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Broadneck High students put science into practice

By LAURA TAYMAN For The Capital

They are three modest, mild-mannered young men who didn't have the highest grade-point averages in their high school class nor big college scholarships awaiting them as they graduated this year.

Yet these seniors from Broadneck High School recently beat out the best scientific young minds in the country and won first place for a team project in the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair in Cleveland, Ohio.

"We just saw what we thought would be a fun project," said Andrew Ascione, 18, of Annapolis. "We were presented with a problem and came up with real-life solutions."

That real-life solution won the three students \$13,500 in cash, \$5,000 in scholarship money, and a new computer - each.

Their first-place win also gives them the opportunity to share their project at the European Union Contest for Young Scientists in Budapest, Hungary, in September.

The ISEF is the world's largest pre-college science fair, bringing together more than 1,200 of the best young scientists from more than 40 countries.

More than 1 million students compete in regional and state fairs from those nations to have the honor of participating in what is called the "Olympics of science fairs" and to compete for more than \$3 million in scholarships, tuition grants, scientific equipment and scientific trips.

South River High School student Erin Frey placed fourth in the grand-prize contest, winning \$500. It was the highest win for Anne Arundel County for an individual project since the school system began participating in the fair more than a decade ago.

South River's Mark Cross was also a finalist in Ohio, but his project, "The Effect of a Test Compound on Rat Brain Tubular Polymerization," did not win any awards.

As juniors last year, students Wyn Bennett, 17, and Aaron Schulman, 17, collaborated on another project that was forwarded to

the ISEF. And though they didn't win, the boys brought back some valuable knowledge about the effort it takes to place.

Early this school year in their physics class, the boys were told that the scientific research nonprofit organization, Public Health Research Institute of Newark, N.J., was looking for help in creating software for some of its new technology.

Well-versed in computer programming, Mr. Bennett and Mr. Schulman approached Mr. Ascione, an excellent student in biology and math, about working on a solution together.

The three boys traveled to the New Jersey offices to learn what the group needed to solve their technology limitations.

"We just sat down with them, and they told us their problem," Mr. Schulman said. "They gave us the data and we gave them a technological solution."

After hundreds of hours of work without the assistance and input of instructors, the boys wrote a computer program called "BEACON."

The program would allow researchers to analyze and identify all living organisms and viruses found within just one strand of DNA.

"What could once only be identified in two hours by doing a culture can now be identified by our program in one hour," Mr. Schulman said.

Aside from the future competition, however, is also the possibility of their program being patented and used by scientific research groups.

"This program is our intellectual property," Mr. Ascione said. "The applications for its use are endless for scientists such as crime-scene investigators, and its costs versus the techniques used now are fairly low."

Mr. Bennett and Mr. Schulman both plan to become computer programmers, while Mr. Ascione hopes to be a surgeon. All three are attending the University of Maryland, College Park, in the fall.

Laura Tayman is a freelance writer who lives in Crofton.

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