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People

Bedford, Mass., girl wins Macy's spelling bee

Victor Li

With the poise of someone twice her age and the vocabulary of someone three times as old, Angappan strode to the microphone and proved that she didn't need spell-check, an iPhone app., or an electronic dictionary to spell like a champion. She won the fourth annual Macy's and Reading is Fundamental (RIF) Spelling Bee Finals at Herald Square on Sept. 26, winning a \$5,000 scholarship from Kaplan Tutoring, a \$500 gift card from Scholastic and a guest spot on CBS' "The Early Show."

Twenty-six children between the ages of 8 and 12 came to New York City from all over the country to compete in the bee. Each had won a regional spelling bee, a requirement to qualify for the finals. The bees were part of a campaign by Macy's and Reading is Fundamental to raise money for children's literacy. Each of Macy's 800-plus nationwide stores asked customers to donate \$3 in exchange for \$10 off a \$50 gift card. In all, Macy's raised more than \$6.5 million for the literacy campaign.

"RIF has distributed over 16 million books across the country to over 4.5 million children," said Lynn Croneberger, the vice president of development for the group. "Macy's and RIF have been partners for six years. The \$6.5 million they helped raise will help make sure that all kids have access to books."

Hailing from all four corners of the continental United States, and several places in between, the contestants were as diverse as they were precocious. There were Asians, Hispanics, African Americans, Muslims, Indians, and Caucasians.

They were also diverse in temperament. Some danced to the music being played over the PA system by Radio Disney, which emceed the event. Others sat in silent concentration, ignoring their rivals while getting last minute instructions from their parents.

After elimination, some contestants took it in stride, smiling all the way to their seats where they were embraced by their proud parents. Others were so devastated that they burst into tears and had to be consoled by their parents.

Under the watchful eyes of celebrity judges Kim Hampton, a former WNBA player, Bianca Ryan, winner of the 2006 America's Got Talent competition, and Croneberger, the children took turns spelling out various eco-friendly and environmentally themed words.

The words started out fairly easy, at least from the contestants' point of view. Twenty-four of the 26 children advanced past the first round with most not even bothering to ask the judges to repeat the word, use it in a sentence or provide a definition.

The words soon got so difficult that few in the audience -- save for the parents who had helped their children prepare for the competition -- could tell whether the contestants were correct or not until the judges rendered their verdict. When Angappan had little difficulty spelling the word "tourniquet," the crowd gasped in shock before giving her a round of applause.

After 10 rounds of action, only two children were left: Angappan and Audrey Jones of Michigan. When Jones missed her first word in the elimination round, Angappan could barely contain her glee as she rushed up to the microphone to spell it correctly.

"Plateau. P-L-A-T-E-A-U. Plateau," she said happily.

Per the rules, she then had to spell her next word correctly, and she did just that, spelling "poinsettia" to clinch the title. With no show of gleeful hysterics, she simply smiled after she was declared the winner and uttered one line: "Thank you, mom!"

Angappan, who is homeschooled, said that she planned to buy some books with her gift certificate. The Bedford, Mass., resident, who had won the Boston regional spelling bee to qualify for the finals, said she just finished reading "Les Miserables" by Victor Hugo and said her favorite author is Rick Riordan. "My mom helped me prepare," she said. "We mainly used the Internet."

Shivani Angappan then spelled out the two easiest words of the afternoon -- at least for her. Her name.



Photo: Victor Li

Shivani Angappan wins the Macy's and Reading is Fundamental Spelling Bee.

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