

Four local students named semifinalists in prestigious national science competition

Alachua County Public School students continue to distinguish themselves at the national level in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields.

Four local students were recently named semifinalists in the 2017 Broadcom MASTERS competition, considered one of the most prestigious STEM competitions for middle school students. The competition is sponsored annually by the Broadcom Foundation and Society for Science and the Public.



Lincoln Middle School 8th graders Anjana Balachandar and Janani Kumaran and Gainesville High School freshmen James Cohan and Jad Helmy were among the 300 Broadcom finalists from throughout the nation. All qualified with projects they submitted during the 2016-17 school year. Cohan was attending Howard Bishop Middle School at the time, while Jad was attending Lincoln Middle.

The projects recognized in the MASTERS competition covered topics ranging from physics to animal science, from biology to machines and robotics. Balachandar was recognized for her project 'High-Fives for Wi-Fi,' Cohan's project was 'Determining the Optimal Cooking Method and Pan Material for Preserving Nutrients in White Cauliflower.' Helmy was honored for a project called "Optimizing and Extending Alzimio to Help Dementia, Autism and Alzheimer's Patients," and Kumaran for her project 'Can Snails Act as Biological Control Agents for the Aquatic Invasive Plant Hydrilla?'

This is actually the second year Jad Helmy has been named a semifinalist. He was also recognized in 2015 for the same project, which he continues to refine and improve. The project involves the development of an app that can detect when dementia patients exit safe zones, informs their family and provides them with routes to safety.

"I like that you can have a problem and fix it, that you can find a solution to it by applying math and other subjects," he said.

Multiple Alachua County Public School students have been named semifinalists in the program every year since its inception in 2011. Altogether 22 ACPS students have earned that honor. They include Anjana's sister Sidhika, who was also named a finalist in 2013, and Jad's brother Amir, who was a semifinalist in both 2013 and 2014.

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To qualify for consideration in the Broadcom MASTERS competition, students must be top performers at science fairs across the country. They must then submit an extensive online application which is reviewed by expert judges. Besides providing information about their projects, the students must also submit information about their other academic achievements, extracurricular and other activities. They must also respond to essay questions that allow them to demonstrate their creativity. For example, one of the questions this year involved deciding what items to bring to an alien planet.

Balachandar, Cohan and Kumaran all earned 1st place awards and Helmy earned a 2nd place award in the Florida Science and Engineering Fair held earlier this year.

“We’re very proud that so many of our students continue to excel at such high levels nationwide,” said Maureen Shankman, the district’s science curriculum coordinator. “STEM education is obviously flourishing in our district.”

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