

Riley team uses its imagination

By MARGARET REIST / *Lincoln Journal Star*
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Six students at Riley Elementary School in Lincoln are on a mission, armed with balsa wood, a cardboard airplane and a script. Their secret weapons: six well-used imaginations, a busload of ingenuity and practiced teamwork skills.

Their destination: Knoxville, Tenn.

Their goal: to take on the world.

That's the world of Destination ImagiNation, a problem-solving program in which students hone their critical-thinking and creative skills to solve whatever challenge is set before them.

The Riley third-, fourth- and fifth-graders have competed in regional and state competitions, earning a place at the global competition at the University of Tennessee May 24-27.

Three LPS schools have Destination ImagiNation teams this year, but the Riley team is the only one to make it to globals — the first LPS team to reach that level since 1997.

And they're ready.

"It's just fun to see how well you can compete against people you don't even know," said team member Crystal Knight.

That, and they get to ride on a bus for 15 hours, go spelunking in caverns during their trip, meet people from all over the world and collect pins from all the other teams.

Destination ImagiNation is designed to teach kids – from elementary school through college – how to take a problem and work through it, emphasizing engineering, technical and science skills as well as the fine arts. It's focus is on teamwork, time management and the process of finding the best answer.

Clear as mud, right?

"I always tell the parents, you'll get it after they've done it for a year," said Kent Steen, a Riley computer teacher who coordinates the Destination ImagiNation teams at the school.

Teams choose from five different challenges, each with a different focus.

The teams are then presented with a specific challenge that must include two "side trips," which can be virtually anything their imaginations can come up with to complement their challenge (enter the fine arts).

Take the Riley team, which chose the structural and architectural design challenge and was charged with building two balsa-wood boxes, one inside the other, to bear as much weight as possible. The challenge is very specific about height, weight and dimension.

The boxes are tested by putting them in a larger contraption and putting weights on the contraption until the boxes break.

That means the team must build another box for the next competition, giving it a

chance to improve as they go.

At regionals in Plattsmouth, the Riley team's boxes could support 25 pounds. By state, they held 101 pounds.

Another part of the challenge is creative: They had to research an architect and tell a story about him.

They chose Jorn Utzon, the Denmark architect who designed the Sydney Opera House in Australia.

They have a script that tells about Utzon and the famous building. Team member Tyler Pope is the voice of the opera house and Larisa Epp shows off her talent for a number of different voices.

They've added the cardboard airplane as a prop. The "side trips" are their costumes and the airplane.

One of the things Steen likes about the program is how kid-driven it is. There are very specific rules about not letting parents and teachers help. And team members have learned to politely deflect any friendly advice, because if an adult gives it to them, they can't use it.

So the parents and teacher helping lead the team, along with a couple of high school seniors who went to globals back in 1997 and agreed to come back and help, have learned to keep their mouths shut on the specifics.

They can, however, help kids focus on the goals, tell them whether they think they've met the challenges — but not how to do it if they haven't.

Alison Nickolaus, a Northeast senior who participated in Destination ImagiNation at Riley and went to globals with a Culler Middle School team, said the program helped her learn to work through problems that crop up in every-day life.

"I think it makes you think about things in a different way," she said. "You're not able to run to your parents and say 'I need help.'"

It also makes you plan ahead and not leave everything to the last minute, she said.

In a third element of the competition, instant challenges, teams are given a challenge and must solve it, right then and there.

The teams practice for the instant challenge, but in the end, it's a matter of thinking on your feet during the competition.

Doing that, Alison said, taught her how to make decisions quickly and act on them.

"Instant challenge makes you commit to an idea and go with it."

To prepare, the Riley students meet twice a week after school.

On a recent Thursday, they hovered over a pile of balsa wood, making yet another box, trying cross beams and triangles and just plain rectangles.

The hardest part, everybody agreed, was making the darn thing level.

Not that they always agree, but that's part of learning to work together.

Sometimes, Larisa said, they have different ideas about how to do things, but they figured out insisting on your own way doesn't always work.

"If you talk and work it through, you come up with a better idea," said fifth-grader Kesi Vidaurri.

And with that attitude, you can go global.

The Team

The Riley Elementary School team that made it to Destination ImagiNation global competition includes:

* Fifth-graders Crystal Knight and Kesi Vidaurri; fourth-graders Brandon Amen, Tyler Pope and Larisa Epp; and third-grader Cecilia Burda.

* Team leaders: parents Mike Burda and MaryLou Epp and teacher Kent Steen.

* Other leaders: Northeast High School seniors and Destination ImagiNation alums Caitlin Mentzer and Alison Nickolaus.

* For more information about Destination Imagination, go to www.idodi.org.

* To follow the exploits of the team while they are in Tennessee, go to <http://riley.lps.org>. The students plan to blog daily about their adventures.

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