

Baltimore Archdiocese spelling bee has middle-schoolers abuzz

ELLCOTT CITY – Sonya Heffernan, a sixth-grader from Trinity School, carefully traced each letter of the word *centennial* in the palm of her hand during the 2019 Archdiocese of Baltimore Spelling Bee May 8.

“Can I start again?” she asked the judges. They nodded and she confidently spelled out each letter, again tracing them on her hand.

“Correct,” announced facilitator Mary Gregorini.

Sonya giggled and quickly turned to shake the hand of second-place winner David Eluchie. David, a sixth-grader at St. Joan of Arc School in Aberdeen, was a fierce competitor, spelling with a clear and confident voice.

“My method seemed to work,” Sonya said, clutching her trophy.

Cade Suko, a fifth grader at St. Louis School in Clarksville, stayed with them through words like *spaghetti*, *faze*, *subtle* and *microfiche*. He took home the third place trophy.

The competition brought 38 middle school-age students from across the archdiocese – all winners of separate spelling bees at their respective schools – to Our Lady of Perpetual Help School in Ellicott City.

As participants arrived with parents and teachers, they were greeted by Catherine Benchoff, a first-grader at OLPH School, who donned a bee costume, antennae and yellow gloves. “Welcome to the spelling bee,” she sang out. Beside her, Eli Dittmar and Nate Gracci held open the doors. The seventh-graders, members of the OLPH student council, wore beekeepers’ headgear.

The contest lasted nearly four hours. Students were called to the microphone in alphabetical order by first name.

In all, students spelled about 350 words, according to Gregorini, a teacher at OLPH,

who said the words came from a Houghton-Mifflin-Harcourt list of spelling and vocabulary words. The judges began with sixth-grade words and progressed to seventh- and finally eighth-grade words in the final rounds.

The children knew those lists.

Ayomide Odedina, a sixth-grader at St. Augustine School in Elkridge and veteran of the Howard County spelling bee, had help from her friends, including Olivia Ross, who came to cheer her on. She studied, figured out patterns and even cut up words and put them back together. Ayomide's sister, Derin, also a bee veteran, recommended this course of study.

"I've been through a lot of spelling bees," Ayomide said.

Aaliyah Perez was the very first student to spell. "I was really nervous, being the very first one," she said. "Everybody's eyes were on me."

"We were praying the entire time," said her mother, Marz Perez. "We couldn't breathe."

Rounds followed one after another in the hushed gymnasium. Allison Mehta, a sixth-grader from Monsignor Slade Catholic School in Glen Burnie, waved her hands just above her lap as each student spelled a word. Her quiet gesture was designed to support her fellow spellers. "I really like 'jazz' hands," she explained.

It was after 3 p.m. when the competition came down to three spellers. Cade said his father went over the words with him every day for a month. "My dad made me practice, testing me on each of the words," he said.

"I think he did very well. He worked very hard," said his father, Scott Suko.

As David received congratulations from his parents and grandmother, he admitted to feeling nervous. "My classmates and teachers say I'm a really good speller," he added.

Sonya said she learned her technique from other spellers. "Even if I know the word, I write it down," she said.

In addition to their trophies and gift cards, Sonia won \$1,000 in curriculum materials for Trinity School, which is also in Ellicott City, according to HMH representative Austin Byers.