

Nikhil Buduma's Talk, CEE Congressional Luncheon May 1, 2014

Almost precisely 3 years ago, I opened up an email that would completely change my life. That email was an invitation to participate in the 2011 USA Biology Olympiad National Finals, a 2 week long camp where the top 20 high school students in the nation come together to explore the life sciences on an unbelievably deep level and compete for a spot on the 4-person Team USA at the International Olympiad. Now, if someone had told me back then that this would be the single most important email I would open during my high school career, my younger self probably would have dismissed them in disbelief. But in retrospect, being invited to the National Finals for the first time my sophomore year opened so many doors that it's impossible for me to imagine what the past three years of my life would've been like otherwise.

I think one of the most valuable aspects of the biology Olympiad is the community built around it. Learning is never a purely individual pursuit, it's highly cooperative, dynamic, and inter-disciplinary. At the national level, the Olympiad brings together people who are deeply passionate about biology, but at the same time come from vastly different cultural and academic backgrounds. Surrounded by a team of world class peers, researchers, and mentors, I've learned more over the cumulative 6 weeks I spent at the National Finals than I learned in 4 years of school. I can confidently say that the rigor of the Olympiad is unmatched by any other high school program in the country. And the fact that the U.S. team has brought home 4 gold medals not one, not two, but three years in a row is a testament to that fact. But, in addition to just helping me build a strong knowledge base, the program has also taught me to ask insightful questions and empowered me with the toolset necessary to design my own experiments and discover the answers. In fact, using everything I've learned through the Olympiad, I've been able to conduct independent research projects on topics ranging from low cost screening techniques for pharmaceutical products to improving the composition of the whooping cough vaccine. And the beneficial effects of the Olympiad don't just stop at the highest level of competition. Through my personal experiences, I've found that the community spirit trickles all the way down to the school level. After bringing the biology Olympiad to my high school, more and more people interested in biology began to study together, and as a result, the science program at my high school has strengthened significantly.

On an even broader level, participating at the International level gave me an eye-opening glimpse of the world beyond my immediate community. I will never forget learning some basic Arabic from a boy representing the United Arab Emirates, discussing the issues of segregation and racial discrimination with the team from South Africa, and hearing the life story of a budding biologist from Iran, who had kept her love of science a secret from her family in fear that they would not accept her. I will never forget the nights we spent in the common area, passing around a Tupperware container of exotic plant specimen most of us had never seen before. And of course, I will never forget standing in front a huge crowd to announce my teammate's birthday the night after the practical exam and hearing the room burst into a surprisingly harmonious ensemble of the song "Happy Birthday" sung simultaneously in at least twenty different languages.

You see, for me, and for tens of thousands of students all over the nation, the U.S.A Biology Olympiad has been a life-changing experience. It's programs like these that inspire students to take their education to the next level, tackle some of the society's most important problems, and engage the world in ways as citizens of a global community. None of this would be possible without the Center for Excellence and Education, who have organized such an amazing program, Ms. Kathy Frame and Dr. Clark Gedney, who have made the USA Biology Olympiad the spectacular success it is today, and all of you whose support is crucial to the success of the Olympiad and its ability to foster the education of future generations of students. Thank you.