

Chalkboard

By

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For the first time in 11 years at Gentry, Regenia and I missed attending Prom. It was a difficult choice because both of us enjoy seeing our young people dressed up and having fun. But as things sometimes happen we had a date in a different direction.

You may remember than several weeks ago our school district hosted the regional Odyssey Of The Mind competition. OM, to quote from a handout, is a “creative problem-solving program that teaches students to think divergently by providing five new competitive, open-ended problems yearly... by tapping into creativity, and through encouraging imaginative paths to problem solving, students learn skills that will provide them with the ability to solve problems-great and small-for a lifetime.”

At the regional meet, three Gentry teams qualified for state level competition. This year the state meeting, with approximately 120 different school teams represented and having teams from the elementary to high school age levels, was held at Blytheville High School in Blytheville, Arkansas. Blytheville is roughly as far northeast as Gentry is northwest. The fastest route is to take I-540 from Fayetteville to Alma, take I-40 across the state to West Memphis, and then head sixty miles north on I-55. Depending on your driving habits the 400-mile trip takes about 7 hours.

Had you been able to attend, you would have been extremely proud of all three teams. I thought their performances were all extremely creative, presented well, and an exemplary reflection of our school district. Our Elementary Division I “Fooled Ya!” team won third place, one spot short of qualifying for world competition, out of 12 teams competing in that division. The team members were Shea Lyn Hutcheson, Casey Haynes, Sarah Barnes, Elisha Patterson, Chase Coonrod, Kyle Miller, and Marcus Welch. The team’s coaches are Myra Welch and Dena Hutcheson. The high school team, coached by Gloria McGooden and Diana Baldwin, consisted of Corbin Smith, Derek Jech, Jeanette Macias, Angela Pierce, Meranda McGarrah, and Gladys Cox. The other elementary school team was coached by Del Duncan and its members are Mark VanDyke, Chelsea Mitchell, Ausha Griffin, Josie Graves-Long, and Ashley Adams.

While our other two teams were disappointed for not placing, I hope they will come to realize, if they do not already, that it was an honor just to

be competing at that level. I personally could not have been prouder of all three teams and their coaches.

I wish you could have been present at the closing ceremony. The Blytheville High School gymnasium was packed full of Omers (OM ers), their parents, OM officials, school personnel from various districts, bus drivers, and spectators. The level of excitement could not have been higher among the participants. It was truly a pleasure to see the support for academic pursuits having the same level as any other state level event. It was an intensity level I normally associate with extracurricular activities such as a tournament level basketball game where the score is back and forth until the final buzzer.

Traveling across the state really gave me an opportunity to reflect on all the state of flux education has been in this spring as the state legislature has debated school consolidation and educational reform. Name after name on road signs representing communities, each possessing its own school district with its own traditions and history, proliferated the drive. Regenia and I even had a few minutes to slip off the four lane and travel some back roads over to the school district in eastern Arkansas where, in 1980 at the ripe old age of 26, I started my career in school administration as a high school principal. It was a bittersweet trip down memory lane. It was also a reminder that the issue of equality and adequacy in public school education is real and deserves some serious attention for the sake of all the state's children.