

## Pennsylvania Geography Bee: Homeschoolers Place Well

from Susan Richman

[This article first appeared in Issue 67 (Summer 1999) of the *PA Homeschoolers* newsletter.]

Ever wonder which US state capital, founded as a gold-rush town, is not linked to the rest of its state by roads? Or can you name which African country borders both the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea? How are you at naming the large island country off the east coast of Africa that is one of the world's leading producers of natural vanilla?

If you're curious about such things, you're made for the National Geographic Society's Geography Bee and it's terrific to see how many homeschoolers all across PA took part in this super opportunity for students in 4th to 8th grades. My daughter Hannah (6th grade) and I ventured to Harrisburg to watch the state finals this year, on April 9, 1999 Hannah's a real geography fan (and hopes to eventually make it to the state level for competition!), and we had heard that several homeschoolers we knew had made it to the state bee, and we just hoped to cheer them all on.

What a happy surprise it was to find out there were actually eight homeschoolers participating in the State Geo Bee more than have ever made it there before! All day long we practically felt we were at Homeschoolers Excellence Day, as we kept running into more and more homeschoolers it was so encouraging to see so many friends of the kids participating. Usually the school kids only have their parents and possibly a teacher with them the homeschoolers practically had cheering sections! Our kudos to the following homeschool students who made it into this select group of 102 kids from public, private, and homeschools from all across PA:

**Aaron Bradford**, 6th grade, with East End Educators in the Pittsburgh area.

**Justin Pyles**, 7th grade, with the Cook Homeschool Co-op in South Hills Pittsburgh.

**Grace Behe**, 8th grade, with the Holy Family Homeschool, Bethlehem area

**Shannon McFate**, 8th grade, with the Pittsburgh East Suburban Homeschool Association

**Kelly Clawson**, 8th grade, with Homeschoolers' Geography Club, Greensburg area

**Benjamin Sacks**, 5th grade, with Mon Valley Home Educators, Washington County

**Alisha Nypaver**, 8th grade, with Catholic Homeschoolers East, from Bellevue area

**Zackery Smith**, 8th grade, with the Homeschool Achievement Center, Union City

You can do the arithmetic yourself almost 8% of the students at the State Bee were homeschoolers.... but homeschoolers are less than 1% of all students in PA! A further fascinating fact of the 102 students competing, only 11 were girls. This is something that the National Geographic Society has been really concerned about, wondering why girls are

not participating in and winning local bees, and making it to the next level of competition. They've even had a Penn State researcher looking into this and making recommendations. The interesting news here? Of the eight homeschoolers at the state level, four were girls showing that for homeschoolers at least, girls do every bit as well as the boys in geography competition. Maybe we can chalk it up to not having any negative peer pressure against appearing too 'smart', something that seems to affect some girls in school situations. Or maybe at home girls just get a better geographic education and really know their material.

But maybe the best part of the day was when we found out that two homeschoolers, Aaron Bradford and Shannon McFate, had both made it into the top ten finalists, and would be vying directly for state champion at the Forum Auditorium right after lunch. This meant that both students had earned a perfect score in the eight rounds of competition in the morning sessions, and further made it through a challenging tie-breaker round to eliminate an 11th student who'd also gotten a perfect morning score. As far as I know, the last time any homeschooler made it to the finals was when Noah Snyder, now finishing up a super freshman year at Harvard, was in 6th grade and took third place at the State Bee.

The finals were very exciting to watch, and the two homeschoolers finished 4th and 5th place, keeping relaxed and focused while up on stage before the large audience. We were so proud of them! All the homeschoolers had done very well as ambassadors for homeschooling that day and all of us present had a wonderful time cheering them all on. Hannah and I highly recommend that more homeschooling kids and parents come out to watch the state-level Geo Bee next year you'll give real support to the kids taking part, and get a new boost to jump into the Bee yourself.

Next year I hope your support group opts to take part in the Bee you'll be part of the 5 million kids nationwide who take part, and you'll be encouraging your students to take geography seriously, while having some real fun! It's very simple to register, and only costs about \$30 for all Bee materials and guidelines (and medals for winners!) a homeschool group leader simply contacts National Geographic Society through their website at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/> or by calling 202-828-6659 or writing to National Geography Bee, 1145 17th ST NW, Washington DC 20036 before next October requesting registration materials, and you'll then be sent a full packet. There is a fee for each group having a Bee, and homeschool groups must guarantee that at least six students took part in their local Bee. Bees can be scheduled anytime from early December to mid-January. Go for it!

Curious to hear how some of this year's homeschoolers prepared for the Bee? Shannon McFate completed a full world geography text borrowed from her school district this year, working with real diligence to complete the whole book before the State Bee. Aaron Bradford has just always loved geography, and has done much reading on his own. Zack Smith is not only super in geography (and he's following up on his brother, Adam Smith, who made it to the State Bee three years in a row!), but also has won first place awards at his regional Mathcounts competition for the last two years. Kelly Clawson has been taking part in regular geography club activities with other homeschoolers led by Gloria Harrison, where students enjoy geo games, give presentations to one another on different countries of the world, and practice up for the Bee. Justin Pyles has just always loved maps, and this year he took part in a weekly co-op with other homeschoolers to follow the Mapping the World by Heart program. His German tutor is also a world traveler, and has continued to spark his

interest in different areas of the world. And I was pleased to hear the following from the mother of the very youngest homeschooler at the State Bee, Benjamin Sacks. His mother Nicholla Sacks wrote:

"How wonderful to see so many homeschoolers represented there at the State Bee. You had asked us to send a note to you about how Benjamin prepares for the Bee. The one thing that I would stress here is that Benjamin began his interest in both geography and history at age 6, while in 1st grade.

"At this time, he was already an excellent reader, able to read books well beyond his age group. He also had a wonderful 1st grade teacher who gave him his first atlas. As a result, he was able to absorb many interesting facts quite early on. His continued interest coupled with travel throughout the US and Europe (My family lives in England) has allowed him to expand his knowledge over these last few years. His 2nd grade teacher lightheartedly told him that she would like to see him in the National Geography Bee in a few years time and so ... here we are...on our way. In addition to his reading, Benjamin loves to draw maps, make up travel tickets and tell me "mommy, you just missed the exit!" At least I can take comfort in knowing that he will never get lost. More recently, now that we are living in our computerized world, he enjoys a variety of geography CDs and regularly does the Geobee Challenge on the National Geographic web site at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/> where they have 5 practice questions per day.

"As I'm sure you know, geography is not a subject that parents and teachers can 'push' on their students. They just have to love to do it and it is that high level of interest more than anything which constantly gives them the incentive to learn more. The only thing that I really do to try and help Benjamin is to make numerous trips to the library to get books and to pay his exorbitant overdue book fees! Best of luck to you and your geobees in the coming year and to all of us who try to make this particular social studies subject more popular and exciting."

And what have I found helps Hannah at home in getting enthused about geography? Personally I've found that watching lots of engaging geography videos is a real help in fostering interest and love of geography really gives kids a window into different areas of the world and makes what could be somewhat dry reading in a text come alive. I also heartily recommend having a big stash of National Geographic Magazines on hand, and lots of maps of all areas. Check out the Internet for geography sites (doing a search for 'geography quizzes' will net you lots of good finds!), read books set in different lands, go to restaurants with foreign cuisine, learn a new language, have a pen pal in another country. Talk to people who've traveled to other places, and go to special presentations on other lands. We also do lots of informal practice with old Bee questions regularly, looking up info on questions we know nothing about. Hannah also loves using her CD-ROM for the National Geographic Society's GeoBee game check out their website for full info or call 800-231-3088. Amazing how even textbook reading isn't dry after all, once you have something to relate it to but be sure you find extra library books written in a more lively way than most texts.

Websites for geography:

- <http://www.iup.edu/ge/paalliance> This is the PA Geographic Alliance webpage, featuring info on upcoming geography events (like Geography Awareness Week and the Geo Bee!), lesson plans, useful Internet links, and more for teachers of geography.
- <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/> Again, the site to go to for info on the Bee, the daily GeoBee Challenge, and full info on the Society's new high school level GEOCHALLENGE research project competition, and much more. A must see!

Hopefully soon you'll be able to say, along with the National Geographic Society, that your "students seem to be getting the message that they are part of a larger world."