

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Understanding “Odyssey of the Mind”

I am on the lookout for opportunities to learn about Monson these days because the town has been added to our Second Hampden District. A regional Odyssey of the Mind competition presented such an opportunity last weekend. Tipped off that hundreds of participants would take over Monson's Quarry Hill Community School, I decided to join them and see what this Odyssey was about. I discovered a magnificent new elementary school, hundreds of proud parents and enthusiastic children swarming throughout the halls as the kids presented the result of their year's labors to solve an assigned problem.

The first problem I had to solve was finding a parking place - barely within walking distance - and then I set about to meet new people and learn what lay behind all of the excitement in the air. Odyssey of the Mind (OM) to those who are in the know is an extracurricular program through which children tackle one of several challenges, develop a presentation to solve that problem and present that solution at an interscholastic competition. Each group is sponsored by a school, PTO or other parent group. Monson hosted the first level competition, and schools from Longmeadow to Rutland participated. Winners will compete at the district level next month. "Set it Free" was one of the topics. Students suspended a ping-pong ball in a structure they built of balsa wood, then created a skit with a plot that required them to release the ball by applying free weights to the structure. It sounds complicated, and it was. I watched several widely different 8-minute presentations before I had any idea what was going on.

A topic called "The Iliad" was easier for me to understand. The task required production of a skit that drew on Greek mythology to address an environmental issue in today's world. One performance featured the Exxon Valdez as the new threat to ancient heroes. There were lots of tired students, but no losers at the end of the day. Everyone seemed pleased with the performances. First and second place teams won the right to compete next month at the district level.

After spending a beautiful day in Monson I came home with renewed appreciation for the challenges of providing for our children. Monson's two-year old elementary school can serve as a demonstration project for learning in the 21st century. Excellent teaching is a primary component of quality education, but the spacious, well-equipped classrooms are a definite addition. Providing such schoolrooms for other children in Massachusetts will require added funding from our distressed state budget. We have a tremendous asset in the parents of those same children, parents who will now work with new determination to effect such improvements in their own schools. The legislature has expanded financial aid for school construction projects, and I will continue to pursue that priority.

And now, back to Odyssey of the Mind. My best wishes to the East Longmeadow, Willie Ross, Monson and Longmeadow teams who will advance to the district competition in Shrewsbury. And congratulations to all of the teams for a job well done!