

# Moraga Elementary School Odyssey of the Mind Team qualifies for world tournament

Submitted by Liz Coyle



Photo provided

**From left: Connor Sakai, Willie Coyle, Niko Smith, Sean Baitx, Everett Fieser, Kira Fey, Jake Barar**  
Photo Michelle Barar

A team of third and fourth graders from

Camino Pablo, Los Perales, and Rheem Ele-

mentary Schools in Moraga qualified for the world finals for their creative solution to a vehicle-based problem in the STEAM program, Odyssey of the Mind (OM).

The team, which includes members Connor Sakai, Everett Fieser, Jake Barar, Kira Fey, Niko Smith, Sean Baitx and Willie Coyle, and coaches Michelle Barar and Nicole Smith, surpassed approximately 20 other teams from Northern California, over the course of two competitions, to secure their invitation to the

world finals.

OM is a creative problem-solving program where teams present their solution to a predefined long-term problem. The solution takes many months to complete, and involves writing, design, construction, and theatrical performance. OM emphasizes a completely participant-driven process, without "outside" assistance from adults or non-team members.

"I like the teamwork and problem solving. We build really unique props, costumes, a vehi-

cle and a play," explained Jake Barar. "I especially like making the costumes and performing in our skit," echoed veteran team member, Sean Baitx.

The Moraga Elementary School team created a vehicle that was powered by three different sources, and performed numerous functions in the context of a skit about an underwater drive-in movie. The skit included original costumes, special effects, music, and a backdrop made from recycled and repurposed materials.

"I'm happy to make new friends through OM, like Kira, who really helped our team this year," said Willie Coyle, who has been part of the team for three years. "I'm proud of our teamwork and how everyone worked together so well on our solution," added Niko Smith.

A huge congratulations to the team, and much gratitude to the coaches, the schools for the use of space, and the team's sponsor, the Moraga Rotary Club.

# Troop 219's recent Eagle Scout Court of Honor

Submitted by Catherine Davis



Troop 219 of Lafayette held an Eagle Scout Court of Honor on March 10 to recognize and celebrate eight outstanding young men who achieved BSA's highest rank, Eagle Scout: John Douglas Orear, James Davis, Toby Brock-Utne, Pierce Gallegos, Henry Joseph Hagel, Jackson Jones, Caleb Sherman, and Simon Vincent Werner.

In addition to earning at least 21 merit badges, Scouts also completed the following community service projects. Orear refurbished a planter box at Glorietta Elementary school, Hagel built a sports cart for Burton Valley Elementary School, Sher-

man expanded and refurbished a fence around the Acalanes High School garden, and Werner restored infrastructure of the garden at Springhill Elementary School. Davis, Brock-Utne, Gallegos, and Jones all built separate 100 foot sections of a fence in Joaquin Miller Park. These eight new Ea-

gle Scouts received recognition and proclamations from the City of Lafayette, Mayor Gina Dawson, Congressman Mark DeSaulnier, California State Senator Dianne Feinstein, The White House, and Contra Costa County.

# Lafayette school board rejects plan to eliminate AIM class

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The director continued saying that "the project based learning specifically and the mentoring opportunities kind of all stood out to me."

Another director said, "That's what I saw when I entered our AIM classroom. I saw kids who had found their tribe. I saw kids whose needs were being met at the individual level, who, you know, if we viewed them as special ed kids - and we could - their needs were being met at where they were found." Another added, "every time we hear from families who have been in the AIM program, the one thing that stands out to me is not necessarily the academics . . . but it's really the feeling of belonging that their student has felt being part of a two year class cohort." Continuing, the director added, "this is the environment where students thrive; a really successful incubator for a lot of the things that help kids . . . feel like they belong, that they're welcome, they're accepted for who they are."

Another director noted that "I love hearing about the deep project-based learning that happens in those classes [and] the feeling of commonality like a common spirit," but added that it stood out and made her sad to hear a student say, "It was really bad for me until fourth and fifth

grade." Additionally, board members felt that the proposed options being recommended to replace the AIM class were not sufficiently developed. As one director said, "You don't drive your car towards the canyon and then build the bridge as your car is moving in that direction!"

Parents and students agreed. One student who has participated in the Odyssey of the Mind program, which is one of the suggested offerings, said that while she had participated in the program for the past two years, and her team placed first in regionals both years and she was invited to the world competition in 2023, "Odyssey could not replace all the collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving that takes place in our AIM classroom every day."

Other speakers noted that Odyssey of the Mind is largely an after-school program, and is mainly run by parent volunteers. Another suggested program to challenge students is the addition of a student newspaper.

Teacher Kathy Martinson, who has been the AIM teacher for the past 11 years, spoke in favor of the program. "First and foremost," she said, "it provides a community, and that's what I keep hearing over and over, a community for those, this special population of kids, many of whom have difficulty in

a regular classroom. It also provides an opportunity to challenge them, as you've heard.

Whether it's in reading, writing, social studies, math, whatever. They're given the opportunity to pursue their own interests." She did agree with others, however, who felt that the OLSAT test, administered to third grade students, and which currently is the only criterion for admission to the AIM class, is not a suitable means to determine eligibility.

Parents were unhappy about the fact that they were only given notice that the Board would be considering the proposal three days in advance of the meeting. A group of parents who talked to the Lamorinda Weekly complained that the district appeared to use conflicting methodologies in comparing data to show that the AIM program was not as diverse as the general school population. The parents said that the school appeared to be saying that AIM had no effect on academic performance, but pointed out that the AIM kids scored as high as was possible, and could not have scored any higher.

However, the parents emphasized that the main benefit of the AIM program is the students in the AIM program do not do well in regular classes, where they aren't challenged. They also suggested that as Stanley Middle School

does not have a gifted program, roughly one-third of AIM students go to private middle schools directly out of elementary, with a continuing trickle to private schools

afterwards.

Following the meeting, the board, having reached the conclusion that the AIM program will be continued for the time being, released the

OLSAT scores, which had been withheld from the third grade students who took the test, and invitations were offered to those who may join AIM next year.

## In Memory

### Laszlo George Bonnyay Resident of Moraga



Laszlo George Bonnyay of Moraga, CA passed away on March 19, 2024, aged 86. Born in Budapest Hungary to Laszlo and Erzsebet Bonnyay. During the turbulent political times of 1956, he fled Hungary at 17. He studied engineering at the Technical University of Munich, where he met his future wife, Ene.

The two married and moved to the US, settling in Connecticut. In 1967, Laszlo became an American citizen and joined Dorr-Oliver, Inc. where he worked for 28 years and became a Member of the Board and Partner. Laszlo had a passion for

business, attaining his MBA from the University of Connecticut in 1972. Laszlo and Ene adopted their daughter, Deborah, in 1972. They moved to Elmhurst, Illinois in 1972, adopting their son, David, in 1975. They arrived in Moraga in 1978 and fell in love with the town. They were soon abroad again, to the Netherlands in 1982, and the United Kingdom in 1989. They moved to Westport, CT in 1992.

Laszlo retired in 1995, returning to Moraga. He volunteered with SCORE for 20 years. Sadly, Ene passed away in 2009, 50 years to the date of their meeting.

Laszlo met Marcia Fisherkeller, with whom he would spend the rest of his life, in 2012. They joined together their lives, interests, and friends and enjoyed interesting trips and many social activities together. Their families too came to enjoy one another, even though they lived on opposite sides of the US.

Laszlo leaves behind his adult children, David Bonnyay and wife Jennifer, Deborah Flaherty and husband Brian, two beloved grandchildren Liam Flaherty and Shea Flaherty, his brother Gyorgy Bonnyay, two nieces, Boglarka and Krisztina Bonnyay, and other extended family across the world.

In lieu of flowers, please consider donating to Doctors Without Borders and the Salvation Army in Laszlo's name.

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