

Students Left to Their Own (Rhetorical) Devices

Cambridge's budding orators master great speeches, absorb history



COURTESY PHOTOS
North Dallas resident Emily Perkins, 16, recites the passionate plea of abolitionist Angelina Grimke against slavery.



With a Southern drawl, Preston Hollow resident Andrew Mowrey captivates fellow students, parents, and judges with 'The Cremation of Sam McGee,' a humorous poem.



Vincent Weir shares what he deems the first of mankind's great speeches, a funeral oration by Athenian general Pericles.

By Tricia Scuggs
Staff Writer

Whether it's an ancient discourse of Pericles, an Athenian general, or exhortation of a U.S. president, students at Cambridge School of Dallas use their own oratorical skills each year to bring historic figures to life. Established seven years ago, Declamation, a schoolwide competition, emphasizes study of history and memo-

“It's a tradition; it's the highlight of our academic year,” said English instructor Bess Banister, who coordinates the program, which took place

Feb. 23. “It's neat to have an academic competition that kids really get excited about. It's almost like a sporting event.”

At the beginning of the school year, students select a person of interest, research

oral work, first in the classroom during semifinals and then again at finals where they vie for a plaque and cash award.

Sometimes the students already have a character in mind, and other times they select a person and fall in love with what's learned about them, Banister said.

Emily Perkins, 16, said each year she looks for speeches that are passionate. This year, Perkins' recitation of an anti-slavery speech by Angelina Grimke fit the bill, earning her first place among the high schoolers.

Bess Banister
Cambridge English instructor

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his or her life, the person's contribution to mankind, and generally seek out the person's most memorable speeches.

From the latter, students must recite three to five minutes of

See *STUDENTS*, Page 4A

Students

Continued from Page 1A

“I have never seen a happy slave,” she pleaded as Grimke.

Rather than a serious, fact-based account, Preston Hollow resident Andrew Mowrey chose to humor the crowd with “The Cremation of Sam McGee,” a poem written by Robert W. Service, which chronicles the experience of a Tennessean-turned-pro prospector who froze to death in the Yukon.

“I looked at it and I really liked it,” he said of the poem.

Mowrey said his first experience with the Declamation was a few years ago when he attended a competition in support of his brother, a Cambridge alum. This year, he shared his selection with his big brother who agreed the story would be a hit.

Mowrey won first place in the junior high division.

“I think the hardest part was not just memorizing the actual poem, but putting the gestures in,” Mowrey said, explaining he also contemplated whether he should speak with a Southern drawl, which he did. “I tried to make

the whole thing gripping from beginning to end. I wanted to keep the entire audience with me the whole time.”

Victor Weir said that unlike other students, he did not consider the audience when selecting a 7-minute funeral oration of Pericles.

“I chose it because it's one of the first great speeches ever written by mankind,” he said.

However, Weir said, having won second place, next year he may find a competitive entry that will be more engaging.

Cambridge parent Ellen Sedeno said it was because of Declamation that she and her husband decided the school's classical education was a fit for their three children.

“It's sort of what pushed us over the edge,” Sedeno said of the first contest she attended.

Some parents, she said, question their child's ability to master a speech and present it before their peers and judges. She dismisses this concern, having witnessed her son's impressive performance.

“When the bar is set high, great things can happen,” Sedeno said.

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