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Pre-teen wins grand prize at state science fair
11-year-old plans to send out college applications this year

Andrew Hsu displays his silver medal at the Washington State Science and Engineering Fair on Thursday in Issaquah. Hsu, an 11-year-old home-schooled boy, won the Silver Medal at last week's fair in Bremerton and became the youngest participant to be awarded a grand prize in the fair's 46 years.



The Associated Press

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ISSAQUAH -- Judges at this year's Washington State Science and Engineering Fair weren't sure what to think when they read the title of the 11-year-old's project: "Identification, Characterization and DNA Sequencing of the Homo Sapiens and Mus Musculus COL20A1 Gene (Type XX Collagen) with Bioinformatics and Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR)."

But after two rounds of interviews, the panel was convinced young Andrew Hsu's work was legitimate.

"He blew us away," said Lois Lugg, the fair's director. "We've never had a kid that young competing in the high-school level. ... He is going to be one of our great future scientists."

The home-schooled boy from this suburb southeast of Seattle won the Silver Medal at last week's fair in Bremerton and became the youngest participant to be awarded a grand prize in the fair's 46 years.

Hsu and Gold Medal winner Dona Sharma, a senior at Sunnyside High in Yakima County, travel to Cleveland on May 11 to represent Washington in the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair, touted as one of the nation's most prestigious pre-college science fairs.

Hsu's project involved examining the genetic makeup of humans and mice and isolating a building-block protein found in both: the COL20A1.

Understanding the protein's location is the first step in solving other genetic riddles associated with it, such as mutations and diseases, and also potential cures.

"I have a special interest for it that other people don't, I guess," Hsu said. "The genome makes

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up who we are as humans. I find that very interesting."

Dr. Peter Byers, a professor of medicine at the University of Washington, assisted Hsu with the project, and said it's graduate-level work.

The boy's parents, David and Joyce Hsu, immigrated from Taiwan in the mid-1980s, and say their first-born son started amazing them at an early age.

At 2, he was assembling Legos into giant robots as tall as he was. He mastered multiplication and was reading Daniel Defoe by age 6. At 9, he started taking high-school classes through an independent-study program run by the University of Nebraska.

When teachers in the Issaquah School District had trouble keeping him from being bored in fourth grade, they put him in a separate room with advanced math and science books for a few days. But that made him lonely, so his parents decided to give home-schooling a try.

"We just provided a lot of materials, lots of books," said David Hsu, 43, a software engineer who makes educational videos.

Now the young prodigy is reading Charles Dickens' "David Copperfield," Matt Ridley's "Genome" and the "Pocket Guide to Prescription Drugs." He studies about four hours a day, spends a couple more in a UW lab, and swims about 1 1/2 hours every weekday with Pacific Northwest Swimming in Issaquah. He holds three team records for his age group.

He scored in the 99th percentile on the ACT college entrance exams and hopes to go to Harvard. He's planning to send out his first round of college applications later this year, his father said.

"I don't know what to expect. It's kind of a headache for me," David Hsu said. "It's very tough to move. But if he goes, there's no way he can go by himself."

"He's just a kid," he added. "I don't think he thinks a lot about his future. ... He says, 'I want to get two Ph.D.s and two Nobel prizes,' but every time he says that, I say, 'You're bragging.'"

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