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## In This Contest, Competitors Flex Their Lexicons and Victory Is All in the Definition

By JAMES BARRON

Billy Dorminy was perspicuous, talking about poecilonyms on television, and there was nothing pusillanimous about the way he did it.

Words, words, words. They were flying inside the main New York Public Library yesterday, where Billy, 16, of McDonough, Ga., was one of 50 finalists in the National Vocabulary Championship, which promised to reward high school students whose strength is verbal acuity with money for college tuition.

This is a group that knows what is pulchritudinous and what is pulverulent. This is a group that knows who is ridiculous, who is nidicolous and who is nidifugous. This is a group that knows what is Brobdingnagian and what is merely colossal.

And this is a group that knows what to do when the television cameras are on. GSN, a cable network that carries game shows, turned the library's Celeste Bartos Forum into a television studio, the better to videotape the competition.

The host, Dylan Lane, questioned the contestants the way game-show hosts do, making friendly chatter with jittery people who have buzzers in their hands. When Billy's turn came, he told Mr. Lane that he knew a synonym for synonym: poecilonym.

He said he had discovered it on a list of words on a Web site. What he did not tell Mr. Lane was that he posted an entry on a different site that begins: "Hello, my name is Billy Dorminy, and my favorite word is 'poecilonym.' 'Poecilonym' is just a synonym of 'synonym'!"

Something else he did not tell Mr. Lane was that he came in fourth in the National Word Power Challenge ("out of the three million participants nationwide") a couple of years

ago.

But yesterday, he was outbuzzed by faster competitors and was eliminated in the first round.

The GSN crew led him upstairs at the library, where he watched a brief snow flurry through a big window while other contestants parsed and parried downstairs. He said he had a word for what he hoped would fall: graupel. "A snow pellet that breaks apart when it hits the ground," he explained. Which was pretty much the dictionary definition. (It also refers to "soft hail.")

Leah Libresco, 16, of Mineola, N.Y., advanced to the second round on a question that called for her to choose the word that did not belong among these three: catapult, disrupt and impede. "I was like, I'm not missing catapult," she said. "PBS did a special on trebuchets. It's a special kind of catapult." A stone-hurling medieval engine of war, also spelled "trebucket."

There were grownups who showed off their vocabularies, or tried to. Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, appearing before the taping began, used words not often heard at City Hall: "coruscating" (referring to the "dazzling" contestants), "paresthesia" (to say there was a "tingling" in the room), and "sexagenarian" (referring to himself).

Rich Cronin, the president and chief executive of GSN, said he was not just thrilled to watch the competition, he was also euphoric. "One person will be the 'American Idol' of vocabulary," he said. (In the end, after an afternoon with its share of technical difficulties and dashed hopes, the winner was Robert Marsland, 18, of Madison, Wis. He will receive \$40,000 toward college tuition. The winners in the finals and in the earlier citywide competitions held nationwide divided more than \$80,000

in tuition money. The Princeton Review, a tutoring and test preparation service, came up with the questions.)

Off camera, it took Joel Chiodi, GSN's vice president for marketing, a moment to remember a word he had learned from listening to contestants around the country.

"I'll get back to you," he said.

A moment later, he did.

"Penultimate," he said. "It means second to the top, or second best."

But the judges would not have bought that definition. The dictionary says penultimate means next to last.

The contestant who finished third was Daniel James Theobald Verdon Thorn of Teaneck, N.J., who said his parents had given him so many names because names were one of the few things they could give him that were free.

After advancing to the second round, he said he was impressed by the competition. "Other people seemed so much better than me," he said. "I had been on a couple of other TV shows with buzzers, so I figured my buzzing skills were up to par."

Micah Jordan, from the Pablo Neruda Academy in the Bronx, had won a citywide competition that earned him his place at the finals. Last week, the school held a pep rally for him. But he was eliminated in the first round.

Later, he looked disappointed but said he felt sagacious.

"Sagacious comes from sage, which is a wise person," he said. "I've been through it now. I know what to expect the next time."

Mr. Cronin of GSN said he had given Micah some advice. "Remember Jennifer Hudson didn't win on 'American Idol,'" he said. "She did win an Academy Award."



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Robert Marsland, 18, of Madison, Wis., won the National Vocabulary Championship, held at the New York Public Library yesterday.