



JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Zoe Halatyn, Harrison Harmon, Matthew Crowe and Tara O'Brien compete at D.I. Performance Night on Feb. 28.

DI competition proves to be the ideal skill-builder

By Carter Smith

DOBBS FERRY — The team 501 Balls of Cheese may have failed their Instant Challenge — to silently stack a pyramid of cups using only string and rubber bands — but that didn't dampen their enthusiasm for Destination Imagination, an extracurricular program meant to encourage students to have fun, take risks, focus, and frame challenges while incorporating a wide spectrum of academic and service learning.

"I do D.I. because it's just really, really, really, really, really fun," said Dobbs Ferry High School freshman Blake Hord, a member of the fancifully named team. "That's seven 'reallys,'" he asserted. "I just

wake up every day and I look forward to doing this team-building, creative exercise."

(Just naming the team was itself a creative exercise. As 11th-grader Liam Daly explained, "We're 501 Balls of Cheese because 'DI' in Roman numerals is 501, so we thought we might as well add something on to that, so... Balls of Cheese.")

The organization that runs D.I. was incorporated in 1982, when it took over the charter for OM Association, Inc. In 1999, its name was changed to Destination Imagination, Inc. Since then, more than one million students have participated in D.I.

The Challenge program is D.I.'s most popular offering. At the start of the season, teams, which can have up

to seven members, choose one of seven challenges. After weeks spent creating, developing and practicing solutions, they go to a local tournament. Top-scoring teams advance to state or national tournaments. The top level of the tournament is the Global Finals — what the organization calls "the world's largest celebration of creativity."

Last Friday, Feb. 28, "D.I. Performance Night" took place in the high school auditorium to raise money for the teams that travel to the State Tournament on April 5 in Binghamton and the Global Tournament on May 21 in Knoxville, Tenn. First up, however, comes the Eastern Regional Tournament, set to take place next Saturday, March 15, just a few doors north of

the middle/high school on the Mercy College campus.

"Travel to Globals is expensive, and the event is so extraordinary that it seemed time to make that trip easier for any person going," explained parent Julie Coburn, who also coaches a team called the Edvard Munchies — named after Norwegian painter and printmaker Edvard Munch. (The Munchies managed to complete the cup-stacking challenge with ruthless efficiency.) "The fundraising group has a 'pay it forward' policy so that the following year's teams have a financial head start," Coburn added. "Out of the total money raised, 80 percent goes to pay for travel and 20 percent goes to

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the next year."

All told, seven D.I. teams — two from Springhurst, one from the middle school and four from the high school — showcased their creativity at "Performance Night." The emcee for the evening was Drew Coburn, Julie's husband, who is also a member of Destination Imagination of New York's board. The Coburn's children, Matt (DFHS Class of 2009) and Sarah (Class of 2012) have 16 years of D.I. experience between them, including eight trips to Global Finals.

In addition to instant challenges, "Performance Night" highlighted the students' improv skills, with story-acting exercises that were open to audience participation.

Julie Coburn explained that she has been involved in D.I. since her son was chosen for a team in fourth grade. "His team was managed by [now Assistant District Superintendent] Doug Berry who, I believe, brought D.I. to the school district."

Once her daughter started to do D.I., Coburn joined the ranks of D.I. volunteers. "I have been a doorkeeper; an appraiser, scoring and awarding points at tournaments; and started the Parent Fundraising group in Dobbs," she said.

As a parent, Coburn considers D.I. "by far the most important thing my children have done. What they learned from D.I. ranks above their academic experiences, their athletic experiences, and their theater arts experiences."

She listed "cooperation, presentation skills, improvisation, responsibility, commitment, and resilience," as among the program's life lessons. "Taking risks in a



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Ben Greengrass leads an improvisation skit during D.I. Performance Night.

supportive environment," Coburn said, "team members come to know and rely on each other at a deep level. The solution to a challenge is found solely by the team members. This builds a confidence and self-reliance that is solid."

Dobbs Ferry School Board member Jonathan Greengrass is also involved in fundraising for D.I. He and his wife, Ellen, moved to the village from New York City about eight years ago, he said, "specifically for the excellent school system, the small-town feeling and the people. We are very happy here." They have two children, Aden, a third-grader, and Ben, a high school freshman. "Ben has been in D.I. since fifth grade," Greengrass said. "His teams have made it to the Global Finals in Knoxville twice

— once placing 11th."

Greengrass was effusive about the benefits of D.I., saying it "brings out the best in the participants." He added, "We have watched as our son and literally all of the kids in the program flourish as they gain confidence and experience. For example, Ben will be serving as the co-MC tonight."

"D.I. has been one of the best experiences of my life," the 14-year-old Greengrass, who is a member of the Moby Dick team, said. "I've been able to learn and grow with my team and it's taught me necessary skills for life in school and out — lessons in creativity, critical thinking, teamwork, and — I don't want to sound pretentious — how to be the smartest person in the room, to think

differently, outside of the box."

Seth Davis of Croton-on-Hudson has been regional director of Destination Imagination of New York for a decade. He first got involved when one of his sons, now 24, was in sixth grade.

"I continue to be involved in D.I. because this program brings out strengths and talents in all sorts of kids in amazing ways," he said. "My own son was faced with substantial learning disabilities, but being in D.I. gave him an initial sense of capability and self-confidence that has enabled him to achieve things we had not even dared dream of. His first D.I. team manager hesitated about giving him a single line in the team's skit. Eleven years later, he was elected a Croton village trustee — at age 23 the youngest elected public official in Westchester County."

Davis added, "His is only one story of many that can be told about what D.I. has meant to our amazing young people. To think that I have helped make this happen for others gives me a supreme sense of satisfaction. And, by the way, it's a lot of fun!"

Drew Coburn was equally avid about how D.I. can bring out the best in youth, saying, "When I see a child open up to their own power, even a little bit, I have a thought that the course of the rest of their life was just altered for the better. D.I. consistently, predictably, almost without exception has this impact on children. Nothing better in life to me — nothing nearly as gratifying as seeing a human being 'open.'"

At the Eastern Regional Tournament, Dobbs Ferry will compete against schools from the following districts: Blind Brook, Briardiff, Croton-Harmon, Freeport, Haldane, Lakeland, New York City, Putnam Valley, Sachem, Somers, Union-Endicott, and Yorktown.