



Original 4-H Play

Promotes Literacy

By Linda Breazeale
Photos by Jim Lytle

Mississippi 4-H was well represented by “a cast of characters” at the 2006 Gold Congressional Award Program in Washington, D.C.

Normally, only the 15 Mississippi 4-H’ers earning the gold award are present for the program in Washington, but 17 additional members involved in the Congressional Awards program were able to attend to perform a one-hour play promoting literacy during the elite conference.

“Literacy is a focus of the 4-H Congressional Awards,” said Linda Mitchell, 4-H technology and creative programming specialist with Mississippi State University’s Extension Service. “I looked for existing and affordable plays that would promote reading but could not find any. That’s when I decided to write ‘Sarah and the Magical Mix-Up.’”

Mitchell said some 4-H members were earning hours of community service in literacy for the Congressional Awards program by interactive reading on a local television station. When the opportunity to be involved in this play came up, they jumped at the chance. After almost 50 young people responded to the casting call for 16 acting spots, Mitchell added two more characters to the cast and understudies for each of the actors. Performers came from seven counties, including Attala, Itawamba, Lee, Pontotoc, Prentiss, Tishomingo and Union.

The story line for “Sarah and the Magical Mix-Up” encourages children to read. When a young girl named Sarah throws a book of fairy tales against the wall, the characters fall out and get all mixed up. Suddenly the Giant from Jack and the Beanstalk is chasing Cinderella, two Big Bad Wolves are fighting over Little Red Riding Hood, the Wicked Witch is stirring up a batch of trouble and much, much more.



Top: The cast of “Sarah and the Magical Mix-Up” took their show on the road, staging performances in Washington, D.C., as well as several Mississippi locations.

Above: During ceremonies in Washington, D.C., Rep. Roger Wicker, left, and John Falk, chairman of the Congressional Awards National Committee, presented 16 gold Congressional Awards to Mississippi 4-H’ers, including Savannah Duckworth of New Albany.

"Sarah discovers that reading can open a door to other worlds and to the people who live in them," Mitchell said. "The play is filled with laughter as Cinderella teaches the Giant how to ballroom dance, suspense as the Wicked Witch kidnaps a favorite character and tears as Sarah must say goodbye to her new friends.

"We have been very pleased with the response of the audiences to the performances and to the message," Mitchell said. "The actors love hearing the children laugh and get involved with the production."

The U.S. Congress established the Congressional Award program in 1979 to encourage young people in leadership and personal development. Youth ages 14 to 24 work their way through three progressively more difficult levels of achievement. Personal goals are set in community service, personal development, expedition/exploration and physical fitness.

"Young people who get in the habit of performing community service and constantly improving themselves tend to continue this pattern for the rest of their lives," Mitchell said.

Lee County 4-H member Nick Simmons made his acting debut in the role of a wolf in the play.

"This seemed like a good opportunity to try something new and make new friends. I also wanted to support the literacy effort," Simmons said. "It seemed like a good way to inspire young children to read."

A recent graduate of Saltillo High School, Simmons is a Gold Medal Congressional Award winner and served as state 4-H president this year. Gold medals are given to youth who complete the top level in the Congressional Awards program. In

Washington, Simmons addressed the audience at the Gold Medal Ceremony on behalf of all award recipients.

"The Congressional Awards program mirrors what 4-H is all about: community service, leadership, health and fitness," Simmons said.

Mitchell said the Congressional Award is the highest award the U.S. Congress presents to young Americans. While in Washington, the Mississippi delegation took part in the Gold Medal Ceremony with Rep. Roger Wicker and an additional ceremony for bronze and silver awards with Sen. Trent Lott. The delegation also toured the nation's capital and took part in activities arranged by the national Congressional Awards staff.

Wicker recognized the special effort Congressional Award recipients have put into their community service.

"It is a special honor for these young men and women to be selected to perform at the awards program in Washington, D.C. Using their talents in a play to highlight the need to improve literacy is a unique way of promoting the ideals of community service and leadership that are key elements of the Congressional Award program," Wicker said.

Following the activities in Washington, most of the group journeyed to New York City for their first time in an audience for a Broadway performance.

"The actors for the literacy play watched with more interest than most people because they wanted to see how Broadway actors performed," Mitchell said. "The trip served to inspire everyone involved in the Congressional Awards program. We expect interest to continue to grow as youth learn of the rewarding opportunities that come with this type of community service."



Nick Simmons, left, and John Paul Whitlock play wolves that are among the mixed-up fairy tale characters in "Sarah and the Magical Mix-Up."