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Dhir to compete in scientist challenge

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Shireen Dhir left Saturday for Washington, D.C., to compete in the Discovery Channel Young Scientist Challenge.

This is the second year the Warner Robins High School freshman made it to the finals in the competition and this time she is out to win.

The 40 finalists from all over the United States flew into the nation's capital on Saturday and spent most of the day meeting and getting their fellow finalists and polishing their interview skills with a talk show host.

Sunday was spent in making oral presentations of their studies at the National Academy of Science. Monday and Tuesday they would have competed in a series of science challenges testing their knowledge and ability to think on their feet. The subject of this year's challenges will be weather.

Tuesday night the young scientist would enjoy a cruise before hearing the final results on Wednesday.

Shireen said that last year's experience was a very special one for her.

"It was a great experience," she said. "I still keep in touch with some of the friends I made there. We had many brother-sister sister relationships."

Shireen said she discovered that most of the competitors last year were a lot like her in that they had followed in their parent's footsteps. Both of Shireen's mother and father are on the science faculty at Fort Valley State University.

"I think it is good that the kids would be interested in their parents' professions," she said. "Most of them were like me and wanted to be just like their parents. My parents are my role models. But it was also good that was able to meet the other kids and show what I know and not just what my parents know."

Shireen said that the intervening year has allowed her to improve skills she will need in this year's competition.



Shireen Dhir works on her microscope skills in preparation for the finals of the Discovery Channel Young Scientist Challenge in Washington, D.C.

Saxby Chambliss on Thursday before returning home.

Shireen's father Dr. Sarwan Dhir, Associate Professor of Biotechnology at Fort Valley State University, agrees that the competition is a good thing for Shireen.

"Sometimes in our culture we hold our children a little too close. This allows her to get out and expand her horizons," said Dr. Dhir.

Shireen has been able to benefit from a unique mentoring program that her father has conducted at Fort Valley State for the last 10 years. With the help of a grant from the National Science Foundation and the United States Department of Agriculture, he has been able to bring in some of the brightest young high school science students in the area and tutor them.

"I have had about 30 students come here over the years and most of them have gone on to participate in the International Science Fair," said Sarwan.

"Shireen has always been interested in our projects," said Dr. Dhir. "She has been part of the mentoring program the last two years. She has been practicing here in our laboratories in prepara-

tion for the competition."

Dr. Dhir said Shireen will be visiting the National Science Foundation during her visit to Washington to be honored as one of their success stories.

Discovery Channel created the Young Scientist Competition in 1999 to be part of the solution to America's chronic underachievement in science and math. The competition identifies and honors America's top Middle School students who demonstrate the best skills in leadership, teamwork, and scientific problem solving.

Forty students are invited to the finals in Washington, D.C. Shireen was the only finalist from the state of Georgia. The goal for her project this year is to develop a method of tissue culturing that would produce symatic embryos that could be encapsulated in Gelrite to produce artificial Stevia seeds. Stevia is a plant that produces a sweetener that is 30 times sweeter than sugar but is safe for people with diabetes.

Shireen hopes to become a biomedical engineer. She also likes to ride horses, play tennis and basketball, swim, and paint.

"Last year I knew what to say but did not have the guts to say it. I did not open up and communicate what I know," she said. "I know what to do better now and I think I have a good chance."

"Last year's winner was from Florida as was her second year in the competition as well," said Shireen. "I think that is a good sign for me."

Although this will be the last year Shireen will be able to compete in the Discovery Channel competition, she said this will not be the last science competition for her.

"There are other competitions such as the International Science Fair and others so there is much more I can do," she said. "I plan to visit other universities such as Georgia Tech and the University of Georgia and shadow some of the faculty members. I want to see what they do and why they do it."

Shireen has received a letter of congratulation from Senator Johnny Isacson and visited with Senator



One of the science challenges Shireen Dhir might face in the Discovery Challenge Young Scientist Challenge is this experiment, which explains the Archimedes Principle.