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ISEF 2022

A year ago, I introduced you to the Regeneron International Science & Engineering Fair (ISEF at <https://www.societyforscience.org/isef/>). I wrote (archived for 5/31/21 at <https://www.murrysvillelibrary.org>) that the Society for Science, whose program this is, is “a champion for science, dedicated to expanding scientific literacy, effective STEM education and scientific research.” The Fair was entirely virtual in May 2021 because of COVID-19. In 2022 it was a complex hybrid, May 4-5 for virtual judging, week of May 9 for on-site judging and other events, in Atlanta, GA.

There were 1750 high schoolers and 1410 projects from 63 countries. There were over 450 virtual judges, including me, as well as about 275 on site in Atlanta, and more than 50 participating both ways.

Judging is hard work, a sacred responsibility to get competition outcomes right, but it is so much fun to interact with these budding scientists, and budding whatever else they may choose to become. It is so rewarding to participate with them as they learn and practice the “scientific method,” which this writer always argues is a discipline that all kids (and adults) should be learning rigorously. The world would be such a better place were that to be so, even if, unlike these ISEF kids, only the few go on to do science professionally.

The ISEF students have learned first and foremost to gather informed (meaning fact-based and rigorously obtained) information from scientific sources. Many of them are fortunate enough to have had academic mentors to guide them. They may or may not go for that information to a public Library. They may go to an academic Library or a corporate Library. They may read through print materials stored on shelves, or they may go to on-line resources. But, they will go to informed, fact-based resources to find a basis for the research idea that is in mind or for procedures for preparation of samples and measurement of properties.

I was so struck this time as a judge that the kids took the resourcing of preparation and measuring methods as so automatic that they never commented on the literature sources that they used, sources that were always there for me to see at the end of written documentations. Automatic! Maybe that is a positive sign.

This year, I judged twelve projects, the majority from Asian and Middle East countries. In only two cases was there an interpreter present, and then only to ease the exchange amongst us occasionally. These kids speak and write in English, go back and forth to each other in different languages, while we all spoke in the language of the scientific method. The last was the true common denominator.

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My dream is that this manner of dealing with one another will become common for all, rather than the tribalism that too often comes from differing languages and cultures. I want Libraries, with their print and on-line collections and programs, to become even more fully appreciative of what an important role they play if only to help enrich life with the scientific method, in its broadest sense.

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