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Eugene Kane | In My Opinion

No matter the ZIP code, kids can e-x-c-e-l

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If you have ever participated in one as a child, you know spelling bees can be nerve-rattling. Even if you think you know how to spell the word, you can never be exactly sure.

Sounding the word out doesn't always work. Think about "*handkerchief*," Or "*silhouette*" or "*larynx*."

See what I mean?

Spelling bees are on my mind after recently serving as the official "pronouncer" for the ninth annual spelling bee for the City of Milwaukee Housing Authority.

About 30 young people from various housing projects in Milwaukee, including Hillside and Parklawn, participated for prizes and T-shirts in a competition designed to increase their vocabulary and deliver some personal pride.

The spelling bee was held at a north side community center at 650 W. Reservoir Ave. Low income housing projects in the central city are not usually considered the natural environment for spelling bees, but looks can be deceiving.

Darrell Finch, an education specialist for the City of Milwaukee Housing Authority, has been involved with the housing authority's education initiative that encourages better grades for students in public housing through a series of programs. He said the annual spelling bee was a large part of that initiative.

"I look at it as a form of building the kids' self-esteem," said Finch, who served as moderator. "It's also about getting more parental involvement in their lives."

The spelling bee was open to sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders who live in public housing. During the competition, students competed to correctly spell words from a series of reading lists in front of an audience of about 60 people. After a slow start, the spelling bee quickly turned into a pitched battle between the young competitors as they advanced with a mixture of confidence and surprise by correctly spelling words they probably were not that familiar with in everyday life.

(Like "*mercurial*" for example.)

As official pronouncer, my job was to select words for the kids to spell from the prepared list. Due to Milwaukee's bad reputation when it comes to educating minority children, I initially found myself picking the easiest words from the list to make sure nobody was embarrassed. But I soon realized these young people were more than prepared for the challenge.

One after another, they rose to the occasion.

"*Incautious.*"

"*Mischievous.*"

"*Allotment.*"

Warm applause and proud smiles from assembled parents greeted many of the young participants as they progressed from round to round. Even those eliminated experienced the kind of recognition many young people in the central city never get unless they are playing sports.

Finch said he understood why I assumed spelling might be difficult for some of the kids from low-income situations. "I was like you the first year I did it." But he doesn't think that attitude should prevail.

"These kids are really interested in lots of areas other than sports," he said. "I think if more parents were involved, we could see the kids involved in all kinds of different programs."

First place spelling bee winners were Khadimou Fall for sixth grade, Angel Parker for seventh grade and Cherish Hayes for eighth grade. The most valuable part of the event was the reminder that some kids are judged by where they live instead of the potential they possess.

The correct word for that kind of thing, I believe, is "*underestimate.*"

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