



Laura Smit Emerald

Rachel Bonin, competing in poetry, original essay and photography for the Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics, listens to her mentor, Bill Sweet.

# ACT-SO program educates youth

With 25 areas of interest, ACT-SO was designed to further the academic talents of black students

By Lindsay Buchele  
Oregon Daily Emerald

When University freshman Rayna Luvert speaks, she commands attention.

When asked what an oratory competition requires, she responded quickly with subtle hand gestures, solid eye contact and a deliberate, engaging tone of voice.

"We have to develop our own speeches and base them around a topic that will be powerful enough to draw in the audience and the judges," she said. "Engaging the judges and getting a response out of them is the most important part of the competition." Luvert developed her oratory skills while in high school by competing in the Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics, a program designed to draw out the academic talents of black high school students. ACT-SO held a progress meeting Saturday at Adams Elementary School.

Luvert participated in the ACT-SO program during all four years of her high school career. Her parents, Henry and Abrella Luvert, were head of the Eugene branch of the program, which is sponsored and run by the NAACP. Her speech on the necessity of Black History Month took her all the way to the ACT-SO National Competition.

"This program takes someone who has potential and builds that potential up," Luvert said. "Black students have the opportunity to excel in a category they love."

The ACT-SO program includes 25 categories of competition in the sciences, humanities, performing and visual arts and business. Some of the activities include architecture, drawing, painting, oration, original essay, entrepreneurship, musical composition and biology.

The Eugene chapter has enrolled 35 Lane County students in the competitive program this year. The program organizers are all volunteers.

Students in the program aim to place high enough in the local competition to make it to the national one, which was originally held in Portland, Ore. This year's competition will be held in New Orleans, La.

The experience of the national competition, and the program as a whole, is nothing but supportive of each youth's talent, Luvert said.

"It's a supportive environment, in the fact that in between big competitions, even people competing against each other are con-

stantly encouraging one another," Luvert said.

One unique aspect of the program is its attempt to engage community members as mentors to the students involved in the competition.

Mentor Charles Dalton, former Eugene NAACP president, said being a mentor is all about giving encouragement to students.

"It can't hurt to be a mentor; it's always helpful," Dalton said.

Jacoby Black, a high school sophomore at Marist High School, said he wouldn't be able to compete if it weren't for his mentors. Black's mother, Serita Black, and his aunt, Yvonne Stubbs, are his mentors in the oratory and drawing categories.

"I wish there had been someone to help me this way when I was younger," Stubbs said. "Mentors in this program are helping to bring out the positive African-American youth in our society."

Most of the mentors are professionals and professors who excel in specific subjects. Bill Sweet, a literature and writing professor at Lane Community College, has been mentoring in the ACT-SO program for five years. Sweet, who is mentoring a student in the poetry competition, said the mentors are there strictly for guidance.

"The work is entirely the students,'" Sweet said. "Our job is to look over their shoulders and give them a push if they need it."

Luvert, who can no longer take part in the competition because she is now a University student, decided to continue in the program by becoming a mentor.

"It's important to know that you don't just take part in this program and then move on," Luvert said. "It stays with you forever. My becoming a mentor shows how it all comes together."

Luvert will be mentoring Linnea Levenson, a sophomore at Sheldon High School, who got involved in the program after she offended some people at the National Association Advancement of Colored People Freedom Fund Dinner last November.

"I was discussing white privilege, and I could tell that some of the audience members took offense to what I was saying," Levenson said.

She decided she would focus her speech for the oratory competition on how the media and society put pressure on blacks to be "more white."

"I want to show people that society has been messing up peoples' perception of African-Americans," Levenson said. "Even African-Americans can't see their own beauty."

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