

Students discuss ACT-SO

By Pam Smith

At the final Portland ACT-SO competition, sponsored by the national NAACP, the judges and the ACT-SO committee chose not to award any gold medals. Their reason was that no student, of all the four major categories, met the criteria set for receiving a gold medal. This criteria, which was given to the participants only the night before at dress rehearsal was to obtain a score of 90 points or more in order to be eligible for a gold medal award, with an all-expense paid trip to compete in the national competition held in Denver, Colorado.

Two weeks ago, the *Observer* spoke with Commissioner Gladys McCoy, Chairperson of the ACT-SO committee and with Lucious Hicks, President of the Portland chapter of the NAACP.

This week participating students express their concerns and expressions.

Alisa Webb of Washington/Monroe High School was a participant in the Humanities category. This was one of the categories that was given no recognition in the awards part of the final performances. She talks about the judging system: "I didn't find out about the 90 point system until the night before the competition and I still thought that there was going to be a first, second and third award in each category, and so did all the other students. Nobody had that 90 point system in mind."

Corey Pritchette of Benson High School was one of two students awarded bronze medals in the area of performing arts. Corey was also a participant in last year's national competitions. He says, "I think that there is a misunderstanding about what nationals are all about. Last year I had the opportunity to go to Miami Beach and compete in the national competition and there were just average high school students from all over the nation. I think that here in Portland they look at nationals as being professional. But there are just average students from all over the nation...some are good...some are average." Corey went on to express his feelings about the judges. "Last year the judges had a different perspective. They knew what the ACT-SO competitions were all about. This year the judges were professors and doctors coming cold to judge."

Alisa Webb continues along the same line saying that the judges could not relate to what was happening.

John Mays, an ESAA counselor and an ACT-SO coach supported his feelings that there was a breakdown in communication somewhere. "I knew one of the judges and after the program I asked her what was going on and she said, 'Honey, I'm a judge and I don't know what's going on.'"

Cindy Phillips who was awarded the highest medal given that evening said that the judges' averaging was unfair. She explains most of her individual scores were in the 90s, but once they were all averaged together, it came out lower.

Mr. Mays explains his feelings on the 90 point system. "There is no information that I have received mentioning the point system. There is nothing that says anywhere that the judges had at their discretion the power to give only a second and third. The information that I have is all that has been sent out."

Some students expressed their disappointment at what happened

the night of the performances.

Gloria Dempsey of Wilson High School said, "I received one of those sheets at dress rehearsal the night before, but I still thought that there was going to be a 1st, 2nd, and 3rd prizes in each of the four major categories." After seeing Cindy Phillips' (Silver medal winner) performance, she said that she didn't expect to win a gold medal, but she was disappointed because Cindy didn't receive what she deserved.

Denise Haret, also of Wilson was a participant in the Visual Arts category. "My category wasn't even shown or anything. All they did was mention our names at the beginning of the program and we stood up. I was kind of disappointed because I thought that this whole thing was set up for young Black students; to give them a chance to express their art, or give them a chance to show what they had learned, or a gift that they possessed. Then the next thing you knew...it just flopped! and then Mrs. McCoy stands up there and says that no one was good enough to go to nationals. I was just really disappointed...so were a lot of other people. Then the MC tells everyone to drive home safely and everyone turns around and start growling because no one understood what was going on."

Kahlil Tanner, a vocalist in the performing category, said that he felt like he had done it all for nothing...that he practiced for no reason at all. Alisa Webb sadly explains: "It wasn't fair because it took a lot of time, effort and hard work, and it took away from other things such as school work."

Gloria Stewart, an ESAA counselor at Roosevelt and a mother of a participating student, explains her frustrations. "They told ESAA counselors to push for excellence, to make sure kids participate. The kids gave up time, effort and energy; and now the counselors' credibility is questionable because the ACT-SO program didn't follow through on their guidelines and we pushed the program."

Speaking as a mother of a student involved in the competition, Mrs. Stewart said her daughter asked if lack of money caused the committee to not fulfill its promise to send a student to the national competition. She said she told her daughter that something will be done; that the ACT-SO committee will have to give accountability even if it's just a statement because we all deserve it."

Parents seem to be just as disturbed by the happenings as the students are. Alisa said that her mother told her that next year she shouldn't get involved if only three awards were going to be given out with so many students involved. Donnie said, "My mother was hot! When I told her what happened, she said, 'I don't understand. They're supposed to be helping our young Black students bring out their potential...and then the next thing you know, they're doing something like that. My mother thought that by the program being sponsored by the NAACP it would do something other than put down students...she was really disappointed.'"

The future of ACT-SO is questioned by this year's competitors. "I won't participate next year unless they make clear, definite, specific rules beforehand for judging," explains Alisa. Cindy Phillips says that even though they didn't keep their commitments she would participate next year but only because she plans to go to college and needs all the money and experience she can get.

Corey Pritchett says it is likely that he will participate, but only because he has been involved with the program before. "I have to give some strong thought to participating next year because I don't want to go through the same thing that I went through this year. I don't want to put a lot of effort into something that may turn out to be nothing." Gloria Stewart says that the future of the ACT-SO program looks hazy. "Students are kind of funny, especially if you make a promise to them and then don't keep it."

The future of the Portland ACT-SO competitions does look bleak indeed, especially when compared to other cities. For example, Des Moines, Iowa sent 10 students from 11 major categories to compete in the national competitions.

Briefly, in retrospect, the NAACP ACT-SO program was conceived in 1978 to discover, develop and reward academic achievement for Black high school student. But according to the ACT-SO competitions held this year in Portland, the NAACP here has yet to understand their own concept.

The consensus of the students participating in this year's program is that until the sponsors of the ACT-SO program get their "ACT" together they aren't going to waste their time and effort in preparing for the competition.

The students felt this was their chance to showcase to the community, their scholastic and cultural achievements, and to be awarded for those achievements. Now, we will never know whether one of those accomplishments might have brought Portland a medal.



Velvet Fikes and Lisa Carter examine names of children murdered in Atlanta that were posted at Irving Park during African Liberation Day activities.

(Photo: Richard J. Brown)

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