

November 25, 2010

[Science fair changes lives](#)

North Country mother touts Ying Tri Region event for kids

STEPHEN BARTLETT Press-Republican

PLATTSBURGH — Mary Eileen Wood's son spent a half-hour each day in bed on his stomach, picture book in hand, determined to learn to read.

Doctors said the special-needs child would never go to college. He went to a science fair in fifth grade and, for one day, said Wood, her son wasn't broken.

"I am a mother of a kid whose life was transformed by a science fair, and I have to pay it forward," said Wood, full-time volunteer director of the Ying Tri Region Science and Engineering Fair.

POWERFUL TOOL

The Ying Tri Region Science and Engineering Fair takes place at Onondaga Community College in Syracuse March 19 and 20, 2011, for students in grades 5 through 12 from public, private and parochial schools, as well as home-schooled students.

It is lauded as a "powerful tool for advocates of pre-collegiate access to science, technology, engineering and mathematics."

The event also features the Ying Scholars Competition, which allows high-school students to compete for two \$1,000 scholarships, and the Rube Goldberg Machine Contest, an engineering event for upstate New York undergraduate and graduate students.

CELEBRATING STUDENTS

Wood travels the Tri Region's 24 counties promoting the event, which can be used as a springboard for national and international fairs.

"People need to realize, if they have children in middle and high school who like science and engineering, they will be in a place they are celebrated. They spend hours with adults and other students who like science, technology, engineering and math."

For example, students in the scholarship competition conduct oral defenses against academics

and high-ranking military officers. Students must convince judges the world will be a better place if their work is funded.

CAREER PATH

The fair helps youths with whom Mary Breyette works discover there is a world outside places such as Elizabethtown.

"This is a huge place for them to meet other teens and find out about careers they might like," said the extension educator for the Cornell University Cooperative Extension, Essex County. It just takes one interested adult."

ADULTS SPONSORS

The Ying Tri Region Science and Engineering Fair doesn't require students to have teachers as sponsors, Wood explained. Any adult can sponsor any number of children.

HELP WITH COSTS

But an obstacle for many is distance, so the fair created a rebate. "If there is a car with four registered kids, I will hand them \$50 for gas money when they show up," Wood said. "The Comfort Inn will put four kids in a room for \$25 each and feed them. We also have a church that knows not everyone has \$25 and will let them stay there for free."

The fair provides a buffet and dinner boxes.

"We have tried to make it so people can come and don't need a six-figure salary," Wood said. That's important, she said, because the fair exists so youths can discover their talent and passion. The science fair pushes the conversation from "I'm interested" to "I want to do this."

"Every kid has something he or she was meant to do," Wood said.

TRANSFORMED

Her son, seemingly trapped by his disability, terrified of people and beaten up at school for his differences, showed up at a fair. He looked at blueprints, closed his eyes and saw the machines in his head. Doctors were baffled, while engineers told him he was a natural.

"One day a year is what he used to get through the next eight years," Wood said. "I saw a child's life transformed. I saw it saved because of a chance to be in a fair. "And because of the motivation of the science fair, he saw himself around his disabilities." Today, he is in the midst of graduate work for mechanical engineering.

"No one says how big your dreams have to be," Wood said.

E-mail Stephen Bartlett at: sbartlett@pressrepublican.com