

South Florida students get creative at Fairchild showcase

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Senior Michelle Loret de Mola of Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart stood to the side of her home-cooked Peruvian Quinoa dish. She spent her Saturday explaining to judges why the dish she made was not only healthy but also environmentally friendly. "This type of food is replacing rice, or risotto, because unlike those grains, quinoa is easily digested and has high mineral and protein content," Michelle said. "It's an excellent meal for vegetarians and every ingredient is organic or locally grown and has a low impact on the environment." Michelle, along with 200 other high school students, came together at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden on Saturday afternoon for one of the Fairchild Challenge events.

The challenge, started and directed by Caroline Lewis, is in its seventh year and holds a variety of challenge options including performances, design challenges, papers, debates and research projects. For each option students throughout South Florida's private and public schools participate in, the more points they earn. The goal is to reach 900 points to receive a Fairchild Challenge Award and the school with the highest number of points receives \$1,000 to support their environmental program. Then the next five top-scoring schools will receive \$500 and the following 10 \$250.

On Saturday, students from Dade, Monroe and Broward counties participated in the Fairchild Challenge Research Project. Students from 33 participating schools could take part in four categories including inner-city sanctuary, green cuisine, solar inventions and field phenology study. But no more than one group of students or an individual from each school could participate in each of the categories.

Two students from South Plantation — Shawn Abrahams, a junior, and Vanessa Thisler, a sophomore — took part in the field phenology study.

"We chose the bald Cypress tree because of its drastic changes," Shawn said. "We found it in a park across from our school and we measured the tree for two months during the wet season and then another two months during the dry season."

They started the project in September by conducting research and figuring out what needed to be recorded. Then they began measuring in October and ended in January.

"We found out that during the dry season, the plants lost most of their leaves and their cones, and during the wet season, the plants retained everything," Shawn said. "I loved doing this project not only because of the learning experience, but because this is the field I'm hoping to go into after high school."

About 60 judges including architects, lawyers, professors, chefs and other community leaders listened to the students' results, scoring them on a judging rubric.

"We decided to make a vegan pizza," said Keith Williams, a senior from Central High School. "We used fresh-grown tomatoes from our school and made our cheese from ground-up cashews and yeast flakes. Then for the 'pepperonis,' we used sweet tomatoes mixed with pecans and garlic powder, paprika and chili pepper."

Keith presented the dish with his two friends, Hector Duran, a junior, and Greg Pierre, a sophomore.

"I love cooking," Keith said.

"This is such a hobby for me and I've learned so much by participating in this challenge and cooking green."

Four friends and classmates in Advanced Placement Environmental Science — sophomores Hector Schmidt and Jamin Alfonso and juniors Lisbet Castillo and Nancy Narvaez-Garcia from Westland Hialeah High School — participated in the inner-city sanctuary category. They designed a "pocket park" with areas for play, rest and other uses that students can enjoy at their school. They are in the process of talking with the school administration to make their design a reality at Westland High.

"We want to make the area at our school more green because right now there's only grass," Jamin said.

"We incorporated native plants like the blue iris and milkweed plants to attract butterflies. We also have a rock waterfall in the middle of our design."

And another group of students from Palmetto Senior High got together to design their own solar invention. The three freshmen, Lee Seifer, Jason Schmidt and Eddie Santos, made a solar-powered aerator filter for aquaculture by using a fish tank powered, connecting old phone cords together and activating charcoal for the filter.

"By using something like this, it would provide a food source for people in Third World countries," Jason said. "This would also help species from going extinct because those people wouldn't have to kill endangered species."

The boys also went on to say that their device harvests biofuels by growing algae. "Algae produces 15 times the amount of fuel as other biofuels," Lee said.

Lewis, Fairchild's director of education, stressed the importance of embracing not only the challenge, but the green movement that she has been working toward. The Fairchild Challenge is getting recognition and is being replicated in places like Costa Rica, Venezuela, Chicago and Orlando, yet Lewis hopes more city officials will come out to the events and support this movement.

"These students and teachers take great pride in these events and we invite city officials and the school board to come and celebrate with us," Lewis said.

“It’s their role and obligation to come out and see what these kids are doing. It’s amazing.”

On May 2, Fairchild is hosting its annual teacher celebration luncheon and Lewis is hopeful many invited officials will attend. Then on May 9 at 1 p.m., the challenge results will be announced for the high schools and 5:30 for the middle schools.

