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Issaquah 11-year-old wows state science fair

By [Michael Ko](#) and [Tan Vinh](#)
Seattle Times staff reporters

Michael Huey, head judge at last week's Washington State Science and Engineering Fair in Bremerton, recalled his first impression of Andrew Hsu standing in one of the booths — he must be saving a spot for his older brother.

After seeing Andrew's presentation, Huey said, "I came back and told the other judges, 'Every now and then, you come across a prodigy.' "

"He blew us away," said Lois Lugg, the state fair's director. "We've never had a kid that young competing in the high-school level. ... He is going to be one of our great future scientists."

Andrew, 11, of Issaquah, won the Silver Medal and became the youngest participant to be awarded a grand prize in the fair's 46 years.

Hsu and Gold Medal winner Dona Sharma, a senior at Sunnyside High in Yakima County, will be in Cleveland on May 11 to represent Washington in the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair, considered one of the nation's most prestigious pre-college science fairs.



[enlarge](#) JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Andrew Hsu won a silver medal at the Washington State Science and Engineering Fair.

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That Andrew is home-schooled initially raised eyebrows among judges over the legitimacy of his entry, titled "Identification, Characterization and DNA Sequencing of the Homo Sapiens and Mus Musculus COL20A1 Gene (Type XX Collagen) with Bioinformatics and Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR)."

After two rounds of interviews, the panel was convinced it was his.

Andrew's project involved examining the genetic makeup of humans and mice and isolating a building-block protein found in both, the COL20A1. Understanding its location is the first step in solving other genetic riddles associated with the protein, such as mutations and diseases, and also potential cures.



[enlarge](#) JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Andrew Hsu keeps a poster in his work area of Albert Einstein, his idol. "He's made so many discoveries and he's such a deep thinker. I want to be like him," said Andrew, 11, who hopes to attend Harvard next year.

In the fourth grade, Issaquah School District teachers didn't know how to keep Andrew from being bored, and decided to put him in a separate room with advanced math and science books for a few days.

Andrew said he felt "lonely," so his parents opted to try home-schooling.

"We just provided a lot of materials, lots of books," said David Hsu, 43, a software engineer who makes educational videos. "We took him to the science center, the aquarium, so he could be stimulated from different angles.

"If you meet my son, you will see he comes up with most of his own ideas. We basically don't get involved too much."

The books Andrew is reading now: "David Copperfield," by Charles Dickens; Matt Ridley's "Genome;" and the "Pocket Guide to Prescription Drugs."

"I have a special interest for it that other people don't, I guess," Andrew said. "The genome makes up who we are as humans. I find that very interesting."

University of Washington medical professor, Dr. Peter Byers, who assisted Andrew with the project, said it's graduate-level work.

Andrew's parents, David and Joyce, who immigrated from Taiwan in the mid-1980s, didn't really know what to make of their first-born son.

At 2, he was assembling Legos into giant robots as tall as he was. At 6, he was mastering multiplication and reading Daniel Defoe. At 9, he was taking high-school French.



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He studies about four hours a day, spends a couple more in a UW lab. In his spare time, he plays with his younger brothers, Patrick, also 11, and Benjamin, almost 3. All the boys are home-schooled.

Andrew, almost 12, also is a member of Pacific Northwest Swimming in Issaquah and swims about 1-1/2 hours every weekday. He has posted in the group's top four times in six events for his age group.

Andrew said he wants to go to college next year at Harvard. His parents are worried about what that will mean for them and the rest of the family.

"I don't know what to expect. It's kind of a headache for me," David Hsu said. "It's very tough to move. But if he goes, there's no way he can go by himself."

He shares another unexpected burden of being a prodigy's father — driving to Barnes and Noble, "more times than I'm willing to go."

"He's just a kid. ... I don't think he thinks a lot about his future," David Hsu said. "He says, 'I want to get two Ph.D.s and two Nobel prizes,' but every time he says that, I say, 'You're bragging.' "

But, his father said, "I hope someday he can cure some disease. I feel strongly about that. For example, Alzheimer's. For example, AIDS. For example, some genetic disease. It will be great if he can do that."

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