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MVTHS grads win Nat'l competition

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. — For four straight years a Mt. Vernon Township High School team has won the 3-D visualization and animation state title.

Now, the school has made its mark nationally when 2008 MVTHS graduates and Illinois state champions Kolten McCulley and Austan Skidmore earned the silver medal in the national 3-D visualization and animation competition recently at the 44th National



Sentinel Photo/DAVID BELCHER

NATIONAL COMPETITORS — Kolten McCulley, LEFT, and Austan Skidmore, 2008 Mt. Vernon Township High School graduates, won second-place in the nation in 3-D visualization and animation at the 44th SkillsUSA National Leadership Conference. The national competitors pose with their Illinois state championship trophy, which advanced them to the national competition in Kansas City, Mo.

Please see **Champions**, Page 3A

Champions:

Continued From Page 1A

Leadership Conference.

"What these two young men and their instructor have been able to accomplish this year in the classroom, and at local and state competitions alone, is astounding," according to a MVTHS statement. "To travel all the way to Kansas City, Mo., and not only compete at the national level, but to bring home a second-place finish is nothing short of outstanding."

"This event mimics the real world production environment where creative output must be accomplished within specific time frames, resources and design constraints. This is a two-person team event. Contestants must produce high quality images and an animated short subject using 3-D computerized images. Students are tested on their technical knowledge, production skills and creative/artistic abilities; take a preliminary written exam and complete storyboarding [visual planning]."

"It's great. It's pretty nice to win second-place in the nation," McCulley said.

"It feels great," Skidmore said.

In the competition, the young men were given a picture of a room from one angle. Their assignment was to recreate the room by designing all the angles in nine hours.

McCulley said worrying that they would get it done on time was their biggest challenge.

Both men said their second-place finish was higher than they were expecting.

Next fall, McCulley said he hopes to go to college, but he is not sure which one.

Skidmore plans to go to Rend Lake College to pursue a 3-D design career.

"This is a validation of our instructor, our students and our program," Mt. Vernon Area Vocational Center Director Rob Knutson said. "What they did at the local and state level was great. But, they had to go head-to-head with the best in the nation in Kansas City. This is where employers and schools go to find the best and smartest minds in the nation."

SkillsUSA is a "showcase of career and technical education students," according to a SkillsUSA statement.

It is the national-level competition for public high school and college/postsecondary technical students enrolled in trade, technical and skilled service profession instructional programs, according to a SkillsUSA statement.

Over 14,000 students, teachers, education leaders, and representatives from more than 1,100 national corporations, trade associations, businesses and labor unions attended the event, according to the statement. There were over 5,000 students in 91 contests.

Each student at the event was a state-level gold medalist.

Making the parade of championships even more remarkable is MVTHS has only had a 3-D visualization and animation class, which provides students with fundamental knowledge of 3-D drawing, for six years — meaning, in addition to its second-place national finish, MVTHS has placed in the top three statewide in five of the six years it has been eligible to compete.

Gary Hatfield, MVTHS vocational drafting teacher, said there are three parts of teaching 3-D visualization and animation. He begins with modeling, creating types of design using geometry and modifying methods to creators.

"They are a very good team," Hatfield said of McCulley and Skidmore. "They both have very good creative minds. They tend to be very meticulous in set-up. They are very disciplined not only in their creativity, but also working within the set time they have to prepare their configuration. They were

so successful because they work well together. They both have a strange sense of humor."

In explaining the school's success over the years, Hatfield praised the school administration for "standing behind the program." Further, he said he has received support "from a lot of parents" over the years.

The school's first 3-D class had 12 students. There will be over 20 students in each of the class' two sections next year, according to Hatfield.

Hatfield does not claim to be an easy teacher. "I make the kids work. I tell them there are no free rides. I live up to my responsibility to teach them there is a certain amount of good discipline in this and I think they like that."

By providing his students with demanding tests, he said that prepares them to study for demanding tests.

Hatfield said he tries to do in class projects similar to what is done in the "real world." Yet, he said he also tries to give the students "enough room to be creative."

He said 3-D design acumen may lead to careers in such fields as animation, movie production or video game production.

"3-D is really big on the East and West Coast, much more than in the Midwest," according to Hatfield.

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