

HUHS students win nationals at SkillsUSA competition

Four friends grew closer working toward victory

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HARTFORD — Four Hartford Union High School students placed first in the nation in a TeamWorks multiple day event at the SkillsUSA National Leadership Conference held in Atlanta last week.

The first-place, four-member team of HUHS students, consisting of Lilly Feucht, Jamison Duehring, Bradin Luedke and Charlie Oehldrich, was told it won the competition in front of a packed State Farm Arena in Atlanta, with a blaring crowd, in what became a very emotional moment for the students.

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From left: HUHS students Charlie Oehldrich, Jamison Duehring, Lilly Feucht and Bradin Luedke on stage in the State Farm Arena at the SkillsUSA National Leadership Conference held in Atlanta, being awarded medals after learning they had won first place in the TeamWorks competition.

Photo courtesy of Nicky Feucht

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Before the announcement, the three top teams were invited on stage not knowing where they had placed.

"It honestly doesn't feel real," Feucht said. "It hasn't really sunk in, and I don't know if it ever will. I was crying. We were all crying. When they called second place, we were like, 'Oh my gosh. This is happening.' That's when I broke down in tears."

The emotional experience was shared by the students' HUHS teacher and adviser, Mark Murphy, along with family who attended the event.

"I couldn't be more excited," said Murphy. "This is a big thing. There are 110 events. We're up against something like 40 competitors in TeamWorks. When Wisconsin was one of the three finalists in TeamWorks, we were just ecstatic. I knew I had a special team going down, but I thought, 'Third place would be awesome.' Then they announced the third-place winners. And then second place. And you could just see the students' faces light up. Then we all just blew up. It was amazing."

The competition ran from Tuesday through Thursday and involved students planning out and building a multitiered structure with complex electrical, roofing, plumbing and brick work, according to Murphy.

Two other HUHS students also attended the national conference and took part in other competitions. Harsh Patel took fourth place in Aviation Maintenance and Jon Brown earned eighth place in Electronics Technology.

Building a team

In 2019, Murphy led a group of students who won third place at state for the TeamWorks competition. But then COVID-19 hit, he said, and competitions were put on hold. This was the first year since the pandemic that HUHS students have competed in SkillsUSA.

This winning group of four students had previously won state in April, Murphy said.

Before that, they bonded while working on this year's VISION house, which Murphy also advises.

The Hartford Rotary Club broke ground on its 24th VISION home build in collaboration with HUHS last fall. Students from HUHS's Vocational Instruction Supporting Individual Occupation Needs (VISION) program built the house throughout this last school year. The VISION program provides vocational training that helps students design and build a house in the community.

"I've been working with these kids since they were freshmen and sophomores," Murphy said. "Their training and progress and everything they did on the VISION house just led to everything they did at nationals at SkillsUSA."



Photo courtesy of Nicky Feucht

From left to right: Harsh Patel (4th place Aviation Maintenance), Bradin Luedke (1st place Teamworks), Lilly Feucht (1st place Teamworks), Mark Murphy (adviser), Jamison Duehring (1st place Teamworks), Charlie Oehldrich (1st place Teamworks), Jon Brown (8th Place Electronics Technology). All six students competed at the SkillsUSA National Leadership Conference in Atlanta.

The four students were already friends, but they became closer while working on the VISION house, Feucht said.

Three of the students, Feucht, Duehring, and Luedke, were driven to compete in TeamWorks, according to Murphy, and they convinced Oehldrich to come on board. Oehldrich, whose dad is an electrician, had done a lot of the electrical work on the VISION house and his skills were valuable to the overall team.

"That's the key to TeamWorks," Murphy said. "Having four students that have an overarching view of everything so they can help and assist on each individual section but also having some specialty knowledge was really valuable for them."

Murphy said Duehring is good at brick work, Oehldrich has electrician skills and Luedke took on the challenge of plumbing work. Feucht was an assist with the framing, said Murphy, but she also led the roofing work in the competition.

"As much as they worked together, they were able to be independent and work on their own as well," Murphy said.

The competition

The SkillsUSA TeamWorks event is a multiday skills test that challenges students to build a specific structure and complete various tasks, such as electrical and roofing work, within a specific amount of time and at a high-quality level.

This year's challenge was a two-tiered project, according to Murphy, who said students

had to frame walls, install a roof over a portion of the structure, run electrical through a couple of areas, including installing a breaker panel and wiring a dryer outlet. Students also had to do plumbing, venting and some brick work on the structure, Murphy said.

On the first day, students went through an orientation and had to present a management plan for how they would progress through the various challenges. For the next two days, on Wednesday and Thursday last week, students put in full eight-hour days to build, Murphy said.

"It was exhausting," Feucht said. "It was very, very hard."

There was a considerable amount of physical stress associated with the multiday competition, Feucht said. The group felt good after the first build day, Feucht said, despite being tired. But after lunch on the second day of building, Feucht said she and her teammates were exhausted and dehydrated and nervous about finishing on time.

Despite the physical stress, the four worked together to finish and earned first place in the competition. And they were presented with medals under the lights of the State Farm Arena in front of a huge crowd.

All four students plan to go into the trades when they graduate, according to Feucht, who said she plans to go into finish carpentry and she finds motivation in being able to see change happening as she works on a project.

"I like making things look nice," Feucht said. "When it comes to that, I'm definitely a perfectionist."