



Ann Kromsky

Corona girl wows best in science

By Patricia A. Gonzalez
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CORONA

Talking to Ivy League professors and Nobel prize winners was a breeze for 17-year-old Ann Kromsky.

"We were in the same level," said Kromsky, a 17-year-old senior from Corona High School.

She had just returned Monday afternoon from Washington, D.C., where she was honored as one of the recipients of a \$10,000 scholarship from the Westinghouse Science Talent Search. A professor who assisted her with her project called the award the "Nobel prize for high school students."

The professors and top scientists in Washington "asked really hard questions on science to see how you are thinking," she said. "The questions are not exactly related to my project but were designed to see how well rounded I was in science. All this work paid off."

Kromsky, who moved to California four years ago from the former Soviet Union, was one of four who won a \$10,000 scholarship awarded Sunday. Her project, "A Computational Model of Child Memory: Memory Acquisition without Biological Constraints," questioned long-held notions about how children speak.

The first-place award, a \$40,000 scholarship, went to Christopher Colin Mihelich of Indiana. His project was based on theoretical physics questions.

To be a finalist in the national program is a true honor, said Curt Burgess, the University of California, Riverside, associate professor who helped Kromsky with her project.

"Quite a few Nobel laureates got their start with this program," Burgess said. "It makes me rethink what I should expect from college students."

Kromsky's project involved feeding to a computer words said by children ages 2 to 6 that were recorded by researchers at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Kromsky obtained the information through the Internet. In total, the computer analyzed 1.7 million words, creating a vocabulary of 6,000 distinct words.

The project challenged linguists' belief that children's ability to learn language has a biological background: that children have an inborn disposition to learn it. If that were true, then the computer would not have been able to learn a new language and develop its vocabulary, Kromsky said.

Kromsky's mother, Marina, spoke about her oldest daughter with pride.

"She never thought she was above average," said Marina Kromsky, who works as a seamstress. "Her English teacher in Russia said she loved her because she learned so fast."

The news of Kromsky's award was not a surprise to her teachers, who described her as a hard-working student.

"We wish we could clone her," Corona High School Principal Karen Pylman said of Kromsky. "She has done some extraordinary things. It makes us feel really special."

Monday afternoon Kromsky took deep breaths as she spoke of the "selective group" of Ivy League professors that judged her project. She said she was honored to have met the most brilliant scientists in the world.

"The questions (they) were asking were just mind blowing," Kromsky said. "They were asking unanswerable questions about the future of science. I got a lot of feedback from my project from elementary school teachers to Harvard professors."