Youth triumphs in Brain Bee battle
Winner headed to Baltimore

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WORCESTER — If you know what chemical signals can help
neurons determine in what direction they have to grow on a
developing brain — and you’re a teenager — you could’ve won
Saturday’s Central Massachusett's regional Brain Bee, an
annual competition designed to encourage high school students
to learn about the brain and to pursue careers in neuroscience.
The real winner, though, 14-year-old Snigdha Allaparthi, an-
swered more questions correctly about the genetics and chem-
istry of neurological diseases than about 90 competitors from
12 local high schools who participated in Saturday’s event at
UMass Medical School, sponsored by its Department of Psy-
chiatry.

Ms. Allaparthi, a freshman at Lexington High School, is possi-
ibly the youngest winner on record here, according to
organizers.

Clasping her award and flanked by students and parents offering congratulations, and
by her mom Salilaya Allaparthi, a UMass Medical School grad-
uate, Ms. Allaparthi explained, “I came for the experience, so no matter what would’ve hap-
pened, I would’ve been happy.”

But she worked incredibly hard to get there, having spent
more than six months studying topics in neuroscience for hours
every day.

Ms. Allaparthi was one of 10 finalists — eight girls and two
boys — who qualified for a final oral exam by scoring the high-
est on a written exam earlier in the afternoon. During the writ-
ten portion, students identified neurological diseases, like Al-
zheimer’s, Parkinson’s, or schizophrenia, based on inter-
views with UMass Medical residents, who volunteered to act
like patients.

The students also identified parts of the brain on a model, and described their function.

Half the finalists hailed from Lexington High School, Massa-
chusetts Academy of Math and Science at Worcester Polytech-
nic Institute, Millbury Memori-
al Junior/Senior High School,
David Prouty High School and
Wayland High School.

Five of them, proudly wear-
ing their school logo, were part
of an eight-student team from
Grafton High School.

The finalists were an-
nounced one-by-one to a lecture
hall of nearly 70 students, par-
ents, siblings, teachers and
medical school staff. They sat in
a row at the front of the lecture
hall and answered questions
that got progressively harder
from Brain Bee Director and
event emcee Sheldon Benjamin,
head of neuropsychiatry at the
medical school.

“This is the most fun thing I
do all year,” Dr. Benjamin said.
The competitors were a little
more nervous, though. One fi-
nalist, 16-year-old Grafton
High School 10th grader, Yvonne
Nguyen, said after the event, “I
was shaking the whole time.”
She was disqualified halfway
through the hour-long oral com-
petition for incorrectly answer-
ing three questions.

But she’s undeterred. Ms.
Nguyen is planning to try the
Brain Bee again next year, and
after high school, she’ll proba-
ably study emergency medicine
or neuroscience, she said.

Ms. Allaparthi will also go on
to study medicine, she said, but
first, UMass Medical School will
pay for her to travel to Balti-
more to compete with winners
from 46 regions, including Bos-
ton, in the national Brain Bee
there in March. The winner of
that event will compete inter-
nationally.

UMass has hosted the central
region competition for nine
years. The Brain Bee, a national
program, was founded in 1999.