## *By Rick Abasta*







## *Sun Correspondent*

The 2017-2018 McKinley County Spelling Bee went for 23 rounds before TaSheena Thompson, an eighth grader at Gallup Middle School, was declared the winner after correctly spelling the word “trespasser.”

The district spelling bee was held at the Kenneth Halloway Auditorium at Gallup High School. Three judges sat at a table front and center of the stage and the pronouncer, Wade Bell, Gallup McKinley County Schools Director of Instruction, sat at the podium left of the stage.

Thompson and second place contestant Jerome Rabaya, a fifth grader from Red Rock Elementary, will represent the district at the New Mexico Spelling Bee at Sandia Preparatory School in Albuquerque on March 24.

Thompson said she has been participating in spelling bees since the third grade and that she has qualified for the state spelling bee since fourth grade. Her confidence showed on stage, where she often spelled her words quickly and with conviction.

Her message to aspiring spellers: “Read more.”

A member of the Navajo Nation, Thompson said she is Tábąąhá (Water’s Edge Clan), born for Tsi’naajinii (Black Streaked Wood People). Her maternal grandfathers are Kinyaa’áanii (Towering House People) and ’Áshįįhí (Salt People) are paternal grandfathers.

Thompson resides in Twin Lakes, N.M. with her parents, Melinda and Emerson.

“Her first time participating in the spelling bee was in second grade,” Melinda said. “From there, she pushed herself to win and read a lot.”

Thompson’s family studied with her for at least three hours during the week and for 10 hours on weekends. Tashina is the eldest of four children and the only daughter. She plays point guard on the school basketball team.

On the court or off, she is a competitor.

Competing at the state spelling bee four consecutive years has captured the attention of many. Last year, she placed seventh from a field of 85 and placed ninth the year before. This year is her last opportunity to reach national competition.

TaSheena’s family supports her dreams of competing in the National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C., where she could follow the footsteps of another young Navajo woman who found herself on the national stage.

On April 6, 1991, Velma Kee became the first Navajo to win the Arizona Spelling Bee and went on to compete at the national spelling bee. She went through six rounds and tied for fourth place from a field of 277 contestants.

Thompson has a chance to become the first Navajo to win the Scripts National Spelling Bee, which is celebrating its 90th year of competition.

The second place winner for the McKinley County Spelling Bee was equally excited to compete and move on to the next level of competition.

“I was nervous. But I felt calm and relaxed at the end of the round,” Rabaya said.

His parents, Joseph and Amelia, said their son has been competing since the third grade.

“He missed last year because we went back to the Philippines,” Joseph said.

Jerome studies spelling with his family anywhere between 30 minutes to an hour each day. Although he is a good speller, his favorite subject in school is math.

“Reach for your dreams and never give up,” he said as a message to future spellers.

Thirty-one students from 16 schools competed in the McKinley County Spelling Bee this year. The Elementary Principals Association organized the competition.

Cindy Arsenault, principal at Crownpoint Elementary School and Jeff Hartog, principal at Stagecoach Elementary School coordinated the spelling bee.

The competition began with a practice round consisting of words like “made,” “show,” “ring” and others.

The first official round began with the word “vampire.”

Competition was stiff through six rounds. By the seventh round, only three students remained and they battled head-to-head for 13 rounds until third place contestant, Joshua Jones, a seventh grader form Rehoboth Christian School, stumbled on the word “memorandum.”

In round 21, Thompson misspelled “whittle” and Rabaya misspelled “sustenance,” so they moved on to the next round.

In round 22, Thompson spelled “lading” and Rabaya misspelled “mouthiness.” In round 23, Thompson spelled “trespasser” for the win.

“The kids did a phenomenal job representing our county. The state spelling bee will send two students from New Mexico to compete at the national spelling bee,” Arsenault said.

“Never give up, even when life’s hard. Always try,” she said.

C-O-N-G-R-A-T-U-L-A-T-I-O-N-S!