

Two UNM-Gallup students place fourth at SkillsUSA nationals

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Two students from The University of New Mexico-Gallup nearly earned bronze medals in the 2023 SkillsUSA National Leadership and Skills Conference in Atlanta in June while a third student placed in the top 10 of their division.

Kayliegh Begay, who graduated in May from McKinley Academy and UNM-Gallup with an associate degree in general studies, placed fourth in the high school Pin Design category. David Moreno, a general studies student at UNM-Gallup, placed fourth in the college Job Skill Demonstration Open category.

“I’m mad,” Begay said of her result. “Fourth is good, but I’m competitive. I wish I could have

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placed third.”

Begay earned a score of 97.7 out of 100 points, so she was only .3 points away from finishing in third and earning a bronze medal. Her presentation focused on her painted design, which depicted hot-air balloons taking flight over the red rocks in the Churchrock area at sunset — all set within the outline of a Route 66 sign.

Moreno was also close to earning bronze in his category with 96 points. For his presentation, Moreno demonstrated his skill with nunchaku technique, which is a traditional Okinawan martial arts weapon form.

“This was the first time I did Skills in eight years,” Moreno said. “Ranking fourth after eight years is not too bad.”

The SkillsUSA Gallup Chapter advisors, on the other hand, were much more impressed with their students’ results.

“These are the highest places we’ve ever had, and to have two students place this high, it’s very exciting,” advisor Ann Jarvis said.

Advisor Frank Sanchez commented on Begay’s presentation in particular.

“I know (Begay’s) disappointed, but it’s just amazing,” Sanchez said. “I talked to the judges afterward and hers was one of the most memorable presentations.”

PART OF THE COMMUNITY

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The two main things that Sanchez credited for helping Begay and Moreno to perform so well at nationals were practice and community support.

The students got opportunities to perform their skills and presentations in front of the local Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, plus employees at Amigo Automotive. They also did presentations at UNM-Gallup's Zollinger Library and other UNM-Gallup staff events.

"Last year was our first year at nationals, but we never felt like our students were out of their element or out of their depth," Sanchez said. "When we got back, we talked about getting the students in front of as many groups as we can to get them practice sessions."

Jarvis noted that community members talked to students after their practice presentations to ask questions or give comments to help them make improvements.

For example, one person highlighted the fact that New Mexico is the only state with an official state aroma, which is roasting green chile. Begay highlighted that detail during her presentation by bringing a green chile scented candle with her to Atlanta.

"It helped me engage with the judges because they wanted to know what green chile smelled like," Begay said.

Moreno said his presentation was largely the same from the beginning, but the feedback from the community helped him hone his presentation by about 20%. Sanchez said it was that extra 20% that carried him to fourth place.

Jarvis said she appreciated all of the community help. She even called people soon after learning about the students' results to share the news.

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“It’s not just the UNM-Gallup SkillsUSA Chapter,” she said. “We’re part of the community up here, and our students are part of not only the UNM-G community but the greater Gallup community.”

In speaking about the community impact, Sanchez also mentioned the job skills the SkillsUSA students gain.

“I think what I am really excited about is that the community now knows and has an idea of SkillsUSA,” Sanchez said. “We know what a powerful resource it can be for this community. If we had more students involved in SkillsUSA — whether they win or not — what they develop as far as job skills is invaluable.”

BENEFITS OF SKILLSUSA

Begay and Moreno both credited their SkillsUSA experiences for helping to boost their confidence.

Begay said she’s still figuring out her higher education plans. She plans to transfer to UNM in Albuquerque for the Fall 2023 semester, but she’s deciding between pursuing a bachelor’s degree in either studio art or art education.

Either way, she said, she has found her passion for teaching people about New Mexico and interacting with people because of SkillsUSA. She said going to Atlanta was an eye-opening experience for her.

“Hearing someone say they see me as a future teacher helps me because I struggled with my academics as a kid,” Begay said. “I want to be able to go into my community and encourage them and tell them they can go further in life as long as you can put your mindset to it.”

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Moreno said he knows the extra self confidence he gained from SkillsUSA will help him as a martial arts instructor.

“I’ve had teachers and administrators who cut you down, but SkillsUSA is different,” he said. “You go out into the public and they critique you, but they build you up. You can represent not only Gallup, but the state of New Mexico.”

BUILDING CAMARADERIE

Jarvis and Sanchez added that SkillsUSA also creates camaraderie and a family relationship among students because they travel and go through such a unique experience together while competing.

“That’s why I’m coming back,” Begay said. “I’m already planning for next year.”

Although Begay will be primarily taking classes in Albuquerque, she will be taking one more online class through the Gallup branch campus, so she will be able to compete on behalf of the UNM-Gallup SkillsUSA Chapter again — but this time in the college level contest.

“I’m getting first for pin design next year,” she said.

Begay is also trying to recruit other students, including one of her younger sisters, to join SkillsUSA.

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“I think Skills is a good opportunity for high schoolers,” she said. “What you may experience on the job is something you would experience in Skills. If you’re having trouble socializing with other people or [are] scared to talk in front of a group, this would be a good experience for you.”

UNM-GALLUP SKILLSUSA CHAPTER

Dewight Leupp, who graduated in May with an Associate of Arts in liberal arts, also performed well at the national competition, placing seventh in the college Job Interview category.

Overall, the UNM-Gallup SkillsUSA Chapter took nine competitors to nationals plus three other students to assist their classmates.

The other six Gallup competitors were:

Brianna Begay, Aidan Brown and Orlan Dale, officers of the UNM-Gallup SkillsUSA Chapter who competed as a group in the college Promotional Bulletin Board category.

Gualterio Beyal Jr., a Center for Career and Technical Education fire science technology student, who competed in the high school Firefighting category.

Judith Long, a CCTE Students Achieving New Directions student, who competed in the high school Job Interview category.

Jacob Betone, a CCTE fire science technology student, who competed in the high school Action Skills category.

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To learn more about the UNM-Gallup SkillsUSA Chapter and how to become a member, email aejarvis@unm.edu.

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