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## Arden Hills student's answer strikes a chord

It's not often that a seventh-grade student is interested in debating the philosophical dichotomy of greed and giving within society, but Rebecca Johnson isn't a normal middle school student either.

The 13-year-old pianist, percussionist and composer from Arden Hills was recently recognized by Kids Philosophy Slam for submitting the "most musical entry" in the nation. Her composition, she said, reflected her stance on this year's topic: "Greed or Giving: Which has a greater impact on society?"

Her submission, which could come in the form of an essay, art, poetry or compositional form, was pinned against thousands of other students across the country.

Using her years of piano lessons, Johnson created and composed a one-and-a-half-minute melody that explained her response to the multifaceted question. Her answer to the weighty question of greed and giving? That greed and giving coexist, for better or for worse, and we cannot have one without the other.

"If there wasn't as much greed, there wouldn't be giving," Johnson said. "And giving sometimes has greed behind it."

She said she created her musical composition -- called "Bittersweet Sunset" -- to reflect the joy of giving and the darkness of greed.

"The major field has a happy-ish kind of feeling to it -- more giving. But the minor field gives more of a darker touch to it, like greed," Johnson said.

The complex melody seems mature beyond the capacities of a "seventh- going on eighth-grader," but when asked how Johnson created such a profound tune, she answered, "I just sit down and start noodling around."

In total, it took her three days to put together the tune on her piano.

Johnson's entry was fostered and developed through her school's philosophy group, led by Highview Middle School teacher Tim Iverson. Iverson -- who has led a philosophy group for a decade years -- began a relationship with Kids Philosophy Slam program five years ago, and has submitted dozens of student entries to the organization over that time.

Two other Highview Middle School students placed in the competition this year: Audrey Kristufek took fifth place and Kelly Catlin received an honorable mention, in the running for "The Most Philosophical 7th Grader in America."

Johnson became involved in the philosophy group in sixth grade.

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"She is one of my top students, always reading, always thinking about important topics, yet she likes to have fun too," Iverson said.

"She's the type that when I walk into the lunch room, her and her friends are always sitting, reading books and multitasking."

Multitasking is an understatement.

Aside from winning national philosophy competitions, Johnson said she enjoys reading, writing, composing, researching, volunteering at her church and attending all of her classes at school. She also said she has her high school classes already mapped out, two years in advance.

But despite Johnson's academic maturity, the depth of her Kids Philosophy Slam entry even surprised Iverson.

"It was a beautiful composition," Iverson said. "I think that her final composition reflected the contrast between the two main themes: the giving and the greed. Her intensity and dedication really came through."

Kathryn Nelson is a Twin Cities area freelance writer.

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