Model UN teaches lifelong learning

By Janice Penix

Russellville High School's Model United Nations team continues to excel at competitions around the state and region.

The team recently won second place for best delegation at the 25th annual Mid-South Model UN at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tenn. Russellville competed against 19 schools from Tennessee, Arkansas, Alabama and Mississippi.

Individual students who earned awards included Lynnsey Molinaro, outstanding delegate; Grace Yokem, outstanding delegate; Sean Morell, honorable mention best delegate; Chris Evans, honorable mention best delegate; and Meagan Schumacher, honorable mention best delegate.

According to Paul Gray, RHS social studies teacher and adviser for the Model UN team, schools from the four-state area represented 300 delegations in the mock United Nations competition.

The mid-south competition is one of three RHS regularly competes at each year. Others include the Arkansas Model UN at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, and a competition at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro.

In March, the high school team will host a competition at Arkansas Tech University for middle-school and junior-high teams from around the state.

Gray has worked with the Model UN team for 12 years.

Teams sign up for the countries they wish to represent prior to each competition. Then, the host institution assigns topics for the teams to research and prepare to debate on at the competition, Gray said.

"It's some pretty deep stuff," he said. "It's pretty amazing what they come up with."

Students also write resolutions based on their research and present and defend the resolutions before various committees.

Gray said the students must research the topics themselves as well as how each particular country would respond to the topics.

"One of the most important things they do is stay in character," Gray said. "They're supposed to take on the values and beliefs of the country they're representing. That's where most of the learning takes place, because they have to learn they can't always think like the United States."
Yokem said she enjoys participating in Model UN.

"I like to do it because it teaches you to work with different people," she said. "Even if a country believes differently than you do, you have to learn to work together sometimes."

Evans said it was fun to debate about world issues.

"You have to learn a lot of facts about different countries," he said. "You have to watch the news and keep up with what's going on around the world."

Schumacher agreed.

"You have to learn how to do research," she said. "You have to know what you're talking about."

Morrell said another important lesson is learning flexibility.

Gray said he was pleased with the efforts of his students.

"I tell students all the time, this is the best way to teach and learn because of the skills you get here," Gray said. "No matter what you do in life, you're going to have to communicate your ideas with other people. In this format, they have to communicate both through writing and orally.

"They also have to learn to work with other people and to be diplomatic. When you combine all those skills together, it's what lifelong learning is all about. This is really an applied learning program."

Students who participate in Model UN are members of Gray's international relations class. He said the class this year was composed of several sophomores and fewer juniors and seniors than in the past.

"This is the biggest class I've had in about five years," he said. "We have a class full every year because this is a pretty popular elective.

"The kids just fall in love with it. If you can get somebody in here, they're going to stay. It's not a class where you sit and work out of a textbook. These students get involved, and, before long, they're running this class."