

# **History of Academic Bowl in Utah**

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The Academic Bowl for Deaf and Hard of Hearing High School students was established by Gallaudet University in 1997. The Western region states consist of: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. Most of the schools are mainstreamed either with self-contained or stand-alone. For instance, Wyoming Rehabilitation serving the Deaf and Hard of Hearing has established an Academic Bowl team of students spread across Wyoming. Almost always the students do not know each other and they do not have practice time as often as most other teams do. It was a very good opportunity for the kids from Wyoming to join with the other teams during the Academic Bowl competitions (Kristi L. Mortensen, personal communication, August 8, 2009).

In August 2003, Pam Snedigar, Director of Gallaudet University Regional Center Ohlone College in Fremont, California, joined the celebration of naming the Deaf Center as the Robert G. Sanderson Community Center of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. There, Ron Nelson as UAD president had the opportunity to meet Pam. She asked Ron regarding the ability of deaf schools in Utah to join the Western Academic Bowl Competition. After a brief introduction to Kristi Mortensen, at that time working on her doctorate and some involvement with students at different deaf schools in the vicinity of Salt Lake City, Kristi expressed her concerns to Pam about the unique nature of Utah's deaf educational system and the difficult logistics of transportation (Mortensen 2006; Mortensen, personal communication, August 8, 2009).



**Ron Nelson & his wife, Kristi Mortensen**

Kristi Mortensen, a long time Deaf Education advocate explains, “The headquarters of the Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind is nestled in north Ogden. The building serves mainly administrative offices. There are also a few classes for students that are blind, deaf-blind, and deaf with multiple disabilities. Most of the

students however are mainstreamed in public schools with special education teachers in self-contained classrooms. They are spread all over the state in what they call districts” (Mortensen, 2006). However, Kristi agreed with Pam that she would give Utah deaf schools a try, but she was terrified. She kept thinking, “How in the world could I solve the logistics of transportation?” The first step Kristi did was to approach Teresa Kunde Owino, a USDB teacher at Skyline High School in Salt Lake City and she was interested (Mortensen, 2006).

Kristi and Teresa started working together to set up an Academic Bowl team, starting with tryouts for students who wanted to participate. They had to rush because the deadline was approaching for submitting the application.



**Pamela C. Snedigar**

After the selection of students, the application was completed, submitted, and accepted (Mortensen, 2006).

In 2004, Kristi became an Academic Bowl coach and a teacher from Skyline High School, Teresa as the Academic Bowl assistant coach (Mortensen, personal communication, August 8, 2009). By the time the practices started, there were only two students in Orem and three students in the Salt Lake area. The practices were held at the Robert G. Sanderson

Community Center every Saturday morning (Mortensen, 2006).

Shortly after the Academic Bowl was formed, Nancy Kelley, a USD teacher at Mountain View High School in Orem was willing to provide roundtrip transportation for the two students from Orem. She even came with Kristi and Teresa to their first Western Regional Academic Bowl competition in Riverside, California, in 2004 (Mortensen, 2006). Kristi shares, “It was a very rewarding experience to see the students meeting other students on an intellectual level.” One of the USD students came to Kristi saying, “That means I can go to college – am I right?”

This phrase has stuck in her mind and she realized she could not let go of the USD Team (Mortensen, personal communication, August 8, 2009).

During the Awards evening, Pam Snedigar announced that the 2005 Western Academic Bowl Competition would be held in Utah. There were many raised eyebrows because it is well known that Utah did not have a true residential school for the deaf due to several mainstreamed programs in Utah. The Utah Academic Bowl coaches had hidden smiles knowing what kind of surprises 16 teams from the Western Region will get when they arrive in Salt Lake City, Utah in February 2005 for the

Academic Bowl

Competition

(Mortensen, personal communication, August 8, 2009).

Kristi explains that the surprises were two-fold: The Competition was held at Utah's beautiful deaf center – Robert G.



**Gallaudet University President I. King Jordan, top right, and provost Jane K. Fernandes, second from top left, join the Utah team, 2005.**

Sanderson Community Center of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. There were many jaws dropping as teams and coaches walked into the Sanderson Community Center and secondly the fun-entertainment at the Hollywood Connection hosted by the Utah Association of the Deaf (across from E-center). Since 2005, several coaches have asked if Utah will ever host the Western Academic Bowl again (Mortensen, personal communication, August 8, 2009).

Kristi also shares, “The Utah Association for the Deaf hosted the competition with the capable assistance of the Sanderson Community Center and Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind. Gallaudet University president, I. King Jordan and Provost Jane K. Fernandes joined the Utah team. Ron Nelson, then UAD president worked hard to build and train a pool of local deaf

volunteers. Pam thought this collaboration was neat because it was a goal of the National Academic Bowl that students get the best of both worlds – having opportunities to interact with people from schools, such as teachers, staff, and administrators, and from the Deaf community organizations, such as Utah Association for the Deaf” (Mortensen, 2006).

She notes that the parents were impressed with Academic Bowl. One parent wrote to



**Jenefer Reudter**

Kristi expressing her appreciation: “Thank you so much for allowing my daughter to take part in the Academic Bowl team. In the past, I have watched her struggle with schoolwork. When she joined the team, her grades improved and her self-esteem has improved. Thank you for making the Academic Bowl team in Utah possible” (Mortensen, 2006).

Another parent wrote through e-mail, as follows: “Please do not let my child quit the Academic Bowl team. This is the best thing for my child and I have watched my child’s mental and emotional well being improve greatly, and especially his social skills. Thank you” (Mortensen 2006).

Kristi felt honor when Gallaudet University asked her to write up an article for the Odyssey magazine about the Utah School for the Deaf Academic Bowl’s participations in the Western Academic Bowl Competition as part of the Academic Bowl’s tenth year anniversary, which was published in Spring/Summer 2006. Kristi noted that it was a thrilling experience to have Utah team’s picture and experiences printed in the national magazine (Mortensen, personal communication, August 8, 2009).

Kristi noted that spring of 2009 proved to be the best year for Utah School for the Deaf Academic Bowl players and players. The Beehive Chapter Gallaudet University Alumni hosted a special evening for students and parents. Kristi thought of having BCGUAA host an Academic Bowl Team try-out. It was the best thing that BCGUAA had ever done. More than 10 students

participated in the tryout and more than 13 students filled out the applications expressing their desire to be on the team. She said it was even better than what happened last year. The only negative part of the tryout was that only 5 students could be accepted as a team. However, the best news that many Utah School for the Deaf students may not know of was that the Utah Association for the Deaf was once again awarded the host ship for the 2010 Academic Bowl Competition. The Robert G. Sanderson Community Center of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing was the site of the competition. Kristi received many emails from coaches across the Western region on how excited they were to be coming back to Utah. The best news for those students who did not make it to the team was they were given the opportunity to volunteer. That was one of the greatest advantages to those students to participate as volunteers (Mortensen, personal communication, August 8, 2009).



The Utah Academic Bowl, 2012

Kristi shares that since 2004 she as a coach has watched these students grow academically and socially. She has seen young people who were formerly withdrawn become more confident and assertive. She also watches them develop ideas on where they want to go after graduating from high school. Her own

understanding – and faith in the students and their ability to surmount their difficult logistics – had grown. As the future unfolds, she believes the Academic Bowl will continue to serve Utah deaf students well and motivate them to aim for an even high education standard (Mortensen, 2006).

In 2010, Jenefer Reudter became a part of the academic bowl team when Kristi became the chair for the Western Region Academic Bowl (WRAB) and asked Jenefer to assist her. After this event, Jenefer continued in assisting Kristi as a coach with her for the academic bowl team.

Jenefer had been with the academic bowl team ever since (Jenefer Reudter, personal communication, October 7, 2013).

For the first time in its history, Gallaudet University hosted 2011 Academic Bowl Academic competitions on Gallaudet campus and the competitions will be held there from now on.

In 2012, Gallaudet established a “Battle to the Books” competition in several deaf schools across the nation. The purpose of the Battle of the Books is to promote literacy amongst deaf and hard of hearing middle school students, to prepare for the academic bowl competition when enter high school, and to encourage critical thinking skills amongst middle school students.



Gallaudet University President Alan Hurwitz with the Utah Academic Bowl Team, 2014.

## **Notes**

Jenefer Reudter, e-mail message to Jodi B. Kinner, October 7, 2013.

Kristi L. Mortensen, e-mail message to Jodi B. Kinner, August 8, 2009.

## **Bibliography**

Mortensen, Kristi L. "Understanding grows as doubter turns into fan." *Odyssey*, Spring/Summer 2006.