



MEDIA CONTACT:

Dan Attenberger

AGP & Associates, Inc.

Phone: 989-839-5800

att@agp-inc.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Walking the talk: Innovation competition goes virtual to address coronavirus concerns

A.H. Nickless Innovation Award organizers repeatedly adapt to allow students, schools a chance at up to \$77,500 in scholarships, STEM grants

UNIVERSITY CENTER, MICH., June 22, 2020 – The 2019-20 [A.H. Nickless Innovation Award competition](#) was proceeding normally: Registration in September and October, 20 teams chosen to move on to Phase Two in November, project reports due in late March, a daylong public event for teams to present their work scheduled for mid-April. But when Michigan’s K-12 schools closed in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, organizers postponed the competition, knowing many of its teams needed access to school facilities to complete their projects.

And when Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer issued a Stay Home, Stay Safe order, the school closure was extended through the remainder of the academic year, *and* the competition venue declined to reschedule due to coronavirus uncertainties, organizers knew it was time to rethink how to complete the competition and give the students their opportunity to win a share of the up to \$77,500 in scholarships for students and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) grants for schools that the competition awards each year.

“Our students had been working on their projects since September, and we did not want to deny them their hard-earned opportunity to present their work for a chance at the prizes,” said Tri-Star Trust Senior Vice President, Senior Relationship Officer and Philanthropic Solutions Group Director John “Jack” Kidwell, who organizes the competition on behalf of the Nickless Family Charitable Foundation each year. “When we knew the students wouldn’t be going back to school – and that we no longer had a venue where they could present – we lined up another venue for two potential dates, planned for minimal capacity at that venue, altered our rules to let our teams present incomplete projects without penalty, and surveyed our teams to ask whether they wanted to continue in the competition and which date they preferred.”

The decision to ensure the competition would continue – even as many activities statewide were simply being canceled – was met with enthusiasm, with 12 of the competition’s 20 teams recommitting to the competition and its new venue and rules.



“Please extend my gratitude, on behalf of myself and the team members I represent, to the committee and other decision-makers for accommodating the current situation and still finding a way for our students to participate in this meaningful event,” wrote Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy Science Teacher David Allan, coach of two teams, in an email to organizers upon learning the competition would not be canceled.

A new plan was in place, and the students would present their projects in a socially distanced manner in a practically empty 500-seat facility. But when it became evident that an in-person competition would not be a viable option, it was back to the drawing board for Kidwell, who ultimately decided that having the students present their projects via Zoom meetings was the best solution to comply with guidelines and protect the students while still allowing them to compete.

In addition to moving the presentations online, organizers recognized that the school closures, social distancing guidelines and Stay Home orders had prevented some teams from being able to fully complete their projects. In a departure from the competition’s typical expectations, teams were invited to report on whatever work they *were* able to complete and the challenges they faced during the process. Teams that were unable to complete their projects were asked to offer thoughts about anticipated outcomes and opportunities for their respective projects had they been able to continue working.

To promote social distancing and to adhere to the Stay Home orders when they were in place, teams were instructed to collaborate online or by phone – *not* in person – to complete their project reports and presentations. Team members also were asked to individually log in to the Zoom meeting from their respective locations rather than gather in a shared location to deliver their presentations.

“By adapting the format and expectations to address the pandemic, this year’s competition truly has ‘walked the talk’ in terms of innovation,” said Janet Royce, who, with her sisters, Joanie Tankersley and Judy Graham, created the award in memory of their late father, Arthur H. Nickless. “It was important to move forward with the competition and award the scholarships and grants for which these teams of students had worked so hard since last fall while also taking appropriate steps to protect their well-being, and the adjustments that were made allowed all of that to happen.”

Following the June 13 Zoom presentations and subsequent judging process, the three winning teams for the 2019-20 competition were:

- **First place:** CD-ROM, Midland High School – \$5,000 scholarship per team member and a \$20,000 STEM grant for the school



- **Second place:** Foresight, Freeland High School – \$2,500 scholarship per team member and a \$10,000 STEM grant for the school
- **Third place:** SunSafe, Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy – \$1,000 scholarship per team member and a \$5,000 STEM grant for the school

For more details on the winning teams and their projects, read “[Local students, schools win \\$70K in scholarships, STEM grants in seventh annual A.H. Nickless Innovation Award competition](#)” in the [ahninnovationaward.com](#) newsroom.

About the A.H. Nickless Innovation Award

The A.H. Nickless Innovation Award was created by the Nickless Family Charitable Foundation to honor the memory of the late Arthur H. Nickless, a local innovator and owner of Wolverine Telephone Company. With a goal of inspiring passion for science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), the competition is open to high school students in Bay, Midland, Saginaw and Tuscola counties and awards up to \$77,500 per year in scholarships to students and STEM grants to schools. For more information, visit [ahninnovationaward.com](#) or [facebook.com/AHNicklessInnovationAward](#).