

Village & Presbyterian Church Co-Sponsor 35th Annual Spelling Bee



When Dr. Bill Smith organized the first Orland Park Open Spelling Bee in 1979, Jimmy Carter was in the White House. "Rocky II" and "Meatballs" were two of the sell outs at the two year old Orland Square Theaters. Orland Square had been open for three years and the village's Recreation Department was officially organized. The Chicago Blizzard of 1979 brought more than 18 inches of snow, helping Jane Byrne becoming the first female mayor of the City of Chicago.

"We started the contest in 1979 at the Presbyterian Church in Orland Park," said Smith, retired school superintendent of Alsip School District 126. "I was the first caller," he added.

Over the last 35 years, the annual spelling contest has been held at the Presbyterian Church, at the village's Robert Davidson Center, and both Orland and Jerling Junior High Schools and at the Orland Park Civic Center for the 20th, 25th, 30th and this year's 35th anniversary contests.

"In 1979, we were upstairs at the Robert Davidson Center, where we had 43 spellers on the stage," Smith recalled. "We had entire families come out to compete. That would be great to see again --- sign up the whole family," he said.

The 35th annual Orland Open Spelling Bee will begin at 2 p.m. on Sunday, October 20 at the Orland Park Civic Center, 14750 South Ravinia Avenue. The contest is free and open to seniors, adults, teens and children age eight and older.

"This is a great event that has become an important part of the village's history," said Orland Park Mayor Dan McLaughlin. "We are grateful to Dr. Smith for the passion he shares for this event, for having organized it for the last 35 years and for all that he does to promote a great hometown contest," the mayor said.

The Orland Park operation has grown from its one caller in 1979 to two in 1983, four in 1989, six in 2000 and now seven callers for 500 words, which takes more than three hours.

"The idea of an open spelling bee came from Little House On the Prairie by Laura Ingalls Wilder," Smith said. "In 1882, in DeSmet, Dakota Territory, the town had an all-town spelling bee. Pa won and Laura finished third," Smith said smiling.

Smith's first open bee dates back to 1976 when he ran the Oak Lawn Bicentennial Open Bee at the Trinity Presbyterian Church. Over the last several decades, Smith has organized nearly 100 open bees in five states.

The Village of Orland Park has co-sponsored the Orland Open Bee since 1983 with Trustee Ed Schussler serving as one of the original contest judges in 1979.

"Tod Noteboom, Bob Jones and I were all on the District 135 School Board at the time and Dr. Smith invited us to serve as the contest's first judges," Schussler recalled. "The three of us were together again at the 30th anniversary bee and I'm looking forward to seeing lots of familiar faces at this year's 35th anniversary contest," he said.

Smith has kept careful notes from the last 35 years, including which village officials have opened the bee, all that the church volunteers do, the number of repeat champions and the youngest participants to win the contest.

"The 25 volunteers from the Presbyterian Church make this contest possible," Smith said. "Without them, we wouldn't have a contest. They come on board and run the show, tracking what's going on, taking registrations, calling the words and more. I am grateful to all of them for their help," he said.

The youngest winner of the Orland Open Bee was Michael Sheehan in 1982, then a 13 year old student from St. Michael School. The late Kathleen Foley won the contest eight times from 1992 through 2005 with Brian Sullivan winning three times.

On October 20, participants ages eight through 10 will begin promptly at 2 p.m. with those ages 11 and over joining in at 2:45 p.m. Former trophy and ribbon winners come on board at 3:30 p.m. with the contest ending around 4:30 p.m. There is no cost to participate and contestants need not live in Orland Park.

"We've had people from throughout the region participate," Smith said. "We welcome everyone."

Twelve trophies are awarded to the top three spellers in each of the four categories, ages eight to 10; ages 11 to 14; high school and overall. Twelve ribbons are awarded to ages eight to 10 with 12 ribbons awarded to overall winners.

Pre-registration is strongly encouraged by sending an email to PCOrland@gmail.com with the participant's name, address, phone, age, school and if a past trophy winner. Or, participants can call 815/713-5502 or 708/429-7764 to register by phone.

Questions about the contest can be directed to Smith at 708/403-0804.

"The wonderful thing about this is the 'open' aspect of it. This gives everyone a chance to take part," Smith said.