

## Newburyport: Laughs and learning at NEF spelling bee

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NEWBURYPORT — Costumes and cash bars aren't what you would typically find at a spelling bee, unless you attend the Newburyport Education Foundation's fourth annual spelling bee on April 4.

The NEF's spelling bee is anything but typical. For starters, the contestants are all adults who form teams of three to compete for the "Eddie Award." The teams are grilled for four rounds on words ranging from aphasia to fantoccini to zigzaggedness.

"(The words) get tough, and they get tough pretty quickly," said Ruth Garvey, co-chairwoman of the spelling bee. "It's amazing these words that are out there — they are not your common words."

Contestants don't have to fear fainting at a microphone, as they are given 30 seconds to write their word down on a white board and hold it up instead of spelling it out loud, Garvey said. All the while, onlookers can see the correct spelling displayed on a screen behind the spellers.

"It's not quite as serious (as a typical spelling bee)," Garvey said. "It's surprising how adults get into this. Some of the teams will actually come in costume and pick out clever names like the "Queen Bees" and the "Spell Chex."

This year the bee will have 27 to 28 teams, ranging from librarians to alumni to bank workers, Garvey said. Each team will pay a \$300 basic entry fee, but in the end they could end up paying upward of \$750, depending on how far they want to go in the spelling bee.

The \$750 includes "option cards" that teams are eligible to buy during the bee: the "pass" card; the "I said what they said" card, which instead of trying to spell the word they select another team to copy, hoping that they have spelled it correctly; a "second chance" card; and in the final round, the "final chance" card costs \$200.

Garvey said they have prepared 15 words for each round, and they also have a list of extra words if the spellers go that far into the list. Garvey said in the case of a tie, where two teams are left and they have used all of the option cards and both have missed the word, they sell the spot in the next round to the highest bidder.

The spelling bee has made several changes this year as well, the first being that the event will be on a Friday night. Other changes include moving it away from the school to Nicholson Hall and adding a cash bar.

"We wanted to move it out of the school because it's really a community event," Garvey said. "We still hear people thinking the bee itself is for kids, but it's a community thing."

The other goal of the move was to raise more money for the NEF's new three-prong campaign, which is an effort to raise money to support literacy closets, virtual high school, and upgrading and renewal of technology.

"(The spelling bee) has surprisingly become a large fundraiser for the Newburyport Education Foundation," Garvey said. "We are capitalizing on that even more; we've expanded advertising opportunities at the bee and are throwing in auction items."

Garvey said they are hoping to have at least 200 people in attendance, which will hopefully garner \$22,000 to \$23,000 for the NEF.

Admission to the event was also increased this year to \$20 per person, but although admission to the event is higher than it used to be, Garvey said it is still well worth it.

"It's worth it because you really are laughing out loud," Garvey said. "It's hysterical."

*The fourth annual Newburyport Education Foundation spelling bee will be held Friday, April 4, at 7 p.m., at Nicholson Hall, 7 Harris St., Newburyport.*

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