

Tara Adiseshan

## A Dream Win

By DEEPANJALI KAKATI

She thought it was all over. As the second place winners were announced in the buzzing hall hosting the 2009 Intel International Science and Engineering Fair (ISEF), Tara Adiseshan thought she wasn't going to win anything this year.

But then, she heard her name called, "for first place, best in category, and the Young Scientist Award. I was ecstatic! I am still shocked that my project was chosen," says the 14-year-old Indian American from Charlottesville, Virginia. Adiseshan received a \$50,000 college scholarship at the Reno, Nevada event in May. Intel says it is the world's largest pre-college science fair and more than 1,500 young scientists from 56 countries, regions and territories competed this year.

For her project, Adiseshan says she identified and classified evolutionary relationships between sweat bees and the microscopic worms that live inside them.

"Doing well at ISEF has been one of my dreams for a long time. I have participated in science fairs for seven years, and this is the last year that I can participate in pre-collegiate science fairs. This has definitely been a very satisfying closure for my science fair journey," says Adiseshan. "More than anything, I hope that this award is an indication that I will be able to help change the world through science in the future."

A homeschooled high school senior, Adiseshan will enter Stanford University in California for undergraduate studies this fall. She later wants to



pursue a Ph.D. in biology. "I hope that in the future, I would be doing as much as possible to help save the inhabitants of the Earth, more specifically conserving animal species," she says.

Adiseshan says that she has always loved animals and wildlife. "I feel that since animals cannot speak human languages, they need people to stand up for them and help them."

An aspiring animal scientist, she also credits her success to homeschooling. "I know that I wouldn't be where I am today if it weren't for homeschooling. I was able to travel, pursue a rigorous education, conduct research and participate in other extracurricular activities. Homeschooling offers freedom and flexibility to pursue one's interests," says Adiseshan, whose parents moved to the United States in the early 1990s. The family visits India almost every year.

Adiseshan is an active member of her community and is on the Roots and Shoots National Youth Leadership Council. Roots and Shoots is an international environmental and humanitarian youth program run by the Virginia-based Jane Goodall Institute. "I started the Charlottesville

Roots and Shoots Club. We are planning on working on a campaign to raise awareness about the amphibian extinction crisis," she says.

For the past year, Adiseshan was the vice president of the Virginia Junior Academy of Science. In November, she collaborated with the University of Virginia's Office for Diversity and Equity to organize a Science Career Symposium. It featured "scientist speakers who were known not only for their research, but also for the level of involvement in their own communities.... There were over 120 students in attendance, and almost as many on the waiting list. The students listened to presentations and participated in interactive lab stations. It was very gratifying to see so many kids from diverse backgrounds having fun learning about science."

This studious teenager doesn't, however, spend all her time cooped up in a research lab. Adiseshan is a certified scuba diver and has gone diving in the Caribbean. "I like playing sports, particularly basketball, and camping. I also enjoy performing in theater productions, especially improvisation," she says.

Adiseshan is an active competitor in speech and debate contests, likes pop and rock music and loves to read. "I enjoy reading fantasy books, but I will usually read anything that I find interesting, no matter what genre the book is in." She doesn't watch TV, but does enjoy watching movies.

Her advice to young people interested in research is, "Don't give up! One of the biggest challenges for students interested in science or mathematics lies in finding a research mentor. It was very hard for me to find a mentor. I had to send out my resume to at least 100 scientists before I was able to find a good fit. Once you do finally get a mentor and get access to research facilities, it is definitely worth it."

**For more information:**

Intel International Science and Engineering Fair  
<http://www.societyforscience.org/ISEF/>

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WILL ELDERS/Courtesy U.S. National Park Service