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9-year-old know-it-all

Kansas girl created winning board game at 6, joins ranks of 'experts'

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. - To play the board game called Beat the Experts, you match wits with 40 really smart people. Brainiacs like Bill Nye the Science Guy, Sir Isaac Newton, George Washington Carver, astronaut Buzz Aldrin, Confucius.

And 9-year-old Elise Veach.

Of Lenexa, Kan.

Elise's game fame comes courtesy of University Games, a San Francisco company that named her the winner of its National Young Game Inventors Contest three years ago, when Elise was just 6.

She nearly flew through the roof when the telephone call came, telling her that she'd won the contest and that the board game she invented, Mouse Round Up, would become a real game.

And she'd won a \$10,000 savings bond.

"I called everybody we knew!" said Elise, shaking her shoulder-length brown curls.

Impressive creativity, humor

Elise is a smart one, all right. She's a deep thinker, a daydreamer who sometimes gets lost in thought while she's helping Mom fold clothes. She reads, reads, reads every day, first thing in the morning, even before breakfast. "I just recently read 'The Secret Garden' and I LOVED that book!" said Elise, who speaks in capital letters and exclamation points when she's excited.

Her creativity, sense of humor and very presence so impressed the folks at University Games that when they began work on Beat the Experts, they wanted Elise to be one of their experts.

The object of Beat the Experts is to simply know more than the know-it-alls. The three game cards that feature Elise tag her as a "smart aleck."

"The game was not about celebrities, it was about experts, and we wanted to have as big a variety of experts from different fields as possible," said Bob Moog, chairman of University Games.

The company quizzed Elise on 30 questions. They weren't terribly hard, not like "What is Sequoyah best known for?" (Inventing an alphabet.) Elise fielded questions such as:

- What do Mrs. Frizzle and her students ride around in? (The Magic School Bus.)

Match wits with Elise

- Here are some of the questions Elise had to answer for Beat the Experts, a board game for ages 8 to adult. (Keep in mind that Elise was 6 at the time.)

1. What famous kitty's motto is "After all, you can never make too many friends?"
2. In Bella and Stella, who is the mouse and who is the bat?
3. What does the "x" in X Games stand for?
4. Who invented the light bulb?
5. If you say, "It's raining cats and dogs," are you using an idiom, a simile or a proverb?
6. What board game features a Peppermint Forest and the Gumdrop Mountains?
7. What two colors would you have to mix together to make a Tinky Winky Teletubby look-alike?

ANSWERS

1. Hello Kitty
2. Stella is the mouse and Bella is the bat
3. Extreme
4. Thomas Alva Edison
5. An idiom
6. Candy Land
7. Red and blue

SOURCE: Beat the Experts game

- Flour, water, salt, cream of tartar and oil can be used to make what toy? (Play-Doh.)
- What famous children's book features characters named Thing One and Thing Two? ("The Cat in the Hat.")

She answered 19 of 30 correctly.

The game cards even reveal trivia about each expert - Elise's favorite color is blue, her middle name is Renee and she was born at the exact minute as her little brother, Ethan. He's 3.

(But oops. The cards claim that Elise was born in DeSoto, Kan. She was actually born in Liberty but lived in DeSoto when the game was produced.)

Elise inherited her father's mind for details, said her mom, Lori. Elise's dad, Vince, is a computer programmer for Burns & McDonnell. When he was a boy, Elise's dad wondered why people couldn't brew coffee like they do tea, from single-serving packets; too bad someone else invented it. "They share the same brain," said Lori Veach.

Mom nurtures it. Lori, a former fourth-grade teacher at Tri-City Christian in Independence, home-schools her daughter in a cheerful classroom in the basement of their Lenexa home. Elise is in fourth grade but her reading comprehension, said her mother, "is like post-high school."

Cowboy cats lassoing mice

The family learned about the inventors contest by reading a restaurant placemat at Disney World three years ago. They followed the contest's "how to make a board game" suggestions.

To start: Choose a theme about something you like. For Elise this meant pizza, bikes or cats. Pizzas don't do much, and bikes only go so far. So she went with cats and mice. Specifically, cowboy cats trying to round up rascally rodents.

When months passed and family members didn't hear anything, they assumed Elise hadn't won.

But then the call came.

"She just has a great sense of humor," said Moog. "We have had winners from the East Coast and the South, and we really wanted to get a good, solid girl from the Midwest, and Elise was it."

In the 10 years the company has sponsored the contest, Moog has been most impressed with how imaginative children can be.

"A child's imagination just works in a different way than an adult's," said Moog. "In Elise's case, we just laughed and laughed at the thought of a cat who was a cowboy lassoing mice. Those were just two different worlds that we would not put together.

"I think if you want children to grow up to do things like invent their own board games, from the day they are born, you have to really encourage them to explore their creative outlets."

That means giving them free rein, Moog said, avoiding the temptation to tell them that that house they just drew doesn't look like a house.

The secret to Elise's genius may actually start in the kitchen. Save for the occasional sweets at Wednesday night Bible study, "They eat well, not junk," Lori said of her kids.

A couple of times a week, in fact, Mom mixes up a healthy, vitamin-packed juice of carrots and apples and celery.

"And spinach," Elise chimes in, "if you're adventurous!"

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