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Blacksburg students' political film wins C-SPAN honors

Travis Williams

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The work of a pair of sibling filmmakers produced an interesting problem Thursday morning.

“We’ve never gotten a giant check before, so we don’t really know what to do with it,” said 14-year-old Mia Lazar.

The oversized cardboard check for \$3,000 was placed in the hands of Mia and her 11-year-old sister Ava Lazar by C-SPAN representatives during a celebration at Blacksburg New School for the sisters’ award-winning entry in the television network’s annual student documentary contest, StudentCam.

The Lazars seven-minute film, “What Should be Done about Money in Politics?” took first-place honors in the middle school category of the national competition, which had 2,887 total entries in 45 states and more than 1,300 middle-school level entries.

“We didn’t actually expect to win, we were just doing it for fun,” Mia said.

This year’s theme was, “Road to the White House: What’s the issue YOU most want candidates to discuss during the 2016 presidential campaign?”

C-SPAN’s Pam McGorry, who was one of three people on the educational team that helped judge each entry, said the Lazars’ film stood out because of the difficult topic they chose and the quality of interviews they included.

“When you look at the interviews that the students got to learn about the different sides of the issue, that was really important,” McGorry said.

Those interviews ranged from the Libertarian think tank Cato Institute’s Vice President and Publisher John Samples to Rio Tazewel, campaign coordinator at People For the American Way, who focuses on getting big money out of politics.

The opportunity to obtain such interviews came as the result of an earlier film award.

In December, Mia was one of six students recognized by the Intellectual Property Owners Education Foundation for her video on Jim Broselow, a friend of her family who created a tape-measuring system that helps doctors determine medicine doses for children based on their height.

As part of that award, she and her family traveled to Washington, D.C., and the sisters began cold-calling people for interviews.

“We figured, if we’re going to D.C. we should take advantage of that I guess,” Ava said.

Mia said it was the annual National History Day video contest, of which she took first place in the Junior Individual Documentary category last summer, that spurred her interest in filmmaking.

“I thought that I wouldn’t have to talk to anybody ... but then I found out that was definitely not the case,” Mia said.

She said her shy nature made interviewing people the hardest part of the creation process, but the addition of Ava really helped.

“I love interviewing people,” Ava said. “That’s how we find out all the different points of view.”

Mia said her younger sister also excelled at creating graphics for the film, while her favorite part was the editing process, which she did using Final Cut Pro software.

“It’s hard, but it’s one of my favorite parts to see it coming together,” she said.

The pair’s mother, Molly Lazar, said in total her daughters’ films had earned \$10,000 in prize money for themselves and \$2,500 for Blacksburg New School, where they both attend.

The girls said they hoped to use their winnings one day to backpack through Europe.

Though both girls have plenty of experience making movies, this was the first time their ages allowed them to enter a contest together.

“They refer to this as their golden year where they’re both in middle school together,” Molly Lazar said.

And they’re continuing to make the most of their time with a another project already in the final voting round of a different con-test.

Earlier this year, Mia and Ava teamed up with two of their Blacksburg neighbors, Kai Imani and Alania Marquis, to make an entry for the Scripps National Spelling Bee’s Spellebrity Video Contest. Their video “[The Love of Reading](#)” advanced to the final 10 and can be voted for through April 22.

Both sisters said they plan to continue making films based on topics they are passionate about.

“I like having our stories spread. I like seeing us on the news and thinking we could actually make a difference,” Ava said.

As for the giant check, Mia joked she might just leave that to her sister.

“Ava said she might use it as the headboard for her bed,” Mia said.