

## **ASLA's First Junior High Science Contest 24 April 2019**

The Atlantic Science Links Association (ASLA, <http://atlanticsciencelinks.dal.ca/>) held its first annual Junior High Science Contest for students in grades 7, 8, and 9 across Nova Scotia on 24 April 2019. ASLA is a charitable science promotion organization that coordinates outreach programs for students in grades primary to twelve.

ASLA's president, Arunika Gunawardena, and the board saw a need for science engagement in Nova Scotia junior high students. This is Nova Scotia's first science contest of its kind and was introduced to challenge junior high students and have them engage with science.

Questions were submitted by faculty members, postdoctoral researchers, graduate students, and research associates in Dalhousie's Faculty of Science. The multiple-choice questions were narrowed down to 40 questions per grade.

A total of 1957 students from 29 schools across the province registered for this exciting challenge. Thousands of exam papers and answer sheets were mailed out to schools and all students completed the test on the same day, at a time during the school day that worked best for their school. All tests were mailed back to ASLA, were organized, and submitted for grading. At each grade level, the top ten-scoring students were identified and invited to attend an awards ceremony. Additionally, the top 5% of students at each grade level were added to the Honour Roll.

The awards ceremony took place on June 8, 2019 at Dalhousie University's Steele Ocean Science Building Atrium. The top ten-scoring students, their parents and families, and teachers were all invited to attend. ASLA's administrative assistant, Clare Snow, served as the MC for the event. The ceremony began with an address from Arunika Gunawardena, in which she noted her inspiration for creating the contest and her amazement at both the number of students who participated and the amazing success of those students. Dalhousie University's Faculty of Science Dean, Chris Moore, addressed the audience next and encouraged the students in attendance to continue engaging with science in many ways and to work towards protecting our natural world. Andy Fillmore, Member of Parliament for Halifax, congratulated the students and shared his excitement about the success of the students and ASLA's work to engage Nova Scotian students with science.

The invited speaker, Jaime Wertman, who is a PhD student from the Department of Microbiology and Immunology in Dalhousie's Faculty of Medicine, delivered a talk entitled "How I learned that I have always been a scientist." She inspired the award-winning students by recapping her scientific journey and reflecting on how seizing opportunities as a child and young student helped to mold her into the scientist she is today.

The presentation of awards began with the top-ten students in Grade 7. Chris Moore presented the certificates to these students, along with cash prizes for the top four-scoring students. There was a tie for second between Sasha Fillmore and John Hamil, with the top score at Grade 7 being obtained by both Devin Huang and Ashton McNamara. Paul Bentzen, Dalhousie's

Department of Biology Chair, and Patrick Ryall, retired professor from the Faculty of Earth Sciences, presented the awards to the top-scoring Grade 8 students. The top three-scoring students in Grade 8 received cash prizes. Rory Clyburne and Eric McClean tied for second place, while Lila Gechtman was the top-scoring student for Grade 8. Arunika Gunawardena and James Brennan, ASLA board member, presented the awards to the top-scoring Grade 9 students. The top four-scoring students in Grade 9 received cash prizes. There was a tie for third place between William MacDonald and Kyle Smith. In second place was Will Cooper, and the top-scoring student in Grade 9 was Isabel Casey.

ASLA's Executive Director, Rajesh Rajaselvam finished the ceremony by offering his closing remarks and thanks to all who helped to make the contest possible – especially the participating students. The ceremony was followed by a reception which offered a chance for students and their family members to mingle and enjoy some refreshments.

We would like to thank our funding partners, Dalhousie University's Faculty of Science, Engineers Nova Scotia, and NSERC as well as our generous volunteers, especially members of the Gunawardena Lab for ensuring the success of this event.

We are very pleased with how the contest went overall. Some of the comments we received are:

"Impressed with this afternoon's award ceremony and delighted to have been there to celebrate. It is great to have such an initiative! I look forward to future such events – well done and thank you to all involved"

"Thanks again for an awesome awards ceremony last Saturday. We were so impressed with the results!"

"Thanks again to you and your team providing this great experience!"

"We appreciated the opportunity to participate in the contest and enjoyed the experience"

"Thanks again for providing such an exciting opportunity for our Middle School students!"

We are planning to organize our second province-wide Science Contest in 2021 and welcome your comments and suggestions so that we can continually improve our outreach activities.

## Award-Winning Students

### Grade 7:

Devin Huang, *Fountain Academy of the Sacred Heart* (1<sup>st</sup> place)  
Ashton McNamara, *Armbrae Academy* (1<sup>st</sup> place)  
Sasha Fillmore, *Armbrae Academy* (2<sup>nd</sup> place)  
John Hamil, *Fountain Academy of the Sacred Heart* (2<sup>nd</sup> place)  
Maya Boyd, *Sacred Heart School of Halifax*  
Nathan Gray, *Armbrae Academy*  
Tommy Deng, *Fountain Academy of the Sacred Heart*  
Yunzhao Lyu, *Halifax Grammar School*  
Gavin Johnston, *Halifax Christian Academy*  
Racheal Delaney, *Elizabeth Sutherland School*  
Hannah Sarty, *Sacred Heart School of Halifax*  
Hugh MacDonald, *Gorsebrook Junior High*  
Aidan Eisan, *Fountain Academy of the Sacred Heart*  
Katrina Hartling, *Musquodoboit Rural High School*  
Mattias Leslie, *Armbrae Academy*

### Grade 8:

Lila Gechtman, *Halifax Independent School* (1<sup>st</sup> place)  
Rory Clyburne, *Fountain Academy of the Sacred Heart* (2<sup>nd</sup> place)  
Eric McLean, *Central Kings Rural High School* (2<sup>nd</sup> place)  
Silas Fillmore, *King's-Edgehill School*  
Evan VanOostrum, *Central Kings Rural High School*  
Bilal Ibrahim, *Park West School*  
Brandon Powell, *Fountain Academy of the Sacred Heart*  
Henry Mulherin, *King's-Edgehill School*  
Anna Henneberg, *Central Kings Rural High School*  
Malcolm Morency, *Fountain Academy of the Sacred Heart*

### Grade 9:

Isabel Casey, *Sacred Heart School of Halifax* (1<sup>st</sup> place)  
Will Cooper, *Fountain Academy of the Sacred Heart* (2<sup>nd</sup> place)  
William MacDonald, *Fountain Academy of the Sacred Heart* (3<sup>rd</sup> place)  
Kyle Smith, *Gorsebrook Junior High* (3<sup>rd</sup> place)  
Daniel Emmuel, *Park West School*  
Jason Jee, *Park West School*  
Aidan Connors, *Riverview High School*  
Sean Yu, *Halifax Christian Academy*  
Pratyush Makkar, *Park West School*  
Samuel Kopriva, *Annapolis West Education Centre*  
Mark Bellefontaine, *Riverview High School*

Pictures:



ASLA President, Dr. Arunika Gunawardena, addressing the gathered students, their family members, and teachers at ASLA's First Annual Science Contest Awards Ceremony.



Dalhousie University's Dean of Science, Dr. Chris Moore, encouraging students to continue pursuing science throughout their lives.



Andy Fillmore, Member of Parliament for Halifax, congratulated the students and shared his excitement about the success of the students and ASLA's work to engage Nova Scotian students with science.



Invited speaker, Jaime Wertman, a PhD student from the Department of Microbiology and Immunology in Dalhousie's Faculty of Medicine, delivering her talk entitled "How I learned that I have always been a scientist."

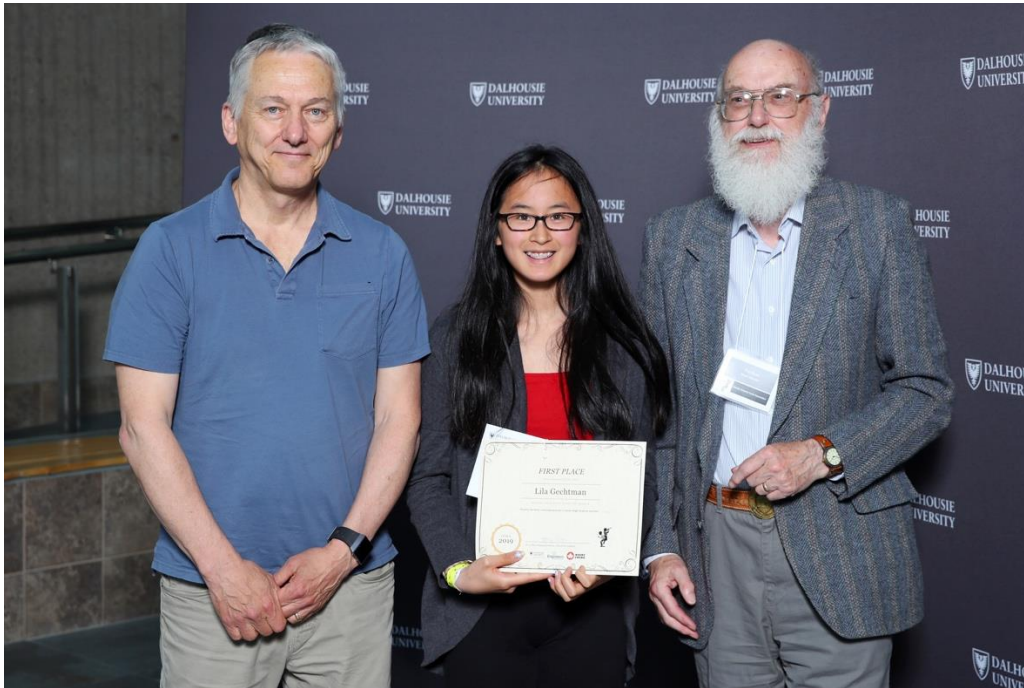




Devin Huang (Fountain Academy of the Sacred Heart), who tied for first place in Grade 7, receiving his award and cash prize from Dr. Chris Moore, Dean of Science at Dalhousie University.



Ashton McNamara (Armbrae Academy), who tied for first place in Grade 7, receiving his award and cash prize from Dr. Chris Moore, Dean of Science at Dalhousie University.



Lila Gechtman (Halifax Independent School), who was the top-scoring student in Grade 8, receiving her first place award and cash prize from Dr. Paul Bentzen, Chair of Biology, and Dr. Pat Ryall, retired professor of Earth Sciences.



Isabel Casey (Sacred Heart School of Halifax), who was the top-scoring student in Grade 9, receiving her first place award and cash prize from James Brenan, ASLA Board Member, and Dr. Arunika Gunawardena, ASLA President.





Rajesh Rajaselvam, ASLA's Executive Director, offering his closing remarks to end the Awards Ceremony.



All award-winning students and ASLA's board members and volunteers.





Students, their family members, and teachers enjoying the reception following the awards ceremony.