

5 Llers place in national app creation competition

Students' projects range from Roblox to parking spots

BY MAUREEN MULLARKEY

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Near the end of his junior year, Aditya Varma said his mother came home from work with a "funny story."

While in a rush to find parking in New York City as a contractor with the Department of Education, she had paid a man to let her park her car in his driveway for the day.

Inspired by his mother's story, Varma created the app Rent Your Driveway, which allows homeowners to rent out their driveways in advance to drivers in need of a parking space.

Varma is one of five Long Islanders who received national recognition for the 2024 Congressional App Challenge — an initiative of the U.S. House of Representatives for middle and high school students, encouraging them to learn to code and to pursue careers in computer science.

Varma, of Syosset High School; Stephanie Sze, of Manhasset High School; Heng Ye, of Smithtown High School West; Trevor Flores, of Eastport-South Manor Junior-Senior High School; and Paul Fleck, of Baldwin High School, are five Long Island students out of 12,682 nationwide who participated.

First-place winners receive waived copyright registration application fees through the ARTS Act. They also will travel to Capitol Hill in the spring, where they will demo their apps at a celebration called #HouseOfCode.

Paul Fleck

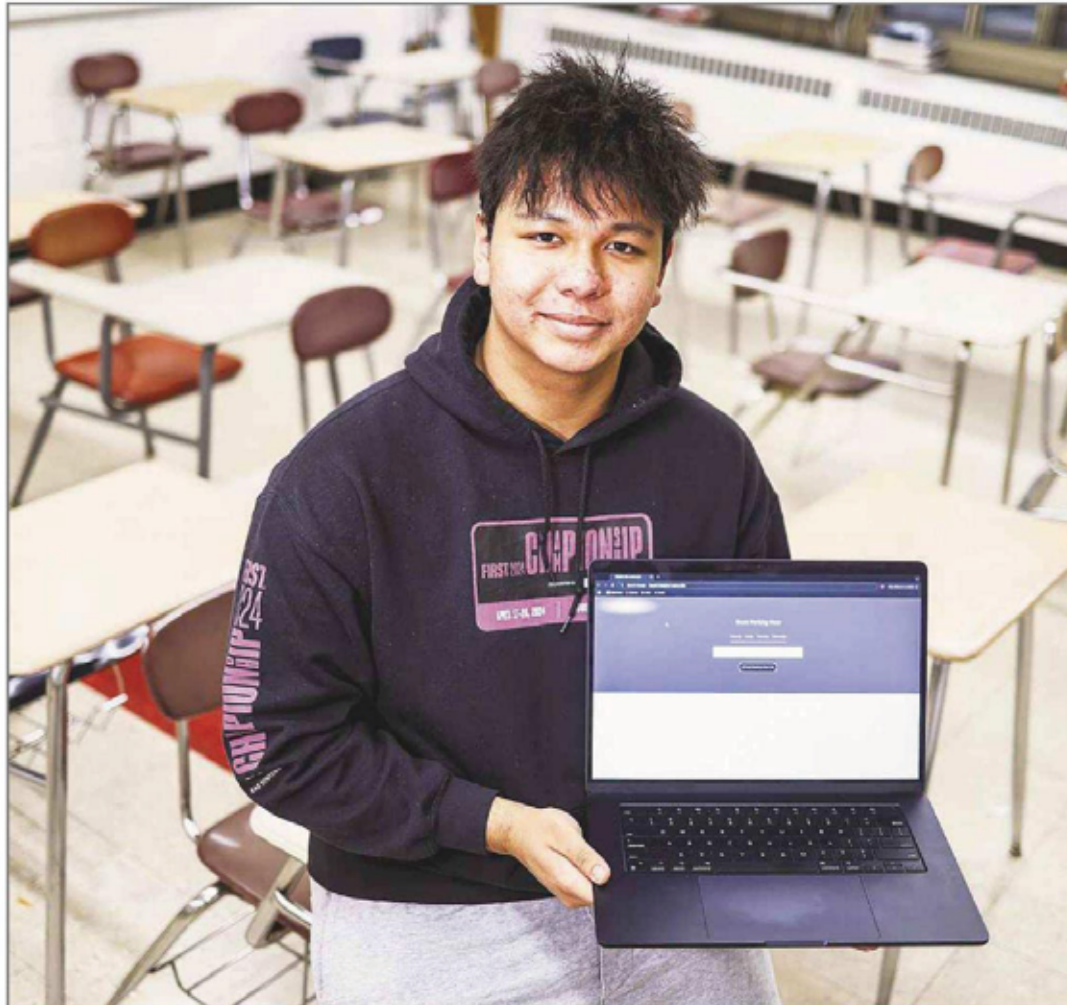
Age: 17

Hometown: Baldwin

School: Baldwin High School
Congressional District: 4th Congressional District, former Rep. Andrew D'Esposito

App: SPLASH Tracker

App Summary: Allows volun-



Aditya Varma, of Syosset High School, won for his Rent Your Driveway app. ■ Video: newsday.tv

teers of Operation SPLASH, a nonprofit that clears garbage from Long Island waterways, to track cleanup areas and be notified of locations in need of attention.

Since he was in middle school, Paul Fleck and his father would spend Saturdays between the months of April and October in the waters off Freeport, collecting litter with Operation SPLASH.

As Fleck's crew traveled east, he noticed a recurring problem.

Too often, a boat captain would travel to one marsh or island to find that another volunteer group had recently cleaned the area, forcing them to another site.

This lack of communication between volunteers wasted time and resources, and created more emissions, Fleck said.

"No one knows all the names to the islands and some of the marshes are not named, so there's no real efficient way of knowing where past groups have been," he said.

After taking AP Computer Science A his junior year, Fleck said he felt confident to create SPLASH Tracker.

After the area is cleared of debris, a volunteer can click on a polygon and the shape will become bright green.

Within five days, that polygon will slowly turn from bright green, then to a darker green

and eventually back to red.

Although coding was more challenging than he expected, Fleck said he had a new mindset each day, knowing that it would be able to help the environment.

The high school senior said he plans to study mechanical engineering in college.

Trevor Flores

Age: 17

Hometown: Mastic

School: Eastport-South Manor Junior-Senior High School

Congressional District: 2nd Congressional District, Rep. Andrew Garbarino

App: Seandertal

App Summary: A Roblox Lua-based survival game where

players must dodge objects to the beat of a song.

For Trevor Flores, creating Seandertal was just another way to rise to a challenge. The high school junior had created many video game based apps in the Roblox gaming platform in a game jam, a competition where programmers create an app within a 24-hour period.

So, when Flores decided to create Seandertal as a friend's birthday present, he decided to challenge himself one Saturday to that same requirement.

Flores created Seandertal, a rhythm game where players must dodge objects in an obstacle course to the beat of a song.

He said the game was a combination of his passions for music, the arts and computer programming. "Music has always been a deep passion in my life," Flores said.

He said he intends to pursue a career in computer science while prioritizing his artistic interests.

"Computer programming is especially competitive today, especially of how fast it's developing," Flores said. "That made me realize that we need a push for more computer science classes within our schools."

Stephanie Sze

Age: 16

Hometown: Manhasset

School: Manhasset High School
Congressional District: 3rd Congressional District, Rep. Tom Suozzi

App: College Buddy

App Summary: Runner-up. Matches high school students with potential colleges through a swiping quiz, with an emphasis on campus culture.

When Stephanie Sze began researching colleges last year, she couldn't help but notice something was missing.

While a school's academic offerings were easily accessible to learn about, information about the school's social atmosphere — an equally valued factor to Gen Z — was limited.

"I realized that there were other aspects of colleges that

NEWSDAY / STEVE PROST



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Paul Fleck, of Baldwin High School, made his SPLASH Tracker to help Operation SPLASH.



NEWSDAY / STEVE POST

Trevor Flores, of Eastport-South Manor High, created Seandertal, a Roblox Lua-based app.



NEWSDAY / STEVE POST

Stephanie Sze, of Manhasset High School, was a runner-up for her creation, the College Buddy app.



RICK KOPSTEIN

Heng Ye, of Smithtown High School West, created the app M7 Stimulator, a railroad simulator.

most people don't really see, and that there are different appeals for different people," Sze said.

Using the Congressional App Challenge as motivation, Sze created the app College Buddy, where users take a quiz by swiping on one of two photos. The photos are categorized into four criteria that emphasize campus culture, including climate, location, political preferences and weekend activities.

The user is then matched with three colleges or universities based on their answers.

"This generation likes pictures more than words, and sometimes lengthy texts aren't the best to keep attention,"

she said.

Sze said creating College Buddy helped in her college application process. She now has a better understanding of schools and what she wants on a college campus.

One thing is for certain — she intends to study computer science.

Aditya Varma

Age: 18

Hometown: Syosset

School: Syosset High School

Congressional District: 3rd Congressional District, Rep. Tom Suozzi

App: Rent Your Driveway

App Summary: First place. Allows homeowners to rent out

their driveway and for drivers to find parking spots near their destination for flexible periods of time in advance.

Aditya Varma said his mother often struggled with finding a parking space as she travels to Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx.

"The parking is nothing like suburban areas, like in Syosset there's ample parking for teachers," he said. "But in the city, there will be like seven spots and they will be reserved for administrative services. You don't really see teachers getting parking spots."

Varma's app allows drivers to find parking and for homeowners to rent out their driveways

or parking spots through a user-friendly interface.

The high school senior spent most of the summer working on the app.

This is the first app he created, Varma said, and it was satisfying to learn in a trial-and-error process. He also was grateful for guidance from his father, Arpit Varma, who works in information technology.

"The coolest part about programming at first was how a string of text can create something really extensive," Varma said. "All these words can become this massive program."

Varma will pursue a career in programming and will attend Carnegie Mellon University in the fall as a business major.

Heng Ye

Age: 17

Hometown: Smithtown

School: Smithtown High School West

Congressional District: 1st Congressional District, Rep. Nick LaLota

App: M7 Simulator

App Summary: The M7 Simulator at the Oyster Bay Railroad Museum allows visitors to experience the thrill of driving a Long Island Rail Road train on the Hempstead Branch inside a realistic driver's cab.

From a young age, Heng Ye loved trains.

But what he enjoyed the most was experiencing a train's simulators.

"I remember the thrill of sitting behind realistic controls, pretending I was in command of a plane or a train," Ye wrote in his applications.

This fascination led him to a passion for engineering and computer science. In elementary school, Ye taught himself coding and then took AP Computer Science as an eighth grader.

In 2017, the Long Island Rail Road donated a quarter-length M7 simulator cab to the Oyster Bay Railroad Museum.

Although the cab had been used for training purposes for about 15 years, all the electronics had been stripped out, preventing visitors from experiencing any kind of simulations.

"My goal was for museum visitors of all ages to be able to feel the same excitement that I felt when I first sat behind the controls of a simulator," Ye wrote in his application.

Ye will study electrical engineering and computer science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology this fall.

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THIS DATE IN HISTORY

1736 The treaty ending the Seven Years' War was signed in Paris, with France ceding its territory in Canada to Britain.

1936 Nazi Germany's Reichstag passed a law investing the Gestapo secret police with absolute authority, exempt from any legal review.

1959 An F4-intensity tornado tore through the St. Louis area, killing 21 people and injuring 345.

1962 On the Glienicke Bridge connecting West Berlin and East Germany, the Soviet Union exchanged captured American U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers for Rudolf Abel, a Soviet spy held by the United States.

1967 The 25th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, dealing with presidential disability and succession, was adopted as Minnesota and Nevada ratified it.

1981 Eight people were killed when a fire set by a busser broke out at the Las Vegas Hilton Hotel.