

Local student wins top award

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In late May, Ashley Huffman, a 16-year-old from Englewood, found out her team had won the U.S. State Department's 2006 Doors to Diplomacy Award.

In June at an awards ceremony, she finally met her two teammates -- Felicia Hollerman, 18, and Katie Olsen, 15 -- who worked with her on the project for five months.

The three are "classmates" in an online advanced placement history class at the Florida Virtual School.

The team triumphed over 304 other teams from 46 countries, making Florida Virtual School the first online school to win the award since it was established by the State Department and the Global SchoolNet Foundation five years ago.

Their project, "Golden Bridges: Connecting People to Peace," provides a look at international diplomacy, specifically the work of the United Nations, complete with interactive quizzes and a time line.

The girls, who live in different parts of the state, hooked up on a conference call in late December.

Ashley is home-schooled and takes all her classes through Florida Virtual School. Having taken Web Design I, she created most of the Web site, work that she said could be "really tedious."

The three gathered information, read books and wrote from their own homes. They stayed in touch through phone calls and e-mails -- many, said Ashley, occurring very late at night.

They never had to fuel up on Diet Pepsi and Doritos, car pool to each others houses or make last-minute trips for supplies for their project.

Ashley said she found out that she won by e-mail, and the team and their families were honored at a luncheon in Orlando earlier this month.

"We didn't know if we should shake hands or hug each other," said Ashley about finally meeting her on-line friends.

In Orlando, the girls also shot a video for their project. Each won a \$2,000 scholarship, and their teacher, Sherry McAuliffe, and school were awarded \$500.

Ashley said she will use her scholarship to study political science. She said she hopes to attend Yale, Georgetown or Penn State.

Meanwhile, she said, she will maintain the group's Web site and plans to participate in the project again next year.

But this time she'll have a face to go with her online teammate, as she and Katie plan to work together once again.

Interested?

What: "Golden Bridges: Connecting People to Peace," is the Doors to Diplomacy award-winning project created by Ashley Huffman, 16, of Englewood, and two other students in advanced placement history at Florida Virtual School.