

Greenville County Student Corral's State Chess Award and Makes History



Sterling School's rising 5th grade student, Ritika Sanghani entered the state chess record books over the summer playing in the South Carolina Chess Association's very first "Girls Scholastic Championships" and winning the "Hannah 'Tori' Whatley G.R.I.T. Award", which qualified her as South Carolina's eighth representative to the Susan Polgar Girls' Invitational. To top it off, she is the youngest player ever to accomplish this daunting task in the 14-year association between the state and the Polgar event.

The "Hannah 'Tori' Whatley G.R.I.T. Award" is an award that is presented, each year, to the young lady who earns the honor of representing South Carolina at the Susan Polgar Girls Invitational tournament, held at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri. In 2008, Tori Whatley became the first South Carolinian to play at the tournament. Ms. Whatley would later become the only North American female member of the six-time national championship

Webster University Chess Team (2014-2018), and a member of the 2015 PanAm Intercollegiate Division I Women's Championship squad. The acronym G.R.I.T. stands for 'Girls with Respect, Integrity, and Tenacity', and the award is given in the spirit of recognizing the determination and perseverance exhibited by the award's namesake, and by chess-playing girls from all over our state. In addition to the beautiful, 10" x 13" inscribed plaque, the winner receives a \$350 stipend to help with travel expenses. Since the Polgar tournament was to be held online this year, due to the pandemic, Ritika and her family graciously requested that the Tori Whatley Chess Initiative (TWCI) use the money to promote scholastic chess in our state.

The Susan Polgar Girls' Invitational is a showcase of talented girls from around the country and is considered the most prestigious all-girl chess event in the world. Each year, about 3,000 girls across the nation set their goals on obtaining one of the highly coveted, fifty-two official state representative invitations (Texas and California get to send two), or one of the small handful of special wildcard invitations to the Polgar event. To date, this tournament has awarded over 5 million dollars in scholarships and prizes. The 2020 event alone, awarded over \$250,000 in prizes. The event's namesake, Susan Polgar, is a four-time Women's World Champion, and a trailblazer in women's chess, becoming the first woman to qualify for the "Men's" World Chess Championship cycle in 1986. In 1991, she became the first woman to earn the men's Grandmaster title.

Ritika's quest to this esteemed event began at age 5, when her dad, Bhavin, a competent chess player himself, began teaching Ritika and a neighbor's daughter the basics of the Royal Game. The two girls enjoyed their casual games and for a couple of years, played for one hour each weekend.

Ritika's tournament debut came in October 2017, when Mr. Sanghani took her to a local contest. She got off to a shaky start in her first couple of tournaments, losing a few games, but she was determined to play better, so her father continued working with her at home, and taking her to local events and chess club meetings. There, she met like-minded children and as her game slowly improved, she started to win trophies. Since then, she has participated in 40 more events, and today plays capably and confidently for a young lady her age.

While her father helps keep her chess skills on track, Ritika's mother, Bhakti, seems to act as the family's metronome, keeping things on schedule and coordinating events for both Ritika and her little brother, Tanay. Tanay is a rising 1st-grader and is following his older sister's footsteps, nabbing 1st place in the (Primary K-3 section) of the recent South Carolina Scholastic Chess Championships.

The last year has brought challenges to the chess community and how tournaments are conducted. Now, many tournaments, such as the South Carolina Girls' Scholastic Championships that qualified Ritika are held online through such platforms as Chess.com. The sport is fortunate that this and other platforms were well-developed and ready when the effects of Covid 19 caused a great disruption to everyday life. However, through it all, Ritika misses over-the-board play and the confidence that feeling the pieces in your hand brings. She, and many others bemoan the "mis-clicks", and the sometimes-unfortunate consequences, that can occur in online play.

Besides the "mis-clicks", other unintended, but equally unfortunate things can happen with online play, as it did with Ritika's Polgar experience. Although she had fun participating in the "warm-up" events with the other state representatives, an important rule was overlooked by a tournament official resulting in her being unable to play in the main event. The Tori Whatley Chess Initiative reached out to some of its allies to see if someone might be able to play a couple of instructive games with Ritika. That call was immediately answered by Tori's old friend, Anna Wyzywany, a former Polgar representative from Louisiana, also a six-time veteran of the event. Besides being an old friend, Anna is also the administrative assistant to the director of the SPICE Program and Webster Chess Team at Webster University.

Interestingly, Anna and Ritika have a "it's a small world after all" story. The two had previously met back in 2019 in North Carolina, when Anna worked for the Charlotte Chess Center. Ms. Wyzywany played and analyzed some games with a group of young girls that included the soon-to-be champion. Anna was appreciative of how the Royal Game connected them then, and now. In the most recent encounter, the pair enjoyed a couple of online instructive games, and a Zoom call. Anna spoke of Ritika saying that, "It was so wonderful to connect with Ritika again. I look forward to watching her progress and seeing her again!". Tori's father, and former S.C. Scholastic Chess Coordinator, David Whatley stated, "This action is representative of the alumnae to which these young ladies now belong. It is a sisterhood that seems to transcend the tournament, and even the game of chess."

It is hoped that the Polgar tournament will return to an in-person event next year. This will give the participants the full experience of the chess camp that runs in conjunction with the tournament. The camp provides world-class instruction, analysis of games, and fun group activities. Additionally, for a week, the players get to meet and interact with Susan Polgar and members of the Webster University Team. Since Ritika is the 2021 Polgar Representative from South Carolina, she is no longer required to qualify for the tournament, and will be welcomed to participate in this experience through her senior year of high school.