

9 LI teens regional finalists in Siemens Competition

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As teenage science whizzes introduced themselves at a [Stony Brook University](#) workshop last summer, Michelle Leonetti of [Long Beach](#) found herself impressed with the attitude of a fellow 12th-grader from [East Meadow](#).

At one point, the other student, Salonee Shah, described her frustration at scoring what she considered a wholly inadequate 94 out of 100 on an Advanced Placement test in physics.

"Good work ethic!" Leonetti thought.

[PHOTOS: Click to see photos of the LI teens in the Siemens Competition finals](#)

After teaming up on a research project involving skin-tissue repairs, Leonetti and Shah now are celebrating their recent emergence as regional finalists in the national Siemens Competition in Math, Science & Technology. The [Long Island](#) pair are among nine area teens who will advance to regional competitions next month, mostly at [Carnegie Mellon University](#) in [Pittsburgh](#).

Teens who get through next month's judging will compete at the national level at [New York University](#) in December, either as teams or individuals, for scholarships of up to \$100,000. All of the nation's 96 regional finalists win at least \$1,000.

Ward [Melville](#) High School in [Setauket](#) produced three regional finalists - Ruoyi Jiang, Aneesh Sampath and Kevin Zhao - the most ever for that school. [Manhasset](#) High School has two competitors, Shaunak Bakshi and Peter Massey.

Other regional finalists are David Park of [Herricks](#) High School in [New Hyde Park](#) and Joshua Pfeffer of North Shore Hebrew Academy High School in [Great Neck](#).

A strong work ethic is a must for the Siemens contest, which features two complete rounds of judging. Each round requires students to deliver PowerPoint presentations before adult audiences, and to appear before six-member panels of jurists for rapid-fire Q&A sessions.

"Rather than grueling, we like to think of it as an opportunity to excel," said Peter Guastella, a science research specialist at [Manhasset High](#).

Students nationwide submitted a record 1,348 projects to the contest this year - up 12 percent from last year. Most projects involve a year or more of research, often at university labs.

For David Park, research has meant two-hour commutes between his [Albertson](#) home and [Columbia University](#) in [Manhattan](#) as often as five days a week last summer. Park has teamed up with a [New Jersey](#) student, Erica Chung, for a project that aims to prevent liver infections.

Despite the long hours, Park says he's never tired of working with his faculty mentor, Ilya Trakht, a Columbia medical researcher. While continuing his research this year, the 12th-grader also takes six college-level Advanced Placement courses, plays the violin and serves as opinion editor for his high school newspaper.

"I became so interested in what he was doing, I just wanted to learn more," Park said.