

Lending an ear to hear the voice of the future

Young people are battling it out to win the world's biggest speaking contest and they're trained by an Irishman, says FRANK MURPHY

THE WORLD'S biggest speaking event involving young people is building up to a crescendo leading to a grand finale to be held in London in July.

As many as 23,500 students have taken part in a series of heats across the 32 London boroughs and 14 districts in Essex that are also participating.

When the finals take place on July 10, one among them will be announced Champion of the Jack Petchey 2008 "Speak Out" Challenge! He or she will win a holiday for four people to Portugal for their efforts and £3,000 in funds for their school.

Jack Petchey OBE is a successful East London entrepreneur. He established The Jack Petchey Foundation in 1999. It is a young, progressive grant making Trust based in Ilford Essex., which is now among the largest and most influential London charitable foundations.

The organisation focuses on projects and programmes that benefit 11-25-year olds. It currently operates in around 1,600 secondary schools and youth clubs in London and Essex and it also has smaller programmes elsewhere around the country.

The organisation's grant budget for 2008 is over £20 million, with over £60 million having been given since 1999. The Jack Petchey Foundation is funding the Speak Out Challenge project with up to £700,000.

The Jack Petchey 2008 "Speak Out" Challenge is managed by SpeakersBank, a trading arm of the Speakers Trust charity. It has trained thousands of people and is Britain's fastest growing trainer-provider in the public speaking and communication fields.

By the end of this year's school year, communication

trainers from SpeakersBank will have given a one-day public speaking workshop to 15-year-olds in every London state school.

They will have taught young people how to improve delivery and structure when they are speaking in front of an audience in public – perhaps for the first time.

The young people will have been taught skills that have been honed and polished at first in front of their families, before being rolled out in competition before their school friends and then in competition with young people from rival schools in their boroughs and in the 32 borough finals.

The young people will have fought ruthlessly to impress judges on the quality of their debating skills, with iPods and a prize worth £5,000 up for grabs.

SpeakersBank's regional director, Sean Kennedy is a trainer, speaker and businessman who now devotes an increasing proportion of his time to public speaking and vocational training work with young people. Sean is also a Trustee of the London Irish Centre in London's Camden Town.

Sean came over to Britain in 1987. He worked on building sites in London before starting his own successful construction company. He soon moved into the property development business and more recently headed up a property investment company. He is currently the Project Director for the Jack Petchey Foundation "Speak Out" Challenge.

He says that the competition has been a great leveller for those taking part.

"Students from underachiev-

ing schools often do better than those from the top-ranked schools. It's all to do with having something to say, preparing, and then delivering with passion," Sean says.

Furthermore, an independent evaluation has shown increased confidence, self-esteem, and enhanced participation in school activities following the training. Teenagers, unused to expressing their opinions to authority figures, say they feel empowered.

Sean explained that the project ties in with the other core curriculum subjects that the young people taking part are studying, like GCSE English, Drama, Business Studies and Citizenship.

"Every student receives up to six hours of training in the skills of public speaking and effective communication from professional trainers," he says.

"The students have the opportunity to talk openly and honestly on any subject that they feel strongly about.

"Our network of professional trainers, speakers and facilitators provide dynamic training to all sectors of the population, particularly to those in the education, voluntary and public arenas who have little access to such opportunity."

Heats leading to this year's final began back in October in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham with heats taking place soon after in Brent at Preston Manor High School and thereafter at venues across London and Essex.

By the end of the competition, some 550 school finals will have taken place, through 38 regional finals. The grand finale in July takes place at the Mermaid Events and Conference Centre in London. It will be hosted by TV personality June Sarpong.

Through its core, SpeakUp! Speak Out! Training platform, the SpeakerBank charity offers training opportunities like public speaking workshops in school, the voluntary and community sectors. It also organises Talking Enterprise Workshops for schools as well as interview skills for young people.

For more information, go to www.speakoutchallenge.com.



PENSIVE: Irish World editor Frank Murphy with other judges in Brent



RIVETED: The audience in Brent pay attention to speakers taking part



TRAINER: Sean Kennedy



SALUTE: Mayor of Brent, Harshadbhai B Patel, centre, applauds Brent heat winners