

CALEDONIA – Retinitis pigmentosa.

Dendrochronology.

Be honest, do you think you could spell those words if you were standing on stage in front of a group of people?

David Heyman didn't receive either word Tuesday at the Lowndes County Spelling Bee at Annunciation Catholic School, but the Caledonia Middle School seventh-grader is confident he would have been able to spell them both if he did.

That's because Heyman has spent plenty of hours studying to hone his ability to spell even the toughest, tongue-twisting words. That work paid off Tuesday, as Heyman spelled Trinidadian to earn the victory in the county spelling bee. His victory comes on the heels of having to spell perpendicularity to win the Caledonia Middle School Spelling Bee in November 2023.

"I didn't have that big of a reaction," Heyman said of his second first-place finish in a spelling bee this school year. "I didn't really realize how big of a deal it was."

New Hope Middle School's David Robertson was the first runner-up. Heritage Academy's Mira Alnas was the second runner-up. Those three will advance to the semifinals, which will be held online later this month. From there, students will advance to the in-person state spelling bee Saturday, March 2, at Mississippi University for Women and then onto the 2024 Scripps National Spelling Bee the week of Memorial Day 2024 at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center in National Harbor, Maryland.

Heyman admitted to a few nervous moments Tuesday, but he said he felt confident with every word he received through round eight, when

he and Robertson remained, thanks to the six hours he spent studying for the event.

Heyman also credited God and his mother, Ashley, for motivation and help studying the words.

“You have to put in the work,” Heyman said. “You can’t just naturally be born to spell retinitis pigmentosa or dendrochronology. There are some really weird words on the list. You have to study them. That is a big part of why I have had success.”

Heyman participated in his first spelling bee when he was in the first grade. He said he earned several third-place finishes as he moved through elementary school prior to earning his initial first-place finish earlier this school year.

Heyman said he will look at the entire list of words for the next steps as well as break parts of words down so he will be able to figure out how to spell any unfamiliar words. He is confident that strategy will work well for him as he prepares for the semifinals and the state event.

From there, who knows? Heyman may have to travel to a few new states or study a few new words, like peregrinate.