

David Heyman's countenance speaks volumes.

When some around him may be overconfident or nervous, Heyman's face is a picture of calm. The Caledonia Middle School seventh-grader relies on his faith to help him through the most nerve-wracking moments.

"Quoting scripture here, but I can do all things through Him who strengthens me," Heyman said.

That passage from Philippians 4:13 is a tenet of Heyman's approach and part of the reason he is such a good student and speller.

On Saturday, March 2, Heyman again displayed his knowledge for arcane and incomprehensible words when he was declared co-champion of the C Spire Foundation Mississippi Spelling Bee at the Mississippi University for Women. Azariah Green, a sixth-grader from Hernando Middle School, joined Heyman in tying for first at the event, which featured the state's top 22 spellers.

"I am definitely proud of myself and all of the work I have done," Heyman said. "I don't think I would have believed you if you would have told me a couple of years ago that I was going to be able to do this."

Green and Heyman will advance to the Scripps National Spelling Bee on May 26-June 1 at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center in National Harbor, Maryland. The semifinals May 29 and the finals May 30 will be televised nationally on ION.

Heyman admitted he "wasn't really big into this stuff" when he competed in spelling bees in elementary school. But he said his thinking changed as he realized competitors could advance to higher levels the deeper they advanced. That notion motivated him to study lists of

words and get into the dictionary to memorize word origins and definitions.

All of that studying may have fazed some, but Heyman said he doesn't get nervous because he realizes everything is part of God's plan.

"I don't need to worry about it if I don't win," Heyman said. "If I don't win, it doesn't matter because that is what God wants. If I *do* win, that's also what God wants."

Heyman also relies on something his father, Alex, told him while studying for the Mississippi Spelling Bee. David said his father told him, "the only person who can beat you is you". He didn't allow that to happen thanks to plenty of hours of preparation and his mother, Ashley, who helped him memorize and understand as many words as possible.

"It comes down to preparation, and David prepares very well for events like the Mississippi Spelling Bee," Ashley said. "We have tried to teach him and our other children to do their best no matter what they're doing and that we are there with them and God is with them. We have tried to take the pressure off by telling our children to do their best and whatever the outcome everything will be OK and it will work out like it is supposed to."

Ashley said David also has learned how to narrow his focus on the presenter of the words and/or the judges at competitions. She said his ability to do that helps him avoid the eyes of the parents, relatives, friends and fans in the audience at the spelling bee.

David thanked his mother for her help in helping him prepare for the latest spelling bee. He said last week that he was going to take a little break from studying before diving back in to the dictionary. David knows he won't be able to memorize all of the words, but he is going to have to buckle down and master his prefixes, suffixes and origins and get plenty of repetitions in the next few months. He said the judges will

pull the “hardest” section of the word list for the preliminaries of the national event.

David plans to watch past competitions and interactions between spellers and presenters/judges to gain perspective and a feel for the event. He said that experience will be valuable because he has been told competitors who have participated in the national event usually have the best chances for success.

“This is the first time he has gone this far, so we want him to be confident and have fun,” Ashley Heyman said. “What an honor it is to get to go to a competition like that.”

David also is looking forward to the honor of competing with the nation’s other top spellers. He said he will stick to his tenets and do his best to narrow his focus and stay as calm as possible.

“There are going to be a bunch of people who are definitely qualified to be there,” Heyman said. “I hope no one gets out in the first round because it is not every day you get a trip to Maryland.

“I think it will be really fun. I think I have just as good a chance as anybody for their first year, but there are going to a lot of people who aren’t there for the first time.”

Later this spring and prior to the Scripps National Spelling Bee, WCBI and other Mississippi television stations will broadcast the C Spire Foundation Mississippi Spelling Bee State Championship. Dates and times will be announced.

In addition to qualifying for the national competition, Green and Heyman received the Samuel Louis Sugarman Award, a 2024 United States Mint Proof Set provided by Jay Sugarman, chairman and CEO of iStar Financial; Britannica Online Premium, a one-year subscription for

the premier online resource from Encyclopedia Britannica; Merriam-Webster Unabridged Online, a one-year subscription for the official word source for all levels of competition for the Scripps National Spelling Bee; Epic Family, a one-year subscription for the world's largest digital library for kids with access to 40,000+ kids' books, videos and audiobooks; a one-year home subscription for a leading K-12 creative coding platform plus eight live, one-on-one online coding classes; and a \$1,000 gift from the Mississippi Spelling Bee organization.