Two years ago we interviewed Neil Maes’ mother, Christy Maes, about her family’s experience with early intervention and guidance provided about cochlear implantation for her child. Neil was eleven at the time and had just competed in the 2016 Scripps National Spelling Bee. Now 13, Neil was recently back in Washington DC to compete a second time.

The path to compete at the national level is difficult. Returning a second time is less common; 22% were return competitors in 2018. Competing twice as a child who is deaf is amazing. We interviewed Neil by telephone to ask him about the competition process, how he prepares, and what advice he has for other students interested in competing.

ACIA: This year there were 516 competitors at the Bee. What steps were involved for all of you to make it to the national level?
NM: I started with a grade-wide competition and then a school-wide competition in January. Then I went to regionals on March 3 (which was also World Hearing Day). From there I went to the Nationals.

ACIA: This is your second time competing in the National Spelling Bee. How did you become interested in competing?
NM: I started in third grade and won my grade-wide contest and then my school-wide competition. I thought it was fun.

ACIA: How do you prepare for the competition? Did you do anything differently to prepare for this year’s competition compared with 2016?
NM: This year I studied vocabulary a lot more. Part of the written test at Nationals is vocabulary as well as spelling. To move on to the top 50, you need to do well on the vocabulary test. I also have a book with word patterns in different languages that I studied. I studied at least 5 hours a week.

ACIA: Do you have a “secret” to your success?
NM: When I’m on stage, I try to stay calm and take my time. When I’m spelling, I go slow so I don’t mess up.
ACIA: Do you have any special accommodations to help you hear during the competition?
NM: Yes, the pronouncer of the spelling bee words uses a FM system so that I can hear the words right directly into my sound processors. Otherwise, I compete the same as everyone else.

ACIA: What is the hardest word you’ve been asked to spell?
NM: The word I missed at the 2016 Nationals – polychromatic. I had never heard that word before. It was unfamiliar to me.

ACIA: What do you find to be the most exciting part of the spelling bee?
NM: The moment right after you spell your word right!

ACIA: What are your future goals?
NM: I’d like to go back and compete next year. I want to go to a four-year degree college. I’d like to be a meteorologist, work at AG Bell or for Scripps National Spelling Bee.

ACIA: You’d like to compete in next year’s spelling bee?
NM: Yes. Next year is the last year I can compete. You can’t enter after 8th grade.

ACIA: Do you have any advice for other kids, with or without hearing loss, who would like to compete in a spelling bee?
NM: Take your time and study hard. Believe in yourself and don’t listen to people who tell you that you can’t do it.

After the interview I spoke with Neil’s mother. She told me a story about something that occurred while they were at the National Bee in DC. Another competitor sought Neil out during the event. The other student has a cousin who has a cochlear implant; she wanted to have a photo taken with Neil to show with her cousin. She recognized the significance of a student competing in the National Spelling Bee!

Authors Note: Neil finished second at regionals this year and competed in National’s through the RSVBee program. The new RSVBee invitational program was developed to provide an opportunity for more spellers to participate in the National Finals. This year’s winner was an RSVBee invitee.

Interview by ACI Alliance staff Susan Thomas