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COURTESY: THE KARNIKS

THE WORLD AT HIS FEET



In learning about India, he discovered the world

Sathwik Karnik in Halebeedu, Karnataka. According to his mother, his pursuit of Geography was partly due to the fact that he was the only Indian kid in his class, and the feeling of being the odd one out in his Massachusetts elementary school led him to want to understand the roots of his difference.

Chaya Babu decodes the making of a champion — **Sathwik Karnik**, winner of the National Geographic Bee in 2013 and the **India Abroad Special Award for Achievement 2013**

It's been a little over a year since Sathwik Karnik won the National Geographic Bee. In May of 2013, on national television, he and his opponent both answered the final question correctly. Seconds before this, Bee host Alex Trebek said, 'Sathwik has the lead, 4 to 3, which means that in order to go to tiebreakers, Conrad must come up with the correct answer to this next question and Sathwik must miss it.'

That's not what happened.

After Trebek gave the question — which called for the name of a peak in Ecuador that is the farthest point from the Earth's center — both contestants quietly jotted their answers down. When they were done and looked up, Sathwik had a big smile on his face. The audience, silent before, laughed.

Trebek turned to Conrad first to see what he put down.

'Chimborazo,' Conrad said, the word popping up in his handwriting on the blue screen on the front of his podium.

Then Sathwik.

'Chimborazo,' he echoed.

Both were right, and with a final score of 5 to 4, Sathwik was the new champion.

He won a \$25,000 college scholarship, lifetime membership in the National Geographic Society and a trip for two to the Galápagos on an expedition aboard the Lindblad ship *National Geographic Endeavour*.



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"I knew the answer to the final question, and I had known that fact for many years, so I was pretty confident with my answer," he told *India Abroad*, explaining that

there were others, though, that tripped him up along the way. "There was this lake in Botswana that I happened to luckily guess right. I had learned it like a week before the national finals."

Sathwik is modest, mild-mannered, and comes off as shy; his family and teachers describe him as warm, compassionate, and highly respected by his peers. That he attributes his knowledge about Lake Ngami to luck speaks

volumes about his humility and his attitudes toward his achievements, which he has learned from his family.

His mother Rathma also emphasized on luck as a major contributor to his victory. Soft-spoken and transparent in her gratitude for the successes in life, she said that she and her husband Vishwanath just encourage their two sons to do the best they can and do what they love.

Vishwanath explained that in coming to the United States, his biggest dream for his two young sons at the time was that they would find stability, comfort, education, and friendship. In deciding to leave India — they were living in

Sathwik Karnik
For his breathtaking
mastery of the atlas; for
being a brilliant
competitor; for
continuing a trend
of excellence.



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In learning about India, he discovered the world

Bengaluru at the time though they are originally from Mangalore — they hoped to settle down in one place where the kids would have consistency that they didn't have when Vishwanath was traveling a lot for work. He has built his career as a software engineer and now does data modeling and analysis for Fidelity Investments.

Rathma is also a software engineer, but on a freelance basis. They have achieved far beyond what they originally imagined — they never expected their sons to receive national recognition.

"With these Bees, sometimes luck is what matters — you might not know the question you got, but you might know the question someone else got," Rathma said. "That happens a lot and in the end there is only one winner. We had faith that he could do it, but in the end it's luck."

Perhaps that is so, but without a vast grasp of geography, luck will do nothing in a national competition of young people who have stored in their brain the names of obscure archipelagos, valleys, capes and rivers on all corners of the globe, earth trivia that a layman and even your average all-star student would never know.

Sathwik, along with his older brother Karthik, who made it to the Bee twice himself, in 2011 and 2012, coming in fifth and sixth, respectively, studied geography together for fun outside of school since they were young. As small children, they played games to try to see who could find a certain city first in a book or a map, but Sathwik's deeper interest was sparked when he was in second grade.

According to his mother, his pursuit of the subject was partly due to the fact that he was the only Indian kid in his class, and the feeling of being the odd one out in his Massachusetts elementary school led him to want to understand the roots of his difference.

"When the kids started school, they started realizing that we are not like the locals here, they saw the difference," his father said. "When they were home, they wouldn't have realized that, but when they mixed with the classmates, they saw that their food, their way of speaking, everything was different. We weren't sure how the kids would adjust to the environment and cope with the differences, but somehow it all worked out for the best."

In learning about India, Sathwik began to be curious about other parts of the world, their histories and cultures, and the desire flourished.

Sathwik recalls a trip to India with his family during the summer after second grade. With the personal screens on the backs of the airplane seats that showed the progress of the trip, he and Karthik quizzed each other about the places they were flying over.

Over the years, using travel books, issues of National Geographic Magazine, and various maps and atlases, they have challenged each other to learn more and different types of information related to geography.

"My brother would sometimes read the events going on in the world and test me on where they were happening," Sathwik said. "And my parents were very encouraging; they sometimes quizzed me on what I learned throughout the day."

But there was no rigorous study schedule. Sathwik and Karthik sought out geography on their own as something outside the school syllabus. Their teachers mentioned,



REBECCA HALE/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Sathwik celebrates with his father, Vishwanath; mother, Rathma; and brother, Karthik. Karthik finished in the top 10 of the National Geographic Bee in 2011 and 2012.

repeatedly, their remarkable initiative and leadership qualities exemplified through their unique and arduous pursuit of the subject.

"I think his passion for geography was mainly rooted in a quest to just learn more about it," Karthik, two years older, said. "The map exercises were always interesting; it was like we were exploring the world on our own and shared information with each other. Looking at travel books helped us imagine what life would be like in different countries. And I think he was also inspired by watching previous champions — he was motivated to eventually succeed in the National Bee."

If there was a news story happening in a city or country Sathwik had never heard of, or he discovered some place new in conversation or through a type of food or from the label of a product manufactured in a faraway location, he used these as starting points to further understand the areas. His passion was something he developed and maintained day-to-day, through the most ordinary of circumstances.

And when it became clear that both brothers possessed a knack for geography, their teachers and school administrators were supportive, letting first Karthik and then Sathwik announce a geography fact over the PA system every day when they were in elementary school, spending time with each of them in one-on-one sessions once a week to help them prepare for entering the state

Bees and then going off to the nationals.

Karthik began participating in the competitions when he was in fifth grade, and Sathwik followed in his path.

"I felt it was really helpful to have someone to study with for the Geography Bee, and he challenged me a lot and he always pushed me to different levels," Karthik said of his brother. "He was a major opponent for me all the time and he helped me reach as far as I did. And I think I definitely was able to provide that for him as well. We both helped each other. It was a give-give friendship. Whoever moved past the state bee would help the other."

This doesn't mean there weren't hardships along the way.

Participating at the same time at the school and state level, with a shared goal of hoping that at least one of them would make it to the next round, meant competing against each other. That was a concern: If one Karthik beat out the other, how the latter would cope. But they decided to go with the flow, each knowing that his brother would be supportive no matter what happened.

Sathwik beat his older brother at the school level when Sathwik was in fourth grade, and then they overlapped at state

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Sathwik explores the Galapagos Islands,
the trip of a lifetime.

bee the following two years, both times ending with Karthik moving on to the nationals.

The second year, when Karthik came in sixth at the National Geographic Bee, this was tough for Sathwik.

"I think he was slightly discouraged when I lost in the national finals in 2012," Karthik said. "I think because it was my second try and I still didn't win and he expected me to at least place in the top 3, it was maybe a bit discouraging to him. He began to have second thoughts about continuing to try."

However, Sathwik's is enthusiasm and desire to push forward ultimately triumphed.

"We were not sure whether to have him participate or not, but Sathwik said, 'I want to try, I want to go,' and we couldn't stop him," Rathma said.

This ability in Sathwik — the drive to keep going, the resilience and strength — was a large factor in his overall preparation as well as in his success at the National Bee in 2013, according to both Karthik and David Quinn.

Quinn, who taught at King Philip Regional Middle School and ran the geography club, coaching both Karniks individually and whom Vishwanath named as one of the most supportive people in the development of his sons' knowledge of geography, described Sathwik's calm and determined manner of studying.

"If he were to get a question wrong when I was quizzing him, he would write it down and go back and take a look later at the question and the facts he missed and the geographic area to see what other factors he could kind of pull into his repertoire," Quinn said. "And in competitions, I think (*both Sathwik and Karthik*) understand intuitively that some of the questions are just the luck of the draw, and that being upset over any one question is not a productive way to go about winning the Bee."

"That's one thing that Sathwik does really, really well," he continued. "He's able to mitigate any of the anxiety that comes along with this. One of my favorite moments was when he was up 4 to 3 with one question left, and they gave the final question and there was a smile that came over his face, which let the audience know that he had won it. His ability to not become overwhelmed by the stage he's on I think was really crucial in not dwelling on a question missed but really being able to focus on what the next question would be, and not let nerves get in the way of actual performance and knowledge."

A year since that big grin, Sathwik is graduating from the eighth grade, which would have been his final chance to participate in the Bee had he not won in seventh grade.



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He's on his way to King Philip Regional High School, where he'll be taking advanced math and science courses, and where he already takes chemistry and geometry, an opportunity that came up as result of winning the Bee.

He mentioned the possibility of being a doctor, but only with a bit of cajoling about potential future plans. It's clear that his head is in the here and now, playing chess and tennis with his brother in his free time, and of course continuing his genuine love for geography.

"Last year he was 12, and here he is and all of a sudden he wins this national Bee, a scholarship, and a trip to the Galapagos Islands, and within days he's on the Kelly Ripa Show, Fox News is calling for interviews, and he has a presence on Google — it happened in a very quick turn," said Dr Susan Gilson, principal of King Philip Regional Middle School. "So that's a lot for any kid to process, and he's done a fine job keeping his balance, keeping his focus on academics, and just being a great kid. And he's a good friend to the other children. He's enjoying the eighth grade."

Sathwik stays in touch with state winners from last year through an online chat group, and together, from their disparate spots in the US, they share new facts and

discoveries about different parts of the world.

Sathwik said they keep tabs on current events, and the Malaysian Airlines incident was an opportunity for them to have an enthusiastic discussion where they applied their knowledge about the world to take stabs at where the plane might have disappeared. He also attended this year's state competition to show his support.

"It was a really great experience from a different perspective of not being in the Bee, but watching it happen," he said. "I had to stop myself from answering the questions."

As things go forward for Sathwik, his natural inclinations will continue to lead him — the stereotype of Indian parents who push hard does not hold true in his case.

"It's too early to say what he'll do later in life," his father said. "He used to say, 'I want to be a doctor!' and then he'd say, 'No I want to be an engineer!' So I don't know what he wants to do. It's not easy to say because it's so fluid and always changing. You never know where he may go."

His mother recited a Sanskrit verse from the *Bhagavad Gita*, translating to mean, "Do your duty and don't worry about the results." This is a motto they try to live by. ■

'He has always stuck close to his brother'

'Whatever his brother did, Sathwik used to follow. Then Karthik got attracted to geography, and Sathwik followed that as well.'

Rathma and Vishwanath Karnik speak to **Chaya Babu** about the biggest influences in Sathwik's life and more

There were a number of reasons why Sathwik's national success came as a surprise to his family, mainly having to do with the Karniks' overall modesty and a simple, unassuming view of themselves, but also Sathwik's quiet ambition and the idea that he had been living somewhat in his big brother's shadow.

When the concept of his two sons' obviously outstanding academic strengths comes up, Vishwanath just says, "I guess so" with a laugh.

His wife Rathma has a similar attitude. Soft-spoken, she graciously acknowledges that though teachers have pointed out both Sathwik and Karthik's success at school since they were small, that doesn't mean her children are more special. "Everyone is intelligent in one way or another, right," she said.

This reflected what King Philip Regional Middle School Principal Dr Susan Gilson said after knowing the Karniks for four years now: "You really couldn't pick a better family to honor, really. They are humble, hardworking, and just extremely nice people. And the parents are just trying to do the best for their kids. They're such close-knit family, and Sathwik's winning the Bee is a way to cast a little bit of light on all of them because they're just wonderful people."

From their home in Plainville, MA, Vishwanath and Rathma spoke about Sathwik.

On developing a passion for geography

Vishwanath: Since a very young age, he was always looking up to his brother, so whatever his brother did, Sathwik used to follow. Then Karthik somehow got attracted to geography, and Sathwik followed that as well.

My wife would ask them questions and quiz them and show them interesting geography stuff on the Internet, so they naturally got drawn to that and cultivated that habit.

Rathma: When they were little, they had these 'I spy' books, and we used to play with them seeing who could find the city first, and these are games I used to play with my brother when I was little. And when Sathwik was in second grade, he was in a school where he was the only Indian in his class, so he came home and said, 'Everyone's saying that I look different,' and he wanted to know the reason for that. So we learned about cultures and why people from different parts of the world look different.

Then he became interested and wanted to learn more about it. He felt a little out of place initially, but he learned



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The Karnik brothers, Sathwik and Karthik, bond over much more than geography.



that because we're from another part of the world, we look like that.

There are so many things they have yet to learn — every day is a learning process. There is no end to it. And almost anything has geography to it.

Vishwanath: It was more my wife (*who helped the kids*), but she didn't know anything about geography before, and once she started learning about it, she also got into it.

It all happened in a really interesting way. I learned a little too from them, but my knowledge is nothing in comparison with theirs.

In 2007, there was an Indian kid who won the National Geography Bee, and my wife watched that and asked some of the questions to the kids.

Karthik answered them and she realized she could work with them and hone their knowledge in the subject. Then she started working with them on a regular basis. They did a lot of different things, and *NationalGeographic.com* is a huge resource in itself.

The kids took the quiz on the Web site every day.

On the brotherly love and sibling rivalry

Vishwanath: They used to play this video game, National Geographic Challenge on Wii, and they challenged each other in that — I guess I'd call it friendly competition. They have that sibling rivalry. My older one is slightly aggressive and my younger one is kind of laid-back. He's not that aggressive, I'd say.

(*Karthik*) is the first child, so he always got the attention and he naturally expected that. Then when Sathwik was born, the attention was slightly diverted to him, so Karthik was always trying to attract people,



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‘The best thing about him is even with all this, he is a humble kid’

Sathwik Karnik’s school principal and National Geographic Bee coach share their stories of the star in their midst with
Chaya Babu

At King Philip Regional Middle School, teachers and administrators learned quickly that in each Karnik who entered the seventh grade there was a mini geography wiz.

Older brother Karthik led the way, bringing his love for learning about geography to the school and taking it to the National Bee, and two years later, Sathwik followed in his footsteps, ultimately becoming the 2013 Bee Winner.

“When Sathwik came to the school, he carried on the tradition,” said Principal Dr Susan Gilson, as she spoke of Karthik’s initiative in starting a Geography Club at school and how the relationship between the two boys served as one of the driving forces behind Sathwik’s victory.

“The brothers have a really strong bond and are very close,” she continued. “Karthik made the finals twice and then Sathwik won — they both work really hard to support and help each other. So as you honor Sathwik, Karthik will be there to cheer him on, but it’s also an implicit recognition of Karthik because Sathwik will tell you that he’s learned a lot from his older brother and they’ve challenged one another back and forth to do their best. That doesn’t often happen between siblings, so it’s been really nice to witness.”

This has been a recurring theme in Sathwik’s story. His parents spoke of their teamwork and cooperative learning as well, as if it were just a given in the dynamic between their sons, and David Quinn, who was a history teacher at King Philip and led the Geography Club, also recalled the brothers as sharing many similar traits, particularly in regard to their academics.

“Both Sathwik and Karthik had an absolute passion for studying geography, so don’t know what, if any, help I even gave because these two are just incredibly dedicated and knowledgeable,” he said. “They’re two very proactive and very curious young men.”

When Karthik came to the school, he e-mailed Dr Gilson directly to express his enthusiasm for the subject and to suggest they start a club. The school is large, with about 800 students total, but the faculty and staff work hard to respond to the unique interests and requests of each child, whether they express an inclination toward



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sports, arts, or even scholarly extracurriculars. And so the Geography Club was born.

As the club’s advisor, Quinn worked closely with the students by helping to create questions and other exercises, gave them a space in which to practice and sharpen their skills, and provided guidance and support to get through the pressure of competition.

“It started off as a five-person club, but then it became a one-person club,” he laughed. “Karthik was... above and beyond everybody else. Basically what it evolved into was just one-on-one coaching with the two boys as each of them prepared for the Bees. But they were very self-directed — there was a rare instance that I could find something new for them that they hadn’t seen or discovered on their own. I think part of it was learning to quiz each other, so it became a game where the two brothers would play together.”

Quinn also pointed out that it was a positive experience for Sathwik to be able to watch his older brother in two consecutive National Geographic Bees before making it that far himself. He had observed the nature of the questions, which minimized the nerve-racking impact of not knowing what to expect.

However, even without this, Quinn said, Sathwik is an inherently relaxed kid and was very much at ease despite the intensity of the national competition.

“He’s also very systematic with his thinking, so even if he doesn’t quite know the exact answer to a question, based on the clues he knows enough about geography as a whole to kind of venture a pretty great guess,” he said. “He asks really insightful questions, not just about geography, but about different areas of academics. He was a just a joy

Sathwik at King Philip Regional Middle School in Massachusetts. The school where he was coached celebrated his victory with him. They welcomed him back with a congratulatory message and gifted him a globe.

to work with, incredibly respectful and curious.”

Both Dr Gilson and Quinn elaborated on the Karnik brothers’ broader aptitude, emphasizing their keen interest in actively and eagerly pursuing competitive academic activities and events akin to the way a young athlete would devote all of his or her free time to practice drills and matches.

“The Karniks have exhibited some extraordinary abilities,” Dr Gilson said. “On top of geography, Sathwik has also demonstrated some major strengths in science and mathematics as well and has been a strong performer in many

ways since I’ve known him. And he probably didn’t tell you this, but he plays the clarinet!”

Though Sathwik himself was either too modest — or genuinely unaware of his strengths — Dr Gilson mentioned his involvement in the MIT Science Trivia Competition two years in a row.

She recalls Sathwik telling her once that he’d like to be a neurologist one day — though his future is wide open and she said she has faith in the likelihood of him becoming anything from a world-class physicist to a global politician.

He has distinguished himself in mathematics at King Philip as a standout member of the math team, which travels for competitions and which Karthik comes back from high school to help coach.

Just this month, he travelled with the Massachusetts All Star Team to Pennsylvania to represent the state in a math competition; he and his brother were two of the 15 people on the team.

“I think the best thing about him is that even with all of this, he is a very humble kid, and kids really like him at school,” Dr Gilson said. “When he won the Geo Bee, they took the time and made a huge poster for the cafeteria window, which spans a few hundred feet, that said, ‘Welcome Back Sathwik!’ and it was just nice because when he drove in on his first day back from the Bee, he was able to see that.”

“It was a wonderful moment —



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‘The best thing about him is even with all this, he is a humble kid’

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everybody felt proud that he won the Bee, and he's just so grounded and down-to-earth that everybody was glad for his accomplishment. Mr Quinn, who was there in Washington, DC, with Sathwik sent me a text saying, 'I think he just won the National (*Geographic*) Bee,' and when he confirmed it, we made an announcement over the PA system and everyone cheered."

The King Philip and larger community recognized Sathwik and celebrated with him both immediately upon his return and for some time after. There was a whole media day honoring him, during which he answered questions for local newspapers and television and radio stations.

At the Plainville annual town meeting, where local officials vote on the budget and other items, Sathwik was introduced and recognized in front of several hundred people.

And last year before a Red Sox game in Boston, he was named a Childhood Hero and had his photo displayed at Fenway Park. It was a lot to take in for any kid, but Sathwik handled it all with grace.

"He did an outstanding job in just coming back home and back to reality and continuing to do a noble job in everything and continuing to be a good friend to the kids in his peer group," Dr Gilson said. "For some kids that would have been a challenge."

Quinn added that the good spirit went both ways: "There are times when kids can get really envious of each other, especially when one kid is having massive success. But they were all rooting for him, and were very encouraging and congratulatory with their big sign and a globe they presented to him. It was just a really nice way of showing that his peers and teachers appreciated his efforts and achievement. There was no resentment — just lots of awe and respect." ■

‘He has always stuck close to his brother’

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as the older sibling does. So Karthik would do something and Sathwik would go along with it happily, following his brother. That's been their dynamic.

In school, if the teachers ask the kids to make a line, Karthik would be first; he'd be in the front. With Sathwik, everybody would go and form a line, and then he'd say, 'Okay,' and go slowly. He's not in a hurry. That's his personality. He's very soft; Sathwik is soft. He has that compassion and empathy for others.

He keeps a small circle of friends — he mingles with everybody and doesn't have any enemies as such and can be friends with anybody. But he's very choosy about his friends. The friends who suit his personality, he's most comfortable with that.

But yeah he has always stuck close to his brother.

On taking the initiative, pursuing knowledge, and not worrying about the win

Vishwanath: For both of them, when it came to geography, they learned it and wanted to do it. They picked it up on their own. We can only show them the path, but it's up to them.

Rathma: We don't force anything on them, whatever they like, they'll do. We can just show them opportunities, and they can take from that what they want... We always just tell the kids, 'Just do your best. We can't think about the results.'

Vishwanath: They liked it; they went for it; they conquered it. That's a good thing. And there's no drawback to that at all. The knowledge gained is always there, so whether you win or lose, that will always be there.

Wherever you travel with knowledge of geography you can talk to people easily. If you know their culture and their cities and rivers and whatnot, you can connect with them about where they're from.

On reactions from family members to the win

Vishwanath: In 2012, we went there and Karthik had been in the top 10 at the nationals that year and the whole family was saying they had seen his photo in the paper and were surprised that he had done so well.

So nobody anticipated that Sathwik would win. Because people were thinking, 'Karthik is the best and Sathwik is in his shadow.' That's what people thought.

But fortunately, it happened, and people were kind of surprised. My parents were pleasantly surprised back in Coimbatore. News reporters went there and interviewed them. They were really proud — I had never accomplished anything of this sort. My wife never did either.

It was big for our family I would say. The TV stations also went to interview my brother and his family in Udipi, and they were

A snapshot from the Karniks' family album.



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very happy.

Rathma: Everyone was very proud. My parents have passed, but my husband's parents said, 'This is the best gift in our old age.'

Vishwanath: And her side was like, 'That's awesome.' They remembered that she had been good in her studies too, but nobody anticipated that our kid would win a national competition.

So, they were like, 'That's Rathma's son!'"

On migrating to the US

Rathma: I'm not sure they would have done this if we didn't come to the US. In India we don't have access to this many books, and we can't afford to buy every atlas in the world. Different ones have different information as their focus.

We've already bought so many and we can't keep buying more. But there are so many resources at the library that are useful for us here. In India you don't have that many books in the library, and the Internet is more available here. The kids have more opportunities here.

Vishwanath: Life is different here — I wouldn't say MUCH better but slightly better... and the kids are happier here than I think they would have been. There are a lot of opportunities here and the resources are plenty.

But we never imagined this. No way. All I was focusing on was getting into a company and giving the kids a good education. I didn't even think about this kind of stuff, competitions or anything.

We were just looking for stability after traveling so much and a good school and good friends for the kids. That consistency was the most important thing. But yes, of course, now we are very proud of what they have accomplished. ■

‘Very knowledgeable and very nice’

Sathwik Karnik was calm, confident, and enjoying everything, which is the way the National Geographic Bee should be, says his predecessor **Rahul Nagvekar**

Just thinking about names like Ras Dejen, Cabinda, and Chimborazo would leave most people perplexed. Yet last May, when he was only 12, Massachusettsan Sathwik Karnik calmly, confidently and, of course, correctly answered questions about these places — and even more obscure ones — to become the champion of the 2013 National Geographic Bee.

Introduced to the subject by his older brother Karthik, Sathwik first began to enjoy geography when he was in the second grade. During the three years in which they both competed in the National Geographic Bee, the Karnik brothers worked together to expand their knowledge of the world.

After seeing Karthik achieve great success as a two-time national top-10 finalist in the Geography Bee, Sathwik says he ‘learned not to be nervous, because after making it that far, you just have to do your best.’

When I was there in 2012, the only year I made it to the nationals — and the year I won — I competed against Karthik, and I had seen him in previous years on television in the final round of the National Geographic Bee, so I knew he was extremely good at the competition, highly intelligent, and knew a lot of good stuff.

The year we were there together, in the preliminary round where everybody is asked a series of questions and the people with the most correct answers advance to the finals, he was one of only four people to get all of the questions correct.

So he was definitely very strong. And of course both he and Sathwik were very nice people to speak to and interact with.

For his part, Sathwik was the third-place winner of the 2012 North South Foundation Geography Bee for Indian-American students.

The year after that, Karthik, then in the ninth grade was too old to take part in the National Geographic Bee, so Sathwik didn’t have anyone to compete against at home.

But his parents and especially his brother worked to assist Sathwik with his preparation, as did a teacher at Sathwik’s King Philip Middle School.

The effort paid off as Sathwik won the 2013 Massachusetts State Geography Bee and moved on to the national competition.

But there were bigger and better things to come.

Making his first appearance in the national event, Sathwik advanced past the preliminary and tiebreaker rounds to the televised finals. Again, he performed almost



REBECCA HALE/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

A boa constrictor is displayed to the top 10 National Geographic Bee finalists last year. Sitting next to Sathwik Karnik is the boy who would win in 2014 — Akhil Rekulapelli.

flawlessly. After answering, quite early in the competition, a particularly difficult question about Botswana’s Lake Ngami — which he had, serendipitously, read about in a travel book just a week before the national finals — Sathwik felt relaxed and confident of his answers.

Eventually, all but two contestants had been eliminated, and he was only five questions from the title.

In the round to decide the championship, he did know the answers — all of them, in fact, including the one to a question that his opponent missed — allowing him to become the national first-place winner of the 2013 National Geographic Bee.

In 2013, I went back to the national competition to watch. I had not spoken to Sathwik much prior to that, but in the afternoon I got to talk to him. Again, he was just like his brother: Very knowledgeable and very nice.

And I remember clearly the day after he won, when he went to New York to appear on national television again on *Live with Kelly and Michael*, I was just very impressed with him both then and when I saw him in the competition.

He was very calm and very confident, and he just seemed so happy and to be enjoying everything, which is the way the National Geographic Bee should be. People work so hard to know all of this information that they should just have

fun when they get so far. Sathwik in my opinion really exemplified that.

I also had the opportunity to see the two brothers together. It was obvious that Karthik had helped in Sathwik’s preparation, so it was a family effort, and it was apparent that they’re very close and supportive of one another.

Sathwik’s hard-won victory came with a number of perks, including a \$25,000 scholarship to a college of his choice and a week-long vacation in Ecuador’s Galápagos Islands, famed for their unique fauna. Sathwik also makes full use of his lifetime subscription to the *National Geographic* magazine — another benefit in our winner’s package.

What does the future hold for Sathwik? He maintains a musical interest by playing the clarinet in his school band, and says that once he knows what subjects he likes in high school (which, for him, will begin this autumn) he will decide what he would like to do later in life. Whatever he chooses, though, Sathwik — having already achieved so much with his knowledge, hard work, and determination — will certainly have very a positive impact on the world in the years to come. ■

Rahul Nagvekar is the winner of the National Geographic Bee 2012 and winner of the India Abroad Special Award for Achievement 2012.

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