



JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

The cheerleaders perform during their clinic on Dec. 15.

AHS cheerleading team leaps onto national stage

By Kris DiLorenzo

ARDSLEY — For the first time ever, Ardsley High School will be represented at the Universal Cheerleader Association's National High School Cheerleading Championship (NHSCC). The prestigious event takes place Feb. 8-10 at the ESPN Wide World of Sports complex at the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Fla.

Ardsley's 19-member team, coached by Helen Berni, earned their invitation on Dec. 7, when the squad placed second in the UCA Empire Regional Championship, held at Nassau Community College in Garden City, Long Island. Minnetonka High School, from Minnesota, placed first.

The team members are seniors Stephanie Faulkner, Kayla Gonzalez, Charlize Guerra, and Skyler Levy (co-captain); juniors Callie Bachman,

Emily Erickson, Amanda Florkowski, and Suzuho Kanno (co-captain); sophomores Christa Farris, Gabriela Maldonado, Kaitlyn Santos, and Madeline Wong; and ninth-graders Mikayla Amir, Jennifer Bonney, Sydney Cohen, Sierra Klett, Brooke Levy, Faith Levy, and Isabella Spar.

Since the regional championship, the team has been raising \$10,000 to cover the cost of the Orlando trip. Their first fundraising event was a Youth Cheer Clinic at AHS on Dec. 15. For four hours, 42 children, ranging from kindergarten through eighth grade, worked with the cheerleaders to learn simple moves. The \$25 registration fee netted the squad \$1,050.

Fundraisers are also planned after the holidays. On Jan. 4, the band Bad Art, which is based in Ardsley, will perform from 9 p.m. to midnight at Doubleday's Restaurant and Bar in Dobbs

Ferry. Admission to the event, which is sponsored by the Ardsley Panther Booster Club, is \$20. In addition, 50 percent of the proceeds from a raffle will be split between the winner and the cheerleaders.

The following evening, Jan. 5, from 4 to 8 p.m., Chipotle Mexican Grill at 12 Lawrence Street in Dobbs Ferry will donate one-third of the food tab for anyone who says they're eating on behalf of the Ardsley cheerleaders.

The team also has a GoFundMe campaign.

A year ago, the cheerleaders seemed far from competing at a national level. In the fall of 2017, the team, predominantly seniors, performed only at football games. The four seniors graduated this past June, and one girl broke her wrist, so the team was left with 12 members. Berni, who started coaching at the school in the fall of 2017, began

recruiting, bringing the team back up to its present complement of 16 and three alternates.

This fall, the team — including an unprecedented seven ninth-graders, among them Levy's twin sisters, Brooke and Faith — added competitions to their football schedule, and rebounded, despite 10 members being new to high school cheerleading.

"We went to some practice sessions in April that weren't required," Levy explained, "and since August, we've been practicing four hours during the week and three hours on Sunday."

At the national event, the squad will compete in the Medium Varsity Non-Tumbling category. Since Wong is the only gymnast on the team, no one will be doing handsprings. In preparation for the competition the girls are

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upgrading their routines, adding more difficult stunts. During their two-and-a-half minutes in front of the judges, they must include dancing, jumping, “stunting,” a full cheer, and stunting during the cheer — without falling or wobbling.

Skyler Levy, who is a “base” (one of the girls at the bottom of a pyramid or other formation, supporting those above), attributed the squad’s regional win to their spotless performance. “We hit everything clean and everything looked like it flowed really well,” she explained. “We were training for so long and we practiced the routine so much that everyone was really confident in themselves and in each other.”

For the national event, the team is keeping Lady Gaga’s “Edge of Glory” as background music for part of their routine, but tweaking the opening. They plan to get the team’s “flyers” (Klett, Wong, and Erickson, the smallish girls at the top of a formation) to do a twist. Getting to the top requires two or more people standing face-to-face, gripping hands to create a platform for the flyer to step up on. Each base can support a flyer’s foot while her “backspot” supports her ankles. The flyer can dismount by falling backward into their arms, which act as a cradle, or the bases can pop her up to perform a mid-air twist like a diver,



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The cheerleading team at their clinic on Dec. 15.

before she lands in the cradle.

Levy wants cheerleading to be recognized as a demanding, competitive sport. “A lot of people underestimate it because they think you just go cheer for the football team, and that’s all you do,” she stat-

ed. “We’re about more than that.”

The squad’s energy level is increasing as the championship approaches.

“We’re all very excited because it’s the first time in our school’s history that we’re doing it,” Levy said. “I think

us winning the regional was a shock to everyone because we are a new team, so we’re ready to put 110 percent into what we do for the next two months to make our routine even better, and do really well in the nationals.”