



ADDING A PICKLE to the top of their car, Kalen Townsend (above, left) and Dawson Kempt put the finishing touches on before the big race. It takes a lot of concentration to build a great veggiemobile. Alyssa VanVleet (below) was biting on her tongue as she worked.

Students use food to build racing cars

Cucumber bodies, orange wheels and cherries on top sounds a little like a custom car rally, and in some ways it is.

Friday morning, Oberlin's fourth and fifth graders gathered in the school cafeteria for the annual Lunch Box Derby.

For the 19th year in a row, Raye's Grocery provided the ingredients for the fruit cars and veggiemobiles.

Two lunch tables were covered with produce – pineapples; acorn squash; boxes of oranges, lemons, cucumbers and green and red apples; grapefruit; eggplants; small watermelons; pears; lettuce; red, orange and green peppers, cases of red and green grapes and strawberries; carrots; parsnips; mangoes; bunches of bananas, celery, broccoli; asparagus and parsley; plates of blueberries, pickles, olives, mushrooms, raisins, pearl onions, green and red maraschino cherries, baby carrots, Mandarin oranges and pimentos; and small packets of fruit snacks.

The students divided into teams of two or three and with a teacher, volunteer or parent to advise, started selecting produce and producing their masterpieces. The adults did the cutting while the students did the designs and helped attach wheels, drivers and decorations with small and large wooden skewers.

Let's see, what would work better – a banana or a cucumber for the body? How about an eggplant or a watermelon? Apples or oranges usually work best for wheels, but sometimes grapefruit come into play, and while most vehicles have two axles, at least one had three with six apples ready to roll.

After each vehicle is finished and

Derby started years ago

What has become an annual event at the Oberlin Elementary School started out as a national contest backed by the Washington Apple Commission.

In 1994, the apple-growers group started a contest to see which pair of fourth and fifth graders across the country could build the fastest model car made of fruits and vegetables.

Raye's Grocery paired with the Apple Commission to supply the produce here. When the commission dropped the national contest several years later, Raye's kept up the tradition, providing hundreds of dollars worth of produce to the school each year.

That first year, a pair of Oberlin fifth graders won not only the local contest, but the national contest held in Chicago.

Stephanie May and Danielle Diederich's "Cucumber Cadillac"

with apple wheels and a grape behind the wheel rolled 26 feet, 9 inches to win the local and regional contests. Their distance qualified them to go to Chicago to compete against teams from Houston, Memphis and Tampa.

A newly-made creation won the Chicago contest, racing to 36 feet, 11.5 inches on a set of Granny Smiths.

The students have learned what works and what doesn't over the years. This year, during the 19th running of the Oberlin derby, four vehicles went farther than that first cucumbermobile in the contest here.

Today, while the winning racers don't get a trip, they do get a chance to enjoy a morning of fun, see their pictures in the grocery story – and they can nibble on a fender or a hubcap if they get hungry.

the leftovers sampled, the creators and cars have their pictures taken. Then it's time to head for the gym to race.

Sometimes the vehicles make it down the ramp and sometimes they end up as fruit salad on the way. Either way, they end up being a lot of fun and delicious.

This year's winners:

FOURTH GRADE

Most creative – "The Phunk," Amy Wentz and Sage Lohofener.

1st place – "The Cucumber Natter," 30 feet, 7 inches, Anna Carter, Erin May and Judith Isbell.

2nd – "Killer Boys," 19-9, Jessup

Ray and Landen Macfee.

3rd – "Fruit Bowl," 14-1, Alana Meitl and Courtlyn Waterman.

FIFTH GRADE

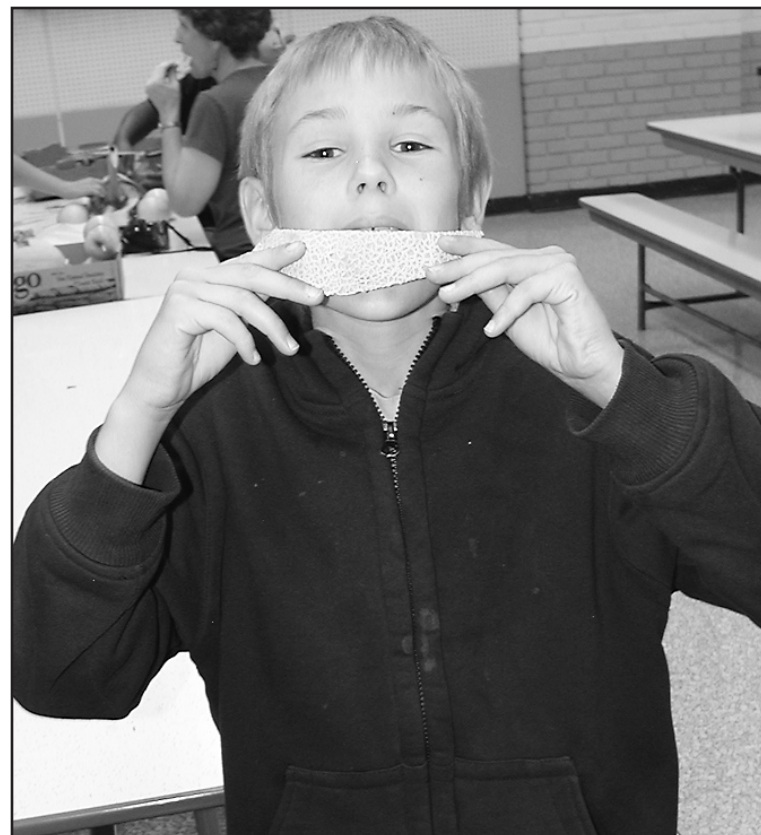
Most creative – "Glimmer," Belle Grafel and Maddie Johnson.

1st – "The Flash," 36-11, Clayton Carter and Faith Meitl.

2nd – "The Watermelon Walrus," 32-4, Kaylen Ashley and Emily Hollars.

3rd – "Mr. Awesomeness II," 30-4, Drew Juenemann and Kaden O'Hare.

Pictures of all the vehicles and their creators can be seen at Raye's Grocery in downtown Oberlin.



STOPPING LONG ENOUGH to enjoy the fruits of his labor, Conner Milton (above) ate a piece of cantaloupe. Meanwhile Bethany Mason (left in left photo) and Hannah Willis were still working on some decorations for their vehicle.



— Story and photos by Cynthia Haynes