

Microsoft award has teen running in fast company

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GREG GILBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Jeannine Johnson, 15, of Puyallup, got to show off her dragster and talk about racing with fellow speed enthusiast Bill Gates at Microsoft headquarters Thursday.



JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Jeannine Johnson, 15, of Puyallup, was one of five finalists for Microsoft's "Start Something Amazing Awards." Johnson uses a computer to diagnose and monitor the performance of her 14-foot-long, fire-engine-red dragster.

For a few minutes, it was just one leadfoot talking to another about a fast car, how to drive it to the limit and win the race.

But these were two extraordinary car nuts. One was Bill Gates, the richest man in the world; the other was Jeannine Johnson, a petite 15-year-old from Puyallup whose hobby is racing a dragster.

Microsoft brought Johnson and her red racer to Redmond on Thursday to receive a national award for the creative ways she uses computers. It was the apex of a 15-month campaign to boost sales of Windows by showcasing how the software can be used for hobbies and activities besides work.

Gates said Johnson and other entrants help validate the vision for widespread computing that led him and Paul Allen to start Microsoft 30 years ago.

"When personal computers first came along, some people thought they would just be for geeks," he said.

Johnson uses a computer to diagnose and monitor the performance of the 14-foot-long, fire-engine-red car she has been racing since she was 9. She also uses Microsoft products to run a Web page — www.jeanninejohnson.com — to promote her team and stay in touch with people she meets while traveling to races. Computers help her maintain a 3.8 grade-point average as a sophomore at Puyallup High School, and she likes to play "Halo" on the family's Xbox.

Gates towered over the girl, who was born 3 ½ months premature (weighing just 1 pound, 10 ounces) and is less than 5 feet tall.

Johnson has wanted to race since her father took her to a track at 3, especially after early surgeries weakened her leg and prevented her from more conventional activities.

"I can't run, so that basically voids me from all traditional sports — basketball, soccer, baseball — so I needed a sport I could be competitive in because I'm really competitive and I love to win, I have that drive," she said. "It takes a lot of ability to drive a car and everything, but it doesn't take running for three hours."

Now she travels around the West Coast on weekends racing a car that reaches 85 mph on a one-eighth-mile run. She is not licensed to drive on the road yet, however — she received her learner's permit in May.

Johnson described her hobby and computer use in an essay she sent to Microsoft's "Start Something Amazing Awards" program. She was one of five finalists chosen from about 3,000 entries.

Other finalists were:

- Andre Isom, 23, a music producer and disc jockey from Benton Harbor, Mich.
- Michelle Tjelmeland, 32, of Springfield, Ill., a teacher turned Web developer whose deafness and deaf daughter inspired her to help other families in similar circumstances.
- Diane Reeder, 40, of Kingston, N.Y., who founded a nonprofit group that helps people maintain good nutrition.
- E.J. Dyksen, 19, of Grand Rapids, Mich., who produces a comedy show for his college TV station.

Gates spent time with each, discussing demonstrations they set up in Microsoft's visitor center.

"It was really great; I felt like I was talking to myself," said Isom, who played Gates an R&B Windows ad jingle he and some friends created.

Finalists won \$5,000 worth of computers and software. Johnson will also receive a trip to New York, be interviewed on ESPN2 and appear in a Microsoft ad running this winter in National Geographic, Rolling Stone, Entertainment Weekly and ESPN Magazine.

Making an impact

When the award was announced Thursday, Johnson's mother, Miyong, wiped away tears and her father, Bill, pulled out an iPaq handheld computer to e-mail relatives.

Johnson's poise impressed the Microsoft image-makers who organized the event.

"She's so energetic; she really embodies what we were trying to capture with the search, from the standpoint she's using technology in a simple way, but it's certainly had an impact on her," said Debbie Anderson, director of Windows communications.

Gates, who has received numerous speeding tickets and owns a few fast cars himself, asked Johnson questions about her car and the sport.

"Are you accelerating full-bore the whole time, or if you do that does it cause a problem?" he asked at one point.

Johnson said Gates was "very friendly."

"I felt very comfortable talking to him, and that surprised me," she said. "I thought I was going to be a bag of nerves."

Gates is the most famous person Johnson has met, but he's not the first. She's also met motorcycle customizer and TV star Jesse James, whose West Coast Choppers sponsors her racing, and pioneering drag racer Shirley Muldowney's autograph is inside her cockpit.

The exposure could help line up additional sponsors and fund her next car, a full-size model she's hoping to race in a few years.

Optimizing performance

Junior drag racing began after a New Jersey track owner built a half-size car for his kids. After he showed the car to the National Hot Rod Association, it created the Jr. Drag Race League in 1992 for kids ages 8 to 17. About 4,500 kids participate, including 50 to 60 in Washington, Bill Johnson said.

The cars are replicas of Top Fuel dragsters. They are powered by 5-horsepower motors — similar to a lawn-mower engine — that are specially tuned and fueled by methanol. Speeds are limited, in part by adding weight to the cars. Johnson said her car could otherwise reach 100 mph.

Johnson has had just one minor crash. She hit a wall at the end of the track, popping a tire.

"She's very safe in it — she's safer in that car on the drag strip going 85 mph than she is in my four-wheel drive going down the highway," Bill Johnson said.

Beginner cars cost about \$3,000, but Johnson's car is worth about \$15,000. Among its trick features is a data-acquisition system she and her crew installed. It reports engine performance to a PC set up in their race trailer. Johnson can graph the car's performance on different runs and optimize the motor. The team also has a weather station that feeds data to the system, so the dragster can be adjusted for atmospheric conditions, tweaks that can save a few hundredths of a second in races that can be won by a thousandth of a second.

Johnson has been using computers since she was in kindergarten. Her father, who works with computers as a civilian contractor at McChord Air Force Base, was a temporary worker at Microsoft early in his career but never met Gates.

"My dad's a computer network engineer," she said, "so he's a heavy computer nerd."

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