2020 Coastal Bend Regional Science Fair winners thrive despite shutdown
By Dr. Debra Plowman

More than 1,000 students, teachers, judges, parents and siblings gathered at the TAMU-CC University Center for the Valero Energy Foundation and Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi Coastal Bend Regional Science Fair on Saturday, February 8, 2020. Young Scientists in grades K-12 from eight different counties representing the Coastal Bend Region proudly showed their scientific knowledge in hopes of winning a prize or a chance to compete at state fair or internationally. After the regional fair, 102 students prepared to attend state by fine-tuning their projects and registering for the state competition. Additional students in grades 6-8 were selected to submit to the Broadcom MASTERS competition, and two students were selected to compete in Anaheim, California at the International Engineering and Science Fair scheduled for the week of May 10th. But alas, it was not to be. One by one, each event was cancelled and rescheduled as a virtual event. Broadcom, which begins as an online submission, had to change the finalists’ competition to a virtual fair, as did the state level and the international levels. The disappointment was felt by all.

What happened after the state fair and international fair were cancelled and went virtual? Our students stepped up! Twenty-one of the students and their projects from the Coastal Bend agreed to do even more so they could be judged at the state level using the virtual system designed by state level coordinators at the last minute, along with 502 students from the other 14 regions in Texas. Our International competitors, Ibrahim Al-Akash, a junior from Veterans Memorial High School in CCISD and Joaquin Haces-Garcia, a senior from Academy High School in Santa Gertrudis ISD began preparing for a virtual fair in April after receiving the message that it was definitely off in late March. Both students created videos and answered additional questions about their projects as well as submitting photos of their displays and limited additional photos of key project elements. These artifacts plus their project abstracts and descriptions were what they would be judged on during the fair. During the week of the Fair, both boys participated in virtual events conducted in various formats and made available on the ISEF virtual fair platform. Virtual rooms held talks from top scientists and students could take virtual tours through the exhibit halls to view other students’ projects and displays. Puzzle competitions were held, and various other workshops were offered for students to virtually attend. The evening social event at the fair is usually something the young scientists really look forward to at the weeklong fair, where they can meet other teens like themselves from all over the world who love science as much as they do, much like a prom might be for high school. The virtual version of this years’ fair included a “dance” in which participants submitted TikTok-style dance videos of themselves.

Both Joaquin and Ibrahim reported that although they had really been looking forward to attending in person, they enjoyed the unique experience that the virtual fair offered. In fact, some parts were better in some ways, such as being able to view all the projects and associated videos and photos of displays. In the face-to-face competition it is impossible to see
as many other students’ projects because public viewing times are limited and the physical limitations of walking the exhibit halls to see projects. Additionally, many presentations and panel talks were recorded so participants could see as many as they desired. During panel presentations participants could ask questions too if they attended when the presentation was taking place.

Finally, both Ibrahim and Joaquin won admission and scholarships to the 2020 Governor’s Science and Technology Champions’ Academy at Southern Methodist University being held this summer at the Caruth Institute for Engineering Education in Dallas Texas. Joaquin also gained an invitation to the Yale Young Global Scholars program at Yale University in July. The Coastal Bend Regional Science Fair congratulates these two young scientists and all their hard work this year. They and other young scientists in our area show promise for their and all of our futures!