

MOOSEHEART, IL, May 8 - As she boarded the airplane in Minot, ND, Maria Pitner had a very unusual piece of carry-on luggage: a black cauldron.

So of course, the 17-year-old told her fellow passengers she was headed to a witch's convention. Pitner was telling those onboard a half-truth. She was heading for an important group get-together, but the cauldron was one of her props for the Moose Youth Awareness Congress, which took place April 30-May 4 in Hampton, VA.

Pitner and her cauldron arrived safely, and she went home with something extra to carry on--a college scholarship worth \$12,000, thanks to her presentation at the Congress being voted best by her peers.

"I wasn't expecting to win at all," Pitner said. "It was one of those things where you bake a cake and you don't know how good of a baker you are. I didn't know how good my project was. I was really surprised then they called my name."

So now Pitner is going to take another airline flight. Thanks to her first-place finish, she and her parents will attend the Moose International Convention, which takes place May 22-27 in Chicago and where Maria will speak to an audience of as many as 4,000. Despite her relative youth, Pitner has been closely involved with the Moose for some time, even though she started at a time when her parents weren't members of Minot, ND Lodge 822.

"They needed servers for the kitchen for when they had the restaurant open on Saturdays," Pitner said. "I loved doing that and I told my parents that they had to come on down and become members. I told them that there were scholarship opportunities for me, and there were many different projects that the Lodge did. My dad had a few co-workers who are Moose members. So they came, had fun, and joined."

The Moose Youth Awareness Student Congress is a gathering of bright teenagers--many who are sons and daughters of Moose members, some simply sponsored by a Lodge/Chapter--who have given a series of "Moose KidsTalks" about some topic in order to help children aged 4-through-9 to make positive choices in their lives. Hosted by the Virginia Moose Association, this year's Congress consisted of 56 young men and women from across the U.S. and Canada in addition to two Mooseheart students: Marlene Gomez and Heather Hensley.

While attending the Congress, attendees have plenty of time to have fun, visit area Lodges and participate in some educational opportunities. This year, in addition to nightly visits to Virginia Lodges, Congress members spent a day at Busch Gardens amusement park and Colonial Williamsburg, a park set to recreate 18th century life in Virginia's first capital city.

"It was one of the busier schedules that I've been involved with," Moose International Director of Fraternal Programs Shawn Baile said. "There was constantly something to do, which was good. There is always a combination of things to do that are either educational or fun. We try to find things that the kids will enjoy."

On the final day, the students go into a room where there is not an adult presence, give their KidsTalks and vote on the best. The top five earn scholarship money. This year, there was a tie for fifth place, and Baile said the decision was made to give all six scholarship money.

Pitner's topic was on the health dangers of alcohol and tobacco use. She used a Power Point presentation, had props, which included that cauldron, into which she'd put the harmful ingredients, found in cigarettes. But she came armed with something else, a personal story that brought home the dangers to the youth to whom she gave her 10 KidsTalks as well as to the Congress members.

"I started to talk about my uncle," Pitner said. "He was 22 and the only son, along with two daughters, in my mom's family. One night, he went with a buddy and they had some drinks. They'd taken a motorcycle and after having some drinks, they decided to drive back. Neither of them wore their helmets, which they had and always wore, and there was an accident and both were killed."

"It happened in the '70s, before I was born. My parents and our family have always helped out at my grandparents' farm, and while we do it gladly, I have always felt that this didn't have to be our cross to bear. My uncle didn't think. He didn't realize that even though it's your decision to drink and drive, the consequences last for years and for generations."

Pitner gave her presentation 10 times in North Dakota for children in second, third and fourth grade. She also got plenty of insight in preparation from her family. Pitner is the seventh of 10 children in her family, and there are nieces and nephews to which she could deliver her presentation as well.

"I know you're not going to be able to change a lot of people's minds with one talk," Pitner said. "But you can change people's minds one day at a time. Talking to my nieces and nephews helped."

The experience of giving her KidsTalk at the Youth Awareness Congress was somewhat different.

"The most fun part was meeting all the other kids," Pitner said. "It was a little nerve-wracking talking to everyone. It was interesting to see how the others would sit and talk about their topics."

Baile mentioned that smoking and tobacco use have been popular topics of the Youth Awareness Congress for years.

"It's interesting because you're expecting someone to pull out some topic that no one's ever done," Baile said. "(Pitner's) topic and story have so much meaning for her that it shows that you don't have to take on something new to win this. It takes effort. Her topic is one that's been talked about by tons of kids over the years and it's still meaningful."

The second-place award, and an \$8,000 scholarship, went to Stephen Perry from North Carolina. Perry's topic was Fire Safety, Gun Safety and Theater Safety. Alberta native Danielle Sather, the lone Canadian representative at the Congress, earned third place and the \$5,000 scholarship. Sather's topic was The Environment. Fourth place and a \$3,000 scholarship went to Illinois' Nimra Elahi, whose topic was Going Green. The tie for fifth place was between Rebecca Cross from Virginia and Pennsylvania representative Adam Zahren. Cross, whose topic was Going Green and Zahren, whose topic concerned Bullying, Stranger Danger and Drug Awareness, each received a \$2,000 scholarship.

Moose International's endeavors include the major support of Mooseheart Child City & School, a 1,000-acre residential community and school near Chicago founded in 1913 for children and teens in need; and of Moosehaven, a 70-acre retirement community near Jacksonville, FL founded in 1922. In addition, the Moose organization conducts more than \$90 million worth of community service programs annually, of which the Moose Youth Awareness program is a major part.

Founded in 1888, the Moose organization has long offered its members an opportunity to do good for others while celebrating life, with family, social, and sporting activities. For more information on the Moose organization, visit the websites at www.Mooseintl.org, www.Mooseheart.org, www.Moosehaven.org, and www.MooseCharities.org, or call 630-966-2229.