

Co-Victors Declared in National Spelling Bee

Eighth-graders Gokul Venkatachalam of Chesterfield, Missouri, and Vanya Shivashankar of Olathe, Kansas, were co-winners of the Scripps National Spelling Bee on Thursday.

Gokul ended a tense standoff before a packed hotel ballroom and an ESPN television audience by spelling “nunatak,” an Inuit word for an exposed ridge in a glacier.

He stood with hands at his side when pronouncer Jacques Bailly told him that if he spelled the word correctly, he and Vanya would share the title. He then raced through the correct spelling, and the hotel ballroom erupted in cheers.

“This is the culmination of six years of work. I’m finally happy to have success,” said Gokul, 14, after he and Vanya raised the championship trophy.

Their win was the eighth in a row by Indian-Americans and the 12th in 16 years.

Vanya, whose sister Kavya won the Bee in 2009, said she was dedicating the shared win to her grandmother, who died in 2013.

“This is a dream come true. I can’t believe I’m up here,” said Vanya, 13, who attends California Trail Middle School.

The co-victory is only the fifth in the 88-year history, with the last time in 2014. Each will receive \$35,000 in cash along with other prizes.

Contest rules call for co-champions to be declared when a 25-word championship round is completed.

Vanya and Gokul became the last remaining contestants when

Cole Shafer-Ray, a 14-year-old eighth-grader from Norman, Oklahoma, misspelled “acritarch,” a kind of fossil.

Vanya and Gokul displayed differing spelling styles during the two-hour finals, with Vanya writing out words on her hand. Gokul, whose idol is basketball player LeBron James, kept his head down, eyes sometimes closed and hands at his side.

Vanya and Gokul, who attends Parkway West Middle School, were among 10 finalists among the 283 contestants in the Bee, held outside Washington, D.C. The finalists chatted onstage between rounds and exchanged hand slaps when they got a word right.

Unfamiliar foreign words rocked some of them. Given “hacek,” a Czech word for a pronunciation mark, Siyona Mishra, a sixth-grader from Orlando, Florida, asked Bailly, “Can you say it five times?” before misspelling it.

The top seed coming into the finals was eighth-grader Dev Jaiswal from Louisville, Mississippi, but who finished fifth after missing “iridoscyclitis,” an eye inflammation.

“Thank you so much, everybody!” he said when he exited to a standing ovation.

Vanya and Gokul emerged from more than 11 million hopefuls in local contests in eight countries and all 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories and Defense Department schools.