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Acorda and WFAS team up on high school science award

By Jackie Lupo

If you want to hear about some of the latest scientific research going on in Westchester, tune in to WFAS-AM radio Sunday morning. That's when some of the area's youngest scientists, all of high school age, go on the air to present the results of their prize-winning independent research.

Acorda Therapeutics has teamed up with WFAS to launch "The Acorda Scientific Excellence Award." The awards program was launched last week and is open to all students who attend high school (public, private or parochial) in Westchester County or who are home-schooled. A new winner will be announced weekly throughout the school year, and each winner will be invited to discuss his or her research project with WFAS host Lisa Wexler on the half-hour "Acorda Scientific Excellence Award" program at 9 a.m. each Sunday. In addition to presenting their research on the show, winners and their schools will each receive a plaque.

Wexler, an attorney and veteran broadcaster who hosts "The Lisa Wexler Show" on WFAS, told the Enterprise that she and others at the station had been kicking around the idea of doing a show like the academic version of their "Con Ed Sports Award" show. She said it would focus on "the many kids in Westchester County that are doing brilliant scientific research."

Wexler, who lives in Westport, Conn., said she had done a show from the Westchester Science and Engineering Fair (WESEF), the regional competition held last year at Sleepy Hollow High School. WESEF is the local lead-up to the Intel International Science & Engineering Fair. Acorda was one of the corporate sponsors of the local competition.

"I was blown away," she said. "I brought a couple of [the winners] on my show and a couple of the Intel finalists. I loved the idea of bestowing as much prestige and fun on these kids who excel, as on those who excel in athletics." Wexler also invited Acorda CEO Ron Cohen and Tierney Saccavino, Acorda's senior vice president of corporate communications, onto her show. "That's when I proposed the idea of becoming a sponsor of this



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Lisa Wexler records an interview with Blind Brook High School senior Kyle O'Neil at WFAS, on Secor Road in Hartsdale, on Oct. 11.

competition," Wexler said.

Acorda, a 15-year-old biotechnology company that has been headquartered since 2012 on Saw Mill River Road (Route 9A), where it employs some 200 people, specializes in developing drugs for people with neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis (MS). "We are a very patient-focused organization," Saccavino told the Enterprise. "We also know it's important to make sure the next generation of scientists and researchers are

going to come along and discover the next generation of medications."

Acorda and WFAS turned to Michael Blueglass, president of WESEF, for help setting up the competition. "[Blueglass] has been a really great adviser to this," Saccavino said. "He helped us to understand some of the important considerations as we were putting this program together." Acorda also supports the Bio-Genius Award for students doing original research work in biotechnology.

A committee that includes scientists from Acorda, Westchester science educators, Wexler, Saccavino, and Eileen Mildenerger of the Westchester County Office of Economic Development evaluates contest entries. Applications will be accepted through March 31, 2014, for this school year, and forms can be found at www.acorda.com.

"We've been reaching out to science teachers at as many of the schools as we can," Saccavino said. "Many of the teachers said they're going to encourage their students to enter, and I think the pace is going to pick up soon."

Entries so far range from traditional laboratory studies to projects about the environmental and animals. "They're really very diverse, which is what we want to encourage," Saccavino said. "We're thrilled we're not just getting traditional lab research."

Wexler said that because there will be 40 winners during this school year, "we want to cover the range of sciences."

Many of the students who will vie for an Acorda award have been on the research track leading to prizes in competitions such as Intel for years. But the organizers of the Acorda competition do not want to limit the field to those students.

"We're also looking for the kids who might not be going to Harvard or Yale," Wexler said. But, she added, whoever wins has to have demonstrated a commitment to independent science research.

Commitment is the case with the first winner. He is Kyle M. O'Neil, a senior at Blind Brook High School in Rye. His study is called "The Effects of Esomeprazole on Cell Chirality."

O'Neil was on last Sunday's broadcast to explain his research on whether a particular drug would influence the shape of cells. He did his research with Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute over the last few years, including two summers. When he is not in the laboratory, O'Neil is also a member of the Blind Brook ski-racing team.

Wexler said WFAS would like to expand the competition to other sponsors. "We really want this to be a community-wide effort," she said. "In Westchester County we have so many fantastically brilliant kids. They are going to be the great discoverers of tomorrow."