**Story for News Page Design**

Minutes after the Ad Astra High School team ended its longest state tournament run since 1981, falling to Liberal Kassebaum High in the state semifinals Friday, senior forward Andre Smith reflected on the feeling of playing for his community.

“We put a community on our back, and we tried to carry our community as far as possible,” Smith said in an AAHS hallway just days after the game.

A week later, Smith’ community was carrying him.

Two days after the state semifinal game, Smith was at the DECA State Career Development Conference in Garden Plain, competing along with six of his classmates in the statewide business competition.

And the same month he helped his team win its first basketball regional title in decades, he achieved something no student at Ad Astra High School ever has: a DECA state championship and a spot in the International Career Development Conference.

The only catch: the conference is in Anaheim, Calif., and the trip will cost $2,500

So last week, Smith and his business teacher Kelsey Griffin created a page on the website GoFundMe, to solicit donations from the community.

Five days later, more than $2,300 had been raised.

“It really almost brought me to tears when I saw it,” Smith said. “People always say the Aspera community doesn’t care, the Aspera community doesn’t support each other, but that’s a lie. The support that I got from the Aspera community was amazing, it’s something that I’ll never forget.

Smith has until April 30 to raise the money for the event, which will go toward airfare, lodging and registration fees. He needs only $400 more to get there.

The donations rolled in from more than 40 people, friends and strangers alike. One donor wrote that “I don’t know you but I feel like I do from watching you play basketball,” and gave $50.

The biggest single donor: the Ad Astra High School custodians, who together gave $500 toward the trip.

Smith said he’s formed a kinship with the school's custodians and tries to never take them for granted, sometimes helping them clean the cafeteria. He even learned a few post moves on the basketball court from one.

“They work really hard, and if something’s wrong with the school they’re always on it,” Smith said.

Their donations will help him compete among the nation’s top business students in DECA’s annual international competition.

Smith, who will attend Baker University Baldwin City on a basketball scholarship, competes in the sports and marketing series. In competitions, he is given the role of a person involved in a business scenario — one time he was a college athletic department employee, another time he was a concert organizer — and must solve a problem while demonstrating an understanding of business and marketing concepts.

“It’s like you’re selling a product every time, so you’re selling your idea with that person,” Smith said.

And the competition fits well with Smith’ future dual roles: a future college athlete and business major.

“It’s really helped me a lot,” Smith said. “It makes you really use your head a lot.”