

Statesman

Westlake Robotics exceeds tech challenges

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There is plenty of enthusiasm in Westlake High School's award-winning robotics program, and it has come a long way since being formed 10 years ago. This year, it inaugurated a new home with substantially more space in the old bus barn, but there never seems to be enough room to accommodate the growing interest.

Six different classes are offered and students who can't fit robotics into their schedule during the day, can participate in a team after school.

Students are passionate about this program where science meets fun, and Coach Norman Morgan says that along the way, the top five skills his students learn are: "communication, problem-solving, time-management, failure and success."

FIRST Tech Challenge Teams are filled with freshman and sophomores, and juniors and seniors work on the varsity team, which participates in the FIRST Robotics Challenge.

"The last two years, we've had over 70 students on our varsity team and over 65 on the junior varsity teams," Morgan said.

The meaning of the team acronym is: For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology.

One of his goals has been to recruit more girls to the program, and they've increased the number of girls substantially. The team "made a concentrated effort to recruit at the seventh-grade level to convince enough girls to sign-up." One of them was Rosemarie Pousset, 17, who will be a senior.

"A few girls and I came together and founded the all-girls FIRST Tech Challenge team at Westlake, called the Psionics," Pousset said. "I'm so proud of the legacy we have here because I've been mentoring the younger girls. Seeing the girls get hands-on after being afraid to makes me so happy."

Pousset is on the leadership team, which does fundraising pitches. Morgan says they go out and find corporate sponsorships.

“Financing the team is always a problem because it is a real expensive,” Morgan said. “We developed a pitch-deck, and she (Pousset) and a few others trained with a start-up guy. Now they have experience pitching to these multi-national corporations.”

Shrey Majmudar, 17, who will also be a senior, is a member of the outreach team who goes to science days at the elementary schools. He encourages STEM and robotics participation in the middle schools, and informs the public about the team’s successes and needs. Voluntary service is a big component of the program.

“This summer, we’re hosting 23 camps through [Eanes school district],” Majmudar said. “We have our team’s student volunteers at each of these camps, teaching kids from third to ninth grade about everything from programming their own apps, to 3D printing, to classic LEGO robots.”

Every year, FIRST Robotics Competition gives out the Dean’s List award, its highest honor, to the student whose passion and effectiveness is exemplary in leading their teams. Majmudar was one of four students to win in the 10-year history of the Westlake robotics program.

Morgan also won the “Woody Flowers Award,” which is the highest honor any team mentor can receive. He was also honored by the Eanes school district with its “Teacher of the Year” title in 2014.

The FIRST Robotics Competition held every year, brings an intense challenge with a six-week time limit to build and program a large robot capable of playing a field game against competitors. Teams have limited resources and must raise funds and use their wits and imagination to best their opponents. For the past five years in a row, the Westlake team received the “Chairman’s Award” at the regional level of this competition “because it best represents a model for other teams to emulate...”

This year’s team also got to the subdivision finals of the World Championship competition with their robot—the furthest the team has ever gotten.

Some team members have also traveled the globe to mentor teams in other countries. Alumni of the program are rewarded by acceptance into prestigious colleges and are employed by pioneering technology companies.

This is an edited version of the print edition.