

Area teacher named Volunteer of the Year in FIRST Lego League



Sarah Demarco, an area Grade 3 teacher, was recently named FIRST LEGO League Explore's Volunteer of the Year.

Demarco, who teaches at Newmarket independent school Pickering College (PC), was honoured by FIRST Robotics Canada for her efforts to foster robotics programs within the PC community.

As the FIRST LEGO League (FLL) lead at Pickering College, she has played an important role in inspiring young students to think creatively, work collaboratively, and tackle the fundamentals of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) in creative ways.

She was recognized in particular for her ?continued dedication to program implementation? and the significant impact she has made within the FIRST community.

Demarco was also honoured for spearheading the school's FIRST LEGO League Explore Festival, which brought seven teams together to showcase their robots ? and their own learnings along the way.

?I am really honoured,? Demarco told The Auroran last week.

Demarco began bringing the FIRST LEGO League Explore program to her students back in 2014, and recently started to do so again after a brief hiatus due to the global pandemic.

She was first inspired to lead the program within the school after being approached by a parent. She initially tried it out as an after-school club, but soon had a much bigger vision as she saw the value of the program demonstrated time and time again.

?I thought the kids could even do it in class as part of our academic program [and] the following year we implemented it into the program, myself and our now retired Grade 1 teacher. The kids just love it; they love the LEGO component, but they also love the robotics. There is always a challenge to follow, but there's a lot of independent creativity for them in how they take on the challenge.?

Over the years, Demarco has seen students excel through the program across the board, particularly gravitating towards coding. For the primary grades in which Demarco teaches, work predominantly focuses on block coding and, as students familiarize themselves with the process, she has seen them begin to teach each other the ropes.

"For the students, it's the critical thinking and them taking the lead and giving them that ownership over that learning," she says. "Then it's their curiosity because with every challenge the past challenge was 'Submerged,' which was an ocean theme, and next year's challenge is called 'Unearthed,' which is an archeology theme they're learning so much, delving deeper into these topics. It's neat as their teacher to see them take it beyond what I would imagine."

"I had a student this year who does not like to write, but he was so invested in this topic and spent a full period just researching and writing. It showed me, 'Well, I know what I can do to get him to write!'"

Bringing this program and its initiatives to younger students within the PC environment has the added bonus for Demarco of seeing how what students learned in Grade 3 is carried with them through to the end of high school as they build upon these early fundamentals.

In fact, within PC's 2025 Graduating Class, nearly 50 per cent of students were headed to STEM-related post-secondary programs.

"We are so proud of Sarah for receiving this well-deserved recognition from FIRST Robotics Canada. Her passion, creativity and commitment to student learning embody the values we hold dear at Pickering College," says Dr. Cinde Lock, Head of School. "Through her leadership of the FLL Explore program, Sarah has not only inspired students to think critically and collaborate but has also built a strong, supportive community that celebrates curiosity and innovation."

Demarco is expected to be formally presented with the honour during the upcoming program season.

By Brock Weir
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