

St. Max students aim to inspire hosting Regionals for First Lego League



By Brock Weir

Students at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School have a passion for science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) and this is a passion they hope takes hold in younger kids as they prepare to host the Regional Qualifiers for the First Lego League's Robotics Competition this Saturday.

Working with FIRST ? For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology ? the students are tasked with reaching out to the community with their mandate of educating younger kids and teens on the STEM principles in fun ways, and St. Max's engineering students decided to take it on as a team.

?I joined First Lego League (FLL) because I wanted to have an environment where I could have a stepping stone into what I wanted to do, which is more about programming and creating things,? says student Dominic Kerstens. ?I am sure a lot of the other people who joined FLL wanted to do the same and, not only, that, it also brings different skills such as teamwork and a lot of the projects in FLL require a lot of creative solutions.?

These creative solutions, in part, will be put into action ? literally ? with Robot Wars, where robots created by each participating team are put through their paces with a variety of challenges. Each team's robot earns points on how successful they are at completing each challenge, but along with the fun comes some significant lessons not just for the students but for the wider world.

?Along with designing and programming their own robot, there is a project they are involved with where they need to research a real world problem related to the theme and to develop a solution on how to deal with that problem,? says teacher Maddalena Kleine. ?This year's theme is Trash Trek, the process and pathway of our garbage. Our team here at St. Max decided to research electronic waste and what is out there right now to deal with electronic waste. Part of the initiative here at St. Max is we actually have an e-waste bin that is in our front foyer and we're looking for the community to deposit the electronic waste in the bin.

?Oftentimes they research to see what solutions are out there and how they can improve upon them, or come up with their own. That is something they are currently working on and come December 12 they will present to their judges.?

A teaser? Not a chance.

These students are focused on keeping their potential solutions under wraps until the big day ? and, of course, organizing the big day itself.

?This is the first time we, as a team, have ever done something this large,? says student Mackenzie Valdez. ?We have done smaller things like participate in the Aurora Street Festival and we did Relay for Life, but we have never done anything so big that we need

the entire team to put their all into it and we are outsourcing volunteers because it is that big of a thing. That's what really excites me ? and I don't know how it is going to turn out!?

Ciara Wigram echoes her teammate: ?I like seeing kids who are younger in elementary school getting excited over things like science instead of just getting excited over sports. It is really cute because you can see them dancing all over the place and having such a good time and they get really into it. I really love seeing that.?

But, out of the fun, comes a set of very real, very important skills; skills they are confident will be beneficial as they pursue their post-secondary lives.

?It is the responsibility you have and the things that you learn,? says Anthony Drektraan. ?Not many courses or high schools offer the same experience you can get from FIRST or FLL and the hands-on skills definitely apply to different kinds of learning styles, and it is just a great environment to be in. You learn so much from people. In our robotics team, everything you learn is from someone who has worked in the trades and mostly everyone on the team wants to be in the trades. It is nice not to learn from a teacher sometimes but from someone who has been there in those shoes.?

Registration for the First Lego League Regional Junior Robotics Tournament begins Saturday at 8 a.m. Spectators from the general public are welcome to come out for the Robot Wars, currently slated to begin around 12.30 p.m.