



Contributors

Andrew Cutler: Science comes alive at robotics rodeo

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Andrew s. Cutler

WHEN WE'RE YOUNG we can't wait to grow up and share in the adult knowledge of the world. But sometimes, it seems, it's we adults who can learn valuable life lessons from the next generation.

I was reminded of this on March 31, when I went to the New England Institute of Technology, in Warwick, to watch Rhode Island high-school students compete in the Vex Challenge, a robotics competition sponsored by inventor Dean Kamen's FIRST program. I also read with great interest Elizabeth Gudrais's coverage of this event in The Journal ("Battle of the brains," April 3).

Kamen's nonprofit aims to excite students about math and science so they'll choose careers in technology, engineering and related fields. A Brandeis University study found that FIRST participants are far more likely than other students to expect to get a graduate degree and pursue careers in science and technology. In short, the program is a natural fit for Rhode Island's mission to better prepare its students to succeed in the 21st-Century global economy.

Last fall, at the Business Innovation Factory's second annual innovation summit on collaborative innovation in Providence, Kamen announced that Rhode Island would be the first state to have all its high schools participate in the challenge.

In the end, this Business Innovation Factory initiative garnered 25 high-school teams and over 150 students from across the state took part this year, making Rhode Island, in just its first year in the program, the state with the most participating schools in its first year.

The program has student teams design and construct a robot capable of completing certain tasks. Teams work as a group with an adult mentor to build and test the robots. After six weeks of preparation, it's time to unveil them. The challenge brings the robots together in a variety of head-to-head competitions, like gladiators, with thumping music in the background and fans on the edge of their seats.

For over six hours, science and problem-solving came alive as an exciting, invigorating challenge with clear, practical applications.

But the students weren't the only ones learning from this program. As an observer, I came away with some valuable lessons about teamwork and collaboration.

I saw students treating each other and their teachers with the utmost respect. I saw them huddling, not unlike a football team looking to score on their next drive, to figure out a way in which they could improve with

each round of this competition; never satisfied with their previous performance. I also saw parents cheering on their sons and daughters through their scientific endeavors.

In the second half of this competition, Ponaganset and Burrillville High Schools, classic rivals in the sporting arena, joined forces in an alliance to give both teams a shot at competing at the FIRST Vex Challenge World Championship Event, being held this week in Atlanta. The point being, when it came to science, the two schools put aside their rivalry to work together as a team. That's an example for all of us, especially as the state's political and business leaders increasingly focus on cross-disciplinary collaboration as a path to Rhode Island's economic success.

In addition, Burrillville won a Connect Award, given to the team that built the best connection with its local community and the engineering community. What better proof can there be of how important a strong and supportive community base is to creating our next generation of scientists and entrepreneurs.

The other winning teams were Mount Hope High School and Cumberland High. Cumberland High was the winner of the "inspire" award. According to FIRST, "This judged award is given to the team that performs well in all categories, that impresses all other teams and whom they would always want as an alliance partner and finally, the team the judges view that best exemplifies all components of the FIRST Vex Challenge philosophy. This team should serve as an inspiration to other teams. This team excels at the game challenge, acts with gracious professionalism and also understands how to communicate their experiences and knowledge to other teams, and the judges."

That is what I learned at school March 31.

Andrew S. Cutler is a Providence-based public-relations man.