Lockheed Martin Robotics Competition Nears Climax For South Jersey Middle School Students

Teams of area middle school students will end five weeks of Saturday morning robotics workshops at Lockheed Martin when they compete against one another in a winner-take-all "dirty kitchen" scenario.

Using Lego NXT(TM) Robotics kits, engineers at Lockheed Martin Advanced Technology Laboratories (ATL) tutored 28 students from Carusi Middle School, Cherry Hill, Cooper's Poynt, Camden, and Gleam, a non-profit Camden-based outreach program for youth. Split into random teams of four, the students received step-by-step instructions in basic engineering and computer programming.

"Many young people think they could never be an engineer because it's too hard or too boring," said James Marsh, ATL director. "We want these students to understand that engineering can be fun and rewarding."

During the first session in October, students used computing programs already built into their robots or written by ATL engineers. These same students can now write their own software code to make their robots accomplish a particular task, like using sonar to avoid objects, using light to follow a line, or using software to navigate a maze.

Marguerite Ferra, director of Gleam, said, "It's amazing to watch our kids emerge in this new environment as leaders in the games as well as good teammates. To see their focus, assembling or programming the robots, shows me what kids can do when put into a best learning situation possible."

The final competition will require students to combine programming lessons and teamwork to program a helper robot to clean a dirty kitchen without knocking over other objects. ATL engineers adapted this scenario from lesson plans developed at Carnegie Mellon University.

"As an educator, I am constantly searching for innovative ways to expose our kids to careers in the field of math and science," said Neil Burti, Jr., Carusi Middle School assistant principal. "This program provides a rigorous, fun and engaging arena for this exposure to take place."

The final competition will occur on November 4 at noon at ATL in Cherry Hill. Judges for the competition will include students from Dresher, PA, who finished in first and second place at the First Pennsylvania State Lego League Robotics Tournament earlier this year.

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