



Unity Care Group, Inc.
"Creating Healthier Communities"

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Teens Get Charge from Robotics

San Jose, Calif., (March 29th, 2002) These robots can't get your coffee or walk your dog. Their big achievement is picking up a soccer ball and putting it in a goal. But their teenage inventors, the best in the nation, might design the super-robots of the future.

After working for weeks on their inventions, high school teams from the Bay Area and around the country will put their robots to the test today in a design and engineering competition sponsored by the non-profit organization FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology).

Dean Kamen, the inventor perhaps best known for his much-hyped Segway scooter unveiled earlier this year, founded FIRST in 1989 to inspire appreciation for science and technology by young people.

"It's a way to get young people, including women and minorities, enthusiastic about doing math science and engineering," says Kamen.

Students spend six weeks paired with professional mentors building original robots. Each year the robots must perform a specific task - this year, it's collecting soccer balls and putting them into goals. Then the robots must move the goals into designated zones. Participants are eligible to apply for \$1.7 million in scholarships from universities, colleges and companies.

Fifty teams of students from California, Arizona, Hawaii and Massachusetts are taking part in regional-level competition today and Saturday at the Event Center at San Jose State University. Regional award winners will advance to the championship competition that will be held April 25 to 27 at Walt Disney World's Epcot in Orlando, Fla.

"I really like working with my hands, and I'm good at science," said Stephanie Studebaker, 15, a sophomore at Pioneer High School in San Jose and a part of its 25-member team nicknamed The Apes of Wrath.

International comparisons, including a report from the 2002 Program for International Student Assessment, have found U.S. students lagging behind those from other countries in math and science skills. Groups such as FIRST are trying to change that by encouraging more students to enter the fields and supporting their progress.

"We want to expose kids to math and engineering and teach them that it can be fun," said David Brown, FIRST executive director.

Alexandra Lewin, 16, junior at the Archer School for Girls in Los Angeles, was curious and afraid when she decided to join her school's robotics team, The Muses.

"I didn't know anything about the field" she said. "I just had to take my time and listen to what people were saying and I knew that would eventually get it."

Tony Watson, 18, Bellarmine College Preparatory in San Jose which won first place in the regional competition last year. As founder and team captain, Watson helped lead his team, the Cheesy Poofs, to win the category of best industrial design.

"It was the most reliable and versatile robot," he said. "I built the arms and that is one of the most crucial parts."

Watson first became interested in the robotics competitions when he attended the event as a spectator two years ago with his father. His experience watching the contest motivated him to start a team at his school.

"I was really excited now because now I was at least going to have a chance to compete," said Watson, who is also the vice president of the African American Student Union at his school. "I like designing and building stuff and seeing it work."

"I'm always trying to get somebody to join," he said. "Some of them don't think they're capable of building a robot or feel that they're not good at that stuff but I encourage them to try."

The Cheesy Poofs team has 40 members who have spent hours after school and at night building a robot to top their last one. They have also studied technical, mechanical and graphic design aspects involved in putting a robot together.

"They understand physical explanations and theories on how things work," said Steve Kyramarios, who serves as the team mentor. He is an engineer for NASA in Mountain View. "These kids push the envelope and come up with bizarre ideas that actually work and amaze me.

Kyramarios has been a team mentor for four years. He says he enjoys working with the kids and is always learning from them.

"They've taught me to look at things differently," he said. Instead of giving reasons why things can't work, "they've challenged me to think of reasons why it can."

ABOUT UNITY CARE GROUP

Founded in 1992, Unity Care Group, Inc. is a community-based non-profit multi-service youth and family development agency. Founded with the goal of developing educational and social programs to enrich the lives of at-risk youth, our mission is to provide quality youth and family programs for the purpose of creating healthier communities through lifelong partnerships. For more information contact the Development Department at (408) 971-9822 or visit us at www.unitycare.org.

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