

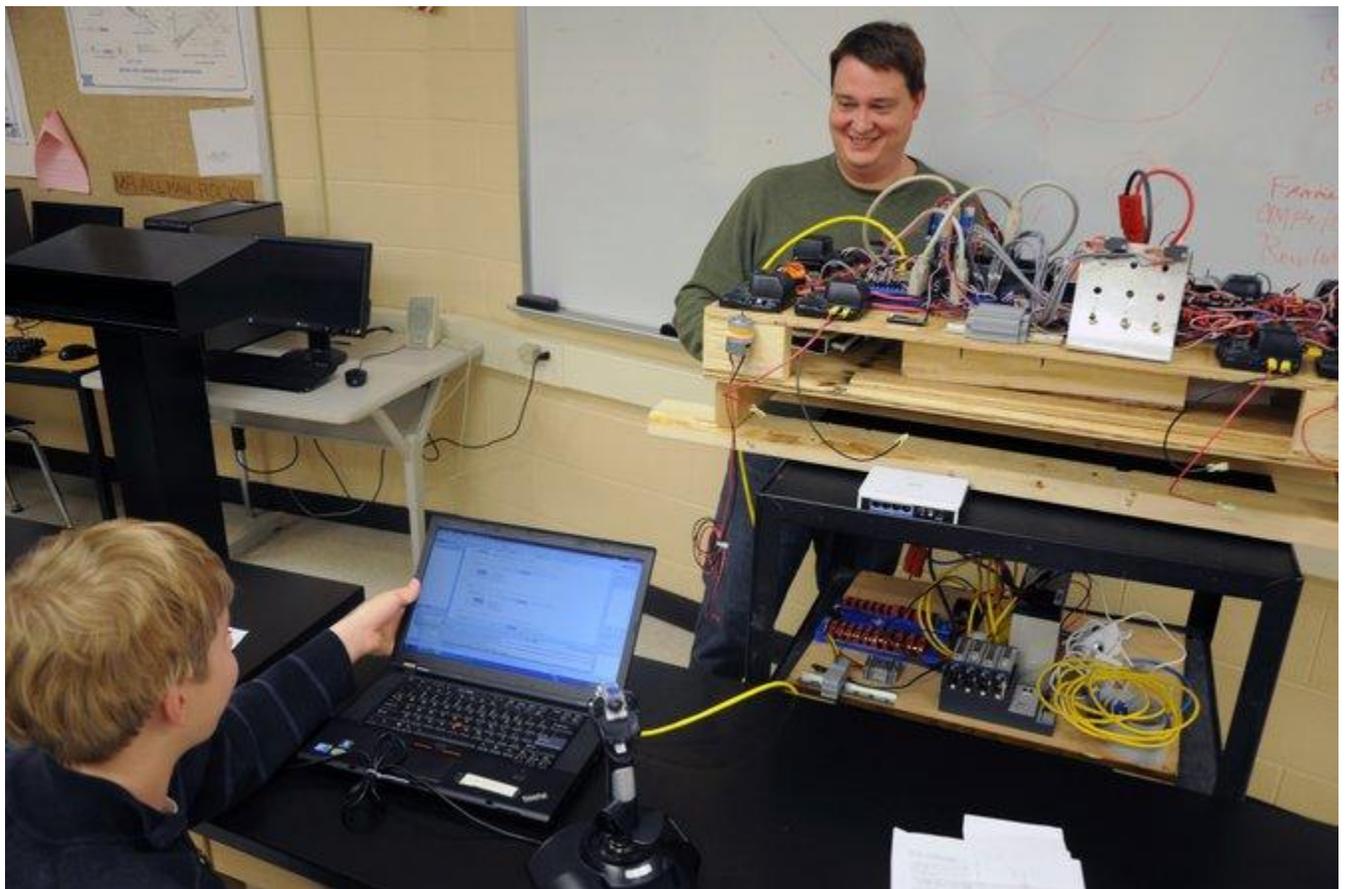
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Mentoring pays dividends

Two advocates of the *FIRST* robotics team share benefits of mentoring



Mentor Troy Beard, Software Programming Engineer from Speedline Technologies, works with Junior Kyle Gulshen on the test board get the robot programmed to compete in the *FIRST* challenge “Rebound Rumble.”

By [Dianne Steingrubey](#)

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As a mentor for Camdenon High School's 4-H *FIRST* LASER Robotics Team 3284, Dennis Harmon enjoys the nostalgia of getting back to his technical electronic roots that got him started in his professional career.

"It's amazing the electronics itself hasn't changed; the components, the computers, everything else has, but electrons still flow just like they did," he laughed.

On Thursday evening, Harmon, a technician and business owner, and CHS freshman student Kale Jackson busily worked side-by-side wiring the control system of the team's robot. Harmon is one of the 30-plus professional adult mentors who spend countless hours aiding students during the six-week build season before competition.

The *FIRST* robotics team, which was formed just three years ago, has been designing, fabricating and marketing a 125-pound robot since Jan. 7 for the upcoming regional competitions. This year's challenge called "Rebound Rumble" requires the team to build a machine that shoots basketballs into hoops. With one week left to assemble and complete, team members and mentors realize the importance of their upcoming deadline.



Dennis Harmon, Electrical Technician and business owner, works with freshman Kale Jackson, showing him where to mount the C-RIO, digital sidecars and jaguar.

Harmon has been a valuable mentor of the team for two years. His son, Jacob, is a third-year team member and his other son, Josh, is a team member on the *FIRST* Robotics Lego League Team at Oak Ridge Intermediate. Harmon feels he would have benefitted from an adult mentor partnership in activities at school, and encourages others who are looking for satisfaction in helping other succeed and want to create a legacy of intelligent young adults to get involved as a mentor in this afterschool program.

"It is very fulfilling. If you have life skills and you want to be involved with kids, this is a great group to be involved with," Harmon said.

“This generation today is such an intelligent generation. It blows me away. These kids really want to learn and I want to do everything I can to help them,” he added. “I may not even be around when society actually reaps the benefits of this generation, but it will be tremendous when they do.”

In addition to the gratifying feelings he receives from working with the students, Harmon said mentoring keeps him active during his slower time at work. Last year, Harmon logged more than 200 hours during the six-week build season. Besides the relationships he has developed with the students, he’s also made friends and networked with other mentors.

“It’s a good strong bond here,” he said.

Like Harmon, Troy Beard enjoys how mentoring fills the gap between Christmas and spring when it is a slower time for him as well. Last year, Beard logged more than 200 hours as well during build season. Beard, a Software Programming Engineer from Speedline Technologies, got involved at the school about five years ago when he joined as a Project Lead the Way mentor. When the robotics team formed and his son joined the team, he began volunteering his time with the robotic students.

Beard has a son, Jason, that has been on the team three years and his daughter, Ashley, has been on the team two years. This year, Beard mainly aids the student programmers with software. He too enjoys all the satisfaction and reaps many rewards from spending time with the students. Seeing a “spark” ignite from the mentees is something he cherishes and finds rewarding.

“Last year, one of the parts of the competition was the autonomous, and when everything came together and it worked for first time, it was really exciting for everyone,” he said.

Mentee Kyle Gulshen, is a programmer who has been under Beard’s wing for three years. He said he feels like they have formed a bond and can ask him anything from programming to what classes he should take in school. Because of Beard’s willingness to share his expertise and knowledge in his field, Gulshen said he has opened the door of programming as a career option.

“I’ve learned a lot from Troy,” Gulshen said. “I think I’ve grown a passion for programming. Before going into robotics, I didn’t know anything about it really. I liked science and math, but not programming specially. I like programming now and I might go into that in the future.”

Mitch Comer, Camdenton R-III Project Lead the Way Instructor and robotics coach said the team is always looking for additional mentors with different skills sets to add to their growing team. He said the team was fortunate this year to pick up a couple of mentors from Boeing in St. Louis, and they were able to communicate through email and Skype when the team needs assistance. He was also thrilled this year to see some former students show support and help out as they are in transition for a job.

Comer also noted that not all mentors have to be engineers or technicians. This year, the team has a mentor who is experienced in crafts and sewing. Comer said she has been working with the students and has shown them how to make attire for their spirit team.

FIRST Robotics is offered as an afterschool program at the Camdenon District. New mentors can transition to the team at any time by calling Camdenon School District's Afterschool Services Director Sherry Comer at 573-346-9233.

The *FIRST* Robotics LASER team is a two time World Championship qualifier. Be sure to support the robotics team as they will contend in two regional competitions in March. They travel to Kansas City and compete March 1-3 and St. Louis on March 22-24.

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