

MU news media

Camdenton hosts 4-H robotics competition

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Photos available for this release:



Safina Earnst of Camdenton prepares for the Mid MO FIRST Robotics Lego League competition.

Credit: Photo courtesy of Camdenton R-III Schools



Michael Warner and Reagan Hubbard put together game tables for the upcoming Mid Mo FIRST Robotics Lego League competition in Camdenton.

Credit: Photo by Linda Geist



Logo for the Camdenton 4-H robotics team.

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CAMDENTON, Mo. – Rural central Missouri will host some of the state's greatest young minds Nov. 16 at the Mid MO FIRST Robotics Lego League qualifier at Camdenton High School.

University of Missouri Extension Camdenton 4-H Robotics LASER 3284 team members design, build and market robots during the after-school program.

With a population of 3,200, Camdenton is small, but its school district covers 372 square miles, drawing more than 4,000 K-12 students. One in 20 of those students participate in the school district's internationally recognized FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) program, working with 43 adult mentors and meeting via Skype with industry professionals who challenge and encourage the students.

In grades K-3, teams build a moving model with Lego bricks. Students in grades 4-6 explore career options and build robots that can perform a series of missions. In grades 7-8, students develop an engineering notebook and design robots to compete. Students grades 9-12 work with engineers to build a 120-pound robot.

Coach Mitch Comer convinced his wife, after-school program director Sherry Comer, that robotics could enhance Camdenton's program. They worked with MU Extension's Camden County 4-H because of 4-H's longstanding commitment to STEM programs. The group got a \$10,000 J.C. Penney grant and continues to receive support, resources and guidance through 4-H.

All program participants in the past four years are majoring in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields at college. All members are college-bound this year, many with scholarships already in hand.

4-H youth specialist Michele Kroll leads "Fantastic Fridays," weekly meetings that introduce students to 4-H and other extension programs.

Students perform community service at domestic violence shelters and for Habitat for Humanity and the Optimist Club, among others. They also learn Gracious Professionalism and "Cooperation," an attitude of cooperation, respect and integrity toward competitors.

The program opens doors for rural students to travel. Members have visited STEM businesses throughout the country and met with legislators in Washington, D.C. They have made more than 60 presentations to promote FIRST and STEM.

Brittany Bolz, a junior at the school, has been in robotics three years. She has seen Gracious Professionalism in action when robots broke and competitors came to the rescue. She plans to study biological or nuclear engineering.

"4-H has brought me out of my shell," she said. "It has made me aware that I can do so much more than I thought I could." She had never been on an overnight trip before joining the group.

Freshman Brenden Barbour programs robots and “scouts” other robotics teams. “4-H has taught me leadership skills,” he said. He too plans to attend college.

Senior Garrett Johnson said he has had many scholarship offers and will attend Missouri University of Science and Technology in Rolla to become a petroleum engineer.

Johnson finds it rewarding to mentor younger students at camps and after school. “Little kids get frustrated, but it’s neat to get to grow with a kid and get them to understand that you have to have downfalls in life to get solutions,” he said.

Currently, members are working on projects for the Nov. 16 competition, which is part of the 2013-14 “Nature’s Fury Challenge,” in which members from 61 countries design applications for natural disasters. A Camdenton team is developing a phone app to communicate emergency information to tourists.

Teams are challenged to raise funds, design a team “brand,” hone teamwork skills, and build and program a robot to perform tasks with limited resources for “Nature’s Fury.”

For more information, visit www.laser3284.org or www.usfirst.org.

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