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Youth Lego Robot Competition Focuses on Solutions for Seniors

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BROOKLYN — They aren't your grandmother's robots, but these kids sure would like them to be.

More than 400 robot-building students from around the city confronted the challenge of building a functioning machine that would improve the lives of **senior citizens**, at a qualifying round for the FIRST Lego League on Saturday.

FIRST, an abbreviation of For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology, is an organization that works to foster an appreciation of science in young people.

Every year at the organization's competitions, student teams face off to solve a world issue with their own robotic Lego creation. Forty-four teams of middle and junior high-schoolers convened at the Polytechnic Institute of **New York University** in Downtown Brooklyn on Saturday and set to the task that would determine if they would advance to the next round.

Half of the teams will advance to the March tournament at the **Javits Center**. From there, the champions will head to St. Louis, Missouri to face off in an international contest.

How well the team members work together has a lot to do with how they score, according to referee Ivan Estevez.

"They're being judged on being able to integrate good values — cooperation, participation —while developing a project." Estevez explained, adding, "It's all made so the kids are made aware of world issues."

But for 14-year-old Taylor Ryan, a 9th grader at K595 **Bedford Academy**, the Lego challenge was more than simply a chance to be hailed as a robotics champion.

"I wanted to show there are other ways to help senior citizens," Ryan explained. "My grandmother has Alzheimer's really bad and I wanted to build something that could help her"

Ryan's team's built a door that opened automatically, only when Legos with a specific white, grey and yellow pattern was detected.

"We developed a code that would recognize the senior's wheelchair every time they rode by," she said.

Sixth grader Thraa Saleh, from I.S. 318 Academy of the Arts and Sciences, values the skills that the competition taught her.

"You have to know what happens if something goes wrong," Saleh said. "You have to have a backup plan. I think it'll help me a lot when I grow up because I want to be a doctor."

Her team's creation was a device that would help seniors to remember critical daily practices like taking their medicine or turning off the stove. The 11-year-old predicts that robotics will play an even bigger part in healthcare by the time she finishes medical school.

"I think robots will help me help older people," she said.

For Alexi Judge, a 5th grader at Packer Collegiate Institute, the best thing was about the competition was the camaraderie.

