Brooklyn Daily Eagle

# Brooklyn Goes Robot Crazy

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**Robotics Competition at NYU-Poly**

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METROTECH – It wasn't basketball that had the crowd going wild in the gymnasium at Polytechnic Institute of NYU this past Saturday – it was robots, 33 of them, hand-built from LEGO components and sent to compete on tabletop courses.

Hundreds braved the cold to attend the Brooklyn finals of the 2010 FIRST Robotics Competition, where student teams demonstrated their ability to research, engineer, build and program robots.

Cheerleaders chanted and supporters yelled as robots the size of toasters zipped along roads and bridges, executing missions like picking up and transporting items and avoiding impacts. This year's theme was robotic transportation.

Some missions were executed flawlessly, while others bombed. But for the students, ages 9 to 14, it was an experience that left them high on technology and raring to compete again next year.

"You guys rock!" Coach Russ Holstein boomed to his students from Williamsburg's I.S. 318, whose robots were performing near the top of the pack.

"Kids get to see what healthy competition is all about," he told the Brooklyn Eagle.

"Everyone's cheering, everyone's positive. There's no putdowns or booing – and we have cool T-shirts."

Michael Ousseinov, an I.S. 318 team member, said that he learned about "teamwork and technology, like 3-D and stuff. I also learned some creative skills I can use – like if I get put on a building group next year, I can apply those skills."

Member Veronica said she was new to the team this year. "Mr. Holstein said he thought I'd be a good addition. I learned how to program the robot's NXT and I learned better teamwork." Veronica said she wished "good luck to the other people going to Javits."

As P.S. 233's cheerleaders filled the auditorium with their chants, coach Jennifer Humphrey said, "We work as a family unit. We recently lost technology from our budget; this helps kids regain what they lost. They learn problem-solving strategies, and this enhances their science and math skills. It also enhances their self-esteem."

**Brooklyn's the Borough To Beat**

Brooklyn had more teams register for the competition than any other borough, said Susan Hermon, administrative coordinator at NYU-Poly's David Packard Center. While 47 teams registered, 33 participated on Saturday.

"The teams have names like 'Legolites' and 'Nerd Herd'; they come with cheerleaders, steppers, posters and banners, pom-poms, whistles -- all to show their team spirit. They are very excited about the event. The anticipation of learning who will advance is always at a high because they have been preparing for the last four months."

"We advanced 19 teams to the citywide finals at the Jacob Javits Center in March, where they will compete with the other four boroughs. Brooklyn is the borough to beat though," she said.

**Polytechnic Students Mentor Central Brooklyn Kids**

Three professors are in charge of NYU-Poly's robotics program (AMPS/CBRI, or "Applying Mechatronics to Promote Science/ Central Brooklyn Robotics Initiative"): Prof. Vikram Kapila (Mechanical Engineering); Prof. Magued Iskander (Civil Engineering); and Dr. Noel N. Kriftcher, head of the Packard Center (and a member of the Dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences).

"We are very proud to be able to offer the first LEGO Robotics Competition on our campus again and even prouder for the opportunity to work as mentors with local students," said Dr. Kriftcher.

"We've introduce hundreds of young people to science and technology by having Ph.D students as fellows (i.e., engineers in residence) at these schools. It benefits the students, and the teachers get the opportunity to develop their skills in the area of robotics and also develop a broader repertoire of instructional skills. The fellows themselves benefit – one learns best by teaching. They provide lessons, work with teachers as well as coaching the FIRST LEGO League teams.

"This intense experience reduces minority group isolation as well," noted Dr. Kriftcher. Out of the 19 teams that advanced, eight are sponsored by NYU-Poly under the CBRI/AMPS program funded by the Brooklyn Community Foundation, National Science Foundation (NSF), JP Morgan Chase, and Motorola. Those schools are P.S. 11, M.S. 113, P.S. 399, Benjamin Banneker High School, P.S. 21, Bedford Academy, I.S. 318, P.S. 233, and P.S. 636.

"If some of these students are engaged and excited to see the possibility to achieve on math, science and technology, and possibly pursue careers in this area, so much the better. All of society wins," he said.

The citywide winners will travel to the world championship in Atlanta, where competitors come from all over the globe.