

Robots Rule at LPA

By Andy Herrick

Hefty backpacks, rolling book packs, packed lunches and early morning yawns are commonplace at Lighthouse Preparatory Academy. Small model bridges constructed from cheap plastic straws and masking tape are not as common. But last Monday straws and tape were everywhere as students of the LPA Robotics class got busy with one of their first class construction projects - the design of a light yet sturdy suspension bridge.

Using no more than 100 plastic drinking straws, the students had to construct a bridge spanning a given distance between two books while supporting a tennis ball. Some bridges looked like state-of-the-art overpasses, something you might spy while driving through a major metropolis, while others looked like early childhood excursions into backyard building. All required creativity, determination, and lots and lots of straws.

The Robotics class is a new and exciting addition to the LPA curriculum this school year, providing students with a challenging, hands-on approach to technology and robotic infrastructure. The class is taught by Mike Rapp, school administrator. It focuses on practical applications, with students designing and creating bridges, platform structures, and stable towers. Mr. Rapp hopes to bring in guest speakers who can elaborate on the electrical and mechanical components of robotics design, furthering the students' knowledge of general technology.

One upcoming highlight for class members will be a chance to participate in the Boosting Engineering, Science, and Technology (BEST) Robotics Competition, set for October 25 in St. Louis. The BEST organization sponsors national competitions, encouraging middle-school and high-school students to get involved with technology early on, in the form of competitive robotic competitions. Each school team receives a construction kit from BEST, and then, using those materials, constructs a robot designed to complete a certain task. Joshua Herrick, an eighth-grade student enrolled in Robotics class, says, "The class is challenging and fun. We learn a lot and I'm excited about the [BEST] competition."

Robotics has a certain allure that appeals to nearly all of us. The shifting arms, the intricate circuitry, the fascination of unknown signals - a robot is the product of our dreams and our efforts. Members of the Lighthouse Robotics class seem excited to be introduced to this stunning academic field - even if everything doesn't go as planned on the first try. History tells us that Thomas Alva Edison, one of our greatest and most prolific inventors, started his investigations by attempting to hatch a duck's egg. He ruined his pants. Likewise, some plastic straw bridges didn't support the tennis ball. But, as Thomas Edison said, "Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration." At the conclusion of this school year, the robotics class may come to understand the deeper meaning of that statement.

Andy Herrick is a senior at Lighthouse Preparatory Academy.