FIRST Time For Everything

Robotics Club Boosted By NASA Official's Visit To Smithtown H.S.

By David Ambro

There is something a little spacey going on at Smithtown High School.

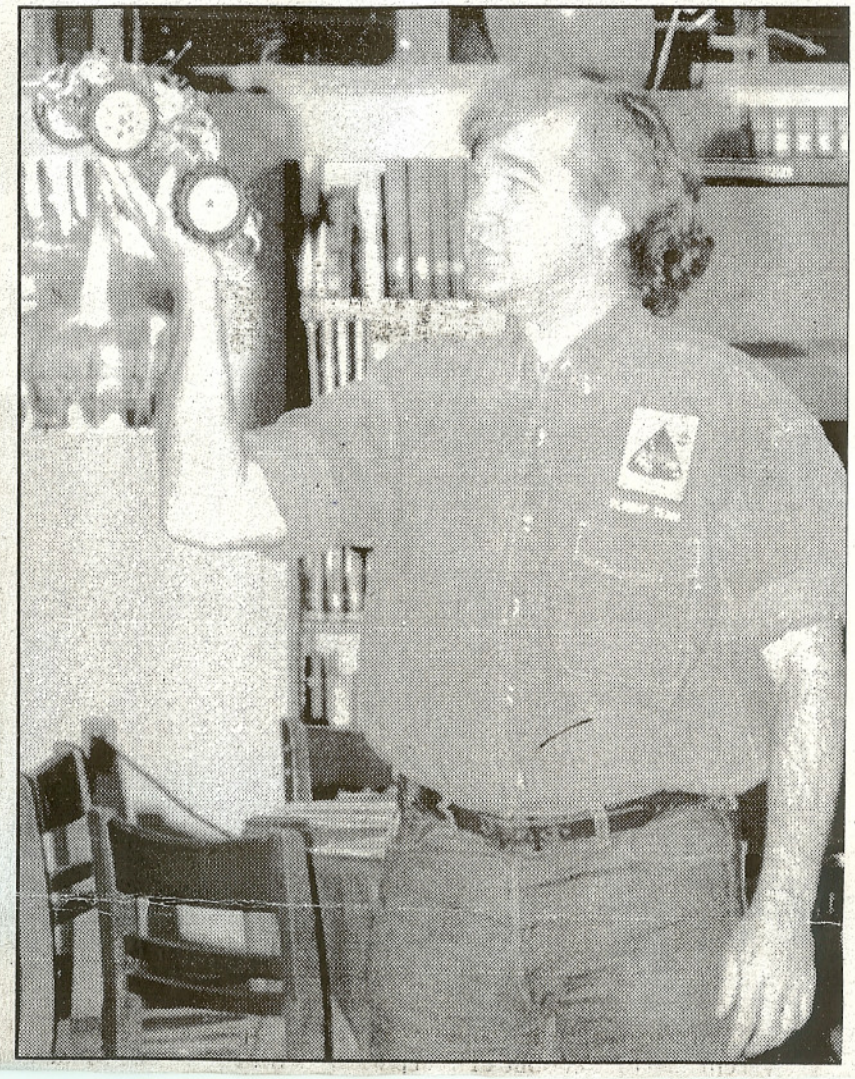
Outer-spacey, that is.

With a dinner fund-raiser November 1, the High School launched its FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) Robotics Club. The keynote speaker for the event was David Lavery, NASA Program Executive for Solar System Exploration, who briefed the dinner audience about upcoming missions to Mars and also provided students with an inspirational message.

Wearing blue jeans and a NASA Mars-mission denim shirt, Mr. Lavery arrived early and mingled with a crowd of students and corporate sponsors. He then used his keynote address to mingle a message for taxpayers' support of the space program with student support for science through robotics.

Using slides and props, Mr. Lavery delivered his message by telling the stories of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) University intern Colin Engle and high school junior Orlando Antongiorgi, of East Tech High School in Cleveland.

According to Mr. Lavery, a group of the world's leading scientists were in the process of developing a $5 billion device which would be deployed to Mars, where it would rove the surface and collect planetary samples. After first being rejected, Mr. Engle pushed and



TEN, NINE, EIGHT...: NASA Executive for Solar and Planetary Exploration David Lavery holds up Tooth (right)—a prototype of the Mars rover Sojourner developed by a college intern—and marches off the steps of the Mars rover Robbie during his keynote address to launch the FIRST Robotics Club at Smithtown High School Thursday, November 1.

-Rob Cuni photos

pushed and eventually was accepted to work with the team as a college intern. By the end of the summer, using a few hundred dollars in parts he bought at Radio Shack, Mr. Engle designed a prototype rover far more capable then the one being conceived by the international team of scientists—thus Mr. Lavery's message to students.

Rather than $5 billion, the Engle prototype cost only $250 million to build—thus Mr. Lavery's message to taxpayers. Mr. Lavery said a Hollywood flop motion picture costs more to produce than the Engle rover cost to build.

The result of Mr. Engle's work, according to Mr. Lavery, was the Sojourner planetary rover, which landed on Mars July 4, 1997 as part of the Pathfinder mission. As he told the story, Mr. Lavery pulled the Engle prototype—named Tooth—out of a bag and held it up. He said the real Sojourner that landed on Mars has a plate on the bottom engraved with the name of its inventor, Colin Engle, who is now a wealthy businessman selling research robots.

The Antongiorgi story hits even closer to home. During his participation with a high school FIRST Robotics Team. Mr. Antongiorgi developed circuitry regulating the power for a system to measure sunlight striking the surface of Mars. That system is presently in use in a NASA craft presently orbiting the neighboring planet.

"Absolutely, positively, yes, one person can make a big difference," said Mr. Lavery, who encouraged students to "go forth and think they can change the world." He also urged employers to view the FIRST Robotics Club program as a training ground for future employees.

Mr. Lavery's message seems to have been heard

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NASA Executive Helps Launch Club

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and the Smithtown FIRST Robotics Club is ready for take-off.

"It is the first time I will be able to work hand-in-hand with robotics," said senior Viraj Mehta, the club's webmaster. Viraj said he joined the club for the thrill of working with robotics and to showcase his ability as a webmaster, which last year earned him an internship at Brookhaven National Laboratory.

After listening to the speech, Viraj said he found Mr. Lavery to be inspirational. "It was unique in telling the missions of Mars compared to what I have heard... I wish he was a teacher at the high school," Viraj said.

"I think it was great. [Mr. Lavery] was pretty interactive and I loved the part where he told us about the future plans for exploration of the solar system. It actually motivated me more," said junior Ahmed El Azhary, Robotics Club Vice President.

Ahmed said he joined the club to add another dimension to his education. "I have a great interest in engineering and in business. I'm involved in the business club but I really love engineering," he said.

Last year, Ahmed entered an engineering contest which he said he thoroughly enjoyed. He said engineering has been a hobby of his and said the robotics club will now allow him to do more with his skills in a framework he anticipates will be fun.

"FIRST Robotics is multifaceted. There is business, public relations, web design, engineering, manufacturing... It is divided into committees and there are group leaders and crew leaders. There is a lot to it," Ahmed said.

To conclude the program, Smithtown School District Superintendent Dr. Charles Planz echoed the message of Mr. Lavery. Dr. Planz said he urged creation of the robotics club and expected about five or six students to get involved. However, there was a far more enthusiastic response to Mr. Lavery's presentation and there are now 60 students working in the program.

"A program like this will allow students to apply their knowledge into something we can use—something society can use," Dr. Planz said. "I think students today need a better understanding of how things work. It will empower them."

"I do think it is important in the society today, especially in light of the events of September 11, to have a broader focus on science and technology," said Richard Lippe of the law firm Meltzer, Lippe, Goldstein and Schlissel, the primary sponsor of Smithtown's FIRST Robotics Club. "Anything we can do to encourage growth and interest in science and technology is critical in this crossroads in the evolution of the world's society."