

Feature Story

Honeoye's FIRST Lego League

New robotics program for girls age 9-14 seeks participants, donations

BY ANNE JOHNSTON

The Honeoye Herald

Nine-year-old Lena Uthe loves tinkering with just about anything she can get her hands on and figuring out how it works. That's why, when a letter recently came home in her backpack inviting her to join like-minded girls in a new robotics program, there was no hesitation.

"It was probably the fastest form that's ever been returned to school," said Lena's mother, Michelle Uthe.

Lena, who is entering fourth grade at Honeoye this fall, will be one of up to 10 Honeoye girls who will form a team for the FIRST LEGO League.

FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) is a not-for-profit that was founded 20 years ago to encourage participation in science and technology through hands-on, creative activities that focus on solving problems and building confidence.

The FIRST LEGO League program is for ages 9 to 14, and while some teams are sponsored by schools – with teachers serving as their coaches – Honeoye's team will be coached by a volunteer, Brian Boorman of Richmond.

An Avoca native with a master's in electrical engineering, Boorman is Principal Engineer at Harris RF Communications in Rochester. He is also a father of two girls, ages 9 and 5, who is well aware that his field and others like it remain male-dominated.

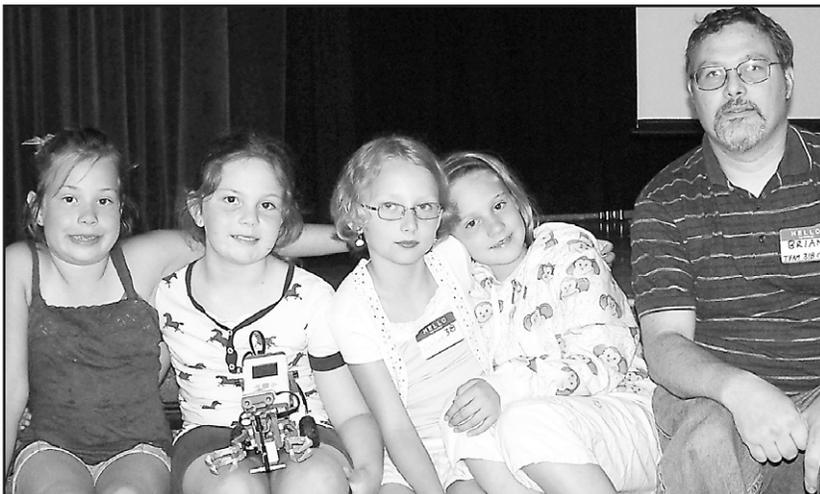
"I want them to know they can do this type of stuff, too – what their dad does," he said, noting that hopefully by the time his 5-year-old is in fourth grade, "this program will be really rolling."

Several area schools, including Victor, Naples and Honeoye-Falls Lima, have FIRST teams for older students. While the high school program involves building custom robots from the ground up, teams in the FIRST LEGO League build their robots from Mindstorms kits made by the LEGO company.

The league kicks off its season each September, when the FIRST organization releases details of the challenge and the rules. The teams get to work and then attend tournaments where their robot competes against others by completing a series of tasks, and they give a presentation to judges about their problem-solving process. Last year, three dozen teams competed in the regional FIRST LEGO League tournament at the University of Rochester.

This year's challenge has yet to be revealed, but Boorman says its name is "Smart Move," and it has something to do with finding better ways to transport people and goods.

One of the best things about the FIRST LEGO League, as far as Boorman is concerned, is that it adheres to a core set of values. While the competition is fierce, there is an emphasis on appreciating the value of others, respecting others and respecting the community. In other words, no team is ever made to feel



Some of the Honeoye girls interested in joining a FIRST LEGO League team that is forming attended a related, one-day camp in Penfield July 11. Pictured, from left: Sierra Nagy, Kristen Boorman with robot "Walle," Chloe Launt and Arieana Flynn, with their soon-to-be coach Brian Boorman.

like "losers," and the teams that do rise to the top do not engage in chest-thumping of any sort. "Discovery is more important than winning," it says on the organization's web site, www.usfirst.org.

Honeoye's FIRST LEGO League team will be for girls only. Boorman has been told that at this age, a gender-specific team is best because boys sometimes have a tendency to delegate the research to the girls and take over the work on the robot. The team is also limited to 10 members, so if there at some point is enough interest to form a second team, a second coach would need to step forward.

Boorman made a presentation about FIRST LEGO League to school officials in April, at a time when they were struggling with budget cuts. While the district is unable to officially sponsor the program at this time, Boorman said administrators were excited that it is getting off the ground and offered to help with communications – such as the letter that went home in backpacks – as well as building use for after-school meetings.

Boorman is busy this summer attempting to solicit approximately \$1,500 in donations from area merchants by explaining the program to them and to community groups. His hope is that collectively, a number of small donations will reach the \$1,500 goal, which will go toward registration fees, the robotics kit and a required game mat.

Meanwhile, seven of the interested girls signed up for one-day LEGO summer camps run by high school students in Monroe County. "It gives the kids a chance to see what the program's all about, and gets them excited about it," Boorman said.

For information about making a contribution toward the support of the FIRST LEGO League team in Honeoye, contact Brian Boorman at 229-4650 or brian@boorman.us