

Robots invade classes

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

PENFIELD — They may be constructed out of LEGOs, but as the wires and buttons attached to the blocks would indicate — these tiny vehicles are much more complex than toys.

In fact, they are robots — not the stuff of science-fiction movies, but genuine learning tools for students at St. Joseph's School.

Beginning this school year, St. Joseph's has introduced robotics technology for students in grades 3-6 through the school's "Project Discovery" program. The youths built and programmed four robots using an educational program, "Mindstorms for Schools," which consists of robot equipment and accompanying computer software. Students have learned how to program the robots for traveling certain distances and changing directions, using computer technology as well as light sensors.

Fifth-grader Mallika Rajamani, 10, recalled that "we had a race between a couple of (robots) to see how far they would go." Her brother Kiran, 12, a sixth-grader, noted that Mindstorms for Schools employs many of the same programming concepts as NASA's Rover mission currently being carried out on Mars.

Back on this planet, the St. Joseph's robots also play music that can either be downloaded or created from computers. Sixth-grader Peter Horton, 12, and fifth-grader Matthew Ambrose, 10, said the mu-



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

Through the Project Discovery program at Penfield's St. Joseph's School, students in grades 3-6 have had the chance to study robot technology. During a demonstration at the school Jan. 22, Mallika Rajamani (from left), Peter Horton, Matthew Ambrose, Paris Peters and Molly Stanley test out their robot.

sical component is their favorite part.

"You could do classical music or write your own music," said Matthew, who added that he especially enjoyed devising spooky organ tunes.

According to Joan Doyle, Project Discovery's coordinator, 24 St. Joseph's students have taken part in the robotics curriculum, and the school is hoping to expand this offering in the future. The program was brought to St. Joseph's School through the support of several donors, as well as volunteers who

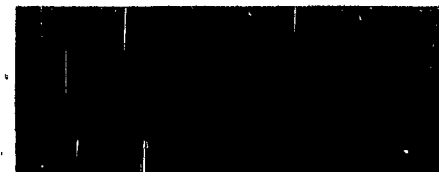
have provided ongoing technological assistance.

"They've been fantastic," Doyle said of the adult support.

One volunteer, Jim Pratt, said that learning robotics might seem a daunting task for many folks, but the St. Joseph's students haven't had much trouble.

"If you make it interesting, the kids are like sponges," said Pratt, who's working after school with a small group that wishes to expand its robotics knowledge even further. One of those students is Pratt's daughter Jean, 9, a St. Joseph's fourth-grader.

Eight-year-old Molly Stanley, for one, doesn't seem to struggle with



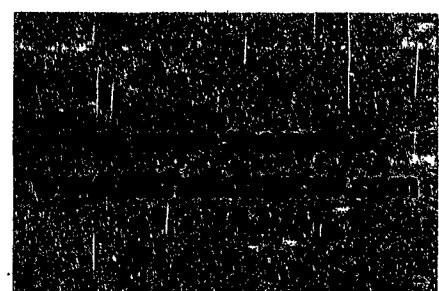
the subject matter. "Not really. My dad was an engineer and he's been teaching me a few things," said Molly, a third-grader.

Then there's Paris Peters, another third-grader, who has polished his considerable technological skills through the robotics course.

"I fixed a TV and fixed my brother's CD player," said Paris, who at the tender age of 8 seems destined for a career as an appliance repairman.

Paris explained that the Mindstorms for Schools curriculum "helped me a lot, knowing what to do and how to do it."

"Problem-solving is very important," Pratt agreed.

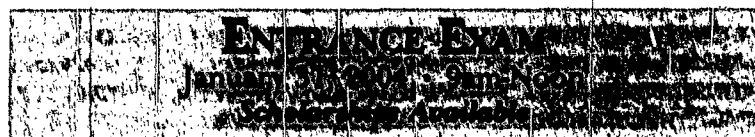


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