

Youth robotics groups showcase engineering talents

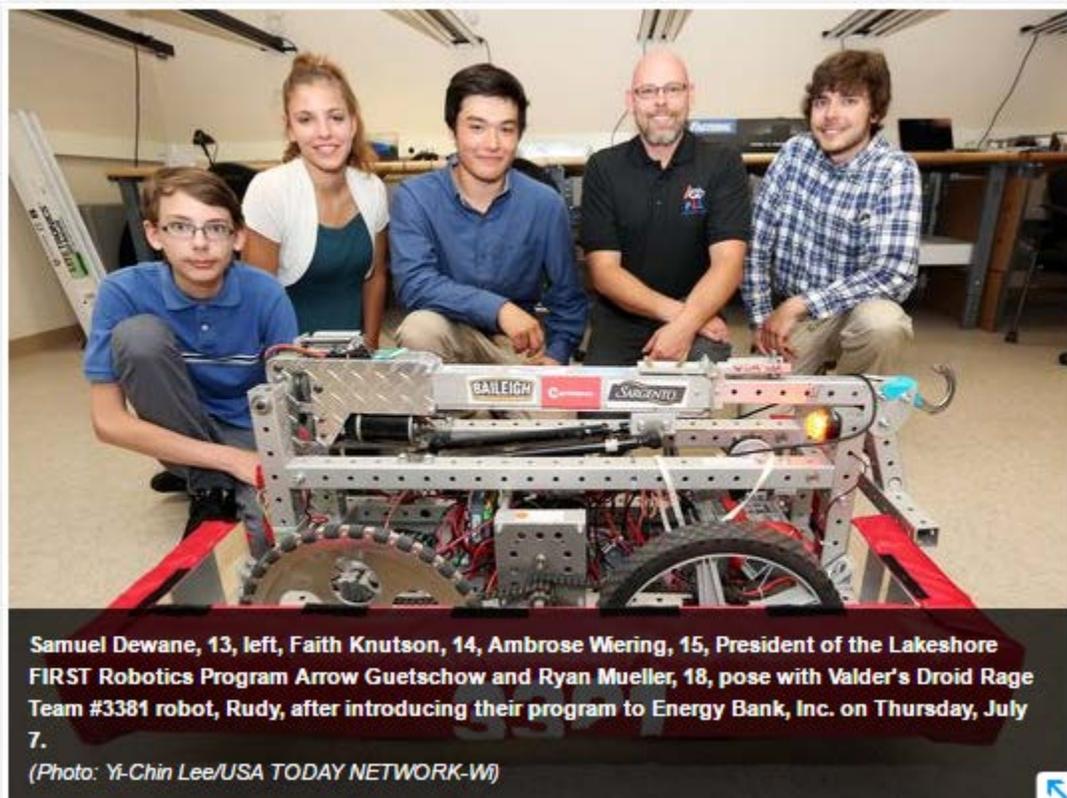
Alyssa Bloechl, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

4:58 p.m. CDT July 15, 2016

MANITOWOC - When Ryan Mueller walked into Energybank with fellow students to give a presentation about their work in robotics, he never expected to find himself with a job less than a week later.

Mueller and three members of Lakeshore FIRST Robotics visited Energybank to showcase the robot Manitowoc-area students built earlier this year as part of a nationally recognized competition with FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology).

FIRST was created in 1989 to inspire children from kindergarten through high school seniors to get involved with science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) related activities, to help foster a future in those careers along with building self-confidence, communication and leadership skills.



Samuel Dewane, 13, left, Faith Knutson, 14, Ambrose Wiering, 15, President of the Lakeshore FIRST Robotics Program Arrow Guetschow and Ryan Mueller, 18, pose with Valder's Droid Rage Team #3381 robot, Rudy, after introducing their program to Energy Bank, Inc. on Thursday, July 7.

(Photo: Yi-Chin Lee/USA TODAY NETWORK-WI)

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The youngest of FIRST participants work with LEGOs in their competitions, and as they age, work up into using software and machinery to build robots from the ground up.

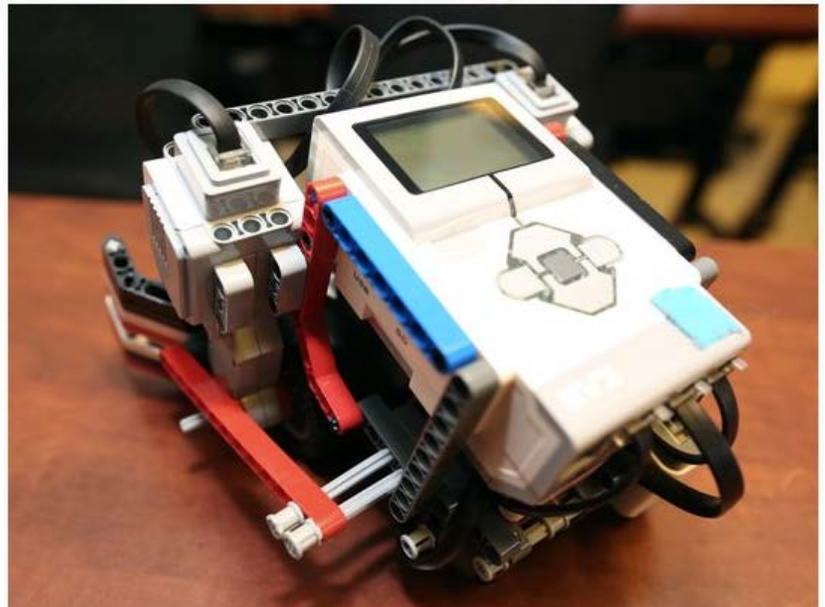
Manitowoc County has teams on all four levels of the FIRST program, three of which are in the Robotics Competition. The teams, based in Mishicot, Valders and Kiel, each designed and built robots with various capabilities that take a lot of work to program to perfection.

All of the work is done by the students, with the help of mentors who are experienced in their fields.

Arrow Guetschow, president of Lakeshore FIRST Robotics, said the older kids only have six weeks to prepare their designs for competition, but their work preps them to be assets to employers.

“They work together under pressure, but they learn a lot,” Guetschow said. “FIRST encourages them to take on subjects like engineering, programming, machining and more, which are careers Wisconsin is in need of as our baby boomers retire.”

STEM-based classes in high school and college are challenging and intimidating, Ambrose Wiering, 15, said during their presentation at Energybank.



A LEGO robot built by fifth to eighth-graders were brought to the presentation at Energy Bank, Inc. on Thursday, July 7. (Photo: Yi-Chin Lee/USA TODAY NETWORK-WI)

“We want to take what is learned in the classroom into the physical,” Wiering said.

Lakeshore FIRST does a lot of networking to introduce their students to local manufacturers in Manitowoc County for co-op, intern and full-time work opportunities.

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"We want them exposed to the jobs here and for the employers to see the local talent we have growing in the area," Guetschow said.

As the students showed off the work of one of the robots made this year, founder and CEO of Energybank Neal Verfuert watched on and asked pointed questions to the students.

"I am a big believer in progress, and I think a lot of kids who have the talent can work here without getting the four-year college degree," Verfuert said. "All four of these students here would be great employees at Energybank."

Within a week, the eldest of the presenting group, Mueller, was hired.

Mueller had a hand in his own fate, as he inquired through email about the potential of having Energybank help create parts to a 3D printer he was making as a personal project.

"I just asked if they could make pieces for me, and then I asked if they were hiring at the end of the email," Mueller said.

He was basically hired on the spot after an interview, and he has started out assembling fixtures to learn the product line. He is anticipating on being taught how to use different robotic machines before he heads off for his freshman year of college at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville to study electrical engineering. Mueller was the electrical engineering captain for the Two Rivers STEM Punk FIRST team.

In being on the job for a few days, Mueller has seen nearly direct parallels to the work process, machines and software he learned how to use with his involvement in FIRST.

Karen Szyman, executive director of the Chamber of Manitowoc County, was also at Energybank to see what the students had to present, as the Chamber helps maintain the workforce pipeline from schools to jobs here in Manitowoc County.

"I think they're amazing," Szyman said. "It is exciting to see practical application of the theories they have learned."

She feels local businesses would benefit greatly by sponsoring Lakeshore FIRST, as there are many local jobs the students could fill.

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Guetschow said he was proud to see Mueller take a job at Energybank.

“It is great that one of our supporters was able to see his value,” Guetschow said. “He is really good at what he does.”

Verfuerth added: “I’m impressed with the skills and communication these students have shown us today. I can’t think of a better investment than the young kids in our community.”

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