

Robotics Teams and Teens – It’s Not What You Think

MANCHESTER, CT, Nov. 19, 2019 -- If you think robotics teams are reserved for the kids who win science fairs, you haven't seen today's robotics teams. Students on these teams are drawn to them because of their interest in everything from social media management to web design, photography, and graphic design. And yes, even the desire to build robots.

That's the message that Barry Curcio and his wife Heather want to share with parents who might not think these teams are for their children. Barry and Heather are mentors and advisors to the Aetos Dios - Eagles of Zeus Robotics Team at East Catholic High School. The team participates in the FIRST Robotics Competition, an international high school robotics contest that gives students real-world engineering experience. The organization was founded by inventor Dean Kamen as a way to inspire future leaders and introduce a new set of skills including leadership and problem solving to students. Curcio believes participating in robotics can be a plus for many students, not just those who are passionate about science and math. "Just because you don't build robots doesn't mean you can't be involved in FIRST," he says.

Curcio says there are a wide variety of roles that students can take on, not just roles for people interested in STEM. "When kids sign up, they are asked what they would like to try," he says. He outlined the benefits that all students can get from their involvement with this "sport of the mind":

Preparation for and Help with College – Robotics are a great way for students to start preparing for college. The various positions on the team allows student to explore various career paths and learn about the challenges of working in a group. In addition, anyone involved with the team is eligible to receive some of the \$80 million in scholarships that FIRST Robotics gives out, many of them going to students who are not on the build team.

Participation in a Sport for the Non-Athlete – Students who are not gifted athletically or interested in a sport often don't get the opportunity to be a part of a team. Robotics changes that. "Robotics is important because it fills the gap of students who don't fit into regular sports," points out Barry Curcio. "Their mind is their sport. These kids meet similar people and it's a whole new world for them. Once they see these commonalities, they shine." Much like students who compete on the field, kids involved with robotics learn about teamwork and collaboration. And, although the competition is just as fierce as an athletic contest, participants learn to respect and even aid their competitors. "Even during competitions when teams are pitted against each other, they offer their help and advice to other teams, creating a really positive environment. They learn what we call 'gracious professionalism,'" he says.

Experience Operating a Business - These teams gives students the ability to run their own businesses. "Robotics teams have to run like businesses with many moving parts and roles for everyone to fill," Curcio says. Like any company, the

team must create a product – a functional robot. In addition, students involved with the team must balance budgets, publicize their teams, build websites, work as a team and build their problem-solving skills. And, like any good corporation, robotic teams are opening up new areas of technology. Curcio explains the work some robotics teams are doing involves building AI robots, incorporating vision sensors, and even building and donating wheelchairs for kids in need. “Kids in robotics are doing what the large corporations are doing,” he says.

Involvement with Community Service –For students involved with robotics teams, community service is a big component. East Catholic’s Aetos Dios team is very involved with community outreach, participating in programs including Reach for the Stars, Cruisin’ on Main in Manchester and various activities with Senior Centers and cancer survivors. According to Curcio, giving back to the community is a big part of the program.

Curcio urges parents to talk about these opportunities with their children, even if they aren’t drawn to the science and engineering opportunities that robotics offers. “Anyone can succeed and grow from robotics, and if students are willing to give it a chance, they can make great experiences out of it,” he says. He describes robotics as, “Unlike any other sport in the world.”

Team Fundraiser Dec. 7 - The members of the Aetos Dios Robotics team are holding a fundraiser to help cover their registration fees for competitions and travel expenses. The Dec. 7 Yellow Ball Race at 1:00 p.m. at East Catholic High School will feature prizes in a race to the bottom. Members of the community will donate to ‘adopt’ yellow balls and prizes will be awarded based on the distance their balls travel down hill. Adoption costs for balls will be: One for \$2; three for \$5 and ten for \$10.