

FIRST: Close to home

Aimee Kalnoskas, Editor-in-Chief

Every once in a while something really new and interesting crosses my desk — and I am not necessarily referring to products. Lately, a lot of those ‘first’ looks have been about FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition in Science and Technology), and I’ve decided to shamelessly participate in what I believe is more than just media hype about this program.

As I mentioned in this column last year, FIRST was founded by inventor Dean Kamen in 1989 to excite and inspire an appreciation of science and technology in young people. My initial association with the program was through National Instruments (NI) and their partnership with LEGO® using NI’s LabView graphical programming language to program robots created with LEGO®s. It was a very 21st century twist to one my favorite childhood toys. Since then, FIRST and its associated programs have gathered considerably more momentum with a growing number of sponsors, supporters and mentors. FIRST works closely with schools at every level to “transform both the perception and reality of education in science and technology,” and it is great to finally see these efforts trickle down to smaller communities.

ECN’s art director, Eileen Whitmore, has a 10-year old son who shows an interest in math and science. Fortunately for him, he has teachers and parents who take the extra effort to fertilize that seed of interest. “Mikey” Whitmore is enrolled in a class at Storming Robots Technology Learning Center in Branchburg, New Jersey — and the proud owner of a LEGO MINDSTORMS® kit. With FIRST as their backdrop, the center focuses on using robotics as “...means to inspire children’s interest and further challenge their intellect in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (S.T.E.M.), analytical, and strategic thinking.” Mikey found that programming the robotic dog to “walk” versus roll was very difficult, but in the process he learned about gears, including 24-tooth and eight-tooth gears, the driver gear and the follower gear. By arranging the icons in the software program to run in parallel for certain tasks, he learned the concept of multitasking in a programming environment. His program then communicated to the robot by using infrared lights. When his Mom asked how the dogs followed the black line on the table (see photo), he said they programmed the light sensors to read the black line, and that they can control the percentage of contrast that the sensors are able to read.

As I mentioned, the number of corporations and engineering colleges and universities participating in FIRST either through equipment or mentoring programs is growing. “Supporting efforts to inspire young people to pursue opportunities in these areas,” said Sheri McCoy, a Johnson & Johnson Company Group chairman and a recent addition to the FIRST Board of Directors, “will open the door to rewarding career choices for them, as well as enrich the future candidate pool for companies like Johnson & Johnson.”

As an engineering professional, you can bring FIRST close to your home community by becoming a mentor. Find out more at www.USFIRST.org [1], and click on “Get

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Cheers,

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[1] <http://www.usfirst.org/>