

Local robotics team conquers the world at international championship



Local students took on the world and emerged victorious at an international First Lego League competition in Arkansas last month.

Aurora's Équipe Francobotique, which received tremendous community support ahead of their trip to the First Lego League Razorback Open Invitational, came home last week with top honours – the 1st Place Champions Award – which honoured not only the prowess of their home-made robot, but their homegrown initiatives to support the environment.

Competing against teams representing 12 different countries, the French-language students wowed the judges. They first earned a perfect score in the robotics championship, in which their Lego creation was put through a battery of tests and challenges.

Their innovation project, a proposal to transform parking lot infrastructure like lampposts into hubs of power generation with solar panels and mini-turbines, also earned top scores.

It was a fitting testament to the hard work of the team, as well as to five out of the team's eight members, who will be graduating to Grade 9 this fall and out of the program.

"This is like winning the Olympics, nothing goes beyond that," says Team Coach Renee Northrup of the First Lego League competition. "It was a surprise; I was hoping the students would bring something home because they have worked incredibly hard all year, but we also knew we were there with 80 championship teams that had already been winners somewhere else in order to get to that level. I couldn't believe our little community team from Canada won the entire International Robotics Competition and I couldn't be prouder of these students – how hard they worked individually, but also how hard they worked as a team to get to that level.

"Even just to qualify was extraordinary. They didn't just qualify, they were there, they did their best, they improved, and they showed the world that they are incredible students who have a lot to offer the future."

Returning from the competition, members of the team shared their excitement with The Auroran.

"It was amazing and felt really awesome to bring [the trophies] back and make our community proud," says team member Arabelle.

Adds Suzanne: "I was very proud because we have been working since the beginning of this school year to create our project,

program a robot, and also work as a team. In this year, there was a lot of variability in the Robot Game. A lot of it depended on luck or just for things to go smoothly. From one of the missions, you had to lift a lever for a unit to fall in the truck, but a lot of the time it wouldn't do that. I think when we got that perfect score or any of the other scores, seeing those things go well really made me excited because I knew that was something that didn't always happen and it was just very cool to see. It was awesome to see a robot perform perfectly.?

Presenting their environmental solution, one that was based on extensive research on the part of the students, already having received the thumbs-up from managers of parking lots like that at Upper Canada Mall, was also an exciting experience for the youth.

?Most of the judges that I remember really loved it and were kind of speechless,? says team member Kaiah. ?We even made the Core Values judge start to cry. It was really something. The Innovation judges were definitely very interested in our project, I think, and they also said there was so much information in our presentation that she was just blown away. It just goes to show how much work we have done this season and I am really proud of our team.?

Perhaps nobody is as proud of the team as Northrup, who has shepherded the team through each level of success available in the league over the last four years. With more than half the members of the team graduating to high school this fall, the next season for the Équipe Francobotique will involve many new faces.

?This is as far as they can go, otherwise it's intergalactic,? says Northrup, with a chuckle, of the current team, noting that after 10 years the Razorback Open is drawing to a close. ?Organizers said our team helped them end on a high note. The Champions Award was not announced in the traditional way, and they actually sang about the award-winners before announcing who it was. They used the song our team used to present their work to the judges, so when we heard them sing to the tune of ?YMCA' we knew they were talking about us and the students got so excited. It's not every day you get a standing ovation, and it's not every day you get a standing ovation from 79 other teams that had to win a championship in order to get there. For me, it was a remarkable moment and I think a moment these students will remember the rest of their lives. They brought pride to their schools, to their Town, to their Province, to their country, and to the Francophones as well.

?Next year we're going to start over with really young students again using our older students as mentors and try and build them up so maybe four years from now they can come back to the same sort of level these guys got to. It takes several years. It's not just one season's worth; they have been working together for four years to accomplish this, which is a feat in itself.?

By Brock Weir
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