

St. Max students take reins of police bomb robot



By Brock Weir

Mackenzie Valdez is at the controls.

With a few flicks of the finger, she takes firm command, guiding the machine around the floor, around obstacles and zeroing in on a few patches of rough terrain.

She attacks the obstacles with gusto; after all, she's 'driving' a bomb robot and they're built tough.

Valdez could hardly contain her excitement when she left St. Maximilian Kolbe for the day earlier last week for her after school job. When she shared the news with her boss, he too joined in the excitement.

On Friday, they were ready. They welcomed the media to share in the fun as, with the help of the York Regional Police, the school's robotics students began test driving the decommissioned robot, a gift from the police.

'It is a bit less scary than our robot,' says Valdez, taking her fingers away from the remote keyboard to answer a few questions. 'I see the work that goes into our robot, but this beats up our robot. I know our robot can handle the rough terrain, but I don't want to break it. This one I know can handle anything I throw at it.'

And a few things were likely thrown at this relatively small orange robot during its time as a valued member of the York Regional Police arsenal.

The decommissioned robot found its way to St. Max following a chance encounter by Constable Steve Mackenzie, a member of the YRP's bomb squad. Constable Mackenzie's son's attention was captured by a booth featuring the St. Max Robotics Club and he brought his dad over to take a closer look. Then, inspiration struck.

'I realised we had some older robots we don't use because we have been fortunate enough to purchase some newer ones,' Mackenzie explains. 'The robot we've donated is 12 years old and here we are, able to see what [the students] are able to do and it is amazing.'

'We are fortunate to have the ability to essentially hand over this robot from the police so they can take it apart, look at it and put it back together, understand the engineering and what goes into this robot so when they build their own next year, it can assist them in the build.'

When Mackenzie approached teacher Steve Miguel about a possible donation, he 'jumped' at the chance on behalf of his team.

?The students are ecstatic about it because they were able to break down the components to see how it works,? says Miguel. ?They can actually see a robot that is used for a purpose in real life as opposed to just building a robot for competition. By seeing the different components, they will be able to make sure their robot can do the specific tasks they need it to do.?

Thankful for the Police's contribution, Miguel says he won't hesitate to ask next year if there is another robot or two they can take off their hands and this appreciation extended to St. Max Principal Dominic Scuglia who said a donation like this goes a long way towards the school's program.

?People don't appreciate the amount of money that is required to be able to provide this kind of opportunity and experience to kids,? he says. ?These kids not only work seven days a week ? and often 18 hours a day ? on these robots, but they also have to go out and solicit sponsorship from the communities. Fortunately, we have been very lucky to get various businesses to donate funds to help make our dream come true, to build these robots so we can be competitive with the other robots across the province and country.

?For York Regional Police to come in and offer us their robots just enhances our opportunities to make our program better. This is an excellent partnership, so the kids are able to make the connections between the work the York Regional Police do and the competition our robots are involved in.?

For Constable Mackenzie, these are very important connections to draw.

?It is important to have the ability to have these relationships built with some of the students and the teachers,? he says. ?It is going to go far in regards to what our involvement in the community is, our ability to interact with the students in an environment like this, as opposed to some of the other situations they have heard about with their friends, maybe some not-so-positive situations.

?I feel blessed to be where I am and to see this type of machine [in action]. I would pay to be here!?