



Robot camp

By Jared Sturges
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

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Bullies, mosquito bites and poison ivy -- the trappings of a standard summer camp.

How about a camp where everyone gets along, works together on projects, and the only altercations are between battling robots?

Such is the case with Robotics and Beyond, a week-long summer camp Michael Morrissey and Paul Chayka started in 2004. They ran separate robotics camps in previous years, before Morrissey, a computer programmer, and Chayka, an engineer, decided to combine their efforts.

"It's something we enjoy doing," Chayka said.

In the camp's four-year history, it has racked up quite a list of accomplishments, including a presentation at the North East Regional RoboLab Conference, an OnSet Computer Corp. award for its sensor-based curriculum, and the honor of being the only camp in Connecticut listed on NASA's robotics camp Web site.

The camp has received support from businesses including Goodrich IRS Systems of Danbury, ATMI Inc. of Danbury and Staples of New Milford, as well as the Lego Children's Fund.

Sixteen- to 20-year-old veterans of previous Robotics and Beyond sessions return as mentors, sharing their experience and knowledge with younger campers.

"It's fun to come and help the kids out," said Kerry Chayka, 16, as he tweaked a \$1,100 computer with a water cooling system. He was one of this summer's three mentors, along with James Leonard and Patrick Willett.

In the past, the group has built a robot that was able to climb walls and another that was programmed to dip a tortilla chip into salsa.

"I try hard not to tell them anything," said Morrissey. "I like to put an idea in their heads and see what happens."

This year's projects included a "hacked" Rhoomba, an automatic vacuum cleaner the group modified to serve other purposes; a "home-brew" robot built with spare parts; and many Lego-based robots, some of which were being prepared to do battle in last Friday's head-to-head challenge.

Many campers think of the robot duel as the culmination of the program. In it, the robots they have meticulously built and tested are pitted against each other all week -- and only one lucky model comes out with all its parts.

"It's a really good program," said Mike Moker, 14, a Henry Abbott Tech student in his second year at the camp. "If you have any interest in robotics, go here."

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