



## The Republican.

### Middle school students program robots at camp

Sunday, August 17, 2008

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SPRINGFIELD - The "Caution - Robots Crossing Please Watch Your Step" sign recently posted in a Springfield Technical Community College hallway gave a hint of the goings-on in nearby classrooms.

Welcome to the college's robotics camp which hosted nearly a dozen middle school students from Springfield and Agawam for a week-long session last month. Although the college held similar sessions over past summers this particular week featured more advanced robots known as BoeBots.

"You can do a lot with them," said class teacher Helen V. Lalone, of the college's electrical engineering technology department said.

Participating students built and programmed their robots and got to take them home to keep at the close of the session.

The BoeBots are actual robots - not toys. They are similar to the so-called swarm robots that NASA may someday deploy to explore other worlds, Lalone said.

Here at Springfield Technical Community College, however, they enabled campers - nearly all girls - to explore a future in engineering or robotics.

"They had a great time doing this," Lalone said. "They never realized they could actually do something like this."

"Now I know how to build a robot," 11-year-old Shavonna Johnson of Springfield said.

"I liked building the robot and seeing what it can do," 10-year-old Kayla S. Johnson said. Over the course of the camp the students built both their robots and the props needed to put them through their paces.

Divided into small groups, the students designed the robots to perform certain functions. In one, they used tactile navigation to negotiate a maze-like structure.

"If they bump into a wall they bump back because they have whiskers," Lalone said.

Another group programmed their robots to follow the beam of a flashlight in a darkened room.

"I am really fascinated by the light situation," 12-year-old Shadore Smith of Springfield said.

Yet another group programmed their robots to maneuver along a dark strip on the floor. Such scenarios, Lalone said, could be adapted for use in search-and-rescue situations.

Adrienne Smith, dean of the school of engineering, said the number of women in the fields of engineering

has not increased in 20 years.

"I wanted to provide an opportunity for young women to engage in a fun, hands-on program that introduces them to a nontraditional career," Smith said.

The camp, Smith said, was provided free of charge through a donation from the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County.

It ended with an open house and a showcase and dinner for the campers and their families.

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