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- [Home](#)
- [News](#)
- [Features](#)
- [Columns » »](#)
- [Departments » »](#)
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- [Donate](#)
- [Subscriptions](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Masthead](#)

The Norfolk contingent of the Northwestern Robotics Gearheads, helps prepare the group's robot for a scrimmage with other Connecticut robots. From the left: Abby Starr, student programmer; Michele Cyr, programming mentor; Shane Cyr, student on the build team; Meredith Torrey, student builder specializing in electrical work; and Loyal Starr, build mentor. Not present: Nate Starr, student builder, and Frank Buyak, mentor. Photograph by Bruce Frisch

Trying For Another Award Winning Robot

Posted by [admin](#) on Thursday, February 28, 2013 · [Leave a Comment](#)

The "Gearheads" from Regional #7 Gear Up For Competition

By Joshua DeCerbo

Emboldened by their success in last year's Connecticut Regional Robotics Competition, a team of over 30 students from Northwest Regional School #7 have designed and built a totally new frisbee-throwing robot for this year's event that opens at the Hartford Convention Center on March 28.

Most team members, including students and adult mentors from Norfolk, are back this year, one year after winning the competition's "Rookie All Star" award, and with it, entrance in the 2012 international championships in St. Louis.

The present team is led by several students from Norfolk, including secretary Meredith Torrey, prototype designer and driver Shane Cyr, lead programmer Abby Starr, vice-president Nathan Starr, website co-manager Griffin Berlstein and build-team member Xavier Rodriguez.

The Hartford competition is sponsored by Northeast Utilities and run by FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology), a non-profit organization that was launched with corporate contributions to inspire more American high school students to study the sciences. FIRST dispenses more than \$16 million in scholarships annually.

The goal of the game in the competition changes from year to year. This year's team must come up with a remote controlled robot able to pick up and toss frisbees into various openings, and then climb over a seven-foot tall pyramid.

Critical support comes from adults in the community with special expertise. Some mentors have engineering degrees. Others, like Norfolk's Michele Cyr, are accomplished computer programmers. Students and mentors combine to fund, design, construct and operate a robot that must accomplish a specific task while competing against other teams in a game that is often over in two minutes.

Cyr, who advised last year's team in the use of the JAVA software which is used to control the robots, says she is "beyond proud of this team." Last year's judges more than concurred. In bestowing the rookie award, they cited the team for "enthusiasm, fantastic strategic planning and for demonstrating the organizational traits of a seasoned team." The judges were also impressed with their dedication to sponsoring teams at lower grade levels.

"We received so many compliments from more experienced teams," Cyr recalls, "that you would have never thought they were a rookie team." Indeed, many in attendance complimented the team on their commitment to community outreach by supporting the development of other FIRST teams in Northwest's middle school and at feeder elementary schools, including Norfolk's Botelle School.

This year's team members, officially known as "Northwestern Robotics Gearheads #4055," finished packing up their latest robot on Feb. 17. Each FIRST team must adhere to strict deadlines and tight budgets. The robots must be designed and a prototype built in a six week time frame between January and mid-February. In addition, the total cost of the robot must not exceed \$3,200. Another \$20,000 had to be raised for event registration fees and travel expenses. The weekend after the regional event in Hartford is over in March, the more than 30 team members plan to go on to another competition in Maine.

Students spend up to seven days a week and many a late night working on their robots. Junior Meredith Torrey says that all the "time spent traveling and building the robots, even past midnight, helped us to grow close to one another, like a family." Torrey recently wrote several successful grant proposals to a variety of technological and community organizations that garnered nearly \$6,000 in combined donations from the United Technologies Corporation and the Norfolk Children's Foundation.

Shane Cyr, who hopes to become an engineer, also echoed the positive impact that the team has had on his life. "FIRST brings a huge opportunity to learn things that you would not learn otherwise in school, such as how to write business plans, real life skills that you need in the future."

Looking forward, the team has several goals in mind. While major financial support was provided by the Alcoa Foundation, that

funding is scheduled to expire at the end of this school year. The team is therefore looking to establish a long-term partnership with Alcoa and other corporations in order to ensure the team's continued existence. Another objective is to persuade Regional #7 to start offering engineering and advanced computer programming classes. Finally, the team would like to support the development of a FIRST LEGO League program at Botelle School that encourages fourth through sixth grade students to design and build robots using LEGOs which are controlled via laptop computers. The proposal has the support of the Norfolk Board of Education as well as Botelle's superintendent and principal. All that is needed now is an adult mentor to oversee it. It is widely believed that programs such as these encourage the development of students' interests in science, technology, engineering and mathematics in the future.

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