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News

Inner-city robotics team to compete in California

BY ROLAND HENRY Observer staff reporter
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Jamaica's first inner-city robotics team comprising five boys and two girls, will participate in the For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology (FIRST) LEGO League Robotics Competition at the San Jose City College in California on January 14.



Shamari Thompson (right) assists William Clarke, president and CEO of Scotiabank in operating one of four LEGO Robots displayed yesterday at the Jones Town Agency for Change. (Photo: Joseph Wellington)

The team, assisted by staff from Halls of Learning - the group which manages the team - yesterday

editorial cartoon



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hosted a robotics display at the Jones Town Agency for Change, in a bid to show the media and team sponsors, Scotiabank, what will obtain at the US state-level competition. The group displayed four simple robots made of LEGO blocks, which were powered by motors on a testing board, as practical illustrations.

Marvin Hall, Halls of Learning staff and team coach, said the programme aims to teach children problem-solving skills and improve reasoning, while allowing them to work together.

Theoni Ellis, student of Mel Nathan Preparatory School, says her involvement with the group has helped her to become more confident in math, information technology and science. Theoni is the youngest in the group, whose members' ages range between 10 and 14.

Other group members include Shamari Thompson of Central All Age; Prince Samuels, Kingston College; Shawayne Crawford of John Mills Primary; Kaytana Taylor of Convent of Mercy Alpha; Percival Robinson, Vauxhall High School; and Steve Nelson of Tivoli High.

The previous Jamaican entrants were placed in the top 20. However, yesterday, team member Kaytana Taylor said she hoped this team would do better. In fact, she said she believed they would place "in the top five".

The children were selected based on their involvement with a similar programme held last summer at the Vocational Training and Development Institute (VTDI) in Gordon Town.

Hall said the team has been working after school and on weekends since last year, just so they could be more efficient at the competition.

"The group has been training since October 1, 2005...these kids came out during the rains and even during spates of violence," he said, adding that some of the children lost loved ones over the period.

Hall told the Observer that the team initially comprised 11 members, however, the number dwindled down to seven because the others were not able to attend regularly due to violence in the community.

During the function, Scotiabank presented the team with a cheque valued at \$719,000 - an amount which Hall said would cover the total cost of the trip to California.

"Building programmes and designing robots, we are very proud of these children in light of their circumstances...Scotia is pleased to assist any such cause," said William Clarke, president and CEO of the bank. Clarke added that most "inner-city youngsters just need an opportunity" to make something of themselves.

"It is very heartening to see the involvement of so many young men...when you hear of successes it is usually the girls," Clarke said. He also encouraged the team to spread the word about the programme.

"Tell your friends, your community about this wonderful opportunity," he said.

Hall thanked Scotiabank for its assistance, which he said was confirmed on January 5 - the same day they requested it.

"Great things and great people can make things happen in a heartbeat," the coach said.

The students' preparation involved lessons in computer programming, simple robotic engineering and a research project dealing with the effects of dumping on the Kingston Harbour. The group is scheduled to return to the island on January 18.

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