President Bollinger Hosts Fireside Chat

By Alex Lyda

Standing nearly 6 feet tall is a mass of levers, wires and wheels, the creation of a group of high school students who chose to spend their Friday nights last year on an Ivy League campus instead of in shopping malls or movie theaters.

Guided by Bob Stark, manager of the Mechanical Engineering Laboratory at the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science (SEAS), and Wayne Penn, SEAS ’06, motivated high school students from the Bronx constructed a robot that outdid competing teams in two regional Olympic-style contests in which the robot completed a special task.

This year, a similar group of 20 students is hard at work on a new robot that will compete in the FIRST (“For Inspiration and Recognition of Science Technology”) Robotics Competition next April. About 25,000 high school students on close to 1,000 teams participate in the yearly competition, which was started by Dean Kamen, inventor of the Segway personal transport.

This year’s students, who call themselves “Robotics for Academic Inspiration,” are from Morris Campus Schools and Bronx Aerospace Academy, situated in the poorest congressional district in the United States. Their mentors are all undergraduates at the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science (SEAS).

Morris won both the New York City and Pittsburgh Regionals last year, and hopes at least to defend these titles. With five months left before the FIRST competition starts, the students in this year’s group will keep coming to the robotics lab in Mudd on Fridays for the rest of the semester and nearly everyday beginning in January.

Their numbers include Jonathan Melo, 18, a senior at the Bronx Aerospace Academy. “I’m the kind of person who likes to watch ‘Monster Garage,’” Melo said. “So it’s a great feeling to come to a university to talk to professors and have them teach me about engineering. Now I can feel more confident about sending an application to Columbia or any other college that offers this kind of program.”

That’s music to the ears of mentor Keseck Janusz, a SEAS sophomore studying mechanical engineering who volunteers his free time to mentor the students. “I think it’s the most amazing thing how students who know nothing about engineering can come to our campus and achieve things like they are doing today,” Janusz said one recent Friday. “They actually get involved and interested and at least half of them end up studying engineering or a science discipline after their FIRST experience.”

Ninth-grade math teacher Stacy Weaver is now in her second year as the program’s coordinator for the Bronx Aerospace Academy. During her first year, the Academy’s team won the New York Regional Rookie All Star Award. “Just being exposed to the mentors is really terrific because the kids get to talk about what it’s like to go to college. What it’s like to major in engineering and what it’s like to prepare for SATs,” Weaver said. She went on: “Morris is a unique school in the South Bronx. A program like this gives our students the chance to believe that they can go to a big-time university to major in engineering, which is very demanding.”

These aren’t just empty words: one student from Morris Campus Schools has already been accepted to Columbia.

For more information, please contact Wayne Penn at wrp2006@columbia.edu or go to Robotics for Academic Inspiration at www.2trainrobotics.com.

High School Students Hone Engineering Skills in Robotics Lab

By Matthew Daniel

Before a fire and with cups of hot cider in hand, Columbia undergraduate students spoke with President Bollinger about topics ranging from dorm issues and the core curriculum, to campus expansion and Columbia’s role in the community and the world. The event, which took place on Oct. 26, marked the first in a series of fireside chats Bollinger plans to have with students in the community and the world.

The next fireside chat takes place on Dec. 8.