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Aiken County Robotics Team Survives Now Thrives with Corporate Support

AIKEN, S.C. (March 31, 2015) – After an auspicious start, receiving recognition as “Regional Rookie All Star of the Year” in 2003 in one division and, just a few years later, winning the world championship in another division, the M’Aiken Magic robotics organization nearly came to an end in 2011 due to lack of funding.

“It was devastating,” said M’Aiken Magic robotics co-founder Clyde Ward, a retired professional from the Savannah River National Laboratory’s Robotics Section at the Department of Energy’s Savannah River Site.

“We still had our much appreciated financial support from the Aiken County School District, but it wasn’t enough to sustain the program, and by the end of the year, we were floundering. We had lost all of our freshmen members and worried that such a successful organization that truly helped so many students would come to an unfortunate end.”

According to Ward, that was when Savannah River Nuclear Solutions (SRNS) stepped in and offered \$10,000 to breathe new life into the program.

“We were jubilant. And, every year since, they’ve continued to provide the majority of our corporate funding,” added Ward.



South Aiken High School seniors and M’Aiken Magic co-captains Reese Boatwright (left) and Amanda Stegen prepare a robot for demonstration at a recent public event promoting the Aiken County Robotics organization.

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M'Aiken Magic, now a part of a new county-wide organization known as Aiken County Robotics (ACR), has regained its reputation and is able to compete at the highest level of competition in both high school divisions: the “big ‘bot” division (FIRST Robotics Competition) and the “little ‘bot” division (FIRST Tech Challenge). This year, out of the top five little ‘bot teams in the state of South Carolina, four out of the five are from Aiken County Robotics.

The M'Aiken Magic organization recently finished fourth out of 66 teams competing in the big ‘bot Palmetto Regional Tournament during the preliminary rounds, won in the quarter-finals and competed strongly in the semi-final rounds before being eliminated.

Since 2003, they have competed for five big ‘bot and four little ‘bot world championship titles.

“As pleased as we are with the overall success of the organization, we take pride in the diversity of our team and work to instill important life lessons,” said ACR Coach Philip Barkhau. “We emphasize the importance of teamwork, community service and public speaking for example. It’s not just about robots.”

Barkhau also explained that without the continued support of SRNS, it’s unlikely the team would be competitive. Many of the highly specialized parts used by ARC within their small and big ‘bots are expensive and must be custom ordered from manufacturers globally.

ARC has recently expanded their organization to include a recently resurrected little ‘bot team from Wagener/Salley and three new little ‘bot teams from North Augusta.

In their first-year, North Augusta High School (NAHS) had 70 students attend the initial organizational meeting last fall. They fielded three teams in the 2015 State Competition. And, exceeding all expectations, they went on to win the little ‘bot South Carolina State Championship in February. Two of their teams will soon be competing in the Super Regional Competition in San Antonio, Texas, with SRNS providing \$1,000 to assist with travel expenses.

“I am very proud of our team members and what they have accomplished in their first year,” said SRNS engineer and NAHS robotics coach Annamarie MacMurray. “We at NAHS are so grateful to Phillip Barkhau, Clyde Ward, Dennis Terry and the continual assistance they and their team members provided us.”

Reese Boatwright, South Aiken High School senior and M'Aiken Magic co-captain, stated that at the nearly constant urging of a close friend he joined the team even though his plan was to become a writer.

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“Since the day I became a member of the team, I have completely changed my mind. This is exactly what I want to do with my life,” said Boatwright. “I love designing, building and machining the robots. It’s my passion. If I wasn’t involved in robotics, I don’t know what I’d be doing with the other 60 hours of my life each week. I love it.”

The annual FIRST robotics organization is a not-for-profit organization devoted to helping young people, ages 6-18, discover and develop a passion for science, engineering, technology and math. Founded over 20 years ago, the 2013-2014 season attracted more than 300,000 youth.

Savannah River Nuclear Solutions is a Fluor-led company whose members are Fluor Federal Services, Newport News Nuclear and Honeywell, responsible for the management and operations of the Department of Energy’s Savannah River Site, including the Savannah River National Laboratory, located near Aiken, South Carolina.

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