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Education

New Horizons robotics team headed to nationals

[By Jennifer L. Williams](#)

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Years of helping other teams and representing science and technology positively in the local community finally paid off.

The FIRST Robotics team based at New Horizons Regional Education Centers qualified for FIRST's national competition by winning the Chairman's Award March 20 at the Virginia Regional in Richmond.

Team 122 NASA Knights is a 13-year participant in the annual robot-building competition put on by FIRST—For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology. The team consists of students from the six local school districts that New Horizons serves, as well as homeschooled and private school students.

Along with the Chairman's Award, Team 122 also won the competition's Entrepreneurship Award, said team coordinator and New Horizons robotics instructor Joanne Talmage.

But it's the Chairman's Award that allowed the Knights to advance to the nationals in Atlanta in mid-April. The award is the highest honor given by FIRST, and is considered higher than actually winning the competition, Talmage said.

In addition to building a robot for this year's game of a soccer-type competition, the Knights presented a beefed-up business plan in the Entrepreneurship Award competition and a new effort toward the Chairman's Award.

Team 122 has been working for two years to put together a good enough presentation to win the Chairman's Award, Talmage said. The award is focused on teams that fulfill FIRST's mission of community outreach and public relations promoting science and technology.

"It's the community that really won the award along with us," Talmage said.

Team members concentrated the last two years on revamping their archive of pictures, videos and other documentation of projects, Talmage said. Students spent months rehearsing their five-minute presentation, which was in addition to five minutes of questions from the judges.

There was apparently so much yelling and screaming and crying when the award — the last one presented of the night — was announced at VCU's Siegel Center March 20, Talmage later had to request a copy of the remarks that were made by emcee Jeff Seaton.

"This team's reach spans land and sea; from the U.S. to the U.K. to New Zealand and countries in between," Seaton said. "Sixteen teams in the FIRST family have been created by their efforts."

He went on to mention the recipient team's community service, outreach projects and long-term partnerships.

"When we heard U.S. and abroad, we knew it was us," Talmage said.

New Horizons provides career and technical training, and gifted and special education services to six local school divisions that pay into it. They are Hampton, Newport News, York County, Poquoson, Gloucester and Williamsburg- James City County.

What's next?

The New Horizons Team 122 NASA Knights will be among 10,000 youths to compete in the 2010 FIRST Robotics Championship, April 15-17 at the Georgia Dome in Atlanta.

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