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## Five Central Brooklyn Teams Qualify for



Caption: Crispus Attucks "Panthers" Thomas Smith and Kelechi Stuart (foreground), won the Director's Award, the top honor of the LEGO League robotics competition. Supporting them were, left to right, Polytechnic University student mentor Andrey Ivannikov; Carla Arnold, team coach and Crispus Attucks (PS21) Principal Harold Anderson.

By Jasmin Dysard

Central Brooklyn has something to cheer about! Crispus Attucks Elementary School, represented by a team called The Panthers won the top honor in the recent Brooklyn Borough Qualifying Tournament in the *For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology* (FIRST) Lego League, an international robotics program, that combines robotics challenges and research projects for students ages 9 to 14. The team was the top scorer over 34 schools.

The Panthers will move on to the next round of competition: the New York City FIRST Lego League Championship at Riverbank State Park on January 26. They will be joined by other area schools that also qualified, including PS 11's Behan Robots, Benjamin Banneker Academy's RoboWarriors, Bedford Academy's Bedbot team, and PS 81.

With the exception of Benjamin Banneker Academy which has its own self-contained robotics program, the teams from area schools participated for the first time ever in a robotics competition as part of Central Brooklyn Robotics Initiative, developed by Dr. Lester Young Jr. of Independence Community Foundation and Polytechnic University and funded by separate grants from Independence Community Foundation and JP Morgan Chase Bank. There are a total of 10 CBRI schools. The others include: PS307, PS 270, PS 233, MS 113 and MS 267 Math Science and Technology Institute, represented by team members Nicholai Charter and Giuseppe DeMatteis, assisted by Carmen Rodriguez, Claudianier Charles and Jamal Rose. "All of them are winners," said Dr. Young at the Brooklyn Tech qualifying event. "They are our community's technology and engineering leaders for tomorrow. Right now, they are having fun building robots and competing with other schools, and gaining an appreciation for science, math and technology in the process."

"The competitions themselves are less important than the opportunity that we present to young people to be stretched and to develop a vision of the future," said professor Neal Kriftcher, who along with his colleague professor Vikram Kapila, was a Polytechnic University architect of CBRI. "The bottom line in all of this is to make kids passionate about these opportunities."

The impassioned atmosphere of the competition was very much like an athletic event. Teams sang cheers as they entered the competition area. Fellow team members, family,

friends, onlookers and well wishers dressed in team colors crowded the area surrounding the fields and screamed out cries of support for their favorite teams, "Go 81!" "Go 81!" "Let's go Warriors, let's go!" Moms cried tears of joy and team members jumped up and down and screamed when their teams won.

The CBRI program pairs a Polytechnic engineering student with each of the 10 schools to train teachers and mentor their students in robotics. Under the guidance of a Polytechnic "fellow," each school's team created a small robot that performed an assortment of tasks using Lego Mindstorms kits.

This year's Lego League robotic challenge had a specific purpose: The Power Puzzle Challenge asked students to come up with solutions to global energy and resource issues. The challenge involved two students from each team performing tasks or "missions", using their robots, on specially designed obstacle courses. The teams received points for completing specific missions such as moving the roof solar panels onto the roofs of houses and lowering satellite panels (all made of Lego pieces). The teams also had to complete a research project in which they selected a building in their community and proposed solutions for how the building could use less energy.

The importance and urgency of African-American inner-city youth being exposed to programs that educate in science, math and technology is a sentiment echoed by many who participated in the initiative. "It heightens interest in majoring in those areas of study in college," said George Leonard, principal of Bedford Academy. "They realize that they can go into careers that relate to technology so we can see more blacks and Hispanics at NASA and the National Science Foundation. It also shows them that science and math can be applied to their real-world lives, and that those fields have a purpose."

"Here's the thing we have to remember," said Dr. Young, noting that this was the first year the CBRI schools participated in the competition. "All these other schools here have been in this for years and they have had the money to do it. This is a clear example of what can be accomplished when concerned groups collaborate on behalf of our children," he said, adding that "the community needs to know of these opportunities, and get behind these schools."

Imani Fischer is the Director of Engineering and team coach for Benjamin Banneker Academy, the only CBRI school that has an established robotics program and did not receive help from Polytechnic. She said, "The program is extremely important! It opens doors of opportunity, and it allows children the opportunity to shine. Our children are quite bright, and sometimes we don't expose them to all that is out there."

Polytechnic's Andrey Ivannikov had as much fun coaching his Crispus Attucks team, as they had participating in the CBRI program: "I found it to be a very good experience. They exceeded my expectations. If you show a student something interesting the student will just look at it and be amazed and then the student wants to have hands on and become immersed, and learn everything about it—all the math, science, everything that's involved in it."

When the tournament ended five CBRI schools qualified – 30% of the qualifying 16 places, and will go on to the City Championships, next month. Indeed, the Central Brooklyn Robotics Initiative proved to be a success not only because the schools made it to the Citywide Championships, but because all of these teams are tracked to become the technology leaders of tomorrow.

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