

The Virgin Islands Consortium

A Lifelong Experience: Elena Christian Robotics Team Returns Home After Louisiana Competition

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ST. THOMAS -- They may not have won gold, but what the Elena Christian Junior High School Robotics SeaPerch team learned at the LSU Natatorium in Louisiana over the weekend will stay with them forever.

The U.S. Navy National SeaPerch Challenge saw 199 finalist teams from middle and high schools around the nation, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands and Australia, competing against each other as they demonstrated what their "remotely operated vehicles" could do.

There were three components to the competition, including an obstacle race which sees the teams' drivers guiding their vehicles through a series of obstacles. The ECJH Robotics Team driver, Garvin Douglas, completed that course in 2:02 seconds, which, according to the competition's judge, was one of the best times recorded, with the best time being 2 minutes.

The two other courses included retrieving round objects from 13 locations within pipes -- golf balls and softballs, among others -- and teams had to use their vehicles to poke an obstacle that was protruded, which would then cause the balls to rise. The drivers would then have to capture the balls with their vehicles and place them in a bucket or platform. Mr. Douglas performed very well in one of those, but struggled in the third obstacle.

"Overall, it was an experience of a lifetime," said Steven Bullock, program coordinator and head coach, who noted that the team was competing for the first time, and had to go against winners who had competed six times before, and against senior students. Mr. Douglas, the vehicle controller, is in the 7th grade. The ECJHS team defeated local groups -- including teams from Good Hope Country, Central High and Complex, among other local schools -- to win the district competition. And by way of topping their St. Thomas counterparts, whose equipment malfunctioned, the Elena Christian team became the robotics territorial champions.



"Given what we know now and with the experience that they have at their fingertips, next year they should be able to really nail it," Mr. Bullock said. He said the students were commended for their skills and met a lot of Navy professionals, and interacted with other teammates.

After the competition, the students got a taste of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with a tour of the USS Kidd, a Navy warship that served in Vietnam during the second World War, and also visited a planetarium. They learned a lot about astronomy -- the universe, galaxies and how they were born. And they were also taken to a art and science museum, where students saw a real mummy and asteroid.

"The competition was good and you are expected to do well. But there are a lot of teams competing and some people have more experience and are better than you," Mr. Douglas noted. Mr. Douglas, Mr. Bullock said, has raw talent that was unmatched at the competition. "I did not see a team, nor competitor, with the raw talent that he has. Just natural talent. So when it is groomed and honed, directed and channeled in the right direction, he will be a force to reckon with."

Stephanie Bullock, the team's coach -- responsible for guiding and making engineering changes -- said the trip was unlike any other experience.

"Just taking part in the SeaPerch and seeing how it went down, was actually something I truly had never experienced before. And seeing all these teams coming together with their heads on, ready to compete, we had to get our students ready and make sure that their focus was up and ready to go," Ms. Bullock said. She noted that the competition included obstacles that the team had not known or practiced previously. "I had to take the team to the room and make fast modifications, cutting out parts and making other changes. And keep in mind we only had that one SeaPerch. So I had to be so efficient in taking apart pieces and putting it back up."

She also praised Mr. Douglas' efforts.

"Keep in mind Garvin did not even practice for the orbs competition; he didn't even know. So for him to go in there and do so well, especially for a first-timer in the orbs round, it was something that I could not even believe. Just pure talent."

According to statistics from UNESCO, China graduates 1.3 million engineers annually. There, women make up 40 percent of working engineers.

"We graduate less than 70,000 engineers a year, so there aren't enough people to fill the pipeline, said SeaPerch Executive Director Susan Nelson (Via Metro). "[The Navy] likes this because of this reason."

The St. Croix team arrived late Monday at the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport, and were welcomed with cheers and applause from parents.