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## Getting with the program

Staff photo by John Ceballos



7/27/10 - Ruskin - SS LEGO - Elizabeth Heli, right, explains the rules of the obstacle course to the youngsters. The obstacle course was one of several challenges the campers' robots would have to navigate throughout the week.



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By **JOHN CEBALLOS** | South Shore News & Tribune

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RUSKIN - Instead of tents, s'mores and campfire songs, the children at a recent summer camp were equipped plastic water bottles, wires and laptops.

They were part of the [Lego Mindstorms Robotics Summer Camp](#) at the [Hillsborough Community College SouthShore](#) campus.

"The main part for the kids is learning how to program," said Elizabeth Heli, the robotics technician who conducted the camp. "They also get to see all of the robots' different capabilities."

Mindstorms is Lego's line of [programmable robots](#) and construction toys, which come in a kit with sensors and wires.

The introductory robotics camp at HCC SouthShore — the first on the Ruskin campus — hosted 25 [middle school students](#) and took place July 26-29. Lego Mindstorms also offers an advanced robotics camp for [middle school students](#) who have completed the introductory course. There are no prerequisites for the introductory camp.

"We usually have 24 kids and we split them into teams of two, but we had enough interest in this camp that we ended up going with 25," Heli said. "So we have one team with three members."

The camp seeks to create a competitive problem-solving environment to teach the kids [application of robotics](#) technology.

"I think it's a great opportunity for the kids to apply some of the things they learn in school — math and [logic concepts](#) — and apply them in a real-world situation," said Carlos Ortiz, [computer science teacher](#) at HCC SouthShore.

Teams competed in various challenges, including having their robots navigate a plastic water bottle-covered [obstacle course](#) and another competition in which the Mindstorms were guided by sound.

"I like the competition the best," said Marissa Hale, 13, of Riverview. "At first, I thought we'd be building them, but I like electronics and finding out how stuff works, so it's been great."

Before each competition, the kids heard a brief introduction of the challenge from Heli.

Once the introduction was complete, the teams would huddle around their laptop to make the necessary programming adjustments and have their robots make repeated trial runs before the official competition began.

"Testing is my favorite part," said Logan Newberry, 11, of FishHawk Ranch. "I love seeing what works and what doesn't work, then racing back and forth to see what's wrong and how to fix it."

Heli hopes the kids take the knowledge and interest in robotics beyond the four-day camp, which had a \$50 registration fee.

"We've had a lot of kids go back to their schools and start their own robotics clubs," Heli said. "This is a great little summer camp, but the real question is where they go from here."

**Reporter John Ceballos can be reached at (813) 627-4762.**

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