

Robotics students help libraries innovate, offer new services

Project may lead to collaboration with Trek

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Submitted photo

OCONOMOWOC — A team of local robotics students has been helping libraries address the growing and diversifying needs of their communities.

One of Divine Redeemer Lutheran School's robotics teams, the "Geek Fr34ks" — the name being an homage to beloved Milwaukee Bucks player Giannis Antetokounmpo, sometimes called "the Greek Freak" — assisted the Oconomowoc Public Library in turning an inactive space into an active one. The project was part of their innovation piece for an upcoming competition, and it led the nine-member team to problem-solve in real time for real clients.

"Our students have been working with the library directors in the Bridges Library System in southeastern Wisconsin since September," said Head Coach Steve Bleck. "Our students researched different fitness products that could be used in libraries. They ran a trial at the Oconomowoc Public Library, then received feedback from their director. They were able to find a different, perfect solution to help library patrons exercise while reading."

The team consisted of students Shelby Artru, Landon Becker, Broderick Bleck, Brooks Bleck, Tyler Eckhart, Jocelyn Cox, Landon LeTourneau, Dylan Saydel and Calder Williams. In addition to Bleck as head coach, Rachel Williams and Darren Wichman serve as assistant coaches.

Kelsey Butterfield uses the desk pedaler at the Oconomowoc Public Library.

Brainstorming and developing

Initially, the team brainstormed an exercise bike or an elliptical with an e-reader attachment as the potential solution for offering an active space at the library, but that was deemed too noisy and distracting. The next proposal was a desk pedaler, which is smaller and quieter but offers the same sort of exercise. After the initial model was deemed not ideal because its pedals heated up, the team settled on the DeskCycle2, which is now available at the Oconomowoc Public Library for patrons to use.

The public feedback so far, which the team plans to work on in the future, is to offer something lighter and potentially even portable so patrons can check one out like a book and take it home for exercise. Bleck said the Geek Fr34ks are now courting a prominent Wisconsin company about making it happen.

"They would like to speak with Trek and see if it's possible to make it quiet and lightweight," he said.

Bleck said initial indications are the desk pedaler has helped the Oconomowoc library bring in more patrons more frequently, and may boost circulation over the long run.

The project is a timely one too, with so many people having adapted and reinvented spaces in their own homes

for new purposes over the last year during the coronavirus pandemic. The students worked with their fitness education teacher, Terri Anderson, to learn the benefits of exercise and how it can help with mental health, an ongoing challenge for some during the pandemic.

Word seems to be getting around about the project, too. Bleck said the Muskego Public Library has purchased their own DeskCycle2 for their patrons, and the team has received an email from the library director at Fort Atkinson, with interest in implementing their own project.

"Now, patrons have been raving to their staff about how much they love having the opportunity to exercise while reading," Bleck said. "The unit itself is extremely quiet and patrons are able to get a great workout in a cozy chair."

The project will be one of four parts the Geek Fr34ks are judged for at the Wisconsin FIRST LEGO League State Finals Robotics tournament April 17, the others being robot games, robot design and core values. "You need to be well rounded in all of the areas that (are) judged," Bleck said.

No matter how that judging may go for the team, the Geek Fr34ks have already made a real impact on real peoples' lives. "They wanted it to have an impact and they really focused on that throughout," Bleck said.