

Robettes mark 10-year anniversary

by Christina Capecchi Ries '00

When the Robettes talk about the robot they designed this year to compete in the FIRST Robotics challenge, their language is ripe with metaphor.

“Even if we get pushed around by competing robots, we’re still able to shoot at the high goal because we can rotate 180 degrees,” said senior captain Janna Fitzgerald, at the Robettes’ April open house, which marked the program’s 10-year anniversary.

To see the girls operating drills and grinders in their state-of-the-art shop and to read the team’s impressive resume – including over 20 awards and two regional championships – it’s hard to believe the program was founded just 10 years ago, when a group of 18 students worked in one family’s garage.

Lower School computer teacher Mary Donovan Sutherland '74 first proposed the idea of a robotics team to Dr. Nichols, who embraced the suggestion. The program empowers girls to develop a totally new skill set, allowing them to participate in one or more of four teams: mechanical, electrical, programming or business. “It exposes them to something they never thought they could do, and once they do, they often become very passionate,” said Mary. In the past few years, many of the graduating seniors have pursued careers they discovered through the Robettes. “The most satisfying thing,” added Mary, “is to see our alumnae come back and mentor our students.”

The presence of a robotics program has informed Visitation’s curriculum, bolstering its engineering and computer science offerings. The Robettes wear bright pink t-shirts, a nod to their being the original all-girls robotics team. “We enjoy flaunting our femininity, especially since we’re one of the few all-girls teams in Minnesota,” said Janna, who applied her robotics skills widely, from building VISTA theater sets to drilling holes into a Target locker shelf that didn’t fit her books.

Jon Stratis, a software engineer at Lockheed Martin, has been



Jon Stratis, Abby Libbesmeier '18, Elizabeth Palmer '10 and Katy Newell '11 in the Opus Hall shop.

a Robettes mentor since the program’s inception. Equipping the girls with basic physics formulas so they can select the right parts is gratifying, he said. “You see it click.”

He’s also quick to acknowledge the Robettes’ collaborative spirit, as articulated in their mission of “confidently exploring STEM by challenging ourselves, competing with integrity and mentoring others.” Robettes have been known to go teach another team between matches when they recognize a problem. They describe it as a practice of “gracious professionalism,” a term coined by Woodie Flowers, an MIT professor and founder of FIRST Robotics that clearly befits Salesian Spirituality.

That generous outreach also extends to future Robettes through the well-attended STEAM camps and workshops that have been hosted at Visitation.

As they celebrate their first decade and anticipate the next, the entire Robettes community is voicing its gratitude. “This program is near and dear to our hearts,” said Candace Logeais, whose daughters Madeleine and Bridget have both excelled. “It’s been beyond our wildest dreams.”

Nearly 100 Middle School girls from 28 different schools attended the 2016 STEAM Day the Robettes helped host.

