

# LIL'BITS

## Big, Little: Full STEAM ahead!

By Sarah Wetzel  
For the Plain Talk

Parents and kids of all ages visited the library Monday for Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) Day to witness demonstrations of the Vermillion Area robotics club's winning robots.

The middle and high school students in the program were involved in two different competitions this year and won both times.

"The first robot is BEST (Boosting Engineering, Science and Technology)," said Stian, grade 9. "We did that competition in the fall. We start in September. Basically they give you a box of materials including the motors or the cortex of the brain of the robot and then you have to make the rest. We did a simple design that picks up the blades that you put into the windmill and we made a pulley system out of the rope."

The design was appreciated by younger spectators at the library event.

"People drive the robots and make towers with pegs," observed Joaquin, age 9. "There was one part where you could actually drive a robot."

Spectators did have the opportunity to see what it's like to guide one of the robots through an obstacle course.

"We got special wheels so the robot could go forward, backward and diagonal," Stian said. "They give you the obstacle course and then you build around that. Last year the competition



Members of the Vermillion Area Robotics Club showcased their winning robots to delighted spectators young and old at the library Monday evening giving them the chance to test drive one of them. SARAH WETZEL / FOR THE PLAIN TALK

was moving balloons so you had to design a robot that would move those. This year we had to pick up blocks and stack them on the towers."

Stian said his favorite part of the competition was building and running the robots. Stian acted as driver for both competitions.

"It is a career I've been looking into," he said. "They need people to manage robots and design them. I was looking into engineering before this so the designing and building was something I really enjoyed."

Joaquin also has an interest in building robots.

"I would if I knew how," he said. "I build with Legos, I build with trio blocks, I build with wooden blocks,

so a lot of stuff."

According to Stian, you don't need previous know-how to do well with robotics.

This is his first year in the program.

"They did 4H over the summer and had different robotics competitions at the Dakota Dome," Stian said. "This fall when they did the BEST they invited me to come help because they knew I was good with building."

Joaquin himself has made a good start with building and problem-solving like the kids in the robotics program.

"I used to just make cars and I would push them," he said. "Then I'd see how far they would go."

According to Joaquin,

trial and error is the key.

"The one car could go pretty far across the kitchen," he said. "Some other cars when I built them they would just go off to the side. I know that it has to be low. It can be pretty long. The front can't be all big and fat. It has to be thin and that was kind of what they did with the robots."

"They didn't make them really, really big like I sometimes made my cars. They made them kind of like a box."

Joaquin said he does want to be an engineer when he grows up but not the kind that builds robots.

"I want to be a civil engineer because my dad's a civil engineer," he said.

## Meet Police Chief: Matt Betzen

By Sarah Wetzel  
For the Plain Talk

If the safety of a city is determined by the attitude of the police force, then it looks like Vermillion is in good shape.

Police Chief Matt Betzen joined the Vermillion Police Department in 2011 and is committed to creating a great team of officers.

Betzen said his favorite part of the job is working with the officers and developing them over long term. "I spent my entire career in law enforcement," he said. "I enjoy developing our officers and encouraging their professionalism and giving them a positive outlook on what we do and how we do it so they can grow and be leaders in their own right."

Having a positive outlook is more challenging as a police officer than your typical career according to Betzen.

"I think that it's hard for anyone in emergency services," he said. "You get exposed to a lot of the negativity in our society. It can be difficult to develop the right mindset where you maintain a positive outlook in life and your

community."

Difficult yes. Impossible no.

"I think that not only can it be done but we're doing a much better job of doing it than we did 20 years ago," Betzen said. "Part of that is recognizing we don't have to become angry curmudgeons as we grow older in this profession. We can maintain a positive attitude. We can look for the good in people."

This is an ability that, according to Betzen is a simple choice anyone can make.

"Being happy and doing positive things in your community, that's all a personal choice," he said. "Things happen to all of us but you just have to have a personal choice to take the silver lining away from whatever happens to you and learn lessons as you go along and look for the good in people."

Betzen gave some tips he passes on to his officers to help them with this.

"A part of empathy, different from sympathy, is understanding where someone's coming from," he said. "When someone's

angry and upset, that's when the police get calls. We want to treat people the way they would expect to be treated if it were 24 hours later and they weren't under the influence of anger or alcohol or whatever they're under the influence of when we're contacting them."

"Most of the people we contact are good people most of the time," Betzen said. "It's just that when we get calls they're at their worst and we've got to remember that. We get paid by society to deal with people when they're at their worst and help them get back up to their best."

Though not native to Vermillion, Betzen is certainly settled here for now.

"It's a wonderful town," he said. "Good people, good wholesome values, the college kids give a lot of flavor to it. The only thing we don't like about Vermillion is the winter. We had 20 years of Alaska winter and we didn't move quite south enough. Of course we love the summers."

Betzen said he and his wife moved from Alaska where he was a police of-

ficer in a coastal Alaskan fishing town on an island in the Bering Sea, similar to the setting of the reality show 'Deadliest Catch.'

"It was definitely an adventure to live there," he said. "It was an 800 mile plane trip to the closest Wal-Mart."

Though Betzen and his wife aren't fans of Vermillion winters, he said it's certainly better than Alaska.

"Where we lived it didn't get as cold because we were a coastal area," Betzen said. "It's almost continuous cloud cover, snow, rain and wind. You can go 200 days without seeing the sun."

Betzen said he is currently writing a memoir about his early years as an Alaska police officer to be titled 'Dutch Harbor Cop.'

"It will be kind of a cross between a historic travel guide to rural Alaska and a collection of stories from an Alaskan cop," he said.

There was certainly enough stories to fill a few memoirs.

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a quote that says if you don't change with your environment you become extinct and I don't want to become extinct."

Other Business: Superintendent Mark Froke reported changes in the capital outlay plan from the last Finance Committee meeting. The changes include high school desks and chairs and also an appropriation for theater. "We're something over \$27,000 in deficit spending," Froke said. "Just a couple thousand dollars off the variance of the other years."

Froke cited door work needed at the middle school, Austin Elementary, the high school and possibly Jolley Elementary as explanation for the increase. Preliminary plans for the high school are becoming

more and more firm as time goes on. Froke mentioned that they will be bringing on 10-12 high school students to help move things out of classrooms at the end of the school year so work can begin.

Two or three students will also be brought on during the summer months to help clear the walls for painters and then to reinstall things after the rooms are completed.

On recommendation from Johnson Controls, the students will also be helping take down things like Smart Boards and projectors which will most likely be stored in the wrestling room according to the board. Board members shared a concern that reinstalling tech could increase the time needed to set the school back in order before the start of the next school year.

According to Froke, things will get started as soon as

possible in order to give the workers enough time.

"There was a suggestion by the board to get a couple of dumpsters out here," Froke said. "We plan to do that fairly soon so the teachers can start throwing out old materials."

Froke also reported that the auditorium lighting upgrade will be a high priority so the spring play and the Community Theater summer production may continue as planned."

The board approved a new waiver for 8th grade Spanish for high school credit. "We wanted to write our

own exam so our teachers could have a better blueprint of what to expect on the exam instead of having something randomly thrown out there by the state," said Principal Pat Anderson to the board Monday.

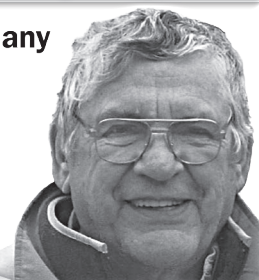
Anderson reported that a committee was set up in October consisting of Len Griffith, Kim Johnson and Grace Benson who have since drafted a new test with two parts.

Students need to score 80 percent on at least one of the parts in order to receive high school credit.

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## Rural Animal Issues As Important To Pet, Livestock Owners

Editor's Note: This is the second of a three-part series looking into how well Clay County takes care of its animals, pets or otherwise.

By Katie Clausen  
For the Plain Talk

Part of being human is showing compassion for, and being the stewards of, things around us. This pertains to the environment, our neighbors and friends, and animals. Part of caring for animals and pets is our animal control model and the authority which we use to determine what is right for an animal, and what is wrong.

While the City of Vermillion has limits that act as a border for many rules and regulations regarding pet ownership, out in the more rural reaches of the community there are often different types of issues with animals. The Clay County Sheriff's department is the authority on the rural laws that are in place to keep both people and their pets safe.

According to Clay County Sheriff Andy Howe, social media is once again a place the department turns to when they respond to an issue with an animal or lost pet.

"If somebody calls and says they lost their dog, we will create a report and alert the on-duty staff," Howe said. "Then we will use our Twitter and Facebook accounts to share information about that animal."

Howe and his fellow Sheriff's department support staff often bear the weight of animal issues within Clay County.

"Generally speaking out in the country we have more issues with a stray coming onto your place," Howe said. "We don't have a lot of reporting of lost dogs, but reporting found dogs is a little more common. There are no stray dog ordinances in rural areas."

Howe and his team are dedicated to protecting the welfare of animals just as much as they are dedicated to protecting the people and their property. The sheriff's department has formed an alliance with local animal support groups to develop a support system.

"The county commissioner has agreed to pay the fee when a stray animal is brought to the humane society," Howe said. "That is a great thing."

Howe said the department doesn't have the funding to obtain the equipment needed to transport animals themselves, but often rural residents do and elect to take the pet as a public service.

"Unfortunately we do not have the funding for the equipment it would take," Howe said. "But it is really great that the county commissioner has agreed to pay the Humane Society fee so that people can be more encouraged to take a stray there."

What is not determined

on funding, however, is Howe's positive attitude about animal control. Currently, the department works with the Sioux Falls Humane Society, but since its opening Howe has been in touch with the new facility in Yankton as well.

"Heartland Humane Society is just a great resource and we'd like to use them," Howe said. "I see us working more and more with them going forward."

Howe is quick to point out that because it is the public who take stray dogs to the humane society, that working with a facility as close as Yankton is helpful. There are many types of animal situations the Sheriff's department is trained in responding to, including some situations that may be less pleasant.

"We've never euthanized a dog unless it was necessary," Howe said. "If they've been hit by a car or something. We don't shoot strays. We don't do it and we are not in the business of doing that."

Howe detailed actually how rare it is that a small animal is in dire need, and that is a good thing.

"I think it's very rare," Howe said. "We've received reports and generally we find it's okay or they agree to find a new home for the dog. Our office will get involved with a vicious dog or neglected dog, but that is also very rare."

Due to the rural nature of the calls the Clay County Sheriff's department responds to, they often deal with animal control issues of a larger caliber, such as horses and cattle.

"We do get calls on horses and cattle where someone driving by suspects they are neglected," Howe said. "Most of the time in those circumstances we find that things are generally okay. Maybe the animal overturned their water or something. We've had cases where the horse was a rescue horse and is in the process of being rehabilitated, things like that."


When the circumstances are less optimistic, there are policies, procedures, and resources the department uses to ensure the welfare of the animal comes first.

"We have the capability to bring in the state veterinarian," Howe said. "They will come and help us check on their water and feed or see if they have parasites and help give advice to the owner. That's generally how we deal with it."

As a last case scenario, a resident may lose their animal. But often, a little encouragement and advice can go a long way.

"We'd never ignore it, an animal issue," Howe said. "We guide the people toward resources and help."

Next week this series concludes by looking at how the City's policies, procedures, and facilities help animals need, and how humane societies, citizens and other resources factor into caring for Clay County's animals.



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