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Hundreds of local topics are being discussed by local residents on Town Square, a reader forum sponsored by the Weekly on our community website at www.PaloAltoOnline.com. Post your own comments, ask questions, read Diana Diamond's blog or just stay up on what people are talking about around town!

Guest Opinion

Working together is not just a robotic thing

by Preeva Tramiel

I am a robot mom.

My sons have been building robots for so long it looks like Fry's, Halted and OSH have partied in my basement and thrown up. On many mornings, I wake to the sound of metal, plastic or carbon fiber being drilled out for themselves.

My ongoing questions to my sons are things like, "Why can't these robots clean up after you?" and "What is a hand saw doing under the wet bar?"

So when they joined the robotics team at Paly, I was relieved. They worked on robots at school. The house became much quieter.

I started sponsoring the Paly robotics team in 2005, in a year when finances were especially tight for the team and I had two sons participating. Once I made an investment in Paly Robotics, I looked harder at it. Adviser Dnug Bertain really lets the kids figure things out for themselves.

Frankly, this initially annoyed me. I had made an investment, and I wanted the kids to WIN. I have friends with children at Gunn High School, and I always sort of looked at their program with envy. They always seemed to do more, and get more, and have more success. I heard rumors that the Gunn parents spent hours and hours helping their children.

I heard that Gunn parents persuaded their companies to contribute, raising a ton of money. I know the Gunn parents brought their kids dinner after school and let their children dye their hair red, because it was "a team thing."

Gunn won a President's award and went to



Atlanta one year, and always ended up near the top of the list of teams at the seeding matches at the tournament in San Jose, and went to the quarterfinals and semifinals.

Paly never did anywhere near as well when I was watching. Last year, when the Paly team finished near the bottom at the Silicon Valley Regional, I'd have conversations like this about three times a week with acquaintances from the Gunn community:

"Oh, your kid is on the Paly Robotics team? My kid is on the Gunn team," they would say. "Oh, your kid does robotics? Good for them," I would reply, as I cringed inside, anticipating: "How did Paly do this year?"

"Well, they weren't dead last," I would say (except last year they were).

The Gunn parents were very gracious, and said, "Ton bad. Better luck next time." Sometimes they added, "Our kids worked really hard on their robot."

And then, to add insult to injury, the Gunn team had the Capitol Steps perform for a fundraiser last year. I love the Capitol Steps, but because I'd have to face that conversation again and again if I went, I didn't go.

So I drove down to San Jose State to watch the Silicon Valley Regionals of FIRST (a national program, "For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology") Saturday, March 16, not quite knowing what I'd see.

I got a chance to see something new and inspiring: The Gunn and Paly robotics teams had joined forces and formed an alliance with a team from Hilo, Hawaii. Together they almost won the tournament.

FIRST tournament seeding is based on points earned in 10 seeding rounds, with six robots in the arena, jostling for points. Each year there is a different task the robots need to do besides just whizz around the track. The task this year

was to pick up 40-inch-diameter balls and push or throw them over a six-foot trestle.

Whizzing around the track gets points. Throwing the ball over the rack gets points. Bonus points are awarded if your ball is on the rack at the end of the round, so there is incentive to knock other teams' balls off the rack.

After the seeding rounds, the top eight teams get to pick two partners, and these teams of three, called "alliances," face each other in the quarter, semifinal and final rounds.

The alliance that wins the final round gets to go to the championship in Atlanta, Georgia. The team that wins the President's Award also gets to go to Atlanta.

There were favorites. Team 100, from Woodside High, always does well, and so does Belarmino's team, which brings a machine shop to the competition and works with NASA engineers every year. Those two teams formed an alliance with Monte Vista High of Cupertino.

Paly had done a lot of scouting, strategizing and shmoozing, and somehow figured out who was going to ally with whom. Team members talked themselves into an alliance with seeds number 2 (the Warrior Pride from a high school in Hilo, Hawaii) and 3 (Gunn).

From what I saw, Paly team Captain Daniel Shaffer was the one who conducted the negotiations after the seeding rounds.

I saw a whispered conversation, a handshake and a smile. I saw the picking of the alliances, and saw Paly get picked to join the Gunn-Hilo alliance.

And that was enough for me. This had nothing to do with politics, and everything to do with mutual interest fostered by competition. Gunn and Paly allied because they wanted to win, and they almost did.

I think this is the only time Gunn has been in the finals, and the contest was so close it is

being re-examined. Gunn and Paly may go to the nationals in Atlanta after all.

There's a broader context to this story. I've been in Palo Alto a long time. I've been at Paly for five years and currently serve as president of Paly's Parent-Teacher-Student Association.

And I am tired of the inter-school rivalry. The parent communities of the two schools, especially Gunn, are always evaluating the other's school's money and position with the district and pointing at imagined inequities.

"Paly got a new pool," Gunn parents say, ignoring their beautiful new library.

"Paly has a much older donor base, so you can raise more money," Gunn says, ignoring the fact that after a while, the donor base dies.

"Paly recruits for its sports teams," Gunn says, ignoring the fact that what Paly does is expect excellence from its coaches, and good athletes flock to good coaches.

At the same time, Gunn comes out on top of Paly in the national and statewide academic rankings, year after year. What is Paly supposed to do, set traps outside the calculus classes and drag the good students downtown?

Any realtor will tell you that Gunn is in demand as a location to buy or rent.

Yada, yada, the beat goes on.

That is why I was so pleased to see robotics teams cooperate during the Silicon Valley Regionals.

And it hasn't stopped there. The two PTAs coordinate parent education programs, and the student bodies have held a dance together.

Seeing the robotics teams work together and almost topple the favorites reminds me that we can do more together than separately. ■

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Streetwise

What do you think of "The Color of Palo Alto" photo installation on the front of City Hall?

Interviews by Veronica Sudekum. Photographs by Danielle Vernon. Asked on Hamilton Avenue outside Palo Alto City Hall.



Andrew O'Connor
Student
Clara Drive, Palo Alto

"That's art? I thought, 'Wow, some windows got blown out and they were repairing it.' Excuse my ignorance. You can't see houses from here. It's a misguided effort."



Jennifer Moore
Research Manager
McCarty Avenue, Mountain View

"That's art? It's kind of nice but I wouldn't have known what it is portraying."



David Smith
Stanford Employee
Greer Road, Palo Alto

"It's pretty cool. It's a little '1984.'"



Irene McNee
Mother
Georgia Avenue, Palo Alto

"I didn't even notice it. It looks like the sky. I'm in favor of public art but it would be nice if it were more visible at eye level. It looks great on that building because the building is not very attractive."



Shaneen Jones
Cardiac Technician
Alma Street, Palo Alto

"Oh! This is my first time seeing it. It's different. It's hard to see from the street. I might be on there!"