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Newton and Pascack Robotics Students Interview Rep Scott Garrett

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AUGUSTA, NJ – The Newton High School robotics team, Aperture along with their counterparts, Pascack Pioneers, invited US Congressman Scott Garret to be interviews at their tent at the Sussex County Fair.

They are petitioning New Jersey's elected representative to have Robotics be designated a Varsity Athletic sports, with all of the benefits the designation entails.

Newton's representative were Team Captain Lara Pennell, Carter Boyed- Marketing and Awards, Administrative Manager Katie Nelson, Liam Oakes Written Media Publicity. The Pascack team, jointly representing the Pascack Hills and Pascack Valley High School were represented by Co-COE's Carlie Rein and Alexandra Capodicasa.

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They spoke with the congressman about their mission. Oakes said, "It's very controversial." To which the congressman responded, "I'm used to controversy," breaking the ice for further discussion. Liam asked if Garrett thought they were deserving of the varsity athletic status. The congressman reasoned that, while supporting their efforts, this is an issue that should be decided at the state level.

In return Garrett asked the students about the requirements they must fulfill to receive varsity status at their school. Both Newton and the Pascack high schools consider robotics a Varsity sports, entitling them to earn a varsity jacket, letter and pins.

Nelson, Rein and Capodicasa explained the requirements were similar to those playing on traditional sports team including a minimum GPA requirement as well as practice and competition participation time requirements. The Newton students said they spend six hours a day, from 3 until 9 p.m. five days a week together, preparing for competitions. They spend so much time together, they refer to meal time as "family dinners."

Despite the school's designations, "we are not considered a sport by others," explained Oakes.

Garrett asked if other academic programs had varsity status. The Newton students pointed to the Science League as sharing the same level of recognition as Aperture. Boyde talked about the desire to first get North Jersey Athletic Conference, the sports league that governs high school the region.

Pennell asked Garrett how he thought STEM impacted society. Garrett said as he talks to people in business around the country they tell him there is a real problem trying to find young people to fill positions. "The question becomes how do you motivate young people in the difficult areas of math and science?" He added that the robotics teams seems to be a way to do just that.

Nelson talked about the quality of STEM education in New Jersey. The students and congressman discussed the positive relationship with Sussex County Community College. Garrett remarked, "We have a good base but we can always improve."

Boyd asked if Garrett thought STEM was important. Garrett talked about the unimaginable technological advancements made in his lifetime. He explained technology in his youth was taking the tube from the TV to the local Agway to be tested and now he “walks around with a blackberry. In education we try to be broad based in high school so it can prepare you for what the future holds.”

Capodicasa asked Garrett if “STEM will help in the real world?” Garrett said “The challenge is for the teacher to reach out to the private sector to provide opportunity for internships. It is an ongoing process. In Bergen County some industrial businesses look to partner with school.” He asked the students if their “schools hooked up with any businesses?” Capodicasa said not for STEM but for the robotics teams they were able to the BMW development center.

Boyd said “We run the team not only like a family but like a business. It give hands on life skills and makes it a little more appealing [to students].” Garrett said the business-like structure of the teams was remarkable.

Oakes spoke about the symbol that appeared on their varsity letter, asking Garrett if he recognized the figure. “It’s the Talon Robot, said Boyd. “It is the national peace keeping robot, for diffusing bombs and in the medical field. It is a great embodiment of what we do.”

The students explained to the congressman that they “build the entire robot, even making the parts from plain metal stock using a milling machine.”

Garrett asked the Newton student about a device they created to help a disabled student. They explained, after seeing him struggle to make use of his locker they created and built a device to make it easier.

The students of both teams had their competition robots on display, even putting them through their paces for the fairgoers. The process will begin again for the students in January when they receive the package of instruction and rules for the next competition. They then have six weeks to develop the concept, create the parts and build the robot to be able to accomplish the designated tasks.

Oakes explained in a previous discussion at Newton Day that Aperture Robotics team members had discussed their mission with Senator Corey Booker when he attended one of their competitions. He quotes Booker, “I think it would be a great thing to have. Being so much a sport-like competition in many ways. It is testing the minds about competing against each other. To give a varsity letter would be perfectly appropriate, especially give the policy urgency that we have in America as we are falling behind in STEM education globally. So, to elevate to a varsity sport would be incredible. And I think all of the students involved would look great in those jackets.”

Before leaving the tent the students gave Garrett a team tee shirt, button and a skull created on their 3D printer. Garrett said the skull would be displayed in his office in Washington DC.

Everyone went out to watch demonstrations of the teams' robots from past competitions.