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The Teton Valley Community School Mars Rover team from left to right: Samantha Schmidt, Anna Pauroso, Jack Dery, Barb Dery, Katie Dery, Oliva Schulz, Ariana Plennes, Mariah Pauroso, Avery Absolon, Quincy Spitzer, Nathan Carter, Owen Klausman and teacher, Natasha Peterson.

Mars Rover competition inspires students

By Jeannette Boner

With a little left-brain ingenuity and a spirit that wouldn't give up, the fifth and sixth grade class at the Teton Valley Community School found success at their first statewide Idaho Teaching Engineering to Children (TECH) Mars Rover Competition this past weekend.

"The biggest surprise was how frustrated they got," said Community School teacher Natasha Peterson on Tuesday. "I had no clue how hard a project this was going to be. I was thinking, 'It's just Legos, right?'"

But after four months of hard work, the Teton Valley Community School classes hopped on the bus to Twin Falls and rode back winners. The class arrived armed with their motorized Lego models, binders full of detailed documentation, and posters showing the process. The whirlwind weekend was a big success for the TVCS students, with one team, the "Martians out of Orbit," placing fourth overall and winning the Lightest Rover competition, and the second team, the "Martians who say 'Nee,'" coming in eighth out of 17 teams.

"As a teacher you still have to lead the kids, and it was the most amazing scientific process I've seen the kids go through," Peterson said. "We would completely and utterly fail and then have to start from scratch. It was challenging for me and the kids to work through the process."

Over the course of four months, students in Peterson's class learned about building with gears and axles, making the rovers move with pneumatics and motors, and putting together detailed multimedia presentations of the whole process. According to a news release issued Tuesday, all 92 students attending TVCS benefited from the Mars Rover Competition as the fifth and sixth graders enthusiastically shared their work with each of the younger classes. The class also visited the Journeys School in Jackson to observe what their high school students were doing at the next level of robotics that included computer programming.

Peterson said that she was particularly pleased to watch the girls in her classroom dig in with hands-on mechanical learning with some of them walking away wanting to dig deeper into computer programming.

"On this project in particular we had to work together in groups and sometimes that meant working with other people in their group that they didn't get along with," Peterson said. "That skill really showed a lot about the benefits of this project. Teamwork is a real world skill. It really paid off in many, many ways."

Anyone interested in learning more about the Mars Rover Competition or how project-based learning is implemented at TVCS is welcome to contact Laurel Loveland, Head of School at 208-787-0445.