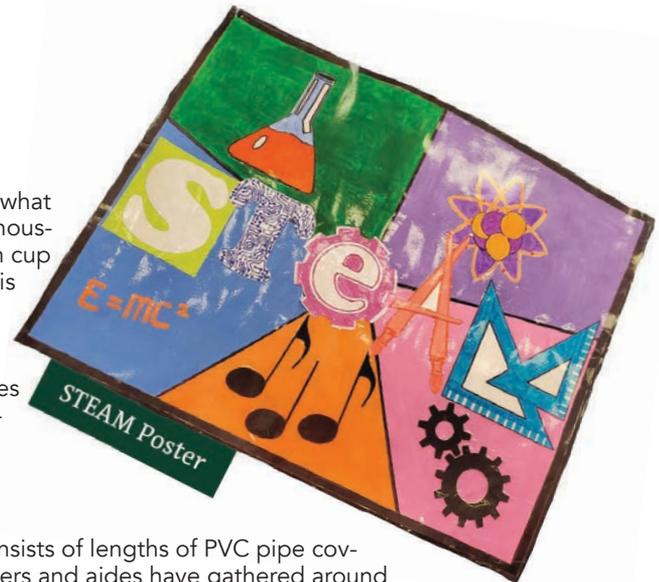


The "Gigabright" kids at the Mon Valley School



get to the gym just in time for Battlebots, but before I can ask someone what kind of bots will be battling, I meet Adam, a tall, lanky kid with a wispy moustache. Adam shows me his "bot" which he made from a white Styrofoam cup and K'nex toys. He named his bot "Gigabright" and, he informs me, it is "perfection incarnate."

Clearly, Adam intends to win. "He's a funny kid," grins teacher Rob DeFillippo, who helped organize the bot activity for the Remake Learning Days event called Diversity Includes Disability at the Mon Valley School, a public, non-residential special education center for students aged five to 21.

"Adam won the first match," Rob says. "You've got to hear him do the announcing." I'm looking forward to it.

In the corner of the gym, I see where the bots will battle. The "ring" consists of lengths of PVC pipe covered with blue and green foam set up in the shape of a square. Kids, teachers and aides have gathered around the ring. Some are sitting cross-legged on the floor, a few students sit in wheelchairs, but everyone is watching, waiting for the next battle to begin. Two kids standing in opposite corners of the ring are holding iPads, which they will use to control the movements of their bots that sit atop Sphero robots that are about the size and shape of a tennis ball, by my estimation.

Adam saunters into the center of the ring and shouts "ladies and gentlemen, **ARE YOU READY TO RUMBLE?**" Gesturing at the blue and orange "corners," he introduces the next bot battle. He sounds so much like a professional announcer, I laugh, half expecting two muscle bound wrestlers to leap into the ring. To commence the match, Adam yells **THREE! TWO! ONE!** and drops down, pounding his hand on the floor. The noise startles me. I jump.

The kids with the iPads concentrate as they maneuver their bots, which chase, circle and lunge at each other. It doesn't take long for one bot to knock out the other by bumping the cup off its robotic base. The audience cheers. When the competitors meet mid-ring to shake hands, Adam thrusts the winner's hand into the air and proclaims him the victor.

The next round is even shorter. In his introduction Adam suggests the "orange" bot named Venom packs a punch "more deadly than a rattlesnake." However, Venom suffers a malfunction in the ring, which pleases his opponent, who smiles when Adam raises his hand in the air.



Sam studying the tortoises



Media Center displays



Adam & Gigabright Bot

As spectators laugh and clap, Rob explains to me how important it is to teach kids that they can't be afraid to fail. "Even building bots, there's learning going on," he says as he lists science, congruency, algebra applications and other concepts that are a natural part of the bot-building experience. "All students are included. Kids with higher level support requirements build bots with a balloon attached and the objective is to pop the other bot's balloon."

I wish I could see the balloon bots in action, but when I glance at the event schedule, I don't want to miss the art activities in the Media Center, so I head upstairs.

The Media Center has tables set up around the perimeter and down the middle of the room. Folded cardboard exhibits and displays are neatly arranged on the tables. It reminds me of a science fair, but at the first table, kids are making STEM Art with plastic salad spinners, similar to the one I use to dry lettuce. I watch a young man put a piece of round paper on the bottom of the spinner, squeeze different colors of paint into the container and turn the handle, which spins the wheel inside to create a design.

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"Just a little bit!" the art teacher encourages him. His other creations appear to be thick with wet paint. "Wow, you're making a huge mess," chuckles the good-natured teacher.

As I walk down the aisles to read the displays, I notice a bespectacled girl, whose name tag says "Sam", trying to get my attention by pointing at hand-made tortoises on a table. So I stop and study the exhibit, which describes how the kids had to read a book about tortoises and create a tortoise with a shell that would keep it safe.

"Those are awesome! Did you make one of them?" I ask the smiling girl. Sam shakes her head no. I appreciate that she just wanted me to see them.

As I leave, I see Adam in the hallway. The Battlebot tournament is over.

"Adam, did you win?" I ask.

"Yeah," he shrugs.

Of course. Because Adam was **READY TO RUMBLE.** ■

Ann K. Howley, who teaches writing classes for CCAC's Community Education Program, just finished writing her first young adult novel.

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