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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

SRNS, Robots and Area Students Team Up to Compete

AIKEN, S.C. – June 13, 2013 – Not long after winning the World Championship, the Aiken County Robotics Team, also known as M’Aiken Magic, lost nearly half their funding due to the loss of multiple sponsors. The financially decimated program was put back on its feet last year and again this year with \$10,000 donations from Savannah River Nuclear Solutions, LLC, (SRNS) as the program’s only major sponsor.

“The management team at SRNS believes the investment made towards the educational enrichment of this highly successful robotics program may one day result in engineers, technicians and scientists that will benefit area industry and, hopefully, the Savannah River Site as well,” said Dwayne Wilson, SRNS President & CEO.

Long time mentor and former SRS engineer Clyde Ward explained that the Aiken County Robotics Team initially had one team in the FIRST Robotic Competition, the big robots and has since added three teams in a new division, the FIRST Tech Challenge, the little robots. This robotics program has attracted more than 100 students over the years to build amazingly clever and complex robots to compete against other teams to overcome one specified challenge in each division, each year. This past season’s goal for the little robots involved placing plastic rings on a series of pegs at varying heights in a version of robotic “tic-tac-toe.”

Each round of the competitions held at the state, regional, and world levels, require cooperative



Former SRS engineer and Aiken County Robotics Team (ACRT) mentor Clyde Ward assists ACRT programmer Darby Wills unload the team’s large robot, designed to send as many frisbees as possible into small target areas during a head-to-head robotics competition featuring both offensive and defensive strategies. ACRT also has three “little robot” teams, all of which have placed well in state and national competitions.

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teamwork with a robotics team from one or two other schools while competing against the robots of two or three opposing teams. Both offensive and defensive strategies are required using the highly versatile, agile and innovative robots.

“Though the competitions are exciting and certainly rewarding for the students,” said Dr. Beth Everitt, Superintendent, Aiken County Public School District. “I greatly appreciate the robotics team’s ability to appeal to those students who may not naturally gravitate to an after school program that strongly supports development in the areas of science, technology, engineering and math. The experience and knowledge gained with this organization will greatly benefit each team member throughout their college education and careers.”

Ward described the donation of funding by SRNS as breathing new life into the Aiken County Robotics Team. “SRNS literally came to our rescue,” said Ward. “These middle and high school students take an initial interest in robotics and quickly come to love the program. Whether designing, building, programming, or driving our three small robots or the large robot, the hands-on, teamwork approach attracts and helps to educate many of our future scientists and engineers. And our country is sadly in need of both. I’d hate to think where we would be without SRNS and our other sponsors.”

Ward noted that many of their team members are surprisingly young, such as Darby Wills, a sixth grade student at Schofield Middle School who has become the primary computer programmer for one of the little robot teams. Wills plans to learn JAVA over the summer to further improve his programming skills for the team and program the big robot next year.

Both Gretchen Caddell, freshman, Aiken High School, and Amanda Stegen, sophomore, South Aiken High School, are small robot drivers.

“I was intrigued by the engineering challenges needed to accomplish the goals of the games,” said Stegen. “Now I appreciate the leadership skills I’ve obtained, learning to work effectively with others.”

Caddell’s past experience and motivation to join the robotics team was unusual. “I spent a lot of time during my childhood working in a car shop. And now, I’m building on those special memories with this experience that will help me with my plans to become a mechanical engineer,” said Caddell.

Former Aiken County Robotics Team (ACRT) student member Philip Barkhau, U.S. History Teacher, Aiken High School, is the current Team Leader for ACRT. He’s quick to note that opportunities abound for each participant to learn many important life lessons in addition to obtaining a nearly endless source of technical, scientific, mechanical and programming knowledge. In fact, the driver of our world championship robot, John Fogarty, is now an engineering student at the University of South Carolina and a mentor for our current team,” said Barkhau.

At this year’s FIRST Robotics Competition, Palmetto Regional, Myrtle Beach, the M’Aiken Magic big robot team was ranked 8th out of 65 teams from the Southeast, and New Jersey, Massachusetts, Michigan and Ohio as well as Brazil. They qualified for the quarterfinal, but lost to the eventual regional winner in the quarterfinal.

At the FIRST Tech Challenge, Palmetto State Championship, Orangeburg, S.C., the Atomix little robot team was ranked third in South Carolina, then lost in the semifinal to the eventual championship winner. The Global Force little robot team was ranked fifth in South Carolina, won the semifinal and then lost in the final round.

Savannah River Nuclear Solutions, LLC, is a Fluor led company whose members are Fluor Federal Services, Newport News Nuclear and Honeywell, responsible for the management and operations of the Department of Energy's Savannah River Site, including the Savannah River National Laboratory, located near Aiken, South Carolina.

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