

Toys'R'them Easthampton students might seek patent

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EASTHAMPTON – Six middle-school students known as "The Toy Squad" will take their invention to the United States Patent and Trademark Office for a national toy competition May 17.

Seventh-graders Rachel Connell, Haley Hill, Michael Lupario and John Waskiewicz, all 12, and Mairead Poulin and Elissa Wright, both 13, created "Dodge It," a game in which participants seek to dodge Nerf balls that are shot from a water-powered machine while staying on their section of a color-coded mat. The students said they will consider getting a patent for their game.

"We have a really good feeling about our toy," said Connell. "We don't want anyone taking our idea."

Waskiewicz added, "We think that people would buy it."

"The Toy Squad" is one of the 190 teams selected out of 400 team applicants to compete in the 2008 Sally Ride Science TOYchallenge Nationals, an event that aims to engage middle school-age students in science and engineering, and to inspire them to pursue careers in those fields.

Their preliminary round entry, which included an essay and drawings on the project, was screened by undergraduate and graduate engineering students and then selected for nationals by judges. The nationals are held in San Diego, Calif. and Alexandria, Va.

Meanwhile, "The Toy Squad" - a name they chose over "The Power Ranger Toy Force," "The Peacock Bombsquad" and "The Peacock Diddys" - will start the finishing touches on their game at Wright's home Sunday. The group was formed in the fall when science teacher and team coach Jan de Ubl asked her seventh and eighth grade classes if anyone was interested in participating in the competition, which she learned about online.

About 10 students came forward at first, but only six, "The Toy Squad," started working this fall.

Like most group projects, they began with an idea. Half of the group wanted a ball game and the other half wanted a water toy. The result of their brainstorming was "Dodge It," an outdoor game for children ages 3 to 7. The game will help kids develop dodging skills that could be useful in sports, the group said. "We wanted to get kids off the couch," Connell said.

Sean Hill, Haley Hill's father who is an engineer, taught the students high school and college-level equations needed for their project, which contains three simple machines

that work together to launch a small ball every two seconds. The students learned about proportions, revolutions, gears, turbines and oscillations.

"Our toy was pretty original - we didn't know if we could actually do this and then he showed us how," Poulin said. "We feel advanced now."

Connell added, "If we wanted to be engineers down the road then we know some stuff."

The Toy Squad will compete, meet students from around the country and see a collection of projects in Alexandria from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, May 17, and will conclude their weekend trip exploring monuments and the National Zoo in Washington D.C. They plan to hold fund-raising activities in the coming weeks to fund their transportation and other expenses.

TOYchallenge is created and run by Sally Ride Science, a company founded in 2001 by Dr. Sally Ride, best known as America's first woman in space, and is dedicated to fueling interests in science, math and technology.

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