

Storm Brewing Brings Smiles While Teaching Valuable Life Skills at Elkhorn Ridge

Most people start their morning with a steaming cup of coffee. Stacy Kreun’s special education class serves coffee with a side of learning to the Elkhorn Ridge Middle School (ERMS) staff.

For the 2023-2024 school year, Stacy applied and was awarded funds to create a mobile coffee cart business for her life skills and resource students. Her clever students named their business Storm Brewing. Foundation grant funds were used to purchase a sturdy mobile coffee cart, a generator, blenders, and airpots for Stacy’s classroom. Other items were donated by Stacy’s friends, Noelle and Lisa Hobza who run Special Perk, or purchased through the district’s special education fund.

This interactive skills lab introduces Stacy’s students to important lessons including measuring liquid and dry items, counting money, providing change, planning, hygienically preparing food, and communicating in a work setting such as greetings/closings, taking orders, and thanking customers. Many of these important skills overlap with lessons Stacy’s students are learning at home, so there is a direct real-life application.

Initially, Stacy envisioned the grant being more

geared toward her life skills students; however, the cart has proven to be beneficial for all her students. It has been particularly motivating to one of Stacy’s students. On more than one occasion, Stacy recalls saying to the student, “You have to do some work first then you can do the coffee cart.”

“The practice with real job skills and real materials gives the students confidence and so much joy,” Stacy said. “My one student just beams when she can make and deliver the coffee. I just love seeing them (my students) feel successful on a bigger scale.”

“My students grow more confident each day, and the staff LOVES to see them being successful and happy. The smiles are contagious.”

After receiving the grant funding, Stacy asked ERMS staff what beverages they would like to see offered on the coffee cart. Based on their feedback, the

students are selling hot coffee, iced coffee, tea, and bottled water. Stacy and her students hope to add smoothies to their offerings in the warmer months. Staff can purchase their beverages using a punch card (10 cups for \$20) or by paying cash (\$3 a cup).

Since this is their first year, Stacy and her students try to get the coffee cart out once a week before school. The eventual goal is to have the cart out on the same day every week. Until that can be accomplished, teachers can submit orders during the day, and Stacy’s students will deliver the order when there is free time.

ERMS staff have been really supportive of the coffee cart and helping Stacy’s students learn. “Some teachers are all in, to the point that they paid for their punch card with dollar bills, so my students could practice their math skills,” she said.

Another benefit is that the coffee cart provides an opportunity for more peer involvement. Currently, there are several consistent peer helpers who assist Stacy’s



Another student counts the money received from their coffee cart with guidance of a peer helper.

without the Foundation’s support. They just really bring so much joy and happiness to the kids.”

Stacy encourages other teachers to apply for a classroom grant for the 2023-2024 school year.

If you are interested in reading about other classroom grants, please visit our website.

The Foundation awarded 76 classroom grants for the 2023-2024 school year totaling \$140,000.



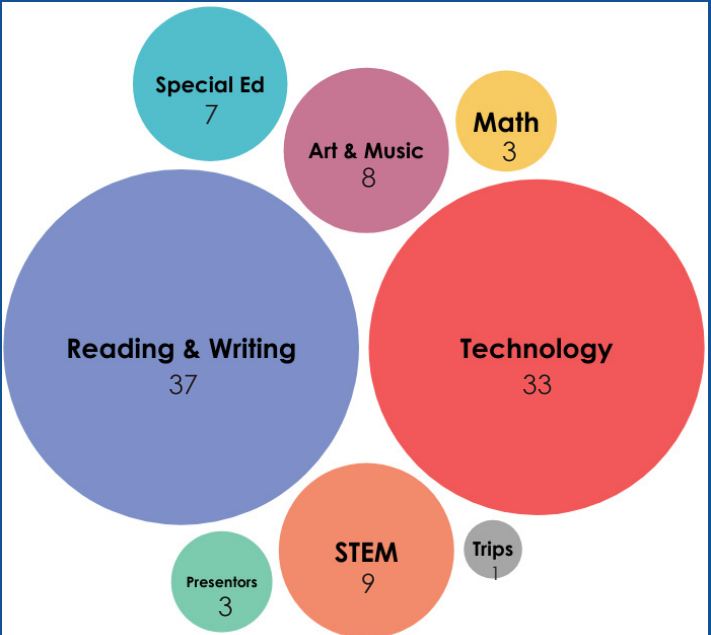
One student serves the coffee she made to Elkhorn Ridge Middle School principal Tanner Schutt.

students in the classroom and with the coffee cart. Stacy said, “The peer helpers are also learning how to work with differently-abled people, patience, and grace. I think overall, the benefit is some joy for everyone.”

Stacy continued, “My students grow more confident each day, and the staff LOVES to see them being successful and happy. The smiles are contagious. [The Foundation’s] contributions are helping prepare differently-abled learners to have the skills they need to contribute to our community as young adults and beyond.” She added, “We couldn’t do these fun things

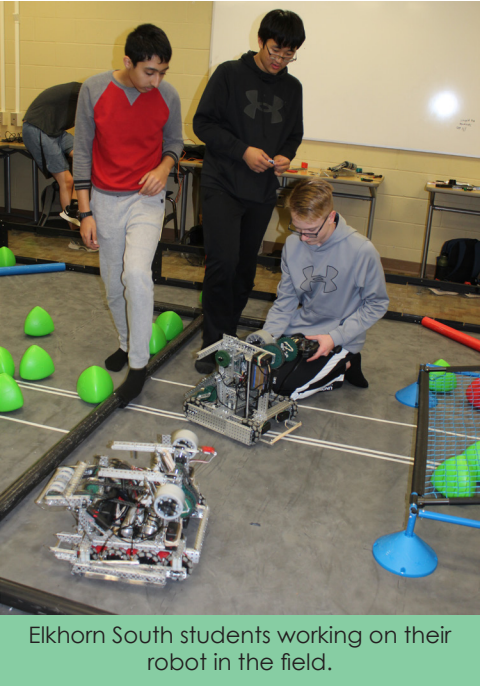


Special education students, peer helpers, and teacher Stacy Kreun pose behind their coffee cart funded through the Foundation’s Classroom Grant Program.



Robotics Grants Provide Unique Learning Experiences at Every Grade Level

In the center of the classroom, there is a 12’ X 12’ square field with two netted goals, PVC barriers, two offensive zones, two elevation bars, and 60 triballs scattered throughout the field. On the elevation bar, hanging an inch or so above the ground is a silver, mechanized robot that can run autonomously, raise itself into the air, and fling triballs across the field. No, this isn’t a scene from *Transformers* or *iRobot*. It is a typical practice for a high school robotics team in the Elkhorn district as they prepare for competition.



For more than 10 years, the Elkhorn Public Schools Foundation has funded robotics programs throughout the district including the high school Robotics Clubs and robotics kits for several elementary schools through our Classroom Grant Program. No matter the level, students participating in robotics learn problem solving, time management, coding & programming, collaboration,

initiative, and perseverance. In addition to these valuable skills, robotics also aligns with academic standards for computer science and technology through the Nebraska Department of Education.

Elementary School

The Foundation has funded grants for coding and robotics at several elementary schools. This past year, Fire Ridge, Arbor View, and Blue Sage elementary schools were awarded classroom grants for Sphero Indi Robots.

Melissa Lightle, media specialist at Fire Ridge for 19 years, has seen an increase in technology integration within the library curriculum for K-5th grade. Students are taught digital citizenship, research, and computer programming.

She marvels at her students’ engagement with this technology. “The neatest thing is that it makes the kids problem solvers more than anything,” Melissa said. Students persevere and are so excited when they solve the problem. She continued, “It makes them think about what they want to achieve and making a plan of how they can get there.”

Melissa has received multiple classroom grants during her time teaching in the Elkhorn Public Schools (EPS) district. “When I think about the opportunities it (the Foundation Classroom Grant Program) provides for our students, it’s things that they need for their core classes, and it’s also the creativity and problem solving,” she said. “It’s the extras that you don’t get through the daily curriculum.”

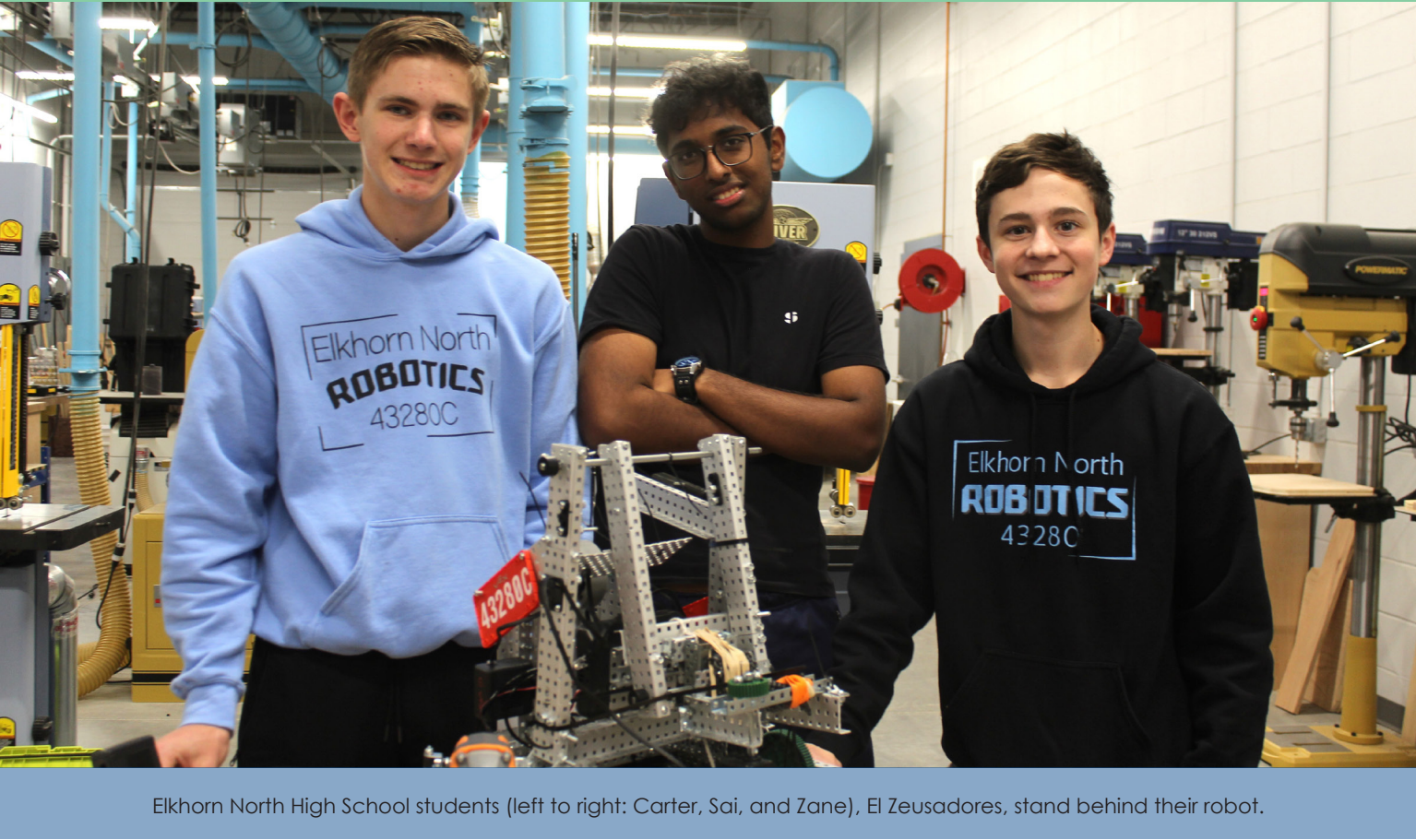
Introduction to activities

like the Sphero Indi Robots start an appreciation for computer programming at a young age that continues into middle and high school.

Middle School

Some middle schools have a computer/technology club, including Elkhorn Valley View Middle School. Amy Williams, EVVMS media specialist, began leading a computer club a year ago and found a surplus of old robotics parts. She decided to revive the EVVMS Robotics Club, and this year she is coaching six 4-person teams! Each team is building a plastic robot and participating in approximately seven VEX-sponsored competitions during the school year.

Amy sees how valuable the robotics club is for her students. She explains, “They have to work through a problem. I just think it’s so cool. Where in their life do they have to do that anymore? They’re using the same concepts we teach in math, and we’re using that in real life with robotics.” Another benefit is that the robotics club is a “community” that gives students a “safe place to be themselves.”



Amy plans to continue coaching the EVVMS Robotics Club, and she plans on applying for a classroom grant to fund more robotics equipment for the 2024-2025 school year.

High School

The Foundation has provided annual funding for the EPS high schools’ Robotics Clubs. Each year Robotics teams build a new robot to compete in that year’s competition, which can be quite expensive. Molly Erickson, HALE Coordinator who also coaches robotics at Elkhorn High School and assistant coaches at Elkhorn South High School, said the grant funding goes to “replenishing and getting newer supplies that VEX will come out with and enhance what the robot can do. The (Foundation’s) funding helps our teams stay competitive.”

Chris Peters, math teacher and Elkhorn North Robotics Club coach, agrees wholeheartedly with

Molly. “[The Foundation grant has] just taken everything to the next level of learning. They aren’t just operating at the basics,” Chris said. “We’d be stuck just buying metal and gears if it wasn’t for the Foundation.” The need for more robotics parts has intensified because there are currently 53 students signed up for Robotics Club at Elkhorn North. The large number of students in the club is both a “blessing and a problem. When you have 53 kids, you need parts for 53 kids. We are using every scrap of metal we’ve got. The Foundation has been an absolute savior for us. The community is investing in kids and getting their hands on technology.”

Zane L., a sophomore at Elkhorn North joined the Robotics Club last year after seeing Coach Peters at the activities fair. The club was a good fit for Zane, whose team ended up going to State even though “we didn’t know how to build anything.” As sophomores,

Zane’s team is learning from their experiences last year. “This year we’re trying to figure out what our bot is good at. Our robot is a good defender – we can just tower over them (opponents),” Zane said. “We’re planning everything out before we build it.”

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The Elkhorn South and Elkhorn High School Robotics Clubs are smaller but just as mighty. Last year, one team from Elkhorn South qualified for both the State competition and the Worlds competition in Dallas, Texas. Molly, who a few years ago had zero robotics experience, has learned



Elkhorn High School Robotics Club students rebuilding their robot for an upcoming competition.

so much from her students, online trainings, and the regional VEX coordinator. “The coolest thing about robotics is that it is completely student-driven. It’s great for them to work as a team and for them to figure out things together. It’s also great for them to have a problem that no one is going to help them with. They have to figure it out themselves,” she said.

Molly is especially noticing these problem-solving skills in action with her EHS robotics students because “they are really and truly starting from ground zero.”

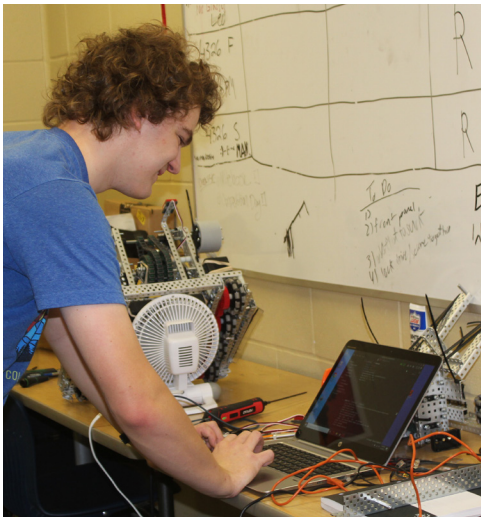
Chris B., a senior at Elkhorn South, was part of the team that went to Worlds in Texas last year. He was introduced to robotics through robotics kits and some experiences in middle school. He joined Elkhorn South’s Robotics Club when he was a sophomore. “I find problem solving and building stuff fun,” he said. His three-person team has figured out their roles and

how to work together. When Chris B. graduates in the spring, he plans on studying robotics engineering in college.

Mike Hale, science teacher and Elkhorn South Robotics Coach, says the biggest benefit for students in robotics club is they develop the engineering design cycle. He has a team who went to a competition in October then decided to completely rebuild their robot before the next competition. “Anytime we can get kids involved in activities that will promote their learning is always an added benefit,” Mike said. “Without robotics, kids aren’t going to get that exposure to engineering principles, especially coding.”

Academic skills are so important, but robotics also gives students a place to belong. Molly expressed that “robotics is just a really great pocket for students who need a place to fit in. It gives them a sense of belonging and place to be plugged in.” Chris Peters agrees, “Robotics brings kids together first

and foremost. We have a lot of high academic-achieving students who don’t necessarily have a team activity they participate in. Robotics brings those kids together.”



Elkhorn South High School student Chris B. programming his robot.

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Foundation Funded Math Clubs Help Students Gain Individualized Instruction

Projected on the white board at the front of the classroom is the following problem: Evaluate the expression $9 \times (9 \times 7 \div 7)$. Isaac, a fifth grader, begins writing and solving the problem on his personal white board during before-school Math Club at Spring Ridge Elementary.



Spring Ridge student Isaac working on math with teacher Leanna Bral.

Isaac is one of the 42 students at Spring Ridge who attend before-or-after school math club. Throughout the district, approximately 400 students are participating in Reading or Math Clubs funded by the Foundation at the various elementary schools outside of school hours.

This is Isaac’s first year in Math Club, and he is already seeing the value of coming before school to get extra assistance. “Math Club is important to me because I just want to get better in math so I can do better in school,” he said. “I like the teachers because they’re super fun and nice.” Other students at Spring Ridge, fourth graders Eliot and Kennedy, have been attending Math Club for three years.

“Sometimes math stresses me out, but Math Club introduces me to things I will do in class, and I

feel a little bit better about what we are going to learn,” Kennedy said. She wants to improve her math skills because “math is everywhere and it’s so important to learn.”

The Elkhorn Public Schools teachers are amazing, but it is difficult to give specialized attention when a teacher has a whole classroom of students. The Math & Reading Clubs provide a smaller learning environment where students get more individualized attention. Through Foundation funding, teachers are paid for time they spend before and after school leading the clubs.

Students recognize how important these clubs are for them, and parents with students in the clubs also appreciate the impact the extra help has on their children’s learning. A key theme among parents was the confidence Math & Reading Clubs help to build in their children.

Molly Anderson saw a huge change in her daughter’s overall academic performance. “Not only did Addi’s math skills improve, but her overall academic performance saw a positive shift,”

Molly said. “The critical thinking and problem-solving skills in Math Club spilled over into other subjects. In addition, the club instilled a sense of discipline in Addi teaching her the importance of practice and hard work to achieve success.”

These parent and student testimonials are so powerful! They represent the 400 elementary students in the Elkhorn Public Schools District who need additional instruction in math or reading. Bids For Kids is the main fundraiser for the Math & Reading Intervention program. This year, the event raised more than \$71,000 thanks to the generosity of our sponsors, donors, attendees, and auction participants.

Angela Bell reflects, “When you first find out that your child might not be keeping up in class, it can be kind of devastating as a parent because you just want them to succeed, but what I love about the Elkhorn Public Schools Foundation is that they’ve stepped in to fill that gap.”

If you are interested in contributing to our Math & Reading Intervention program, please visit our website to make a donation.



Spring Ridge students Eliot and Kennedy in math club with teacher Emily Haynes.