

Carnage and Mayhem 101

STEM Education Gets Fanfare in Documentary Film

What did you learn in school today? This typical parental inquiry is met with several responses but rarely followed with, “The complete and total annihilation of robotic machines in a no-holds-barred death match.” While most students complain about science and math homework, the high school students featured in the documentary film *Bots High* were able to apply their expertise to a national robotics competition that rewarded chaos, carnage and mayhem equally to ingenuity, craftsmanship and engineering.

Filmmaker Joey Daoud was interested in what it took to build a robot and the people behind them rather than focus the film on a robotics competition. “I was a big fan of robot shows as a kid and when I found out that not only did robots still fight and compete, but that high school kids were doing it, I was really intrigued.”

Bots High follows three high school robotics teams battling for first place at the national robotics competition in Miami, Florida. As mentioned, the focus is more on the students than the competition itself, a perfect example of how differently high school engineering and science students are viewed in 2011. “The stereotype of the outcast, anti-social nerd tinkering away in solitude is dead,” Daoud comments. “These are kids who build robots during the day and go out and have fun at night. They’re extremely smart and talented. It goes to show that given the resources and guidance kids can do amazing things.”

One of the strongest areas of the film is the girls involved in the competition. “One of the main schools competing in Miami is an all-girls school, so they’re used to half a robotic competition being full of girls. But some of the older girls that went to different competitions around the country talk about some of the adversity they met simply for being girls at



a robot competition,” Daoud says. “I wanted the film to portray girls doing things that are generally associated with boys—and in many cases, kicking butt.”

Daoud was quick to point out that although both boys and girls are equally prepared to study engineering after high school, less than one-fifth of engineering students are girls. In the film, The Mechanical Misfits are an all girls team that will stop at nothing to prove they belong while sacrificing school, relationships and friends to win the competition.

After completing the documentary, Daoud is more optimistic about science education in the United States. “There’s still a long way to go and it’s been great that there’s been a big push by the president for STEM education. There should be more robotics competitions, whether its task or combat. I don’t think there’s a better way to rein-

force what you learn from the text book than applying all that into a practical challenge.”

So far the response for *Bots High* has been fantastic. “Young kids have gotten more excited about robotics, adults find it fun and entertaining and everyone loves robots smashing each other.”

Daoud doesn’t have any plans to return to high school for his next project (he just finished a short film called *Space Miami* about an abandoned rocket site in the Everglades) but he would love to do another high school subject in the future. The Florida State University film graduate got into the documentary segment for practical reasons. “I wanted to make my own projects and documentaries are easier to get made. Daoud says. “Lower costs, small crews, no actors. About 90 percent of the time it was just me and a camera, no one else.”

For more information on *Bots High* visit www.botshigh.com.