

Statesman

Westlake junior is on top of the world of robotics

By Suzanne Majors Davis

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Joseph Asfour has done what no Westlake High School student has ever done before: win the prestigious Dean's List Award in FIRST Robotics. The junior was one of 20 students in the world chosen for the honor from a field of 140,000 sophomores and juniors on robotics teams.

Each team nominates one or two of its own members who demonstrate "gracious professionalism," leadership, technical expertise, passion, entrepreneurship and creativity, and who motivate team members and increase program awareness in their school and community.

Asfour learned of his honor in April, when he was competing with his team in the For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology (FIRST) world robotics championship in Houston.

Professional mentors of the Westlake team, composed of local engineers and computer scientists, helped select the nominees. Robotics Coach Norman Morgan and mentor Joyce Witowski, wrote Asfour's nominating essay. They were aided by outreach team member Shrey Majmudar, who was a finalist for the award last year.

"Joseph is involved in a lot of other activities, and he is a very humble young man," Morgan said. "I don't think he gives himself credit for what he does. He worries about the success of his fellow teammates more than he does with his own success. It is an incredible honor to be chosen, and we're super excited for him. It's well-deserved."

Westlake's FIRST Robotics Competition Team 2468 was also a finalist for the Chairman's Award at the World Championships. Morgan said the honor "is bestowed on a team that makes the most impact on their community and is viewed as the team to emulate. There were three finalists picked (out of 50 teams) and we were one of them."

It is also given to the team who inspires innovation, encourages self-confidence, communication and leadership and fosters a well-rounded life.

Both awards are named after serial entrepreneur Dean Kamen, who founded FIRST Robotics and invented the Segway and numerous other technical advancements. This summer, Asfour and 19 other Dean's List winners will head to a Summit at Kamen's hexagonal mansion in New Hampshire to meet him and receive more recognition for their accomplishments.

Asfour has participated in robotics for six years, starting in fifth grade at Cedar Creek Elementary School, continuing at Hill Country Middle School and then at Westlake. On a recent visit to the lab, he proudly explained the large robot he helped design, which was entered in the world competition. In college, he plans to study Mechanical Design and Electrical Engineering and is also considering following his father into medicine. While in the Health Occupation Students of American at Westlake, he explained how he designed a patch that can heal wounds fast.

Somehow, he also found time to also serve as a student council officer, drum major and French Horn player in the Westlake marching band and was recognized as an All State Musician for two years in a row. Asfour maintains an "A" average and accumulated 550 hours of service while serving on the FIRST team.

Speaking of his team, Morgan said it was a good year overall, winning the second highest number awards in the program's history.

And remarkably, they've accomplished this despite not having state-of-the-art facilities. "We have to simulate a practice field since we don't have a full field for drivers and programmers to experiment on."

Their crowded lab resembles an obstacle course, but, Morgan counts his blessings. On any given day, he said there are 170 people working after school on robotics.

"I am grateful for the large number of adult mentors who spend time helping seven different teams," Morgan said.