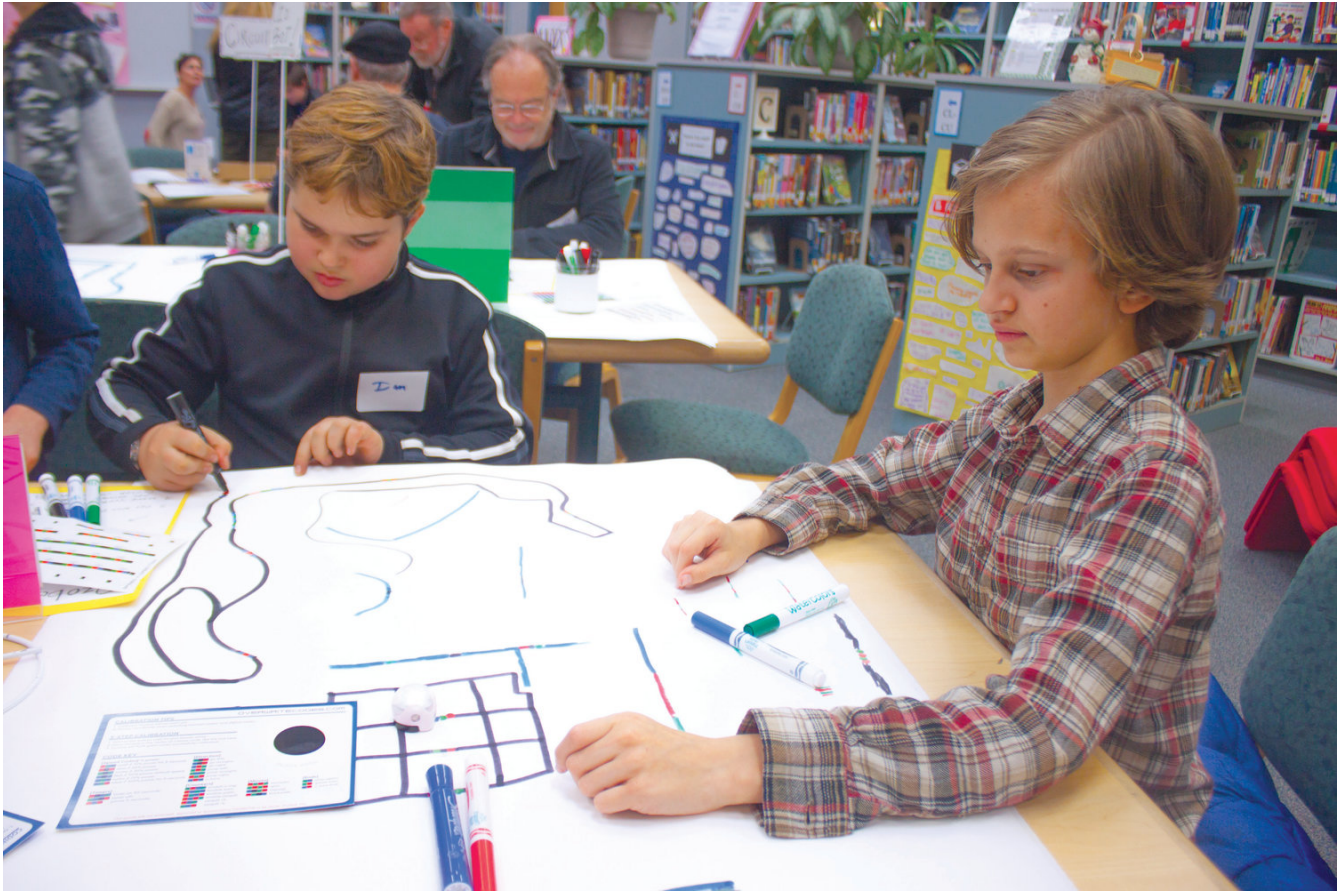


'Hour of Code' returns to Blue Heron for 2nd year



From left, Blue Heron students Ian Rose and Tommy Magee draw paths with different colors of magic markers to direct tiny robots on white sheets of paper during the Dec. 10 "Hour of Code" at their middle school.

LEADER PHOTO BY KIRK BOXLEITNER



Posted Wednesday, December 18, 2019 3:00 am

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Blue Heron students Ian Rose and Tommy Magee retained their laser-like focus on their robots, small enough to fit in their palms with room to spare, as they applied different colors of magic markers to blank white sheets of paper to direct the tiny robots' paths.

"They react to different colors by doing different things," Rose said, before laughing and telling Magee, "I drew lines to trap your robots."

Although Rose had never worked with these robots before, he liked that they were "kind of smart," since "it knows there's a line drawn under it, and it knows what each color means."

While Rose seemed to appreciate his robots' relative autonomy, fellow Blue Heron student Alex McMahon welcomed the measure of control he had over the slightly larger robots in his corner of the room, which he compared to the gyroscopic spheres in "Jurassic World."

"I've always been a bit of a techie," McMahon said. "I like being able to remotely operate a vehicle without being inside of it. You wouldn't have wanted to be inside the spheres in 'Jurassic World,'" he added, laughing.

"And there's an app for your phone that you can use to connect to it," added Aidan Nichols, as he and classmate Benja Greene helped themselves to slices of the multiple pizzas that had been ordered for the event.

"Yeah, do you want to try this?" McMahon asked The Leader reporter.

Even though it was more than two hours after the close of the school day, on a particularly dark winter Tuesday, the Blue Heron Middle School library was buzzing with roughly 75 students, parents and adult mentors for coding night Dec. 10, as part of the Port Townsend Public Library's second annual "Hour of Code" week.

Hilary Verheggen, youth services manager for the Port Townsend Public Library, credited the success of the event to the collaboration with Joy Wentzel, district librarian for the Port Townsend schools, and the volunteer members of the Port Townsend Think and STEM clubs, as well as PT Library Coding Club organizer Gage Pacifera.

"We decided to pool our efforts for one big night of coding," Verheggen said. "We also worked with teachers and administrators from both organizations, in order to make this night happen. We had an amazing turnout, and everyone was incredibly engaged."

Seventh-grader Claire Porter was joined by her mother, Nelia Swayze, at a laptop, attempting to set up the connections so that touching a given object — in this case, a lump of Play-Doh — would be recognized by the computer in the same way as striking a key on a keyboard.

Porter is already involved in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math), and welcomes the opportunity for extra credit that the evening of coding would provide, but she also enjoys "robot and coding stuff" for its own sake.

"The kind of things we're able to do now wouldn't have been possible 10 years ago," Porter said. "Coming here tonight gives me access to robots and other materials that I wouldn't have otherwise."

Swayze noted the evening's event advertised itself as an opportunity for all ages to learn more about coding.

"I'd like to know at least as much as my daughter," Swayze said. "It gives me a chance to explore things I'm not as familiar with."

Tim Finan and David Ehnebuske were two of the adults from the PT Tinker Club who guided students including Jordan Bowman through hands-on lessons on subjects such as circuitry.

"I'm trying to make it so that, when I press the button, the light goes off," said Bowman, who'd hit a bit of a snag.

"We're attempting to debug it," Finan chuckled. "We're using another model of the circuit as a reference, along with a set of schematics."

While Bowman remains unsure what career he might pursue as an adult, he expressed confidence that, "whatever I'll be doing, I know I'll be using electronics," for which reason alone he deemed the night of coding to be useful.

As for Finer, he hopes to help students such as Bowman avoid his own youthful mistakes.

“Back when I was their age, I didn’t know this was a possibility as a career field, so it’s like I’m going back in time,” said Finer, who also agreed that the technology of today would have seemed like the stuff of science fiction during his youth.

“If you don’t understand it, it’s just magic,” Ehnebuske said. “If you do understand it, it’s just technology. Too many people treat this stuff like it’s magic. Personally, I think it’s more fun to be the magician than the audience.”

Verheggen touted the value of such programs for encouraging students to learn “21st century skills through communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity,” all while having fun and eating pizza.

“Planning a series of events, all in one week, is really great,” Verheggen said. “It allows us to really delve into different aspects of technology and coding. Even within one theme, we have a lot of activities — some with screen time, some without — so that there’s something for everyone.”

Verheggen expects the Port Townsend Public Library to repeat its Summer Coding Club, as part of its 2020 Summer Reading Program.

Verheggen added the Port Townsend Public Library and School District partner on other programs, including “Lunch at Your Library” once a month at Port Townsend High School and Blue Heron Middle School, and “Salish Library After Hours” from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. on early-release Wednesdays.

During the latter, Verheggen and Derec Velez, a para-educator at Salish Coast Elementary, check out books, lead crafts, tinker with straws and connectors and Snap Circuits, and occasionally have special guest presenters.

“We’re just finishing up our pilot program, and will start back up on Jan. 22,” Verheggen said.