

Saturday, May 3rd, 2025

My name is Michael Viens. I'm currently 25, living in Scarborough, Maine, and I work for Apple Inc. as a Genius. I was a member of multiple robotics teams throughout my entire education. I started in 4th grade when my elementary teacher had a Lego Mindstorms set that he had personally purchased for his classroom. We would set up our own custom courses that we had to figure out how to navigate through. During this time, I had no idea about FIRST Robotics, but I knew that I had a love for solving problems and asked my teacher if there was more that we could do. He didn't fully explain it to me in the moment but shared that there were programs waiting for me once I made it to middle school, and that due to how small our school was, we couldn't do those programs as we didn't have enough money or enough interest.

When I did make it into middle school, that is when I found out about FIRST Robotics and the different competitions we could go to and compete in, but this time it wasn't just about building a cool robot and finding new ways to solve increasingly more complex challenges; this time it was also about presenting a 'real world' solution to a real world problem. I remember one of the challenges we had was called "Body Forward," the goal of this game was to perform or provide different medical solutions, such as putting a cast on a broken bone, or providing "white blood cells" to a patient in need, finding out how to solve these problems was exciting as it got my brain thinking, but we also had to work on a "project" and our project that year was about different ways to provide clean drinking water to those in need. We had to present this project in the form of a "product" to be either sold or provided to those who need it, while I don't remember the specifics of everything, I remember learning a lot about filtering water through different forms of rock and sand, which we even had a minor demonstration of how it worked. This all culminated in multiple trips to the Augusta Civic Center where we completed and eventually presented our ideas and "product." Unfortunately due to not having enough money or support, we never really had an opportunity to travel to different states to compete in higher level competitions.

Finally, once I got to high school, FIRST expanded from working with Legos to working with real parts, gears, solenoids, and our team's favorite structural support, 80/20 Aluminum. I was on Team 2648 based out of Oakland, Maine. This was the first time I had been on a team where we were all "one team" but really leaned on each other's strengths and differences. I learned the most about teamwork and leadership in these years. Together, our team was able to travel to most of New England and even made it to the World Championship all four years of my high school career. This didn't come without a lot of work from myself and fellow team members. Not only were we working on a robot and a presentation, but now in order to be able

to afford parts for our robot, maintain our build space, travel to our competitions, and have food and drinks for the team while there, we needed to do a lot of fundraising. These things were not cheap, and while we had a few different sponsors such as Wrabacon Inc., who lent us their loft area as a build space and allowed us to use their metalworking tools, or even other local sponsors who donated money in order for us to afford different things, I still encountered not having enough money for all the things our team wanted to do. Like picking and choosing which of our favorite events we would go to or skip out on as we didn't have the money for transportation. We also would miss different "off-season" summer and fall events as we couldn't find a bus or we had gone to one too many regular season events and didn't have any more uses of our school's busses or bus drivers.

Our team was incredibly fortunate enough to have been matched with another FIRST Robotics team based out of Qingdao, China. They were a new team and were just starting out, so we were acting as a mentor for them for our entire regular season. This was an incredible experience as it allowed us to not only share ideas with each other but also learn about each other's culture, lifestyle, and schooling. This connection culminated in a few of us being able to go to China and visit this other team's school and build space and help them in person with their robot to compete in a small competition with a bunch of other teams who had mentors from all over the globe. I was personally able to go on this trip due to the graciousness of my parents being able to afford a portion of the cost to send me over there. I had to miss a few events during our regular season in order to make it work, but it was an experience I will never forget.

If I could do this all over again, I would in a heartbeat. FIRST Robotics is truly something that I think every kid should go through, not only to learn about engineering and problem-solving but also to develop critical teamwork skills. This grant would allow kids to be able to do all of the things that I was so lucky to have been able to do, but with less stress about where the money is going to come from to be able to afford all of the different events, unplanned trips, or even go to a world championship. I think about the teams that we played against during my time who either won different competitions or had the best presentation and received banners and awards for it. With those banners and awards comes an invitation to the world championship, and I know many teams full of students who didn't go to the world championship simply because they could not get enough money to afford it. While this grant matching program will not eliminate the amount of work students will need to put in to be able to do what they want to do, it will keep them from being held back from achieving their highest goals.