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Robot brings classroom to homebound student

In a scenario straight from the iconic animated sitcom "The Jetsons," robotics is making life better for Foster ES 3rd-grader Miranda Garcia.

But this is no 1960s interpretation of the future, nor is her helper robot a clumsy out-dated model like Rosie, the fictional Space Age family's beloved maid. Instead, VGo is a sleek, state-of-the-art, 4-foot, two-wheeled dynamo designed to allow users face-to-face contact from a distance whenever they can't be together in the same place at the same time.



VGo provides Miranda opportunities to watch and participate in learning activities from her home, while her classmates can continue to enjoy her company on days she's not well enough to come to school.

And for students such as Miranda, who are homebound due to illness, the benefits are out of this world.

"The robot is a unique opportunity to bring advances in technology to medically fragile students who are unable to attend school, but whose lives could be somewhat normalized through the use of the robot," said Dr. Vangie Aguilera, the District's senior executive director of special education.

SAISD is the first South Texas school district to pilot the program, which originally was intended for medical situations. Aguilera and Dr. Michael Richards, SAISD's homebound facilitator, pursued use of VGo after learning about the robot at a Texas Council of Administrators of Special Education conference last summer.

After obtaining it on loan free of charge

from developer VGo Communications Inc., a search was conducted for a student to participate in the pilot. Miranda was selected based upon how long she is expected to be out of school, turning an otherwise unfortunate circumstance like prolonged absence into an ample opportunity to evaluate the robot's effectiveness in one classroom.

The debut of hers and VGo's partnership earlier this month drew local and national media alike to Foster and her house to document this auspicious occasion, acclaim she and her home and school family took in stride.

For them, the best part of this experiment is re-uniting Miranda with her classmates.

"It allows her the freedom of interacting with her peers and not worry about her illness," said principal Stacey Lewis.

"She's back to being part of the classroom. As for her classmates, well, they all want to take care of her (via the robot) and are glad to have her part of their discussions."

This is made possible through a home laptop that connects to the school's Wi-Fi, providing



With media there to capture the occasion, Miranda joins her school chums and teacher Belinda De Luna in a guessing game of "Who Am I?" Participants ask questions to help them determine what is on their head bands. Miranda's (in front of VGo) is a butterfly.

Miranda a virtual presence in the classroom where she can see and hear what's going on while those at Foster can see her face on the robot's video screen.

She also is able to move VGo throughout the classroom with assistance at school from her friend Esther Rose, who acts as co-pilot to help make sure Miranda maneuvers the robot with minimal bumps along the way.

But participating via robotics does not mean Miranda is excused from abiding by school decorum. She can only move VGo when appropriate and must seek permission before speaking. For this, instead of raising her hand as she would in the classroom, Miranda turns on a light near her on-screen face.

"Everyone is extremely excited to be a part of this innovative technological experience," Lewis said, adding:

"This is something many of the students had seen on TV during commercials, and to have a robot in the classroom made a real-life connection for them, mainly because of its purpose – to help their classmate."

To augment Miranda's learning, a homebound teacher continues to come to her house, a procedure that would remain for other students in her situation should the pilot prove successful.

If so, participating students and campuses would be chosen on a case-by-case basis and cost for the robots would be funded through the Department of Special Education's budget, said Aguilera. Thus far, she considers the results at Foster to be encouraging.

At any given time 50 to 55 SAISD students are confined to home due to illness for periods ranging from four weeks to several months.

Besides SAISD, about 30 school districts nationwide have incorporated VGo into their classrooms.

Mustang JROTC bound for National Academic Bowl Championship

This summer four talented Jefferson HS cadets will join an elite cadre of teens to compete in a contest designed to prepare them for the rigors of college.

The JROTC team of Jysun Cardenas, Walker Hayse, Abel Hernandez and Joshua Ibarra is among just 24 nationwide and one of only three from San Antonio advancing to the 2013 National Academic Bowl Championship June 21- 25 at George Mason University near Washington, D.C.

The students qualified by besting more than 1,500 competitors worldwide in two previous rounds that were conducted online.

At the national contest, teams will vie in a minimum of 10 rounds of competition using buzzers

in a "college bowl" game where they will field questions on a wide variety of academic subjects as well as citizenship and leadership.

The winner will go on to compete at the JROTC Tri-Service Academic Bowl against the victors of the Air Force JROTC and Navy JROTC academic bowls.

Offered in partnership with the College Options Foundation, the bowls are nationally recognized academic competitions created exclusively for JROTC students. Participating cadets learn the values of citizenship, academic competition and college opportunity.

Goals include preparing students for state exit/ graduation exams and college entrance exams such as the SAT and ACT.



Jefferson HS principal Joanne Cockrell congratulates JROTC cadets (l to r) Abel Hernandez, Walker Hayse, Jysun Cardenas and Joshua Ibarra. Behind them appearing to share her pride is the statue of the school's namesake. Col. Tracy Chavis (not shown) is their instructor.

Candidates on the ballot for School Board

Voters in SAISD Trustee Districts 1, 3, 4 and 7 will soon head to the polls to select their representative for the next four years.

The candidates include two who are running unopposed. They and the occupations listed on their applications are:

District 1

- Steve Lecholak - attorney and former SAISD Citizens' Oversight Committee member.

Incumbent and current School Board Vice President Rubén D. Cuero is not seeking re-election.

District 3

- Incumbent Debra Guerrero - developer and former District 3 City Council member who was appointed to the School Board in 2012 to finish the unexpired term of Carlos Villarreal.
- Chris Alvarado - quality specialist.

District 4

- Incumbent and School Board Assistant Secretary Adela R. Segovia - administrator who was elected to the School Board in 2009.
- John "Rocky" Graciano - customer service worker.
- Arthur V. Valdez Jr. - aircraft engineer.
- Fernando Velazquez - social worker.

District 7

- Incumbent and School Board President Ed Garza, urban planner and former San Antonio mayor, who was elected to the School Board in 2009.

What voters need to know
VOTE EARLY: April 29 - May 7
ELECTION DAY: Saturday, May 11

Second interview set in superintendent's search

Following recent interviews with three candidates for superintendent, Trustees met in a special-called meeting on Monday, March 25, to discuss those interviews, and decided to hold a second interview round. They will bring back one of those candidates for a second interview, to be held on Friday, March 29.

"We are continuing the interview process and are looking forward to getting into greater depth with one of those candidates through a second interview," said School Board President Ed Garza.

"This is a critical process and our goal is to find the right candidate to lead the District."

Candidate interviews have followed an extensive process led by the PROACT Search firm.

Trio of schools head to state science and engineering fair

Fifteen students representing Harris and Longfellow middle schools and the Young Women's Leadership Academy are advancing to the ExxonMobile Texas Science and Engineering Fair based upon their success at the qualifying competition. This round took place at the recent Alamo Regional Science and Engineering Fair.

The following, listed by school, award, subject and name, are honorees in the junior category.

- **Longfellow MS.** Fourth grand prize in environmental, Arthur Mendiola. He also received special awards from Broad-Com Masters and the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. Additionally, Arthur earned a total of \$225 in cash prizes from Air and Waste Management and the local branch of the American Chemical Society.

- **Harris MS.** Second in botany, Alfredo Cantu, Antonio DeLeon and Gerardo Valles; and third in medicine and health, Clarissa Galvan and Abigal Macias.

In all, Harris students earned 15 ARSE awards and two special recognition honors.

- **YWLA.** First in engineering, Jasmine Gonzalez; first in medicine and health, Sakshi Mohan; second grand prize in physics, Laura Gorena; second in environmental, Zoe Kimora; third in chemistry, Janelle Arnold; and fourth grand prize in microbiology, Nadia Pulido.

Senior division YWLA honors were: second in medicine and health, Rebecca Garcia; and fourth in environmental sciences team project, Carola Cortinas and Mikyla Stalbaum.

Additionally, Jasmine and Dominique Cameron placed first in the junior and senior levels, respectively, for an award from the National Society of Black Engineers, earning them \$50 each, while Carola and Mikyla were awarded \$100 from the Boerne & San Antonio Chapters Native Plant Society.

Highlighting YWLA's honors is receiving the prestigious Charles McGibbon Award for the second consecutive year. This recognition is presented for school participation and scientific excellence in the categories of physics and math/computer.

In all, YWLA students earned 26 awards at the fair.



Science teachers Roseanne Volpert and Kathy Gonzales (far left and right, respectively) with (l to r) Gerardo Valles, Alfredo Cantu, Clarissa Galvan, Abigal Macias and Antonio DeLeon.



Science teacher Karen D. Harris (right) holds the Charles McGibbon Award with (l to r) Zoe Kimura, Nadia Pulido, Jasmine Gonzalez, Mikyla Stalbaum, Carola Cortinas, Laura Gorena, Rebecca Garcia, Janelle Arnold and Sakshi Mohan.



Science teacher Roland Ruvalcaba (left) and principal Liz Solis with Arthur Mendiola.

Brackenridge and Jefferson students take top honors at film festivals

Some aspiring Steven Spielbergs already have the hardware to start their future collection of trophies.

The work of Brackenridge HS Media Productions Magnet Program student Samantha Serna placed first in two different recent film festivals.

She earned top honors for documentary in the student-production category at the 35th-annual CineFestival en San Antonio. Assisting her were

classmates Meaghen Bailey and Steven Martinez.

Meaghen's own work also was screened there, are well as that of Raymond Ambrose and Miguel Guzman.

Samantha's other first-place award - earning her \$500 - was for PSA at Can't Beat Love, where her classmates Baldemar Esquivel, Bianca Galvan and Yesenia Olvera received honorable mention honors.

Also making their presence known at these festivals were Jefferson HS Mustang Cinema Club members.

Videos by Edward Flores, Mia Mendez, Anthony Mireles and Roland Olveda were screened at CineFestival.

Roland also placed second for short film at Can't Beat Love, earning him \$750. There, his classmates Lennon R. Maldonado and Jesse Torres earned third place and honorable mention, and cash prizes of \$500 and \$100, respectively.

CineFestival is the nation's original and longest-running Latino film festival for established and emerging filmmakers including students.

Can't Beat Love is an annual film festival for high school students, and this year's theme was anti-bullying. Winning entries for that contest were shown at Santikos Northwest 14 Theatre, a co-sponsor.

Sponsors are the National Council of Jewish Women and Family Violence Prevention Services Inc.

Other co-sponsors are the Macy's Foundation and Café College.



At the CineFestival (left photo, l to r) are Brackenridge students Meaghen Bailey, Samantha Serna, Miguel Guzman and Raymond Ambrose. Back at Brack (center photo), Samantha shows off her trophy won at Can't Beat Love. Other winners there (l to r) include Meaghen, Steven Martinez, Baldimar Esquivel and Yesenia Olvera. Their teacher (not shown) is Jorge Hernandez.

Jefferson students with their awards (l to r) are Jesse Torres, Roland Olveda and Lennon R. Maldonado. Just for the fun of it, teacher Adam Rocha poses with a pink piggy bank.



in the Spotlight



Smorgasbord for book lovers

Decisions! Decisions! Overseen by Haven for Hope CEO Mark Carmona, De Zavala ES 2nd-graders begin the daunting task of deciding which from a wide variety of books they would most like to take home. The book bonanza was courtesy of Haven for Hope, which acquired 2,000 hardbound volumes through donations - enough to provide all 610 students one of their very own with plenty left over for all to enjoy in their school library. The giveaways (this was the first of two) also exemplify an SAISD priority to increase rigor in reading.



The Briscoe care bear patrol

Who better to come bearing gifts of these cuddly creatures for those in need than the very own Briscoe ES Bears? To show his gratitude for the big-hearted students' generosity, San Antonio Police Chief William McManus came to their school to personally accept the gift which will be given to children with whom first-responding officers come in contact. Students collected more than 1,500 teddy bears in honor of fallen officers, and the project was part of their character development studies.

Celebrating a landmark achievement

Ensuring that an important piece of San Antonio's post-Civil War history is not forgotten is this historical marker at 701 N. St. Mary's St., near the site where the city's first school for freed slaves once stood. Originally the Rincon School, the predecessor to Douglass ES served this location between 1869 and 1915. The plaque replaces one stolen about five years ago. Unveiling it at a ceremony is Gary W. Houston, Bexar County Historical Association associate member. Joining the celebration (l to r) are School Board Secretary Olga M. Hernandez, Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff, Interim Superintendent Dr. Sylvester Perez, District 2 Trustee James Howard, School Board Vice President Rubén D. Cuero, Douglass principal Derrick Brown and 2nd-grader Blessing Ellis.



Grand reopening

Addressing attendees at the newly renovated Willie C. Velásquez Learning and Leadership Development Center is the District's Director of Adult Education Rebecca L. Atchley. In partnership with the city of San Antonio Department of Human Services, SAISD offers a variety of classes there for adult learners such as GED preparation, basic education, civics and English as a Second Language. Currently 243 students attend the city-owned, West Side facility whose state-of-the-art renovations include upgraded technology and a fully equipped computer lab.



Photo courtesy of the city of San Antonio Department of Human Services

Principal of the Year

Presenting De Zavala ES principal Joseph Cerna (right) with a Certificate of Achievement is District 5 Trustee Patti Radle. The veteran 12-year District educator was honored for his selection as the SAISD Council of PTAs Principal of the Year. Cerna, who has been De Zavala principal for five years, was chosen based upon letters of support submitted by community members. Among those extending congratulations was SAISD Council of PTAs President John Alcoces.



All SAISD schools and most offices will be closed March 29 in observance of Good Friday.



Have a safe and happy holiday!



Walk this way!

Among the ways the Edison HS community commits to being fit are through organized evening strolls along the school's lighted track such as this recent "Walk with the Principal." Participants included (front row center, l to r) Roger Rodriguez, SAISD senior coordinator for health and PE, Olga M. Hernandez, School Board secretary, Charles Muñoz, school principal and Edison junior Brianna Reynosa, who also is a Mayor's Fitness Council student ambassador.


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