

Robotics team's mission is Mars

The Circuit Breakers at Clark Magnet High contribute to a long-term mural project by artist.

By Angela Hokanson
NewsPress

The robotics team at Clark Magnet High School, the Circuit Breakers, learned Wednesday about the Mars Exploration Rover mission at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, but the final product from the students' visit may not be finished for years, when a national mural project is installed in a former mill town in Connecticut.

The robotics team is one of a handful of student groups across the country helping to create the American Mural Project under the guidance of artist Ellen Griesedieck. The mural, which is expected to be 120 feet long and 48 feet high, and will be housed in Winsted, Conn., is a tribute to the inventiveness and determination of American workers, Griesedieck said.

She started working on the mural in 1998, and it may be another eight years before the mammoth project is finished, she said.

Griesedieck is traveling to every state in the country to get people involved in the creation of the mural.

"She's working with students all across the country to do representative art projects for all the different types of work people do," said Mary Baerg, deputy lead for the Mars Public Engagement program at JPL.

The Circuit Breakers team will be working specifically to craft a portion of the Space Studies project, a 12-by-14-foot section in the middle of the mural that is dedicated to NASA's mission to Mars that began in 2003 with the Spirit and Opportunity rovers and continues today.

So far, Griesedieck has



TAMMY ABBOTT News Press

Rob Steele, a software engineer for the Mars Science Laboratory at JPL, describes to the visiting Clark Magnet students Wednesday how an older Mars rover, the "Rocky Eight," functions.

paired students in Texas, Arizona, Ohio and Florida with scientists and engineers who helped send the rovers to Mars in 2003.

Griesedieck's goal is to involve scientists from all the NASA centers that helped create the Mars rovers, and to bring students in to create art to represent this outer-space accomplishment.

"Their only limitation is to stay within the parameters of the overall painting," Griesedieck said. "You don't want to limit them."

Griesedieck selected the Circuit Breakers at Clark because JPL scientists who were involved with the Mars rovers have acted as mentors to the school's robotics team.

"They've worked with

these people, but they've never really seen what they do," said Chuck DeVore, who teaches math at Clark and advises the school's robotics team.

The Clark students did a "life-cycle" tour of JPL on

"If everybody thought the same, it would be a disaster."

Rob Manning

About working on the Mars Exploration Rover mission

Wednesday, hearing from NASA engineers about each stage of the Mars rover project, from the development of the technology to the testing of the equipment to the launch.

Rob Manning, who worked on entry, descent and land-

ing for the Spirit and Opportunity rovers, told students about the importance of building a team of diverse thinkers when undertaking an endeavor like the Mars project.

"If everybody thought the

same, it would be a disaster," Manning said.

Griesedieck said Manning's comments could be applied to the mural project as well, which demanded creative thinking and spontaneity out of its contributors.

Students also took a peek at the Mars Science Laboratory, a six-wheeled rover that is still in development and will be sent to Mars in 2009 to look for signs of life.

Laura Widholm, 14, said she thought the team's artistic creation would help document the technology that was used to send the rovers to Mars.

"I think it will be nice, especially for historical purposes," she said.

DeVore said he wasn't yet sure when the team would start building their contribution to the mural, since the robotics competition season gets underway in January, when the students will have six weeks to build a robot that can complete specified tasks.