HANDS-ON ROBOTS

One of the exhibits which drew consistently large crowds was sponsored by the University of Maryland’s 4-H sponsored FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) Tech Challenge (FTC) program. 4-H is a youth development program that was established in Ohio during the 1800’s as an innovative strategy to introduce agricultural technology to the farming community and its influence has spread across the nation. Since its inception in Maryland, 4-H has sponsored pilot robotics programs in 18 counties. Arlene Lantz, a coordinator of the FTC program, said that she volunteered for the festival to draw more interest in the sciences. “Most of the students [working the exhibit] are from farms and carpentry. That was what they were going to do,” she said, “but I think almost all of them are now interested in engineering and robotics.”

It’s easy to understand why students of all ages would be so easily lured into the robotic fields when exposed to robotic platforms like LEGO Education WeDo. Children crowded around a LEGO figurine, shrieking with laughter as the LEGO alligator snapped its jaws onto their fingers. Across from the tent, some volunteers were explaining the SuGO, or sumo LEGO, program to a crowd of enraptured children and parents. SuGO are light- and motion-sensitive robots that wrestle each other, mimicking Japanese sumo wrestlers. Two robots faced each other in a white ring, and then one abruptly moved forward, pushing the other out of the boundaries while the audience cheered.

Lantz was happy about the amount of foot-traffic that this exhibit received. “This is the slowest our exhibit has been,” she laughed, as another wave of children shoved each other for a prime spot around the SuGO ring.

BE A SCIENTIST, SAVE TESTUDO

The College of Chemical and Life Sciences also had an exhibit at the Expo. Britney Hardy, a junior microbiology major, engaged visitors in a mock crime scene investigation to determine who attacked Testudo. She handed out DNA samples from the scene of the crime, and visitors tried to match them up to the DNA samples from some of Testudo’s notable rivals: the North Carolina Tar Heels, the Duke Blue Devils, and the Wake Forest Demon Deacons. Those who correctly identified the nefarious assailant received a button that proudly proclaimed, “I’m a Terptective!!”

“Dr. Shields [an instructor with UMD’s Cell Biology and Molecular Genetics department] was the mastermind behind the wall,” Professor Edgar Moctezuma said before he flitted away to help with the DNA Beads activity.