

FIRST® WASHINGTON WIRE



FLL UPDATE

As you may have heard, LEGO Education and FIRST® will be ending their partnership after 2026-2027 season.

Here at FIRST® WA, we are committed to keeping things consistent for our FLL-age participants, both current and new. At a minimum, we will support team development and host events through the 2027-2028 season utilizing SPIKE Prime and SPIKE Essential.

FIRST® will also support the use of these kits and events built around them, even as they are developing their new strategy for the future state of FIRST®'s K-8 offerings.

As soon as we have more information on new offerings from FIRST® we will hold a Coaches Chat for teams, and will continue to hold Coaches Chats throughout the off season to keep teams informed.

What's Inside this Issue

- Presidents Message
- Industry Spotlight
- FIRST® LEGO League
- Board Member Spotlight
- FIRST® Tech Challenge
- Staff Spotlight
- Student Perspectives
- FIRST® WA Supporters

2 MINUTES AND 40 SECONDS...

This month I watched hundreds of 2 minute and 40 second performances across the state, aka FRC matches. I also joined our amazing volunteers in Yakima, re-setting the field and ensuring that each team had a regulation playing field to compete on. Yet through all of the excitement of competition and flying yellow balls (known as fuel in this year's REBUILT Game), all I could focus on was that I am seeing Washington's future workforce being built in real time.

As President of *FIRST*® Washington Robotics, my goal is to ensure that students have access to, and are receiving the training, support, and experience that is preparing them for tomorrow's workforce.

Workforce readiness is more than technical aptitude. It's the blend of technical proficiency and employability skills, including communication, teamwork, project management, problem solving, adaptability, and the ability to integrate new skills and tools quickly. Competitive robotics is the ideal environment for this. Students work on tight design cycles, real budgets, rigorous rules, and immovable deadlines. Teams bring together AI, hardware, software, and data alongside human judgment, which is exactly where modern work happens. Across my career in workforce development, I have both designed and delivered many "career ready" programs. At this critical juncture in time, *FIRST*® Robotics offers the most comprehensive and life-changing experience available in the early career and learning space.

Coaches, mentors, and volunteers prepare

students for priority sectors across our state, including advanced manufacturing, space and aerospace, healthcare technology, robotics and automation, core software and AI, agriculture technology, construction, and logistics. Students don't just build machines. They build businesses, as planning, budgeting, fundraising, outreach, and community engagement are all part of the work. That combination of engineering and enterprise develops young adults who can contribute to an employer from day one.



What makes *FIRST*® Washington unique within the workforce training sector is our coach/mentor/volunteer

ecosystem. Students work side by side with industry professionals and after school educators, gaining real feedback, meaningful connections, and leadership opportunities that typical job shadowing simply can't offer. Results show up on the field, in classrooms, at internships/apprenticeships, and throughout careers.

FIRST® Washington Robotics is not just a nice to have enrichment activity. It is a proven, scalable workforce readiness program for Washington's employers and communities. Thousands of hours of work boil down to a 2 minute and 40 second performance. Thank you to the coaches, mentors, volunteers, schools, and companies who this make the magic happen.

With Appreciation,
Fred Krug

P.S. That's me doing field reset at the SunDome FRC District Event!

BUILDING KENT'S WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE

A conversation with William Ellis, Kent's Chief Economic Development Officer

Statewide workforce trends in Washington become clearer by examining one community. Kent exemplifies how *FIRST*® Washington Robotics is critical to a regional workforce strategy, notably in a place anchored by aerospace and advanced manufacturing for over sixty years.

William Ellis, the City of Kent's Chief Economic Development Officer, has spent years listening to employers describe what they need from the next generation of workers. The gaps they name are rarely about specific tools or programming languages since companies can teach those. What they struggle to teach are the habits that make someone effective in a fast-moving, team-driven environment. As Ellis puts it, employers want to know "how does a young person behave in a team... how do they organize themselves." These are the skills students practice every day on a *FIRST*® Washington Robotics team.

Kent's history makes this especially important. The valley's industrial identity stretches back to the days when Boeing built a major research and development campus tied to the Apollo program. That legacy continues as new space companies start up and scale, and advanced manufacturing continues to require new talent.

With most of these companies tucked away in industrial corridors, far from where students live or attend school, young people in the area rarely see these industries up close. *FIRST*® Washington offers a vehicle to change that paradigm.

FIRST® Washington brings industry mentors directly to students. Engineers help middle schoolers debug code. Technicians teach high schoolers how to machine aluminum. Project managers coach teams through design reviews.

Coaches, volunteers, and mentors give students a window into careers they might not otherwise encounter, and partnership with corporate mentors gives employers a direct line to future talent long before they enter the job market.



The City of Kent has recently convened more than twenty aerospace CEOs to discuss shared workforce needs. Those conversations point to the same conclusion. The region needs a stronger, earlier, and more consistent connection between industry and young people. Again, *FIRST*® Washington offers a viable and scalable solution to this need.

When companies mentor a team, host a plant tour, or support a local program, they are not simply volunteering; they are investing in the workforce that their company's success will depend on in the future. Mentors and volunteers help students build the technical fluency, leadership habits, and problem-solving skills that modern manufacturing and AI-enabled industries demand. They also do this at the stage when it matters most.

Ellis often returns to a simple idea. The region's biggest challenges, including affordability and opportunity, are tied to education and mentorship. *FIRST*® Washington Robotics delivers both. The City of Kent's investment and partnership with *FIRST*® Washington Robotics exemplifies what is possible when a community, its employers, and its educators pull in the same direction.

If your employees are not connected to a *FIRST*® WA Robotics team, let's get you involved before the next season starts!



FLL RECAP

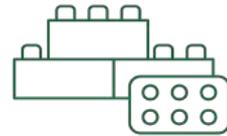
2025-2026

FIRST® LEGO League teams across Washington spent this season exploring the world beneath our feet through the UNEARTHED challenge, a theme that encouraged students to investigate ancient sites, uncover hidden histories, and imagine how discoveries from the past might shape the future. Using LEGO robotics and a strong sense of curiosity, teams guided their robots through missions that demanded careful planning, quick adjustments, and steady teamwork, turning each match into its own excavation. Alongside the robot game, students developed Innovation Projects focused on real archaeological problems, researching, interviewing professionals, building prototypes, and presenting their ideas with creativity and confidence. Together, these experiences highlighted the imagination, collaboration, and dedication that defined the UNEARTHED season for students across the state.



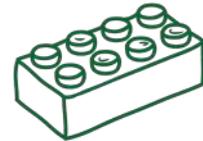
2

STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS



4

SEMI-FINALS



22

QUALIFIERS



4,125

PARTICIPANTS



550

TEAMS

EASTERN WASHINGTON WINNER



Team 55142 Tomb Raiders

WESTERN WASHINGTON WINNER



Team 27820 The Unearthed Dinos

EASTERN WASHINGTON FINALIST



Photo credit: Spokane Public Schools
Team 58650 Odyssey Dragons

WESTERN WASHINGTON FINALIST



Team 24975 Tinkering Turtles

FLL AWARDS

CHAMPIONS AWARD

This award celebrates a team that embodies the *FIRST*® *LEGO*® League Challenge experience by fully embracing the Core Values while achieving excellence and innovation in Robot Performance, Robot Design, and the Innovation Project.

The Champions Award Winners and Finalists move on to the World Championships in Houston, TX.

BOARD SPOTLIGHT

CREATING SPACE FOR GIRLS TO LEAD: PRIYA KRISHNAN AND THE POWER OF *FIRST*[®]

Nearly half of young women who start on a STEM path leave before earning their degree. Women hold only a third of STEM jobs even though they earn nearly half of all STEM-related bachelor's degrees. The problem is not ability. It is the lack of support and role models who show young women what is possible. Priya Krishnan, mentor of Team 26215 - Matrix Robotics, and *FIRST*[®] Washington Board member, is trying to change that.

Priya is a Senior Engineering Manager at Amazon, with over 20 years of work experience in STEM-related roles. She has spent her life leaning in to address the gender gap in STEM whether that is through mentoring female engineers and aspiring women managers or young women participating in *FIRST*[®]



Robotics.

Her passion for enabling girls through *FIRST*[®] grew from what she saw while coaching and parenting co-ed teams. The girls showed up early and they



stayed late. They were prepared, focused, and determined. But competition days often told a different story.

“When it was the day of the competition and it was actually all about driv-

They were prepared, focused, and determined.

ing the bot... the boys would very easily take over,” she said.

That moment stuck with her because the environment did not give the girls on the team room to lead.

Matrix Robotics, an all-girls *FIRST*[®] Tech Challenge team, grew out of that realization. Her intention was to create a space where girls could own every step of the process. Coding. Driving. Strategy. Outreach. “Having an all-girls team and having a community with these women... it became very natural to bring all of the team members together,” Priya explained.



“

Teams show grit as they work toward a shared goal.

”

For Priya, *FIRST*[®] has never been about just robotics. It is about how students learn to collaborate, respond to adversity, and build confidence. “Learning to work with other engineering people... is the biggest thing *FIRST*[®] teaches these kids,” she said. Learning includes failure. “Every single thing is not going to succeed... and all of these pieces are very important for them.”

Mentorship is what makes this growth possible. Early on, many students are hesitant to build or speak up. “It took a conversation of bringing a team of folks together, walk through a learning journey and building confidence slowly,” she shared. With time and support, those same students become leaders and mentors themselves.

That confidence shows up far beyond competition. Matrix Robotics students run outreach events, manage social media, host podcasts, and actively work to make robotics more accessible in their community. In one notable experience, the team pushed back after encountering ungracious professionalism during a competition. Their advocacy helped lead to clearer rules the following season. For Priya, it was a reminder that students can create change when they are encouraged to speak up.

In her professional life as a Senior Engineering Manager,

the similarities are hard to miss. “In both *FIRST*[®] and Amazon, teams show grit as they work toward a shared goal,” she said. The work looks similar in both places, from rethinking designs to communicating through problems and learning from what did not go right the first time.

When Priya talks to young women who question whether they belong in STEM, she encourages them to reframe the question entirely. “One should not think whether one belongs, they just need to think about what they are passionate about.” STEM, she says, is not about checking every technical box. It is about problem-solving. “Women often bring a strong attention to detail, empathy, and persistence... those qualities are not just valuable in STEM, they are essential.”

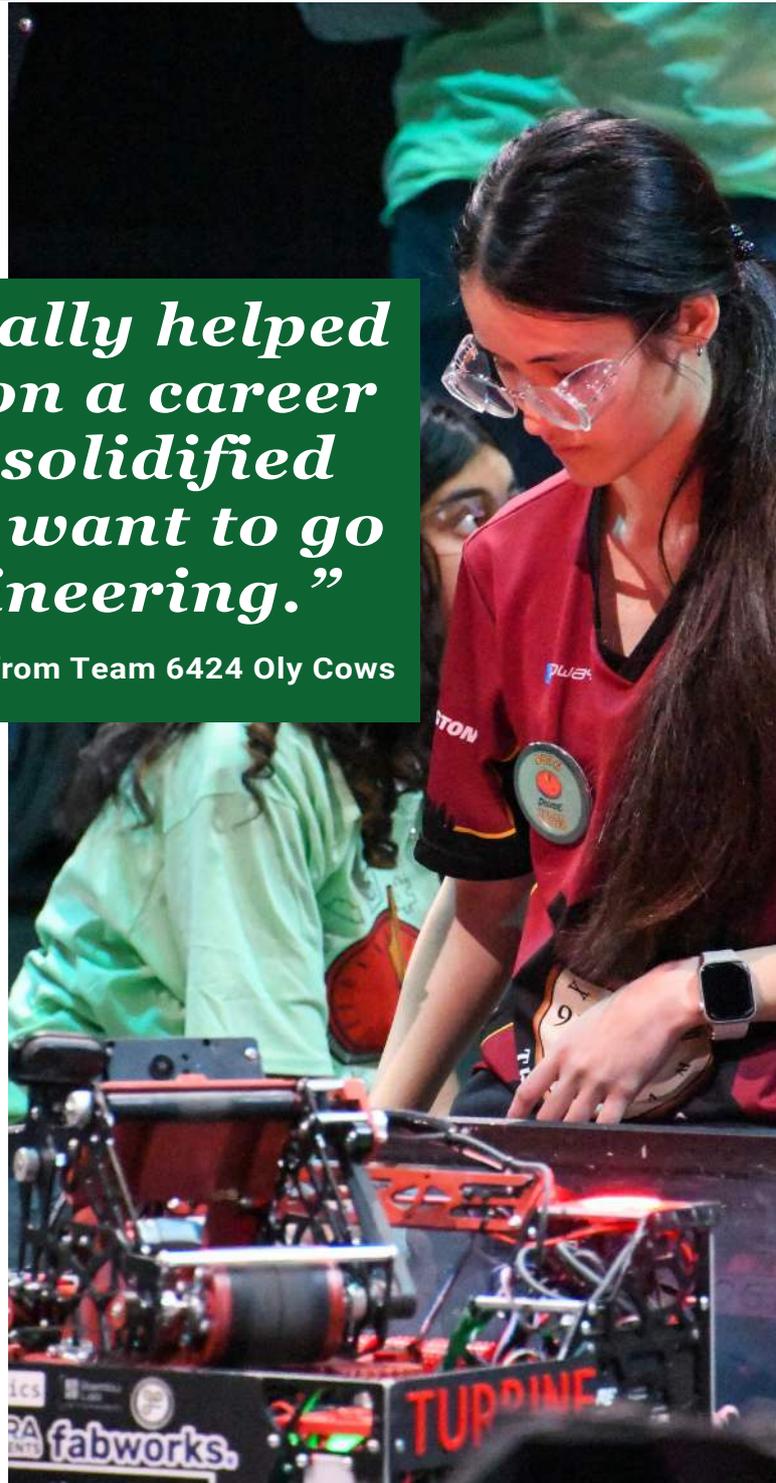
Through *FIRST*[®], Priya sees students learn that lesson early. They begin with a robot, but they leave with confidence, belonging, and the belief that their ideas deserve to be heard. If Priya’s story inspires you, or if you want to help the next generation of girls find their place in STEM, reach out to our Volunteer Manager, Rhonda McRae (rhondam@firstwa.org) to get involved.

FTC RECAP 2025-2026

The 2025–2026 *FIRST®* Tech Challenge season, **DECODE**, wrapped up in Washington after months of work from students, mentors, volunteers, and staff, showcasing a community deeply committed to creativity, problem-solving, and collaboration. The game’s shifting objectives and fast pace pushed teams to adapt quickly, refine their designs, and stay focused through every match. Beyond the field, the season highlighted how FTC helps students build connections, strengthen their communities, and grow as leaders. As teams look ahead, the dedication and spirit shown across the state continue to shape what’s possible for the *FIRST®* Washington community.

“FIRST® really helped me settle on a career path... it solidified that yes, I want to go into engineering.”

-Member from Team 6424 Oly Cows



FTC by the NUMBERS

1

STATE CHAMPIONSHIP

2,172

STUDENTS

181

TEAMS

7

LEAGUE
TOURNAMENTS

28

LEAGUE
EVENTS

2

SUPER
QUALIFIERS

FTC AWARDS

We want to congratulate all teams on an amazing DECODE season! For a list of all awardees, click [here](#).



Team 19745 Turtle Walkers

INSPIRE AWARD

The highest honor a team can earn, recognizing exceptional performance in robot design, documentation, and outreach.



Team 14179 Sushi Squad

CONNECT AWARD

Recognizes a team's connection with the STEM community and highlights the team's presence and professionalism in the broader STEM ecosystem.



Team 23305 Creative Minds and Team 19745 Turtle Walkers

WINNING ALLIANCE

The winning alliance is recognized for its strategic gameplay, teamwork, and overall robot performance, contributing to it winning the tournament.



Team 23270 Sounder Bots

REACH AWARD

Celebrates the teams that actively engage in outreach efforts, spreading awareness of STEM and robotics to students, schools, and the broader community.



Aarush Abraham (Team 23270 Sounder Bots), Ethan Lee (Team 18225 High Definition), Abigail Li (Team 14179 Sushi Squad), and Saket Toshniwal (Team 23511 Seattle Solvers)

FIRST® LEADERSHIP AWARD

Recognizes outstanding individuals in areas such as leadership, entrepreneurship, and dedication to advancing the mission of FIRST® within their communities.



Team 19708 Emerald Bots

THINK AWARD

Recognizes the team that masterfully documents their engineering process and robot using a portfolio.

VOLUNTEER MANAGER

how one parent's curiosity became a career supporting thousands of volunteers

Rhonda McRae's connection to *FIRST*® Washington began when her son joined FRC Team 3070 in 2016. At one of his early competitions, she learned that the event was largely volunteer run. The passion and the impact volunteers had on the students' experiences drew her in, and she signed up to help. This experience led her from parent to long-time volunteer and eventually to her role at *FIRST*® Washington.

Rhonda saw the impact of *FIRST*® as she watched the change and growth in her children. Her son learned how to work with others, teach younger teammates, and take responsibility for shared work. Her daughter, often soft-spoken and shy around adults, became a senior engineering lead who could explain her robot design with confidence. Most importantly, Rhonda saw firsthand the non-technical skills *FIRST*® students learned.

Those realizations have kept her involved long after her children graduated. She volunteers at events, supports [Unified Robotics](#), and runs summer robotics camps for

students in her community. Volunteering has become something she genuinely loves, and she finds herself drawn to the people who make the programs possible.

“When I saw that this program, which I saw my son benefiting from, needed volunteers, I started volunteering.”

Today, Rhonda serves as *FIRST*® Washington's Volunteer Manager. Her role brings together everything she learned as a parent, mentor, teacher, and long-time volunteer. She supports volunteer coordinators, communicates with volunteers across the state, and helps create an environment where students can thrive. Her background gives her a clear understanding of what volunteers need and how to support them.



Rhonda stayed with *FIRST*® because she believes in its mission and the close-knit community. She has seen the confidence, teamwork, and sense of belonging that grow within these programs. That belief guides her work every day and reflects the spirit of *FIRST*®. If you are interested in getting involved

or want to learn more about volunteering, email Rhonda at rhondam@firstwa.org.

FROM THE PITS

at sundome

As the Marketing and Communications Manager, I got to walk the pits at SunDome and talk with some amazing students. *FIRST*® is more than robotics and these students prove it. It's community, family, and a stepping stone for the future. See for yourself in the quotes below! A huge shoutout to the students from teams 5468 Chaos Theory, 6443 AEMBOT, 4125 Confidential, 10416 Radical Raccoons, and 9023 Future Martians!

“

I ended up falling in love with *FIRST*®, not only with the robotics side of everything, but also just the teammates that were on my team.

”

“

I joined our film and marketing team, and I fell in love. I thought, ‘This is what I'm set out to do.’

”

“

Literally just join. You have nothing to lose. Just dip your toes in and have fun. No matter what you decide to do, you can always have fun.

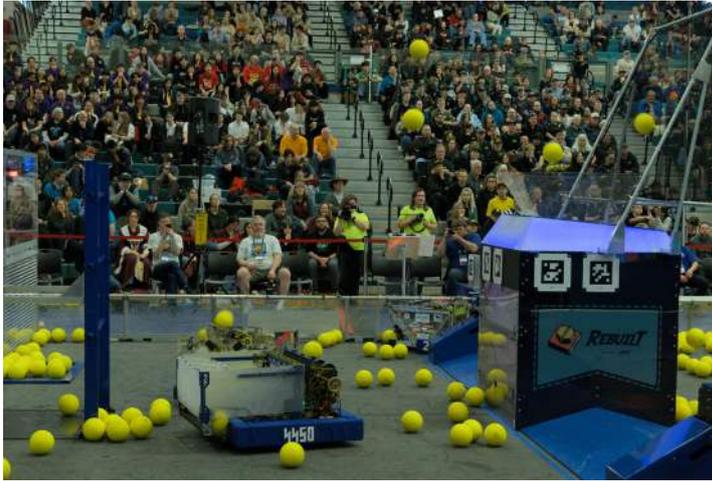
”

“

Our voices really matter...I helped initiate an act called the KOSA Bill to protect children online.

”

GET INVOLVED



THANK YOU

Thank you to all the generous individual donors who support our work both via annual and monthly donations!

Thank you to our incredible event volunteers who provide over 35,000 hours of volunteer time to ensure all the events run smoothly!

Washington State calculates the value of this time at a rate of \$41.70/hour, meaning that event volunteers alone represent an investment of about \$1.5 million annually to the *FIRST®* Washington Robotics ecosystem!

Thank you to our Board of Directors for their financial support and investment in time and knowledge!

And thank you to all of the companies who either directly support teams with funding and/or provide matching funds for employees who are working to ensure the next generation of STEM talent is well-prepared for the workforce!

2025-2026 AGE SEASON SPONSORS AND SUPPORTERS

Alaska Airlines Foundation
Amazon
Argosy
Ball
Bechtel
Blue Origin
Blue Scope
City of Kent
FIRST® HQ
FIRST Tech Credit Union
Google
Google.org
Kalispel Tribe
M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust
Microsoft
Norcliffe Foundation
Novelis
OMRON
OSPI
PACCAR
Pacific Power Foundation
PEMCO
Puget Sound Energy
Seattle Foundation
Southwest Washington High Tech Council
T-Mobile
Target Circle
U.S. Department of Education
XEROX
Yakima Valley Community Foundation