



Robotics teacher Dick Leonard shows Mark Gelfand some of the underwater robots that students have created.

Swampscott classroom dedicated to donor

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Mark Gelfand, a local software engineer, said it was his way of trying to get a lot of things done with limited resources.

But school officials were a little more ecstatic on Wednesday evening, Nov. 2, in the planning and design engineering room at Swampscott High School.

“I think it goes without saying that the generosity of this gift is something I don’t think we’ve seen in Swampscott and we’re incredibly grateful,” said School Committee Chairman Jacqueline Kinney.

“They have given us a gift — it’s more than money,” said Superintendent of Schools Lynne Celli. “It’s a gift for students and it’s a gift to jump start what our children need.”

The Gelfand Family Charitable Trust grant to Swampscott schools, spread out over four years, was being honored with the naming of the engineering rooms after Gelfand.

A plaque bearing a photo of Gelfand as a child was unveiled during the ceremonies, which were attended by family and friends of Gelfand as well as school officials and staff, town officials and some residents. The plaque, which included two of Gelfand’s favorite sayings, “Inside every child is a scientist” and “Always be curious,” will hang in front of the two engineering rooms at the High School.

Celli explained that Gelfand's 2011-12 donation, which includes funds that allow the school to create an Electronics Club, a Bioengineering Club, hire floating STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) teacher/coaches at both the High and Middle schools, increase professional development in those subjects at both schools and purchase new equipment.

Celli said it was important to tie the STEM classes to the humanities. She explained that growing up that dancing was one of her passions.

"Physics, that's the last thing that I was interested in," said Celli. "I did it because I had to. Chemistry was not an interest. I did it because I had to. ... [But if a] consulting STEM teacher had taught me the physics of a pirouette, I would have been a better dancer."

Gelfand said he was lucky growing up.

"I have an uncle who was an electrical engineer, just enough to crystallize my interest in science to focus it into some hobby that was really interesting to me" said Gelfand.

Then several times he repeated the phrase, "But what about all the other kids that don't have someone?"

Gelfand's efforts to help those kids extend well beyond Swampscott. He has donated money to help science and engineering students at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell and at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, where he grew up.

And he spoke about recently returning from Ethiopia, where he has set up three science and engineering centers for high school kids and has another three in various planning stages. "In the case of Swampscott, the town that adopted me ... I'm trying to do what I can," said Gelfand. "I know it seems like a lot of money ... it's actually a small amount of money that I'm hoping will make a big effect."

He said his donations gave Swampscott schools the "freedom to purchase materials, lab equipment, and also to be able to more easily be able to fit in a few extra teachers that have purely science on their agenda."

After the ceremonies, Gelfand toured the other engineering room, which Principal Lynne Millington called the construction room, where the robots and other projects are built by the students.

"Oh, this what I've been wanting to see," said Gelfand as he entered the room.

Dick Leonard, who has been teaching robotics since 2007, showed off underwater robots that would test conditions such as temperature and salinity at a depth of 30 to 40 feet and send that information back to MIT as part of the SeaPerch Challenge.

Leonard also spoke about creating robots that would travel at 30 mph, be 4-foot tall and weigh up to 150 pounds. Those would be entered in the annual state robotics competition at the Agganis Arena in the spring.

“You’re doing the lifting, I’m not,” said Gelfand during the presentation. “I’m just trying to be the little nudge, the catalyst. That’s the role I like to play.”



Superintendent Lynne Celli speaks about all the ways that the donation made by Mark Gelfand, left, will help the schools.