



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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VISION CHARTER STUDENTS RACE TO LEARN STEM

(BOISE) -- Students at Vision Charter School in Caldwell are racing to prove their STEM skills.

Literally. In fact, the students in grades 4-12 who have signed up for a special after school Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) program will be showing off their skills at Firebird Raceway.

Led by fourth-grade instructor Brenda Willson, the students are building a stock drag race car from scratch, using a 440 Block engine and a 1979 Plymouth Volare Duster chassis as part of the STEM Racing program

For Willson, who will drive the car in an effort to reach 100 mph in a quarter mile from a standing start, it combines her love of STEM education and drag racing and is a way to engage both the students at Vision Charter and the community. The car is tentatively scheduled to race May 30 in the Oldies But Goodies race at Firebird Raceway just off Highway 16 between Meridian and Emmett. It will be on display for the public to see during a car show the program is putting together on May 14 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the school. The show will feature classic cars, hot rods and a funny car driven by amateur drag racer Dale Harsin, the father of BSU football coach Bryan Harsin.

A long-time and "passionate" fan of drag racing and an amateur driver in the sport, Willson said she "scratched the surface last year with a STEM component and some racing. I saw how much the kids enjoyed it, so I pitched the opportunity" to school officials for a STEM after school program focused on drag racing. They gave her their full support, and with fellow teacher Kara Evans, who coordinates the science component of the project, the STEM Racing program was born.

One of the first students to sign up was James Reibe, a high school student "who probably knows more about pistons, rods and crankshafts than I ever will," Willson said. "His family realized it gave him an outlet for some vo-tech education."

Students of all ages (50-60 students in grades 4-6, and 16-17 students in grades 7-12,) signed up for the program and participation is spilt fairly evenly between boys and girls.

Some of the work on the car has been done in the classroom. The elementary students, for example, were given a task of cleaning, identifying and organizing a collection of spare parts. Then they had to look up in catalogs the best price for parts they needed. "One might find a crankshaft we needed, but another may have found one cheaper. They learned a lot about using catalogs and costs." Other students used their art skills to design logos and posters.

The older students who worked on building the drag racer, and who will be part of the race crew, were bussed by the school to a nearby storage shed where the bulk of the construction took place

--More--



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under the watchful eye of Brad Hunt, who handles building maintenance for the school. “He’s a big MOPAR fan and he has a wealth of knowledge” about cars, Willson said. “He knows his stuff and is co-facilitator of the program on the high school side.”

Since the school didn’t have the money to build a drag racer from scratch, Willson has worked to create a lengthy list of community partnerships -- some with businesses, some with individuals. NHRA professional funny car drag racer John Hale has provided advice on how to find parts and pieces and has served as the “star” mentor for the program. “He’s my professional go-to guy,” Willson said.

Sponsors such as Fast Glass, Commercial Tire-Farm City, McDowell’s Specialty Repairs, AV8 Media and Crawford Network Consulting have donated parts, services or funds to the program. Other individuals have loaned jacks or motor mounts or even spare parts. “We beg, borrow or steal whatever we need,” the energetic elementary teacher joked. “We don’t have any funding, so we have to ask for help all the time. And the people of this community have stepped up to help us.”

The owners of Firebird Raceway have supported the project. On May 15, all of the students in grades 4 and 5 at the school, plus the STEM Racing program’s grade 6-12 participants, have been invited to show up for the Ignitor Nitro Funny Car Opener race. Prior to the racing, arrangements have been made for the students to meet with the drivers and crews of three professional funny cars – Nitroholic, Warhorse and Bardahl. “That’s about 150 kids,” Willson said, “and we’ll have about 50 adult chaperones. That’s almost unheard of to have that many chaperones for a school function, but some were actually begging to be included.”

In a letter to parents explaining the program, Willson wrote “Students learn teamwork, leadership skills, community involvement and giving back.” She went on to add, “We are excited to see all the hard work we have put in become a reality.... It takes a team with goals for greatness and a vision to make things happen!”

At every step of the process in building the car and preparing it to race, some element of STEM learning has been involved.

“This has been a dream come true for me. When you can mix your passion and academia, and excite your students to learn, this is how you teach. You integrate and inspire.”

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(For more information about the program, go to the Vision Charter School STEM Racing Facebook page at www.facebook.com/stemracing12.)

Cutline:

Picture 1: Brenda Willson may be smaller than some of her students in the STEM Racing after-school program at Vision Charter School, but she has big ideas for teaching STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math).

Picture 2: Students at Vision Charter School’s after school program work on rebuilding a Block 440 engine for their STEM Racing car.

Picture 3: Students in the Charter School’s after school program sort and clean parts for STEM Racing car.