'A once in a lifetime opportunity'
SSCC prof develops Star Wars coding class

Three Southern State Community College students recently had an opportunity to help teach two Star Wars-themed coding classes at a fan gathering in California, and the same class is coming to SSCC's central campus July 25-26.

SSCC Computer Science Professor Dr. Joshua Montgomery said he was asked in May 2021 to build a coding class for DroidBuilders, a group that builds and supports building animatronic droids from the Star Wars movie series.

So, Montgomery and his computer science students built 20 miniature domes styled after R2-D2, a droid character from the Star Wars films. At the end of May, Montgomery, along with SSCC Computer Science students Alex Bradshaw, Blaine Parker and Elijah Siders, used the mechanical domes to teach two coding classes at Star Wars Celebration — Anaheim 2022 in Anaheim, Calif.

"I could not be more happy with the class," said Montgomery. "It went beyond my expectations. The students were excited and proud of their work."

Montgomery said students who were in middle school and high school, as well as a few STEM teachers, were able to program the domes to move, make noise and light up.

Bradshaw described the experience as a "once in a lifetime opportunity."

"Being surrounded by individuals who are passionate about creating and building inspired me to continue my education," he said. "Volunteering my time to teach others was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life."

Parker said the event "allowed me to see a real-life scenario for my studies."

"Not only did I get to see what I have been learning about come to life, but I also got to help teach other students about these skills," he said. "During this trip, I realized that you don't have to go to a large school to do awesome things. Southern State has provided me with a life-changing event that I never dreamed would happen."

Parker also said the experience showed him that "anyone can participate in and excel in whatever they put their minds to if they have the right teachers."

Parker and Bradshaw thanked Montgomery for his influence on their education.

Montgomery said Bradshaw, Parker and Siders also spent time working on hands-on tech projects with youngsters at the gathering.

"These three students were not only willing and ready to do anything they were asked, but they were also fantastic with the kids," said Nancy Schunke, STEM director at DroidBuilders and teacher at Frenship High School. "Alex, Elijah and Blaine never complained and showed sincere enthusiasm… These Southern State students showed their muster while sharing their skills."

Montgomery and students will teach the same class at SSCC in July. Classes will be held July 25 from 1-5 p.m. for students entering grades 6-9 and Tuesday, July 26 for students entering grades 10-12. The cost is $75, which includes the class fee, snacks, materials, and a camp T-shirt.

Students must pre-register by July 20 to secure their spot at sscc.edu. STEM educators can attend one class each on either of the days for free. Those with questions can contact Amy McClellan at amcclellan@sscc.edu or 800.628.7722 x3510

Montgomery, an avid Star Wars fan, has built a full-scale film-accurate version of R2-D2, and often attends events with the droid in tow.

The professor said designing the domes for the classes took more than a year to complete.

"I have never prepped so much for two classes in my life," he said, "but it was all worth it to watch the students get excited and hear stories of inspiration."

Montgomery said the biggest heartwarming moment for him was after the class in California. Montgomery said a mother of one of the middle school students came up to him and said the class was the reason they came to the event, and, while crying, told him that her daughter had just asked if he would still be teaching college classes in five years because she wanted him as her teacher.