Laurel student hosting CLE Hack-a-Thon

By SUE REID

When Laurel sophomore Ella Witalec first became involved with coding and robotics as a middle-schooler, a love for computer science took root.

Not only would she learn the value of teamwork as part of her involvement in the school's Robotics Team, but also gain confidence and broaden her knowledge in what is considered

Witalec

a male-dominated field.

Ella, 15 of Orange, is sharing that passion through mentoring others.

Through her Capstone Project, which is a two-year endeavor that takes place in 10th and 11th grades allowing students to delve deep into a passion or area of interest, and her involvement in Laurel's entrepreneur classes and opportunities, Ella is throwing a

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Hack-a-Thon at her school in June.

The free event — the CodeHers CLE Hack-a-Thon — is designed to introduce middle school girls to Python, a beginner-friendly multipurpose programming language that Ella taught herself.

To bring this event, which will take place from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. June 3, to fruition, Ella entered and won the Teen Accelerate competition through the Cleveland Leadership in February. She pitched her idea, beating out 11 other teams and taking home the $1,000 prize.

"I explained to the judges how there is a lot of gender inequality in this field," she said, "and how we need to get more girls involved and give them support to see role models in field."

She said that statistics show girls lose interest in the field around the age of 15 mainly due to loss of support and societal pressures pushing girls away from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, or STEM, coursework.

"I was inspired to do some sort of project that would help middle school girls in particular to get involved in computer science," Ella continued.

Her goal is to provide support for others to sustain an interest in the field, showing them how computer science serves to solve real-world issues.

"That's the most exciting thing about it," she said.

Ella said she also loves how computer science combines the aspects of logic and problem solving with creativity, "really exercising that side of your mind.

"It's really exciting to see the results of your code," she said. "I think that the problem-solving of coding is interesting. Figuring it out and working through logic is the fun part. It's kind of like a big puzzle."

She credits the support of Laurel to carry that drive forward.

"At Laurel, in an all-girls environment, to have that kind of support (is great)," she said. "I felt my voice was valued and didn't feel that same support elsewhere."

Going into Capstone, Ella said she knew she wanted her project to focus not only on computer science, but something that would help the community.

Participants in her Hack-a-thon – defined as an event where people engage in rapid and collaborative engineering over a short period of time – will not only learn the basics of Python, but work in groups to build a project to address an issue they care about.

Ella said she hopes this event will be held for many years to come, adding that computer science is a field very relevant in today's world.

"I'm really interested in AI and machine-learning," Ella said of her future path. She sees computer science as one way to help people in the medical field, improving new models for diagnostics and treatment of people with medical issues. She is hoping to work in the area of research.

She said that she does not believe artificial intelligence will ever have the level of creativity of humans

"As of now, AI still has a long way to go," she said.

Ella, who has attended Laurel since pre-school, serves as co-captain of the high school Robotics Team and helps with the middle school team. She is also a member of Speech and Debate and the school's Investment Club and plays tennis.

Outside of school, she enjoys reading, running and hanging out with friends.

She said her family is very supportive of her computer science path.

The field has definitely taught her persistence, Ella noted.

"It's learning a whole new language, and you will make mistakes, but if you're invested in it and keep trying, that's the most important thing," she said.

Those efforts to learn more and do better are at the core of her education, she said.

"It's the whole ethos of the Laurel environment, fostering innovation and a spirit of risk-taking for every student," she said. "That has given me the confidence."