

Vishnutheja Rachakonda– Testimony

My name is Vishnu Rachakonda and I am a 12th grade student at Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Greenbelt, MD. I am the president of the school's robotics club and *FIRST* Robotics Competition (FRC) Team 53 "Area 53." I became involved in *FIRST* activities in 7th grade, when I tinkered with LEGO MINDSTORMS robots and the competition field designed by *FIRST* as a member of a local STEM club. When I moved to high school, I continued my existing interest in the STEM fields by joining my school's FRC team. Since then, I have spent five more years involved in *FIRST* programs such as *FIRST* LEGO League (FLL) and *FIRST* Robotics Competition.

I have found my *FIRST* involvement to be among the most unique experiences of my education and lifetime. FRC, the competition I have spent the most time in, has challenged me to engage the STEM fields more thoroughly than other academic or extracurricular activity I have done. Due in large part to FRC, I plan to major in biomedical engineering in college. In addition, it has been thoroughly enjoyable. The spirited nature of the teams reminds me, as an extremely avid sports fan, of the atmosphere of a college football game, only with a much more friendly spin. Building within teams themselves, as well, has been very fun.

Perhaps the most enjoyable and useful aspect of being a member in *FIRST* programs has been the sense of appreciation I feel as a student for having been given this wonderful opportunity. Mentors and adults regularly tell me how they were not able to access such inspirational, competitive, and educational activities. Furthermore, *FIRST* has allowed me to appreciate being an American. Recently, I went to Japan to present original research at a conference for other high school students. There, I described my experience in *FIRST* programs to students, world-renowned researchers, and Education Ministry officials. Their amazement with the *FIRST* programs allowed me to appreciate them even more.