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ERIC HEINO | May 27, 2010 - 10:42 AM | 0

Arts and trades race to the finish line

Take one sheet of plywood, a power sander, some glue and paint. Add in a handful of artists, tradesmen, 10-year-old drag racing enthusiasts and let them mix for six weeks. Out of this unique combination comes... the Power Tool Drag Race Grand Prix.



Created by Steven Laurie, the Art Gallery of York University's interim education and collections assistant, the Jane and Finch Boys and Girls Club got a chance to build miniature drag racers driven entirely by power tools.

Arts and trades race to the finish line. Jane and Finch Boys and Girls Club members Matthew Paul, left, and Frank Danquah, both 12, put the final touches on their power tool dragster, Robotic Swagger, moments before its big race. The youngsters had spent the last six weeks designing, building and decorating their cars with help from York University artists and trades workers before racing them in the parking lot of Yorkgate Mall on Tuesday. Staff photo/ERIC HEINO

"Even though they are crude, these dragsters have a lot of design esthetic that came directly from the youth, which is important because I feel they should have ownership over these types of projects," said Laurie.

The group of youths between 10 and 14 years old spent one day a week working with York University artists and tradespeople to design and construct their creations. The kids were split into two groups, which they named Team Supreme and Team Robotic Swagger.

They began to prepare for the inevitable day when the two creations would be pitted against each other in the Grand Prix. On the afternoon of May 25, they gathered in the parking lot of the Yorkgate Mall to do battle.

A crowd gathered and checkered flags waved as the team set a 50-foot wooden ramp along the hot pavement. Safety rails were built in to keep the vehicles straight as they sped down its expanse into awning garbage bins at the finish line.

Tension built as 12-year-old Frank Danquah put the final touches on Robotic Swagger's flame-patterned ride.

"We didn't just think of speed, but we went for style, too," Frank said as he lovingly brushed off a few rogue pieces of dirt on his paint job. "We put in these exhaust pipes even though nothing comes out of them. It just looks better."

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Across the track 13-year-old Kadiatu Barrie didn't look impressed. She and team supreme had created a white dinosaur looking racer, complete with spikes on its back and mean-looking headlight eyes.

"Ours is cooler, faster and it looks better," said Kadiatu.

Finally, the moment had arrived when both racers took their place at the starting line. They were plugged in and ready to rip. With a flick of the switch, both took off down the track with incredible speed. At the end of the track, both dragsters crashed into a garbage bin at top speed, necessitating multiple repair jobs.

Each dragster won its share of races, but at the end of the day Laurie felt it didn't really matter who the winner was.

"It's a matter of them feeling empowered that they can drive a nail, drive a screw or make a pilot hole to properly fasten things together. They also have the opportunity to touch power tools which are normally safeguarded," said Laurie. "We used arts and trades to create this spectacle in a parking lot where nothing is usually going on."

He plans to look for additional funding for an expanded program next year. In the meantime, he sees his legacy in a confident bunch of youngsters that can utilize their new skills for the rest of their lives.

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