During the first few days of my sophomore year, I was asked, “Well, what are you interested in?” At a new school with so much to offer, I was baffled. I choked out something that hopefully sounded like, “Science”, and I was told to go to room 67 after school on Tuesday.

Not having any idea what to expect, I made my way after French class to the room down the hall, and upon entering was barraged by the scene before me. The four tiny walls contained a whirlwind of activity as students labored over all manner of interesting looking contraptions outfitted with thrumming servos and rotating arms. Screws skittered across the floor. Machines whirred, computers with their desktops full of code whined under their loads and general pandemonium ensued—all to the steady, electronic lull of techno in the background.

I made my way up to the teacher presiding over the tableau, who introduced herself as Ms. Fernandez. Upon learning I was new, she called for silence, and a room full of expectant eyes turned to me.

I look back on my apprehension then with humor, as so many of those expectant faces morphed into my dearest friends over the course of the following years. That first VEX robotics meeting, in which I was sat down with a manual and a kit of parts, taught me so many things still relevant today. For example, when constructing something, every time you build a piece, you will take it apart six times.

Robotics holds such fascination for me in the way it is conducted. For all of our competitions a problem must be solved, and to overcome the challenges posed by the provided constraints, it is necessary to revolutionize the way in which we see the situation. Our teams must analyze each obstacle and bend our minds around them until we can think of a solution. Flexibility in the face of challenge is something I have learned thoroughly from my time with the Mecha Makos, not to mention quick thinking, should something malfunction at competition.

I love walking into the engineering room, and being able to build that which I see in my mind. To be able to design something, put it together, and then see it actually function is a magnificent feeling. The dual aspects of theoretical and mechanical knowledge and their impact on each other are so useful to me, and nowhere else can I apply what I’ve learned in my textbooks to the real world. I learn in physics how a lever works, and I can then go to robotics and incorporate that knowledge into my design in order to overcome a problem I was so stuck on the week before.

In addition to my experience with VEX, much applicable knowledge has come from my years in that room full of metal and mind games. I’ve learned how to operate countless power tools, and how an engineering firm is run. I believe that all that sandpaper has helped to make me a well-rounded individual.

The people I have spent my time with in robotics have also furthered me as a person; to have a place in which to geek out about calculus and chemistry is a wonderful thing. My VEX team is like a family, and our constant banter and contrastive conversation with each other has knit us closely together. It also makes the long car rides to competition much more enjoyable and really worth it when you’re packing a car at three a.m. full of robots and extra gears. I have learned as much from my friends in robotics as from a class in school, and have had massive amounts of fun doing it.

In so many ways VEX robotics has been an asset to me during my time in high school. I have learned so much and met so many people whom I now could not imagine my life without. On any given day, I can be found toting a bit of robot between classrooms, and the current competition is always present in my mind. And now, I am always the advocate for the new-comers, those shy, small girls who wander in on the first Tuesday of the year, eager to fill their lives with robots and experience for themselves the joy of bringing their ideas to life out of c-channels and servos.