

BMHS program builds real-world skills

By HILLARY GAVAN Senior staff writer | Posted: Thursday, January 7, 2016 4:00 pm

BELOIT — “You can’t always be 100 percent sure about something until you get your hands dirty.”

That’s one of many lessons Beloit Memorial High School senior and secretary of the SkillsUSA Club Savannah Terwilliger has learned while fixing cars as part of the automotive program.

The senior is in her third automotive class. She not only changes oil, but can put on new brakes and tires as well as tinker on engines. She first learned about cars from her muse — her father Mark Terwilliger.

As she moves toward her dream of becoming an engineer one day, she plans to use her auto mechanic skills to fix her own vehicles and save money. Savannah’s already won a dinner date from her grandmother after performing a successful oil change.

To help further her skills even more she’s joined in SkillsUSA, a club designed to promote workforce and real world skills. There are district, regional and state competitions for everything from automotive and construction tasks to doing advertising, architectural and cabinetry work.

In the School District of Beloit the main emphasis has been on mechanics, construction, machining and welding with 20 kids in the club.

Savannah isn’t the only girl in SkillsUSA. The group’s president Alyx Richards is a senior specializing in machining.

A competition was held on Dec. 7 at Portage High School where five SkillsUSA students participated including Savannah, Trevor Carr, Geovani Castellanos, Jose Cuellar and Brandon Sachs.



SkillsUSA club

(From left): Beloit School District SkillsUSA club member Geovani Castellanos, vice president Josh Lankford, treasurer Dominic Putnam, president Alyx Richards and secretary Savannah Terwilliger gather around a vehicle students are working on. Students in SkillsUSA compete in competitions focused on real-world skills such as construction, auto mechanics and more.

Trevor competed in automotive winning second place, and Geovani competed in carpentry winning a first place at the competition.

Geovani said he had 45 minutes to build a staircase. He won for best overall quality. Although he's excelling in carpentry, automotive instructor Aaron Troxell said Geovani is equally skilled in auto mechanics.

Geovani said it's his first year in the SkillsUSA club, and it has been a great learning in experience.

"My uncle said in order to succeed, learning is the key to everything," Geovani said.

Senior Trevor Carr, who won second place in automotive repair competition, is taking his third automotive class and works at McKillips' Muffler & Exhaust.

Trevor is working to rebuild a 1953 Ford Customline he hopes to one day give to his grandfather as he works on another truck and cars via his driveway.

He said SkillsUSA has allowed him to meet people who share his interest in repairing cars. Although it's a tradition rich in Trevor's family, he wasn't able to find other auto enthusiasts until the club.

Troxell said the next competition for students will be held on Jan. 28-29. To help pay for the competitions, students hold a lawn mower repair event in the spring and a snowblower tune-up event in the winter.

On Nov. 7, SkillsUSA students changed oil, checked gasoline and changed spark plugs for 23 snowblowers with help from CARQUEST and Schultz Power Equipment.

Last summer students were able to rehabilitate 70 mowers, including 20 riders. Troxell said plans are already underway for the next spring lawnmower tune-up.

Senior Dominic Putnam, who competed in the SkillsUSA competition last year, said he likes the club as well.

"It's a challenge, it gives you something to do in your free time, and it's also a team-based club," Putnam said.

Putnam has also put his skills to work fixing up his 1988 Honda. He plans to one day study engineering.

"I've always been good with hands-on activities and work," he said. "I'm excited to keep going and pushing toward future goals."