

YOUNG SCIENTISTS

Obama praises invention by Williamston students

By Maureen Groppe
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WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama Monday said the country needs to honor young scientists — such as the Williamston High School students who invented a rip tide warning device — just as much as it celebrates athletes and musicians.

"We want you to know that you've got a whole country behind you as you pursue your dreams," Obama told the dozens of students gathered for the White House Science Fair. The event celebrates student winners of a broad range of science, technology, engineering and math competitions from across the nation.

Solar-powered buoy

Julie Xu, a senior at Williamston High School, and Spencer Ottarson, a Williamston graduate who now studies computer science at Michigan State University, got to show the president the alarm system they developed with Williamston classmates to save swimmers' lives.

The buoy uses solar power to measure water flow and to set off an alarm to warn swimmers of dangerous conditions.

When the president checked out their device, he asked about its real life application.

Meant for Great Lakes

"He thought it was (a) really good idea," Julie said. "And he was really interested in how it could be implemented on a greater scale in the future."

Spencer explained to the president that the buoy was designed for the Great Lakes — where 43 people drowned in Lake Michigan alone in 2011 — but that the next step is to make a version for the ocean.

Spencer called it an unreal experience to be explaining the device to the president in the White House gardens.

Obama jumped on a stationary bike to test out a bicycle-powered emergency water sanitation station invented by Florida students.

Speaking to the group of inventors, their teachers and family members in the White House after visiting every project,

Obama said the science fair is one of his favorite annual events.

"This stuff is really cool," Obama said, as the crowd in the East Room laughed.

"And I want to thank these incredible young people for explaining to me what the heck is going on."

Celebrity guests included New York Giants wide receiver Victor Cruz, actor LeVar Burton and Bill Nye, host of the educational television program "Bill Nye the Science Guy."

Patent is next

Nye interviewed the Williamston students for the White House's livestream of the event. That was watched back home by the other members of the Williamston team who received the original \$10,000 grant from the Lemelson-MIT Program to develop the device, which they now are seeking to patent.

Dan Schab, co-director of the school's math and science academy, said the device stood out because nothing like it exists.

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President Barack Obama listens to Spencer Ottarson, 19 (center) and Julie Xu, 17, both of Williamston, as they explain their Offshore Rip Current Alert System (ORCA), on Monday during the White House Science Fair on the East Garden of the White House in Washington, D.C., PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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"Here's a chance to save lives," he said.

Obama said the science fair projects of today could become the products and businesses of tomorrow.

"One of the things that I'm concerned about is that, as a culture, we're great consumers of technology, but we're not always properly respecting the people who are in

the labs and behind the scenes creating the stuff that we now take for granted," Obama said.

"And we've got to give the millions of Americans who work in science and technology not only the kind of respect they deserve but also new ways to engage young people."

Nearly half of Americans (46 percent) say that the main reason that many young people do not pursue degrees in math and science is mostly because they

think these subjects are too hard, according to a new survey by the Pew Research Center and Smithsonian magazine.

U.S. 15-year-olds rank in the middle of developed nations in science knowledge, according to Pew.

Asked what he thinks can be done to encourage more young people to stick with math and science, Williamston teacher Schab applauded the White House event.

"This is a start," he said.