



JEFF TAYLOR/THE WINCHESTER STAR

Members of the Clarke County High School Widget Cup team build an outdoor chair they designed during the Frederick County EDA's regional Widget Cup on Thursday at Millbrook High School. Teams from each of the area's five high schools solved a real-life problem for a local employer by using skills acquired through career and technical education (CTE) and science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) courses. This year's challenge was to design and build sturdy outdoor chairs to be placed along the hiking trails at Belle Grove Plantation near Middletown. The Clarke County team won.

Widget Cup showcases design, building talents of area students



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By BRIAN BREHM
The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — Have you ever seen one of those cooking shows where aspiring chefs are given an hour to prepare an assigned dish? If so, you already have a pretty good idea of what the Widget Cup is all about.

The Widget Cup Competition is an annual event overseen by the Frederick County Economic Development Authority (EDA) that gives students from five area high schools — Handley, James Wood, Millbrook, Sherando and Clarke County — an opportunity to design and build an item needed by a local nonprofit.

This year's Widget Cup was held Thursday at Millbrook High

Sherando High School junior Prem Patel helps his team construct a sturdy outdoor chair during the Frederick County EDA's regional Widget Cup.

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School near Winchester. Teams of eight students each gathered in the morning to find out what they were going to build and which nonprofit would benefit. This year, their mission was making outdoor chairs to be placed along the walking trails on the grounds of the historic Belle Grove Plantation near Middletown.

"The chairs will provide people a place to rest while they're hiking and enjoy the beautiful views," said Shayla Rickard, business retention manager for the Frederick County EDA and organizer of the Widget Cup.

Rickard said the students were given an hour to design a chair, followed by three hours to build it with materials provided in equal amounts to each team. If a squad ran out of boards or screws before its chair was completed, they had to troubleshoot the problem because they couldn't ask for more materials.

Something new this year was that every item used for construction was sponsored by a local business. In year's past, Rickard said the EDA solicited financial donations from companies, then staff went out and bought the building items themselves.

"All of the pressure-treated lumber was donated by Frogale Lumber, all of the Trex boards were donated by Trex, the steel came from Extreme Steel, Barrett Machine donated the welding supplies, Solenberger's [Hardware] provided the glue, Home Depot provided some of the hardware," Rickard said, adding that lunch for the students was donated by Shaffer's Barbecue in Middletown. "We just went



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Millbrook High School senior Corin Patton uses a grinder to shape a strip of metal during the Frederick County EDA's regional Widget Cup on Thursday.

out and picked it up. It was wonderful."

Representatives from the sponsoring companies visited Millbrook throughout the day Thursday to watch the students compete.

"We hope that they'll see somebody who can be a potential worker for them," Rickard said.

In the workshop at Millbrook High School, students crowded around tables during the afternoon

and raced to finish their chairs.

Matthew Jennings, a junior at host school Millbrook who was competing in his first Widget Cup, said everyone on his team threw in ideas for their chair's design before the crew started building it.

When asked if Millbrook's entry would win this year's title, Matthew said, "I haven't really seen anyone else's. I've been so focused on ours."

Millbrook junior Dylan Brewer was more confident, proclaiming that Millbrook's was the best.

Most of the builders on Thursday were boys, but a few girls were there as well to hammer, saw, measure, glue and so on. One of the female competitors was Kayla Grum, a junior at Sherando High School.

"It feels empowering in a way," Kayla said when asked how it felt to be the only girl on her team. "It gives me motivation to push through all of it and go on to pursue a career in the field."

Kayla said she hopes to join the U.S. Air Force and learn aviation maintenance.

The Clarke County High School team was an equal mix of girls and boys. One of the most experienced members was senior Bailey Beard, who was competing in her third Widget Cup. She said all of the chairs being built Thursday looked great, but she believed her team's would stand out.

"It's very, very strong and doesn't wobble at all when you sit on it," Bailey said. "And definitely the added details with the metal weaves will set us apart from other people."

Sean Hodel, a sophomore from Handley High School, was competing in

his second Widget Cup. He said his team's performance on Thursday was something to be proud of.

"I feel like we're more organized than last year," Sean said. "We're working as a team."

Kim Herbstritt, executive director of Blue Ridge Habitat for Humanity, was one of the judges at Thursday's event, strolling around the workshop and assessing the performance and build quality of each team.

"I think it's amazing to see all the different schools and the variety of designs they have," Herbstritt said.

The highlight of the Widget Cup Competition came after building ended at 4:20 p.m. That's when each team took the stage in Millbrook's auditorium to explain why their chair was the best, and they backed up their presentations with multimedia video and audio presentations that had been compiled throughout the day by a member of each squad.

The judges who had watched each chair being built then conferred and determined that this year's trophy and bragging rights would go to Clarke County High School.

Rickard said students from each team will now take their chairs back to their schools to apply finishing touches like paint and sanding, then all five entries will be presented to Belle Grove Plantation at 3:30 p.m. May 15.

Rickard said she and her fellow organizers will then have a few months to rest before starting preparations for next year's Widget Cup.

"We'll start in August to plan for '25," Rickard said.

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