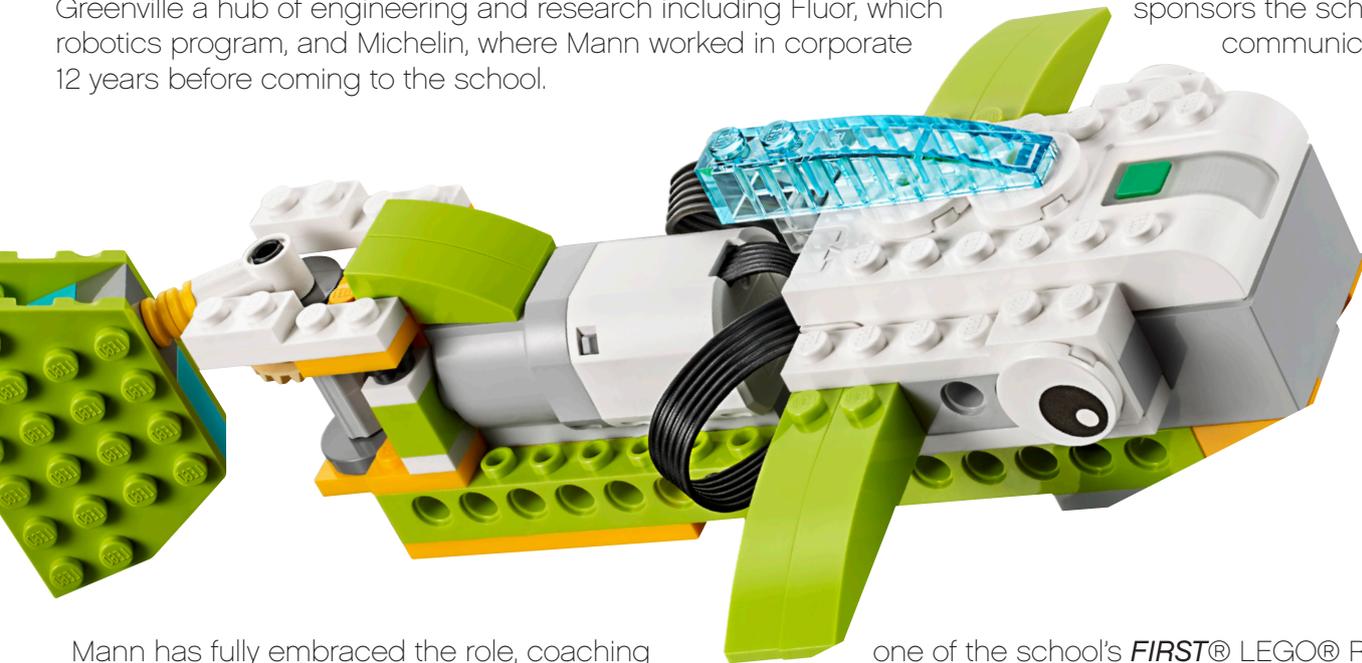


# Making Juan Smile: A Profile in LEGO® Confidence and the Power of Passionate Educators

While LEGO® Education solutions are deliberately designed to foster hands-on learning experiences that build student confidence, sometimes serendipity plays a role in getting them in front of the students who need them the most. It's the kind of thing that happens when a community comes together to build a special learning environment, one woman decides to change course and leave the corporate world for education, and a little boy from a challenging background comes face to face with a room full of LEGO Education products.

The A.J. Whittenberg Elementary School of Engineering is the fulfillment of a promise made almost 40 years ago to a community with a long history of poverty, crime, and unemployment. As the only elementary school in South Carolina with a school-wide engineering curriculum, LEGO Education products have been involved from the start. Lynn Mann, the school's Programs Director says, "You'd be hard pressed to find a LEGO Education product that's not in our building." The school has also formed partnerships with many companies that have made Greenville a hub of engineering and research including Fluor, which sponsors the school's LEGO robotics program, and Michelin, where Mann worked in corporate communications for 12 years before coming to the school.



Mann has fully embraced the role, coaching teams and founding "Innovate!" an intervention children succeed in the 21st century. One of those children is Juan (we're using a pseudonym to protect his anonymity). Lots of schools have a "Juan"; the kind of student that is incredibly quiet and so shy that making friends is nearly impossible. Starting in his first grade year, Mann saw a child with challenges to overcome, who needed an advocate and an opportunity to shine. Over the next two years they crossed paths a few more times and in the summer before his third grade year, Mann got Juan into the "Innovate!" program.

one of the school's **FIRST®** LEGO® Robotics program with the primary goal of helping at-risk

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Juan's nearly non-verbal presentation isn't helped by the fact that English isn't his first language; it was a real barrier to his confidence and definitely played a role in his reluctance to speak. With parents from different Central American countries, Juan spoke both Spanish and Mayan at home. Couple that with instances of being alienated because of it, and you come away with quite an emotional burden for any 8 year old to carry. Mann and the school counselor took it as an opportunity to help Juan to find his voice, "The next time someone questioned him about his ability to understand English, he was able to look them in the eye and say, 'I speak three languages. How many do you speak?'" said Mann.

Over the next year, Mann spent a lot of time with Juan. "I just made it my mission to do whatever it took to make him happy," she shares. It wasn't easy, but she was determined. The following summer, the final piece fell into place in the shape of a LEGO brick. Mann asked Juan to help bring some things to her office, which she describes as, "Head to toe LEGO, decals on the walls, a LEGO lamp, even my Kleenex box is made out of LEGO bricks." And of course there's all of the LEGO Education products, everything from LEGO® Education Coding Express to LEGO® MINDSTORMS® Education EV3. "His eyes just kind of lit-up and this quiet little guy says, 'You have the most LEGO I have ever seen.'" Mann saw her opportunity and asked him to join her LEGO robotics team, and that was it, "that was the moment I saw Juan smile for the very first time," she says.



Juan was named "Master of the Mat" for **FIRST®** LEGO® Robotics team #233, the Agents of Fury. He took his new role seriously, "We got to spend a lot of time together. I was his ride to all the competitions so we'd spend all day on Saturdays together. I'd get him breakfast and lunch and often we'd stop for dinner on the way home."

Juan became a leader on the team, collaborating with his peers and helping to develop solutions on team missions. "That's what I love about LEGO Education," says Mann, "It meets you where you are, but challenges you to surpass that and take it as far as you're willing to go." Juan was ready for the challenge. In his fifth grade year, he told Mann he wanted to be an engineer. As usual, Mann didn't hesitate and immediately started working on getting him into the premier STEAM middle school in the district.

Simultaneously, the Agents of Fury were having a terrific season, making the State Championship, winning the Robot Programming award, and taking home a big LEGO trophy. Juan was ecstatic. "He's just holding the trophy the whole way home. I said Juan, you've got to let me come to the door so we can show your parents your trophy!" When his parents answered, he translated in a mix of Spanish and Mayan as Mann told them how amazing Juan did in the competition. "I said we're so proud of him, he's such a great leader and engineer, and I could see how proud he was for his family to hear this, and that he was filled with a sense of accomplishment and confidence."

Juan hadn't just transformed the way he saw himself, his family had changed their perception as well. That Monday Juan came to see Mann in the morning. "He walks up to me and says, 'Ms. Mann, my dad signed the paperwork so that I can go to Fisher, (the STEAM middle school) can I give it to you?'" Mann gets emotional recounting this part of the story.

Now in eighth grade, Juan is thriving at that STEAM focused middle school. He made the A/B Honor Roll in his last quarter. This summer he was back at Innovate!, "He speaks in a clear voice, and if you ask him what he wants to be he still says an engineer," says Mann proudly. Juan's story perfectly illustrates the immeasurable impact of dedicated teachers combined with hands-on, experiential learning tools. When students like Juan can build confidence not only in learning but also in their personal value, the potential for success in the classroom and beyond is limitless.

**Find out how you can bring the transformative power of LEGO® Education to your students at:**



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