Bios of 2020 World Championship RoboArts Judges

Jr & Sr RoboArts Competition, Friday September 11, 2020

Vivian Kao earned her PhD in English Literature from Rutgers University. Her research interests include the teaching and learning of humanities and writing at STEM universities, literature/film adaptation, postcolonial studies, and the Victorian novel. At LTU, Dr. Kao serves as the coordinator for the Composition Program and works on various other projects that help students integrate writing into their coursework across the university.

Shannan Palonis has been our Robofest Coordinator for five years. She holds a BS in Speech and Theatre Education from Ball State University with additional graduate coursework from LTU in Industrial Operations. Prior to joining the Robofest Staff, she worked in Marketing for 15 years, starting as a Training Coordinator, Project Manager and Operations Quality Manager. She has volunteered for both Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts for 14 years.

Elmer Santos has been the Robofest Assistant Director since 2017. Elmer is a Mechanical Engineer with a BS inMechanicalEngineering from Cornell University and MS in Manufacturing Systems Engineering from Stanford University. He worked for General Motors for 30 years in body assembly, industrial engineering, injection molding, paint engineering, and advanced vehicle development as an engineer and an engineering group manager. At GM, Elmer has worked with various robotics applications in Body Shops (resistance spot welding, material handling) and Paint Shops (sealing, painting). He has been involved with student robotics activities since 2001, mentoring teams and volunteering in Robofest, First Lego League, First Tech Challenge, First Robotics Challenge, Vex Robotics Competition, Vex IQ Challenge, and World RobotOlympiad.

Pam Sparks is a Robofest staff member and coach. She is a Michigan educator having spent the majority of her 28 year teaching career at Hazel Park High School in Hazel Park, Michigan. She achieved a B.A. in the Biological Sciences and a M.A.T. in Education from Wayne State University in Detroit, MI. Also having a DX (Unified Group Science degree) made her the perfect candidate for bringing S.T.E.A.M. projects to her classroom and her award winning Science, Engineering and Robotics Programs. In 2013, The National Association of Biology Teachers recognized her excellence when she was awarded the State of Michigan's Outstanding Biology Teacher Award.

Liz Wetzel, Co-Director, Transportation Design at LTU.
Wetzel's global automotive design experience spans more than three decades where she has executed and led over seven concept vehicles and 25 production automotive designs onto the road and into the hands of customers. As a former Design Director for General Motors Global Design, Wetzel's experience is wide and deep. In the last 20 years, she has held leadership positions in Exterior Design, Interior Design, Color & Trim, UX Product Design, Brand Strategy, and Perceived Quality, as well as an international assignment as Interior Design Director, GM of Europe. A few examples of the award-winning interior designs she has led include the Buick Avenir and Buick Avista concept vehicles, the production Opel Adam (European Interior of the Year, Red Dot Award) and Opel Corsa (European Car of the Year), the Pontiac Solstice, and the Saturn Sky Roadster. Her most recent production vehicle was the 2019 Buick Enclave and Buick Avenir interior designs. For her groundbreaking designs and efforts to recruit and excel women in the automotive design profession, Wetzel has been recognized by the Automotive Hall of Fame, Inducted into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame, and featured in the Dallas Women's Museum, as well as several publications and featured media spots.
A BFA graduate of the University of Michigan, Stamps School of Art & Design, Wetzel's focus was on Industrial Design, which she credits for her mindful, customer-focused approach to solving design opportunities that she used throughout her career at General Motors. Wetzel is excited about the automotive design industry transformation that is taking place and is looking forward to new technology-led opportunities that will shape the future of mobility.

Keith Young: Mr. Young considers himself a venture capitalist, lending resources to kid and teen scientists. Since his graduations from Central Michigan University and Harvard's Leadership School, he has applied his impressive skills as a successful entrepreneur. In 2005, he was inspired to found a new company; ECOTEK Labs started as a means to provide his own children space to create foundational experiments and eventual startup companies. Projects at ECOTEK focus on climate change, DNA, making biofuels, robotics and other fields of research. ECOTEK has reached young people by way of field trips, science fairs, and in-class demonstrations at schools. Today, he's helping transform the lives of around 250 student scientists across the country in places like Detroit, Florida and Maryland. Those students are working on issues ranging from robotics to 3D printing to finding a cure for a rare form of cancer.