ALEX PERRY/SUFFOLK NEWS-HERALD

Women of Weighted Angels hold some of their stuffed animal donations with Sentara Obici Hospital Women's Center and Nursery staff on Monday. From left, Weighted Angels Communications and Marketing Director Sarah Berry, Vice President Kate Crump, President Kasie Ballard, Women's Center Director Hattie Boone, Educator and Maternal Nurse Navigator Lisa Milburn, Women's Center Unit Coordinator Jordan Carr, Nursery Unit Coordinator Penny Baugham, Women's Center Bereavement Coordinator Dawn Eure and Clinical Nurse Manager Beth Johnson.

Helping parents hold on after loss

BY ALEX PERRY
STAFF WRITER

Founders and board members of Weighted Angels visited Sentara Obici Hospital on Monday morning to help make sure that no family that has suffered a pregnancy or infant loss leaves the Women's Center with empty arms.

Weighted Angels is a nonprofit organization that operates in Hampton Roads and Richmond. Its founders and board members are Lauren Fuller, Kasie Ballard, Kate Crump, Taylor Louis, Sarah Berry, Erin Miller and Heidi Anderson. Each of these women experienced a stillbirth.

They had dreams of one day leaving the hospital with their newborn children in their arms. Instead, they left with blankets, locks of hair and other small tokens of remembrance. But their hands still felt empty.

"We've all experienced a loss, and we all left the hospital with nothing," said Ballard, president of Weighted Angels. "We wanted to fix that."

The Women's Center at Sentara Obici received 18 of the organization's "Angels," which are finely crafted stuffed animals that are made with materials that give them weight.

They're each soft to the

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Helping: Program helps women grieve

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touch with a solid, well-balanced distribution of weight and the faces of friendly giraffes, deer, rabbits and other animals. Every animal represents a child that belonged to one of the board members and also a different weight class, ranging from less than a pound to nine pounds.

The goal is to allow parents who have experienced pregnancy and infant loss to have an "Angel" that has a similar weight to the child they lost.

"We try to get it as close to the actual weight — by the pound," said Co-Vice President Crump, wearing a gray-and-white shirt with the name "Ellett" written on a beautiful silhouette of a deer. Ellett was Crump's son that was stillborn in June.

Weighted Angels began operations in December, and Sentara Obici was the second hospital to receive a full set of stuffed animals. The first being Sentara Williamsburg Regional Medical Center earlier this year, Ballard said.

"I think it's a wonderful support for the parents in the center," said Beth Johnson, clinical nurse manager for the Women's Center and Nursery. "We're just honored that they chose our facilities to donate to."

Bereavement Coordinator Dawn Eure said the "Angels" are a wonderful asset for parents coping with such a tremendous loss.

"There are so few things we can give them to help them in the grieving process," Eure said. "This is just an extra thing to give them to help."

Weighted Angels operates in Hampton Roads and Richmond but also fills out individual orders elsewhere in Virginia. Ballard said some of them have contacts that work in the birth community that let the women know that a family is in need.

Each board member wore a gray shirt with a different animal's design on it, along with the name of the child that woman lost in bold white font.

Berry, the nonprofit's communications and marketing director, said that Monday would have been the birthday of her daughter, Finley. She was delivered stillborn in April 2017. Berry's shirt was emblazoned with a bunny's outline and Finley's name.

She said that being able to hold something that weighs like the child you lost as you're leaving the hospital can help ease that burden, especially after you hold your stillborn child for a moment — and then never again.

"It's something to hold on to and help you through the grieving process — to have and to hold in your arms, and to remember what it was like to hold her. Because I'll never hold her again," Berry said.

The long-term goal of "Weighted Angels" is to raise enough money to provide every Virginia hospital with a complete set of their stuffed animals. Visit facebook.com/weightedangels for more information and to make a donation.

ALEX PERRY/SUFFOLK NEWS-HERALD

Abigail Powell, rising fourth grader at Oakland Elementary School, observes on the sea critters held by Jacqui Stanford, outreach educator at Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center, in the Pioneer Elementary School library on Friday.

Turtles, whelks, spider crabs — oh my!

BY ALEX PERRY
STAFF WRITER

Students were wowed by close encounters of the marine kind on Friday at Pioneer Elementary School.

Jacqui Stanford, outreach educator at Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center, conducted a presentation for young students in the Tidewater Regional Governor's School's summer program.

Stanford's audience learned about some of the animals that reside in the Chesapeake Bay, as well as the adaptations they have for survival. She did this with both animal remains and living examples that captured the attention of her students.

"They are just always interested in the animals," Stanford said about the students. "If you have a living animal, then you have them hooked."

The Governor's School has held this hands-on learning program since 1993. The school selects 60 gifted students — rising fourth- through seventh-graders — out of more than 200 applicants from Suffolk, Isle of Wight, Franklin and Southampton.

This year, 30 of those students are from Suffolk Public Schools, according to Tidewater Regional Governor's School Executive Director Leslie Moring.

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Crabs: Animals investigated at school program

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The students were divided into groups of 30 on Friday, and both groups had their own morning session with Stanford in the Pioneer Elementary School library.

Stanford showed her students a dolphin's skull to demonstrate different features. Dolphin's eyes, for example, are lateral and on either side of the skull, which allow dolphins to see in front of them, beside them and even behind them.

They got to take a close look at shark teeth, including those of a sandbar shark and a sand tiger shark, and the carapace of a turtle.

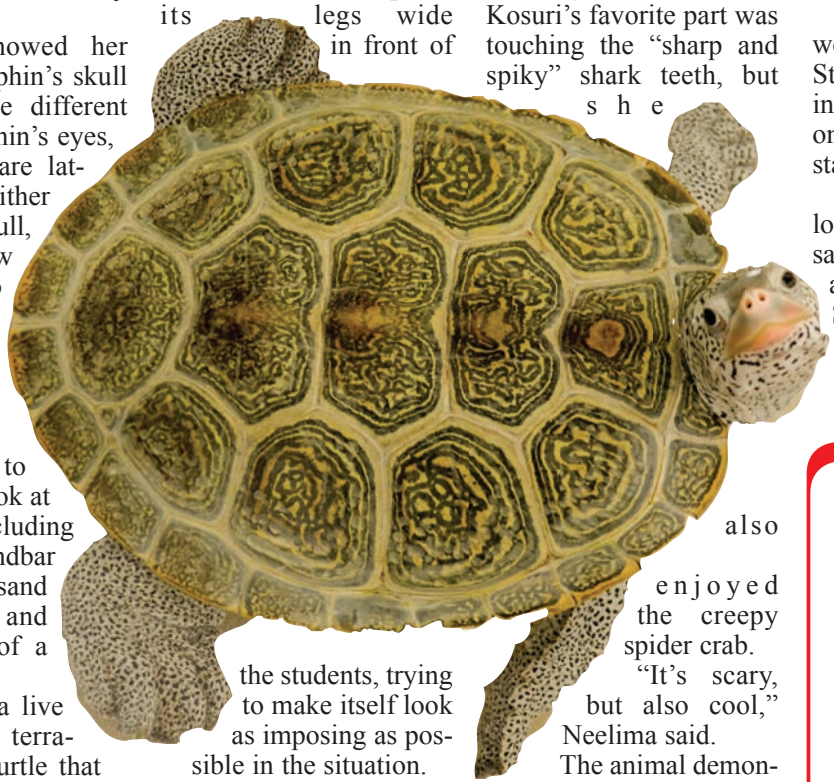
But Tyson, a live diamondback terrapin, was the turtle that made the biggest impression on the students Friday morning. Stanford held Tyson for each student to gently touch, if they wanted to, and the children marveled at the turtle's colorful appearance.

They were introduced to the knobbed whelk, a large, carnivorous sea snail that lives in tidal estuaries along the Atlantic coast. These snails feed on clams, oysters, mussels and other bivalves.

There were also hermit crabs that quickly poked their heads out of their shells and surprised the students — but not as surprising as when the decorator crab got the spotlight.

Decorator crabs earn their name by decorating themselves with smaller animals, seaweed and other plants from their habitats, which are fastened to the back of their shells with Velcro-like bristles called setae.

They're also known as spider crabs for their long legs. Stanford held this spider-like crab in her hand, and the crab spread its legs wide in front of the students, trying to make itself look as imposing as possible in the situation.



Its appearance made quite an impression on the young students.

"It had long legs and stuff," said Jeremiah Martin, a rising fifth-grader at S.P. Morton Elementary School in Franklin, said about the decorator crab. "That was my favorite (animal)."

Nansemond Parkway Elementary School rising fourth-grader Neelima Kosuri's favorite part was touching the "sharp and spiky" shark teeth, but she also enjoyed the creepy spider crab.

"It's scary, but also cool," Neelima said.

The animal demonstration tied into the students' other activities for the week, which included selecting a Virginia marine organism to research and discuss. The students will learn their respective organism's various adaptations, its place in the food web and how it's impacted by humans, like how sea turtles are harmed by plastic bags, Moring said.

Moring said the students were really interested in Stanford's Friday morning lessons, especially the ones that were alive and stared right back at them.

"They were asking a lot of questions," Moring said about her students, and also answered Stanford's questions in turn. "I think it went really well."

Challenging robots, even better teamwork

BY ALEX PERRY
STAFF WRITER

Teams of young, critical thinkers worked together last weekend to overcome obstacles in the second annual Sea, Air and Land Challenge held in Suffolk.

Nicknamed the SeAL Challenge, the competition was held on Saturday at Col. Fred Cherry Middle School. There were 14 robotics teams competing in this year's event, including five Suffolk high schools and middle schools.

Developed by the Penn State

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ALEX PERRY/SUFFOLK NEWS-HERALD

The King's Fork High School "Mechatronics" team carefully navigates the air challenge on Saturday.

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Lakeland High School junior Imani Boatner, 16, senior Arianna Fisher, 17, and senior Trinity McRae, 18, at the Sea, Air, and Land Challenge held at Col. Fred Cherry Middle School on Saturday.

Robots: Challenge brings out student engineers

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Electro-Optics Center and sponsored by the Office of Naval Research, the SeAL Challenge offers three unique engineering challenges for middle and high schoolers — one underwater, another in the air and the third on the ground.

The teams designed, developed and built unmanned vehicles and customized payloads for these challenges, which were based on scenarios faced by military personnel and first responders. Virginia State Police was also at the school on Saturday to demonstrate different tactical robots.

"Students are designing and building robotic systems that can perform maneuvers similar to those that first responders or the military might use in their operations," said Christine Lafferty, Suffolk Public Schools manager of information services and regional coordinator for the SeAL challenge.

Virginia is the third state to host this event, alongside Pennsylvania and Ohio. This year's competition brought out the best from Lakeland and King's Fork high schools, plus John F. Kennedy, Forest Glen and Col. Fred Cherry middle schools.

Norfolk Technical Center also fielded a team on Saturday, as well as Booker High School from Sarasota, Fla. The all-ladies Florida squad came to Virginia to both win a trophy and bring the challenge to their home state.

"As I look out at all of you, I couldn't be more excited," U.S. Navy Lt. Commander William Corrigan said during his opening remarks on Saturday. "I couldn't be more optimistic about what the future of America holds and the direction that we're going, and that's all because of you. Our future inventors, our future scientists and our future leaders."

All of the teams attempted their respective challenges twice on Saturday — first in the morning and again in the afternoon.

Sea challenge teams gathered at a water-filled tank in the bus ramp at the middle school. In the water were boxes that represented "drop zones." Students designed and built remote-operated vehicles to find objects in the tank, retrieve them and put their "payloads" in specific drop zones.

But the pilots didn't simply look at their robots. This test required teams to use camera equipment to observe their unmanned vehicles.

"Students have designed and built a remote-operated vehicle (and) they use a camera — or a backup camera from a pick-and-pull wrecked car — to operate that vehicle without watching it," Lafferty said.

Students didn't have direct line-of-sight in the land challenge, either. Pilots sat with their backs to the wood-framed box that their robots rolled around in, identified objects of interest and deposited them in the judge's designated location.

This challenge required intense teamwork when it came to flying quadcopters inside the gym for the air challenge. Each team had a pilot to fly their copter while a teammate gave directions through carefully placed cameras.

"They also are supposed to be able to carry a payload and drop that payload in a specific location and hit a target," Lafferty said.

The KFHS Mechatronics team had to recalibrate their approach after their first quadcopter attempt in the morning, but thanks to some great piloting, they were able to get at least one payload into the target in just under a few minutes.

"We're going to adjust the cameras so that we can have a more accurate view, and also calibrate the drone more so that we won't have as much tilting," KFHS junior Bradley Harrison, 16, said during their lunchtime calibrations on Saturday.

The winning middle school sea team for this year's SeAL Challenge was Col. Fred Cherry Middle School's "Ospreys," and Forest Glen Middle School had the winning land team, which was dubbed "1 if by Land, 2 if by Sea." There was no middle school air team at this year's competition.

The "Norfolk Raiders" of Norfolk Technical Center had the winning high school teams for both land and sea, and the Mechatronics of KFHS won in the air. Booker High School's "Legacy" team also won for best innovation in the sea challenge.

"I have seniors that are leaving," said KFHS Robotics Coach Todd Gidley, "and they're going to celebrate this win on the way to college, and that's huge."

But Gidley was also quick to give credit to their surprising benefactors during the team's darkest hour on Saturday.

Around lunchtime, the KFHS air team realized they didn't have a charger for their second battery. Without that battery, they couldn't complete their second flight.

Debra Shapiro, the FGMS technology and engineering education teacher and Gidley's mentor, put him in touch with Richard Dyer, engineering technology instructor for the "Norfolk Raiders."

Dyer didn't hesitate. He immediately gave Gidley's team a charger — but then the Mechatronics discovered a half-hour later that their second battery had a bad cell and was unusable.

Dyer and his team stepped up once again to give Gidley's students a brand-new battery that they spliced and soldered to connect with the KFHS drone.

He could have just said no. Instead, Dyer helped KFHS soar on Saturday, and all he asked for in return was for Gidley's team to provide flight time and instruction to his own students.

"My guys are going to drive over one afternoon and invest an hour in flight time to teach his guys, and we're going to see his shop," Gidley said. "I'm just excited about both schools working together in the future."

This seemed to just be standard practice for robotics teams like Dyer's "Raiders." That same day, they donated a drone frame, motor and propellers to Shapiro's FGMS team to help get them started on their air team next year.

"I've been competing in robotics for about 18 years, and one of the things I try to teach my students is that it's not about you winning," Dyer said. "It's about what you learned in working with other people, helping them out, making them better."