

Strengthening the Susquehanna Valley by Preparing Tomorrow's Leaders

JENNY DROVE A ROBOT IN SCHOOL

By Chris Berleth

In what can only be described as a moment taken out of an episode of the Jetsons, I had the awesome privilege to watch technology in the Valley come to life as Jenny Wentz, the Assistant Director of Leadership Susquehanna Valley, controlled a robot in New Berlin from her desk in Shamokin Dam, PA. How on earth did we get to this, you may wonder. In truth, as the summer brought on new hopes for small group gatherings, so too did the LSV program committee aspire to regain for members of the Class of 2021 a sense of normalcy for the upcoming program days. We worked diligently with the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit, our program day sponsor, and SUN Area Technical Institute, Lunch Sponsor, to develop a program that would be hybrid in format (partly virtual, and partly in-person) which would showcase the very best of education in the Valley. Unfortunately, as the risk of COVID-19 intensified, we chose health and safety first and scrapped the in-person portion of the program for fully virtual day. So, how could we do something really inspiring for LSV class members who wouldn't get the invaluable experience of walking the halls at SUN Area Technical Institute for our annual tour?

It was the CSIU who held the answer – “Use a robot to go on the tour.”

Few realize that the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit was founded as (and remains to this day) a strictly entrepreneurial endeavor, offering services to school districts for a fee, without receiving tax dollars directly. This foundation places the CSIU in a strictly unique position, frequently evaluating services and programs for effectiveness and impact...which leads us back to the robots. As a mechanism to serve students who may not be able to attend school in person due to hospitalization (or some other such obstacle) the CSIU invested in robots which could be the eyes, ears, and legs of a student at any school in the Valley.

The student controls the robot, and the robot goes to class. On the surface, this doesn't seem all that different than the position so many of our youth and educators have been in since the pandemic began, right? Wrong! Consider that the robot can be personalized, can navigate the halls, attend individual classes, require

engagement and skill development above and beyond muting oneself or hiding your video, and can afford a small sense of normalcy in the simple act of being able to turn and speak to a neighbor (or neighboring robot) in a private conversation. School with such a robot isn't school in the age of the pandemic – it's school in the age of the Jetsons. I don't envision 148 million robots wandering the halls of American schools anytime soon, but consider for a moment the implications that this technology can have in the future, and what it means for our community to have it accessible now.

With Jenny's careful driving (and the CSIU's speed controls firmly in place to prevent tomfoolery of any kind), Jenny went on a virtual, robot-tour of SUN Area Technical Institute. She negotiated turns, waved to students through windows, and chatted with those students who have given their all for a hands-on education so as to enter the workforce on-schedule with certificates and apprenticeships under their belt. From the comfort of their homes, LSV class members watched Jenny and provided real-time feedback and questions to students, educators, and our staff.

Perhaps most compelling was the chance to interact with an electronics student, knowing that by the time he gets to Penn College of Technology (his dream), he may very well be designing robots like this for the actual Jetsons next door.

Leadership Susquehanna Valley is so grateful for the opportunity to experience the compelling beauty of our community, and to learn so much from so many. Thanks to John Kurelja, Kevin Singer (CSIU), Jennifer Hain, Joe Weiser (SUN Area Technical Institute), Jennifer Polinchock, Jordan Fetzer (Lewisburg Area School District), Caz Russell (leadership coach) and Heather Allison (Pennsylvania College of Technology) for their incredible programming, and for the hundreds of people innovating in the face of challenges like the coronavirus in our community. Stay tuned for more as we explore healthcare day next month!

