

“Happy birthday, dear Danny...” The song echoed along the basement hallway connecting the LASA Robotics shop to a classroom filled with budding engineers. Our head mentor, Danny Diaz, was being sung to by a group of about 40 students, but he wasn’t at a party. Instead he spent his birthday at our team’s Drop Dead Decision Day, and stayed late into the night talking with students about everything from drive trains to hanging mechanisms. This example of how Danny puts our team first is far from unusual. Danny is a full-time engineer for National Instruments, and has a family of his own, but can always be found at our team’s afterschool and weekend meetings.

Danny was introduced to Team 418 in 2003, and has been a permanent fixture ever since. He’s the team’s lead technical mentor in charge of mentoring Programming, Electronics, Controls, Technical Writing, Presentation, Website, Scouting, and just about everything else thrown at him. If there’s a student interested in doing something for the team, Danny has always been ready and willing to provide support to them. Anthony Bertucci, the team’s head coach and 2009 LSR WFFA winner, commented, “Danny is the reason why LASA Robotics has grown to be more than just ‘a team that builds a robot.’ The students on this team get a much more rewarding and well-rounded experience thanks to his involvement.”

Danny’s biggest contribution to the team as a whole has been in coordinating Team 418 through its growing pains the past several years. In 2004 the team had roughly 15 members, and due to its success grew in 2006 to over 50 team members. Seeing that the team was under a lot of stress, Danny worked closely with the team’s student leadership to define a new team leadership model aimed at improving communication throughout the team, improving the effectiveness of the team, and growing more leadership and responsibility opportunities. While the growth was not sustained, the team leadership model was – since 2006 the team has slightly tweaked its leadership model each year to better fit its changing needs, but the model is mostly unchanged.

Danny is an inspiration to team members, parents, and mentors on 418 in a lot of different ways but his outreach and support of engineering programs, such as FIRST, is the most profound. Not only is Danny an avid supporter of FRC, but he is also a driving force for FLL in Central and North Texas – this is a passion that Team 418 has also been infused with for as long as Danny has been with the team. He even donates a lot of his own time to write LabVIEW-based software used in FLL tournaments around the world. Steve Hinkley, the North Texas FLL partner, praised Danny’s commitment, “Danny inspires not only the children but also the adult organizers and supporters of FIRST, so that they can in turn inspire literally thousands of children. His impact is much broader than the software he writes, the teams he mentors, and the events he works. Danny inspires FIRST partners to be excellent. I cannot imagine there is a volunteer out there whose impact is as broad, profound, and essential to FIRST as his.”

Danny is also always motivating the team to push harder and do more each and every year, and even went so far as to offer up an incentive last year; if the team wins a regional competition, he will learn to dance for our team. The result? We gleefully chose a Tap Dance for him to perform at our annual team and alumni gathering this summer!