



CHATHAM – John Galiher, chief executive of Preferred Freezer Services, was relaxing after work one Friday last fall at Charley's Aunt when he heard students asking the owner of the Chatham restaurant to sponsor their club.

As they were leaving, he called them back, and they gave their pitch for helping the Chatham High School Robotics Club.

He toured the school's robotics lab and met their teacher, was very impressed, then wrote a check for \$10,000.

"The level of work these young kids are doing between ninth grade and 12th grade is pretty impressive," Galiher said.

"Just the time and energy they were putting behind it, and the little robots they're building are impressive too."

Since then, he has written a second check for \$10,000 and he bought two new high-tech 3D printers, valued at about \$6,000 each. One of the printers is used by club members to make parts for the robots they built to compete in the FIRST Tech Challenge competition; the other is in a science classroom for use by all CHS students.

"Now we just keep in touch to see if we can keep helping," Galiher said. "I imagine we'll do it for years."

Preferred Freezer, which has its headquarters in Chatham, also provided sweatshirts with the company logo and the words "Robots Rock" for club members and their teacher.

Julianna Ryan, a design and technology teacher who runs the school's robotics program, called the students running into Galiher an example of "right place at the right time."

"He loves to provide help to local STEM communities and he loved what they were doing. He was quick to jump on and the check was here the next day. It's been very, very helpful for the season," Ryan said Dec. 3, when Chatham High School hosted a qualifying tournament for the FIRST Tech Challenge.

In a recent email, Ryan called Galiher's contributions "invaluable."

The monetary donations have allowed students "to focus on what's important rather than stress about the cost of a new part, event registration fees or not allowing an amazing idea come to life due to financial limitations," she said.

Since Robotics Club members received Galiher's donations, they have sent money that they raised at bake sales to a robotics program that lost everything to the wildfires in California last fall "and hope to donate to programs here in New Jersey who have not had the same opportunities," Ryan said.

"As an educator, it was so heartwarming to see a group of teenagers ask to donate a small portion of their hard-earned money to those who need it."

She said the two new 3D printers "have provided our students with a broader set of tools to learn and explore ... as well as provided machines with greater capabilities than our original 3D printers."

"Rapid prototyping has reshaped the manufacturing process, allowing complex student designs to be created within a few hours, which helps students assess complications and make alterations far quicker than older approaches to manufacturing would have allowed."

The Robotics Club used a grant from the [Chatham Education Foundation](#) to purchase some drones in 2016, Ryan said. Galiher's donations will permit her to update the drones program with new equipment and explore new project options in the future, she added.

One of the school's two teams, //Cougars, qualified in December to compete in the state tournament, which will be held Sunday, Feb. 25 at West Windsor Plainsboro High School North.

Unfortunately, the other robotics team, the Cougars, did not qualify for the state championship, Ryan said, "but had an incredible season diving into the new machines and even learning to fabricate different materials for their chassis on our new CNC machine."

"Although, everyone was disappointed their season ended earlier than hoped, the students have taken notes on how to improve for the future and how to best prepare for seasons ahead," she said.

Both teams attended the state meet last year, and //Cougars advanced to the super-regional tournament.

Galiher said the competition requires the students to design a robot to accomplish certain goals, such as moving and stacking blocks. "They're given a task, and they literally have to be young engineers and design it. ... Then they got to write the software to run it. They're learning a lot."

In addition to robotics, the students are learning problem-solving, engineering, and how to set a goal and achieve it, he said. "It's not just about making the robot.

"It's the perfect definition of science, technology, engineering and math. And it was half girls and half guys, which was nice to see. And they're sharing ideas and they're working with each other. Good program."

Big Freezers

Galiher, a 10-year Chatham Township resident, started Preferred Freezer Services in 1989. It designs, builds and operates warehouses for frozen food throughout the United States as well as in Vietnam and China.

At the beginning, the company had about 25 employees and \$4 million in sales. Today, it has nearly 3,000 employees, sales of about \$500 million and \$1.5 billion in assets under management.

Of its 40 warehouses, six have high levels of automation. "Not everything makes sense to be automated," Galiher said. "But when it does fit, we try to do it."

"Like anything else, an automated machine if it's designed properly and maintained properly is probably faster, more reliable, doesn't get the flu, doesn't call in sick, doesn't get hurt, doesn't quit, doesn't do drugs."

Preferred Freezer hires about 100 people a year, and finding people for those jobs is challenging, Galiher said.

The company, which is adding new locations throughout the U.S., recruits at the University of Massachusetts, NJIT, Rutgers and Fairleigh Dickinson, but often college graduates don't want to move. "Relocation is key for us because we're not growing just here. We're growing all over the country."

Preferred Freezer hires computer science and software graduates as well as sales, operations and financial people.

When Galiher hires people for management roles, grades and degrees are less important than the applicants' energy level, whether they worked part-time jobs to get through college, whether they know how to balance a budget.

"Then you look for that spark. That person who seems to want to get ahead ... who wants to contribute and wants to learn and you think is going to be around" because "nobody wants to be your competitor's training center."

Galiher, who earned a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering at Southeastern Massachusetts University, said his first job after college was as a refrigeration engineer and salesman in Boston.

He learned the business as a service provider, then at age 27 bought an older building in Perth Amboy and renovated it amid the real estate crash of 1988-89.

For 10 years, he ran that location with 40 employees. After the next economic downturn, he bought a second building out of bankruptcy from the government in Miami.

The company then built a warehouse in Miami and one in New Jersey,

"then the company really started to grow."

"We just kept growing."

Preferred Freezer moved its headquarters to Chatham about eight years ago after outgrowing corporate offices in other New Jersey cities.

"We grew through the recession," Galiher noted.

He and his executive team choose the space at 1 Main St., Chatham, because of its footprint as well as its proximity to Newark and Morristown airports, highways, and hotels for visiting customers and employees.

Employees also enjoy being able to walk to local restaurants, the post office and local businesses, he said. "It's a nice little town."

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