

The Oklahoman

# JOY OF LEARNING

## TechJOYnT puts the JOY into tech-based education for children

BY JIM STAFFORD  
For The Oklahoman

As Ray Shaik and a car full of elementary-age children navigated the long stretch of interstate highway between St. Louis and Oklahoma City toward school and home in 2011, they showed that neither a whiteboard nor a black marker are required for effective brainstorming.

Shaik and the children were returning from a world robotics competition in St. Louis where Shaik had served as the voluntary coach for the Oklahoma team.

Now the kids were bummed that robotics season was over. They wanted to be able to enjoy year-round technology-based activities.

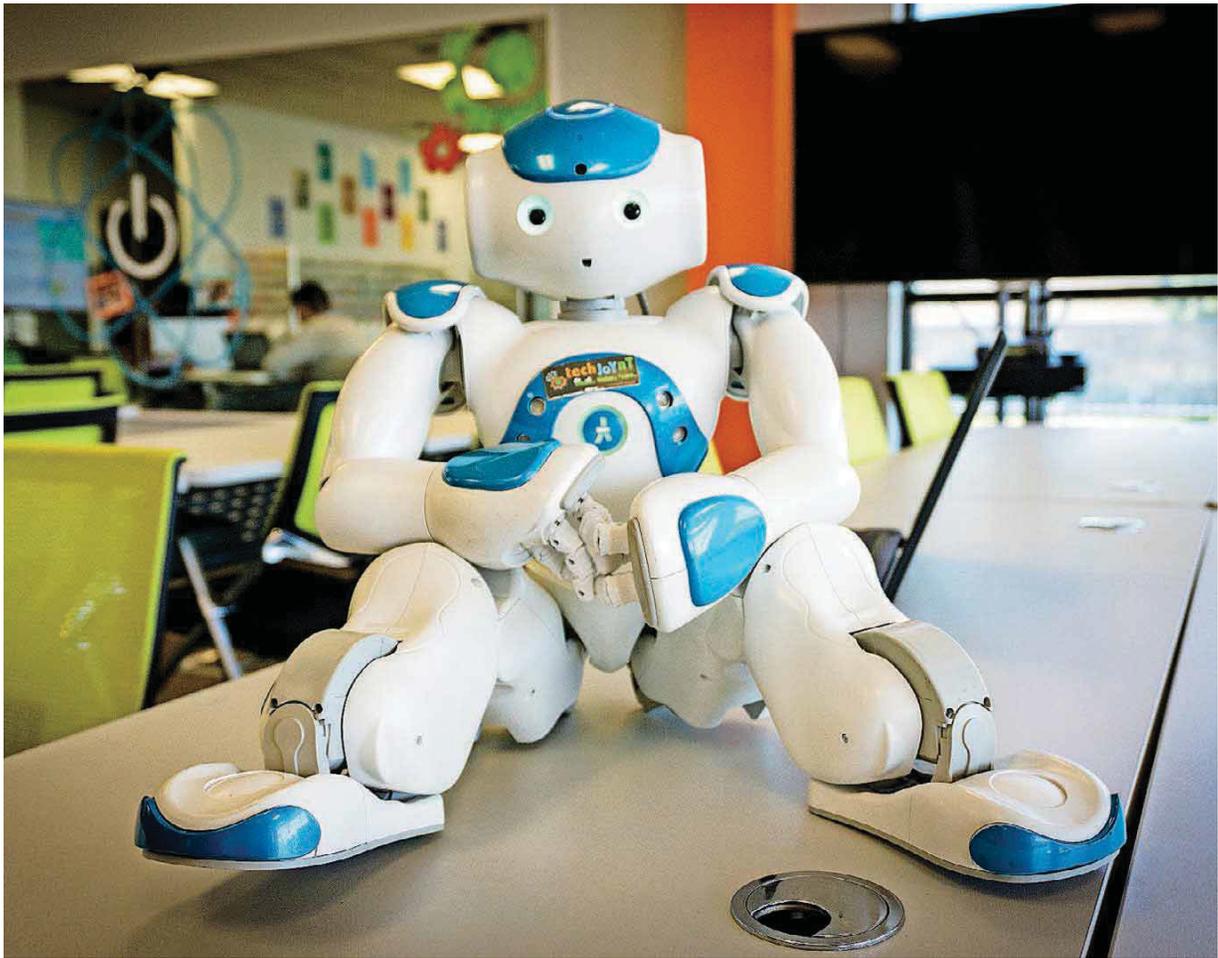
So, Shaik decided to create such a year-round, after-school STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) program. As they drove down Interstate 44 toward OKC, he challenged the children to come up with a concept.

SEE LEARNING, 6C

### MORE ONLINE



To see a video about the techJOYnT program, go online to [Oklahoman.com](http://Oklahoman.com).



TechJOYnT is aimed at helping students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills through making video games, coding and building robots. (PHOTO PROVIDED BY OCAST)

Source: Oklahoma Allergy and Asthma Clinic

# LEARNING

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"I gave them a project for that summer," Shaik said. "If it means so much to them, why don't they come up with a name and a concept of what they would like to learn."

With input from all four of his then elementary-age daughters, Shaik founded techJOYnT STEM Academy & After-School Enrichment Learning Centers after that 2011 road trip.

"We came up with Tech-point and several other names, but this stuck," said Shaik, now the CEO of the techJOYnT Learning Centers.

"They liked the JOY aspect of learning," he said. "One of the fundamental things I had in mind when I started this was that kids should not be pushed to come here, but there should be a draw and a

pull for them to continuously improve their skills."

A mechanical engineer with nearly a decade of experience in the U.S. automotive industry, Shaik began his journey down the entrepreneur's path when his automotive position was eliminated during the Great Recession in 2009. He then bought into a retail wireless business in the Oklahoma City area.

"As I was operating a retail wireless service, I saw a huge need in Oklahoma for STEM programs," he said. "That's what led me on this journey of techJOYnT."

So, techJOYnT opened in 2011 to provide age-appropriate, in-class and after-school tech-based activities for K-12 age children in both rural and urban Oklahoma.

Shaik calls it "gamified" learning.

"Primarily, our goals are to help them improve their critical thinking and problem-

solving skills," he said. "We do that by things kids already love to do, such as making video games through coding, building robots, and more."

## Bringing classroom concepts to life

The techJOYnT coaches guide children along four different pathways that include game design, electronics, app development and robotics. Each pathway also offers a series of weeklong summer day camps.

"We are trying to bring the concepts they learn in the classroom to life," he said. "These are concepts that are being taught in school, but the lifetime retention of these academic concepts is an issue. At techJOYnT, students take away one concept at a time, where they will understand what they are learning in the classroom."

That might involve writing

code that makes a robot dance, for instance.

"They can think they are making the robot dance and making the moves, but they totally forget that they are actually coding the robot to make those moves," Shaik said.

Shaik has plans to franchise the techJOYnT concept, which already is in the works. In fact, the Edmond facility is actually a franchised location, he said.

"We have a plan to grow to 90 locations in the next five years," Shaik said.

TechJOYnT also has been accepted to participate in round two of MassChallenge Accelerator, a Boston-based international startup competition.

Shaik turned to the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology (OCAST) to help his pursuit of Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grants for future educational

initiatives.

"The support they provide for writing SBIR grants is just phenomenal," he said.

The company's philosophy of year-round, tech-based learning goes back to the impromptu brainstorming session during that 2011 St. Louis-to-Oklahoma City road trip.

And how does techJOYnT lead students down that STEM path?

"It's hands-on activities and solving a problem using math and science in a way that really builds their confidence, then leads them later on to take on STEM careers," Shaik said. "We hope we will make a small impact in that."

For more information, go to [www.techJOYnT.com](http://www.techJOYnT.com).

Jim Stafford writes about Oklahoma innovation and research and development topics on behalf of the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science & Technology (OCAST).