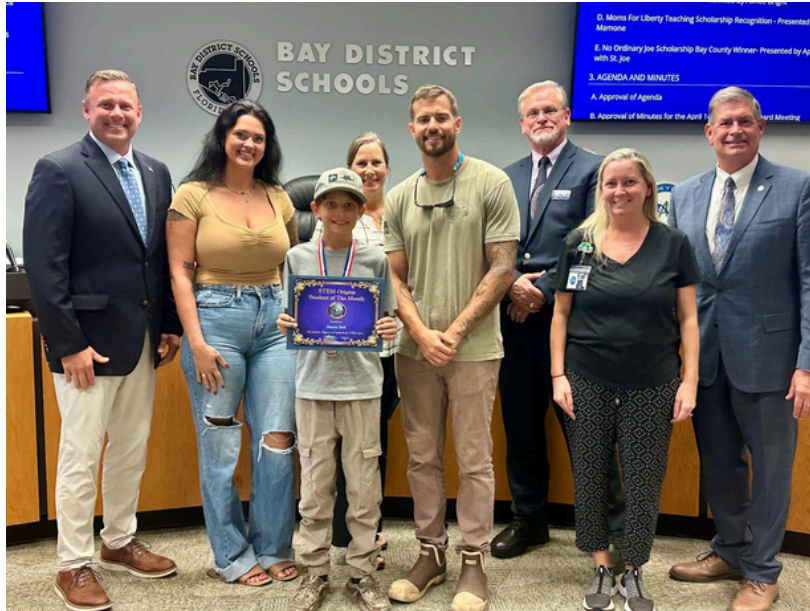


ORIGINS

STEM Origins Foundation

May 2026



Mason Ball: Student of the Month

Every month of the school year, we select a STEM student in recognition of those who most reflect our core values of Passion, Diligence, and Aptitude for STEM, while also demonstrating Collaboration with others.

On April 28, 2026, the STEM Origins Foundation presented our monthly STEM Student of the Month award to **Mason Ball** of Walsingham Academy. Mason received a medal, a certificate suitable for framing, and a gift certificate to Texas Roadhouse.

Because outstanding teachers help to create outstanding students, we also recognized his STEAM teacher, **Julie DeFelice**, with a gift

certificate from Texas Roadhouse along with a copy of Mason’s award to display in her classroom.

Congratulations to Mason on his achievement!

Below is a summary of the nomination written by Ms. DeFelice:

Mason excels in STEAM well beyond the norm for a 5th grade student, consistently demonstrating intellectual curiosity, analytical strength, creativity, and a mature commitment to real-world solutions. He has an especially inquisitive focus on building and engineering, and his passion is evident in his excitement and insightful questions.

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Mason approaches challenges with focus, patience, and perseverance. He also remains determined until his designs operate successfully. His aptitude is reflected in strong logical reasoning skills and his ability to think objectively and apply interdisciplinary concepts.

See *Mason Ball*, pg. 2

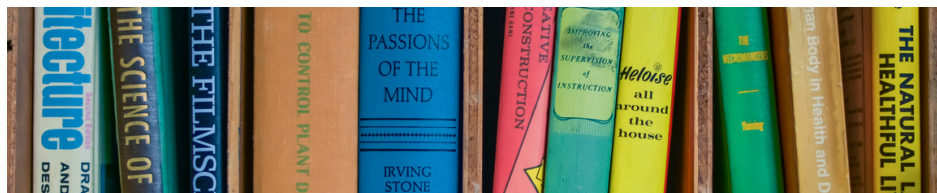
Mason Ball (Continued)

Mason works effectively and respectfully, communicates his ideas clearly, listens thoughtfully to others, and contributes meaningfully to group discussions and projects. He naturally balances leadership with cooperation, ensuring that all team members are engaged while keeping the group focused on achieving a working solution.

We applaud you, Mason!

Upcoming Events

- May 13: LMWS Farmers Market
- May 16: Future Physicist Club Meeting
- May 26: STEM Student of the Month and 2026 GCSC Summer STEM Camp Scholarship Awards @ BDS Board Meeting
- June 11: Rising Star Scholarship Award Ceremony @ GCSC
- July 10: MLK Jr. Recreation Center: Baking Soda Volcano
- July 18: LMWS Grandparents Day
- August 1: MLK Jr. Recreation Center: Solar Oven S'Mores



Meet a STEM Origins Volunteer: Melanie Smith, Communications Officer

Melanie Smith brings energy, creativity, and a lifelong love of literacy to her role as Communications Officer for the STEM Origins Foundation. A National Board Certified Literacy Specialist, Melanie began her career in education in 1998 after graduating from Gannon University in Erie, Pennsylvania.

“I was closely involved with the science community at Gannon,” Melanie recalls. “I was the new member coordinator for the Biological Honor Society, and I earned a minor in biology. I have always LOVED learning.”

She began her education career as a fourth grade teacher while also earning her master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a Reading Specialist Certification from Hood University in Frederick, Maryland.

After 6 years as a classroom teacher, Melanie served as a K-5 Literacy Coach and Reading Specialist across schools in Maryland and Virginia for 17 years, where she played a key role in strengthening both readers and literacy instruction across several school districts.

After teaching both online and in person during the COVID pandemic, Melanie shifted gears in 2021, taking a break from public education to work with Scholastic before settling into an early retirement in Panama City Beach, FL.

Today, Melanie channels her passion for storytelling into STEM Origins. She captures moments through photography, creates social media posts, and writes the STEM Origins Newsletter. Melanie says, “It feels good to be part of an organization that supports students who may very well change the future right here where we now live.” She and her husband, **Scott Wray**, proudly support STEM Origins for its direct impact on Bay County students and its focus on science and technology innovation.

When she isn’t helping the STEM Origins Foundation, Melanie can be found enjoying the beach, taking fitness classes, walking the neighborhood with Scott, reading, writing, paddleboarding, bicycling, hiking, philosophizing quantum theories, and focusing on holistic health. She also enjoys her pets and visits from friends and family.

Origin Story: Steve Sasson, Digital Camera Inventor

Steve Sasson, an electrical engineer, invented the digital camera and helped reshape the future of photography. Raised in Brooklyn, New York, he developed an early interest in electronics. At age 13, he built an amateur radio and accidentally transmitted on a restricted frequency, earning a warning from the FCC. This moment reflected his curiosity and willingness to experiment.

Sasson attended Brooklyn Technical High School and later studied electrical engineering at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, earning a bachelor's degree in 1972 and a master's degree in 1973. That same year, he joined Kodak's research laboratory, where he focused on electronics.

In 1974, Sasson explored whether a new technology called a charged coupled device (CCD) could be used to capture images electronically. With creative freedom, he drew on his experience with electronics and television systems to design a new type of camera. By December 1975, he built the first self-contained digital camera. The device used a camera lens, batteries, a CCD sensor, and multiple circuits to capture and store images digitally.

Sasson continued advancing digital imaging, and in 1989 he co-developed an early digital single lens reflex camera. Although Kodak initially hesitated to market digital technology, it eventually became the industry standard. For his contributions, Sasson received the National Medal of Technology and Innovation in 2009. He continues to support young innovators through education programs, encouraging creativity and problem solving in future scientists and engineers.

U.S. Patent No. 4,131,919
Inducted in 2011
Born July 4, 1950



<https://www.invent.org/inductees>

Thank you, Texas Roadhouse!

We are incredibly grateful to Texas Roadhouse at Pier Park for partnering with the STEM Origins Foundation to support our **Student of the Month** program! Through their generous donation of gift certificates, we are able to recognize not only our outstanding students for their diligence & aptitude in STEM, but also the amazing teachers who take the time to nominate and encourage them. Partnerships like this help us continue building a culture of achievement, appreciation, and community support for the next generation of STEM leaders. Thank you, Texas Roadhouse, for investing in our students and educators and helping us celebrate excellence every month!



Why STEM Matters Right Now

The Growing Demand for STEM Skills

Across the United States, employers are increasingly seeking workers with STEM knowledge and technical problem-solving abilities. Here are some key trends shaping the workforce:

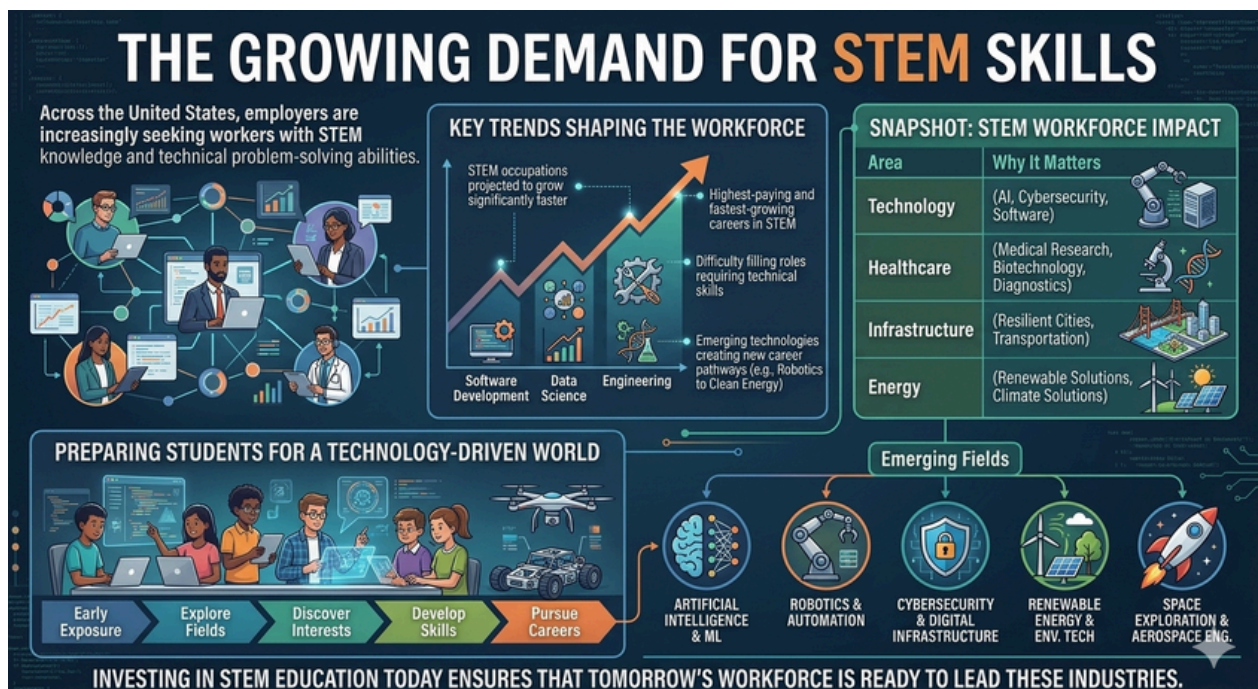
- STEM occupations are projected to grow significantly faster than the average for all jobs over the next decade.
- Many of the highest-paying and fastest-growing careers are in STEM fields such as software development, data science, engineering, and biotechnology.
- Employers report difficulty filling roles requiring technical, analytical, and computational skills.
- Emerging technologies—from robotics to clean energy—are creating entirely new career pathways.

Preparing Students for a Technology-Driven World

Technology is now woven into nearly every aspect of modern life. STEM education helps students become not just consumers of technology, but creators and innovators. Examples of emerging STEM-driven fields:

- Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning
- Robotics and Automation
- Cybersecurity and Digital Infrastructure
- Renewable Energy and Environmental Technology
- Space Exploration and Aerospace Engineering

Early exposure to STEM experiences allows students to explore these fields, discover their interests, and develop the skills needed to pursue them.



A "Tee-mendous" Success: Our TopGolf Fundraiser Highlights

We would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to our incredible community for making the STEM Origins Foundation TopGolf Fundraiser on April 26th an unforgettable success. Your attendance and enthusiasm go beyond the green, directly supporting our Rising Star Scholarships for students within Bay County Schools, helping us pave the way for the next generation of innovators.

The afternoon was more than just a fundraiser; it was a celebration of community and education. Over three hours, guests enjoyed a vibrant atmosphere filled with food, entertainment, and friendly competition in the hitting bays. The energy was palpable as participants of all skill levels connected over shared goals and exciting golf games.

Congratulations to **The Blind Co. of PCB** for winning the auction of a Top Golf Platinum Elite membership! Owners **Rod & Becky Roberts** won a multi-round bidding war with other participants to get this special prize. STEM Origins appreciates their support and all those who participated in our fundraising event.

We are profoundly grateful to every sponsor, participant, volunteer, and community member who contributed their time and resources. This event is a testament to what we can achieve when we come together to support our students.

For more information on our upcoming initiatives or to learn how you can continue supporting our scholars, please visit the [STEM Origins Foundation website](https://stemorigins.org/).



Empowering Young Engineers: Bay District Schools Launches Chompsaws in STEAM Labs

Bay District Schools (BDS) is revolutionizing hands-on learning with the addition of 30 Chompsaws to STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, & Math) Labs across elementary special area classes. This new initiative, powered by the BDS Career and Technical Education (CTE) department, provides students with a kid-safe power tool designed specifically for cutting cardboard, enabling them to engage in the Engineering Design Process from kindergarten through graduation.

Building Skills from Kindergarten to Capstone

The Chompsaws are part of a vertical progression strategy, ensuring that STEAM competencies grow with the student:

- K-2: Students build fine motor skills by asking, imagining, and creating through guided design challenges.
- 3-5: Learners integrate math concepts like fractions and scale as they begin to plan and build with more independence. 3rd graders at Cedar Grove Elementary, for example, have already used the tools to create recycled cardboard tropical fish.
- 6-8: Students apply scientific reasoning to test and improve prototypes collaboratively.
- 9-12: Advanced students use the saws for structural analysis and rapid prototyping before moving to 3D printing or woodshop fabrication.



The ChompSaw operates like a rapid hole punch, allowing for clean lines, smooth curves, and slots without the danger of exposed blades. Because the cutting head is too small for fingers, students can safely and independently shape materials, fostering a sense of ownership and confidence in their work.

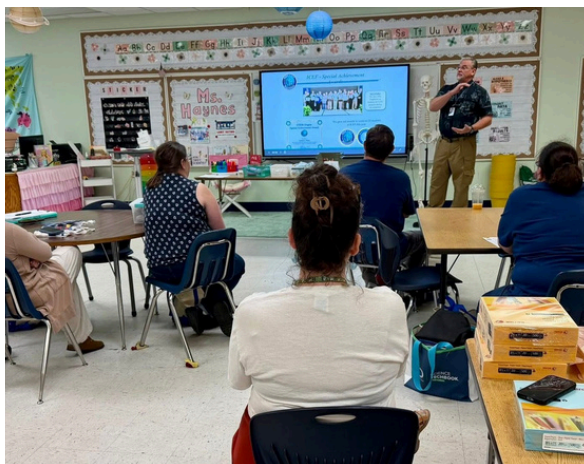
The district's commitment to this hands-on approach was evidenced by the CTE department supporting six recent school community events to demonstrate the Chompsaws in action. By utilizing reusable materials for rapid prototyping, BDS is creating an authentic, vertically aligned engineering pathway for every student.



STEM Origins Partners with BDS Professional Learning

At the BDS Professional Learning Community (PLC) Day on April 15th, STEM Origins partnered with teachers to share innovative programs, resources, and hands-on opportunities that bring science, technology, engineering, and math to life in our classrooms.

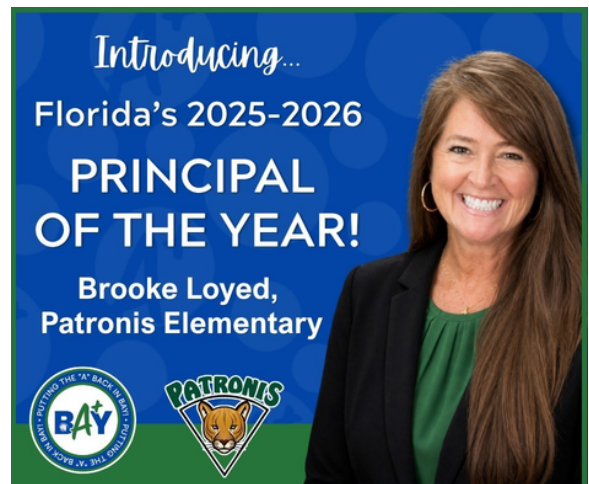
Thank you, **Mark Bradshaw**, for sharing your passion for STEM with these educators, and thank you STEM teachers for the opportunity to engage with you during your PLC. From classroom equipment and student scholarships to mentorships and STEM camps, we're working together to inspire the next generation of problem-solvers right here in Bay District Schools.



Congratulations to FL Principal of the Year

The STEM Origins Foundation congratulates **Brooke Loyed**, the principal of **Patronis Elementary School**, who has been named Florida's 2025-2026 Principal of the Year. Selected by the Florida Department of Education from all 67 counties, Loyed was honored for her instructional leadership and "culture of connection."

Under her guidance, Patronis maintained an "A" school grade for four consecutive years, with 2025 proficiency rates reaching 79% in English and 75% in Math. **Superintendent Mark McQueen** praised Loyed for her ability to inspire students and staff, noting her achievement as a "first" for Bay District Schools.



STEM Origins at Gulf Coast Salute Air Show

Thank you to all of our fabulous volunteer mentors who demonstrated STEM activities during the Gulf Coast Salute Airshow from April 10-12th.

Brian Maxwell, Pam McCarthy, Mark Bradshaw, Mare Malone, Greg Mertz, Dan Rush, Scott & Connie Deon, David & Donna Alexander, and Maureen Nerenbaum spent time interacting with families from at least 5 different states—sparking interest in Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math!

Mark Bradshaw reflected, “Dozens of students, young and old, were awestruck by interesting & amazing demonstrations of various aspects of science, physics, and engineering. Their eyes opened wide and their mouths dropped in wonder at so many cool things.”

Brian Maxwell agreed it was a good investment. “The expressions on the children's faces and the interactions with the parents were worth the time and effort,” he said.



Educators Embark on Naval STEM Adventure

Crystal Wielenga and Katie McCurdy, representing **Bay District Schools** and **Gulf Coast State College (GCSC)**, were recently selected for the Navy League's prestigious Educator at Sea program. From March 30 to April 2, 2026, they joined ten other STEM educators nationwide for an immersive residency aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN-71).

During the voyage, which began with a flight onto the carrier via an Osprey, the educators explored critical operations, including the flight deck, catapult systems, and jet engine shops. They engaged directly with leadership and crew to understand the practical applications of STEM in naval environments.

This collaboration aims to enrich local curricula by providing teachers with real-world examples to inspire students. McCurdy highlighted that the "once-in-a-lifetime" experience will help foster the next generation of innovators in Bay County by demonstrating how classroom concepts function at sea.



Field Adventures by the Bay

Open to visitors and residents of all ages, this memorable experience from **Emerald & Forgotten Coast Adventures** offers a hands-on look at the unique marine ecosystems of Northwest Florida. You will have the chance to see, touch, and interact with the incredible organisms that call our coastal waters home.

When you sign up, your tax deductible contribution helps support local students by giving them access to real world marine science field experiences. All ages are welcome. Minors must be accompanied by an adult, and all participants need a ticket. Please register online in advance and complete the required waiver. More information at <https://emeraldforgottencoastadventures.org/field-adventures-by-the-bay/>



About Us

Our mission is to support local education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) with projects that inspire students and teachers at every level of the academic ladder from kindergarten through college.

We seek to increase the quantity, quality, and diversity of high school and college STEM graduates. Our approach involves engaging students early (K-5) to foster interest in STEM subjects and maintaining engagement throughout middle school, high school, and college with progressively advanced activities.

Programs include providing hands-on experiences, classroom equipment, and

access to STEM professionals through visits, virtual presentations, and coaching on innovation and long-term goals. We plan to offer scholarships for college STEM fields and STEM camps for all grade levels overtime. Additionally, we support STEM teachers through grants for career development, professional growth, and innovative classroom experiments to enhance student learning experiences.

The STEM Origins Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in Bay County, Florida. IRS Certification, Articles of Incorporation, and By-Laws are available on our [website](#). Also visit us on [Facebook](#).

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