

Students race toward bright future

By Robert Miller
STAFF WRITER

DANBURY — Devante Pratt watched his car — made of balsa wood, carrying a soda can, powered by the sun — streak across the courtyard. In that heat, at least, he was the king of solar speed.

“Sweeeet!” Pratt, of New Haven, said, walking quickly to retrieve his car before the next run.

That was one of several triumphs so far during Pratt’s stay at the Green Light Academy — a four-week summer school on Western Connecticut State University’s westside campus. He also learned to swim at the WestConn pool.

“It’s fun, Pratt, a senior at Hillhouse High School in New Haven, said about the academy. “I’m glad they offer it.”

By the end of the month, the 60 students — from high schools in New Haven, Bridgeport, Fairfield, Stamford and Norwalk — will have refitted their solar cars to run on small fuel cells.

They will have built small windmills to learn about wind power.

And they’ll spend their final week at Penfield Reef, off Bridgeport, working on solar and wind projects intended to power the lighthouse there.

“We’re not using any wiring,” said Samantha Goldman, 16, of Brian McMahon High School in Norwalk, tracking down her car. “Everything we’re doing here comes straight from the sun.”

The academy, led by Casey Jordan, is funded by a \$1 million grant from the state Department of Education.

Jordan is a professor of justice and law administration at WestConn. She’s also president of Beacon Preservation, a group dedicated to saving old lighthouses.

The academy, she said, is designed to give high school students hands-on experience with environmental issues — and the possibility of a green future.

“We don’t tell the kids what to do,” she said. “We give them guidance. But there’s no right way or wrong way to build these solar cars. They’re not kits. Every one is different.”

“Everything we do is experiential,” said Frank LaBanca, who is chairman of the science department at Oxford High School and has also taught at WestConn and the University of Bridgeport.

“We can understand by doing. Building these cars, they can learn about solar power, engineering and the environment.”

And because enrollment



Juniors Kevin Gonzalez, of Bridgeport, left, and Robert Bryant, of Stratford, make final tweaks to their cars at the starting line.



Students react as two of the fragile race cars collide.

in the academy is not specifically geared to kids planning to be scientists or engineers, its staff has been able to work with the students in areas not related to green energy.

Although the first week of the camp taught its 53 students general environmental concepts along Long Island Sound, and the last will be at Penfield Reef Lighthouse, Jordan said WestConn has

proved to be a great setting for the academy.

While the winners in the solar car races cheered as their models zipped around, Jordan said even the kids with larger, less speedy models had fun.

“Some kids are perfectly happy to have a slow car that looks cool,” Jordan said. “As are most SUV owners, I guess.”



Casey Jordan, left, executive director of Green Light Academy and a WestConn instructor, high fives senior Devante Pratt, of New Haven, after his car wins a race.



Hadiyall Foster, left, and Asia Dixon, juniors from New Haven, work on their stylish solar cars Friday.