The Woodie Flowers Award: Celebrating Mentorship, Communication, and Inspiration in FRC

The Woodie Flowers Award (WFA) is one of the most prestigious honors in the FIRST Robotics Competition (FRC). It recognizes exceptional mentors who not only guide their teams technically but also inspire students through effective communication, leadership, and passion for learning. Named after Dr. Woodie Flowers, a co-founder of FRC and a renowned MIT professor, this award embodies the values that FIRST seeks to cultivate: gracious professionalism, innovation, and the transformative power of mentorship.

Dr. Woodie Flowers believed that engineers should combine technical expertise with empathy, creativity, and strong communication skills. His philosophy that science and technology must be guided by humanity and ethical responsibility shaped the foundation of the FRC culture. To honor his legacy, the Woodie Flowers Award was introduced in 1996. Since then, it has celebrated mentors who emulate his vision by nurturing curiosity, teamwork, and respect among students.

The award is divided into two levels: the Woodie Flowers Finalist Award (WFFA) and the Championship Woodie Flowers Award (WFA). During regional or district competitions, teams nominate one mentor for the WFFA. Students write and submit a concise essay describing how their mentor inspires excellence in both technical and interpersonal areas. Judges review these submissions and select one WFFA recipient per event. Later, all WFFA recipients become eligible for the Championship-level WFA, where a panel of previous award winners evaluates them to select one mentor who best represents Dr. Flowers' ideals.

What makes the Woodie Flowers Award unique is its student-driven nomination process. Only students, not mentors or adults, can write and submit the nomination essay. This ensures that the award reflects genuine student appreciation and highlights the personal impact a mentor has had on their lives. The essay is limited in length, requiring students to capture the mentor's influence in a clear, heartfelt, and compelling way. Successful essays typically emphasize not only technical guidance, such as teaching programming, engineering design, or problem-solving, but also how the mentor fosters leadership, confidence, and collaboration within the team.

The selection criteria for the WFA go far beyond technical skill. The award celebrates effective communication, the ability to teach complex concepts in ways that students understand and retain. It also values gracious professionalism, a term coined by Dr. Flowers himself, which encourages individuals to compete with integrity, respect, and kindness. Mentors who embody this ideal inspire students to not only pursue excellence in robotics but also to become compassionate leaders in their communities.

Over the years, many WFA recipients have become role models across the global FRC community. They often share their mentoring techniques, outreach strategies, and philosophies to help other teams grow. This creates a ripple effect of inspiration, strengthening the overall

culture of learning and collaboration that defines FIRST. The award thus serves as a powerful reminder that robotics is not only about building machines but also about building people.

The impact of the Woodie Flowers Award extends far beyond the competition field. Many students who are WFA recipients have been mentored and go on to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), often crediting their mentors for instilling in them the confidence and curiosity to explore these fields. Others carry forward Dr. Flowers' message of empathy and ethical innovation, becoming mentors themselves and continuing the cycle of inspiration.

In conclusion, the Woodie Flowers Award is much more than a trophy; it is a celebration of human connection, communication, and compassion within a technical world. It honors mentors who embody the heart of FIRST: those who inspire students to think critically, act kindly, and create boldly. Dr. Woodie Flowers' legacy continues to live on through every mentor who teaches not just how to build a robot, but how to make a better future.