DESIGNsquad Nation

Five Questions with Adam Vollmer

Where did you grow up? What was your childhood like?

I grew up in the city of roses, Portland, Oregon. Portland was a great place to be a kid. Most of my childhood was spent outdoors. I learned to ski when I was two and from then on spent most every weekend hiking or skiing in the mountains with my family. As a child, I wanted most to be an astronaut, a LEGO engineer (before I knew what an engineer was), or a dinosaur hunter. Well, my dreams have almost come true. I got to play with LEGOs all the way up through grad school, I had the chance to work with NASA during the filming of *Design Squad Nation*, but…I'm still on the lookout for dinosaurs.

What hobbies do you enjoy? What do you like to do outside of work?

I love the mountains! Skiing is definitely my favorite hobby. I am almost more comfortable on skis than I am on my own two feet. Beyond that, I enjoy nearly anything that gets me exploring the outdoors. I think bicycles are amazing machines—I love them so much I built my own! I race mountain bikes, volunteer in bicycle transportation advocacy, and, in general, try to spend as much time riding my bike as I can.

Do you have any advice for kids who are interested in engineering?

For any kids who are interested in engineering, my advice would be—don't wait! There are so many resources—online, through college programs, community centers, and elsewhere—for kids to get a taste of what it's like to be an engineer, and to start picking up some really cool skills. Find an adult—maybe a family friend—who's an engineer, and learn more about what they do. Build something cool for Maker Faire, join your school's robotics club, or dabble with open source software and physical computing online. Take a welding class! And, keep studying math and science. It'll help make you a razor-sharp engineer who really understands how our fascinating world works.

If you could invent anything, what would it be?

I love that engineering gives me the tools to understand how the world works—it's like knowing an extra language. I think that the biggest problem in the world today is our abuse of the Earth's scarce natural resources and our rapidly warming climate. If I could invent anything, I would invent a low-cost, alternative energy, power supply that could be installed at every home (or at least in every neighborhood) in industrialized nations and used to feed a compliant, distributed power grid that would end our reliance on coal and other carbon-emitting fuels. If people produced their own electricity to power energy efficient homes and electric vehicles, then the money they would save not purchasing energy could be used to subsidize portable personal power plants in cities and villages all over the developing world.

What are you hoping kids will take away from *Design Squad Nation*?

I'm hoping that kids will see *Design Squad Nation* and be absolutely amazed at all of the different ways that engineering can be a part of their world. I hope it inspires kids to think about what sorts of problems and challenges THEY would like to solve, and to see engineering as a powerful skill that will can give them a great career where they're able to make a difference, have fun, and be as creative as their imaginations allow.

WGBH