

In the 80s there was a television show called Knight-Rider where a man talked to the car. Not many envisioned that to ever be a reality.

Not only do people talk to their cars, but there home computers also talk to their car and to the computer at work.

Not many can make that happen, but only local soon-to-be college freshman can do that, but he can do it pretty well.

Mackenzie Stephens recently finished fourth in Inter-networking at the Skills USA national competition, held in Kansas City, Miss.

Stephens, who is the son of Mary and Michael Stephens, qualified for state by placing in the top five at regionals and then winning the state-level competition.

He carried the success at state into nationals and was very pleased with his fourth place finish.

“Out of our presser in the last seven years, the best finish was a seventh place,” Stephens said. “My realistic goal was to be better than that. I was extremely happy with fourth place!”

Only one other student from prosser finished in the top 10 and that was a nursing student.

Stephens said Skills USA is an opportunity for students studying different disciplines, like nursing, networking, bricklaying, fire fighting and many more to compete. In all their were 92 disciplines competing.

The winners at nationals advance to a world competition, but there are fewer than 92 disciplines offered.

Stephens estimated that there were more than 6,000 people that competed at the national competition.

He explained what he does with computers for those who may not be knowledgeable about computers.

“What I do is I take computers, or a phone and a computer and now they even have cars, and I get those to communicate together,” Stephens said. “I’ve heard it described as building the roads that the information travels on – getting information from point A to point B.”

All three levels, regional, state and nationals, have a written test.

Stephens said at regional there was a physical lab with computers, routers switches and networking equipment.

“There were problems in it and we had to trouble-shoot,” he said.

He said at the state level, it was just a written test.

At nationals, Stephens said it was put on by a company called “Cisco.”

“They are one of the biggest networking companies in the world,” he said. “We had a written test. A technical assistance call, a trouble shooting portion where you had a bad network and you had to trouble shoot it and a network that had to be built from the ground up and cable making. It was three days.”

Stephens competed against 29 students in his discipline.

In 2012, Stephens didn’t make it past regionals.

There were 1,000 points available and each task had an individual point value.

He said winning and losing came down to who was able to manage their time better in attacking the problems.

"I knew how to do everything, and so did the rest of the students there, but the key was the time, because everything is timed," Stephens said. "So we had to do everything as fast as we could and trying to get as much as I could in the hour or two I was allotted.

"My biggest opponent throughout the competition was not having enough time to complete everything I had to."

He said those who put the competition together wanted it that way.

"The competition was not meant to be completed necessarily, but more so to challenge us," Stephens said.

His love for working with computers started when his church, Pekin United Methodist Church, brought in a person to train church members on running the computer and sound board.

Stephens said he was the only one who showed up and after spending a few weeks being shown what to do, they turned him loose and he has been doing it at PUMC since.

Running computers and sound at church led him to look into prosser, which offered two computer processing.

"Inter-networking sounded fun," Stephens said. "I picked that one. There were two classes. One the teacher was more of an in the book type and the other was more hands on. I got lucky enough to get the hands on guy. He gave me the tools to succeed and said go. I took everything he gave me and was able to study on my own.

"It's didn't feel like work, it has always been fun."

Stephens will continue his fun this fall when he begins at Ivy Tech, where he will pursue a degree in Information Security.

The course study for Information Security and Inter-networking are very similar and Stephens may leave school with a degree in both.

Stephens also works at RCS in the field of Inter-networking.

As for what he gained from the Skills USA competition.

"It was just a great experience," he said. "The one thing that school can't give you is experience. The hands-on experience of meeting the guys who put on the competition. They are so knowledgeable and the advice they give you.

"They kept pounding us everyday with the fact that everything counts. When you are in the work place, you can't say, 'I can't do it!' and just give up, you won't be there long. So, the message is to go in there and try everything – you can not give up!"