Hobbyist brings 'Lost in Space' robot to life

July 27 2010, By Rick Bentley

The "Stunt Robot", by Frederick Hodges

A dire warning fills Tom Boothe's Clovis, Calif., living room. "Danger! Danger!" shouts the deep voice.

Boothe taps a few keys on his computer and the warning gives way to the sarcastic remark, "If I had a dollar for every time someone wanted to take my picture ..."

Boothe smiles. That's because he's brought to life one of his favorite

childhood programs, "Lost in Space."

He remembers watching reruns of the show after school with his friends and wishing for a robot like the one that protected the space-traveling Robinson family.

The 49-year-old Boothe has made his wish come true.

In his living room stands a 7-foot exact replica of the Robot -- from red lights that blink in sync with the voice to the red and yellow twirling sensors that look like ears.

Boothe's Robot can repeat one of 600 different phrases recorded by Dick Tufeld, the actor who provided the Robot's booming voice in the show.

He started building it about three and a half years ago after finding the B9 Robot Builders Club on the Internet. (The club's name comes from the model style of the Robot as revealed in the episode "The Ghost Planet.") The online club has more than 500 members around the globe, many building their own "Lost in Space" Robot. Between 75 and 100 club members have completed their projects.

"Lost in Space," which launched on CBS in 1965, follows the exploits of a space traveling family who gets knocked off course. They spent three seasons visiting weird worlds while dealing with a trouble-making stowaway, Dr. Smith (Jonathan Harris), as they try to get back to Earth.

The 1998 movie featured an updated version of the Robot that was also voiced by Tufeld.

The Robot became both a protector for the family and a foil for Smith. It was designed by Robert Kinoshita, who also created Robby the Robot

for the film "Forbidden Plane."

Making a life-sized robot is just the latest in a long list of interests for Boothe. The hobbyist has built model planes and cars, flies radio-controlled airplanes and wants to construct a large model train layout in a spare bedroom.

"I've always liked doing stuff with my hands. I think that goes back to watching my dad put together models. He would build models like the Apollo rockets. I can remember watching him paint the little black jets on the Moon Lander," Boothe says.

Even Boothe's line of work lets him build and rebuild. He repairs transmissions for semi trucks.

He calls making the Robot the ultimate model project.

The B9 club has the rights to the detailed designs for the iconic TV character. After getting the blueprints, Boothe estimates he's built half of the 300-pound Robot -- made of aluminum, fiberglass, acrylic, metal and rubber -- and purchased the other half.

Getting the right materials has taken time. Blueprints call for the Robot to have 32 decorative wheels -- the majority hidden from sight. Boothe spent years going to recycling centers to find round pieces of aluminum he could shape with a small lathe into wheels.

"My wife asked me why did I need so many wheels since you can't see them," Boothe says. "I guess I'm just a little bit of a perfectionist."

No detail of the Robot has been overlooked, including the two rows of five large glowing buttons across the front that read Alpha 101, Beta 101, Gamma 101, etc. There's even a removable power supply on the

side, often pulled by someone on the TV show to disable the Robot.

The Robot's collar is made of 127 pieces of clear acrylic rods -- about four inches long -- that Boothe heated and shaped by hand.

Club members specialize in making various parts of the Robot. Boothe's an expert in making the motorized sensor ear posts that stick out from the neck and the triangular brain that can be seen under the Robot's clear top bubble. He sells these parts to other club members.

It's hard for Boothe to put an exact price on building the Robot. He's spent about $3,000, but that doesn't include the thousands of man hours he put in on the project. He's recouped about $1,000 by selling parts to other club members, something that helped win over his skeptical wife (she thought he was nuts when he started the project).

"When he told me he was going to sell pieces, I wondered who else is going to buy this," Sherry Boothe says. "Then the parts started selling like crazy."

The Robot's now complete enough to greet visitors. But Boothe is debating whether to end his long project. He might try to make the arms move. He would like to add a motor -- like those used in wheelchairs -- so his Robot can move around. That would mean revamping the entire support structure. He would also love to get Tufeld to create a personalized message -- but that's something that would mean spending several hundred dollars.

He is building special crates to hold pieces of the robot so he can take it places.

"If I saw this standing somewhere, I would want to stop and look at it or have my picture made with it," Boothe says.

Boothe likes sharing his Robot with friends and family -- that is until his wife goes all "Dr. Smith" on him and makes him move it back to the garage.

"I was hoping to have it out of the living room and back into his man cave by our Fourth of July party," Sherry says. "That didn't happen. I'll give him a month and it goes back in the garage in August."

That move, to quote The Robot, "does not compute."

For information on how to build your own Robot go to www.b9robotbuildersclub.com .