

High Tech

By Ross Daly

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Stony Brook University is where the DigiGirlz are

Students in the computer science building at Stony Brook University often open computers and remove their memory boards. But it's not often that those students are young teenagers. Or that they're all girls. Or DigiGirlz.

About 130 teenaged girls visited the campus last week for DigiGirlz, a three-day Microsoft program designed to expose young women to technology – and, possibly, careers in the field.

"I love it here! It's so cool. Everyone is really nice and it's so diverse," said Tiajah Lee-Fassett, a 13-year-old from Patchogue. "I learned I really like computers."

Tiajah is not alone in that reaction, according to Laurie Carey, a Microsoft employee who works with state and local government and lives on Long Island. Carey has spearheaded the DigiGirlz effort here, and insists "we're not just teaching them about technology."

"We're teaching them how to be successful in their careers," Carey said.

Panels at the event discussed the hiring of interns, balancing family and career and earning certifications. The girls learned how to get certified and how to use that to get a job, either permanently or to pay for college.

One of the opening activities had the girls designing their own business cards, which they later exchanged during a networking session.

More than 500 girls applied to the free program, far more than could be accommodated. "I had a mother call me yesterday to register her kid for next year," Carey said.

About half of the girls attended of their own volition and half because their parents wanted them to do so, she added.

Danielle Ferrante, 14, who will be a Smithtown High School West sophomore in September, was in the latter group. "I thought it would be just sitting in a room and listening to people going on and on," she said, but instead, the hands-on learning left her excited about the computer industry.

It's not just altruism that caused Microsoft and cosponsors CA and Motorola to present DigiGirlz, or convinced Stony Brook's Center for Excellence in Wireless and Information Technology to host it.

"There's a huge need for technology talent," said Cathrine Collins, Microsoft's public relations manager for the East region, adding that in the past year, Microsoft saw 3,000 jobs unfilled because the company couldn't find qualified people.

So the firm is encouraging students to study math and computer science, and it's targeting woman and minorities, groups underrepresented in the field.

"We have to take action," said Scott Passeser, the director of industrial outreach for CEWIT who led Stony Brook's involvement in the program, noting girls the age of those at the event are potential IT leaders of the future.

"But if we don't introduce them to it, they won't be able to do it," he added.

CEWIT intends to host the event again in coming years, Passeser said.

The DigiGirlz programs started in 2001 at Microsoft's campus in Redmond, Wash. The company has run the program in many regions, always at a Microsoft facility; the DigiGirlz at Stony Brook was not only the first on Long Island but the first held off Microsoft property.

"They're watching to make sure this works," Carey said.

Pending a successful review, other off-site DigiGirlz events are planned.

On the last day of the Stony Brook event, Kathleen Farrell, CEWIT's special projects coordinator, said she was exhausted, but gratified at having "an opportunity to show them the possibilities." Everyone at the university, from the Wang Center staff to IT support, went out of their way to welcome the students, Farrell added.

Carey also had a personal reason for leading the charge. "I've been in this field for 25 years and I'm still always the only woman," she said. "I have a passion for this. I wish I'd had this program when I was in high school."

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