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Chuin-Wei Yap

SCIENCE AND MATH Conference helps girls fight stereotypes

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FAIRFIELD -- Amanda Fogarty recently built her own room.

She built it online, at a Web site called Zoey's Room, picking out a bed, chairs, and ornaments to hang on her walls and ceiling.

"We go step by step, and then we get the final result and submit it to a contest," said the 11-year-old Houlton girl.

Zoey's Room, at <http://www.zoeyroom.com>, is a technology community for fifth- to eighth-grade girls to explore mathematics, science and technology in a creative environment.

This year, its makers, Vini Nair and Erin Reilly, collaborated for the first time with Waterville's Hardy Girls, Healthy Women at the nonprofit's seventh annual Girls Unlimited! conference, dubbed TechKNOW Girls, at the Kennebec Valley Community College on Saturday.



KNITTING YARN AND MATH TOGETHER: Graphic designer Maggi Blue of Rockland helps Brooke Elliot, 12, of Hampden during a knitting workshop at the Hardy Girls, Healthy Women's seventh annual Girls Unlimited! conference at Kennebec Valley Community College in Fairfield on Saturday. "Knitting is one way for people to use math in a creative outlet," said Blue.

Amanda -- part of a Houlton team that was the "most active group" in Zoey's Room -- and about 100 other girls were at the conference, both to engage each other and learn about opportunities in science, geography, Internet, video art and animation and engineering.

"It's a time for girls to explore opportunities in a fun and safe way," said Karen Heck, founder of Hardy Girls. "This year, it's math and science and technology. Last year, it was money. The year before that, it was beauty."

It's important for girls to learn about such opportunities now, because at the seventh- and eighth-grades, girls begin to transition to a point where modern culture starts inflicting stereotypes on them, Heck said.

The conference featured workshops on how to build a Web site, how to create a Web log, and how to find oneself on a Geographic Information Systems computerized map.

It also introduced girls to video storytelling, introduces participants to Colby College women in medicine and science, and taught them how to link mathematical principles to hobbies like knitting.

At the conference, Colby professor Lyn Mikel Brown also spoke to the girls about the need for their awareness of how modern marketing tries to shape the female self-image as a string of stereotypes -- "perfect little angels," or boy-crazy shoppers, or sexy divas.

"Technology is very one-on-one, and computers can be very male-oriented," Nair said. "Girls are more community-oriented. For example, they network using messaging a lot more. The whole concept (of this conference) is to teach how technology and the Internet ties the world together."

Zoey's Room uses technology to encourage girls to use technology to build social groups, Reilly said.

The Rockland outfit started about two years ago, when Nair and Reilly noticed a trend that girls were steering away from mathematics and science. They began to research the issue and found a need to bring the subjects back to girls.

Hence Zoey's Room, which allows girls creative ways to engage these subjects.

Carol Kiesman, who teaches at Houlton Southside School, uses the room as an after-school teaching resource.

Her daughter, 12-year-old Emily, used one of its resources, called "Fab Female," to meet a woman computer engineer, Darlene Coolong. Coolong works at South Portland's National Semiconductor, and they chatted for more than an hour on her job and engineering.

"We can talk to women around the country," Emily said.

The girls had fun.

"Whenever I see numbers, I always count them up," said 12-year-old Melissa Buzzell, of Waterville Junior High School. "I just enjoy numbers."

"Math is my favorite subject," said Jen Smith, Melissa's classmate. "I'm interested in numbers and problem-solving."