

Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

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WITH THE KIDS

Exploring possibilities

From engineering to robotics, science beckons girls at a Caltech festival.

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

Peer pressure, stereotypes of "geek" scientists, lack of encouragement from teachers or parents. Many reasons are cited to explain why young girls drift away from science studies once they hit puberty.

Today, however, many factors are supporting girls in their passion for all things scientific -- more women are scientists than ever; schools are providing math, science and technology curricula specifically targeting young women, and the public is more accepting of women as scientific explorers.

A good place to bring a budding Marie Curie is the second annual Los Angeles Science Festival on Saturday at Caltech in Pasadena. Young women interested in science will be able to meet each other and relish in their communal love of electrons, polymers and chemical equations, all without fear of being labeled "too smart."

The festival includes a street fair with hands-on activities and exhibits tailored to pique the interest of girls ages 11 to 16 (although boys won't be turned away). Attendees also get to meet women role models at various workshops as well as have the opportunity to hear how science has been an integral part of the life of the first American woman in space: Sally Ride.

Ride and the San Diego-based company she founded, Imaginary Lines Inc., organizes these festivals across the country. She says her goal is not to "make converts, but rather to support those girls who have a passion for science, math and technology."

"This kind of event opens up a world of opportunity to girls and introduces them to women who are pursuing their dreams in various scientific fields," says Ride. She says some leaders of last year's workshops developed mentor-like roles with participants and in some cases have kept in touch with the youngsters.

Workshops extend from veterinary sciences, Antarctic exploration and medical research to economics, engineering and robotics. Sessions for parents and teachers will explore ways that adults can stoke the fires of inquisitiveness in young girls.

"I personally didn't have any role models when I grew up," says Ride, "but I did have two excellent high school teachers who helped build up my confidence." Today, she says, role models -- while not in abundance -- are out there for young girls.

"Today, 9% of engineers are female," she notes. "That number is up from one-tenth of 1% in the 1970s.... Sure we still have a long way to go, but we are growing, and that's what counts. Today, there are women in every scientific field and profession."

Along with K.C. Cole, science writer for The Times, Ride will be giving the keynote address at Saturday's festival. Ride will describe her career from space shuttle crew member to her duties on the commission investigating the Columbia's recent explosion.

Has that tragedy diminished girls' interest in science and space exploration?

"Not in the least," says Ride, adding that most questions at another recent science festival concerned the program's future.

"They are intent on what they are intent on," says Ride. "When you have determined girls, nothing really will deter them."

Los Angeles Science Festival

Where: California Institute of Technology, 1200 E. California Blvd., Pasadena

When: Saturday, 11:30 a.m.-4:40 p.m.

Cost: \$20, advance; \$25, day of the event

Info: (800) 561-5161

SIDEBAR:

Sally Ride's story

Born: Encino, 1951

Family: Father taught political science at Santa Monica College; mother did volunteer work; one sister became a Presbyterian minister.

Early schooling: Westlake School for Girls in Encino (now Harvard-Westlake High School)

Favorite subjects: Math and science

Least favorite subject: Sewing

Sports: An avid tennis player at age 10; joined the junior U.S. tennis circuit and considered playing professional tennis until college.

Higher education: Earned a dual undergraduate degree in physics and English literature from Stanford. Master's degree and doctorate in physics, also from Stanford.

Career: Applied to the space program in 1977; one of six women selected by NASA to attend the astronaut class of 1978. Chosen as a crew member for the space shuttle Challenger in March 1982. Flew missions in 1983 and 1984.

Life after space: Recently appointed to the presidential commission investigating the Columbia explosion; she was on a similar commission after the 1986 explosion of the Challenger.

-- Brenda Rees