

BAE's Women in Technology program encourages girls to enter STEM careers

NASHUA – Helaine Hall knew she was good at math, and she even knew she liked it. But knowing how to turn that love into a career was the challenge.

“I wanted to do something that would actually translate into a job,” she said Tuesday. “I hadn’t really thought much about it.”

But now, only a few months after struggling to come up with an idea of a college major or life path, Hall said she knows exactly what she wants to do after graduating from Milford High School next year: become an electrical engineer.

And she credits BAE Systems’ Women in Technology program with helping her make that decision.

Women in Technology, started at the company’s Nashua campus 18 years ago, held its annual graduation ceremony Tuesday at Sky Meadow Country Club, honoring the 18 young women from high schools around the region who completed the engineering exploration program this year.

Meant to encourage young women to engage in science and math, the ceremony got a boost of inspiration Tuesday from visiting members of the state’s female congressional delegation, including Sens. Jeanne Shaheen and Kelly Ayotte, and Rep. Annie Kuster.

The program, started with six students from the former Nashua High School in 1995, brings young women with an aptitude in science and math to BAE to learn about various types of engineering over the course of a few months.

Students participate in activities like building a robot and programming it to complete certain tasks. They work to build electrical circuits and in the company’s microwave engineering lab.

And the women are assigned mentors, who help them figure out which areas of engineering might interest them most, as well as advise the students involved on the courses and programs they should be involved in during high school and college to find a good career in the science, technology, engineering and math fields.

Encouraging more young women to enter these fields, program coordinator Sandi Pelletier told the graduates and their families Tuesday, is the ultimate goal of the program.

Improving STEM education and encouraging more young people, particularly young women, to enter into those fields was a hot-button issue this election season.

Gov. Maggie Hassan made expanding science and math education at the K-12 levels a priority, and focused on continuing efforts at the state’s community colleges to tie engineering and math education to real world applications.

At Tuesday’s event, the three members of Congress said BAE’s Women in Technology program is an ideal example of the kind of work that needs to be done more frequently.

While women make up 48 percent of the national workforce, Shaheen said, they make up only 28 percent of workers in STEM fields. And in New Hampshire alone, at least 43,000 jobs in engineering and similar fields will need to be filled by 2018.

Getting young women interested in these career opportunities before they enter college is key to filling these jobs and keeping the state's workforce thriving, she said.

"This is your career path, remember that," Shaheen advised students. "This really is the key to our future."

Ayotte told the students that while there will always be people who tell them they can't do something, it's important to remember that they have the skills they need to contribute to the world.

"Don't take no for an answer," she said. "Your voices really matter."

Kuster said it is programs like BAE's that continue to make New Hampshire a leader in innovation and business, and that she hopes Tuesday's graduates would consider entering into the engineering field during college.

It was a hope that was quickly answered, as student after student stood to tell their stories of entering into and graduating from the Women in Technology program.

For Sydney Cookshaw, a Nashua High School South junior, a career in engineering was something she never considered before joining the BAE program.

She knew she enjoyed science and math, but said she imagined jobs in those fields to be boring, and questioned whether she would actually enjoy doing something like that as a job.

That all changed after entering into Women in Technology.

"It was great to learn about all the different areas of engineering and the different jobs I could do," she said.

Even better, she learned she wasn't the only young women interested in math and science, something Cookshaw said was hard to recognize in her high school. That camaraderie with the other young women involved, she said, helped encourage her to consider engineering as a career.

For Milford's Hall, the program gave her a similar perspective. Hall said she is now looking for colleges with good engineering programs. In fact, she and her mother, Rochelle Hall, are planning to spend spring break doing just that.

For Rochelle Hall, seeing how the program has impacted her daughter's college and career plans has been impressive.

Hall said she has an arts and education background, and while she always wanted to support her daughter's interest in math and science, she didn't always know how.

"When I was her age, there weren't so many opportunities for women in these fields, so I had nothing to go on," she said. "So giving her the opportunity to look into putting her love of science and math into a career was amazing."

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