8th-grade girls learn about STEM careers at INL

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By Nathan Brown
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Brian Ziel asked the group of a little more than a dozen eighth-grade girls whether any of them were interested in pursuing careers in health care. A few of them raised their hands.

One girl said she was interested in becoming a heart surgeon. Another was interested in orthopedic surgery. One was thinking about becoming a nurse.

“It really takes a whole team to make a hospital or a health system work,” said Ziel, a marketing specialist at Mountain View Hospital.

The girls from Mountain View Middle School then put on blue surgical scrubs and came down to the front of the room. Half of them sat in front of some laptops, where they performed a virtual surgery. The other half clustered around the table in front, looking at plastic bones and learning about how a hip replacement works.

About 145 eighth-grade girls, mostly from Idaho Falls-area schools, came to Idaho National Laboratory’s Energy Innovation Laboratory and the Center for Advanced Energy Studies on Friday for “My Amazing Future.” Now in its 11th year, the program features different workshops and presentations from INL researchers, engineers and scientists in the hopes of getting girls interested in careers in science, technology, engineering and math.

The event was started by a group of women who were scientists and engineers at INL, said Lynne Coe-Leavitt, who runs “My Amazing Future” and is the safety and health manager at INL’s Materials and Fuels Complex.

“They wanted to share what kind of work went on at the lab as well as engage the younger generation in these career fields,” she said.

Districts that were represented included Idaho Falls School District 91, Bonneville Joint School District 93, Pocatello, Blackfoot and, for the first time this year, the Snake River School District, Coe-Leavitt said. While almost all of the girls are from public schools, private school students can take part if their parents come to chaperon, Coe-Leavitt said.

The girls who attended were recommended by their teachers.

“Our teachers recognized our love of science and math,” said Lily Browning, an eighth-grader at Taylorview Middle School.

“I thought it was really fun,” said Taylorview eighth-grader Julia Finlinson. “I enjoyed it a lot.”

“I’m learning a lot, too,” Lily added.

Lily, Julia and a few other classmates had just finished with a demonstration that sought to teach them about the principles of engineering in a practical way.

“I want you girls to design something to cushion that egg from the fall and not let it crack,” Amanda Gates, who is a mechanical engineer at INL, told them.

After drawing a face and hair on their egg with a marker, the girls packed it in cardboard, surrounded by toilet paper and cotton balls to cushion it, and stuck some straws and Q-tips in as well to hold it in place. Finally, they duct-taped some balloons to the sides of the cardboard, which ended up slowing its fall.

The egg didn’t break.

Then, Gates turned on a video of the Mars rover project. The point of the egg drop was to teach the girls about some of the principles of design that also went into the Mars rover. She asked the girls what they thought the quote “dare mighty things” meant.

“You dared mighty things and all the eggs survived,” Gates said.

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Elizabeth Rasmuson, Allison Fullmer, Julia Finlinson and Katya Nyberg, eighth-graders from Taylorview Middle School, construct a vessel to protect an egg when dropped during the “My Amazing Future” event Friday at Idaho National Laboratory. The experiment was designed to mirror the entry of the Mars rover landing on Mars. The event is an Idaho National Laboratory initiative started 11 years ago to share the work the lab is doing and encourage girls to enter into STEM fields. John Roark / jroark@postregister.com

John Roark / jroark@postregister.com Ember Torres, an eighth-grader from Mountain View Middle School, performs a digital surgery during “My Amazing Future” at Idaho National Laboratory on Friday. The event is an INL initiative started 11 years ago to share the work the lab is doing and encourage girls to enter STEM fields. John Roark / jroark@postregister.com

Taryn Levitt, Ember Torres, and Dessi Sanchez, eighth-graders from Mountain View Middle School, help each other don surgical gowns and gloves before learning about surgery during “My Amazing Future” at Idaho National Laboratory on Friday. The event is an Idaho National Laboratory initiative started 11 years ago to share the work the lab is doing and encourage girls to enter into STEM fields. John Roark / jroark@postregister.com

Sidnee Menefee, an eighth-grader from Mountain View Middle School, adjusts a metatarsal plate, used to shorten or lengthen a toe bone, as students learn about surgery during “My Amazing Future” at INL on Friday. ^ John Roark jroark@postregister.com John Roark / jroark@postregister.com

Kyra Musingi, an eighth-grader from Taylorview Middle School, watches a film about the Mars rover's entry onto Mars during "My Amazing Future" at Idaho National Laboratory on Friday. The event is an Idaho National Laboratory initiative started 11 years ago to share the work the lab is doing and encourage girls to enter into STEM fields. John Roark / jroark@postregister.com

A student from Mountain View Middle School adjusts a screw to simulate fixing a broken bone while learning about surgery during "My Amazing Future" at Idaho National Laboratory on Friday. The event is an Idaho National Laboratory initiative started 11 years ago to share the work the lab is doing and encourage girls to enter into STEM fields. John Roark / jroark@postregister.com