

Women in STEM Offer Inspiration and Encouragement for East St. Louis Girls

by Megan Wieser

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EDWARDSVILLE – An electrophysics engineer, clinical pharmacist, statistical geneticist and STEM program coordinator shared personal experience and advice on overcoming challenges, believing in oneself and acting as a leader during the Women in STEM event held Thursday, March 15 at the Christian Activities Center in East St. Louis. The audience of girls ages 10-11 soaked in the inspiring remarks.

The Women in STEM event was coordinated by Southern Illinois University Edwardsville STEM Center Research Fellow Henriette Burns, a role model herself, as part of programming in the Exploring Global Challenges: A STEM+C Curriculum for Minority Girls initiative.

“Nationwide, women in STEM, especially engineering, are lacking diversity, including in the St. Louis area,” Burns said. “For years, my focus has been on the diversity of women in STEM. It is important, especially for girls of color, to see what they can be and how women of all colors struggle and overcome.”

The March Women in STEM event featured:

Lakesha Butler, PharmD, clinical professor in the SIUE School of Pharmacy Department of Pharmacy Practice, and Diversity and Inclusion Coordinator
Carrie Butts-Wilmsmeyer, PhD, director of the SIUE Center for Predictive Analytics and associate professor in the Department of Biological Sciences
Candice Johnson, MAT, SIUE STEM Center program coordinator and resource manager
April Pritchard, PhD, electrophysics engineer at Boeing

“The young ladies in attendance were engaged and eager to learn,” Butler said. “I saw leadership qualities in many of them. Early exposure to various career fields in STEM is important, and can make a significant impression even at the elementary level. This is especially important for underrepresented individuals in STEM fields.”

Butler encouraged the girls to learn from their failures, emphasizing that everyone who has had success has also failed. She told them to fail forward, by learning and growing from the experience.

“I have faced being the only female or the only African American in various spaces within my profession, which can be intimidating,” Butler explained. “However, those same intimidating spaces have helped to build my confidence in knowing who I am and being proud of that. It has also been helpful to be surrounded by genuine cheerleaders and mentors who want to see me succeed.”

Pritchard, who helps design, analyze and test aircraft projects, underscored the importance of having positive female role models.

“Even with having multiple degrees, I’ve sometimes struggled with feeling confident in my abilities,” she said. “Sometimes as a woman, I feel like I have to know it all and work harder than others to be taken seriously. I have overcome this by knowing that learning is a lifelong journey. No one knows it all. I reminded the girls that they are loved, talented, awesome, favored and can do amazing things!”

Johnson's advice included using available resources, seizing opportunities, and never being ashamed to ask for help.

"Sometimes the journey to success takes a village supporting and uplifting you along the way," Johnson said. "As a black woman, I have come across several hurdles to becoming a woman in STEM, and I enjoy sharing my story with young women who may experience some of those same hurdles."

"People have made assumptions about my intelligence and abilities that were not true," she continued. "I have always combated those thoughts by exhibiting how I excel in those areas. This ensures I am known for my outstanding abilities rather than a stereotyped assumption."

The next Women in STEM event is scheduled for Thursday, May 14 at the Christian Activities Center in East St. Louis. Female influencers in STEM fields from the St. Louis area who are interested in participating may contact Burns at hburns@siue.edu.

Exploring Global Challenges is led by the SIUE Center for STEM Research, Education and Outreach, in partnership with the SIUE Department of Computer Science, the iBIO Institute EDUCATE Center and the East St. Louis Christian Activity Center. The program is funded by a \$846,416 National Science Foundation (NSF) grant and is working to integrate computational thinking—a way of thinking about problems so that a computer can be used to explore or solve the problems—into the EDUCATE Center's existing Stellar Girls STEM curriculum. Implementation of the student program began in November of 2018.

The Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Center for STEM Research, Education and Outreach comprises an independent group of researchers and educators, innovating ways to engage students and the public in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). Within the SIUE Graduate School, the Center brings together research faculty, graduate students and practitioners to conduct education research. The Center contributes educational expertise to SIUE undergraduate classes and provides professional development for K-12 teachers. The Center boasts a significant library of equipment and resources, which are available for loan at no cost to campus and regional instructors. For more information, visit <https://www.siue.edu/stem/> or contact STEM Center Director Sharon Locke at (618) 650-3065 or stemcenter@siue.edu.