

AAUW Orinda-Moraga-Lafayette STEM Conference at Saint Mary's College  
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Examining a sheep's brain; noting the differences from a human brain; making slime, and getting creative with coding. These are but a few of the hands-on workshops which 200 middle school girls attended at the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Conference at Saint Mary's College on March 17. For the third year, the conference was presented by the Orinda-Moraga-Lafayette (OML) branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW). The conference leadership partners with the Saint Mary's College of Science and the Expanding Your Horizons National Organization.

"It is important for young girls to meet other girls who have similar interests and passions. Together they can encourage each other and build a support network", Stacia Cragholm, Conference Co-Chair explains. "The STEM conference is an opportunity to help middle school girls follow their dream by providing a sense of encouragement and empowerment to pursue their interests in science. I think by starting at this early age they might follow their passions and not get sidetracked."

To this end, nineteen workshops were available to the girls, who attended three during the day. Along with the ones already mentioned, some of the others were: Minimizing the Effects of Climate Change, Learning to Design and Build Bridges, Field Day in the Fourth Dimension; Bottle Rockets: An Introduction to Aerospace Engineering; and one with the intriguing title, Affordable Housing for Gummy Bears.

While Audrey said she wanted to learn how to design a suspension bridge, Larkin thought that learning to disassemble and assemble a computer sounded like a good, practical skill. Rosie liked getting to act in the short film her group made.

Girls from twenty-nine schools participated. Almost 60 girls attended from the Antioch School District. Ana Castro, adult supervisor said, "I enjoyed the opportunity to expose the girls to the college campus environment and have the opportunity to attend a wide variety of STEM sessions. It was an amazing trip. It was the first time for our district to attend this event. It is definitely something we will do again." One of the Antioch students said "I liked the ability to choose different classes. It gave me the opportunity to explore several subjects to see if I liked them or not."

High school aged girls and young women from Saint Mary's College were engaged in the conference. Enthusiastic and dedicated young women involved in the branch's high school ambassador program develop their leadership skills by assisting with conference planning, volunteer training, and coordination of logistics on the day of the conference. High school volunteers also serve as workshop aides at the conference. The high school girls have been past participants in the local branch's AAUW STEM-oriented Tech Trek summer camp (<https://www.aauw.org/what-we-do/stem-education/tech-trek/>), the Sister-to-Sister program, or have expressed interest in a leadership role. Isabelle, who volunteered in this capacity, said it was fun to see the day from a different perspective and she was glad to give back as she felt she gained so much from the STEM conference last year.

Eve Phillips gave the keynote address, with inspirational words about some of the personal "stories" that have helped shaped her life. Her example provided a success story of women in the world of science. Eve is a Group Product Manager at Google, leading product strategy and

development for its Chrome products in the workplace. Previously, Eve co-founded and served as CEO of Empower Interactive, Inc. a digital health company. She is a graduate of Miramonte High School, Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 2014, Eve was elected to the Orinda City Council and served as Mayor in 2017.

The event was hosted by Saint Mary's College and its School of Science. Generous sponsors were Chevron, Lamorinda Sunrise Rotary and Rossmoor Rotary Foundation. A conference of this magnitude required over 100 volunteers, including workshop leaders who are STEM Professionals, AAUW OML members, students from Saint Mary's College and local middle and high schools.

Parents were provided with a morning workshop with the theme, "Negotiating the Maze: How to guide your daughter through choosing her academic electives in high school and college to ensure academic and professional success in the pursuit of her dreams.' The presenters included a STEM professional, a social worker, one of the high school ambassadors, and a Saint Mary's student intern.

The AAUW Orinda-Moraga-Lafayette branch is committed to STEM programs, and to developing the interests and self-confidence of young women. We are thrilled to have been able to provide this opportunity to middle school girls in our local and neighboring communities.