I had the opportunity to participate in the inaugural Girls Day In event, where I introduced the local girls to the LEGO Mindstorms educational robotic systems. It was a great opportunity to encourage and inspire young minds.
By MC1 Grant P. Ammon

More than 50 young women from Monterey-area high schools and middle schools descended upon the Naval Postgraduate School campus, Mar. 11, as part of the Girls Day In pilot program. Girls Day In is a new K-12 outreach program that aims to introduce science and technology disciplines to children in the local Monterey community by providing opportunities for female students from local schools to explore the fields of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).

During the day-long event, the girls were exposed to a variety of presentations and activities, which included opening remarks by university president Dan Oliver and a keynote address by Dr. Alana Sherman, pictured above, of the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute (MBARI), in addition to the opportunity to build, program and operate robots under the tutelage of NPS professor Timothy Chung.

"Don't be afraid to try new things," encouraged Sherman during her opening remarks. "This profession is hard, but I believe failures are almost as important as the successes."

Sherman shared her experiences working as an engineer and researcher with the girls and chaperones in attendance during her kick-off speech. She vividly detailed her adventurous career as an engineer studying ice caps in Antarctica, mapping the ocean floor inside the submersible capsule "Alvin" and piloting remotely-operated vehicles. Sherman also shared her feelings on the study of math and science that she had early in her scholastic endeavors.

"I had some tough math and science teachers in high school. In my first year of college, I took an astronomy class and was relieved that it would be my last exposure to science and math," Sherman noted. "Down the road I took another math course and the teacher was great. I really started enjoying my math and science courses. I realized math was fun."

The girls were also taken on an escorted tour of the university campus by volunteers from the Monterey Sea Service Leadership Association (SSLA) and were afforded the opportunity to see first-hand the world-class research laboratories. The SSLA volunteers saw the afternoon as a chance to provide guidance and mentorship to a younger population of girls that may be interested in pursuing careers in the STEM fields.

"A primary function of our organization is the mentorship of fellow women serving in the sea services. Girls Day In was an opportunity to continue that mentorship and outreach," said Navy Lt. Heather Hornick, a meteorology student at NPS and member of the SSLA. "As soon as we heard about the program we asked how SSLA could help. Taking the time to volunteer at this event gave us the chance to work with young girls and show them the opportunities that are possible in the science and engineering career fields."

Attracting young female students to STEM careers is more important than ever for Americans to remain leaders in science and technology, and for one student attending Girls Day In, the day provided a forum to exercise problem solving skills and make new friends.

"I really liked the chance to create a robot," said Monterey High School senior Heidi Jones. "It was fun to meet new people and I learned a lot. I even had the chance to program the robot we built. I liked that we had a problem to figure out, and worked towards a solution."

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(Caption: NPS Prof. Timothy Chung introduces the science of robotics to a group of local middle and high school-aged girls as part of Girls Day In in the Barbara McNitt ballroom, Mar. 11.)