

# Aspirations in Computing Awards Celebrate Young Women in Tech

Monday, May 23, 2016



It's 9 a.m. on a Saturday morning and instead of sleeping in, fifteen young women were in the lobby of the University of New Hampshire at Manchester trying to figure out how to build the tallest tower they could out of few pieces of dried spaghetti, a marshmallow, a strip of masking tape and string.



The activity was an icebreaker for the recipients of the 2016 National Center for Women in Technology (NCWIT) Award for [Aspirations in Computing](#), a national initiative to honor young women at the middle and high-school level for their computing-related achievements and interests. The Aspirations in Computing Awards Event, held on May 14, was a half day of activities that provided an opportunity for young women from New Hampshire, Maine and Vermont to interact with students faculty and industry members in the field of technology. The awardees are selected for their computing and IT aptitude, leadership ability, academic history, and plans for post-secondary education. The program

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provides opportunities for young women to find internships and earn scholarships, including a \$1,500 award to UNH Manchester for NCWIT awardees and a \$1,000 award to NCWIT participants.

Twenty-five young women received awards this year, and Tammy Andrew, computer science teacher at Milford High School, received the Educator of the Year award from NCWIT.

Keynote speaker Margaret J. Eppstein, chairwoman of the Computer Science program at the University of Vermont, told the teens that life is unpredictable, but that she's found success by working hard and continuing to push toward her goals, including getting a Ph.D. at the age of 41 while raising two children.

Eppstein became the chairwoman of the Computer Science department at UVM in 2012 and has since become very involved in advocating for women in the computer science field.

"As a woman in a non-traditional field, you've got to grow a thick skin," Eppstein said. "You have to advocate for yourself. Every time you do it and you're successful, you feel empowered by it and it helps you to grow more."

Activities like the icebreaker and the hands-on activity held during a morning breakout session helped the young women connect with a larger network of tech-savvy teens, and to develop leadership and team building skills. While the young women broke off to work on programming circuit boards with Valerie Magri, a recent Rochester Institute of Technology graduate, the parents and a handful of educators attended a session to learn about additional opportunities available through NCWIT.

The teens also heard from a tech industry panel, which included Gunjan Choudhary, software development manager at Autodesk; Heather Lavoie, CEO at Geneia; Pauline Letizio, a UNH Manchester graduate from the [Computer Information Systems program](#); Charlotte McPherson, vice president of product

development at Fidelity Investment; and Bethany Ross, Network Operations Center Administrator at Dyn. In a question and answer session, the young women asked the panelists where they went to school, the skills that are important to success and whether they like their jobs.

Often there is a misconception that careers in computing are boring, but Ross said her job is unpredictable and exciting.

“If there is a crisis, I get paged at 2 a.m. to fix it,” said Ross.

“Every day is different. I didn’t want a job that was the same day in and out.”

“It’s just not about writing code. It’s such a big field — you have to find out what your favorite thing about computing is,” said Letizio, who gravitated toward data analytics and now writes code that analyzes data.

Letizio and Ross each talked about being the only girl in the class, which can be the case for some computing classes. Ross said she found ways to connect with other women in the field and later launched Future Tech Women, a networking group for women in technology in the Manchester and Seacoast areas. Letizio, who is a few years younger than Ross, said it is still very much a male-dominated field, but that her time at UNH Manchester saw more female involvement in the program, both students and faculty.

“At least a quarter of my classes had a female professor,” said Letizio.

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