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Friday, November 14, 2014



Landover, Hyattsville girls find inspiration, opportunities at UMD

Students among 350 discovering cybersecurity at annual career event for girls

By Alice Popovici Staff Writer

Lauryn Felder of Cheverly said she figured a cybersecurity workshop at the University of Maryland, College Park, would teach her "how to protect the Internet" — but she wasn't counting on picking locks.

Lauryn, 11, and her classmates from Thomas G. Pullen Creative and Performing Arts Academy in Landover were among about 350 middle school girls from Maryland who learned how to pick a lock, take apart a computer and decipher a code on Nov. 12, during a hands-on workshop meant to introduce girls to careers in cybersecurity.

The Cool Careers in Cybersecurity for Girls Workshop, hosted for the third year by the university's Maryland Cybersecurity Center, brought together about 36 women working in cybersecurity for employers such as the National Security Agency and Lockheed Martin.

The event was started by Davina Pruitt-Mentle of the National CyberWatch Center at Prince George's Community College in an effort to encourage girls to consider careers in the growing field of cybersecurity.

"It's great to get them when they're young and let them know this is a field that's open to them," said Gail Schnell of Accokeek, one of the professionals leading the lesson on picking a lock.



Bill Ryan/The Gazette Thomas G. Pullen seventh-graders Jessica Haley (left) and Chamya Dowd practice cryptography Nov. 12 at the University of Maryland's Maryland Cybersecurity Center cybersecurity workshop for girls. More than 350 girls from Maryland middle schools attended.



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Schnell, who served in Afghanistan as an IT specialist with the U.S. Army, owns a consulting company called Schnell-Tech Solutions LLC.

Schnell said the lock-picking activity was meant to introduce students to the concept of security, beginning

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with something as familiar as a combination lock.

"It shows you how something as simple as breaking into a lock can open up a vulnerability into a system," Schnell said. "Physical security is just one layer of cybersecurity ... but the physical layer should be the first line of defense."

Thomas G. Pullen and Hyattsville Middle School were the only Prince George's County schools selected to participate in the National Science Foundation-sponsored event — with about 40 students each. Ronnie Lowenstein, an advisor with the Washington, D.C.,-based Alliance for Science & Technology Research in America, said she chose the schools for their commitment to integrating arts into their curriculum, which is a priority highlighted this year by county schools CEO Kevin Maxwell.

Leaders and experts in cybersecurity are reaching out to girls in particular because the field is adding new jobs more quickly than it can find qualified employees, said Jan Plane, director of the university's Maryland Center for Women in Computing. She said one way to fill the vacancies is to look to groups that are historically underrepresented in IT — such as women — and to help them discover all the possibilities the field offers.

Plane said young people often get a "small-slice idea" of what cybersecurity is, and may not realize that outside interests such as the creative arts can be applied to careers in computing.

"The arts actually encourage discipline," she said. "Learning to read music and to understand that language is the same thing as learning a computer language."

It seems the event inspired at least one student to consider a career in cybersecurity.

Lauratu Bah, 13, who plays the saxophone in the Hyattsville Middle School band, said she had planned on pursuing a career in music, but is now thinking of majoring in a math or science field so she can work for the National Security Agency.

"If I major in one of these, I have something to fall back on," she said.

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