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For Immediate Release

Friday, July 23, 2010

“E-GIRLS” FIND CLUES TO “WHODUNIT?” USING REAL-LIFE SCIENTIFIC PROCESSES AND ANALYSIS

Forensic science camp funded through Science Foundation Arizona; geared toward increasing girls’ interest in science, technology careers

(FLAGSTAFF, AZ) Girls between the ages of 13 – 18 are spending the week in a summer learning session at Northern Arizona University, scouring mock crime scenes for evidence and using real-world forensics to solve their cases, much like a modern day crime drama that emphasizes evidence and technology to find the culprit.

Known as “e-GIRLS” (e-Tools for Girls Investigating Real Life Sciences), the six-day program funded by Science Foundation Arizona (SFAz) focuses on teaching teenage girls how to use science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) to analyze and solve problems, as well as expose them to career fields in which women are underrepresented.

Initially funded through a three-year grant from SFAz in 2007, e-GIRLS hosts two sessions each summer, one for beginners and one for advanced students. Scenarios to which they are exposed include mock dog abductions, “homicides,” abandoned campsites with old skeletal remains and claims of theft and harassment. The girls gather evidence, such as hair and saliva and test for DNA, review medical histories and blood types and examine and study skeletal structures to determine identities, as well as test for different types of substances in a laboratory environment. Additionally, the girls use handwriting samples, check fingerprints and analyze other data to develop hypotheses about what happened at the scene of each incident to solve the “crime.”

“Exposing students to the wonders and intrigue of science is particularly important at this age, before they have chosen a career field,” said William C. Harris, President and CEO of SFAz. “Once they get the hands-on experience of using technology to solve problems, they have the potential to do just about anything – create the next Microsoft, find a solution to the world’s energy crisis – the possibilities are as endless as the universe.”

“The project-based work gives them the opportunity to experience and potentially develop an interest in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) careers,” said Darcy Renfro, SFAz Vice President and Executive Director of STEM Initiatives. “Being able to spend six full days studying science in a community setting with their peers, using technology that you would find in real crime labs is a great way for them to learn more about the 21st century careers that await them.”

The sessions include six teams of three girls each with this year’s student participants from Yuma, San Luis, Flagstaff and the Valley. Each of the teams presents a synopsis of their cases, an overview of the evidence gathered and forensic tests conducted to develop a hypothesis of what happened and what led to their conclusion. The teams compete for first place based on their collaborative efforts, quality of their work, including their research, understanding of the evidence and science and their ability to explain in detail what they did and discovered – all components of the building blocks of a 21st century skill set.

“For a lot of the girls, this is some of the first exposure they’ve had to real, hands-on science, real problem solving,” said Bruce Jones, a Mesa educator and e-GIRLS camp lead teacher. “We try to present the work in a non-classroom setting - we don’t give them the answers, but are there to help them discover what they can on their own. The excitement that comes out of the program is that they were able to do it.”

The advanced session concludes on Saturday afternoon. The beginning session finished its work on July 17th. E-GIRLS is run by NAU’s Office of Community Engagement Director John M. Acedo, Jr.

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About Science Foundation Arizona: Science Foundation Arizona (SFaz) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization initiated in 2006 by the Greater Phoenix Leadership Inc., Southern Arizona Leadership Council and the Flagstaff Forty in conjunction with the executive and legislative branches of state government. SFaz serves as a catalyst for high-wage, knowledge-based jobs and economic diversity through administration and strict oversight of research, development and education grants to public education and other non-profit research performing institutions. For more information, visit www.sfaz.org.