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Girl power

By Susan Salcido, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

More than 30 years ago, Sally Ride became the first woman astronaut to orbit the earth. She was also the youngest, at age 32. Three years later, Judy Resnik became the second woman in space. She was also a concert pianist, an electrical engineer, and the first Jewish astronaut. Both ardently sought to be known simply as “astronauts,” rather than identified by the subgroups they also represented. Their pride and joy was the work they were able to accomplish.

Asked once why she wanted to be an astronaut, Judy Resnik famously replied that if you had to ask, you’d never know.

These women were the natural extensions of the brilliant and accomplished women who went before them, including those at NASA, where the story of three trailblazing professionals was immortalized in the recent movie “Hidden Figures.” More recently, Amy McGrath became the first female Marine to fly a combat mission in an F-18 fighter jet for operations for the United States.

“Girl power” has always been a force. While it is growing at every turn, young girls still need support as they pursue their dreams, especially in fields that have traditionally been the domain of young men.

The Girl Scouts of America recently added a merit badge option that young girls can achieve by earning credits in STEM projects — Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math. That is wonderful news. Young women should be encouraged to follow whatever paths they choose, wherever their talents lead them.

The idea of “Girl Power” was underscored when Sylvia Acevedo, CEO of the Girl Scouts of America, recently came to Santa Barbara’s MOXI – The Wolf Museum of Exploration + Innovation.

Acevedo credited the Girl Scouts with launching her own career in science. She explained that some of the Girls Scouts’ first badges were based in science and engineering. She herself earned a degree in systems engineering at Stanford and went on to become a scientist at NASA. It has been her

goal as CEO to increase the Scouts' commitment to encouraging members to take part in science and technology fields.

The need for these efforts is documented by data that shows young girls in elementary school excel in math and science, often outscoring their male counterparts. But somewhere during junior high or middle school years, the drop-off becomes dramatic, and young girls who once seemed highly interested and accomplished in math and science opt to go in a different direction.

If that is their true preference, we support it. But if other factors impact that decision — if peer pressure or subconscious cues from those in authority, or even subtle messages that they really aren't suited for these fields — are the cause of their change of heart, then that is an issue we need to address.

Contributions to our communities, our country, our economy, and our overall wellbeing by girls of all ages are well documented. It's important to do all we can to support and nurture the innate talents of all our students, male and female alike. The needs of our communities and our country require contributions from all who are able, not just a portion.

Let's encourage "Girl Power" as part of the solution to the challenges we face.

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