



Santa Barbara County Education Office

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Scientists spark passion for science at local junior high schools

On Oct. 4 and 5, Partners in Education and the Youth Innovation Club unveiled a collaboration with one main goal in mind: to get students excited about science, specifically their science projects. To do so, they recruited 36 scientists and engineers to play the role of science project advisor for nearly 600 total students on the Santa Barbara and La Colina Junior High campuses.

With school science fairs planned ahead of the County Science Fair that will take place in March 2019, students are creating their experiment plans now. For eighth graders, the science project is a requirement. However, not every student feels prepared to tackle the project.

“For most students, this was their first time speaking about their projects or about any science with a person with a science background, other than their teachers,” said Marilyn Garza, science teacher at Santa Barbara Junior High.

Scott Love, a teacher at La Colina Junior High, said, “The best part was easily the one-on-one support that was given to the students. It was amazing to see the variety and quality of mentors.”

The 36 scientists and engineers—all volunteers, half of whom are women—ranged from undergraduate and graduate students, researchers and professors from UCSB and Santa Barbara City College, to professionals representing organizations such as Cognixion, DataCloud, Sonos, Transphorm, Inc., Von Arnim, LLC, Cate School, and the Museum of Natural History.

Over the course of two days, they interacted with small groups of students, listening to project ideas, and offering suggestions.

In describing the experience, one student said, “I think that the best part of having a science project advisor was having a real person with good experience in science to bounce my ideas off of.”

“They gave me very helpful suggestions on how to apply my project’s results to the real world,” said another.

A third student said, “It made me feel a bit more confident about my project.”

The Youth Innovation Club’s founder, Vicki Chen, discovered Partners in Education nearly a year ago, when she led educational outreach for Sonos. Partners in Education coordinated the details and helped bring Vicki’s vision for a night of science and mentorship to life, providing a small group of junior high students with the opportunity to receive science project advice from Sonos employees in their downtown headquarters.

Bringing science project advisors from a variety of backgrounds to multiple campuses was an expansion of that vision, and the goal is to engage more volunteers and students each year.

Now on the path to starting her own nonprofit, Vicki—a scientist herself—also wants to find ways to assist science teachers and their students with expert science support on an ongoing basis.

Meanwhile, Partners in Education receives dozens of requests for science-related support throughout the year, and volunteers are always needed.

“I feel every scientist should be engaged in outreach,” said Braulio Castillo, one of the science project advisors and a UCSB graduate student focusing on microbial ecology and biogeochemical cycling. “It provides younger students with a chance to be inspired to do science by meeting real-life role models, increasing the accessibility of science to the public.”

For more information about Partners in Education, visit partners.sbceo.org.

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