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"Coming from a Hispanic family," she said, "they don't know where to sign up or what to ask or what to do."

If her daughter goes to college after graduating from high school and the Eureka! program, she will be the first in Barajas' family to do so.

Nye said it's important that Girls Inc. continues contact with the girls even after they enter college.

"The first three semesters of college – that's make-or-break time," she said.

Applications for new Eureka! students, who must be outgoing seventh-graders in the Portland or Woodburn region, will be available at girlsincpnw.org by Feb. 1. Girls Inc. will accept applications through June, but space is limited.

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"STEM itself has been a hot topic on the workforce development side for quite a while, if you look at where our economy is going," said Chris Harder, the economic development director at Portland Development Commission.

He said diversifying the workforce recently became a priority for Tech Town Portland, a partnership between the PDC and more than 20 tech-based companies, including Puppet Labs, Jama and Elemental. The collaboration, formed in 2013, is aimed at showcasing Portland as an emerging tech town and attracting new tech companies and workers from out of state.

Its video boasting Portland as the ideal setting for tech industry has had more than 41,000 views online.

"A lot of these innovation-focused, fast-growing companies," Harder said, "can't hire fast enough, and they are having difficulty finding qualified talent here in Portland, but Portland is not unique. The Bay Area runs into this challenge. So does Boston, New York and Seattle."

Many blame the emergence of the tech industry in San Francisco for making it unaffordable for pre-existing residents. Won't attracting tech to Portland contribute to its already dire housing crisis?

Harder said it's complicated.

"We have dual concerns," he said.

"There's a gap between the number of qualified workers and the number of job openings they have. We want to help move the needle on who's getting these jobs."

He said that while everyone agrees affordable housing is needed, another strategy for tackling the affordability issue is to work with disconnected communities to make sure they get the skills that will qualify them for the jobs that pay well.

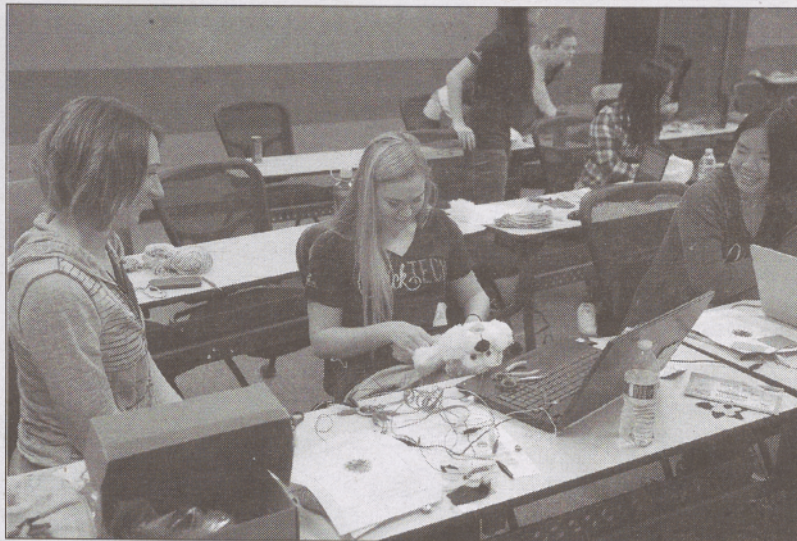


PHOTO BY WOJTEK RAJSKI

A participant at ChickTech: High School's kickoff in November is about to pull stuffing out of a teddy bear. She programmed the circuit board in front of her to light up different parts of the toy. Some girls programmed theirs to play music.



PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

Eboni Holmes, 14, is participating in her first year of Eureka! with Girls Inc. of the Pacific Northwest. Here, she attends a weekend conference where girls meet with a panel of prominent women working in STEM fields. Holmes plans to pursue a career in science when she's older.

"It's not one or the other," he said. "I think in order to solve these problems and make sure we don't go the way of San Francisco, because we don't want to go that way, we need to work on both of those."

During the past five years, Harder said, Portland's seen an emergence of code and technical training schools.

"A great example of one that focuses

specifically on women or girls is ChickTech," he said.

Janice Levenhagen-Seeley, a Portland computer engineer, founded ChickTech in 2011.

"Janice realized after she had gotten her degree and gone into software development how hard it was in the industry for women. Sexism was rampant, and there just weren't

that many women in the field," said Janelle Coburn, ChickTech Portland's co-lead. "It really drove her to do something about it."

Today, ChickTech has chapters in technical hubs all over the country offering tech-oriented events and workshops for K-12 girls and adult women who are interested in switching careers.

More than 100 high school girls attended its 2015 ChickTech: High School kickoff at Portland State University in November, the first in a seven-month series of mentoring events and workshops.

"I have seen the number of women in STEM decreasing," Coburn said. "From 1991 to 2014, the number of women in computing jobs went from 37 percent to 26 percent."

She said her employer is currently looking to hire a number of data scientists. "We aren't getting the female applicants," she said.

She said many women are likely to leave the industry in their first year due to male chauvinistic work environments. She's worked various jobs as an analytics consultant and systems analyst and said she's experienced sexism herself.

"I experienced that being a strong female voice and being passionate about my work is seen differently than males that exude the same passion and the same strength," she said. "There's a difference in treatment from management."

That's one of the reasons Coburn is involved with ChickTech, she said.

"I don't want people to have to deal with that, whether they be young women or career-level women," she said.

"I think, honestly, everyone needs to step up for this. I don't think it's just women. We need to have more men that are stepping up for women in tech and realizing that there is a gender disparity, because I hear a lot of people – even close friends of mine – saying that, 'Well, you know, maybe women just don't like these jobs.'"

Between boys and girls, Girls Inc. director Nye said the capabilities are "absolutely equal." The challenge, she said, "is getting everyone to an equal playing field."

As area nonprofits and tech industry recruiters turn their attention toward girls, changes are happening in the toy aisle too.

Frustrated with the lack of real science kits for girls, two female scientists, who are also moms, founded Yellow Scope in 2014. This Portland-based company makes chemistry sets and science kits for girls ages 8 to 12.

The packaging isn't pink, and rather than instructions for making soap and makeup, the contents teach concepts like chemical reactions and molecular motion.

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