PHS grad designs Lego set for aspiring female scientists

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

According to a 2011 study by the U.S. Department of Commerce, only 24 percent of STEM jobs — science, technology, engineering and math — are filled by women.

In an attempt to help close the gap, Pendleton High School graduate Circe Verba designed a Lego set she's hoping will inspire the next generation of girls to pursue a job in a STEM field.

Verba, a geologist with the U.S. Department of Energy, used Lego digital design software to create a 3-D model of a female geologist undertaking experiments and other daily tasks.

Verba submitted the model to Lego Ideas, a website where designers submit concepts for Lego sets to be voted on by visitors.

If a set gets 10,000 supporters, it will garner consideration from a Lego review board. With review board approval, the set is manufactured for worldwide sale.

Verba's set quickly attracted 1,500 votes after she submitted it Feb. 3. As of press time, Verba's set has 2,260 supporters with 332 days left to campaign.

The set depicts two scenes — one where a research geologist discovers minerals in a limestone rock and the other a laboratory where the geologist analyzes the minerals for their characteristics.

Photo courtesy of Circe Verba

Pendleton High School graduate Circe Verba's Lego set design features a geologist discovering and studying minerals.

On the set's webpage, Verba wrote that the set is a sampling of her career, which has taken a sharp upward trajectory since her days in Pendleton.

Growing up, Verba said Legos were one of the few things that was easily accessible in a family living below the poverty line in Pendleton.

Her interest in science was piqued by a lesson on the solar system delivered by Sunridge Middle School science teacher Quinn Williams.

She pursued a career path in astronomy until she started attending college at Oregon State University, when she decided to switch her focus to geology.

As a graduate student at Northern Arizona University, she studied dust devils on Mars as a part of NASA's HiRISE program.

After graduating with a master's degree in geology, the U.S. Department of Energy hired her and paid for her Ph.D at the University of Oregon.

Having obtained her Ph.D in 2013, Verba now studies the effect coal has on rock formations for the National Energy Technology Laboratory in Albany.

Now that she's a successful geologist, Verba wants to see her personal experiences added to the growing collection of Lego sets depicting women in science.

Last year, Lego debuted their Research Institute set, which depicted female scientists from several different fields.

If her set meets the 10,00-supporter goal, Verba hopes to include supplementary material that briefly explains the science behind the Legos, though she admits the final decision rests with the company.

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HERMISTON

Trees damaged by November cold snap

By GEORGE PLAVEN
East Oregonian

Fruit orchards weren't the only source of trees damaged by last November's sudden and severe cold snap.

Ken Frost, plant pathologist at Oregon State University's Hermiston Agricultural Research and Extension Center, said a large number of local pine samples also appear to have been affected by the same deep freeze.

"I think it was a pretty significant event," Frost said. "Obviously, we're dealing with the ramifications."

Temperatures fell from 60 degrees to the single digits in a matter of days during mid-November 2014. The Arctic blast happened so fast many trees didn't have a chance to acclimate, dealing a serious blow to orchards around Milton-Freewater.

Now, homeowners in Hermiston are beginning to notice dead and withered needles on the tips of branches in their ornamental pines, prompting them to bring samples into HAREC.

Researchers won't know the full extent of the damage until later in the spring, Frost said.

"Right now, it's really a wait-and-see," he said.

Symptoms of damage will vary depending on the age and type of tree, as well as its orientation to the sun. Though the damage might look bad, Frost said fully mature trees shouldn't be at risk at dying.

HAREC station director Phil Hamm said residents can spot cold damage on pines if they see dead needles on the younger tips of branches. Dead needles are to be expected farther up the branch in older growth.

Hamm cautioned residents not to prune their pine trees, which could substantially and irrevocably damage the shape of the tree. He said homeowners should not worry about long-term damage to older trees in their yards.

Acres of young trees — those less than two years old — have already been uprooted from orchards in the Walla Walla Valley. Clive Kaiser, extension horticulturist for OSU in Milton-Freewater, has said the weather event was a disaster for the region and doesn't expect much of a harvest off stone fruits for the coming year.

The Mid-Columbia's pear and cherry crop also sustained significant damage from the November freeze, according to OSU in Wasco County. They too will have to wait until spring to find out just how bad it really was.

HERMISTON

Altrusa sponsors author visit to Middle School

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

Young adult fiction author Maureen McQuerry had some words of wisdom for Armand Larive Middle School students on Friday.

"You will fail sometimes," she said. "You will make mistakes. That's part of life. Get over it. That's not important. What's important is that you get back up."

Risking failure was a necessary step to becoming an author, said McQuerry, but it was just one of many pieces of advice she gave students that applied to chasing any dream. Daring to dream is the first step, she said, followed by finding people who believe in you, taking risks and finding your "tribe" of people who share your passions.

McQuerry said it takes a combination of curiosity, passion and determination to succeed in pursing a dream such as becoming a published writer. Without those traits, she said, just having talent isn't good enough.

In her case, she left teaching to become a full-time writer and published award-winning books "The Peculiars," "Nuclear Legacy" and "Beyond the Door."

Staff photo by Jade McDowell

Maureen McQuerry, author of "The Peculiars" and other young adult fiction, speaks to eighth graders at Armand Larive Middle School.

McQuerry said writers store ideas like crows, picking up "shiny" feelings and tucking them away to be used later in a book or poem. She said she is always taking those ideas and asking "What if?" which is how she got the idea for "Beyond the Door."

A face she saw carved in stone at a cathedral in Oxford, England started her thinking.

"It was a face that was caught between being a person and a tree," she said, noting it reminded her of an entry in J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings."

"I thought, what if my skin turned to bark? What if birds started landing on me? What if vines started forcing their way up my throat and out of my mouth?"

That thought spurred her to research the Green Man in Celtic mythology and create a character for "Beyond the Door" that was part man, part tree.

She said good fiction writers explore a question, not always to give an answer. They also understand that a good story isn't just about having a plot, it's about how the things that happen to a person change that person.

"Story is transformation," she said.

McQuerry's visit to the school was sponsored by the Hermiston Altrusa Literacy Committee. She spoke to several large groups of students throughout the day, then conducted a smaller workshop for 15 students selected based on their submissions to a writing contest sponsored by the literacy committee. Winners Daisy Paredes and Hannah Johnson also received a Barnes and Noble gift card and a set of McQuerry's books.

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Meet Rocky Heights principal candidates

East Oregonian

HERMISTON — All three final candidates for Rocky Heights Elementary principal will be on hand for a meet and greet Wednesday, March 12, from 3:30-5 p.m. in the school's library.

Jerad Farley, Stacie Roberts and Michelle Jensen are being considered to replace current principal BJ Wilson, who will leave Rocky Heights next year to become the Hermiston School District's special education director.

Jensen has worked for the district since she was hired as a school counselor in 2006. In 2014 she moved up to the role of online learning and academic support coordinator, overseeing Hermiston's online school and the Talented and Gifted program.

Roberts started at Hermiston School District in 1999 as a sixth grade teacher at Sandstone Middle School. She moved up to dean of students and athletic director at Armand Larive Middle School and is the current vice principal there.

Farley is a district instructional coach for Othello School District in Othello, Washington, and is completing an administrative internship there. He has a background in math and language arts as well as bilingual, migrant and Title I programs.

Participants in the meet and greet on Wednesday are asked to stay the entire time to hear from all three candidates and fill out survey cards at the end.

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