

Nonprofit gives girls chances at construction, more

DemoChicks show the way to new non-traditional career choices for women

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Lily Sochin always wanted to be an engineer.

But even as a freshman in high school, Sochin said, one thing was clear: Men, by far, outnumber women in that field.

“My first day of freshman year, my engineering class had like 26 boys and six girls,” said Sochin, who attended Long Beach Unified School District’s McBride High School — which boasts a college-prep focused engineering program. “So I was like, oh — that’s a little bit not fun.”

And it’s not just engineering.

It’s well known that women are vastly underrepresented in STEM — science, technology, engineering, and math — careers. But in the adjacent ACE industry, which centers on the fields of architecture, construction, and engineering, women are equally lacking.

Though women represent more than half of the United States workforce as of 2019, according to a recent report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, they occupied just 27% of architecture, engineering, and related jobs in 2021, according to BLS data.

And that same year, only 10% of construction jobs went to women.

Though Sochin, who is now 18 and prepping for her first year of computer science studies at Long Beach City College, never felt excluded in school based on her gender — she says she wishes that she’d had more opportunities to explore the ACE field as a kid.

And that’s where a Long Beach-based nonprofit — where Sochin has spent the summer as an intern — comes in.

DemoChicks, founded by chemical en-



MINDY SCHAUER — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Robin Thorne founded the non-profit DemoChicks to empower girls to enter careers like architecture, engineering and construction. She is an accomplished chemical engineer herself and is the CEO of CTI Environmental Inc. She has fun with Kyla Daez, 16, left, who is interested in mechanical engineering, and Lily Sochin, 18, who will be studying computer science in college.

gineer Robin Thorne, has one key goal in mind: Empowering young girls and women to pursue careers in nontraditional fields — specifically ACE and STEM.

Aside from offering virtual and in-person educational workshops centered on science and math for younger learners, DemoChicks also provides internships aimed at giving participants interested

in ACE jobs a taste of the career — without having to fully commit to it.

Thorne, who runs engineering firm CTI Environmental Inc., sparked the idea for DemoChicks while celebrating a big project her company had just completed in 2018: The demolition of a 122-structure federal prison.

“When we did that project, I was like

wow — this is a curriculum,” Thorne said, noting that few girls are given the opportunity to engage with ACE careers at a young age. “I was just really driven to just show that the demolition industry was too limited.”

DemoChicks launched just over a year later, right before the start of the pandemic — and members began speaking to cohorts of young women at Long Beach schools, providing math and science-centered educational workshops for kids, career mentoring for young women, and working with community partners citywide to get the organization’s message out.

Thorne’s sister, who helps run the organization, hosted DemoChicks’ first in-person events in Philadelphia — where the siblings are originally from. But just before Thorne could host her first workshop in Long Beach, scheduled to take place at Jordan High School, the pandemic hit.

“That’s when we went online,” Thorne said.

And despite that damper on DemoChicks’ efforts — it didn’t slow the group down much.

Instead, Thorne and DemoChicks embraced the new virtual reality, opting to host all of its activities virtually until very recently — as COVID-19 restrictions have begun to ease across California.

“It was amazing,” Thorne said, “One of the powerful things about our online workshop is that they’re (the kids) at their kitchen table, so it’s practical. They’re at home, in front of their computer, learning about science.”

The online-aspect of the workshops, she added, allow more kids to engage. And, all materials needed for experiments during workshops are either provided by the organization, or are pantry staples most people already have access to.

One participant, a young girl, took a DemoChick’s lesson in interior design — a staple of the architecture field. A month

DEMOCHICKS » PAGE 27

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HeART

FROM PAGE 24

twice a week.

Because of the pandemic, 2020 was an interesting year for City HeART, Matos said. The main focus during the pandemic was to distribute food, help with hygiene items and household cleaning items and PPE. At the beginning of the pandemic, many of the volunteers were not coming in and interns were being pulled out of their placements by the schools.

Matos and her husband, Izzy (art director and executive VP at the organization), originally didn't have a plan when to reopen the Hub, since times were uncertain. When they returned to work at the Villages, organizers told them that City HeART needed to operate because many of the resources the community needed were coming from them.

With the support of the Villages and from John Oppenheim, the Veterans Council director and chief operating officer, City HeART was able to offer its

services again.

"I can't emphasize that enough, the support from (the Villages) and the community here just making sure that we stayed open was everything and still to this day is everything," Matos said.

As volunteers were getting vaccinated and returning to help, the Hub became busier providing services to people than ever, Matos said. This year, Matos decided to become the full-time executive director to make sure that things kept going operating smoothly.

"The amount of people we serve has gone up since 2020, and pretty consistently, but the types of things we get asked for have also changed," Matos said.

When case managers refer their clients to City HeART, the person is invited over to the Hub. The volunteers meet the person's needs, but sometimes also discover they need more help. They report it back to the case manager to see what can be collaboratively done to meet those needs, whether it's food, social connection, mental health or transportation.

"We always go back to the case man-

agers and check in with them and that's kind of how we operate and that's why the number definitely goes up for the services that we're providing," Matos said. "But everything needs change; as a person gets older as they lose their job or lose a loved one, needs change."

In 2021, Matos and the organization began to see the effects the pandemic had on mental health in the Villages. That led to City HeART's partnership with Veterans Pure Access Network and a program called Akua, a nonprofit substance abuse program.

"What we do is love and provide that family/friend support. But there are times when we need to know how to appropriately respond especially when it comes to mental health," Matos said. "So having that clinical direction from Akua and really adding some expertise behind what we do, has allowed us to really grow up as an organization, which has been amazing."

City HeART continues to provide art workshops as well. The organization believes that art can not just change the world, but it can really heal a person, Matos said. With two pianos at the Hub

and a room full of art supplies, Matos says that City HeART tries to have art everywhere making it appealing to become a tool for healing.

To continue the storytelling side of the organization, City HeART launched its own magazine this year, honoring recipients of the Heart of the City award and Art from Ashes award that City HeART gives volunteers or organizations to highlight their contributions to helping the community.

Donations of any kind, including money, are welcomed at City HeART, Matos said. The funds can be directly gifted to a specific program or a general donation will also help with the programs and everyday operations.

The four key programs at City HeART are the Veterans Council, Connect!, HeARTy Foods Groceries, and Art from the Ashes.

If people would like to volunteer, they can sign up on the City HeART website, go through a bit of training depending on where they would like to help and volunteers can choose their own adventure one day or every day of the week, Matos said.

DemoChicks

FROM PAGE 25

later, Thorne said, the child has drawn a detailed design of her own bedroom — and told her mom she'd learned it from DemoChicks.

"They're gaining from the program and expanding their minds," Thorne said. "Our thing is elevating and empowering."

But as to why so few women are in ACE, Thorne believes some people fall into the sexist trap of believing that women are less capable of doing physically demanding work — and others just aren't aware of the myriad types of jobs within construction and demolition, many of which don't require

hands-on work.

"It's not just field work — I'm not out in the field, I'm the owner of a company," Thorne said, noting the many types of ACE career pathways. "It's just letting them know that these careers exist. We believe in 'see it, be it.'"

Since DemoChicks launched, the organization has participated in events and hosted workshops with Long Beach Unified's Female Leadership Academy, the American Institute of Architecture, Long Beach City College, and with the Salvation Army.

And, the organization launched a partnership with LBUSD to provide some of its students with summer internships — which is how Sochin got involved with DemoChicks.

"I know that if I was that kid, I would be so excited about being able to do

something like that." Sochin said of her time helping DemoChicks put on educational workshops. "So being able to be like the one kind of facilitating that, it's just really important to me."

Kyla Daez, an 11th grader at the California Academy of Mathematics and Science, also spent her summer interning with DemoChicks through the LBUSD partnership.

"They don't just influence women, they're also influencing the boys and that field in general," Daez said of DemoChicks. "It's more like, oh, wow, we're not limiting who gets the opportunity to see what the field is about."

For Daez, the experience with DemoChicks helped open her eyes to her different career possibilities ahead of college.

"I was so passionate before I entered high school — I'm going to be a doctor,"

Daez said. "And now, I'm just more open to ideas — like I don't know anymore, maybe engineering could be something I could do."

And though the gender gap in her school's engineering gap is also intimidating, Daez said — it also motivates her.

"What if I can do this?" Daez asked. "I could have more knowledge on engineering as well."

DemoChicks, for its part, doesn't intend on slowing down anytime soon.

"We are definitely impacting their lives," Thorne said, and they're working on more partnerships to expand that impact to girls and women all throughout Long Beach.

To learn more about DemoChicks, visit the organization's website, demo-chicks.org.

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