

People: Encouraging Girls to Explore Science

Cherrill Spencer was on hand May 4 to see the Expanding Your Horizons Network receive the 2010 National Science Board's Public Service Award. Spencer, a magnet engineer at SLAC, has played a variety of leadership roles with the EYH Network for the past 29 years. This award was presented at a [banquet](#) at the State Department in Washington, DC.



Expanding Your Horizons Network members including SLAC researcher Cherrill Spencer (center) hold up the award plaque at the U.S. State Department. (Photo courtesy Cherrill Spencer.)

Expanding Your Horizons Network is a non-profit organization that runs conferences for middle and high school girls. The workshops feature women scientists and engineers, who lead hands-on demonstrations to pique young girls' interest in math, science and engineering.

Spencer first became involved in EYH in 1978, when the organization was in its infancy. It started out in 1976 as a small conference at Mills College, limiting participants to the Bay Area. Spencer led a workshop at a similar conference at Foothill College in 1978.

"I saw how much the girls enjoyed it, and the following year I joined the organizing committee at San Jose State University," she said. "We try to make it fun, and plan the workshops so the girls can be successful in the hands-on experiments."

While in graduate school at Oxford, Spencer was the only woman in the nuclear physics department. "I thought it was a great pity there weren't more women in physics," she said.

With the EYH conferences, she saw the opportunity to recruit more girls into science and engineering college majors by introducing them to women in those fields and encouraging them to take more math courses in high school. The annual conferences offer a variety of workshops, which allow girls to experiment hands-on with lasers, polymers and DNA extraction.



Cherrill Spencer at the State Department during the reception. (Photo courtesy Cherrill Spencer.)

In 1981, Spencer joined the organization's board. She has also served, at various points over the years, as president, vice president, secretary and treasurer. In the meantime, the EYH Network has blossomed into a nationwide initiative. The EYH Network provides instructions on how to run a conference, and many EYH alums have gone on to start satellite conferences when they get jobs in a town that does not have such a program.

Last year, the organization hosted about 20,000 girls in 86 conferences staggered across 30 states. California alone has EYHs in 16 different locations. Since 1976, almost 800,000 girls have come through the conferences.

But sheer volume does not begin to tap into the success of EYH, as Spencer points out. Bringing girls

into the workshops isn't enough ; they have to see that engineering and science careers aren't weird or impossible or boring. The workshops have to shift girls' attitudes – and an EYH survey of alumnae backs up that they do.

"Seventy-five percent of alumnae who completed our Web-based survey say that it had an influence on their choice of their undergraduate major," Spencer said. In exit surveys, nearly all participants say they would recommend an EYH conference to a friend and more than half resolve to take more math classes.

The EYH conferences are also trying to break down stereotypes and myths about scientists and engineers, helping girls to realize their potential.

"Anything to show the girls that being a scientist is a good thing," she said.

—*Julie Karceski*

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