

# Women in tech aim to grow next generation's interest beyond family ties



As more programs emerge, obstacles still exist in effort to get more girls, women in tech.



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**L**earning to program computers has been an education for Nathalia Bailey.

The 25-year-old freelance web developer and writer used an online training site recently to develop her skills, despite growing up with a database software engineer father and living in Silicon Valley for a bit.

Now she's part of a group trying to lead the charge to encourage more girls and women to learn how to program in Central Florida.

It's an effort some say has lagged behind other regions of the country.

Still, new local chapters of tech groups, such as Girl Develop It and R-Ladies, can help give girls a better idea of what careers are possible, said Bailey of Deltona.

"We need to see this as little girls so when we do go into college, we have in our minds that we can do something other than teach or be a nurse," she said. "Right now, those are the careers we are exposed to early."

Efforts to increase the percentage of women in tech careers have had mixed results. While some say there is increased awareness of the issue, the percentage of science-based degree students who are women dropped from 37 percent to 18 percent between 1985 and 2015, according to the National Center for Women and Information Technology.

Web developer Cassandra Wilcox said she expects that number to climb as more programs reach younger girls.

She has been organizing a local chapter of Girl Develop It, a nonprofit that offers women training in web and software development.

R-Ladies Orlando, a developers meetup group that focuses on the programming language called R, also recently debuted.

"It's important to start girls young and introduce them to the idea that technology is something they are absolutely capable of getting into," said Wilcox, who owns the development consultancy for startups Code Hangar.

More industries have been adding workers with tech-related skills. In today's tech-centric world, a cigar company will need a website just as much as a city government will need a mobile app.

The skills needed to contribute to these futures will be crucial, Wilcox said.

“I’m not trying to convince them all to be programmers, but they should all know how to code in the same way that they should all know how to read,” Wilcox said. “It helps them look at a problem and figure out how to solve it instead of seeing it as something to avoid.”

Female role models in the industry are key, said Robin Hernandez, Orlando-based director of private cloud offerings at IBM. She speaks to younger girls and encourages others to do so, she said.

“It’s not enough just to get society to agree that young girls are capable of this,” Wilcox said. “Some of them are raised by mothers who believe they may not be capable of it. There is always going to be that lag.”

The Grace Hopper Conference served as a three-day celebration of women in technology last week in Orlando. The conference reported that 18,000 people attended.

The percentage of tech workers who are women had jumped slightly last year, from 21.5 percent to 22.95 percent, according to AnitaB.org. Philanthropist and technologist Melinda Gates shared the data at the Grace Hopper Conference.

Encouraging more women to pursue technology-based careers has been a high-profile topic in tech for years.

In recent years, the focus has been on catching them early, sometimes even in elementary schools, Electronic Arts’ Maitland-based Vice President and head of operations Daryl Holt said.

“It’s impossible to raise the number of female workers in technology unless you start to build a pipeline of interested talent,” he said.

To do that, Holt said the company often hosts student groups at its local Tiburon game-development studio, where games like NBA Live and Madden football are made.

EA met young people interested in science, technology, engineering and mathematics careers at the Grace Hopper Conference.

The company is “not only encouraging, but also actively shaping a future they can see for themselves in a world where STEM is the new normal,” Holt said.

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