

Young Masters of Science

By Steve Maynard, The News Tribune, Tacoma, Wash.

Jul. 12--Twelve-year-old Chyna Thomas coached other youths on how to build a tanklike robot out of Legos.

"Don't pull the track so hard," said Chyna, a seventh-grader at Tacoma's Hunt Middle School.

In this summer class at The Evergreen State College Tacoma campus, the girls are instructing the boys.

The female and male middle- and high school-aged students meet separately three days of the week at Evergreen. But on Wednesdays, girls who were in last summer's Girls' Math, Science and Engineering Academy teach. The boys' version of the academy is new this summer.

Program director Luversa Sullivan originally reached out to girls who were intimidated by science and math. Now, she's also helping boys, who studies show often don't involve themselves in math and science.

Byron Evans, 12, liked learning from the girls.

"I can understand a little bit better," said Byron, a seventh-grader at Drum Intermediate School in University Place. "They explain a little bit clearer."

It turned out two girls needed to move the plastic axle on the Lego robot -- loaded with a computer chip -- before the rubber track fit properly.

Now in its second summer, the Girls' Math, Science and Engineering Academy is part of a program Sullivan started as a pilot project during the school year five years ago.

"The goal is to help the kids learn how to use the tools of technology to better their lives and help better the lives of others," said Sullivan, information systems analyst at Evergreen Tacoma. "When they learn that they can do something meaningful then it really boosts their self-esteem, which improves their academics."

Nearly 20 students are meeting from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays through the first week of August at Evergreen for the six-week academy. Three other Evergreen instructors also teach them about public speaking, environmental science and media advertising.

The class is free. The girls' program is funded primarily by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, while Intel Corp. is the main sponsor of the boys' academy.

The students huddled in teams on a carpeted floor and assembled their 4-inch-long yellow robots, called "tank-bots." They took turns programming the robots using a wireless connection and watched them follow orders: backward, zigzag, turn, shake. They even downloaded music so the robots could dance to tunes.

Fourteen-year-old Chris German said he enjoys the class. "I like learning math and science through the vehicle of technology," said Chris, a ninth-grader at Stadium High School.

Fifteen-year-old Ylisse Bess, a 10th-grader at Bellarmine Preparatory School, said the class is "pretty cool" and she's not put off by science.

"It's easy to learn," Ylisse said about her first summer academy. "We have good teachers."

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