

Teachers Offered Lessons on Putting 'Cool' in Science

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By DENISE M. BARAN-UNLAND For Sun-Times Media

The thought of a scientist may conjure an image of a bespectacled man in a white coat working alone in a laboratory with only his test tubes for company.

At least that's close to how Laura DiMartino and Annette Herrera pictured a scientist in an exercise at the Sally Ride Science Academy in Washington D.C. DiMartino, a resource specialist at A.O. Marshall Elementary School, and Herrera, a fourth-grade teacher at M.J. Cunningham School in Joliet, were among five Joliet elementary educators who spent five days at the academy.

From July 25-29, the teachers learned innovative strategies to introduce young students to STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) careers. They also received sets of the Sally Ride "Cool Career" book series for use in their classrooms.

"The books just slide into our lessons as they exist now," DiMartino said. "For instance, when teaching third-graders about the rock cycle, they can read about geologists and what they do."

DiMartino, who previously conducted an after-school science club at Pershing Elementary School in Joliet, praised the academy's efforts and said the program is long overdue.

"For some reason we're not getting kids interested in and remaining interested in technology, engineering, math and science," DiMartino said. "Companies often have to import people to fill these posts and it's a crying shame. We should be growing our own."

The educators will also train other district teachers this school year.

The academy is a partnership between Sally Ride Science (founded by American astronaut Sally Ride) and ExxonMobil. According to Ride, research shows that when students learn of the variety of options available to them, they are more likely to choose a science-related career.

Herrera agreed. A lifelong lover of science, Herrera enjoys sharing that love with her students. Yet she never considered channeling that passion into such careers as oceanography, astronomy, engineering or technology.



Laura demonstrates another science lesson to teachers. (submitted photo)

Last year, Herrera attended the Exxon Mobil Science Academy where she learned hands-on methods of teaching science. This year, she can take that fun to a new level. "I want to teach kids about the science and math careers out there that they can enjoy," Herrera said, "the way that I enjoy mine."

"I thought scientists were all like Thomas Edison," Herrera said. "I think one of the reason kids don't choose science as a career is lack of awareness. I honestly think they don't know these choices exist."