

'Geek chic' gatherings for technology-loving women

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By Kara Andrade, AFP

SAN FRANCISCO -- Leather-clad, spike-heeled women with boldly colored hair and beefed-up laptop computers are getting their geek on at supportive gatherings in Silicon Valley.

A recent "She's Geeky 3" conference in the city of Mountain View in northern California was just such an oasis for technology-loving women in a profession blatantly dominated by men.

"There are only so many women you can convince not to drop out of science," said Kaliya Hamlin, who runs the conferences she launched in 2007.

"I want to create a conversation about how to support women in mid-life, mid-career, increasing their skills and joining the industry on the technical side."

The two-day conference in January was the first of an array of similar gatherings planned for U.S. cities including with a goal of building bridges between women techies.

"She's Geeky" was attended by more than 150 women, many from companies such as Apple, Hewett Packard, Yahoo!, Google, Orange Labs, and McAfee.

"Women here are trying to sidestep that bureaucracy of moving up the ranks," said 34-year-old Jen Castillo, a firmware engineer and dancer.

"We're tired of trying to figure out this magical formula that will get us moving up. This is a way to do it on your own terms and not rely on the current institution to help you pave your way." Conference workshops focused on topics ranging from videogame design and software coding to the art of beekeeping.

"It's awesome that through the power of technology ... geeks are seen as being cool and coming together as super foxy geek chicks," said Classes for Causes vice president of operations Alicia Washkevich.

A Girl Geek Dinner timed to coincide with the conference mirrored similar women-only eating and schmoozing events held in Britain, Canada, France, Ireland, Italy and other countries.

The dinners were started in London in 2005 by "one girl geek who got annoyed and

frustrated about being one of the only females attending technical events," according to its Web site.

Attendees described the all-girl gatherings as vital for building confidence and honing skills in a technology arena women are deserting.

"There isn't a joint in the pipeline from which we're not losing women from," said Computer Science Teachers Association executive director Chris Stephenson.

"We're losing girls from the beginning, at the university level; we lose women after their graduate degree and we lose them a few years into the industry."

He added that the reasons are "complex and have to do with the nature of the field."

The University of California, Berkeley, has seen the number of bachelor's degrees in computer science awarded to women drop from 27 percent in the 1998-1999 school year to 12 percent in 2007-2008.

The proportion of women in computer and information sciences has decreased in the past 20 years, according to The Anita Borg Institute for Women in Technology.

While the stereotype of a geek is usually a man, women are seeking kindred spirits at conferences and dinners to make the world more hospitable to female geeks.

Women attending the conference see seizing the title "geek" as a step toward reversing the trend by showing that it is hip to be brainy.

While introducing themselves, conference participants proudly explained why they considered themselves "geeky."

"The bottom line is that every woman has a different face and the more faces we put out there then the chances are that more women will identify with them," said Stephenson.

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