

Girls construction camp offers camaraderie, career-info and hands-on training

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Whether they were installing flooring, putting up drywall or putting in electrical fixtures, the girls who participated in this year's Let's Build Construction Camp for Girls not only learned about opportunities in the construction industry, they also got the chance to practice their skills.

It was all part of the third annual camp, organized by Eastern Pennsylvania's Associated Builders & Contractors and two other organizations, Construction Specifications Institute Greater Lehigh Valley Chapter, and Lehigh Valley Architecture, Construction and Engineering.

The free, weeklong camp serves to provide career info and hands-on training activities for girls 14 to 18 who have interest in construction, architecture, engineering and related fields. Proceeds raised from the event through the sponsors benefited the camp and the ACE Mentor Program-Lehigh Valley Chapter, a nonprofit.

Each year, the program continues to grow.

Last year, 21 girls participated and this year the camp drew 27, including one student from Chesapeake, Virginia, and another from Wisconsin who ended up making the trip as part of a visit with family in the area.

This year's event, held at Bethlehem Area Vo-Tech from July 8-12, allowed the girls to work on teams of five to build and design part of a room, with the girls doing all the physical work.

The program aims to give teen girls inspiration, courage and confidence in gaining new skills.

Several women who work in the industry in the Lehigh Valley volunteer each year to help with the camps, guiding the girls in their efforts.

Another level of mentorship comes into play as girls who participate in previous years often return to serve as mentors for the newcomers.

On the last day of the camp, one of the volunteers, Donna Braden, owner of Jack's Glass in Allentown, spoke about how much the girls accomplished.

They built all the walls in one day, learned how to build toolboxes out of metal and learned measuring skills, as well as how to hang drywall, and how to put in stamped concrete, Braden said. The girls also installed stonework, flooring and plumbing and visited local companies to learn about careers in the industry, she said.

"It's to give them a taste of all the different possibilities in the building trades," Braden said. "The girls have just been amazing."

This year, the campers learned how to install stamped concrete, a new project for the camp.

The girls put concrete around the base of the school's flagpole, which previously had been a muddy spot. Now, the school has a permanent fixture, complete with a Let's Build logo imprinted in the concrete, said Jon Lattin, president of the Greater Lehigh Valley Chapter of CSI.

Lisa Zelko, sales representative for Casilio Concrete in Bethlehem, said her company supplied the concrete. All American Concrete did the actual work of pouring the concrete.

Andrea Coyne, corporate communications lead for Victaulic of Forks Township, said her company was on site to show the girls the installation of heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems and an alternative method of joining pipe. Coyne said her company also talked to them about welding careers.

The girls also heard presentations from members of Commercial Real Estate Women Lehigh Valley, who spoke about opportunities in the construction industry, including in areas such as finance and project management.

The weeklong camp culminated in a nailing competition where each team showed how fast they could hammer a nail into a board, with the fastest team to sink a nail winning top place.

Overall, the girls appeared to show eagerness to learn and enjoyed the chance to learn new skills.

Abygail Jacobs, 15, a student at Upper Bucks County Technical School, described how she enjoys welding.

"It's a trade that doesn't have many women," Jacobs said.

Another participant, Colette Potter, age 15, from the Easton Area School District, said she likes interior design.

"I am working on re-doing our family playroom," Potter said. "I think I'll be able to use those skills."

She said she also liked learning how to do drywall and install an HVAC system.

This year's program brought in many new girls, so the organizers paired them with other girls who were more experienced, said Kristen Fallon, regional vice president of member services for the Eastern Pennsylvania Chapter of ABC.

"It helps boost them up internally," Fallon said. "Certain ones that are quiet, they are finding their voice."

The girls from last year's camp had the opportunity to serve as project managers this year if they wanted, Fallon said.

With worker shortages in the construction industry, the camp's supporting believe it's a way to help fill those gaps.

Fallon said she is working with other CSI and ABC chapters to help grow the program across the U.S.



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