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Girls get crash course in careers

October 12, 2007

By *Daphne Larkin Times Argus Staff*

RANDOLPH CENTER – They cut logs, sat in a helicopter, wielded fire hoses, and tried to imagine some untraditional professions.

Almost 400 young women from 60 Vermont high schools descended upon the campus of Vermont Technical College Thursday to participate in the ninth annual Women Can Do Conference for High School Girls.

Firefighting, law enforcement, computer technology, painting and auto mechanics were just some of the hands-on workshops offered during the daylong event.

Designed to expose young women to non-traditional careers, groups of girls filled classrooms and simulated outdoor work sites as professional women taught them about their trades.

Women in the Vermont Army National Guard landed an OH-58 helicopter on the VTC green before teaching groups of girls about the machine and letting them sit in the cockpit. Under a steel-gray morning sky, girls swarmed around the helicopter, talking about the day.

"I'm excited so far," said Paige Ibey, a sophomore from Twinfield Union School.

Firefighters from South Hero and Randolph provided equipment and gear for girls to suit up in before operating a fire hose and climbing the ladder atop a truck.

"You have to hold onto (the hose) because it pulls you back," said 15 year old Keri Capron, a Twinfield sophomore.

Capron, about five-feet tall and fully suited in firefighting regalia sans the air tank, was waiting her turn to climb the fire ladder. The gear weighs 60 pounds fully loaded with an air tank.

"I could very easily get tired from this," she said.

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ENLARGE IMAGE

Randolph Center assistant fire chief Rob Wheatley, left, looks on as Keri Capron, 15, of Northfield, center, along with Samantha Tallman, 16, and Ervina Iseric, 16, right, both of Essex, learn to use a fire hose during a "Women Can Do" workshop at Vermont Technical College Thursday.



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Inside a classroom, Woodstock Police Officer Jennifer Hutchins McGuire taught a roomful of girls about the world of law enforcement. McGuire spoke to the girls of her own lifelong desire to be a cop.

"Mel Gibson in Lethal Weapon 2 – he was a real bad ass," said McGuire, who added that she liked the idea "that justice has been served."

One workshop, which taught girls how to operate a chainsaw, was taught by current and former technical center students at a Vermont school. Under a tent on the green, the instructors taught girls about safety equipment – chaps, goggles, steel-toed boots and Kevlar gloves – and eventually had them cutting "cookies" off the end of a log.

"You hear the put-downs: girls can't do what guys can do, but we can!" said Dena Durkee, one of the instructors and a 16-year-old junior in the natural resources program at Hartford Career and Technical Center in White River Jct.

The conference was organized by Vermont Works for Women a 20-year-old nonprofit organization based in Essex Junction, and is supported by the Vermont Department of Education, VTC, state technical centers, and a consortium of corporations and public agencies.

The conference started out at the Capitol Plaza with 60 girls, according to Tiffany Bluemle, Vermont Works for Women executive director. VTC has provided the space and access to technical equipment, like computers, for the past six years they have hosted the event.

The 33 workshops offered Thursday also included instruction in videography and building construction.

"Even if girls don't enter tech programs after high school, they will know they can do anything," Bluemle said. "It's just a one-day experience, but it is something that all the technical centers really value because they see it as a way young women can look at what to do with their lives."

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