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Breaking down gender barriers

Founder devoted to exposing girls to sciences



DEBORAH CHANTSON PHOTO

Larissa Vingilis-Jaremko is this year's YWCA Women of Distinction recipient for breaking gender stereotypes in math and science. Larissa Vingilis-Jaremko always knew she wanted to be a scientist. But it wasn't until she was in Grade 4 that this year's YWCA Women of Distinction recipient for breaking gender stereotypes in math and science realized she was one of a select few. "That's when I came up with the idea for the Canadian Association for Girls in Science (CAGIS)," says the 23-year-old University of Toronto science major. Of course it wasn't until she was 11 that the association was fully up and running. "I had help of course," laughs Vingilis-Jaremko. At the time of CAGIS's inception, Vingilis-Jaremko's mother was already the president of the Canadian Association for Women in Science. "I used to get dragged around to her board meetings," explains Vingilis-Jaremko. "At one of them I announced that I wanted to start a science club for girls and they said, 'Wonderful, go for it, we're not going to do it for you, but we'll definitely support you.'"



Larissa Vingilis-Jaremko teaches a young student about geology. To this day, Vingilis-Jaremko knows she is the minority, both in her chosen field and the support she had in entering it. Research has found that females are dissuaded from excelling in science from a very young age. "If you go into a class of Grade 4 students and ask 'what does a scientist look like,' they'll give you that typical Albert Einstein image," explains Vingilis-Jaremko. "In the media you watch cartoons and you get the mad scientist image." But lack of strong female role models isn't the only thing deterring girls from entering the field, according to Vingilis-Jaremko. "Even in science class what ends up happening sometimes is the boys get right in there and suddenly all of the good jobs are taken. The girls get stuck with the secretarial role. It's not that the boys are to blame, it's just differences in learning style and being assertive." Perhaps the most disturbing influence is what psychologists have labeled the Stereotype Threat, which suggests that telling a group they'll perform poorly causes them to in fact perform poorly. "A lot of times science teachers or parents don't realize it but their own stereotypes subtly send the wrong message to girls." Cagis is doing it's best to curb this message. Geared towards girls between the ages of 7 and 16, the organization is devoted to exposing girls to the sciences. "Part of it is taking girls to the workplace of a scientist and giving them a behind the scenes look," explains Vingilis-Jaremko. "But we also do fun hands-on activities so they can realize, 'I can do this and have fun doing it.'"

LEYLEA EMORY/METRO TORONTO

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