

AHS sisters aim to empower girls through coding



By Brock Weir

Maya Bishop has always been interested in science and technology, but when she sat down to put her interests to good use in high school computer engineering course, she noticed something a little bit unusual.

She was one of only two girls in the class, leading Maya, now a Grade 12 student at Aurora High School to ask the obvious question: why?

The answer, at least on the surface, seemed to be a simple one. For far too long, when computer tech courses are mentioned young girls see images of 'the geek behind the desk.'

'I really got to feel how big of a gender gap there is,' says Maya. 'Most people have the geek behind the desk vibe when they hear it, but they don't understand how amazing that profession is.'

She and her sister Amanda, Grade 10, however, are not content to just quietly forge ahead on their technology and science path, they are aiming to challenge those misconceptions for girls across Aurora and close that gap by hosting female tech leaders for a night of conversation.

Why Code Aurora: A Night of Empowering Girls Through Code will take place October 24 from 6.30 - 8.30 p.m. at Aurora High School and is open to young women from the whole community - and even the guys.

It brings together a group of six women who have forged careers in technology who will dispel the vibe and encourage up-and-coming talent to see the possibilities before them.

'We want these women in computer fields to share how they got their job and what obstacles they have faced and overcome,' says Amanda. 'Our focus is how there are far fewer women. We hope this will help the girls in the community to realise there are jobs in technology they can do, and it is not a 'man thing' to be in computers. It is an easy and creative outlet.'

'There are so many jobs in technology [and a lot of people] don't really know what most of them are. You hear titles, but you don't really know what they mean. I am hoping this event will help me realise more opportunities I have to go into.'

While Amanda hasn't yet firmed up her possible career goals, Maya is a bit more definite in her plans to continue in the computer sciences and engineering fields.

'When we started creating this event we had to deal with that 'geek' stereotype, but then we started seeing the stereotype of the frat boy who is smart who can deal with computers, but we haven't created anything that is making girls want to go into the field,' says Maya. 'They are thinking it is a very male field and working with computers is a male thing.'

'The women on our panel are all women in the industry, so they all understand this [gender gap] issue and they all want to help it in some way. I found out while I was researching the issue that girls as early as Grade 5 start eliminating careers; they don't pick their career, but they start eliminating them, so we want to reach out to the age group of Grade 5s to Grade 12 and try and show them what a career in this area is like because, at that age, all you have is the mentality of the nerd guy. We want to show these girls what it is truly like and [our panellists] are all for it because they see the issue every day, they understand it, and they all want to fix it.'

Coming together to help fix the problem are Modana Ebrahimi, Product Manager for OntarioMD; Wendy Foster, Director of Data

Properties at Wattpad; Kate Kurtz, IBM Bluemix Development Manager; Maryam Shoebybi, Software Engineer Achievers; Kaitlin Smith, Producer, Uken Games; and I-Yana Tucker, Talent Manager at Wattpad.

?We are giving them a pretty open range on topics,? says Maya. ?We want to discuss with them their company, what it is like, how they got into computers and why. If you have any questions about the field, you can go ahead and ask what the job is like.

?It is a really unique experience. You don't often get the opportunity to talk to actual people in the field very often, especially if it is a field you don't know a lot about. Unless you're in it, you don't really get to talk to someone who actually knows what's going on and what it is like.?

If you're interested in attending October 24's Why Code Aurora at Aurora High School, register at tinyurl.com/WhyCodeAurora.