Girls math camp focuses on problem solving

BY REBECCA RABICZ
rbabicz@rgj.com

Sixty-two Northern Nevada girls took time out of their summer last week to sharpen their math skills at the 10th annual Girls Math and Technology Camp at the University of Nevada, Reno.

The overnight, weeklong camp is for girls with various mathematical abilities who are entering the seventh or eighth grade. The camp focuses on problem solving, spatial reasoning, geometry, data analysis, algebra and math-related computer technology.

The girls stay overnight in the dorms and live the college life. They go to math class all day and have fun activities in the evenings. They took half the day off on Wednesday and went to Wild Water Kingdom.

Lynda R. Wiest, the founder of the camp, said that the girls come to camp for a variety of different reasons. Some genuinely like math and want to improve, others come for the campus and social aspect, and still others just want to get away from home for a week. Whatever the reason, the girls are engaged in math and technology once they arrive, Wiest said.

“It gives you a whole college experience, so when I grow up, I want to go to college,” said Asuncena Rivas, a 13-year-old from Reno.

The camp costs $395 per girl, a price that’s been offset by a grant from the Lemelson Education and Assistance Program through the Nevada Women’s Fund.

Wiest said she likes to run the overnight camp to reach out to girls who live in rural Nevada because they can’t make the commute every day.

“I wanted to come to camp because I thought it would be fun to meet new people and get a head start before school,” said Lacy Marsh, a 13-year-old from Gardnerville. “The teachers teach things in an easier way by showing different techniques to finding the problem.”

The camp encourages talking among the girls and hands-on activities.

“We like to use the hands-on material because it equals the playing field and makes it not about solving equations but about creating the model and it decreases boredom,” said Amy Taylor, a fifth-grade teacher at Sierra Vista Elementary.

Taylor did her UNR graduate research project on the topic of girls and math. She concluded that when boys are not in the classroom, girls do better in math because they aren’t scared to look smart and they aren’t scared to be wrong in front of boys.

This is why girls seem to benefit from the all-girls atmosphere.

“The middle school level is when attitude, achievement, and participation decline, which is why we targeted this age group.”

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for camp,” Wiest said.

A study released Thursday by the journal Science said that there is no difference in the scores of boys and girls in math tests required by the No Child Left Behind educational law in 2002. The study stated that women are now earning 48 percent of undergraduate college degrees in math, but lag far behind in physics and engineering.

“I wanted to teach this camp to experience the grade below, to see where girls are struggling,” said Jenn Kelchner, a math teacher at North Valleys High School.

Kelchner is an instructional assistant at the camp and spends time with the girls throughout the entire day and stays in the dorms with them.

“You learn the little things about the girls, like who shouldn’t eat sugar at 10:30,” Kelchner said.