

Three county girls recognized for technology achievements: National award aims to encourage tech-saavy women

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Posted: 06/03/2010 01:30:29 AM PDT

SantaCruzSentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ -- Java, PHP, C++ -- while these puzzling programming languages keep most of us at bay, they fascinate Damon "Chizu" Kawamoto, Idzel Cano and Brianna Flores.

Kawamoto, 16, Cano, 14 and Flores, 14, are among 25 talented Bay Area girls who will be honored by the National Center for Women and Information with an award for aspirations in computing Sunday at the Computer History Museum in San Jose.

"With technology jobs projected to grow faster than all other job sectors in the next decade, it's imperative that we nurture the computing aspirations of women, who will make up half the professional work force," said Lucy Sanders, the center's co-founder. "This award allows us to recognize and encourage talent that might otherwise be overlooked."

The three girls never really considered technology, they said. Their use of desk computers and laptops at home was basic. Then they fell into game programming.

"I like to solve problems with logic and see the results on screen," said Kawamoto, who has programmed a remake of the classic video game "Tetris."

The Santa Cruz teen took an honors computer science class at Pacific Collegiate School last year and was instantly hooked, she said. Kawamoto's attraction led her to enroll in the California State Summer School for Mathematics and Science, COSMOS, at UC San Diego and to teach programming to Mission Hill Middle School students through the iGames program this semester.

Watsonville High School freshmen Cano and Flores learned game design while middle-schoolers through the Girl Game Company, an after-school project sponsored by Scotts Valley-based ETR Associates in Watsonville. They are now both enrolled in the company's TECH Teach program, teaching computer skills to fifth-graders at MacQuiddy Elementary School, Cano said.

Despite their achievements, the three girls said they didn't expect to be recognized.

"When people are talking about technology, they talk about San Jose or over the hill, but they don't think about Santa Cruz County," said Jacob Martinez, project director at ETR Associates. "To have these three girls awarded reflects highly on the county."

The National Center for Women and Information Technology picked Kawamoto, Cano and Flores over applicants from 11 counties in the San Francisco Bay and Central Coast regions.

"It's crazy," Flores said. "It's really an honor because in Watsonville we're not really known for technology but more for agriculture."

Beyond the award, the girls have won a confidence booster to pursue their dreams. Kawamoto is focused on majoring in computer science, Cano wants to dig into game design and Pixar fan Flores is considering a career in movie animation.

"If this is something they want to do career wise, we'll be here to support them," Martinez said.

The National Center for Women and Information Technology is a nonprofit coalition of more than 200 corporations, academic institutions, government agencies and nonprofit agencies working to encourage women's participation in information technology.