GM's Innovation Manager in Austin Shifts STEM Education into High Gear

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01/27/16 @7:57pm in Tech
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(Courtesy image)

Angela Piñeyro De Hoyos moved to Austin from Mexico at age 5, and when she graduated high school, she moved to Paris to learn French. Languages were her thing -- she speaks Spanish, English and Arabic.

"I can sing in 11 languages, but I can't order a taxi in the others," she joked.

After college, she worked at an Austin PR firm. Her desk was next to the IT team, and, after she overheard their conversations, they became her closest work friends. And with that exposure to IT, she started thinking about a big career change.

It's kind of like MacGyver for kids.

Now, after working at Google and Dell, Piñeyro De Hoyos is an innovation project manager at General Motors' IT Innovation Center in north Austin. As she talks about her nontraditional path into tech, she remembers some of the key moments that got her interested in engineering and technology. And she's leading a program to get more young Hispanic women the types of hands-on experiences that can spark interest in the sometimes daunting field of science and technology.

GM, backed by a variety of sponsors, plans to launch a new project called "A World in Motion" in February. The program, which has existed in other cities GM operates in since 1990, is a joint venture with the Society of Automotive Engineers. The program will challenge 4th and 5th grade students at River Oaks Elementary in the Pflugerville School District to construct a balloon-powered vehicle.

The students will get a balloon, wheels, straws, tape and paper. Then, they have to figure out how to turn that into transportation.

"It's kind of like MacGyver for kids," Piñeyro De Hoyos said.

It's the type of empowering challenge that could help students, especially young Hispanic women who many not see IT as a strong option because of its historic dominance by white men, get the introduction to science they need to start thinking of it as a great career option.

"Growing up, I never thought of IT," she said. "I didn't know that was a career that was available to me. So I think there's a huge opportunity for awareness of what these other careers are."

And Austin is just the place. It ranked number 2 (http://austininno.streetwise.co/2016/01/26/austins-ranking-for-stem-jobs-education-and-salaries/) among all major American cities for careers involving science, technology, engineering and math, and those careers are among the highest-paying roles at many Austin companies.

Now GM is looking into opening a tech lab at its facilities in north Austin that could be a place for students to learn about technology by day and for adults to come and learn in the evening.

About a week ago, the General Motors Foundation announced plans to open a technology lab at the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas campus in Arlington, where GM recently expanded its operations. That project focuses on closing the digital divide, and the League of United Latin American Citizens is one of the partners in the project.

At the Arlington location, UTA students help prospective students with college applications and learn about STEM programs -- from engineering to coding and design. Piñeyro De Hoyos thinks that type of engagement could be a meaningful resource in north Austin, and her primary advice for other young women considering a tech career is to be tenacious and willing to dive into the unknown.

"For anyone trying to make the jump into a tech company, if they have the passion, the drive, the hustle, they should look for any opportunity to get a foot in the door at a company they love," she said. "Don't be afraid to be somewhere that you don't know."

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