

African-American science fair attracts record numbers of students to buck the odds in Silicon Valley

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At California's only African-American student science fair, the presentations on cardboard poster boards had a lofty mission:

High school sophomore Daniel Tekle compared germs on the euro and American dollar; ninth-

grader Saron Tedla's achieved neutral buoyancy with a homemade submarine, and 14-year-old Galila Amedie's deciphered the effect of temperature on DNA extraction.

For the 80 kids -- a record number -- who participated Saturday in the annual fair sponsored by the Frank S. Greene Scholars Program, though, the science may be the easy part. Upending long-standing societal trends will be their real conquest.

Many of the students showing their projects at Cypress Semiconductor's San Jose headquarters will head back to classrooms where they often feel pushed more toward sports and music than neuroscience and cell biology.

"A lot of people consider African-Americans not as smart, and I think showing somebody that, yes, we can do all these things, is important," said Natania Jones Mitchell, hoarse after explaining her absorption of light experiment in both Spanish and English.

But, like other students at the fair, which is in its 11th year, Natania is not letting it get her down.

Asked how she likes attending the Keyes Middle School in Palo Alto, where she's the only African-American girl in her grade, the spunky 12-year-old shouted back: "Awesome!"

"Sometimes I get racist jokes, but it's fun to know I'm different from everyone else -- but still the same."

Cialysiah Washington, a San Jose 10th-grader, has a similar resolve. She plunged her father's feet in ice to test the ability of video games to distract from pain.

"Just because I'm African-American, people think I can't do chemistry," said Cialysiah, one of only two black students in her class. "So when I do say I'm into chemistry, they are kind of surprised."



African-Americans make up just 2.6 percent of the Santa Clara County population, 2010 census data show. And according to a 2010 analysis by this newspaper, just 1.5 percent of computer workers living in Silicon Valley were black. At the technology heartland's top 10 firms, just 296 of 5,907 top managers and officials in the valley were black or Latino.

The Frank S. Greene Scholars Program -- named after the Bay Area's first black venture capitalist -- is working on upping those numbers. The program has served 500 children since its 2001 inception, providing year-round science, technology, engineering and math lessons for children

from kindergarten through high school. The number of students involved has doubled, and the reach has expanded beyond Santa Clara County to include kids from San Leandro to Stockton.

"It's a refuge," said founder Debra Watkins, a former East Side Union High School District teacher. "Sometimes they're made to feel black people don't do science. They hear: 'Who do you think you are?' "

With a modest parent fee and corporate contributions, the program offers robotics camps and weeklong immersions at NASA Ames Research Center and Texas Instruments. One-hundred percent of the program's graduates have gone on to college.

The science fair is the program's proud centerpiece.

Director Gloria Whitaker-Daniel blew in from 10 days in Shanghai just in time Saturday. The senior program engineer for Amazon was raised by factory workers with third-grade educations who nonetheless dreamed big for their children. Whitaker-Daniel has worked as an industrial engineer for Johnson & Johnson, a drilling engineer for Exxon Mobil, an aerospace engineering for Lockheed Martin and a laptop developer at Apple.

"I can't force them into math and science, but I can expose them," Whitaker-Daniel said. "This is an environment where the children can use their curiosity, their intellect, their desire to answer the question: Why?"

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