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Naked City

You Go, Grrl

BY SARAH HEPOLA, MARCH 31, 2000, NEWS

"I want to welcome everyone to a new chapter in technology," shouted **Girlstart** founder and all-around-cool-gal **Rachel Muir**. "We're breaking down a lot of stereotypes here."

At the Tuesday night opening of Texas' "first and only" **Girls' Technology Center** at 608 W. 22nd, some of the facts behind those stereotypes were laid out in a flier distributed to the approximately 350 children and parents who turned out for the opening. "Parents purchased technology twice as much for their sons as their daughters," the flyer read; and "Only 8% of engineers are women." Cut out and pasted on a posterboard decorated with blinking, glittery butterflies was a piece of paper: "Girls take only 17% of advanced placement computer tests."

Rachel Muir is changing that. Three years ago, at 26, Muir founded **SmartGrrls** -- now Girlstart -- with \$500 and a credit card. Her goal was to bolster adolescent girls' participation in technology, math, and science -- subjects they typically shy away from at that age. "One in seven girls says they're good at math," Muir later reeled off inside the center, her eyes darting around the room as giggling girls and their parents wandered in and out.

To help even out that statistic, Girlstart offers a variety of programs: camps every Saturday (teaching things like Web page design and desktop publishing), "Take Your Daughter to Work Day," school-affiliated programs, and summer camps. But the feather in Muir's cap is the Girls' Technology Center, built with donations from companies like **Dell**, **3M**, the **KLE Foundation**, **Worth Ethic**, and **TL Ventures**. The center is a comfy, whimsically designed (by artist **Mercedes Wanguermert-Peña**) home base equipped with 16 new computers; and it's located smack-dab in UT's West Campus, an area known more for frat houses and keg parties than girl power.

But that's just another one of those stereotypes Muir is fixin' to break. "We are right in touch with our volunteer base here," she explained -- not to mention that the location gives visiting girls a proximity to the campus and a glimpse of what opportunities exist for them there.

Back outside the center, artists like Genevieve Van Cleve, Spike Gillespie and Ginger Mackenzie perform under the tent, where groups huddle to shield themselves from the steady, fat droplets of rain. "It is often

true that behind a successful woman is another successful woman," reads a letter sent by **George W.** and **Laura Bush**, congratulating Muir & Co. on the center's grand opening. But the best evidence of the center's usefulness could be seen in the young girls themselves, milling through the crowd wearing buttons that read "Future Chemist" and "Future CEO" -- more interested in dancing and talking with their friends than chatting about technology, math, and science. Because for them, it's a given.

"I am not currently in Girlstart," one girl reads to her friend aloud from her application, "but I have always been a smart girl." She smiles and nudges her companion. "Get it? SmartGrrl?"

Finally, yes, we do.

(Volunteer and registration info can be found at <http://www.girlstart.org>.)

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