

By Mike Cassidy Mercury News Columnist Contra Costa Times

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When Amy Tsai headed to UC Berkeley in the fall of 2011, there was no way in the world that she was going to major in computer science.

Yes, her father was a software engineer, but as much as she loved the guy, what he did sounded boring. Her passion was civil engineering, until she heard about a program called CS KickStart, a student-initiative on campus aimed at showing women what computer science is, while building a community of women to support them should they pursue it.

The program brings female students to campus for a week before classes start in the fall and offers them programming instruction, field trips and a chance to get to know other women interested in the field.

"I really think it was kind of life-changing for me," Tsai says. After a week of programming, meeting people who were excited about computer science and learning about how the discipline could change the world, she was hooked.

But wait. If Tsai had no interest in majoring in computer science, why did she sign up for the KickStart program in the first place?

"My parents forced me," says Tsai, a 20-year-old junior. "I'm really glad they did."

It seems sometimes father, and mother, know best. Tsai's initial distaste for computer science is not unusual among girls and young women. Social scientists such as Jane Margolis of UCLA demonstrated years ago that many factors conspire to leave girls with the impression that computer science is boring, or for socially inept nerds, or that it is a solitary pursuit that doesn't really solve real-world problems.

CS KickStart is one of the programs cropping up that aims to turn that distaste into delight, or at least an interest. The effort is only 3 years old, but already it has attracted students who want to help it build momentum -- including Tsai, who is now one of the women who organizes the annual program.

While her focus is on supporting women studying computer science in college, Tsai says the real work of helping girls understand how fulfilling the field can be needs to begin well before then.

"We need to start girls programming earlier," she says, "because that's when they start forming all the misconceptions."

Spoken as one who knows.

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