Science related activities can open doors for young girls

Nicole Castro takes her gloves off and walks quickly to catch the next pipe-fitting station. She already soldered with a blow torch, twisted steel, and bonded a pipe. Next up is unclogging a bathroom sink.

Castro, a seventh-grade student, eagerly takes the challenge, during a recent Girl Scout outing at the UA Local 469 Arizona Pipe Trades Apprenticeship Training Center.

“I would definitely do this again because it’s fun and helps you learn everyday skills that you’ll need when you grow up,” says Castro of Gilbert. “Stuff like this always happens, and you’d be able to fix it yourself and save money.”

The event Castro attended, Playing with Fire, is a collaboration between the Arizona Pipe Trades and Girl Scouts -Arizona Cactus Pine - Council.

The program evolved from the Girl Scouts council’s existing effort to encourage girls into pursuing science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) professions, says Crystal Kilkenny, a camp director who leads the Girl Scouts council’s STEM programs.

The event will be repeated May 4 and open to Girl Scouts in grades 4 to 12.

“We are excited to introduce girls to different trade fields, including the field of pipe fitting, plumbing and material engineering,” says Kilkenny. “We want girls to know they can do science, too!”

The event starts with girls attending a safety presentation. Then they move on to soldering copper tubings and fittings, cutting pipe threads, cementing plastic pipe and fittings, and taking apart/reinstalling a sink p-trap.

Susan Preisler, a Chandler Girl Scouts troop leader, notes that these opportunities haven’t always been around.

“When I was young, 60 years ago, you didn’t do this. It was a boy’s job. It was your husband’s job,” says Preisler. “Girls are becoming more prevalent in this field and that’s good, this needs to continue.”
Bill Brown, a volunteer with UA Local 469 agrees. He says the program is already a success with the Boy Scouts. They’ve had more than 700 boys go through the pipe fitter’s program since it started in 2011.

Brown and Gary Jordan, another UA Local 469 volunteer who helps out with the Boy Scouts Merit Badge council, approached the Girl Scouts to offer the same experience for girls.

“Bill and I felt it’s good for the kids to show that there’s an opportunity besides college,” says Jordan. “Some people like to work with their hands and their brain.”

The Girl Scouts took to the idea and created this special event, first aiming it at students in sixth through 12th grades. After the first round on April 6, the Girl Scouts opted to make the program available to girls as young as fourth grade.

Journeyman Billie Wilcox, who has helped with the Boy Scout program, has been pushing to get girls the same experience for some time.

“Now that the girls are finally here, I am excited!” says Wilcox, who traded a career in restaurant management for the pipe trades seven years ago.

Wilcox enjoys showing girls the art of soldering copper pipes and tubing because it offers them career options. This trade has been good to Wilcox, and she hopes more girls turn to it, as it offers a potential for good pay and benefits.

Cheryl Fisher, a ninth-grade student from Gilbert, participating in the program, said the enthusiasm from the instructors to teach the troops is contagious.

“There are a lot of career options that I’m looking at, but I might take this into consideration,” says Fisher. “I’m pretty sure other girls would love this because it gets girls motivated to say, ‘It’s not only guys that can do stuff like this, we can too.’”
Arizona Pipe Trades Apprenticeship Training Center, www.ualocal469.org