UCI’s Rising Stargirls program dawns again this summer

The program provides an artistic gateway for girls to discover the cosmos alongside UCI astronomers.

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One of the many rising stargirls who've come through the program's doors.

Picture Credit:
UCI/Rising Stargirls

Rising Stargirls is a UCI Department of Physics & Astronomy outreach program founded by Clare Boothe Luce Associate Professor Aomawa Shields that seeks to help young girls of all backgrounds and colors discover something they may not have ever been shown before: the Universe. The program’s leaders, including

Shields and Physics & Astronomy Ph.D. students like Jessica Howard, Maya Silverman, Kiana Whitfield and Christina Dinh, guide groups of girls who visit UCI, either virtually or in person, into the cosmos using the creative arts, with the aim of fostering interest in a population that tends to gravitate away from the sciences as they grow older.

“It turns out that around sixth, seventh and eighth grade is an age range that shows, for one reason or another, girls start to be less interested in science,” said James Bullock, who is the dean of the UCI School of Physical Sciences. “Professor Aomawa Shields is working directly with students at this crucial age through her Rising Stargirls program to encourage girls, particularly girls who come from underrepresented backgrounds, to become interested in math and science. We want to see more female scientists come through our doors in the coming years, and programs like Rising Stargirls create an opportunity for young girls to picture themselves doing that.”

In a recent Stargirls effort, Whitfield and Silverman co-led and co-developed a program called “The Universe: More Than Meets the Eye,” which saw girls use art supplies mailed to them by Dinh to create things like imagined landscape scenes on planets beyond our solar system. In a survey given to the girls after the program, one wrote: “I liked how supportive it was, I liked how friendly everyone was, and I liked learning about things I wouldn’t normally learn about in school, such as what different shapes on planets and moons might mean. I also liked exploring new knowledge through discussions and art.”

This year, Rising Stargirls will dawn again, and in the coming months Shields, Howard and Silverman will be training the next cohort of Rising Stargirls program runners. Then, come summer, they hope to welcome girls from all across our home planet, from Southern California to the rest of the U.S., and hopefully Africa and South America. The kids will spend 10 days in the company of UCI astronomers over the course of two to three weeks, working through the More Than Meets the Eye program and connecting with the cosmos through their creative impulses.

“This year, our plan is to begin to nurture relationships with teachers at schools that might serve girls with high interest in participating — relationships we can continue to develop over time” said Shields. “My hope is that last year’s summer virtual workshop will become a growing workshop, and that perhaps future workshops will include girls who have continued to participate year after year.”

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