



This story first appeared on the cover of the Nov. 12, 2019 edition of Cascade Business News.

<http://cascadebusnews.com/new-chicktech-director-working-hard-to-light-a-fire-under-tech-minded-girls-women/>

New ChickTech Director Working Hard to Light a Fire Under Tech-Minded Girls & Women

BY RONNI WILDE — CBN REPORTER ON NOVEMBER 12, 2019 BUSINESS & INDUSTRY, E-HEADLINES

(Lisa O'Brian)

ChickTech, a national nonprofit dedicated to retaining women in the technology workforce and to increasing the number of girls pursuing tech-based careers, has a new director of the Central Oregon chapter who is passionate and motivated to see the program thrive.

Lisa O'Brian, a retired Microsoft project and program manager, came on as ChickTech's volunteer director of the CO chapter about a year ago. Although she oversees both the high school and adult programs, her biggest push at the moment, she said, is in fine-tuning the student side. She jumped on board two months before the chapter's big annual two-day high school workshop in November 2018, and said she realized that there was much to do and learn in getting ChickTech to reach its full potential here. Although the workshop was a success and 68 girls attended, there was room for 100 participants, and O'Brian — a go-getter at heart — aims to fill every seat.

Following the event last year, she began reorganizing the Central Oregon chapter, and has lofty goals for the organization. The high school workshop is the biggest piece of what the chapter does, so

that's where most of her time and energy are going for now, she said. "National has been driving this two-day event over the past three years, with local volunteers here in Bend and Madras. However, the ChickTech High School program is designed to have additional follow-up workshops, mentoring, etc. to further support our high school participants beyond the two-day event," she explained. "When I got involved during last year's event, I worked with other volunteers who felt like we could do more locally to grow our chapter and our offerings. So I took on a commitment to be the director here for three years and worked with the team to develop a three- to five-year strategy to support our vision. It's my passion and skill set."

ChickTech was founded in Portland in 2012, and its national headquarters is there. There are chapters sprinkled throughout the U.S. The Central Oregon chapter has been in existence since 2016 and encompasses eastern Oregon as well. At last year's high school event, there were girls in attendance from as far away as Ontario, Oregon, and from many rural areas in the region.

The workshop is held at OSU-Cascades and is completely free for attendees. The workshops are led by industry professionals, and include opportunities to learn coding, design computer interfaces, design and create items such as a 3D game in a virtual world and more. All attendees are provided with food, workshop supplies and transportation if needed, and those who live farther away sleep in the dorms at OSU. They must be nominated — typically by a science teacher — in order to attend. O'Brian said that in one case, an attendee told her that when she read the letter of nomination to her family, they all cried.

"The purpose of the event is to give the girls exposure to tech, to build their confidence and interest and to get them to understand that this is a reachable career for them," said O'Brian. "At the end, they put on a tech show to demonstrate what they worked on. The difference between the girls from when they come on the first morning and are quiet and shy to the end is remarkable; there is hubbub and excitement when they show off what they've done." Following the event, she said the feedback from the attendees and their teachers was very positive.

The 2020 high school ChickTech event will take place on April 3-4 and is themed "Oh, the Places You Can Go." It will emphasize tech jobs that don't necessarily require a four-year degree, O'Brian said. To facilitate attendance, O'Brian said she is working to develop relationships with all the schools and to keep excitement levels about the event higher. O'Brian and her team have already successfully partnered with Bend-La Pine and Eastern Oregon schools, and are looking to build relationships with the other districts as well. "Our retention rate from nomination through to attendance was 50 percent last year," she explained. We had 123 nominated, but only 68 attended. We are focusing on

engaging with the schools to retain the interest of these girls.” Last year, there were two high school events, one in Bend and one in Madras, but this year the two will be combined, with the Madras girls coming to the Bend workshop and staying in the OSU dorms.

One way in which O’Brian is hoping to achieve this is through the creation of a pop-up workshop for the girls the month before the big two-day event to help maintain enthusiasm about technology and the program. She is also creating scholarships to be awarded to two high school senior girls enabling them to attend ACT-W in Portland, the largest female tech conference in Oregon. “We are learning, and we are trying a few new things this year,” O’Brian said. Other projects she is working on are generating relationships with companies in order to develop corporate sponsorships; updating ChickTech Central Oregon’s website and collateral materials; and launching its social media platform. “It’s exciting and daunting. There is so much to do, but I have to look at everything we’ve already done too,” she said. Currently, O’Brian has two volunteer leaders who are helping with ChickTech Central Oregon, and she hopes to build a team in the coming months. “As with every project, the heavy lifting is in getting the right people in place. Then it gets easier,” she said.

“I loved participating in ChickTech at OSU-Cascades last year,” said Katie Jackman of Summit High School. “It was a good way to meet other girls my age who are interested in coding and computer science. I loved learning new skills and embracing my ‘inner nerd!’ I am looking forward to participating in ChickTech again. It was an amazing experience; everyone was so nice and helpful. I can’t wait to go back!”

After last year’s workshop, O’Brian said she asked teachers if there is indeed a need for this program in Bend and the surrounding areas. “They all said that there absolutely is,” she said. Statistics concur with this opinion. ChickTech’s national headquarters reports the following about women in technology:

- Although women make up nearly half of the total workforce, they represent only 25 percent of STEM professions.
- More than 66 percent of fourth-grade girls say they like science and math, but their interest plunges as they continue their education, and by eighth grade, boys are twice as interested in STEM careers as girls, partly due to a persistent cultural portrayal of scientists as males.
- Less than three percent of college-bound women choose to pursue computer science or engineering, compared to 17.5 percent of their male peers.

- Of graduates awarded a bachelor's degree in computer science, 11.7 percent are women, and 88.3 percent are men.
- Women who enter the computer science field following graduation leave it at an alarming rate of 56 percent within the first decade of their career. Women are twice as likely to leave a scientific or engineering job as men with comparable STEM degrees.

On the adult side of ChickTech, O'Brian said there are existing Meetup groups. "We want to partner with the existing groups out there rather than creating things from scratch." She hopes to co-host some adult events with these other groups during the next year. "These events will focus on networking, along with career and tech workshops. We will also be partnering with our Portland chapter to co-host the two-day Pacific Northwest ACT-W event."

At this stage, O'Brian said her call to action is to develop leadership-level volunteers, especially those who can help with marketing and communications and in creating the adult and mentoring programs; to find volunteers who can help with event planning; and to further develop corporate sponsorships and partnerships to fund the high school event and kick-start the adult program. Last year's local corporate sponsors included Navis, Lonza, Karnopp Peterson LLP, Kollektive, Hayden Homes, Gunter Group, Bend Broadband, Lancaster Engineering and TimberCon, and local companies that provided in-kind products, services and space included Swire Coca-Cola, Tetherow, Safeway, Starbucks, Dancing Beans Coffee, Market of Choice, Blue Origins, E::SPACE Labs, COCC and Oregon State University. ChickTech also received significant donations from individuals in the community who are passionate about supporting women in tech. O'Brian hopes that these lists will continue to grow.

"We are big proponents of ChickTech," said Rick Silver, co-founder of E::SPACE Labs, a ChickTech sponsor who donates use of classroom space to the program and conducts one of the high school workshop classes. "We spend lots of time and money on this, all donated and as volunteers. We are trying to promote women and young women in STEM programs."

Silver said the 15 participants E::SPACE hosts each year during the high school workshop walk away from the event excited and motivated. In the session, the girls are trained on how to use a micro-processing computer called "Raspberry Pi." The little unit plugs into a monitor, and the girls learn programming language. Four engineers who work with E::SPACE Labs teach the class, along with the other E::SPACE co-founder, David Robson, and at the end the girls get to take home their "Raspberry Pi" units.

"It's fun and very rewarding," said Silver. "These girls are selected because they want to learn, and they have picked this workshop. At the end of the program, the girls present what they've learned,

and they are very excited about it.” He continued, “One of the girls has taken our class twice because she liked it so much.”

“There aren’t enough female engineers in the U.S., said Robson. “It’s at about 17 percent, whereas in Europe, it’s 50 percent. When I was in engineering school, I don’t remember ever seeing a girl in class. It’s better now, but we still have a long way to go. It’s a waste of brain power.” Silver added, “ChickTech speaks to diversity. Women think differently than men, and that’s a good thing. We need that in this industry.”

To volunteer with ChickTech or for more information, please contact O’Brian

at lisa.obrian@chicktech.org.

centraloregon.chicktech.org