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## Camp designed to win girls over to technology

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Thirteen-year-old Ruth Ballenger of Springfield received her own computer to play with Thursday morning. The only problem — it was in pieces.

Ballenger and her partner, Shannon Tavenner, 15, of Paxton, had to take all of the components — such as the motherboard, hard drive, CD-ROM and RAM stick — and put them back together inside a computer lab at the University of Illinois Springfield.

Thirty minutes later, it was time to test the reassembled computer, and Ruth clasped her hands in nervous excitement.

“Yay, we’re the first ones!” she exclaimed after the start-up screen appeared normal.

The girls are among 24 middle school students participating in UIS’ Girl Tech 2010. The two-day camp, in its second year, aims to get girls interested in computer science and strengthen their technology skills.

“The idea is to start with the things that are fun,” UIS computer science instructor Mary Sheila Tracy said.

For example, this year’s sessions include “Explore the Robo-Jungle,” where girls can program a robot animal to hop and crawl, and “Spooky Alice!” which allows girls to use programming design software to create their own ghost story using 3D objects and characters.

The camp, which is for girls starting seventh through ninth grades in the fall, concludes today.

“We have no illusions that we’re going to be able to teach them everything, but this is to light that spark of inspiration so that they want to know more,” Tracy said.

“The data nationally indicates that there are fewer and fewer women going into computer science,” Tracy said. “A couple of our graduates noticed this at a conference and decided they were going to act locally and start a technology camp for middle school girls, because middle school seems to be the place where girls walk away from math and natural sciences, but also applied sciences, like computer science.”

Celina Kneller, 13, of Springfield, enjoyed the program so much last year that she encouraged her friend, Alli Grub, 15, also of Springfield, to join her this year.

“I would like to get into fashion design, and I think knowing all the graphics is going to help in the future,” Alli said.

Fashion is one way Girl Tech instructors try to appeal to girls.

Liz Murphy Thomas, an assistant professor of digital media at UIS, is teaching a session that shows the girls how to use Photoshop to create their own designs. The designs are then printed onto T-shirts the girls can take home.

“I hope they learn that the computer is accessible in that anyone can be a designer, depending on what you want to create. It’s not something to be intimidated by,” Murphy Thomas said.

Tracy hopes Girl Tech and programs like it will continue to grow.

“I’d love to see it catch on everywhere so all girls have this kind of opportunity. You never know what’s going to turn somebody on to something like this,” she said.

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