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'I didn't even have to ask, and I'd have half a dozen guys assuming I needed help. And then you start thinking, "If they think I need help, what am I missing?"' — Serena Vandersteen, on her experience in computer science at the U of M

Breaking through the tech barrier

City group teaches code to women, girls

WHEN Serena Vandersteen graduated from computer science at the University of Manitoba in 2013, she was part of a minority. The percentage of women in her program, at the time, was just seven per cent. "I always remember being one of two girls in a class of 20 to 30," she says.

Her experience isn't unusual. In 2011, 30 per cent of Canadian math and computer science grads were women. Women remain under-represented in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) workforces.



JEN ZORATTI

But Vandersteen, 26, is just one of many Canadian women working in STEM who is passionate about improving those numbers. She's a full-time software developer, and she's also the co-leader of the Winnipeg chapter of Ladies Learning Code (LLC), a not-for-profit Canadian organization dedicated to empowering women and girls with the skills they need to become builders of technology.

LLC was founded in Toronto in 2011 by Heather Payne, Laura Plant, Melissa Sarifodeen and Breanna Hughes. It now exists in more than 20 cities across the country. The Winnipeg chapter was established in 2014 and, since then, the team here has held four Ladies Learning Code events, two Girls Learning Code events, as well as a few other events. In total, seven instructors and nearly 30 mentors have taught 381 Winnipeg women and girls to code in 2015. And they want to teach more.

The gender gap in tech can be attributed to many factors, including socialization and widely held cultural norms. Math and science are still thought of as boys' subjects; the myth girls are inherently bad at math persists. Technology is still marketed more heavily to guys. Girls are not exposed to STEM spheres early enough. And even if they are, by the time they get to university, their confidence is eroded.

Vandersteen saw that first-hand, noting that feeling intimidated and overwhelmed is a typical response to feeling unwelcome. "Being in an environment in which you're feeling unsupported because you don't have a lot of girls in computer science around you — you feel like you don't belong. And then your environment and the people around you amplify your own insecurities."

Even Vandersteen, who describes herself as both stubborn and confident, felt out of place in computer science when she made the switch



RUTH BONNEVILLE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Serena Vandersteen says more women need to be encouraged to go into the computer science field.

from engineering. She recalls getting a lot of unsolicited offers from well-meaning male classmates. "I didn't even have to ask, and I'd have half a dozen guys assuming I needed help," she says. "And then you start thinking, 'If they think I need help, what am I missing?'"

The number of female computer science grads has declined over the past three decades. In the U.S. in the early 1980s, 35 per cent of computer science majors were women. Many people in the field — including Vandersteen — will tell you the decline partially has to do with the fact home computers, not unlike cars, were marketed specifically to men.

But coding, in its nascent form, was women's work. In the early 1960s, a British woman by the name of Stephanie Shirley formed a women-only startup called Freelance Programmers. Her team of women, working on paper and punch cards at their dining room tables, programmed the black-box flight recorder for the Concorde, which took its first commercial flight in 1976.

These days, she's known as Dame Stephanie Shirley. But back then, she went by Steve Shirley, knowing full well Steve would be taken more seriously than Stephanie.

When people talk about tech needing women, they aren't just talking hiring practices. Women do indeed work at tech companies, but not enough of them are working in technical positions. Let's take a large company, Google, as an example. On the non-tech side (finance, marketing, etc.), women made up 47 per cent of employees. On the tech side, women made up just 18 per cent.

But diversity in technical positions is critical for what should be painfully obvious reasons. Vandersteen relays an anecdote from filmmaker Robin Hauser Reynolds' documentary *Code*, which looks at the gender gap in computer science. The airbag was developed by a team of male engineers and was developed to the average size of a team member. It tested successfully, went to market and, lo and behold, a whole bunch of people were killed by deployed airbags.

"And by people, it was women, kids and older people," Vandersteen says. "In general, developing something to the average person on your team is probably a bad idea. Another perspective would have said, 'No, don't do that.' And if there was a woman on the team, the 'average size' would have been different.

We're building technology for society. When is another perspective not important?"

So what's the solution? It largely comes down to education. Coding needs to be made a priority in schools, beyond an occasional workshop. And it needs to be taught much, much earlier. Last week, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau visited Google Canada's new engineering HQ in Kitchener, Ont., and addressed the fact Canada is falling behind the UK and several European countries when it comes to coding. "We need to do a lot better job of understanding what coding is and how it's important, how to program, how to problem solve," he said. Vandersteen hopes that translates into more computer science classes focused on building, not just using.

In the meantime, she's working hard at recruiting women for Ladies Learning Code events, which she says has been a challenge — perhaps, she thinks, because of the intimidation factor. The next workshop is Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the University of Manitoba. No experience, just enthusiasm, required.

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Car crash leads to alleged identity fraud

SHE was about to be let off the hook with a simple traffic ticket, but instead a 27-year-old Lac du Bonnet woman faces several criminal charges in a bizarre case involving a car crash, drugs and a false identity.

Caley Elizabeth Steele, 27, faces a slew of charges, including identity fraud, assaulting a peace officer, resisting or obstructing a peace officer, escaping custody, dangerous operation of a vehicle, driving while prohibited and three counts of failing to comply with a probation order.

It began around 7 a.m. Jan. 20 when Carberry RCMP responded to the report of a single-car crash on Highway 1 in the RM of North Cypress-Langford, about two kilometres east of Carberry. Police arrested the female driver after finding a small amount of drugs and drug paraphernalia in her possession and had her vehicle towed back to the detachment for a more extensive search. After the search, the investigating officer found there wasn't enough evidence to lay a drug-possession charge, so the officer wrote her a ticket for not having a valid driver's licence and was about to release her when she asked to go back to her car so she could charge her cellphone and call a friend to pick her up.

The officer waited with her while she sat in the car waiting for her ride to arrive, but after checking paperwork in the car, he discovered the woman had given a false name. When the woman realized this, RCMP said in a news release issued Thursday, she tried to drive away, dragging the officer alongside the car and driving into snowbanks before stopping. The woman allegedly assaulted two officers who tried to arrest her, receiving minor injuries herself in the process.

Steele appeared in court in Brandon Thursday and remains in custody.

INSIDE

Arts & Life	D1
Business	B6
City	B1
Classified	B10
Comics	D5
Diversions	D6
Editorials / letters	A6
Horoscope	D4
Jumble	B10
Miss Lonelyhearts	D4
Movies	D4
Sports	C1
Think-Tank	A7
TV	B4
Weather	C8

OBITUARIES

■ COLUMNISTS	
Bob Cox	A7
Mia Rabson	B7
David Christianson	B7
Myron Love	E4

LOTTERIES

In the event of a discrepancy between this list and the official winning numbers, the latter shall prevail.

LOTTO 6/49
Winning numbers Wednesday were: 7, 19, 32, 39, 40, 48. Bonus number was 45. The jackpot of \$7,000,000 was carried over. Saturday's jackpot is an estimated \$10 million. The Extra winning numbers were: 4431256.

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Saturday Jan 23 10 A.M.
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