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JOURNAL REPORTS: RETIREMENT

A Passion for STEM in Retirement

Retired educator still helps girls with her nonprofit, Amazing Girls Science



Cynthia Barnett, founder of Amazing Girls Science, says even if her students don't pursue careers in science or math, they develop self-esteem, critical thinking and problem solving. PHOTO: ROBYN TWOMEY

By *Julie Halpert*

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Cynthia Barnett began her career in education in 1975 as an elementary-school teacher in Norwalk, Conn., where she always kept a piano in the room.

The piano, says the 74-year-old Ms. Barnett, helped her draw out the shyer students whom she assigned to lead roles in class musical performances.

“It gave them a lot of confidence,” she says.

CYNTHIA BARNETT

Age: 74

Hometown: Norwalk, Conn.

Primary career: Public-school teacher and administrator

Current path: Founder of Amazing Girls Science, a nonprofit program that teaches and inspires girls about science, technology, engineering and math

Why this path: “It’s all about providing an opportunity the girls might not have realized they had.”

After so many years, Ms. Barnett is still inspiring confidence in children, now through a nonprofit she started that encourages young girls to learn about and pursue careers in science and technology.

Ms. Barnett came to the U.S. from St. Vincent in the West Indies when she was 19. After initially studying piano at the New York College of Music, she graduated from New York University with a major in elementary education and minors in music and art.

She loved teaching. “Education is in my DNA,” she says.

She then spent 10 years in administration but eventually felt her “creativity was being stifled.” At the same time, she felt increasingly concerned

about the achievement gap between black, Hispanic and white students, she says.

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So, in 1996, while working as assistant high-school principal in Norwalk, she started her first nonprofit, the Saturday Academy, through which local boys and girls met on Saturdays to learn about computers and science and take trips to a museum in New York. Ms. Barnett kept the program going until she retired in 2003 to pursue other interests, including writing and offering retirement coaching to women.

Then, in 2008, inspired by an article about how few women pursue careers in science, she changed her trajectory and returned to education.

“It triggered a lightbulb in me,” she says. “I wanted to join the movement to help young girls think of the STEM [science, technology, engineering and math] area as a possible career.”

The following year, with help from Norwalk Community College, she launched Amazing Girls Science, a program that attempts to encourage enthusiasm for STEM subjects and to bolster girls’ confidence and self-esteem. Roughly six part-time employees and 20 volunteers work for the nonprofit, which gets funding from several foundations and corporate donations.

At the first event, she says, she was expecting 50 girls; 100 showed up. Since it began, more than 4,000 girls have attended the programs, which include science and computer-science conferences, robotics, a hackathon called Coding for a Cause and a mother-and-daughter engineering festival. About 50% of participants are considered economically disadvantaged.

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“The joy I get from helping girls ignite a spark for STEM is indescribable,” says Ms. Barnett, who believes that had she known of such opportunities when she was young, she may have become an engineer herself. Even if they don’t pursue STEM careers, the girls develop self-esteem and learn team building, critical thinking and problem solving, which can be applied to any career, she adds.

Last year Ms. Barnett received an AARP Purpose Prize, a \$50,000 award given to people over 50 who are living a life with purpose and giving back to the community.

She hopes to continue running her organization for the next 10 years, and is considering how to keep the legacy alive after that. She says she is trying to persuade one of her daughters, a lawyer, to take over.

“It could be her second act,” Ms. Barnett says.

Second Acts looks at the varied paths people are taking in their 50s and beyond. You can reach Ms. Halpert, a writer in Michigan, and let us know how you're starting over, at reports@wsj.com.

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