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Feminizing IT

Lucy Sanders makes it her business to get women into technology

By Roger Fillion, Rocky Mountain News
March 5, 2005

Lucy Sanders heads a new nonprofit - one she plans to close in 20 years. Why then? This former Bell Labs executive hopes that in two decades far more women will be working in the information technology industry than today.

Sanders is CEO of the National Center for Women and Information Technology, housed in the Engineering Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

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The nonprofit was formed last year and will formally launch this year. So far, it has raised \$4.5 million.

Sanders spoke with the *Rocky Mountain News* about the center, its goals and women in the IT work force. An edited transcript follows.

News: What is the center's goal?

Sanders: Our No. 1 goal is gender parity in the IT work force in 20 years.

News: What's the situation today?

Sanders: The percentage of high school girls that are advanced placement test takers in computer sciences is 16 percent. And it's dropping.

News: Why is it important that roughly equal numbers of men and women work in IT?

Sanders: Our message is innovation. We believe men and women bring different creative skills to the innovation table and that we need both involved in the invention of technology, especially today.



Rick Giase © Special to the News

Lucy Sanders, CEO of the National Center for Women and Information Technology, hopes the nonprofit, which has raised \$4.5 million, officially comes out of the shadows when it formally launches this year.

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Technology is becoming so pervasive in everything we do that we need the unique life experiences of men and women both.

News: How does gender show up in technology?

Sanders: It's hard to describe something that's absent. We don't have that many women inventing in the IT space. So we don't really know what we're missing.

But I recently spoke with somebody who is a high-tech provider of cell phones. They said it's very obvious when women are a part of the design team for a cell phone. The phones are equally as applicable to men as they are to women - in the way women carry them, use them, the size of their fingers, the layout of the keys, how the phone looks. Everything.

News: Why are there so few females in IT?

Sanders: We need to do more research into this. There's a lot of speculation that the IT industry's image is a little geeky. That it's a solitary profession and you sit in front of a keyboard all day programming software.

That's not the case. After spending 25 years as a technologist myself, I spent a small percentage of my time doing those things.

News: Give us your take on working in IT.

Sanders: The IT profession is a wonderful profession. Inventing technology is a wonderful thing for society. It's a great thing for our country's economy. And women bring a lot to it.

Technology also is going to become so pervasive in what we do. You're going to swallow it pretty soon in your medicine. You're going to wear it in your clothes. It's going to run your house. It would be a very nice thing to have it as good as it could be and as well balanced as it could be, with more women participating.

News: What can be done to get more women into IT?

Sanders: We don't convey the right image about what a career in IT really is. We need to do that. We need to really think about how we teach computing sciences in K-12. Computing science is a discipline, just like biology, chemistry or physics. It's about how machines and people interact and how people really are getting machines to do things for them.

News: What does the center plan to do?

Sanders: The first thing is to build a national community. We have more than 50 higher-ed institutions and corporations working with us now. We'll build our community by bringing these institutions and corporations together so we can talk with them. We need to learn what's working for them in terms of attracting and retaining girls and women in computing education and careers.

So that's job No. 1: creating alliances, building community, mobilizing for change, and using effective practices that are based on research evidence.

News: What can women bring to the table that is different from men?

Sanders: Their whole life experience. Turn that question around.

What do men bring that's different from women? Their whole life experience.

Think about a painter. They paint something. Who knows where that comes from? It comes from how they feel, what they've experienced, how they've lived.

Creating software and technology isn't that different. And in the case of men and women, they very seldom do anything the same. So they probably don't create technology in the same way either.

News: When will you know if you've achieved your goals?

Sanders: It will take years. We have a goal. We have formed our nonprofit to be out of business in 20 years. That's not a trivial statement. It causes you to think differently about everything. We're going to form ourselves, run our programs, raise our money and do everything based on that timetable.

News: Will there be numeric goals to show how you're doing?

Sanders: Yes. We're working on that now. We've gotten financial support from industry to do the first one of our annual scorecards. It will track the growth of women in information technology. It will present statistics. It will highlight some effective practices. It will talk about trends in the IT industry. Hopefully, there also will be a piece of it that speaks to parents.

News: What can parents do?

Sanders: We believe parents are important influences, just like everybody else does.

We do want to reach out to parents and give them information about what a good computing curriculum in their school would look like. What they can talk to their teachers about. What they could talk to their school district about.

News: If you had a daughter, what advice would you give her?

Sanders: The one piece of advice that serves us all well - boy or girl - is to be relentless. That's always been something I've told my son.

So many people believe things are too hard for them, or that they're not right for them.

In reality, they just don't get into it enough to understand they can do hard things.

You need to be relentless. You need to just keep going until you get it - because you're going to get it.

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