



HERLEAD

REFLECTIONS THIS INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Blog written by Carisa, 2017 HERlead Fellow

I am a woman in STEM and am aware that I am in the minority. I was first personally introduced to this community in fifth grade when I joined a robotics team. When my eighth grade robotics team represented the United States at the RoboCup Junior World Championships, I was surprised to see only a few girls at the competition. Determined to overcome this gender inequity, I began to think about ways that I could help bridge the gender gap in STEM fields.

I was honored to be selected as a member of the White House Council on Women and Girls, a council convened by President Obama to ensure that federal agencies and legislation encompass the needs of women. I had a voice on important issues that affect women in the US and beyond, and most importantly, I realized how much could be accomplished by working together. My role on this council fueled my passion for bridging the gender gap in STEM.

In tenth grade, I was invited to attend the White House Summit on the United State of Women where I participated in sessions with Congressional leaders focused on President Obama's STEM initiatives. While discussing factors that dissuade girls from pursuing STEM, I learned about cyberbullying and its devastating effects on young women.

Cyberbullying disproportionately affects middle school girls, impacting their confidence, their willingness to pursue STEM, and their desire to hold leadership roles. Cyberbullying prevents girls from going into tech, which further widens the gender gap. Although many students use the internet, not every school teaches internet safety.

I created CyberSensibility, a free internet safety program, to combat cyberbullying and bridge the gender gap. I believe that awareness is the first step towards tackling the issue. Once children are aware of the difference between bullying and teasing, they are less likely to engage in the aggressive behavior. The curriculum includes hands-on activities, worksheets, and lesson plans to teach students about internet safety and bullying with the goal of building self-confidence, increasing the number of women leaders, and bridging the gender gap in STEM. I also created a website (cybersensibility.org) where my curriculum can be easily accessed and inexpensively reproduced to reach more students. With minimal printing costs for schools and camps, my curriculum provides a low-cost alternative to typical STEM programs, thereby making the project sustainable. I received grants from The Medical Letter (2016) and HERLead (2017) to develop and implement the project. Thus far, CyberSensibility has reached over 1,400 students across the world.

This past year, I had the honor of being named a 2018 Millennium Fellow, a fellowship designed in conjunction with the Millennium Campus Network and United Nations Academic Impact. As a Fellow, I was introduced to a network of college students on campuses across the world who were working on initiatives to advance the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. When I first began working on CyberSensibility, I knew that I wanted to recruit others to join the team, helping spread the mission of CyberSensibility to their communities. Participating in fellowships and programs like the Millennium Fellowship, HERlead, NCWIT, and Three Dot Dash gave me the opportunity to cultivate global connections with youth interested in affecting change. Using this network, I began recruiting regional ambassadors. After collecting applications and interviewing applicants, five ambassadors, with diverse interests and from various countries across the world, joined the team. Over the past six months, working with these regional ambassadors, the curriculum has taught students in locations including Nigeria, India, Kansas, Puerto Rico, California, and New Jersey.

As a recent graduate of high school, I've had the ability to reflect on the activities I pursued throughout my high school career, especially as I continue to develop my passions in college. The hours spent on robotics over the past eight years morphed into time spent building rockets as a member of Penn Aerospace. My involvement in my community led me to join the Wharton Undergraduate Dean's Advisory Board, a group of students dedicated to improving the Wharton academic environment. Most notably, my experiences as a HERlead Fellow, in many ways, laid the foundation for my growth.

I joined the HERlead community as a high school junior, was a 2017 grantee, and participated in the 2018 HERlead ambassador forum. The leadership training provided by HERlead is unparalleled as is the community of strong, passionate women. While being a member of the HERlead community had tangible impacts on the development of CyberSensibility, it also played a part in my personal development. As a result of the HERlead Fellowship, I have a concrete support system consisting of women who have shared similar experiences. While the Fellowship may only be a short period of time, the meaning of the phrase "HERlead Fellow" is timeless. Being a HERlead Fellow means joining a community of powerful women. It means gaining access to a constructive environment that prioritizes personal growth. It means being a part of a network where every success and failure is shared.

My experiences have shaped me into the person I am today. Through speaking at the United Nations on the topic of youth engagement in the private sector, I have learned the power and responsibility of Generation Z. Mentoring children on robotics teams has showed me the importance of equal access to education. Attending forums and summits dedicated to leadership training has highlighted the potential of youth leaders to affect change. On International Women's Day, as we honor and celebrate the achievements of women, it is important to acknowledge that the power of women does not fade as the day comes to a close. Rather, let International Women's Day serve as a reminder that women are strong, fearless, resilient, and can and will accomplish anything they put their minds to.