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Festival gets girls fired up over science

By PAIGE HEWITT

Eileen Collins, NASA's first female space shuttle pilot, told about 1,200 Houston girls Saturday that as a youngster she almost always had a book in her hands and felt a calling from the skies.

"I read a lot, about horses, chemistry, microscopes," Collins, 50, told preteens attending the Sally Ride Science Festival at Rice University. "And I used to watch planes. I'd look up and say, 'Gee, I wonder what it's like up there.' I wanted to be an astronaut."

Collins, a native of New York who said her family struggled financially when she was a child, was the featured speaker at the festival, a five-year-old event that encourages girls in grades five through eight to pursue math, science, technology and engineering.

The gathering was sponsored by Deloitte & Touche; Sally Ride Science, a company founded by former astronaut Sally Ride; and various departments at Rice.

It was the second time that the festival was held in Houston. Other events have been held in cities across the country.

A retired U.S. Air Force colonel, Collins was an instructor pilot for the T-38, the training jet used to prepare pilots for supersonic flight, before being selected for astronaut training in 1990.

A wife and mother of two, she became the first female shuttle pilot in 1995 and in 1999 became the first woman to command a spaceflight. After 16 years with NASA, Collins left the program last year.

At Saturday's gathering, she told the girls that America needs "creative" thinkers to go into the math and science fields, "to make this world a better place." She urged them to think about the future and what role they might play.

"Twelve people have been to the moon, but a woman has never been to the moon," she said. "Maybe by the time you all are in your 30s or 40s, you

can go to Mars."

At the festival, about 40 booths, largely hosted by women who work in or study the math and science fields, featured experiments, games and exhibits.

Girls from schools across the area scattered about, learning about rocket propulsion, aerospace engineering, biomedical sciences, quantum physics, logistics, atmospheric chemistry, nanotechnology, forensics and more.

At a booth manned by students from the University of Texas Graduate School Of Biomedical Sciences, strawberries were used in a lesson about DNA. Wearing a white lab coat, Kristina Fox asked girls what they knew about DNA.

"I know we all have it, and all of ours is different," responded Taylor Gaston, a student at Sheldon 6th Grade Campus.

Girls standing in a long line to get Collins' autograph were asked if they would prefer being a famous, beautiful pop star or an astronaut exploring space.

Brenda Hernandez, a fifth grader at McWhirter Elementary, thought hard over that choice.

"An astronaut," Hernandez finally said. "It would be cool to go to other planets, other places no one else has ever been, and see things no one else has ever seen."

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