PARKLAND COLLEGE

GIRL COMPUTER POWER

Summer programs help young females build tech skills

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CHAMPAIGN — When her parents first mentioned a Parkland summer activity, Sinfony Rosales thought it sounded like "computer geek camp."

"My Mom said it would be a good thing for me, and I said, 'Oh no!' But then I found out it was just for middle school and high school girls," said Sinfony, who's learning to design her own Web site with popular software programs.

"My brother's in computer design, and he tried to teach me but I didn't understand," said Sinfony, 11, who will be a Franklin Middle School student in the fall. "Now I'm in a totally different place. I'm starting my second Web site, and it's going to be a lot better than the one I had before."

Maria Mobasseri, head of Parkland's computer science department, said this summer for the first time Parkland and several other colleges in Illinois are using National Science Foundation money to teach the schoolgirls about computers.

"We want to reach out to females," Mobasseri said. "They don't have as much opportunity to get familiar with hardware and software, and their male classmates tend to dominate. We're offering these workshops so they can easily participate in the classroom."

"We want to arm them with confidence, knowledge and computer skills before the barriers are set," said Ann Blackman, a program leader.

Students in the programs range in age from 10 to high school seniors. Mobasseri said her department plans to follow the students to see if they enter computer fields after they graduate.

Parkland told teachers about the program and also advertised for students to enroll for free. The reaction surprised Mobasseri and Blackman.

"It was harder to get stu-

dents for the longer hardware class," Mobasseri said. "We enrolled some girls through the Urban League. But we had to create two extra Web workshop sections."

"We were bombarded," Blackman said. "We thought we'd have one class of 24. We had 70 in the Level 1 class last week and many of them wanted to come back. They could sign up for Level 1, Level 2 or both."

The three advanced sessions, which ended Thursday, were roughly divided by age. In a morning session, teacher Rose Marshack helped younger students plug in programs to make their Web sites lively and useful.

"I'm making mine with pictures of kittens, of course," said 10-year-old Megan Counter, a South Side School student.

"I mostly go on the Web and do e-mail," said Julie Strauss, 10, a Countryside School student.

"My Dad wants me to make him a Web site," said Bailie Roy, 10, also a Countryside student.

Using overhead viewers, art teacher Paul Young taught older students how to use graphics and other tech-

niques.

"By the time kids these days are 12 or 13, they are working at a college-age computer comfort level," Young said. "They might as well take college classes."

Mobasseri said she hopes to take the workshops on the road to reach more girls, especially Hispanics and African-Americans. "We might take them to after-school programs," she said.

She said she has another plan to start a "girls in games" club for high school students so they can learn to design computer games and enter them into contests.

This past school year, games by members of the college's new game club for women computer technology students placed first and second and also earned an honorable mention in a University of Illinois contest. That performance brought $7,000 in prize money to Parkland, $3,000 for the department and $4,000 for the club.

"We'll be using that money toward scholarships for women, and we'll be visiting high schools to recruit more girls for computer technology programs," Mobasseri said.

Heather Coit photos/The News-Gazette

Sinfony Rosales, 11, of Champaign focuses her attention on her screen as she and other girls improve their computer skills at Parkland College on Thursday.

Parkland instructor Paul Young assists students Jordyn Harriger, left, and Karolina Kalbarczyk, both 12-year-old Urbana girls.