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Seeking Diversity in Tomorrow's Engineers

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Danielle Desalu speaks to a group of high school girls and their parents as part of the keynote speech at "Design Your Future Day," at her alma mater, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

Danielle Desalu would be the first to admit that IT jobs are not particularly "sexy." "Passion," however, is her favorite word, and it is a passion for IT that she brings to the pursuit of inspiring young people to consider a career in IT.

Desalu, a systems engineer who works with Cisco channel partners providing wireless and mobility solutions to the U.S. federal government, has done outreach to high school and middle school students on many fronts, most recently as part of the new Cisco program IT Rocks. Launched in November 2007, IT Rocks

aims to inform teens about the IT field, encourage them to explore its possibilities, and, hopefully, get them excited to seek a future there.

What makes Desalu an invaluable collaborator in the IT Rocks program is the unique profile that she presents to her young audience: that of an engineer who is both a woman and a person of color. "There aren't many people in the technology field who look like me," she says.

For that reason, Desalu is able to serve as a role model for many teens who would not otherwise have stopped to picture themselves in IT.

Says Desalu, "It's that simple image, of, 'Wow, OK, she looks like me, and she can do this—I guess it's OK.' At that young age, that's sometimes all they need."

Peter Joyce, global lead for talent development in Worldwide Channels and the leader of IT Rocks, is very happy to have Desalu on board.

"I'm a big Danielle fan," Joyce says. "She's a very upbeat, 'can do,' encouraging type of person, and I think that is picked up by young people as well as her colleagues, who she's recruited to join her in this crusade."

This outreach at the teenage level is mission-critical for Cisco, as Joyce points out.

"In Worldwide Channels, our partners are telling us that the number one inhibitor to growth for them is a shortage of talent," he says. "We need to figure out how we can best strengthen what's coming through the pipeline. The purpose of IT Rocks is to get to that talent early enough so that it will come to us."

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The Passion to Overcome Barriers

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Peter Joyce
global lead for
talent
development,
Worldwide
Channels

Takes Center Stage

Desalu's most exciting and rewarding experience thus far with IT Rocks came this past April when she returned to her alma mater, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, New York, where she earned bachelor's and master's degrees in computer and systems engineering. Desalu was the keynote speaker at Design Your Future Day, an RPI program that brings high school girls on campus to get a firsthand look at what IT careers can offer.

Addressing an audience of 600 junior and sophomore girls and their parents, Desalu focused on the theme of passion. She talked about all of the elements in her life that fueled her passion for an engineering career and helped sustain it.

As part of this discussion, she spoke about the barriers and negativity that women might face in an industry that is 90 percent male. She advised her listeners that they would need to persevere in the face of all sorts of comments: "I didn't know you were the nerd type." "Girls don't typically excel in math and science." "I give you one year; you will switch majors after your freshman year."

"The inspiration I provided to the women in the audience was a validation of why I do events like that," Desalu says of the Design Your Future Day experience. "Usually, a keynote speaker finishes, and you move on to the next segment. But at the end of the speech, I received tons of great questions: How hard was it for you your first couple of years being the only female in the class? How difficult was it for you to make the decision to move on to a master's degree? How is it for you now, knowing that you're a female in an industry dominated by males?"

Planting the Seeds for Growth into IT

Another significant part of Desalu's outreach has been working with inner city, minority teens, both female and male. As with Design Your Future Day, this work has been a process of opening minds to IT. She likes to ask inner city, middle school students what they want to be when they grow up.

"Nine times out of ten, you get the same usual answers: a firefighter, a pilot, a nurse, a doctor, a police officer," Desalu says. "Most of these roles are about helping to save lives."

She lets the students know that the Internet that fills so much of their lives exists because of the contributions of those who studied math and science. She then goes on to show the youngsters how the jobs that they dream of have been helped in exciting ways by technology.

"Doctors are able to conduct surgeries hundreds of miles away because they're using the Internet and other technologies to remotely facilitate the procedure," she tells them. "Using technology, police are able to pull up records and other information faster than ever before, so they're able to get criminals off the street much faster."

Amid Slow Changes, Critical Shift Is Emerging

In working to change preconceived notions among the young about what women and minorities can do, Desalu admits to them that she still gets occasional reminders in her own life about the obstacles.

To her Design Your Future Day audience at RPI, Desalu recounted going recently to a customer site, where she was introduced as the systems engineer and technical point of contact. During the meeting, there was some confusion among the customers about who would be handling their technical needs, and Desalu's role as the engineer had to be reexplained. Even after the meeting, a customer in the room asked, "Who do we point our technical questions to?"

The times are changing, however.

"Our workforce is shifting in a way such that populations and groups that we didn't really pay a lot of attention to are becoming the majority," says IT Rock's Joyce. "And we're going to have to pay some attention to them in terms of ensuring that everyone has the skills they need for the 21st century. That is why Danielle is so critical."

Desalu's supervisor Mark Gallo, systems engineering manager in Public Sector Channels, agrees with Joyce.

"Hiring managers at Cisco and our partners continue to struggle with hiring qualified systems engineering candidates," Gallo says. "Danielle's experience as an SE and her natural ability to connect with today's youth is allowing high school and college students to see the unlimited opportunities in the IT industry."

It is Joyce's hope that IT Rocks will expand into new Cisco theatres as the company mobilizes to meet the worldwide talent shortage head-on. "Hopefully," he says. "it will get out of control!"

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