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Q&A

Black Girls Code founder looks to expand skills outreach, challenges CIOs to help the cause

Kimberly Bryant founded Black Girls Code In 2011. Since then, the chapter-based nonprofit has taught programming to more than 3,000 young women across the country.

By Mary K. Pratt   FOLLOW

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Programmers aren't usually featured in People *magazine, but computer scientist **Kimberly Bryant** made the cut, landing on the magazine's June 16 list of "15 Women Changing the World Right Now."*

Dossier: Kimberly Bryant

Hometown: Memphis

Recent accolade: A White House Champions of Change for Tech Inclusion award in July 2013.

If you weren't doing this, what would you do? "I would definitely be working on my own startup company. That's what I was working on before the task of Black Girls Code found me."

What books have you read lately? The *Hunger Games* series.

What's on your playlist? Jazz and R&B

What do you do in your spare time? "Sleep. But I'm also a bit of a shopper. It's relaxing to me."

What's your favorite vacation spot? The Caribbean. Anyplace with a beach.

Indeed, Bryant is making a difference. She started Black Girls Code in 2011, inspired in part by her desire to offer a richer digital experience to her own daughter, 15-year-old Kai. Since then, this chapter-based nonprofit has taught programming to more than 3,000 girls across the country. Here, Bryant shares her thoughts on the importance of her mission.

You call teaching girls of color to code "revolutionary." Why is that? We look at technology and teaching computer science as an innovative skill set that will be at the core of the nonindustrial, but still industrial, revolution. And if this revolution is focused on technology, having women of color at the forefront and being key participants in learning this skill set is revolutionary.

Women in general have not been at the core of driving the next economic/jobs revolution in any other industrial revolution we've been through. Giving them the keys to the kingdom is really changing the paradigm.

Does your organization aim to get girls of color into the technology workforce or just help them be comfortable using technology? It's really focused on making sure we get these girls in the forefront as leaders and drivers in the technology industry. We're trying to create the next Mark Zuckerberg. But we know some of our students won't go into technology, and with that being the case, it's really giving them the tools to understand technology for whatever career they may choose.

Where are girls, minorities and minority girls in terms of tech careers? We have a pipeline issue. We see half of all girls expressing interest in STEM [subjects] in middle school, but by high school it's less than 10%. And [in] college, we see those numbers dramatically drop. If you take all the Ph.D. students in computer science, less than 0.5% of those are women of color. And the same thing with bachelor's degree statistics: Only 3% of those are African-American women, and less than 1% of those are Hispanic.

Is the digital divide about economics, or is it cultural? It's definitely not a cultural issue. It's exposure. There have been foundational studies that delve into the use of the Internet and various devices and platforms, and people of color overindex to their peers. They're early adopters of mobile devices, they're more likely to use the Internet for entertainment.

We're heavy users of technology, but we're not heavy creators of it. That taps into economic access. Having broadband access in communities of color is a huge issue, [as is] access to devices that you can use to create technology. That's always one of our biggest obstacles. We may have 100 girls in the class, but probably only a quarter of them have access to a laptop. It's hard to engage them in learning when they don't have access to the equipment to continue to develop their skill sets.

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What are your other obstacles? It's having the corporate support and funding to reach all the students who need this opportunity. We have 700 chapters in the U.S. and one in Johannesburg, and we have a running list of 40 or 50 other cities that have asked us to bring a chapter to their city, but we can't keep up with it because our funding is still relatively low.

What sets Black Girls Code apart from other groups that teach girls to code? There are others that focus on girls or youths. But we want to create a culturally sensitive curriculum that taps into the need to teach girls of color and the need to keep them in the pipeline until they go into college and go into careers in technology.

We're just getting to the point where people see, with the number of students we reach, that there is a need for this particular type of focus. We're creating this unique place where girls of color come together around a shared interest.

We get pushback on the name from time to time: Is it exclusionary? We have girls of all ethnicities attend our program, but it is empowering, that this is something girls of color do. Black Girls Code.

Do you just teach coding? It's heavy on coding because that's where the job growth is. But now it's broader. We try to introduce the girls to every technology field we can. That could include robotics or gaming. We're trying to really show them that technology touches everything and every industry and to find where their niche is.

How do you get participants excited about, and not just interested in, coding? We really make sure that all our classes are project-based, so they're coming to learn to build something. That's something that girls aren't often in -- that role of builder. But all these kids are digital natives, so

they're using this technology already.

One of the reasons I founded Black Girls Code is to find something more productive for my daughter to do than just play Xbox. She's not the only girl like that. So we tweak that and show them how to create their own games around things that are interesting to them. That's how we grab their interest right off the bat.

When we do game design classes, we can't get the girls off the computers. It's an automatic pull for them to want to learn more. The same thing happens in our "build a Web page in a day" class.

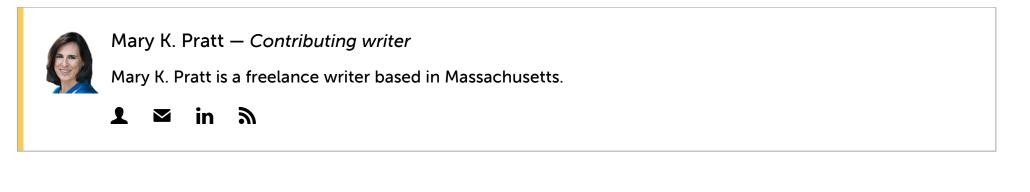**What should IT executives be doing to attract more women, girls and minorities to the profession?** Be transparent about the numbers and the work that has to be done, put dollars behind programs that are trying to solve the problem, and start earlier.

For women, the turning point is usually middle school. Same for people of color. You need to invest earlier in the pipeline. And companies need to develop training programs so their employees can go back and teach in those schools.

One of the biggest problems we have is we don't have teachers who can teach technology, but we have employees who can go back and do some of that training and... mentoring of students. [For more on this topic, see Thornton A. May's column "Women and the Future of IT.]

What's your proudest accomplishment with this organization? People always say don't focus on the numbers, but that's my proudest accomplishment. This is our third full year, and we've been able to reach over 3,000 girls and we're continuing to grow. And it's not just the number of girls we've reached. I'm proud that we've become thought leaders in this space. The work we've done has really shined a spotlight on this issue, and we've played a role in driving that conversation that I think will lead to change.

What are your global ambitions with Black Girls Code? Our goal is to teach 1 million girls to code by the year 2040 globally. We want to create this large chapter-based organization. We're hoping to continue to expand that reach. We're hoping to go to the Caribbean and Puerto Rico with one of our partners to reach 1,000 girls with bilingual classes. We're also hoping to expand to other countries in Africa as well as in Europe and Canada. We think of ourselves as a global movement.

Mary K. Pratt — *Contributing writer*

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