Breaking the Mold

The stereotype: kindergarten girls like the color pink,and dolls. I broke this mold; some have even wondered aloud if I'd ever gone out of my way to actively avoid the crowd. For example, I attended my first day of kindergarten with a dark blue backpack I'd tracked down in the "boys" section of the store. The dolls given to me by well-meaning relatives remained tucked away in a toy box while I constructed complex train tracks and watched my favorite electric trains haul their long chains of cars around and around.

Maybe that's why my best friend ended up being a boy in my class, whose ears seemed just a little too big for his head, though he has grown into them by now. The two of us bonded on a drizzly winter day over a model of Thomas the tank engine and an enormous outdoor chess board, whose pieces seemed like giants to us, but now barely reach our hips.

In fifth grade, I got my first exposure to robotics. We were paired off and given Lego Mindstorm kits to complete engineering challenges proposed by our teacher. My best friend and I ended up as a team, and we flew through the challenges. We built and programmed robots to navigate mazes and kick a ball around the classroom.

That was probably the first time I ever considered robotics as something I might want to pursue. Up until that point, I'd been convinced that I wanted to be a Superhero Mouse, a vision brought about by seeing every single "Wonder Pets" episode more times than I can count.

It wasn't until eighth grade that our school offered a class in line with my interest: Intro to Computer Science. I was one of three middle schoolers who were excused from our PE class to attend this high school elective. I was thrilled; this was the first time I got the chance to work with actual line-by-line coding. I still have the complex little game I created in my final week of that class: you played as a dragon, defeating knights in matches of Ro-Sham-Bo.

The next year, I was the only freshman, and one of only five female students in the AP Computer Science class. That same year, I was accepted to the school's robotics team, one of four female students on the fifteen-person team.

I'll always remember my first competition. The music was three years out of date, the pizza was cold, and we had to leave at six in the morning to get there on time. It was amazing. So many different teams had developed different plans and ideas for a Skyrise robot. And I found that this was something I loved doing: strategizing the game, building the robots, or even just sitting around with a bowl of popcorn debating autonomous programs.

After that first competition, my mother noticed that I was "the only girl in the room." For as long as I can remember I tended to break the stereotype, not following the same path as other girls my age. But I'd much rather be standing at a robotics competition surrounded by other strong, intelligent women, than to be the only one there. That's why I am working at my school to encourage other girls to break the mold and join me in this challenging field.

Title: Breaking the Mold

By: Sophie Max Kojima, Robohawks, 8000