

Discovering Girl Power Through Nine Seasons of T-VEX

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By: Jessica Yang

It has been nearly a decade since I first sat on the sidelines of a VEX robotics competition. Metal clashing and motors whirring, I remember the whizzing of robots zooming across the field, filling my ears. I remember sitting in the bleachers as the team received countless awards and falling asleep to the whirring echoes of robots. I remember laughing during team dinners and going to Disney World because the World Championships were in Orlando; and Disneyland the following year since the World Championships were in Anaheim. I remember driving to Nebraska for Nationals and then coming in second place at Nationals. I remember the first time we became Programming Skills world champions. And the second time. And the third time. I remember my brother making an appearance on ESPN and leading T-VEX to our first Tournament World Champion title.

Nearly ten years ago when T-VEX was first founded, there were merely four members, three of which were male. The only girl on the team was Faith. And as the only girl, she played a critical role. When no one knew what to do, she did. When no one agreed with one another, she would suggest a compromise. When the team was down, she would lift the team up. She led the team to become one of the best in the world. Ten years ago, very few women were involved in the STEM field. But though more women are involved in STEM than before, women still remain underrepresented in the STEM workforce. This is true for other fields of work as well. We need more women holding government positions. We need more female CEOs. We need more women acting as role models for the countless little girls who so badly want to be like their dads, brothers, uncles, and grandpas who build architecture, design software, and further propel the world of STEM. We need more women revolutionizing what it means to be female. This is what lit the fire of passion and determination inside me to continue what Faith started on this team and show the countless little girls that they can do it too.

My brother, Tiger Yang, dominated the VEX Robotics Program as a driver and programmer for 9090 since he was in the sixth grade. Throughout the years of his robotics career- since I was five years old-, I quietly watched on the sidelines at every competition, traveling along with the team to competitions and the annual world championships, dreaming about the day that I would finally get to fill his shoes and be in the spotlight. As time rolled by, vivid snapshots of past victories became a pinnacle of excellence I was destined to uphold.

To my delight, the number of girls on the team gradually increased along with the size of the team, which rapidly multiplied, prompting us to split up into multiple teams, eventually forming 9090A, 9090B, 9090C, 9090D, and 9090E. Among T-VEX, the representation of girls among the team was still small, with merely four girls in an overwhelming majority of guys. These girls were the backbone of the team, the very core of the T-VEX community, powering the team through their immense dedication and passion for robotics. T-VEX slowly blossomed into a thriving community, becoming one of the top competitors in the world of VEX robotics.

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As the team flourished, I restlessly awaited for the day that I would finally become a part of the VEX community. When I was in fifth grade, the day finally arrived. VEX IQ had been recently announced as a program for elementary and middle school students. That year, three other teammates and I formed 9090Z, one of T-VEX's VEX IQ teams. One of the key moments of my first season of robotics was the North Texas regional competition. As the main programmer of the team, I spent hours upon hours writing, testing, and tweaking the code ever so slightly, praying that our beloved robot would miraculously listen and carry out the program. In addition to programming, I also spent a large portion of time on our STEM Project. Our team was beyond excited that we were one small step away from qualifying for Worlds, but when the day arrived, we were faced with a perplexing dilemma. Looking out the window, all I could see was white. The roads were completely covered with ice, and we were unsure as to whether or not we could safely make the hour long trek to the competition arena. The team members were all eager and determined to go, as we did not want to throw away this opportunity. Long story short, our team braved the storm and safely made it to the arena, where we then proceeded to receive the STEM Research Project Award and become the Robots Skills Challenge Champion. Because of our hard work and perseverance, we made our way to Louisville for the world championships, where we were presented with the Judges' Award. I was ecstatic that after so many years of watching from the sidelines, I was finally on the field and in the spotlight.

Now that I'm in my freshman year of high school, I cannot imagine my life without VEX, and I would not be who I am today if it were not for robotics. I like to think that I grew up with VEX just as much as VEX grew up with me. As I grew, the VEX community also grew into the world's largest robotics program. And as the VEX program as a whole has evolved, I have also watched as our robotics club evolve. And now that all of the familiar faces that have surrounded me for nearly a decade have left my side, I hope that I will be able to inspire and show little girls that they can do it too- just as Faith instilled the willpower in me to one day continue what she started. I know without a doubt that I will be able to fill their shoes and continue this story.

Looking back to those days, I have realized the true role that girls hold in the world of STEM, and what it truly means to be girl powered. Your gender should not define your potential. Regardless of gender, we are a team that is dedicated, passionate, and determined to accomplish whatever we set our minds to. I have learned that to be girl-powered isn't just being the only girl in a majority of guys. To be girl-powered is to work hard no matter the circumstances. To me, to be girl powered is to be involved. To bring harmony and unity. Like glue, we bring the team together. We are the missing pieces of the puzzle, filling the void and completing the unfinished picture.