Orange is the new cool: 3-D statues at NorthPark Center in Dallas honor women in STEM careers

The innovators represent a world of professional possibilities for young girls.



Archaeologist and paleontologist Myria Perez, a fossil preparator at the Perot Museum of Nature and Science, is among those being honored with a statue at NorthPark Center. “Honestly, I still can’t believe it,” Perez says of her full-length digitally generated silhouette. “I mean, it’s me, and life-size, and 3-D, and I’ve got my lab apron on and my scribe, all my tools that I use in my hand. I just really hope that somebody goes up and thinks, ‘Hey, that looks like me,’ and then learns a little bit more and could see themselves being a fossil preparator or paleontologist.” (James Edward)

Jennifer Stimpson was 9 when she decided she wanted to be a scientist. She grew up in Oak Cliff working summers in her family's West Dallas compounding pharmacy, where she watched her father — Stimpson's first science mentor — do more than just dispense medications for his customers.

"As he was making these medicines for folks, he would talk to them about health care and health care practices, and he made sure that they recognized what they needed to do to get better," says Stimpson, a veteran science teacher in Dallas for two decades. "So, for me, I learned from my father how to pay it forward."

Stimpson, the first Black woman to graduate from the University of Northern Iowa with an advanced STEM degree, is a chemist, award-winning educator, community volunteer — and what a scientist looks like.

She is among the more than 120 "ambassadors" highlighted in "#IfThenSheCan — The Exhibit," a collection of statues of female STEM innovators on display at NorthPark Center representing the professional possibilities waiting for young girls who pursue opportunities in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. The statues are what Stimpson calls a "beautiful intersection of art and science."

The women, including 10 from North Texas, were selected by Lyda Hill Philanthropies and the American Association for the Advancement of Science in a multi-layered initiative to help ignite conversation and bring about a cultural shift in how the world perceives women in STEM.

Inspiration can be found at every vibrant orange acrylic turn of the NorthPark Center display and throughout the accompanying digital collection of free resources.

Featured Texas ambassadors are engineers, medical doctors, mathematicians, educators, inventors, a geneticist, a health technologist, an aviation maintenance technician, an archaeologist and paleontologist Myria Perez, a fossil preparator at the Perot Museum of Nature and Science.

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Perez, who earned a double degree in geology and anthropology at Southern Methodist University, has been obsessed with dinosaurs and prehistoric life for as long as she can remember. At age 12, she started volunteering at the Houston Museum of Natural Science, where she found mentors and encouragement to pursue her dream career.

Burçin Mutlu-Pakdil, a Turkish astronomer and astrophysicist, is among the women in STEM fields who are being honored in the exhibition.(Lola Gomez / Staff Photographer)

There's a dire need to encourage more female STEM graduates, not just so the U.S. remains competitive in science and technology, but also to bring a broader diversity of ideas to the table, says If/Then ambassador Minerva Cordero, professor of mathematics and associate dean in the college of science at the University of Texas at Arlington.

Cordero, a passionate advocate for representation in STEM who holds a Ph.D. in mathematics, points out that less than 30 percent of the STEM workforce is women. Hispanics make up about 6% and Blacks roughly 5% of that figure, says Cordero, a first-generation college graduate from Puerto Rico. Her three sisters also earned their degrees in STEM.

"Mathematics is for everyone. Science is for everyone. Engineering is for

everyone," says Cordero, who applies her expertise in finite geometries to computer science and artificial intelligence. "Neither your gender, race nor ethnicity determine what you can do. We all can do amazing things to help society, and having a career in a STEM field provides amazing opportunities to do that."

Stimpson, wrapping up a fellowship as a 2020-21 Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator, is set to return to her fifth-grade science classroom at The Hockaday School in the fall. She hopes the If/Then collection will help inspire the next generation of pioneers.

"You see these women out there braving the oceans, soaring in the skies or doing research to fight off vaccines, but they're also chefs, they're also dancers and film designers — they are regular people," Stimpson explains. "What I want this exhibit to do is to show girls their voices matter, and their voices are needed, and there is a space for you."

Details

"#IfThenSheCan — The Exhibit" is on display at NorthPark Center through Oct. 24. It includes statues of STEM innovators, a scavenger hunt and more. Visit ifthenexhibit.org.

Related:#IfThenSheCan – The Exhibit gives little girls something to shoot for