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## UCSC hosts fifth annual West Coast Conference for Undergraduate Women in Physics

By JANE PALMER

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SANTA CRUZ -- Female undergraduate physics students from around the nation will congregate at UC Santa Cruz starting today to attend the fifth annual West Coast Conference for Undergraduate Women in Physics.

The three-day event, which starts today, highlights opportunities in the field of physics for women and promotes networking between established female physicists and students.

"What this does, hopefully, is ... give encouragement to women students," said Dave Belanger, chair of the physics department. "It will give them some inspiration that they too can become excellent physicists."

Such encouragement is sorely needed. While 50 percent of high school physics students are girls, less than 25 percent of undergraduate students are women and an even smaller proportion are graduate students, according to the American Institute of Physics.

"Historically, women are underrepresented in physics and astrophysics," said Cissy Madden, the program manager in the UCSC physics department who is helping organize the event. "This is something that is meant to retain them and excite them."

Teaching staff and students alike were impressed by the impacts of previous conferences. Melinda Soares, a UCSC physics major who attended last year's conference at the University of Southern California, has kept in touch with more than 30 other women physicists she met at the event.

"It was really nice to talk to professional physicists who are also women," Soares said. "Especially to talk to them about their career experiences."

Jessica Missaghian, also a UCSC physics major who attended last year's conference, agreed.

"Walking into a room that has about 80 other female physicists who are my age was just awe-inspiring," Missaghian said. "It's a rarity to see that many young females who like to occasionally make the spherical cow joke."

The two students benefited so much from their experience they jumped at the chance to help organize the conference this year. Physics professors David Belanger and Michael Dine are overseeing their efforts.

The students will get the opportunity to meet some well-known female physicists and also some graduate students, Belanger said. He expects between 75 and 100 students to attend the conference.

Sandra Faber, a professor of astronomy and astrophysics at UCSC, said an added advantage of such conferences is that women can discuss the age-old challenge: how to balance an academic career with motherhood.

"This is a huge issue for women," said Faber, who is speaking at the conference this weekend. The conference gives students an opportunity to listen to the life histories of other female physicists and learn the strategies they are using, she said.

Soares believes it has helped her gain the confidence that she too can get pursue a career in physics.

"As you go through physics there is a feeling that you might not make it," Soares said. "There is a kind

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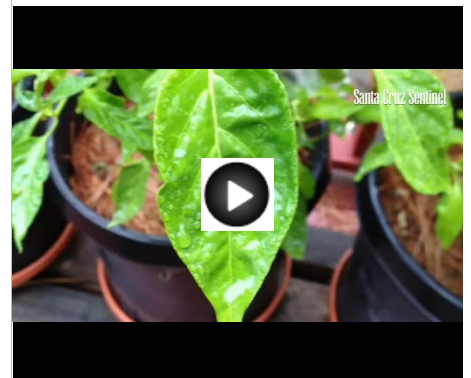
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Each year, both men and women move into other fields and class sizes get smaller and smaller, Soares said. But meeting other women at the conference who have already been through it and are now enjoying their work is encouraging, she said.

"They are just regular people," Soares said. "It shows you that you if you just take the necessary steps, you can do it."

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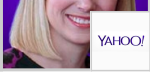
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