



## SCI TECH GIRLS October 12, 2007- Deauville

It all started because of one troubling observation: young women today are opting out from studies and careers in science and technology. In response, Aude de Thuin, president and founder of the Women's Forum for the Economy & Society, L'Oréal Fondation d'Entreprise and Orange decided to take action. They were soon joined by the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Cisco, Suez, Thales, Total and the city of Deauville, who saw the urgency at hand, and believed in the project.

A few brainstorming sessions later, the project took shape—a day dedicated to helping young women meet women active in the domains of science and engineering. An international initiative, these established professionals could be role models to encourage these girls to enter the world of science and technology. And so Sci Tech Girls was born.

Some 130 young women answered the call to attend this special day which took place alongside the Women's Forum, on October 12, 2007. The girls came from the regions of Normandy, Ile de France and elsewhere. Some took the train early on Friday morning (the SNCF, partner of the Women's Forum, allotted two train cars for the occasion) and took advantage of the trip to Deauville to get to know one another, share their first impressions and look over the questions they had prepared for the day.

At 10am they arrived in sunny Deauville with the firm belief that they would leave that evening with a clearer vision of their future.

High-school students “majoring” in science, attending preparatory classes at the *grandes écoles* or already in science and engineering universities or schools, the young women were eagerly awaited in the Deauville events hall. Breakfast was waiting, but so was their first appointment of the day, with Aude de Thuin and Philippe Augier, Mayor of Deauville. One of the engineering field's most renowned members, Susan Scheer Aoki, vice president of Cisco USA, was also present as was Habiba Bouhamed Chaabouni, professor of genetics at the University of Tunis—the first woman in Tunisia to take an interest in medical genetics and to gain recognition in the process.

Aude shared her commitment and beliefs with the assembly: “In an ideal world, the Women's Forum wouldn't exist. Today is your day to open doors to lead you to scientific and technological studies. It is the duty of past generations to leave you their place, encourage you and stimulate you in your career choices”. Philippe Augier was equally happy to welcome the young women and proud that the city of Deauville was participating in the project: “We are here to promote talented young women, and allow them to commit themselves,” he stated.

The girls were attentive as they listened and began to understand the major opportunities that would be offered in the coming years, in addition to the challenges they would face.

“You are the future women in science and the world needs you,” enthused Susan Sheer Aoki. For Habiba, women's role in the development of science can only be a good thing as their world vision is both less aggressive and more cooperative. She added that a stellar career was compatible with a fulfilling personal life if one followed four golden principles—organisation, belief, trust and the ability to convince others.

The morning soon came to a close, and the assembly gathered in the sunshine to take a group photo. The girls then went off together for lunch to talk among themselves and take a breather before the afternoon session.

Three of the girls, however, were in a hurry—they were expected at Deauville's Congress Centre where the 3rd edition of the Women's Forum was in full swing—to participate in the press conference for the Deauville Statement, a strong message to society which encourages the presence of young women in scientific careers. The small room was packed with attendees, when Monique Canto Sperber started. "Science created a new world and a new humanity—women should be present as well. It's up to women to be audacious, to take Marie Curie's example. She left such a mark on the history of science, while for decades women were kept out and didn't have role models they could identify with. It is high time women conquered Science. It's time we opened our eyes and took action,"—the emotion was palpable when the three girls spoke. Barely 30 years old, but their Call was heard. Project partners Didier Lombard, Béatrice Dautresme, and others signed the Deauville Statement in the light of flashing cameras.

Back at main hall, the day's activities continued. Some 11 roundtables featured around 20 women with exceptional careers in science and technology.

Those who came especially to meet the young women included: Reine Note, Principal Scientist Predictive Toxicology, L'Oréal, France ; Barbara Dalibard, Senior Executive Vice President Orange Business Services, France ; Amandine Aftalion, Mathematician at Laboratoire Jacques-Louis Lions; Catherine Feray, Lab Director at LAB'EAU, Lyonnaise des Eaux, Suez, France; Brigitte Bouquot, Vice-President, Marketing & Sales France, Thales; Albane Arseguel, Floating Support Engineering Manager, deep offshore, Exploration Production, Total; Prudence Mutowo, PHD student, University of Nottingham, Department of Food Science, UK and Laurence Danon, Board Member, Rothschild Corporate Finance, France.

One man, Laurent Blanchard, General Manager of Cisco France, moderated the session along with Noni Allwood of Cisco USA.

It was an afternoon that could be compared to speed-dating: every half hour the role models changed tables to meet with a new group of girls.

The young women were shy at first, but their confidence soon grew, and rapid-fire questions quickly came in both French and English. The Partners' representatives were delighted and spoke openly about their career paths using concrete examples. After all, abstraction is one of the main obstacles for young women.

- ⇒ Can women have a career in the very male-oriented oil industry?
- ⇒ How can you have children and keep a family together when you travel a lot?
- ⇒ What kind of relationship do women have in a field where there are so few women?
- ⇒ Is there a big difference between men and women in the workplace?
- ⇒ What kind of careers are there at the CNRS?
- ⇒ Why don't women allow themselves to enter the field of mathematics?
- ⇒ How can we progress professionally? What's the best way to start?
- ⇒ What can you tell us about gender discrimination, and how can we avoid it?
- ⇒ How do men perceive women's networks?
- ⇒ Did you face any cultural issues when working in Arab countries?
- ⇒ We didn't get enough information in our last year of high school. Where can we get information to make the right choices?

The room was buzzing and the speakers were enthused by the energy. They were delighted to give the young women clear and coherent answers to the queries and told them about potential opportunities in research, science and technology.

At 5pm the last questions are asked and the young women gladly took contact details from those companies who could help them in their future choices.

They were delighted with the experience and said they now had a clearer idea of things to come. "I know what I want to do later on and I can do it!" a young woman in prep school enthused. Another high-school student added, "Now I know what a female engineer or researcher means. Before today I wasn't sure. I was afraid that those terms described someone who was cold and wrapped up in her

own little world, but that's just not the case!" A number of young women found answers to their questions: "The people I met today convinced me of one thing: this is the job I want to do later on!"

The Partners concluded the roundtable discussions: "Don't let anyone decide for you and believe in what you want to do," said a L'Oréal representative. Those from Cisco and Suez were excited at the thought of welcoming some of these young women into their ranks in a few years. This was the first time Thales spoke publicly on these issues and the company's two representatives understood the generation gap that separates those with experience from those who have a lack of benchmarks.

The Total representative spoke of the importance of apprenticeship—to teach and learn from others. For her, apprenticeship, studies and training are an integral part of the "school of freedom". Participants from Orange and Suez viewed the day as a dip into the fountain of youth. As a whole, they believed that self confidence would be the main driver for young women choosing careers in science and technology.

In conclusion, let's remember Irène Joliot Curie's words from 1938 which resonate today, 70 years later:

"Scientific research is comforting from a moral standpoint—the pleasure of discovery, the joy at having surmounted obstacles and knowing that all new knowledge is a lasting gain for humanity.»

\*\*\*\*\*