

“Who’s Who” of STEM Education Attend Coalition Launch

By Cynthia D. Miller

“When Sputnik was launched, the U.S. answered the call and won the race to the moon. American’s love a crisis... but we shouldn’t want for a STEM education crisis to do something about it.” This was the opening story from Miles O’Brien, broadcast veteran, passionate advocate for aviation, space and technology, and host of the Business and Industry STEM Education Coalition press event. Over 300 business, industry, education and government leaders attended the event held at The National Academies on March 12 in Washington, DC to hear from notables from each sector, but students were given a place of honor in both the event’s lineup and every speech given thereafter.

Opening remarks were given by Dr. Charles Vest, President of the National Academy of Engineering and president emeritus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Though the number of awards and accolades bestowed upon Dr. Vest during his career are evidenced his own academic and professional excellence, woven into his success is a passion for sustained excellence of U.S. higher education, and quality and diversity in the U.S. engineering workforce... attributes that were well demonstrated by the four high school students invited to speak about their perspectives of STEM education.

A young man from Garrett County, Maryland spoke of how a teacher was instrumental in turning his agricultural background and 4-H involvement into a newfound desire to study mechanical engineering and robotics. A student from Mechanicsburg, PA described how his experience designing a bridge in West Point during the “Real World Design Challenge” - an annual competition that provides high school students the opportunity to work on real world engineering challenges in a team environment – inspired him to become a mechanical engineer. A young woman from The Thomas Jefferson High School for

Science and Technology in Alexandria, VA refused to pad her educational resume with classes that would maintain her G.P.A, instead taking classes like Quantum Physics to experience its “theoretical elegance and Eureka moments.” Finally, a young man from Washington, DC, engaged the audience with his stories about his desire to study nuclear engineering in order to help abate our country’s energy crises. It was obvious to all that both a future engineer – and future politician – had been born.

Representing young STEM professionals, Dr. Sarah Leonard, Principal Scientist in neuroscience research for Pfizer Global Research and Development, described her involvement with “Wyeth Scholars”, a program aimed at putting scientists in the classroom to help teachers with science content and help students understand “what it is to do science”. “One of our projects teaches students how to extract DNA from strawberries and bananas, and to see the look on their faces when they realize what they’ve just done... that’s what it’s all about!”

Next to the stage were representatives of the business, industry and government sectors. Rick Stephens, Senior Vice President of Human Resources for The Boeing Company also serves as a principle on the Business and Industry STEM Education Coalition. Stephens, a former U.S. Marine Corps officer, now serves on numerous education and workforce committees and is dedicated to giving students insights into how education can prepare them for successful careers. Tom Kalil, current Deputy Director for Policy for the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and Senior Advisor for Science, Technology and Innovation for the National Economic Council, spoke of the administration’s quest to focus on the educational infrastructure to create a future workforce with the skills needed to sustain America’s competitive advantage. Dr. Norm Augustine, retired chairman and CEO of Lockheed Martin, served on the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology and led the 2005 National Academies commission the produced the report, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and*

Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future whose tenants are in direct correlation with those of the Business and Industry STEM Education Coalition.

Rounding out the docket were Rep. Bart Gordon, Chair, House Science & Technology Committee, and Rep. Vern Ehlers, Ph.D., Ranking Member, Research & Science Education Subcommittee and the first research physicist to serve in Congress. Gordon gave the audience a call to action, requesting that they become “3rd party verifiers” by writing to the science committee in favor of heightened STEM education focus.

“I’m a nerd and proud of it,” said Ehlers. “I wear a pocket protector as a symbol of that, but in the long run, it’s all about the kids,” he said.

For more information about the Business and Industry STEM Education Coalition, logon to

<http://www.ndia.org/Divisions/Divisions/STEM/Pages/default.aspx>

#

Cynthia D. Miller is President of Miller.Omni.Media, Inc., a woman-owned small business specializing in strategic communications, marketing and media production. She can be reached at milleromnimedia@comcast.net.