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By [Derek McKissock](#)
News Editor

Christi Whitworth Recognized For Making A Difference - Brevard NC

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Christi Whitworth received the AAUW's "Women Who Make a Difference Award" Tuesday during a luncheon at Connestee Falls.

Whitworth, the education director at the Pisgah Astronomical Research Institute (PARI) in Balsam Grove, is the 38th recipient of the award by the [Brevard](#) branch of the American Association of University Women.

The public had the opportunity to nominate women for the award. The AAUW will give \$1,000 in Whitworth's name to the Eleanor Roosevelt Scholarship Fund.

Ladene Newton, who chaired the AAUW award committee, said Whitworth was picked based on new criteria that emphasizes the woman's accomplishments and complement AAUW's mission of "advancing equity for women and girls through advocacy, education, philanthropy and research."

"Your work at PARI and outside truly embody the mission of AAUW," Newton told Whitworth.

Last year, Whitworth was also the co-president of the AAUW Tar Heel Branch, which serves the whole state.

On Tuesday she received a certificate from the national AAUW because of her contributions to the organization.

After receiving her award, Whitworth addressed the audience.

"You may not realize that every time I get to go out and talk to a group of people...I always find interesting people that I would never have met," she said. "So, the opportunities that you provide for speakers to come and meet your chapter and the opportunities that you provide by just simply connecting to new people, who might have something beneficial, you are making these things possible. The work that I do is built off of that and the work that PARI does is built off of those networks."

Whitworth talked about the importance of groups, such as AAUW, that support the efforts of PARI and others.

"Standing beside all of you, I know that I have a tremendous amount of support that I never knew

existed as a teenager growing up and had to change my mind about a lot of things to learn to use that network of people, especially AAUW, to help transfer the hard work," she said.

She asked AAUW to keep up its "hard work" so that she "can keep doing what she loved."

PARI Executive Director Ken Steiner said that for the past eight years Whitworth has led multiple projects at PARI, and beyond, directed at the education of girls in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

Girls have always been included in the PARI broad-based STEM programs, including the STARLab planetarium, Smiley radio telescope, SCOPE online citizen-science program, Duke TIP (Talent Identification Program), Space Science Lab and Homeschool programs.

"Christi knows that while girls tend to be under-represented in science, technology, engineering and math fields, they are most specifically under-represented in the fields of computer science and astronomy," said Steiner

The National Girls Collaborative Project (NCGP), funded by the National Science Foundation, named PARI the host institution for the [North Carolina](#) Girls STEM Collaborative and named Whitworth as the collaborative lead.

The collaborative provides three years of grants, professional development and other resources to individuals and groups in [North Carolina](#) who are involving girls in STEM disciplines.

PARI, led by Whitworth, co-hosts SciGirls, a program for girls ages 9-14, with the [Transylvania County](#) 4-H.

SciGirls is a national effort sponsored by Twin Cities Public Television to change the way girls think about STEM. PARI and the local 4-H host programs each month that coordinate with televised SciGirls episodes.

The programs developed by PARI and the 4-H feature on-site activities that involve young girls in fun, hands-on activities that have a basis in STEM.

For example, topics have included the science of cooking, weather balloons, forest restoration and high tech fashion.

Additionally, PARI hosted a week-long 3D Planets workshop for girls between the ages of 9 and 13 funded by the Burroughs Wellcome Fund.

The girls learned about lunar and planetary altimeter data, 3D design and 3D printing, and then used their knowledge to design new tools for educators in [North Carolina](#) science museums to use for people with visual impairments.

With the addition of Braille and geographic markers, the designs are printed for use at museums throughout the state.

These projects and others are giving young girls a "leg up" on scientific process and discovery, Steiner

said.

"Over the years, Christi has observed during her interaction with girls in all the PARI programs that the activities are life changing and result in an immediate impact on the self-confidence and interest in pursuing more scientific subjects in their school work and science projects," he said. "She is constantly working to see that all the programs are maintained and expanded."

SciGirls is in its fourth year and is self-sustaining. Hundreds of middle school girls from [Western North Carolina](#) have participated. The 3D Planets program is in its second of three years before the current grant ends, but plans are in place to reapply for another three years to be able to reach more girls.

"As education director at PARI, she maintains, manages and creates programming for PARI's StarLab portable planetarium, science education, and outreach programs including homeschool programs, distance learning and citizen science programming," Steiner said.

Steiner said that as a father of a daughter who is a professional engineer he knows "the value of strong mentors and examples for young girls."



Christi Whitworth (right) received her award Tuesday during a luncheon. She is pictured here with (left) Ladene Newton and Ken Steiner. (Times photo by Derek McKissock)

Whitworth is currently training to become a SciGirls trainer for the PBS television program component.

Also during the luncheon, Betty Schenfield, the AAUW's past president, noted the branch's 60th anniversary this year and its work the past 12 months.

The following are the slate of officers for 2015-2016 who were installed at the May luncheon:

- President: Linda Thompson;
- President-elect: Aleta Tisdale;
- Past president: Betty Schenfield;

- Secretary: Barbara Holden (second year of two-year term);
- Treasurer: Betty Runion;
- Vice-presidents, membership: Judy Lauter (second year of two-year term) and Kathy Piersol (first year of two-year term); and
- Vice-presidents, programs: Leslie Chepenik (second year of two-year term) and Kathleen Milligan (first year of two-year term).

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