For this Sally Ride Science instructor, STEAM inspiration is a two-way street

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Instructor Spotlight: Manju Muralidharan

Manju Muralidharan works with students in Craftronics, a free workshop she teaches as part of the Library NExT program.

Manju Muralidharan attended her first computer class as a fifth grader in Bangalore, India, in 1997. Programming in the Turtle Logo language captivated her right away.

“It was the joy of seeing that something you did produced results immediately in front of you,” she said. “I’ve been programming pretty much ever since.”

She remembers a key moment from that class. “My computer teacher told us about the first computer programmer, and it was a woman – Ada Lovelace,” Manju recalls. “And that really inspired me. It made me think programming is not just for the boys.”

Now Manju is inspiring students as an instructor for Sally Ride Science. She creates and presents STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) workshops for two programs – Library NExT (https://sallyridescience.ucsd.edu/next/), which offers free classes in San Diego library branches, and the summer Sally Ride Science Junior Academy (https://sallyridescience.ucsd.edu/junior-academy/).

As she teaches, she’s constantly getting new ideas from her students. “I enjoy going out into the community and interacting with the kids,” she said. “I learn more from them than they do from me!”

Megan Lancaster, program manager for UC San Diego Extension Pre-College Programs (https://extension.ucsd.edu/courses-and-programs/pre-college), called Manju “a one-of-a-kind instructor.”

“She is continually creating innovative workshops that give students the opportunity to play scientist, computer programmer and engineer with hands-on activities,” Lancaster said. “She empowers students to lead their own learning. Manju is a perfect example of what Sally Ride Science stands for.”

A chance to give back

Manju got her bachelor’s degree in computer engineering in India and then worked as a web developer for Oracle Financial Services. When she got married, she moved to the United States, and her husband persuaded her to go to graduate school to broaden her opportunities. Manju earned her master’s degree in computer science from Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago.

Her grad school advisor at Illinois Tech ran a computer camp that offered summer and after-school classes for middle school girls. Manju got involved in the program. “That’s how I got into teaching,” she said. “I found that I really loved giving back. I had opportunities when I was growing up, and I wanted other kids to have opportunities, too.”

After moving to San Diego in 2015, she started her own company, Code Makers, to offer coding classes. She began teaching workshops at the Mira Mesa library branch. Then she heard about Sally Ride Science’s STEAM workshops, and she became an instructor for those programs, too.

Manju has her hands full caring for her 2-year-old son, but she finds time to create and teach a wide variety of STEAM classes.

In *Craftronics*, one of her Library NExT workshops, students combine crafts and circuit-building on projects like a light-up LED bracelet or a moving robot bug. In another class, *Stop-Motion Animation*, kids work in teams to make animated movies. She also teaches *Lego Mindstorms Robotics* and *Electronic Breadboard Design*, among other workshops.

At this summer’s Junior Academy, to be held June 24 to July 19 at University City Center, she will teach *Introduction to Circuits* for grades 4-5, and *Android App Design* and *Raspberry Pi Projects* for middle school students.

How does she come up with so many concepts for new workshops? “Most of my class ideas come from the kids,” she said. “I teach the projects that they want to do. With all of the ideas they give me, it’s a continuous learning process. That’s what I love about it.”

In fact, her biggest challenge is just keeping up with her tech-savvy students: “The kids nowadays are just so far advanced. I’m actually teaching middle school level programs for elementary kids.”

Manju works hard to stay current on the latest tech developments. Otherwise, she says with a laugh, “the kids will say, ‘Oh, that’s so last month.’ ”

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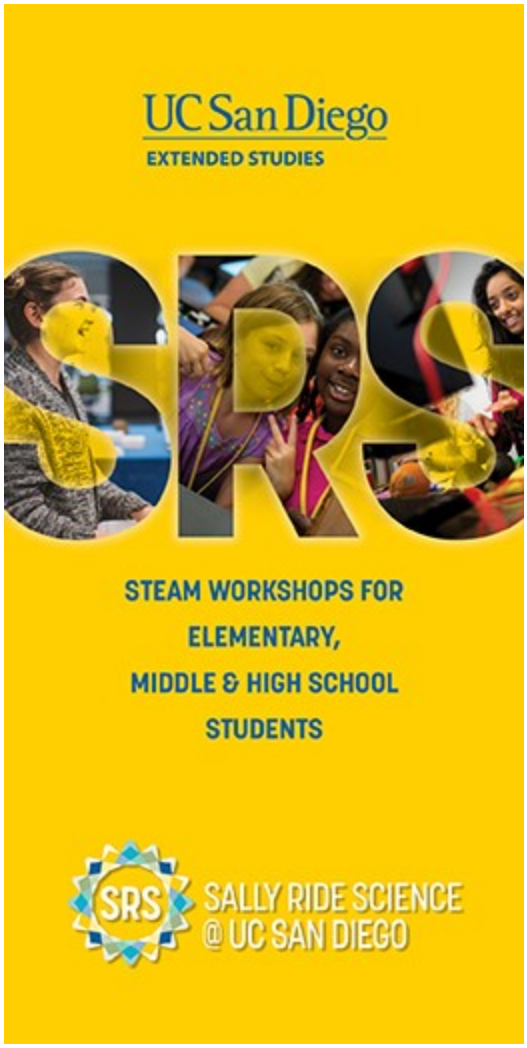

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