



Women of Color Award winners show 'STEM is a girl thing'



From left: John Meyers, Tashara Cooper, Norma Clayton, Connie Standifer and Lt. Cmdr. (select) Rolanda Findlay at the 2016 Women of Color STEM Conference Oct. 13-15 in Detroit.

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. — Seven NAVAIR women were recognized for their leadership, technical skills and abilities in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) at the [2016 Women of Color STEM Conference](#) Oct. 13-15 in Detroit.

Sharon Keith, a mission systems lead engineer for the F-35 Lightning II Joint Program Office based out of Arlington, Virginia, won a Technical Innovation - Government Award for her work on the U.S. military's largest, most complex program and her long career in naval avionics.

"[This award] meant finally knowing, after working 30-plus years in naval aviation, my professional accomplishments were being recognized among such a diverse audience of my peers on a national and international stage," she said. "My engineering career has given me great pleasure knowing I've played a significant role in providing guidance and mentoring to junior engineers and providing our warfighters, servicemen and women the capabilities necessary to protect the U.S. while supporting our international partners as well."



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Keith said her mother inspired her to take on new opportunities and value education. She advises new employees to engage in STEM activities as much as they can.

"Look at ways to develop your critical thinking skills, take advantage of internship programs and look for individuals currently in your field to mentor," she said.

NAVAIR also had six Technology Rising Star Award winners: Tashara Cooper, Lt. Cmdr. (select) Rolanda Findlay, Nikeya Gibbs, [Bethany Harris](#), Connie Standifer and Kendra Woodruff. Rising Stars are women with fewer than 22 years in the workforce who are helping to shape technology for the future.

Cooper is part of the Human Integration and Performance Division, one of the largest STEM departments at the Naval Air Warfare Center Training Systems Division in Orlando, Florida. Her research helps provide improved, more effective instructional strategies to train warfighters.

She said she feels pride in helping pave the way for other individuals with visual disabilities within the scientific field.

"It means a lot to me to not only change the world for myself — however small or great — but to change the vision of possibility for others," Cooper said. "Transitioning from the role of management analyst to research psychologist says persons with disabilities can not only serve well in administrative roles, but in technical roles as well."

Findlay said she decided to become a naval aerospace experimental psychologist because it was a unique career path unlike anything she had previously seen.

"I could use my background in industrial and organizational psychology to make a direct impact in naval aviation," she explained. "I was intrigued by the possibilities, and it appeared to be a powerful way to use my skillset." Findlay, who is based out of Orlando, has brought several scientific advances from her field of industrial and organizational psychology into applied selection and training technologies that support mission accomplishment and safety for the aviation community.

Standifer is NAVAIR's first Logistics and Industrial Operations (AIR-6.0) competency manager to be selected for the Technology Rising Star Award, which she said brings her career full circle.

"My parents taught me and my siblings to always give 100 percent in whatever we set forth as our goal," she said. "They were right in that you may not hear your name called in the moment, but just keep pushing forward, for greatness never goes unnoticed."

Recent college graduate Woodruff said the movie "Toy Story" inspired her to pursue a career in modeling and simulation. She works as a computer scientist based in Orlando,



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where her biggest accomplishment has been integrating the latest electronic learning standard, Experience API, into a previously developed 3-D game-based training course. Her team became the first Navy entity to communicate successfully with two remote learning resource stores owned by the Naval Education and Training Command and the Advanced Distributed Learning Co-Lab.

NAVAIR relies on its STEM professionals to accomplish its major goals and initiatives, such as delivering integrated and interoperable warfighting capabilities. In fiscal year 2016, women accounted for approximately 18 percent of all STEM positions at NAVAIR.

Each of the award winners encouraged new and up-and-coming STEM employees to seek out new opportunities and mentoring.

"If it's your dream to go into any certain field, you must first take fear out of the equation and go for it," Standifer said. "You can achieve anything you set your mind to; always remain goal oriented, and there's really nothing you can't do."

Cooper advised finding a mentor: "Surround yourself with those who believe in you and your dreams," she said. "Embrace that it will be really hard at times, and you may fall short here and there, but push through while remaining true to who you are. Know that everything that happens — or does not happen — is all part of a perfect plan for you, so hold steady, because we are all riders on our own unique journey. No two paths are identical."

At the conference, hosted by Women of Color Magazine and with a theme of "STEM is a Girl Thing," attendees also participated in workshops, training and networking opportunities.





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Bethany Harris with her Technology Rising Star Award at the 2016 Women of Color STEM Awards Conference Oct. 13-15 in Detroit.



Brig. Gen. Greg Masiello, left, Technical Innovation - Government Award winner Sharon Keith and Barry Keith at the 2016 Women of Color STEM Conference Oct. 13-15 in Detroit.



From left: Tashara Cooper, Lt. Gen. Nadja West and Connie Standifer at the 2016 Women of Color STEM Awards Conference Oct. 13-15 in Detroit.