



News-Journal photos/DAVID TUCKER

Science cheerleaders, a group of former professional cheerleaders involved in the fields of science, technology, engineering or mathematics, get the crowd fired up at the 2013 STEM Expo on Friday at the News-Journal Center in Daytona Beach.

GO SCIENCE!

Cheerleaders help sell science and math to students

By **DEBORAH CIRCELLI**
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DAYTONA BEACH — With silver pom poms in hand, the five former NFL cheerleaders burst onto the stage to cheers from hundreds of high school students.

But this wasn't your typical halftime performance.

They danced at the News-Journal Center on Friday to music such as the 1980s hits "She Blinded Me With Science" and Paula Abdul's "Opposites Attract." They even held up letters spelling out the word science and some yelled "Go Science" after individually introducing themselves.

The cheerleaders, some of whom had symbols of molecules on their shoulders, are part of a group of more than 250 current and former professional cheerleaders from the NFL, NBA and other pro sports leagues pursuing or already working in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields.

They performed and talked to about 500 Volusia County high school and Daytona State College students at the STEM Expo, hosted by Daytona State College and the STEM Community Scholars Program and a grant through the National Science Foundation.

One of the cheerleaders, Melissa Hodges, a neuro-researcher at Vanderbilt University who cheered for the Tennessee Titans, said she's "not afraid to cheer" about math as she chanted "addition and subtraction, algebra and chemistry — that's where I want to be." Felecia Sheffield, a former Miami Dolphins cheerleader who has a doctorate in clinical psychology, said science cheerleaders are "more than enthusiastic and cute, they have brains and sass."

A former Kansas City Chiefs and St. Louis Rams cheerleader, Laura Clark, who works as a nutritionist, said "our goal is to break down stereotypes." Hodges also later told a group not to be intimidated by science fields, especially females.

"Girls can do it too. We're proof of that," Hodges said.



Daytona State College professor John Picione ignites a hydrogen-filled balloon during a demonstration on combustible chemistry at the 2013 STEM Expo.

The expo, which included displays from area universities as well as business and science groups, was intended to "expose and engage" students about the STEM fields, according to LaKisha Holmes, a Daytona State College math professor who is overseeing the grant.

"Our goal is to show them the possibilities that they can have in a career majoring in science, tech-

nology, engineering and math," Holmes said. "We are trying to increase the pipeline of students into those fields."

Holmes said area business partners point out that students need to have math and science skills "in order to help our nation remain a leader" in industries with those jobs.

Kantis Simmons, of Atlanta, who is described as a "youth inspi-

ration speaker" and "rocket scientist," energized students as part of the keynote address. With a bachelor's in chemistry and two master's degrees in polymer science and textile and fiber engineering, he talked about "growing up insecure."

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SCIENCE

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He was teased for being born with missing fingers on his left hand or what he calls having "7.25 fingers."

Using humor throughout his talk and involving the students on stage, Simmons described hearing the words "you have the cooties" or "he's so special." One day as a youth he was driven to want to cut off the remaining 2½ fingers on his left hand and his mom told him "stop looking at what you don't have and start thinking about the things you do have."

That message has stuck with him, he said, throughout his life.

His career has since involved working with NASA on materials for rockets and airplanes; developing new products for Mobil Chemical Co.; and creating new contact lenses for CIBA Vision.

Simmons told the group no matter what issue they are dealing with in life, "if you don't allow your mess to stop your success, no one can stop you."

"We all have something we

are uniquely passionate about," Simmons said. "When you find something you love to do and people are willing to pay you good money to do what you love — this is how I define success."

Area high school and college students also participated in demonstrations outside by Daytona State College chemistry professor John Picione, including mixing sugar and sulfuric acid to produce a growing black coal-like substance with smoke coming out of it.

Josh Lutczka, 25, who is attending Daytona State College and wants to transfer to Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University to get a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering, said he's interested "in outer space" and wants to design space stations or spacecrafts.

"I believe in the future we'll be travelling out there a lot more," he said.

Several students from Spruce Creek and University high schools demonstrated various robots as part of the exhibits for the expo. The two schools have worked on projects for various national competitions.

One robot shoots a basketball while balancing on a bridge.

"We want to show them this is possible in high school," Kim Wrenne, a 10th-grader at Spruce Creek, said about the projects.

A DeLand High School senior, for example, was talking to a representative at an Embry-Riddle booth. Rebecca Rohmeyer, 18, has been accepted at Embry-Riddle for the fall majoring in human factors, which incorporates psychology, engineering and other areas. She attended the expo because she likes the science field.

"I like to figure out different things," she said. "People don't realize that the sciences and math make everything they use work." Two other students from Taylor Middle-High School in Pierson were inspired by the talk from the cheerleaders.

Megan Holmes, 16, who is on the dance team at Taylor, said it's inspiring to see people be able to cheer and still be science majors.

"I really want to be involved in the medical field," Holmes said.



Kantis Simmons, the event's keynote speaker, makes a point with the help of several students on stage while sharing his story and proven strategies.

Daytona Beach News Journal
Volusia County
Daily 99,600
February 9, 2013
Sports section C,
pages 1 and 2