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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 28, 2009**

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Conference Teaches Girls Importance of Choices

YORKTOWN HEIGHTS – Jessica DuLong is proof that there is no such thing as a “man’s job”. As one of the only female fireboat engineers in the world, she’s used to coming up against stereotypes. “I still hear that some jobs are for girls and some are for boys. I’m here to tell you – that’s not true,” she said last week to an audience of attentive fifth- and sixth-grade girls.

Ms. DuLong was the keynote speaker at the 15th annual Women Helping Girls with Choices conference held at Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES on October 23. Ms. Dulong is also a newly published author and a writer who has contributed to a variety of international and national publications.

“A million little things led me here – it wasn’t what I envisioned,” Ms. DuLong told the young conference participants. “You have to remember that there are thousands of opportunities waiting for you around each corner. You never know where life is going to take you. So you have to open your eyes and realize opportunities come in unexpected places.”

The Women Helping Girls with Choices Conference is designed to provide leadership training for girls in the fifth or sixth grade. The conference includes a keynote address by an influential female, small-group activities designed to foster self-esteem and leadership development, and informal question-and-answer sessions with female role models. The conference’s goals include fostering “I Can” attitudes in girls, discussing expanded career options for women, enhancing participants’ self-esteem by connecting them with women of achievement, and encouraging support and consideration of others.

Dr. Marla Gardner, P/NW BOCES’ director of curriculum and instructional services, said this year’s conference was attended by 108 girls from 11 school districts. “This is an exciting conference that we enjoy coordinating for the young women in our region,” Dr. Gardner said. “Their response is always positive and they learn a lot to take back to their school districts.”

Students from Briarcliff Manor were enthusiastic participants. Laura Charney said she learned “how different people grow up and what I have in front of me.” Laura hopes to become a doctor, a veterinarian, or an actress. Alexa Heller learned there’s no such thing as a women’s job or a man’s job, and Alana Galan learned how to be confident and respectful of others.

Participants from North Salem also gained valuable insight from the conference. Hannah Pastore learned about leadership and to never give up. Kate Fraidi learned to believe in herself. And Julia Chen learned about teamwork. “I learned that just because people say women can’t do something that men can doesn’t mean its true,” Julia said. “If you want to do something, just do it.”

One role model, literary assistant Kirsten Bowen, left participants with great advice. “Be passionate about what you do,” she said. “Be a good listener. Be able to take criticism so you can grow. Be self-confident. And be very curious – get a lot of life experience.”

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Students from Briarcliff Manor listen to a role model address their group during the Women Helping Girls with Choices Conference at P/NW BOCES.



Role Model Kirsten Bowen answers questions from participants – including these students from North Salem – at the Women Helping Girls with Choices Conference at P/NW BOCES.



Jessica DuLong delivers the keynote address at the Women Helping Girls with Choices Conference at P/NW BOCES.