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INTERESTED PARTIES: Karen Sorenson, center, served as mentor to Mia Suzuki, left, and Amy Shaw.

Grant aims to boost youths' interest in math, sciences

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If Amy Shah becomes a doctor and Mio Suzuki becomes a nuclear engineer, it will be partly the result of their experience at this year's science fair.

The 40-year-old Santa Clara Science Fair got a big boost last year from the newly created Synopsys Outreach Foundation, which is trying to get more local students interested in math or science.

The result was a 400 percent jump in participation. Amy and Mio were among the 1,200 students with experiments at the fair this year. Their project took first prize.

Students and science teachers are now gearing up for next year's fair to be held March 17 in San Jose. It will be followed by the Intel Corp.-sponsored International Science and Engineering Fair.

The foundation is looking for mentors to assist the young mathematicians and scientists.

The foundation was the brainchild of Aart de Geus, CEO of Synopsys, the Mountain View company that creates software used in making computer chips.

Mr. de Geus was becoming increasingly concerned about the shortage of high-tech workers in Silicon Valley — and the nation. "In Silicon Valley there is no question that the number of people in high-tech is at an all-time premium," he says. "Anything that can help with that is a good thing."

In 1999, for example, Joint Venture Silicon Valley Networks studied 1,160 area students in the eighth and 11th grades and found that 35 percent of them wanted to study art, drama or speech. Only 16 percent wanted to study computer science, 13 percent wanted to pursue algebra and 5 percent favored the study of chemistry.

Mr. de Geus became intrigued by the science fair as a way to help turn students around. He saw the fair as a powerful symbol of Silicon Valley.

"The student, like the entrepreneur, comes up with an idea, makes a case, figures out what is needed in something like a budget, and finally has to defend it," he says.

Mr. de Geus created the foundation with \$3 million in July 1999 and hired former Mayor Susan Hammer as its CEO. The fair is now known as the Synopsys Championship. With the foundation's help, the schools also have created

the Science Ploozza, for East Side Union School District students, which had 650 participants this year, says Gary Robinson, the foundation's president.

The grants range from \$50 to \$150 to help with each project.

"Many teachers are hungry to get their kids involved in hands-on activities," says Heidi Black, the science fair coordinator based at East Side Union High School. "But that takes time and money and equipment."

The Synopsys effort has spawned others to participate. Nextlink has donated \$120,000 over three years to help fund a science fair coordinator for the East Side Union School District, a position that Ms. Black now holds.

Xilinx Inc., meanwhile, has given \$30,000 for teacher training.

Amy and Mio attended Saratoga High School, when they decided to enter the fair. Their project took them to the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, where they were guided by a mentor, researcher Karen Sorenson. They

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looked at the effect of radiation on the reproductive cells of hamsters and concluded that even the smallest dose of radiation could affect the cells.

Mio is currently enrolled at De Anza College. She plans to study chemical and nuclear engineering. Amy is thinking of becoming a pediatric oncologist.

"Because of this project, I have become a lot more interested in the subject," she says between classes at UCLA. "I want to help people."

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