

## Let's hear it for the girls!

*Digital Divas esports is hit with ECA female gamers*

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The pandemic may have temporarily suspended Tai Kwon Do competition for secondary black belt Allie Banach, but she maintains her competitive edge through Digital Divas esports. Banach, 16, is a third-year student at the Early College Alliance @ Eastern Michigan University (ECA@EMU) and said being involved in video gaming competitions has multiple rewards.

"I didn't know what to expect when I joined the team three years ago. I looked at esports as a way to meet new people, but it has been so much more. It's a great environment to be in; learning to work together, learning more about STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics), and problem-solving has been huge," Banach said.

Banach is one of a half dozen girls from the ECA who joined the program's esports club and have discovered the many advantages. Bia Hamed, the Director of K-12 STEM Outreach and the coordinator for esports Digital Divas (all females) and Digital Dudes (all males), says esports is one of the avenues to attract young ladies to STEM careers and to cultivate life skills.

"Esports is a billion-dollar industry and there are lots of scholarship opportunities," Hamed said. "Girls are underrepresented (in video gaming) and esports gives them a means to become more comfortable with technology, learn to work as a team, communicate-with teammates and strangers-and develop critical thinking skills. It's the right sport at the right time."

Hamed said girls can sometimes feel unwelcome when gaming online and she hopes Digital Divas will make them more accepted. May Allen is a second year ECA student and would like to study Chemistry at Columbia in New York, when she completes high school. She saw esports as an opportunity to gain access to scholarships and STEM mentors. She has experienced sexist remarks in chat rooms, but she said once the guys get to know them they advocate for the Digital Divas.

"I enjoy the team-building aspects, meeting really nice people, and becoming friends," Allen said. "Our bond is strengthen through team work."

Patricia Dace's daughter, Lydia, is on the Digital Diva's esports team and she was happy that she joined.

"We live in a world where lots of careers are male-dominated. Digital Divas gives young girls early lessons and helping them to navigate the workplace. My daughter is interested in math and economics and those are primarily male dominated professions. When she goes into a field, Digital Divas will give her experience and being involved in gaming will give her an edge. These young girls have the advantage of being part of something where they're working with a team. My daughter knows she's not alone; she knows she has someone in her corner and can face the obstacles together," Dace said.

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Hamed said esports and digital divas is life altering for young ladies.

“I have heard so many stories of life changes. One woman told me ‘I was that girl from a rural community and didn’t know anything about technology.’ This young girl came with a high school group and sat in on a cyber security class with Digital Divas. After high school she enrolled at EMU and now has a career in cyber security. Digital Divas has helped so many girls improve their grades, build confidence, and access careers. We’re building a culture of girls in STEM.”

EMU launched Digital Divas 12 years ago as a conference for high school girls to introduce them to STEM careers and to meet women in STEM professions. Hamed launched Digital Divas esports three years ago with the support of Dr. Ellen Fischer, ECA principal. The program is funded through grants and sponsors.

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