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WEEKEND CONFIDENTIAL

An Engineer's Bid to Modernize the Girl Scouts

Sylvia Acevedo, a former IBM executive with degrees in industrial engineering, is emphasizing science and technology in her effort to revive the storied organization



'We are always trying to look at: How are we relevant to girls?' says Sylvia Acevedo. PHOTO: MATT FURMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL; HAIR & MAKEUP BY NICKEE DAVID



By

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When Sylvia Acevedo was a fourth-grade Girl Scout in New Mexico in the 1960s, most of her troop mates were trying to get the badge for cooking. But that wasn't enough for Ms. Acevedo: She wanted the science badge too.

A troop leader suggested it after seeing Ms. Acevedo's excitement in gazing at the dazzling night sky on a camping trip. To help earn the badge, Ms. Acevedo collected newspaper articles about the space program and built an Estes model rocket from a paper-and-plastic kit.

Now as head of the Girl Scouts, Ms. Acevedo, 61, faces an even more challenging task: reviving the storied organization, founded in 1912. The number of girls enrolled has fallen from 3.8 million in 2003 to 2.5 million today as the group struggles with its old-fashioned reputation.

"We are always trying to look at: How are we relevant to girls?" she says.

Title IX, the 1972 civil rights law, opened more opportunities for women, but it also left female-only organizations like the Girl Scouts in the position of having to explain their value in a coed world. "What we failed to do for Girl Scouts is communicate how staying in Girl Scouts would be a way to get scholarships and earn our difficult awards," says Ms. Acevedo.

She sees the Girl Scouts' mission as relevant today, as a single-sex environment that can foster girls' confidence and provide a safe venue for expression. "When girls are trying to do something nontraditional in a coed environment, they typically don't get called on first...and there's typically peer pressure not to do that," she says. "Today's coed environment puts so much pressure on them."

Since being named CEO in spring 2017, Ms. Acevedo, a former IBM executive with degrees in industrial engineering, has emphasized science and technology. When she told staffers that she wanted to add badges in coding, robotics and cybersecurity to the traditional lineup including cooking, craft and first aid, they said they'd do it by 2025. Ms. Acevedo wanted it done faster.

She has also pushed technology in other ways, rolling out efforts to recruit new members on social media and testing a mobile app for planning and communication. Earlier this year, the Girl Scouts opened a center in Texas dedicated to teaching girls science and math skills.

Part of Ms. Acevedo's strategy has been to raise awareness of the organization through her own story. In September, she released a memoir called "Path to the Stars" about her childhood as a Girl Scout. She grew up in Las Cruces, New Mexico, the daughter and granddaughter of Mexican immigrants. Her father was a chemist in the Physical Science Laboratories at New Mexico State University while her mother stayed home with her and her siblings.

She joined the Girl Scouts at age 7. Initially shy, she says that the group helped her to gain confidence. Selling cookies gave her a sense of how to set goals, she says, and activities such as stargazing helped to stoke an interest in science and math.

She went to college at New Mexico State University, majoring in industrial engineering, which focuses on making processes more efficient. After graduating, she spent five months working at the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., where she helped to analyze data from the Voyager Spacecraft as it passed by Jupiter.

After working at the lab, she attended graduate school at Stanford, studying systems engineering and industrial engineering. She landed a job at IBM, working first as an industrial engineer and then as a marketing representative. Eight years later, she moved to Apple. She fought to win promotion to a post as regional business development manager, overcoming her superiors' concern that businessmen in South America, which was part of the region, might not want to work with a woman. She traveled to Chile and Ecuador in an effort to prove that she could successfully do the job, and she got it.

After stints at Autodesk and Dell, she launched and sold her own business software startup, before founding and running a consulting company focused on children's health and education. Her work launching campaigns to provide fitness programs, books, toothbrushes and reading glasses to underserved school districts in cities such as Dallas, Atlanta and Los Angeles helped to earn Ms. Acevedo a spot as a Commissioner on the White House Initiative for Educational Excellence for Hispanics in 2011.

In 2016, she was named the interim head of the Girl Scouts after serving on their board of directors since 2009. She officially took over as CEO last year.

Ms. Acevedo says that her push to broaden the Girl Scouts' tech offerings hasn't rattled traditionalists who cherish activities such as camping and cooking. She says that she has ensured that outdoor activities remain an important focus—in her own life, too. "As much as I

love technology, all my vacations are outside, doing all the things Girl Scouts has to offer like kayaking and horseback riding," she says.

She is undaunted by the Boy Scouts' announcement last spring that they would allow girls to join their ranks, and she has no plans to incorporate boys. "We are only going to focus on the girls in Girl Scouts."

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