



## **Cheering for science and engineering!**

The Science Cheerleaders are a group of scientists and engineers who are also current and former US professional cheerleaders. They came together last year to promote and celebrate women in STEM careers.

Darlene Cavalier is the founder of ScienceCheerleader.com, a blog that aims to promote the involvement of citizens in science and science-related policy. She is also a former professional cheerleader for the basketball team the Philadelphia 76ers. In her mission to improve science literacy, she decided to enlist the help of the 2009 76ers cheerleaders to promote "18 things you need to know to be science literate". This zero-budget collaboration with George Mason University put her blog on the map and spawned the Science Cheerleaders in 2010, a group of scientists and engineers who are also current and former professional cheerleaders for the NBA, NFL and other pro sports leagues. Here Darlene tells us how it all began and why the group's members are such powerful ambassadors for science and technology careers and we meet a cheerleading engineer from NASA.

### **How did you form the Science Cheerleaders?**

I started receiving emails from professional cheerleaders pursuing science careers and I decided to profile these remarkable women on the blog. Shortly after that, I received an invitation for them to perform at the USA Science and Engineering Festival (the Burroughs Wellcome Fund sponsored their appearance). That was the first time I had met any of the women. I could hardly believe the reaction from festival-goers: overwhelmingly positive. Long lines of people waited for their autographs and hundreds of little cheerleader-wannabes learned why these women are so passionate about their science and engineering careers. That's when I knew we were onto something big. The Science Cheerleaders are powerful ambassadors of the site and, it turns out, have been very influential in challenging stereotypes and inspiring young girls to consider careers in science and technology.

### **How often do you perform and typically what kind of events?**

We've had four appearances in the last six months and are considering several invitations now. Our first appearance was in October at the USA Science and Engineering Festival in Washington, D.C. We've performed for the White House and NASA and, most recently, we kicked off the Philadelphia Science Festival along with the Mayor of Philadelphia. The Science Cheerleader teamed up with the Franklin Institute to lead hands-on science activities aimed primarily at young girls.

### **What do you do at the events?**

The Science Cheerleaders perform science-themed routines which include cheers and individual speaking roles for each Science Cheerleader. ("Hi! I'm Alyson, a Tennessee Titans cheerleader AND a biochemist! When someone tells me that being smart isn't cool, I say, 'EXCUSE ME!? Being Smart is H-O-T, HOT!') Crowd cheers include: S-C-I-E-N-C-E, SCIENCE!(clap, clap), SCIENCE! (clap, clap). And, this is one we did for NASA: N-A-S-A, NASA research ALL THE WAY!!

Then the SciCheers meet the crowds and sign autographs on their personalised trading cards, do science activities with kids (tailored activities designed to appeal to young women in particular), run impromptu, free mini cheer camps and pose for lots of pictures. I'd like to mention that the choreography and cheers are created by Laura Eilers of Going Pro Entertainment and the uniforms donated by Angela King Designs.

### **What is the typical reaction you get when they find out what you all do for a living?**

Most people (especially moms of little cheerleaders) are thrilled. Many people are surprised there are so many professional cheerleaders who are pursuing science careers (more than 50 in the National Football League alone). Frankly, I was surprised! The Science Cheerleaders do a very good job of inspiring others by encouraging them to work hard, pursue their passions, develop good time management skills, and "never let someone else's opinion determine your destiny."

Find out more about the Science Cheerleaders at [www.sciencecheerleader.com](http://www.sciencecheerleader.com)