What if we could alter the perception of the "Software Developer"?

Birds of a Feather Session - Anne Simmons

<u>Desc</u>ription of the topic

While manning a recruiting booth and attending last year's "Grace Hopper Celebration", I chatted to lots of students. Many of these women had degrees, masters' and doctorates in Computer Science. When I asked what role they were looking for, most said Business Analyst. This really surprised me. With that many years of development behind them, why didn't they want to be developers? Even after five years of Computer Science, I was horrified to learn that the stereotype of "programmer/developer" was *still* affecting women's choice of whether or not to become a developer. How can we hope to inspire younger women to take up IT, when even at this level women still have the wrong impression?

This was the exact position I found myself in three years ago when I graduated. It was only when I was given the opportunity to meet 'real' developers in 'real' jobs, did I realize that being a developer can be so much more than the stereotype leads us to believe.

In this "Birds of a Feather" session we will explore these questions:
- When you picture a Software Developer, what is the first image that comes to mind? Is it an unwashed male wearing a band t-shirt who communicates in grunts living in a basement with no windows? Or is it Software Engineer Barbie? Or is it somewhere in between?
- Where did this stereotype come from? Movies and TV? The Gaming industry? Hackers? Media? School - It's just not cool to be a nerd.... Even during your Computer Science degree men vastly outnumber women.
- What can it *really* like to be a software developer in the industry? It's fun! It's collaborative! We pair! There is constant feedback and self-development. Continuous learning. The support that we can give each other. Being part of building something that will make other's live better and more efficient. The list goes on...

For the remainder of the session (35 mins) I want to facilitate an interactive, informal sharing and brainstorming activity with those in attendance to answer two main questions:
- What information, and at what point, would of influenced my initial impression?
- What can we do to challenge the stereotype? There are lots of initiatives that women are already doing within this space that are really inspiring. Let's share what they are so that we can leave motivated and feeling like there is something that we can do to help.

The aim of this session is raise awareness that the stigma still exists, but in many environments is unfounded. Being a developer does not mean you have to *become* the stereotype. I want people to leave with a different outlook on what being a developer can be like. I want people to leave inspired with ideas that they can implement tomorrow and every day after. From something as (seemingly) small as mentoring another female in your school/organization to creating a whole company that is devoted to training women in new technologies, every little bit helps.

Wouldn't it be great if we could start to change what a women imagines when she thinks "Software Developer"?

Description of the expected audience

The session is aimed at two groups:
- Those who are embarking on a career in Computer Science.
- People currently working as software developers who can contribute their experiences and help change the stereotype/impression.

Description of the BOF format
Assuming a session length of 60 mins.
15 mins - Introduction to the topic, exploring the stereotype and my experience.
35 mins - Facilitated Brainstorming session. Perhaps using the Fishbowl technique to answer the two above questions, capturing key realizations and/or ideas as we go along.
10 mins - Recapping the session's highlights, as well as action pints that the audience and panel can take away for their own implementation

Summary of the qualifications of the session leader(s).
Miss Anne Simmons is a Consultant Developer at ThoughtWorks Inc, a Global IT Software Consultancy. She joined ThoughtWorks three years ago as a graduate developer in the UK and has been helping clients all over the world create top quality software using Agile Software Development Techniques. Anne is passionate about creating well functioning teams that produce quality results. She firmly believes that women have a huge amount to contribute to a development team and doesn't want the stereotypical view of what it means to be a developer to keep women away.

Some references
- When I searched for "programmer" on Google, this is the first image that I got. http://www.funnyjunksite.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/08/programmer.jpg
- Study done with children on role models and gender stereotyping. They drew a picture of what they thought a stereotypical scientist looked like. They then re-drew the picture after the session. I would love to do something similar to open and close the session. http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2010/07/07/role-models-and-gender-stereotyping/
- Some initiatives that I came across. http://techfemme.wordpress.com/2011/01/05/vanessa-hurst/ http://girldevelopit.tumblr.com/
- Fishbowl Technique for facilitation of the session. http://www.activetraining.com/facil_consult/tool_fishbowl.htm
- Girls only Computing lessons at High School http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/technology/girls-only-computer-class-hits-refresh-on-its-geeky-male-image/article1857933/