

## Women's History Month Highlight: Vera Vander Kooy Bringing STEM to Indy's Youth

By [Shawnta S. Barnes](#) - March 28, 2017



March is Women's History Month. During this month it is important to not only reflect upon women who have made notable contributions nationally, but it is also important to get to know women who are making a difference in our own communities. A woman making a difference in Indiana is educator Vera Vander Kooy. She is the founder and director of the non-profit organization The STEM Connection.

“Our goals are to break down stereotypes related to STEM, to challenge all children to be their best and to provide meaningful learning opportunities which engage and encourage. Programming includes field trips, Challenge Clubs, STEM@Night, family and scout hikes, summer camps and other traveling STEM experiences. Programming is connected with ongoing conservation projects that honor the land and waterways of Indiana and seeks to grant access to those underrepresented in the STEM fields. Currently, over 2000 children and adults are served yearly.”



**Shawnta Barnes:** You began your career as a science educator. Why did you decide to leave the classroom and begin The STEM Connection?

**Vera Vander Kooy:** During the summer of 2014, we ran one week of camp at Moore Road Farm and watching the children each day was eye-opening. Exploring, hiking, discovering, working with science tools and in the garden lead to so much learning! This experience was the motivation to shift from the regular school

setting to hands-on, minds-on, and feet-on-the-ground STEM at the farm and during out of school time.

**SB: You are The STEM Connection, not The STEAM Connection. Do you address art in your programming and if so, how?**

**VV:** All good STEM programming involves Art and Design. Art and Design are woven into our programming and not isolated. Creating towers, building bridges and considering where to plant the flowers in the garden are all natural Art and Design extensions. No need to change the acronym.

**SB: Your organization provides after-school STEM Challenge Clubs around Indianapolis in parochial schools, township schools, and Indianapolis Public Schools. What benefits have these schools seen from their students participating in your after-school club?**

**VV:** The children that have been a part of club show confidence in problem-solving, consider themselves scientists and engineers, learn failure is part of success and discover that technology is any tool that helps us do work.

**SB: The Trump administration has recommended cutting education funding, in particular, funding directed towards after-school programming. Could these potential budget cuts affect your programming?**

**VV:** Yes, each school or district is unique and the way our programming is funded is modified to each one. Our programming has been funded by parents, Title 1, 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant and neighborhood centers.

**SB: Are there other organizations you have partnered with that have helped make The STEM Connection a success?**

**VV:** Relationships, collaborations and organizations are key to our success today and tomorrow. Having a champion in a school has been very helpful. Take you for example!

**SB: In five years from now, what is your hope for The STEM Connection?**

VV: Our goals include accessibility and sustainability. Also, providing hands-on, minds-on and feet-on-the-ground STEM experiences to all children in Indy and the surrounding areas is our goal! In five years, I hope we have met the first two and are reaching at least  $\frac{1}{4}$  of our target audience in some way.

**SB: Is there anything else about The STEM Connection that people do not know that you would like to share?**

VV: Our headquarters is Moore Road Farm which is located on the northwest side in Pike township. Join us soon!