All-Woman Team Takes First Place in a Backcountry.com “Hackathon”

By Steve Eaton

A team made up of three students and a graduate from the Huntsman School of Business took first place in a competition sponsored by Backcountry.com recently that pitted them against industry professionals in a 24-hour contest that drove programmers to work through the night.

It was called a “hackathon” and they excelled in a category that pitted all-women teams against each other. A hackathon has nothing to do with illegal computer hacking but is instead a term that has evolved to describe a gathering where teams or individuals tackle extreme programming challenges.

Backcountry.com’s website described its hackathon this way, challenging teams to: “Collaborate and build something awesome in 24-hours – at the end of the event the best, most inspiring hacks will receive prizes. It doesn't have to be helpful to anyone, or even remotely sane. Just something you are excited as hell about doing. Hackathons are meant to be fun.”

The team included Huntsman students Ani Aghababyan, Gina Baldazzi, and Meghan Lewis. Britney Johnson, a Huntsman graduate, was a critical part of the winning effort, according to team members. Britney is part of a start-up company, PoliticIt, that is made up of current and former Huntsman students. She brought some unique programming experience to the table.

“Britney stayed up nearly all night programming,” Meghan said. “Her focus was amazing.”

Britney said that she went to the event not searching for a job but networking so that she’d be better aware of the programmers who might be available were she to want to hire someone. She said people often come to her looking for help but her work at PoliticIt keeps her very busy. She said she likes to be able to refer people to talented programmers.

She said she learned, for example, of the strong work ethic that Gina, Meghan, and Ani have as she watched them push their limits all night long working on the project. She said at the Huntsman School she learned programming basics more importantly, learned how to work with a team and tap individual strengths of each member to make accelerated progress. The hackathon gave her the ability to see how others work in a taxing, intense team setting.
“What you go to school for is to develop the ability to work hard, and learn to work as a team,” she said. “You learn that each person has strengths. You value those who have focused on specific skills and developed an expertise in those areas. You also learn how to motivate those who aren’t performing well to do better.”

The contest drew about a dozen teams and most of them were employees of Backcountry.com. The Huntsman team built what it called a “gift-able application” in Facebook that, once fully developed, would help people buy gifts for their Facebook friends who have an interest in outdoor recreation. Each member of the team won a $100 gift certificate to Backcountry.com but Meghan said the certificates were not the incentive to compete.

“It was definitely for the experience,” Meghan said. “We also hoped it would prove a good addition to our resumes.”

Gina believes the company created an all-women category because firms want to encourage more women to go into management information systems and to increase exposure to their own outdoor product offerings to women. The contest was not a way to get some fast low-cost programing but it was held in hopes it would spark new ideas for the company, she said.

“They didn’t take any of our code,” Gina said. “They were just looking for ideas.”