Dear Alexis

What a powerful essay! Thank you so much for sharing your experiences both in person during our monthly AIMS^2 meeting this afternoon and through this thought provoking narrative.

I can see that the conference was incredibly useful and informative, and I am confident that you will continue to grow and empower others as a result of this transformative experience. With your permission I would like to share this with our entire team so they are inspired as I am to do everything we can to make a difference for our students. Thanks again!!

All the very best,

Dr. Ramesh

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From: Siguenza, Alexis <alexis.siguenza.540@my.csun.edu>
Sent: Thursday, April 25, 2019 7:41 PM
To: Cruz, Cindy J <cindy.cruz@csun.edu>; Ramesh, S K <s.ramesh@csun.edu>; rupa@codechix.org
Subject: A Thank You - My DevPulseCon Experience

Dear Cindy, Dr. Ramesh, and Rupa,

I would like to thank you all once again for allowing me to participate in the exciting experience that was DevPulseCon. I had never done anything like this before, and am very glad I took advantage of this opportunity to hear and learn from women engineers and other professionals in the tech industry. I look forward to further developing both my knowledge of the conferences' topics and of myself in the future.

I have been sharing my time at DevPulseCon non-stop with my peers, and was elated to see how many other women I've spoken to were interested in experiences like this. I am glad that such places as these exist to provide inspiration, support, and advocacy for women in engineering. I have written more, and invite you to read about, about my experience in the attachment below. Once again, I greatly appreciate your continued efforts and support that made this opportunity possible for Kavya, Megan, and myself. Have a great weekend.

Sincerely,
Alexis Siguenza

On Being a Young Woman in Tech:
DevPulseCon – a Learning Experience
Alexis Siguenza

© XKCD, "How It Works" (https://xkcd.com/385/)
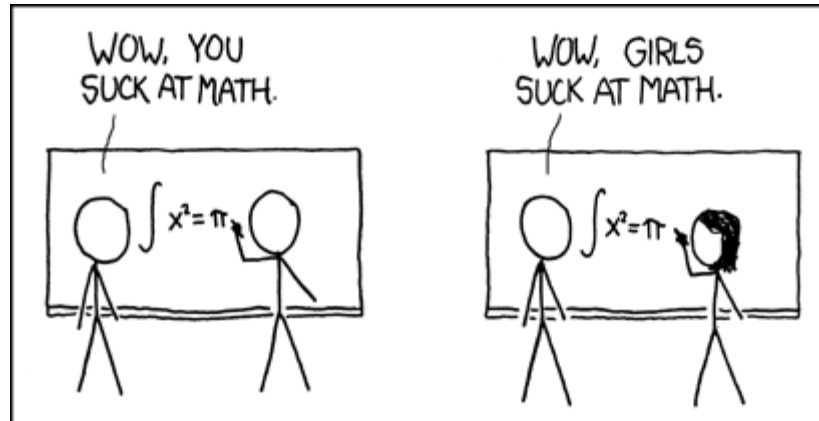
The first time I truly "tinkered" with programming a computer was in the sixth grade. My teacher, Ms. Gallagher, was truly the epitome of awesomeness in every which way. In our "Computer Applications and Literacy" class, she introduced us to the concept of computer programming through Scratch, a Lego-esque program that lets kids build interactive games using a building block interface—and share them with the world. The point being—it was ridiculously fun and I got hopelessly addicted. I was excited to learn, and I wanted *more.*

That was the last technology class I was exposed to until junior year of high school.

The passion I had never went away: from sixth grade on, I had never stopped exploring, and I had never stopped learning. But once I left middle school, I never again had the amazing support system that I found in Ms. Gallagher. So I was nearly bursting with joy when my high school introduced a new course, Intro to Computer Science. I jumped on the chance to join! Except, the first day (week, month…), I couldn't help but notice one thing:

"Where are all the girls?"

In a class of 35, there were an astounding nine of us. A little more than a quarter of the class were female. In my sixth-grade class, it seemed to be pretty evenly split—at least, enough to not notice for an excited preteen girl. Unfortunately, this downward trend has been extremely common throughout my educational career. This lack of peers and mentors with life experiences similar to your own translates to undermined confidence, feelings of isolation, and the oh-so-prevalent stereotype threat. The higher you go, the less women you see. And that's a problem.

So imagine my excitement when, as fate may have it, I was offered the opportunity to attend DevPulseCon as part of the AIMS^2 program at California State University Northridge. DevPulseCon is a small technical conference that aims to do something that many professional and educational tech events lack: a dedicated, nonjudgmental space for professional women in tech to share their experiences and expertise—with other women! By and large, I was extremely hesitant to go to this conference. After years of experiencing the previously mentioned phenomenon, I was, truth be told, cynical and skeptical. As a female student studying computer science, I have combatted gender-related assumptions and bias—both conscious and not—constantly throughout my time in academia. What could this event offer that others have tried, and failed, to include?

The answer, it seems, was everything.

Casting my doubts aside, I bit the bullet and, before I knew it, found myself waking up at 4am in the morning to get ready for a 7am flight for a 9am conference in Northern California. As I stumbled like a zombie to my bathroom mirror and the harsh lights jolted my brain awake, I thought to myself, *"What did I get myself into?"* This would be my first technical conference (luckily, as a group with two other young women in our program)—and I had no idea what to expect.

Spanning the course of two days at the Computer History Museum in Sunnyvale, California, the agenda for DevPulseCon was jammed pack with back-to-back speakers for the majority of the first day, with an interactive workshop at the end of the day. The first item to check off the list was registration (which, from my personal experience setting up other events, went surprisingly smoothly)—and then off we headed to breakfast! Almost immediately, you could feel the buzz of energy zipping through the air—students, industry professionals, company representatives, all mingling with each other, tapping away at their laptops, and nibbling a delicious breakfast. A full house for a full schedule, and we just joined the swarm.

After a welcome and opening remarks, this was it: DevPulseCon had begun. The morning began with presentation topics related to tech. As a student, perhaps the most pleasant revelation of the morning was of all the subjects being centered around current, cutting-edge technologies. These included data science, quantum computing, and the development of privacy-minded computation techniques that I had never been exposed to in my schooling. Let me paint the scene for you: a college student, leaning over a table, eyes wide and jaw nearly dropped the entire time the speakers were presenting. Although some inevitable terminology and advanced techniques naturally flew over my head, I was incredibly surprised at how digestible and approachable these topics were made with what seemed like a multitude of different audiences in mind. These were unique, bleeding edge subjects extremely relevant to the current direction of my field—and I was hooked.

I knew from just the feel of the room that most attendees were professionals that have worked in their industries, and developed their careers, for years if not decades by that point in time. It was, of course, a fair bit intimidating as a student who has yet to even begin an entry-level job. Yet, I never got the feeling that, as a less experienced individual, I was being left behind in the dust during any presentation or (as has often been assumed in some of my other tech-related experiences) being talked down to.

Perhaps even more so, the second portion of speeches dealt directly with the experience of being a women in a technical field. Inspiring, motivational, hilarious—these were only some of the words to describe how they perfectly captured a large catalog of feelings I have experienced but could never put the words to. The environment offered soon calmed any anxieties or worries I had when I first walked into the conference that morning: it was one of complete acceptance, open encouragement, and opportunity to learn free from many of the pressures women often feel in fear of seeming incompetent or "confirming" stereotypes.

This was most prevalent during what was perhaps my favorite portion of each day—the workshops. Although I knew little going into the "Python Refresher" workshop of the first day, I knew I was not alone in my gratitude for the workshop speaker's patience and understanding in my absolute lack of familiarity with the language. Similarly, the technical interview workshop involved a fair amount of industry jargon and references that I could not personally relate to as a student. Yet, I thoroughly enjoyed the groups we formed in order to share our experiences with different interview-style questions and brainstorm answers to them based on the projects we have done. I learned more here than I ever have on my own—the firsthand knowledge of professional women speaking about the programming issues, challenges, and triumphs they have experienced or seen will be invaluable to my own future career development.

However, the one moment that seemed to particularly stand out to me was completely unplanned compared to the rest of the extremely organized conference schedule. A moment came at the end of the second day's technical interview workshop that a female attendee and her male companion were approached by staff at the front of the stage. After the workshop, Founder and leader of CodeChix and DevPulseCon, Rupa Dachere, came up to the stage to address this earlier moment. During a discussion group that the male attendee had been a part of, it was observed that, although he had attended the conference under a complimentary "Male Ally" ticket, it seemed he had not fully understood what the meaning of this term meant—that is, of a supportive, inclusive observer. A person whose role is encouragement and active involvement in allowing women to express their voice and opinions in the workplace. Although this was explained to them and they were encouraged to stay, the two companions chose to leave.

Before this moment, I, myself, had admittedly a fairly vague idea of the dedication and responsibilities the term "male ally" fully represented. During the aforementioned technical interview workshop, a male workshop assistant was guiding our group through the brainstorming exercise, yet I was curious why he rarely spoke up in our discussion. One poignant interaction I recall was of a member of our group asking him, "What are some software architecture questions you have asked in interviews?" He avoided giving us his personal examples; rather, he encouraged us to find questions we, as engineers, would ask others if we were interviewing them. Admittedly, I was slightly confused as to why he seemed hesitant to share his experiences, however in retrospect, I realized that he meant to foster a space for us to have a strong voice and reflect on our *own* personal experiences. For this, I was immensely grateful. As a woman, there have been countless academic, professional, and personal environments where I felt my voice was not being heard.

I knew from the very moment Rupa went on that stage and apologized to us, directly, for this incident—an absolutely courageous act—that this was a conference that truly stood up to its brightest ideals. One of inclusion, non-judgement, and sincerity to the mentorship and advocacy of women in tech. And one I was proud to have experienced as a student who often suffers from feelings of uncertainty and imposter syndrome that this field may not be right for me. That day, I saw a community of supportive, confident women who rose above the numerous challenges they have had to face, and I knew that, yes, I belonged here—and, for myself, for other women, this is where I needed to be.