

Women in Math: The Limit Does Not Exist  
Episode 36 - An Interview Recap of Amy Cakebread by Olivia Myers.

OK take two.

So, I'm Liv Myers and I had Damien for calc 1-3. In all honesty, I didn't finish calc 3 because COVID happened and it was just a lot. This is me recording for the second time, because when the individual who I interviewed . . . when we interviewed we didn't actually record. Sometimes that's how it goes. You move on, you persevere.

The person I interviewed was Amy Cakebread. Amy Cakebread is a teacher at Portland Community College and she predominantly teaches math. She does calculus, math 211-213 as well which is Foundations of Elementary Math. Those teach those who want to teach others elementary math. Super cool.

What draws me to Amy so much is her mathography, she calls it. Or math biography, I don't remember. She graduated highschool not being able to do math. I don't know how to explain it. She said to me, when you go to the store and they have a 3 for \$5 sale and you have, like, a gut feeling about how much 1 would cost without using a calculator, she didn't have that. If something said it was 20% off of \$30 she couldn't figure out the dollar amount so she just wouldn't buy it.

She also came from a poor family which affected her education and the way she thought about herself. She has experienced blatant sexism in her education and specifically in math. I remember when she told this story for the first time.

She was going to a university which I won't name. She did a group project with a group of all boys. Before the project, the

professor said that a woman had never earned more than a B in his class and he basically said he wasn't going to change that. So she did all the work in the group project, all the boys got A's and she got a B. At this point in her life, she was just like "whatever." The guys in her group were more upset than she was and said she should speak out about it to get the A she deserved.

I find that interesting because, if you know Amy, you know that she doesn't take shit from people. She knows that she's right and she knows how to explain it. She even admits when she's wrong so it's interesting hearing that she just took that at a point in her life is fascinating knowing her now.

She also talked about how poverty affected her a lot. She's from a rural place with a lot of siblings and going to college just wasn't something you did. She was good at reading and writing but math was something that she didn't understand. She kept retaking the same math class again and again all through highschool and couldn't pass it. Her teacher finally sat her down and said "look, you're not meant for this. I'm just going to give you a D so you can graduate."

I want to be a teacher, so as somebody who wants to be a teacher I hate that a teacher said that to a student but also just as a human who gives a crap about how people feel I can't imagine being in both of those situations.

One being in the situation where you're telling the student, "you're not meant for this, I'm going to throw you a bone." That's condescending and makes students not want to believe in themselves.

Two, I can't imagine being a student and having your teacher be like, "I don't necessarily believe in you." So that must have been

sick.

So it's interesting that this teacher is like, "you're not meant for this," and Amy's whole life is math. That woman loves math more than anyone I've ever seen. She geeks out about it so much! If you talk to her about tessellations, oh my god she could talk about it for an hour and a half about tessellations. It's a lot. So I think it's interesting that now her whole life is math.

What really pushed Amy to overcome this family set up that she had-- you know-- because nobody went to school. I don't remember how she said it, but there was no higher education. Not that they weren't high achieving, just because you don't go to college doesn't mean you're in out achieving, but at least the schooling aspect of it, they weren't achieving in that way. So it was weird that--

I guess poverty does that to you. If you aren't exposed to that kind of scenario and if you're not exposed to people going to college and becoming teachers and doctors why would you really think to do it if that's not what you were around ever? So that makes sense.

She was in a job when she was 23 or 24, she had a kid, either married or not yet. I feel like she did a lot of really grown up things early so that made her seem more adult. So she's in this job, she's good at it, she is training people, but she keeps getting passed over for promotions.

Finally she gets to the point where she says, "what gives? Why am I being passed up?" She goes to her manager to ask why a girl who was younger than Amy. Amy was qualified, Amy had trained the girl who was being promoted before her. Her manager says, "I can't put you in front of customers, you don't have a college degree."

In that moment, Amy realized she had a family to provide for, she . . . um . . . Sorry, my back just spazzed out.

Anyway, she has a family she needs to provide for and she's being held back because she doesn't have a college degree? No. So she goes to PCC and she's put in math 20 which, for those who don't know, teaches you how to add, subtract, divide, and multiply. She works her way up to math 11 which is pretty much the cap for the math you need for a degree, she wasn't even going for a math degree, she was going to be an actress because that was the easiest one she could get.

All of a sudden she has all these teachers asking her if she has every thought about teaching. She finds herself in these positions in class teaching other students. It's like the first time in her life that school is working and she's understanding it. Her teachers became like her mentors because they could see what she needed and could see her background and where she came from. They could relate to her with that. I think that's something I've never thought about going into being a teacher but also as a student, which is probably a privilege in itself . . .

She also said that because she came from such poverty, she cursed a ton. She would think that she was getting all these points across and making sense when she was talking but then her teachers would say, "no, you're not making sense and you have to stop cursing all the time. If you want to be respected, and the way that you present yourself is obviously the way people are going to see you."

So for the first time in her life as an adult woman with a kid she's being called out. Nobody had ever done that before and she said that was necessary for what she needed. I think a lot of people would have a big issue with that. Getting called out on

your crapola, doesn't feel good. It sucks. The fact that she says that's what she needed and it's what a lot of students need, I think it shows that she's realistic about everything.

Moving on, she has these teachers who say she's good at this and should be a teacher and not an actress because they believe in her. So going from highschool and her teacher saying she's not meant for this and I'm going to throw you a bone, to four years later being told, "you are good at this, this is your life calling, go to school for this." I think it's amazing. She found teachers who were amazing and believed in her.

She said once she started to get her graduate degree she had this mentor who was one of her biggest supporters. I don't remember his name, but he was one of her biggest supporters, he wouldn't take anything less than A's because she had a 4.0 all the time. Which is also amazing because you also have to think about this: She's not a young college student, she has a kid, I think she's pregnant again at this point, she got married, she has bills to pay, she's putting herself through school, she's so in debt . . . like . . . the strength that that takes!

She would hate that I'm gassing her up like this! She literally told me that when we realized we weren't recording. She said, "don't be too nice, I'm just a regular person." And to me, that's not regular. I remember when she told us that story of her professor saying he'd never give a woman an A and that was when she vowed to herself that she'd never get a B. [Snaps.] Role model. Immediately. Immediate role model.

She hated when I told her that which is also something that is so interesting about her, that she doesn't want compliments. Since she came from such poverty and started school so late she has this horrible imposter syndrome which she still has to this day, all the time. When she's teaching, when she's having one on one

time with students, when she's getting taught, just all the time. That's so wild to me because she is genuinely so good at what she does. She will forever be one of my favorite professors that I've ever had.

In general, PCC's math department? Oh my god. People who want to talk crap on community college honestly can do some things that I'm not going to say on audio. The math department is one of the most extraordinary departments of a school I've ever seen in my life. I've never had a bad experience with that department. Every single one of them are so qualified and so educated, they have it so together. You walk into the offices of the math department and it's organized. They have their shit down. To me, Amy fits in so well. It's wild to me that she feels like she doesn't. At least, that's how I interpreted what she said.

Honestly, Amy wows me. In so many ways. She's doing all this stuff and also making a family. Honestly, what kind of frickin superhero are you? What the hell? I don't understand.

Anyway, with this professor who would not accept anything less from her. She'd go into his office, her feet are up, she's pregnant, she's on the couch complaining because you have to take classes that don't have anything to do with your degree so she had to take psychology.

She didn't like psychology. I think it was a class on development, I don't remember. She was complaining to her professor because her class was talking about how smart babies are and she has babies and she knows that they're literally not, this is crap. She just wants to give up on this class. This professor called her out on her shit. He said "no, you're not going to give up your 4.0 for this stupid psychology course that you know you can get an A in without even trying. So no, you don't get to do that."

I think that's amazing that she had someone in her life like that who was comfortable enough to say, "no. Shut up." We should all have somebody like that. That's also something that Amy and I talked about. Having mentors for students in school who tell them all the time that "I believe in you, I know you can do better" and can relate to their life situations. I don't know if I'm explaining this well.

Amy started when she was already an adult, she had already had a job, she already had a family, she was married. And then she literally turned her entire life around because she realized that because she didn't have a college degree, she would keep getting passed over for promotions. She didn't want her family to have the life that she had. She wanted to break the cycle of poverty. The amount of strength and whatnot that that takes I don't think a lot of people could do.

This woman is wild to me. Absolutely wild. Because . . . yeah.

Let me think about what else we talked about.

Can I pause this? I don't think so.

Hi Damien, you're just going to look at me think now.

Yeah, I think that was mostly it. How long is this? 20 minutes?  
Yeah I think that's solid.

Overall, what I want people to take away from this is that . . . I don't think Amy is going to like that I said this . . . just because you started school late and you maybe had a teacher in the past tell you that you weren't good enough, doesn't mean you can't start.

Amy changed her entire life. She's also somebody in her life who doesn't let any of the kids in her family not go to school. Like higher education. The bare minimum she lets them do is a highschool diploma and at least two years of PCC or university or trade school, something like that. She wants to break that cycle of not aspiring to do more. She's realistic about it, she doesn't demand that they go to a specific school. If they want to go to trade school, they have to do it. Every single time she sees them she asks them about their grades which as a kid I'm sure is super annoying like "oh crap, Amy's going to be there, I have to have my report card ready while I just want to play Mario Cart with my cousin. That's great."

But also, it's someone who is making sure these kids know "I know you can do better. I know what you're capable of. I want you to know that I know that all the time so you have no excuse to mess around."

I think anyone who listens to this and can figure out what I'm saying, because sometimes I go on 4 different tangents in a million different years and it's fine. But if you want to take math courses, no matter who you take at PCC-- like if you take Damian-- like one, he has a Women in Math podcast. If you don't already know that this man is already killing it . . . hmm. Take a second. Acknowledge that. Because he doesn't have to do it and he does and that's why I love this man.

Great hands with Damien, Amy Cakebread. Oh my god. Oh my god. You're going to learn. Period.

Jessica Bernard is literally amazing. Oh my god! Also, Wendy Fresh? Dear god! Absolute freaking angels. They are so smart and so genuinely good at teaching and believing in people and making sure you know they believe in you.



I am very sad about leaving PCC and one reason is because their math department is so good. But that is what I know about Amy Cakebread's story. I think she's a force to be reckoned with and I don't think the world has seen the last of what she's going to do.

[End of episode.]