

Episode 39 - Donna's Story

Hi, I'm Donna Hooshmand and I wanted to share part of my story and the things that led to me to where I am today.

I was born in Portland, Oregon but moved to Iran when I was six months old. While I can take you back to my entire childhood, my story begins five years ago on a hot spring day in Camon [sp?], Iran.

I was taking notes for one of my final classes as the female teacher stopped her lecture to advise us that there was no need for women to study and get degrees because at the end of the day we were all going to become mothers and be tasked with cooking and cleaning inside the home.

Hearing this was a shock because it happened at Noted [sp?] A very prestigious high school. Last year I called some of my classmates to check up on them and ask if they remembered that day. Some of them didn't because this isn't something unique. They didn't remember because they're so used to comments like this that they push it aside.

I think it took a few years for me to stop pushing these comments aside and to share my story. I was asked to be a part of this podcast in the spring of 2018 and it took me almost three years to say yes. This experience is one that I think back to from time to time and it

motivates me to work harder in order to break these false limitations and norms.

After graduating from Noted [sp?] I moved back to Portland. I'm a bit hesitant on sharing more stories or experiences because I don't want to seem pessimistic or bitter in any way. But I do believe it's important to talk about some of these experiences as other students might be going through them. They should know that they are not alone.

I've had people of authority, such as staff or faculty, dismiss my achievements and questions because of my gender. Most of the time my achievements get pushed aside and they argue that I only got the position because I'm a woman and they need more diversity. I'm more than just a statistic. I'm a combination of this strong work ethic and dedication I put into my work and studies. My achievements are because I earned them, not because of some statistic.

Unfortunately this is a much more frequent occurrence than one might hope. This is one of the main reasons why many women, especially women of color, struggle with Imposter Syndrome. Whether it's for a class, job, major, or even grad school. If you are struggling with this, take a step back, look at all of your struggles and how they have shaped you and made you stronger. Look at the accomplishments you have, even the minor ones. You deserve to be here and you have earned it.

Again, I fear this will be taken out of context and seem bitter so I'd like to highlight that I've also had a lot of professors, faculty, and peers support me. I can't name all of them but they have all pushed me to do better. They are the reason I want to be a professor. To support future computer scientists as much as they have supported me.

I'm currently a senior and pursuing my Bachelor's from the University of Oregon, double majoring in mathematics and computer science, with an emphasis on computer security. My undergrad education also has an emphasis on networks and machine learning due to my research with Professor Resorajoy [sp?] on the longitudinal analysis of major video streaming services in the US.

I am currently finishing my research which has been delayed a bit due to COVID-19 and multiple lockdowns, and will soon start writing an Honors Thesis which I aim to publish before attending graduate school.

Furthermore, I aim to attend graduate school and study artificial intelligence and security. My desire for a career in these two fields has grown significantly over the years. AI has turned into a key technology in today's world. From the creation of self-driving cars to engineering real artificially intelligent and self aware machines, I believe it is extremely important to look at the intersection where AI meets computer security.

By exploring these topics I've become very interested in this field which has become a newly emerging and exciting area. Despite its importance, not much research has been done in this field.

Additionally there are only a handful of professors and researchers that specialize in both AI and Security. I aim to pursue a PhD in AI plus Security, which is a niche I hope to focus on and expand for the future.

The unfortunate truth in today's world is you can tell a girl she's smart, encourage her in her studies, buy her robotics kits, and support her as she gets her degree in STEM fields. But she might walk into a classroom, job interview and have someone, male or female, dismiss her because of her gender. My own experiences and realization of this reality has made me a big advocate for women in STEM roles. Not only for myself but for all the young women who need to hear it.

For this very reason, while in undergrad, at the University of Oregon, I founded the Persian Student Association and the Mazalhani [sp?] Society to build a supportive community for Persian students and for women studying mathematics, respectfully. In addition, I'm also a member of the Women in Computer Science Club.

These communities have helped me stay grounded in my culture as well as my ultimate goal of becoming an instructor and diversifying the fields of Computer Science and Math. These groups have helped me stay well-rounded and socially adept.

Fortunately I grew up in a supportive and well educated family. My parents are both finishing up their PhDs in Construction Management and they have always supported my enthusiasm for academia. To a large extent I credit them for a lot of my achievements and I'm truly thankful for all they have done for me.

I distinctly remember my dad giving me a two hour lecture on binary and bit representation when I was ten years old, after I made the horrible mistake of asking him how a computer works. My dad is still in Iran but his support has not stopped to this day. In fact, he gave me an hour long lecture on fuzzy logic my first year at the University of Oregon through WhatsApp.

There was never a question of whether I'd pursue higher education or not. I always knew I wanted to go to college and become a professor. I aim to help foster an inclusive learning environment for potential computer scientists as has been provided for me. I would like to inspire many young women and men to follow their passions in computer science and mathematics regardless of their gender or experiences.

If you're struggling with math or STEM, or if someone is placing false limitations on you because of your gender, race, or anything similar, know that you are not alone and it does not define you. There are a lot of people and communities that can offer support so feel free to reach out.

Thank you for listening to my story and I'd also like to thank Professor Damien Adams for giving me this opportunity to share my experiences.