

Podcast

Women in Math: Episode 30

Nola's story

My name is Nola. I wanted to share the story of how I once gave up on math. When prompted by the phrase "Math is . . ." I am tempted to say, "everything." I love math so much, I do it for fun. I do it when I'm bored. I do it all the time.

Since I was young, I've had a connection with math. It wasn't so obvious at first, but it started to show through. When I was in first grade, a family friend who was a teacher, decided to teach me multiplication one night. I picked it up very quickly. So she tried long multiplication. I picked that up too.

It was realized that I was really good at recognizing patterns and recreating them. That explained my ability with math. I rarely remember the rules for math, I just recognize the patterns. That's what I remember.

When I was 13 I was tested for math, ranking in the 99th percentile in the nation. When I took any standardized school test, my scores were always extremely high. When I took the SAT, my score was a 720. The only reason it was not an 800 was because I accidentally didn't see the last two questions for one of the sections of math. So I never answered them. But every other question I got correct, even the ones you had to fill in for yourself.

So, with all my amazing happenings with math, it's a wonder what could have led me to quitting and just giving up. When I was a junior in high school, I was taking calculus. During one of the first weeks of school, I got really sick. I missed an entire week of lessons. After that week, we had our first math test.

When I arrived to school the next week to take the math test, I received my very first F on any form of math. And it broke me. Never mind the fact that I was sick the previous week, so it shouldn't matter since I could retake it. But all that mattered to me was the fact that I didn't get an A. And with that I lost all confidence in myself with math.

Every prior good thing that I could do didn't matter anymore. I continued to fail the tests in calculus. I got a tutor, a former math teacher from my high school. Just like in first grade with the family friend who was a teacher, whenever he prompted me with a new form of calculus, I was able to do it in front of him without much help. I was good at it.

I even received my favorite complement of all time from him. He told my mother that while watching me do calculus, or just math, was like watching Good Will Hunting. I had never seen the movie but I knew what that meant. He knew I was capable of doing this math and calculus.

But I still barely managed to pass my calculus class with a C. At this point I decided not to quit yet. I figured I'll take

a break for my senior year, then start up again my first year of college.

Fast-forward to my first year of PCC. It was my second term, the spring of 2017. I decided it was time to tackle calculus once again. Lo and behold, I got sick again in the first weeks of school.

When I returned, we had a math test. I failed, once again. The only reason I failed this time though, was because I did not know how to properly display my math, that's required in college. Because of that, even when all my answers were correct, I failed.

It was at this point, I thought, I can't do this. I officially gave up. I decided I was incapable of doing calculus. This time, instead of getting a C, I got a no-pass. I'm pretty sure I ended up with what would have been a D or an F. I don't know which.

By this point, I'd acquired a fear of calculus. And I never wanted to see it again. Just thinking about it caused me to have major stress. I remember wanting to cry. I decided I wanted to become a teacher. Specifically for elementary school, since the only math class I could do at this point was lower division.

I couldn't pursue my dream of doing a career with math. So why not help other students eventually get to that point? I signed up for the Foundations of Elementary

Math class here at PCC. I heard an inspiring story from my teacher.

They are a great teacher, especially with math. They have great math abilities. But in high school, they barely passed high school with a D in remedial algebra. Then, there they were. Teaching college math.

After hearing their story, I came to realize that the only thing preventing me from doing calculus was me and my self-doubt. I could clearly do calculus, as I was able to do the math for my tutor before. And he said I did an amazing job at it too.

But when it came to taking tests, I would doubt myself so much that I was convincing myself I was answering my questions incorrectly. So I changed the process of what I was doing. That's what would provide me with the incorrect answer, not because I had no clue what I was doing at all, but because I didn't think I could do it.

I convinced myself that I was incapable of doing calculus, when the only thing that I was incapable of was believing in myself. I knew I needed to fix that. I re-took Calculus I in the fall of 2018. My very first test score was a 99.33%. The only reason it was not a 100% was because I forgot to include a (-) sign. It's always those things that get me, I always forget to do something. It's not because I don't know it, it's just that I forget about those small details.

By the end of the semester my final grade in calculus was an A. I remember being so happy about that. I realized it was my self-doubt all along. It was just myself holding me back. I could do calculus.

I still struggle from time to time with not doubting myself. But it's gotten much better. When Damien asked me to be on his podcast, I knew I wanted to share my story of my struggle with self-doubt. There are so many people out there who believe themselves to be incapable of doing many things, or that they aren't smart enough to do these things.

I'm here to tell you that you are capable, you are smart enough. The only thing holding you back is your own self-doubt. It took me years to realize this, even with other people telling me I was capable, that I could do this, that I was amazing. But what they were saying didn't matter to me. It had to come from within.

I know I'm currently being one of those other people, telling you that you're capable of doing this. But I'm coming from the standpoint of someone who has lived with this self-doubt, and I've acknowledged it. I still struggle with it.

But I'm also a person who realized I am not the only one who struggles with this. Other people need to hear that they can do things. You are so capable of doing so many amazing things. It's just the self-doubt that you're hearing that is stopping you.

So, whenever you think you can't do something, just realize you can do it. The only thing that can't do it is your belief. It needs to be from within: a full belief. You are capable of doing amazing things. Do not let anyone, especially yourself, tell you otherwise.

[End of episode]