

[Episode 7 - Alice Schafer Transcript]

Hi, guys. My name is Paris. I'm a student of industrial engineering at Cabrillo College, and today I'm going to talk to you guys a little bit about a woman named Alice Turner, or later she'll be known as Alice Shafer when she gets married.

She was born in 1915 in Virginia, and she was raised by her two aunts after both her mother and father passed away when she was a small child. She did not discover her love of math until high school, and even at that point she was planning on pursuing a career in English. But one day during her math class, her math teacher told her that a girl could never understand a concept as complex as long division. Now, while you wouldn't necessarily think that long division would be the math concept to change her entire path, she was the kind of girl who always rose to a challenge, and would never let someone else tell her what she couldn't do. So not only did she conquer long division, but she decided to go on to study math at the university level.

She decided to apply to the University of Richmond to study mathematics, and she went to her high school principal and requested a letter of recommendation to send over with her application. But unfortunately, he turned her down. He said that math was not a subject for girls and he would be happy to recommend her to the college if she decided to study history instead. So of course, she did not decide to study history. She went ahead and sent her application over without a letter of recommendation, and the university did accept her into the math program.

She also wasn't the only woman to be accepted into the math program, but unfortunately the university system was not set up to allow women to succeed in mathematics. Women were not allowed to enter the library. Male teachers would openly express their desires to fail any woman that dared take their math classes. There were a few women teachers that worked at the college, but they were only allowed to teach the lower level math classes, so once she got into the upper division coursework, she only had mainly unsupportive male teachers. She did persevere despite all of the roadblocks she faced, and she came out of it with a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, a doctorate, and two published papers on the singularities of space curves.

She ended up teaching math in over ten different colleges and universities, and was eventually named the head of mathematics in an all-women's college in Massachusetts. She tried to retire multiple times, but she never could give up her love of teaching. So she ended up teaching until she

was 81 years old, and that's the time that she retired for the final time. Five years later, she became a founding member of the Association for Women in Mathematics, which is an association that's still around today, and the foundation named a math award after her, the Alice T. Shafer Mathematics Prize. So the award still exists and is awarded annually to one undergraduate woman that excels in math. So if you want information about that award, you can check out the website for the Association for Women in Mathematics.

Every aspect of the story of Alice's life demonstrates a strong-willed woman who never let injustice or adversity get in the way of her goals, and even at times let that adversity fuel her to work hard at her goals. And while I don't face nearly any of the hardships that she had to face, her story inspires me to remember that no one can set limits on what I can accomplish in math or in any aspect of life. So I hope you enjoyed learning a little bit about Alice Shafer. Thanks for listening.