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Women in Mathematics

The Space She Never Had

A young girl growing up in a small town in rural Wisconsin had no idea that she would one day be an accomplished engineering professor at an Ivy League college. This is Dr. Vicki May's story. While growing up on her grandparent's farm, Vicki did well in school and loved math and science. Her mother was a teacher and her father was a social worker. When she was finishing high school, she started thinking about what she wanted to do as a career. She knew that she wanted to teach. She knew that she loved math and science. She knew she did not want to go to medical school but was not sure what else she could do with her interests or what was available for women.

Armed with hope, Vicki set off to the University of Minnesota as a music major. Vicki's roommate was an engineering major, which was a field that was new to Vicki. Soon, she found herself helping her roommate with math homework. Engineering was a world that Vicki had never considered pursuing, but soon realized her interest and saw that it could open up many doors and possibilities for her. So, she switched to engineering as her major. Vicki worked hard but felt insecure since she was often one of few women in her classes.

Vicki's courage and perseverance prevailed and she earned a scholarship to attend Stanford for graduate school. There, Vicki worked even harder, even though there were less women than ever. She found herself in giant classes and often felt as if she had no voice. Vicki always felt a thirst to prove herself in a sea of discouraging voices. Even though there were times when she wanted to quit, Vicki pushed through. She had a dream and nothing was stopping her from getting there. From Stanford, Vicki earned her Master's of Science and Ph.D. in Civil/Structural Engineering.

After teaching at California Polytechnic State University, Dr. May started teaching at the Thayer School of Engineering at Dartmouth. She worked her way up to Associate Professor, leading the way in innovative ways to teach and to inspire others, especially girls and women, into engineering. She teaches courses in General Engineering, Introduction to Mechanics and Integrated Design. Her classes are small and often focus more on 'doing' rather than passive learning. For example, each year she has her class design and build treehouses. In her classes, students are encouraged to speak up and ask questions. Dr. May is proud to say that quieter people, especially women, often feel safe to participate more in her classes. She creates the learning environment that she never had. In 2013, Dr. May was awarded the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching New Hampshire Professor of the Year. Dr. May also runs K-12 outreach programs. These programs are STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) based and encourage children to figure things out for themselves as they apply math and science.

Dr. May wants everyone to have the opportunity to go into the engineering field, because everyone deserves that chance. Today, there are more women than ever before going into engineering, but there is still a long way to go. There are many girls around the world deprived of proper education or mentors to guide them. Even in this country, there are still many girls who will not go into a science field, especially engineering, because they may not know what it is, they may not understand it or they may be discouraged or intimidated from trying. Dr. May's dream is to prevent that from happening. She wants every girl to be able to follow whatever

career path that they choose. Dr. May has come a long way through her perseverance, courage, and hardwork and is now inspiring and making it possible for many other girls and women to do the same.