

The World of Mathematics Has Changed

By Haley Song

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Interviewee: Carolyn S. Gordon

How have times changed from the twentieth century to now? Well, for one, math was once considered boys' territory, and academics were rarely taught by women. In the 1960s, Dr. Carolyn Gordon was just a teenager in middle school and was seen as an anomaly. After years of being looked down on, she proved her worth, not just by majoring in math at Purdue University, but also continuing onto graduate school. And now, in 2022, Dr. Gordon is an accomplished, prodigious, emerita in Isospectral geometry at Dartmouth.

Growing up in Charleston, West Virginia, middle and high school was harsh to Dr. Carolyn Gordon, with boys constantly teasing her, the stress of puberty, and middle school in general. Gordon was seen as different because she wasn't like other girls her age. Nowadays, being unique is greatly admired. But, when kids were mean, and school was tough, she looked to her sister. Her sister was seven years older, and she had also respected math. When the puzzle of life got taken apart, Dr. Gordon and her sister would try to put the pieces back together. "That [having a sister] really was helpful to me especially if I felt like an oddity, having a sister who also liked it [math] made it much more okay." Dr. Gordon told me with a tiny laugh, and a big, warm smile.

At Purdue University Dr. Gordon majored in math. She told me that she always saw herself ending up doing math in college, and when that vision came true, she couldn't have been happier. Although at times she still felt like she was out of place, she knew that she had to keep going. "The way I see it, if you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain." -Dolly Parton
Although Dr. Gordon is a retired geometry professor, she told me she hasn't always liked it. In fact, (my eyes grew wide at this, and my jaw might've dropped to the ground) she used to hate it. Remember, she was a professor at Dartmouth, so she knows how strong the word hate is. It wasn't until graduate school that her love for shapes even started to develop. She had been forced to take the class, and albeit she was not happy at first, but by the end of the semester she was in love with the subject.

One year all the national math societies had their annual meetings in St. Louis, where almost like fate, was where Dr. Gordon was going to graduate school. She decided that she was going to go to some meetings, and one day, she stumbled upon one of the meetings for the new Association for Women in Mathematics. "I walked into a room full of women mathematicians, and it was really like an electric shock! I hadn't been aware that I had missed seeing women mathematicians, but when I saw a whole room full of them, I just felt so joyous." Dr. Gordon exclaimed with a grin the size of Texas stuck on her face. As she said this her eyes lit up like how a kid's face would when you gave them a lollipop, balloon, and a whole week at Disney World, which made my smile stretch from ear to ear.

At the end of the interview, I asked her if she had any advice, or anything else to add, and what she said broke my heart. "I know for me, I've always struggled with feeling like an imposter, you know. 'If they really realize how little I know, they're going to find me out. I'm not really good enough.'" Dr. Gordon whispered in a small, insecure voice. Then, she told me that people tend to judge themselves too much, and that is what's holding us back from thriving in the things we love. She then gave me phenomenal advice that I will never forget, "If you like math, don't judge yourself...just do it."

Times can change. Times have changed. Women have a voice in mathematics, just like men do. Last year, the Association for Women in Mathematics celebrated its 50th anniversary. After sixty years, Dr. Gordon can tell you how much this world has grown, and how it will continue to grow. And, always remember, when you have a dream, just do it.

About the Author:

My name is Haley Song, and I am currently a seventh grader at the Richmond Middle School. Right now I am taking Algebra 1, and hopefully I will be able to take the geometry course next year. I enjoy math, but I also enjoy all my other classes as well. Besides math, I like to play viola and I love to run 100 Meter Dashes.