

THE POWER OF MENTORSHIP

— Melanise G.



Thick curly hair, cocoa brown skin, full lips, petite body, and a height under six feet (specifically 5'5). "Engineer" usually is not the first word that comes to people's minds when they hear this description. However, this is me and I am prepared to change that paradigm.

My junior year was the first time I took Honors Physics. Even though I took the class for the challenge (and because it looked great on college applications), I was not sure what to expect from the class. It did not take me long though to become captivated by the subject material. Class assignments and experiments, like using a ball of salty dough as a conductor, demonstrated to me how fundamental physics is in the real world. Physics can explain things on the macroscale, like the solar system, and explain things on the microscale, like electrons. Things I considered "mysteries" were actually basic physics concepts. It was like I knew the secrets to the universe's magic show, and I was excited to learn this information. My physics teacher also took notice of my excitement and became my unofficial mentor. Based on my engagement with the course material, my physics teacher recommended engineering, a profession built upon the concepts of physics, as a possible career choice.

I looked into it, but it did not take me long to realize that I would be a minority in this male-dominated field. African American females were more of a rare breed in engineering. Suddenly I questioned my pursuit in engineering. Could I handle it? Was I smart enough? Since my physics teacher was a Hispanic female, she understood my concern, but still refused to let me cross out engineering as a possible career choice due to insecurities. Instead, she encouraged me to look into events and programs that could stimulate my interests.

Well all that research led to an accepted application for a summer program at one of the best engineering schools in the nation. After my junior year, I spent my summer participating in workshops, reading and discussing topics in science, and contributing to a course project that I ended up presenting in front of important faculty and my summer-program peers. Since the program was also geared towards students from underrepresented backgrounds, I also got the chance to communicate and network with influential people, such as patent lawyers and biomedical engineers, who came from backgrounds similar to mine. These people were living visions of what I could accomplish.

As of right now, I am in my first year of college majoring in mechanical engineering. Although the summer program confirmed my pursuit of engineering, I owe my path to my physics teacher. Under her influence, I developed a love for physics, gained confidence, and explored opportunities I did not think were possible. She rooted for me, encouraged me, and believed in me, before I believed in myself. She taught me the true meaning of #actuallyshecan.

*ActuallySheCan*SM