

Unspoken Bruises

Natalia Rodriguez, UC Santa Cruz, Class of '18

It was by chance my undergraduate friend invited me to the conference. We had crossed paths and since I identify as Latina and female, I decided this would be empowering as a double minority. My expectations were nonexistent. I knew nothing of the organization Synperc. Nor did I have prior knowledge of Berkeley. I stepped off of the BART into a place absolutely foreign to me. All I knew was that I wanted to be a part of the conversation taking place at the conference.

When I entered the room, I immediately recognized I was the youngest. Most of the other attendees looked like graduate students, professors, or professionals. With this in mind, I felt withdrawn and displaced. I decided to skip the introduction. My expectations at this point were low. My second attempt at interacting at the roundtable lunch was smoother than the morning. Many of the attendees were quite impressive individuals. Their responses to my questions were energetic and friendly. This eased my anxious and timid feelings.

In the afternoon, Michael Penn's presentation stood out to me. He emphasized that every journey is unique to each individual even if many face the same barriers. His approach of asking what his audience wanted to hear personalized the experience and opened the floor to a discussion. Even though I didn't speak up, hearing others voice their struggles and being able to relate to them definitely gave me the reassurance that I was in the right place. It was a very intimate experience.

During the poster session and reception, I came across and had interesting conversations with several people. I saw a colleague from UC Santa Cruz's Women in Science and Engineering organization whom I've worked with before on a volunteering project. I approached her and we talked about our experience thus far. An individual from the Berkeley Lab encouraged me to look into labs and I truly appreciated his kind words, as I've doubted my chances of becoming a researcher. In this environment, I felt comfortable because so many blatantly expressed their desire for a more inclusive STEM environment, which strongly resonated with me.

The following day proved to be a testimony of my struggle and my desire to overcome it. After the lightning talk, a short break followed. In light of the refreshing weather, I stepped outside for a short walk. Before I moved an inch, I noticed a man walking quickly deeper into the heart of campus. I noticed he kept glancing at me. Automatically, I felt annoyed but decided to ignore him and began my walk. His paced suddenly slowed and eventually stopped completely. The hostile tension intensified; I picked up my pace to pass him. When I looked back, his gaze was inflamed and fixed on me. Without thinking twice I started running and he trailed behind. I turned the corner towards the entrance of the tower where a group of three ladies conversed. Hiding behind them, the strange man spotted me as he slowly passed by. I was definitely shaken up from this encounter. Instead of skipping the rest of the conference, I returned. I didn't want to leave yet. I was drawn to the brief but strong interactions. However, once inside the building, I cried because I felt alone. Maybe if I had shared this experience, I wouldn't have isolated myself either. Maybe it was too soon to do so. Regardless, the haunting flashbacks reoccurred throughout the day.

For lunch, I stayed inside the lecture hall alone for a while. I thought about what I heard, on-going projects and resources at UC Santa Cruz promoting diversity. When I came out, I grabbed lunch and sat down at a table where two women happily chatted. They welcomed me.

One of them was a graduate student talking about the sexism in the lab. I thought about how cruel and unjust of an environment that must be. Hearing this conversation revealed a dark spot one wouldn't normally have with a prospective graduate student. These raw and unspoken talks are what stuck out to me. Most researchers would not dare mention that I might be silently expected to play the department housewife role. The way sexism would affect me was an issue I had undermined as a young scientist. It was more prominent than I thought.

Eventually, these conversations empowered me to walk over to a security guard; I requested a follow-up on the report I had made earlier that morning. To my dismay, the man was not caught. I stepped outside and broke out in tears. My watery eyes were not the response to fear but rather generations-old frustration. Even if this man was caught, no arrest could have been made. Had I been oblivious of my surroundings, this man could have ceased the opportunity to commit his crime. But he didn't because I didn't let him. I ensured my safety and his innocence, altogether. This incident was a bruise I could feel deep beyond my skin but everyone at the conference served as my backbone, which gave me the strength to not shatter.

Since my journey here was a lonely one from the beginning, I felt I had to finish it that same way. However, listening to the guest speakers definitely reminded me that I am not alone. I am not alone even though I come from a low-income background; I am not alone even though my professors do not look like me; I am not alone even though sexism prevails; and I am not alone because the sense of inclusion every speaker embraced with their audiences is what drew me back when I easily could have just slipped away.