**Women of Color Making Waves in the World of STEM Episode 187**

00:00:00 **Bao-Chi**

As you go through yours, thinking become a STEM major. Yes, there will be a lot of challenges, there will be a lot of struggles, but as you hear those saying out there, "If it not challenging, it not going to change you," it have to be challenging. And then we all know that success and strength are product of struggles. So, it's okay too, we struggle.

00:00:22 **David**

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00:00:29 **Tania**

And I'm Tania Anders, and we are your hosts on this journey through the heart and soul of our institution.

00:00:35 **David**

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00:00:54 **Tania**

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00:01:05 **David**

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00:01:15 **Tania**

Welcome to the Mt. SAC Podcast.

00:01:22 **Tania**

As a female in a STEM field myself, I'm particularly excited to introduce today's episode. In this episode, we are diving into the world of STEM with a special focus on the brilliant women of color making waves in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

00:01:38 **Tania**

Joining us are trailblazers in their field, Dr. Bao-Chi Nguyen, a faculty member in our very own Mt SAC Math Department, Dr. Cathy Samayoa, Biology Professor and Health Research Director at San Francisco University, and Elizabeth Ondula, a PhD student of Computer Sciences at USC.

00:01:59 **Tania**

Get ready for a dynamic episode as we celebrate and acknowledge these incredible women serving as role models for so many and shaping the future of STEM.

00:02:12 **Maura**

So, my name is Maura Palacios Mejia and I am a Professor in the Biology Department. Some of my students are actually here today, so yay my students. Thank you all for being here, we're really grateful to see your faces and I hope that you enjoy some food for thought that we're going to get from our panelists today.

00:02:28 **Maura**

So, the purpose why we started to put this event together is because there's a big gap and there's a need as well for women of color in STEM. There's less than 21% of women in STEM and only about 5% are women of color. So, representation of women of color is really important because we bring a diversity of perspectives with our multi-variable identities that we have.

00:02:54 **Maura**

So, it's kind of critical that we get that point of view and increased in terms of women of color in science and STEM, and that's why we're here. We're here to kind of support you if you are a woman of color in STEM or if you're interested in learning a little bit more. So, we're going to bring up Elizabeth to do our first introduction, which is our future medical doctor. She'll be introducing Dr. Boa-Chi Nguyen, so come on down.

00:03:27 **Elizabeth**

Hi, good afternoon everyone. My name's Elizabeth, I aim to be a future doctor. I'm currently a microbiology major and I've been here a couple years, but I'm almost out. So, I'll be out of here soon enough. I would like to introduce one of the panelists, which is Dr. Bao-Chi Nguyen.

00:03:43 **Elizabeth**

She moved to the U.S. at the age of 17 from Vietnam and she's an alumni of both Pasadena City College and also UCLA. She completed her PhD and applied mathematics from MIT and she also conducted research at UCI. And although she did enjoy doing the research, she felt a calling to do teaching.

00:04:06 **Elizabeth**

And she's a third-generation teacher here at Mt. SAC and she's been here for almost 13 years as a full-time teacher. And in her free time, she likes encouraging interests in the STEM for all girls, but also women of color, and she also enjoys spending time with her daughters.

00:04:26 **Maura**

Thank you Elizabeth for that amazing introduction. So, next up we're going to bring Jasline and she's going to be introducing Elizabeth.

00:04:36 **Jasline**

Hello everyone, I'm Jasline, I'm a Biology Major. And this is my second year here at Mt. SAC and I'm a first-generation college student. And today I had the honor to introduce Elizabeth Ondula, who is a PhD student of Computer Science at the University of Southern California.

00:04:55 **Jasline**

Elizabeth's research focuses on reinforcement learning and its applications in guiding informed decision-making under uncertainties. Elizabeth is passionate about STEM and education mentorship for the next generation. In her free time, Elizabeth enjoys music, spoken word, poetry, fine arts and mural photography and outdoor activities.

00:05:22 **Maura**

Thank you for that great introduction Jasline. Next we're going to bring up Desiree, and Desiree is going to be introducing Dr. Cathy Samoya.

00:05:32 **Desiree**

Hi everyone, my name is Desiree, I am a second-year student here at Mt. SAC and I study marine bio. I do have some research experience. I work with Dr. Smith from Cal Poly Pomona. He has this kelp restoration project that I'm a part of and also some field site sampling along, SoCal's beaches.

00:05:52 **Desiree**

It's a long-term monitoring project called Marine, which I think is really funny. And I also got accepted to the STARS Program earlier in September and I work with Palacios doing Agrivoltaics, it's very fun. And I have the privilege to be introducing Cathy Samayoa and she's a Latina scientist and daughter of Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants.

00:06:14 **Desiree**

Cathy's educational career began at City College in San Francisco. She then earned her bachelor's and her master's in cellular and molecular biology and then later got her PhD in cancer biology from the University of Texas Health in San Antonio.

00:06:30 **Desiree**

Cathy is currently an assistant professor of biology and the Director of Health and Equity Research Lab at San Francisco State University where her lab focuses on Latina breast cancer survivors and checking up on sleep, stress and aging. In her free time, she likes to spend time with her boo, 22 years, and her five-year-old son and listening to Bad Bunny.

00:07:07 **Maura**

Thank you for that amazing introduction Desiree. Alright, so thank you for our panelists for being here. We're going to go ahead and get started then with our first batch of questions. So, we'll start with our first one. So, our first question that we'd like to ask all of you in no particular order, tell us a little bit about yourself and how you became interested in STEM and what is the contribution that you are most proud of?

00:07:31 **Bao-Chi**

Hi everyone. Thank you for being here. I've been teacher for 20 something year, but every time I'm at public speaking I'm get so nervous. I don't know, you can't feel my nervousness but I am.

00:07:42 **Maura**

You're doing good, you're doing great.

00:07:44 **Bao-Chi**

When I'm in my classroom I have no nervousness but in front of student, I always like that. So, first math problem for you of the day, you didn't know you had to do math. So, let's see , I came here when I was 17 and was 1991. How old am I now?

00:07:59 **James**

49.

00:08:02 **Bao-Chi**

James. Okay, so you get a car. Yes. So, I came here at the age of 17. So, you know how difficult it was because I didn't know any English. So, I came here, I remember the day I left Vietnam, my uncle gave me a bottle of Eucalyptus oil and I was like, "Why?" He said, "Because you going to do a lot of sign language so you need that to massage your hand." I'm like, "Okay."

00:08:30 **Bao-Chi**

So, but yes it was difficult and I'm pretty sure that as you go through your educational journey, you feel the same way that I felt. But yeah, I went to community college and I'm a proud graduate from Pasadena City College, and I will assure you that you are in good hands.

00:08:47 **Bao-Chi**

Because we faculty here, all we care about is what, about your success. It's not about our research. When I was at UCLA, that's how I felt and that's why I changed my ... I'm like my true calling is teaching and I love seeing the light bulb moment in my student and that's why I decided to teach at the community college.

00:09:05 **Bao-Chi**

And I just share a bit of my journey with you is that when I finish MIT, I was all up here, I get into postdoc at UCLA and it was exciting everything. But then when I decide I want to follow my true passion, which is teaching and I have a really rough time because come from research world, people think that you're not cut out for teaching.

00:09:26 **Bao-Chi**

So, I apply everywhere, the only place accept me with a tenure track was in Bakersfield College. You probably wondering where the heck is Bakersfield. So, my friend called middle of nowhere, but you know what I told myself I have to get my foot in the door.

00:09:43 **Bao-Chi**

So, I packed my mother up and my two daughter, two and four-years-old and we moved to Bakersfield for a year and that's when opportunity starts to open up. And when I apply again I landed a job here at Mt. SAC and I love every single day that I spend here on this campus. So, thank you.

00:10:07 **Cathy**

That was wonderful. So, you learned a little bit about myself. I am the daughter of Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants. I'm the first in my family to graduate high school and go to college. I think their dream for me was to graduate high school.

00:10:21 **Cathy**

And I remember my dad was a truck driver and my mom worked at a factory making clothes. So, I remember we would go to Costco and my mom would be like, "Look you can be working at a cash register and you have benefits, this is the life."

00:10:38 **Cathy**

So, my goal was like to graduate high school and find a job and have a life , that I think was a dream that they had for me. I didn't take an SAT when I was in high school, that wasn't sort of what I was preparing for, but I somehow found really good mentors that said, "You should think about college." My parents didn't have money for college, so I was trying to figure out how that was going to happen for me.

00:11:05 **Cathy**

So, I applied to some scholarships and I got a scholarship to attend City College of San Francisco and I was thinking maybe I can be a pharmacy tech and then work at Costco as a pharmacy tech. So, I started taking the general requirements for that to like general chemistry, intro bio, things like that.

00:11:24 **Cathy**

And my general chemistry professor pulled me aside and said, "You come up with really creative solutions, you're doing really well in lab, have you ever thought about transferring?" And I was like, "No, I'm just doing my requirements." And I actually got sponsored to do summer research with him.

00:11:43 **Cathy**

So, I was part of a NIH program that supports students who are interested in doing research and they actually brought panelists of people who were doing research in the fields. And I met some amazing role models and mentors and I knew, I was like, "That's the life I want." This is exactly what I wanted to do.

00:12:02 **Cathy**

So, I did some internships in science to figure out, "Is this for me?" And I thought scientists had the coolest lives, like they can ask the questions they wanted, had autonomy in their schedules in so many different ways. And I think something that was important for me was finding folks that had a balanced life, that had a job that they loved, where they felt valued but also can spend time with their families and having a beautiful balanced life.

00:12:29 **Cathy**

So, I went ahead and I did transfer to San Francisco State University where again I met a really strong mentor and from then I just started following my passions. So, my passion has always been biology, but I have a very social justice lens based on my personal experiences and where I grew up, I saw a lot of things that were really unfair, a lot of health disparities.

00:12:55 **Cathy**

And so, I was trying to figure out, "Where do I go with this?" And at the time there was no such career so I just followed what I wanted to do and trusted that I would figure it out once I got there. So, I ended up actually doing a master's in molecular biology looking at abnormal mammography in diverse women. I did a PhD in cancer biology to get a strong foundation of the biology and the pathways that go wrong when people get cancer. So, I work with mouse models, I work with biochemical assays.

00:13:26 **Cathy**

And then for my postdoc I really got to do exactly what I wanted. So, I went out in the field, developed methods to collect samples from diverse breast cancer survivors. And I think for me that has been my greatest accomplishment that in a lot of clinical trials and a lot of studies, there's underrepresentation of minorities and I would say on purpose. So, minorities are usually excluded from these studies.

00:13:51 **Cathy**

And I developed methods that were both in English and Spanish. I went into the community, I met people where they were at, we got one paper published on how we actually did this. So, we identified all of the barriers, identified facilitators and developed this approach to collect their samples.

00:14:09 **Cathy**

And then we brought those samples back into the lab where we have students, I have a student there, Lupe, who is actually taking the salivary samples and looking at molecules in there. So, they look at cortisol, which is a stress hormone, they look at melatonin, which is a sleep-related marker. We also look at telomere length and epigenetic aging as a marker for premature aging.

00:14:31 **Cathy**

And I think for me, having my community represented in science and visible in science has been one of my biggest contributions. And I think I'm super lucky to have been able to find these mentors who were role models, became friends and colleagues that have supported my career.

00:14:50 **Cathy**

So, in 2022, I got a tenure track position as assistant professor at San Francisco State University, which was my dream job. And it was a little bit delusional, like you don't just apply to one or two jobs. I actually applied to two jobs, got both jobs and I think that's when I felt really just blessed that I had the opportunity to do what I always wanted to do and work with amazing students.

00:15:13 **Cathy**

So, a big part of my job is also to support students. It's hard to balance all of it, but I think that for me that's the important thing, that I get to support students in their own dreams the way that my mentors supported me in mine.

00:15:36 **Elizabeth**

Hi everyone. So, I think first of all, just thank you Mt. SAC for this invitation here, the opportunity to at least share my story. I'm just grateful to be here. I was born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya. So, I'm here only for my PhD program, but a lot of my life has been back in Kenya.

00:15:58 **Elizabeth**

My mom was a chef and a hairdresser, my dad was an artist, so at least family-wise, there wasn't like a really STEM foundation just from my immediate family.

00:16:11 **Elizabeth**

I enjoyed school, I think most of my friends would say they didn't really like school. But I'm that person who actually enjoyed school, my favorite subjects were like math, sciences, I liked geography, but I also liked arts and craft and music. And then as I went on through high school, I enjoyed English literature and chemistry. So, that may be generally how I got just interested in STEM.

00:16:37 **Elizabeth**

Our system in Kenya is a bit different where after high school we actually get to choose which course we want to go to campus or what to study. For the longest time I was mostly interested in robotics, but unfortunately, I wasn't the best student, so I never got to the program that was close to robotics. But I ended up choosing a course that was maybe close to robotics, which was electrical engineering, and that's what I ended up pursuing.

00:17:14 **Elizabeth**

In general, two areas that were fascinating for me growing up were around naturalism. So, I wanted to be a naturalist at one point because I'm still curious about nature and just the laws of nature. And then engineering, basically I just love inventing new things or innovations and creating things whether, I would say like I used to play a lot with the radio back at home and the TV and I think I broke it a couple of times.

00:17:45 **Elizabeth**

But I think from TV and media, that's where maybe my interest in robotics and AI came. So, in university when I started off, sometimes going from high school to university, I realized some freedom. So, I wasn't very keen in my first and second year.

00:18:09 **Elizabeth**

But then I had a relationship breakup and sometimes I say that's how I got interested in robotics because one part of my brain wanted to figure out how to make a robot that would really care for me, and that's where my rage kind of went to.

00:18:33 **Elizabeth**

So, many things happened since then, but that was the point when I started just getting serious and going out to hackathons and engaging with just other like-minded people in the community, not just in my university. So, in terms of contribution, I really enjoy my current research that I'm doing today.

00:18:55 **Elizabeth**

Before coming to my PhD, I used to work as a software engineer and while I was working there I was at IBM Research, I got to do patents. So, one interesting one was around trying to measure stress in plants and hopefully use that to predict yield. So, that's one thing that I'm always proud of.

00:19:20 **Elizabeth**

In general, I enjoy just as it was said in our introduction, just mentoring students and really just engaging or collaborating in projects even if they seem too crazy.

00:19:36 **Maura**

Thank you so much to our panelists for sharing a little bit about you. We're going to go ahead and then move on to our next question. So, question is, why do you think the participation of women of color in science is important? And if you're willing to share a little bit about your navigation and pathway to do so, you're welcome to do it

00:19:54 **Bao-Chi**

As an applied mathematician, I hope this is something to motivate those who wanted to pursue degree in mathematics and you're thinking math is all theory, no that's not true. So, I did theory for my undergrad and yes, do I love it? Yes, I love it, but is it useful to me? No.

00:20:10 **Bao-Chi**

So, that was the reason why I switch over to applied math, because applied math, I got to apply all my skillset to do things , to explain things that happened in real life. So, as a mathematician, what I'm most proud of is that I was able to do mathematical modeling to explain things that happen in biology, in physics.

00:20:29 **Bao-Chi**

So, I do tissue grow, I do cancer growth, I do all that stuff and I did everything using my differential equations and I able to turn up a gene budget hitting a parameter and send it to zero. As in a laboratory, if you do that, you might kill the cells. So, that's the most powerful thing about math that you can do a lot more than what people can perform in the laboratory.

00:20:52 **Bao-Chi**

But once I switch over to teaching, my most contribution is what, it's basically to make a difference in my student life by sharing my story, by giving them advice, by lending them ears to tell me what problem you have. When you come to my office hour, it doesn't have to be about math, it can be about things that you encounter that you need an ears , I'm all ears.

00:21:13 **Bao-Chi**

So, I know I have some of my student here. And even if you're not my student, you can always come to my office hour. So, the coolest thing is I'm here, so you can always follow up . So, let me see, why do I think the participation of women of color in science is important?

00:21:30 **Bao-Chi**

And I believe because of our background, of our upbringing of our parents background, it give us an edge that we can think outside the box, we can think on our feet and then we have all the training, all the difficulty in life that we go through when it comes to the contribution to the STEM field, we are going to give a different lens, different perspective, and that overall will improve innovative, we have innovative ideas that maybe people about the color might have.

00:22:00 **Bao-Chi**

But for me, myself, I've been through a lot of difficulty. I've been laughed at, after I finished at UCLA, I said I want to apply for a PhD program and I said I want to apply to MIT and they give me this look, "Yeah, right." And what I l earned is that I want to take whatever the negativity that they give me, turn i t into a positive source of energy and use i t as springboard to s pring forward.

00:22:23 **Bao-Chi**

So, as you go through and become a STEM major , there's a stereotype is that, "Oh, you don't have what it take." So, you just silently take that, internalize it, turn it into the energy, and then do it, make it happen, and then to prove to them that they're wrong.

00:22:40 **Bao-Chi**

So, only you can do it. And I believe that with our background, with our upbringing, our parents and the community that we in, we have that kind of strength that all the people might not have. So, I want you to capitalize on that strength that you have, be proud of your background and use it and make it happen. Prove people that they're wrong.

00:23:09 **Cathy**

I think STEM has been a field that it's been very exclusionary. So, women were not allowed, women of color specifically were not allowed to become doctors. You see a lot of leadership petitions that still have a lack of diversity. So, apparently being a woman of color in STEM is radical. We're resisting against a system that wasn't created for us.

00:23:32 **Cathy**

And specifically in science and in STEM, in the work that I do in clinical trials, in biomedical research participation, we see that 90% of genetic studies only include more dominant cultures or people from European ancestry and things like that.

00:23:52 **Cathy**

And I think that because of that, we then create studies or we create medical devices that are then inherently racist or sexist. So, for example, we have pulse oximeters, which are little devices that usually you put on your finger or your toe when you go to the doctor and they're measuring the oxygen in your blood.

00:24:14 **Cathy**

And this might be important if you have COVID or any sort of respiratory infection, but these were not developed in communities of color or people that have pigment on their skin and these readings are actually inaccurate. And you have to think about, "Why did no one catch that?" Who was at the table developing this device that it never happened.

00:24:36 **Cathy**

We have also even face detection when you were unlocking your phone and it works better in some populations and not in others. Those are computer scientists and engineers sitting at the table that only tested it on certain faces and didn't think that inclusion was necessary.

00:24:53 **Cathy**

So, for me, being a woman of color in STEM is a way that irises, and I think it's important to do the work that those that came before me have done to open up these paths. And is not to say that we're not facing sexism and racism now. We still are, but I think at least we're gaining admission or getting some of the jobs. And I think there's still a lot of work to do, but if we don't do the work, then we are just propagating a system that is inequitable for people.

00:25:31 **Elizabeth**

So, I think in addition to what has been said, "How can you be what you haven't seen?" At least in my generation, I would say our foremothers and our fathers or a lot of people have done a lot of work to pave the path for us today.

00:25:49 **Elizabeth**

So, at least today, I think I can say I know for example, a woman in maybe engineering or a woman in any STEM field. We need to make an effort to also find these women or people in our communities, just the different communities that we are in.

00:26:11 **Elizabeth**

For us who are in these fields, it's also our responsibility to inspire others who are interested also in this field. So, not really giving up, which to some extent can also be a challenge. So, at the end of the day, from my experience, I would say I was maybe lucky to be in an extended family where, for example, my aunt was an engineer, my grandmother had a computer and to some extent even taught me how to do typing.

00:26:44 **Elizabeth**

Not everyone may be in the same state I was in, but I just want to believe our communities around, we have schools or different spaces that at least have sort of facilitated opportunities to bring women of color, women in STEM to a room like this. And we are able to share our experiences and then also learn from each other.

00:27:07 **Elizabeth**

So, another thing which was also brought up is it's important also because we need the diversity of thought. There are certain, I would say for example, in the field of computer science, like today with computer vision, there's a problem with facial recognition systems and maybe it can only recognize people of a certain color and/or gender or things like that, and that's a huge problem to our society.

00:27:37 **Elizabeth**

So, how do we actually develop some of these technologies that are able to serve anyone and not just a particular group of people. In general, we need those diverse thoughts and experiences in order to just innovate and invent solutions that can help us at least improve on our quality of life in this planet and also aid in some sort of discovery processes.

00:28:12 **Maura**

Thank you so much. We're going to move on to our last question. So, our last question is, what advice do you have for women of color to be able to succeed if they're trying to pursue a career in STEM?

00:28:25 **Bao-Chi**

So, actually, beside being on the panelist here, I actually have been to local high school and middle school and talking to girls and kind of encourage them and all that. So, I really hope that as a student right now, I want you to think about, because study shows that when we have a diverse faculty body, it will increase student success in women of colors because they see someone like themselves out there and it motivating and is empowering them to pursue.

00:28:51 **Bao-Chi**

So, any of you thinking about going to teaching is a great salary reward , but also it make a huge difference in many other student life. So, I'm just throwing my pitch out there. So, yes, I'm recruiting.

00:29:06 **Bao-Chi**

So, I have a few things that I want to share with you that from my personal experience. So, the one thing is that just like Cathy shared that you really have to be out there, stand up for yourself and everything. So, it's hard because it's stereotype. They think women don't have what it takes , especially women of color don't have what it takes to be successful in STEM, so you need to learn to step up for yourself.

00:29:27 **Bao-Chi**

So, I remember when I was a PhD student, my very first time writing a scientific paper, I came, I handed it to my advisor and he looked at my paper and said, "Bao-Chi, this is BS." My jaw was just dropping. I'm like, "Why?" And he said, "You cannot write something like this."

00:29:44 **Bao-Chi**

And I broke down, I cry and I'm thinking, " Why he talking to me like that?" And then after that I become upset and I said, "You know what, I try my best. And now we've been in this country for this long." I come back to him the next day and I said, "I hope you put yourself in my shoes. If you were to live in Vietnam for this long, will you be able to write a paper like that?"

00:30:06 **Bao-Chi**

And that was a wake up call for him. So, he told me, he said, "Yes, I never think of it that way." So, sometime people live in certain setting that they don't know what going on outside. So, you just have to give them that kind of wake-up call.

00:30:19 **Bao-Chi**

If you come across a professor or somebody that tell you things that you feel is unfair, you have to speak up for yourself. And because of that, after that, he have changed his perspective about me. He's been very supportive and everything. So, that one thing that I want to share.

00:30:34 **Bao-Chi**

And the second thing is that it's very important, I tell all my students, making connection. Connection is the biggest thing to be successful in pursuing a STEM field. Just like Cathy said and shared that the mentoring that you got.

00:30:50 **Bao-Chi**

So, I said to my student, get to know your classmate. You never know they'll become a CEO of a company in the future. Get to know your professor because they will write you recommendation letters. And just make all that connection.

00:31:03 **Bao-Chi**

And I will say , I was kind of surprised when I applied to MIT, I'm just testing the water. I'm like, "What the heck? I'm just going to apply and get in or not, doesn't cost me anything." And the next thing I know, I was selected one out of the 20 out of a pool of 500 applicants. I was just shocked .

00:31:19 **Bao-Chi**

But then when I got to MIT I find out that three of my recommended, two of them, one went to MIT as an undergrad. The second one, he's a close friend of the chair of the selection committee. I did not know that. I did not know that I have those connection.

00:31:33 **Bao-Chi**

So, therefore, I hope that as you go through your journey here at Mt. SAC or when you're transferring out, get to know your classmate, get to know your professor, you can come, you can talk to them. Not about math, you can talk about anything else.

00:31:47 **Bao-Chi**

And yes, you will run into a professor who not very welcoming, very friendly, but just move on, find another professor. And like I said, my door's open, so you're more than welcome to come. I love talking to students . I always said I have the best job in the world because what, I get to meet different student every day. I get to hear their story and I get to learn from them, from their background, so yes.

00:32:10 **Bao-Chi**

And as you go through your thinking, become a STEM major, yes, there will be a lot of challenges. There will be a lot of struggles. But as you hear those saying out there, "If it not challenging, it not going to change you." It have to be challenging. And then we all know that success and strength are product of struggles, so it's okay too, we struggle.

00:32:32 **Bao-Chi**

And another last quote that I'm going to share with you is my favorite quote I always have on my syllabus, embrace your mistake. It's okay to make mistake, but knowing what to do with your mistake and change it, that's the bigger picture.

00:32:48 **Bao-Chi**

And the quote from Albert Einstein said, "Anyone who had never made mistake, had never tried anything new." So, be out there willing to try anything new, willing to embrace your mistake and you'll go far. Thank you

00:33:10 **Tania**

From the Mt. SAC Podcast team, thank you for tuning in today. And thank you so much Maura Palacios Mejia from Mt . SAC Biology Department for organizing this special event of women of color in STEM. Until next time, this is Tania Anders. Thank you for listening to the Mt . SAC Podcast.