

Speaking at Congress!

...by Danica McKellar

Shortly after I graduated from UCLA with a degree in Math, I was invited to speak at Congress on the importance of Women in Math and Science.

Congress?!

As the big day approached, I was nervous, but excited, too. I never imagined anyone would ask me to speak in front of Congress, let alone about math! To prepare for the talk, I was sent a 100 page report on the current state of women in math and science. I read the entire report (it took me forever but hey, I wanted to be prepared!), and I was fascinated by some of what it said.

The report included a study that stated, “by the 8th grade, girls’ interest in mathematics and confidence in their mathematics abilities has eroded, even though *they perform as well as boys in this subject.*”ⁱ

Throughout the report, the same message came through loud and clear: Even though we girls are just as good at math as boys (and often better!), for some reason our confidence in math starts decreasing during the middle school years. Most of us girls simply do not identify with math, and do not feel confident about it... despite our abilities! In other words, *we’re smarter than we realize.*

This led me to a big question: *Why* aren't more girls pursuing math in this day and age?

As I first thought about this question, I realized I would first have to answer the same question for myself. After all, when I went to college, I never planned to be a math major. It never even entered my mind. And why?

I'll tell you why: I didn't think I'd be able to compete with those "college math people" – after all, math was hard enough; college math must be nearly impossible. And also, I didn't see myself being a scientist or a mathematician. And I couldn't even tell you why. No-one ever told me I couldn't do math or science; I just saw it as inaccessible and foreign.

The strange thing is, at the same time that I harbored all of these self-doubts and feelings of alienation in regards to math, I was graduating high school with really good grades in math. True, I had struggled in middle school to even get a "C" in math, but now I was in the top 3% of my high school, graduating with honors and an A+ in the highest AP Calculus course offered in the US.

I'll be honest with you – I think I was *scared* to try math in college. And I think I was afraid that if I studied math, that meant that I'd have to be some sort of lab-coat wearing anti-social nerd, sitting in the corner with only a pocket protector and a calculator to keep me company. I know it

sounds silly, but I think that's what I assumed it meant to study math in college.

Oddly enough, I ended up taking a math class near the end of my freshman year of college because one of my best friends was taking the class, and I wanted to hang out with him.

I was terrified, and studied harder than I ever had before for the first test. In fact, I even dug out some of my high school books and studied from them - I just didn't want to fail. But guess what? Of all the 168 people in the class, girls and guys, I ended up scoring the *highest* on that test! I never in a million years thought that would happen.

It just goes to show that you never can tell how smart you are, until you study really hard... I'm telling you: All of my math success came because of challenging myself to study. No-one, I mean no-one, is born understanding math.

Oh, and the speech before Congress? Although my knees were shaking the whole time, it (thank goodness) was a success, and proved to be the first step in what has become one of my life's missions: To change the way people—especially girls—think about math.

ⁱ Morella Commission Report : Recommendations to Attract More Women and Minorities into Science, Engineering, and Technology Hearing before the Subcommittee on Technology of the Committee on Science, House of Representatives, One Hundred Sixth Congress, Second Session, July 13, 2000. Section Three, pg.3-4