

Pitch a STEM Tent for **Your Vision and Dreams!**

BY DR. CHRISTINE S. GRANT

I HAVE NEVER BEEN CAMPING in the wild. I did, however, camp in my kitchen — lining up chairs, covered with blankets held in place by rubber bands. This elementary school girl was already working on structures long before her first statistics class at Brown University. My toys, fake people (i.e., dolls and imaginary friends) all convened in my tent to plan for the future. It was a future of world peace, power and all that I had seen on 1960s cartoons and PBS shows. I had dreams and visions and BIG plans for the area I ruled under the tent in the kitchen. In this case, the real future was the two hours later when dinner was ready and the family needed the chairs back.

Now 50 years later, I know I was nurturing my STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering Arts and Math) gene — through my dreams and visions. Lucky for me, my dad (the music teacher) and my mom (the science teacher) nurtured the creativity inside. I thought everyone built greenhouses with old windows, had a darkroom in a closet and did science experiments on the weekend with their mom. Who knew that the weekends spent helping dad design and build a boat were actually engineering? My dream was to *do*, but it took a pre-college engineering program to call it *engineering!*

We should each have a dream that overlaps our STEM career. The dream is like a secret tent we have around our STEM vision. We stock up provisions for the STEM journey — of course not always in plain sight. We may take an online class, pursue an entrepreneurial venture or be mentored by a corporate coach. We dare to dream — a DREAM is “Defying Reality, Executing the Amazing for Me” (and others). Don’t let your dream be thwarted by the changing position and capacity of your tent.

It’s never too late to dream! Emerging STEM professionals — as you complete your degree, you are laying the foundation for your empowered career trajectory. Seasoned STEM professionals, you can utilize your experiential wisdom to adjust the footprint of your STEM tent. At this point in your career, you may have a large tent full of mentees, peers and collaborators that are essential to prepare

for the execution of your vision. In contrast, you could also have a seemingly smaller tent that requires a quiet contemplation of your vision. In your VISION you are “Very Inspired, Seeking Innovation and Owning the New!”

Finally, it’s critical to connect past dreamers and visionaries to present dreamers and visionaries. Not unlike entrepreneur Madam C.J. Walker and chemist Rosalind Franklin, the latest National Medal of Science honorees are physicists. RPI President Shirley Jackson and chemist Professor Geraldine Richmond have pioneered entrepreneurial opportunities in academia, government and industry. Created in 1959, the National Medal of Science is the nation’s highest honor for achievement and leadership in advancing the fields of chemistry, engineering, computing, mathematics and the biological, behavioral/social, and physical sciences.

We just came out of the “artificially constrained” Black History month and are moving into the four short weeks dedicated to recognize Women’s History month. Okay, pause... deep breath... you don’t have to attain “STEM rock star” status to be a dreamer and a visionary in your career trajectory. You can create a poster of accomplished Hispanics in robotics or Native Americans in communications for young people to “hang in their STEM tents.” We all can celebrate a diversity of STEM men and women with VISIONS and DREAMS. After all, studying the STEM tents of others puts our own journeys in perspective. Indeed, it puts diversity in action!

Grant is an academic resilience strategist, consultant and award-winning mentor. She co-edited “Success Strategies from Women in STEM: A Portable Mentor” (Elsevier Press). An associate dean of faculty advancement and a chemical engineering professor in the North Carolina State University College of Engineering, Grant consults and empowers STEM professionals in customized workshops, coaching and keynotes. Contact her at drchristinegrant.com.

