

# Blaec A. Bejarano — Diversity and Inclusion — Jan. 2022

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As a first-generation college student in my immediate family, I have found that the mentors and teachers throughout my academic career have been the driving force behind my success in progressing through various levels of academia. Not to say that my family was not supportive, they were simply unfamiliar with the processes involved as well as the required channels for financial viability via scholarships and other opportunities which could afford myself and others like me, the chance to follow our dreams and maximize our potentials. Growing up in Des Moines Iowa as a person of Hispanic descent, my grandfather faced challenges raising his family as a factory worker, manufacturing tires for Firestone, and my father was never taught Spanish out of fear that he might be outcast from society, and in turn, lose opportunities to progress own his life for the future of his family. My grandparents went as far as to change the pronunciation of our last name to an Americanized version, Be-jar-a-no phonetically, rather than the correctly pronounced, Be-har-an-o. Luckily, much has changed in our 21<sup>st</sup> century society, where my family has now been able to reestablish our original surname, but nevertheless, I have missed out on the opportunity for full fluency in our native Spanish language.

I grew up in Des Moines prior to my parents separating, eventually relocating with my mother at the age of nine to Gulf Breeze Florida. I have been fortunate with the circumstances and ability she enabled me to possess, not only with a better education than either she or my father were provided as young people, but also with a healthier and more active lifestyle/environment that was more conducive to my growing into the person I wanted to be. While ultimately my parents were unable to follow their initial passions and interests, they sacrificed heavily for my sake, allowing me to follow my goals and desires at all costs. I have been extremely privileged in comparison, although not without my own trials and tribulations, and I will never be able to fully thank them for what they have done for me.

In Florida, I often encountered the blatant ugliness of racism prevalent throughout the region and I cannot say it did not affect me, as for a time, I became numb to what I witnessed in my surroundings. Throughout middle and high school, I was confronted with peers who inherited these negative traits, and I ashamedly let them believe I was Italian rather than Mexican out of dread that I might be unfairly scrutinized. However, I later accepted my heritage as something to be embraced in a positive manner rather than something to shy away from, and through my experiences I have become a much more tolerant and empathetic human being. It is now my goal to combat the hideousness of racial superiority, gender discrimination, and economic disparity, and although I was adversely impacted, I proactively chose not to let it harden my heart, but rather to rise to the occasion, disputing these behaviors for the sake of others, and becoming a beacon of encouragement for the education necessary to inevitably lead to an enlightened mentality. I truly believe that one should be judged for the merit of their spirit, not their outward appearance or economic status.

To further engage in this pursuit, I have made it my life's mission to give back to underprivileged communities filled with people, who like my parents, were not entitled to the same benefit of similar educational opportunities. There are millions of children and young adults across the world who have the capacity to achieve great things and make substantial progress towards a better future as we encounter the

unprecedented challenges and adversity of climate change, the depletion of natural resources, the mass extinction of our planet's wildlife, and the destruction of pristine biospheres all across the Earth.

As a graduate teaching assistant, instructor, and tutor at Oregon State University, I have been fortuitous in my freedom to interact with and aid students from all different backgrounds. The majority of courses I taught as a course instructor were strictly for international students, many from Asia and the Middle East, and providing them with the technical assistance and guidance required for success in their respective fields, as well as getting to know them personally, has been a great asset in my realization of this goal. It has been my honor to give back to this community through the university, a department that permitted me to pursue an advanced degree in mathematics, which I must admit, would not have been at all feasible without the financial assistance of tuition remission, afforded to me as a graduate teaching assistant. Furthermore, without the faith and dedication of my advisors/mentors at the University of West Florida, I would never have become perceptive to the fact that this kind of support was accessible and overall obtainable to someone in my situation. I owe it to them to encourage others to follow their own paths, their quests to achieve happiness via occupations aligning with their life objectives and ambitions.

Along with my previously mentioned teaching experience, immediately before receiving acceptance to Oregon State University as a graduate student, I worked with disadvantaged youth at Lighthouse Private Christian Academy, helping 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> graders learn the fundamentals of both mathematics and English that was imperative to their future attainment of knowledge. Simultaneously ingraining in them both a sense of enthusiasm and wonderment for science while imbuing them with the power of articulating their thoughts and feelings through the critical thinking, reading, and writing skills mandatory in any setting of employment or study. Many of my students were qualified for Exceptional Student Education in Florida, i.e., special needs, so they required help at all different levels, and I did my best to accommodate this by any means including devoting extra time and resources to their specific difficulties. They were a real treat to work with as I enjoyed my time with them immensely, and they probably taught me more about myself than I ever taught them.

Even now, as I follow my proclivities for mathematical research in theoretical and applied aspects of physical modeling Earth behaviors via my planned application for a Ph.D. with the Department of Earth and Space Science at the University of Washington, located in Seattle, I still find myself carrying forward the personal goals and aspirations which have molded me into the person I am today. The lessons I have learned from my advisors/teachers, colleagues, and especially students, my focus continues to be both educating and enabling others to follow their hearts and interests, progressing towards their goals as I persist in following my own. In addition, I proceed to encourage academic and technical communities to reflect critically regarding their stance on racial and economic disparity and the role they can actively play in changing the status-quo/norms of our associated work cultures, and this has become quite apparent as a cherished lifelong purpose and resolution of mine.