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Arts in STEM

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Art Autobiography

In my current philosophy about arts and STEM, I believe the two are intertwined and inseparable. To get to this understanding, I had to break down some cultural and family barriers and embrace the idea that appreciating both can be part of my identity.

As a family we LOVE museums. We moved around a lot because my father served in the US Army. Of all the places we lived, I fondly remember spending many years within driving distance of the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. I remember waking up really early on Saturdays, my father driving to and getting a parking space right on the Washington Mall and walking to the museums. After visiting all of them, I knew my home was at the Natural History Museum. I would return with my notebook, and painstakingly copy down the signs and descriptions, and make sketches of all the dinosaurs, diamonds, and (first lady) dresses (at the American History Museum). Looking back, I'm sure I felt like an urban naturalist - observing and taking notes about the dioramas.

Growing up, I certainly felt confident in my artistic abilities. Looking back, I feel as if my parents humored me, but never outwardly encouraged it (for example, no art classes). They never hesitated to buy me paints, yarn, faux flowers, or beads. Most of my art class exposure

came from outside of my family, especially through Girl Scouts. Through my scout network, I learned to sew, make jewelry, tie-dye, and mold ceramics.

However, there was an unspoken expectation that I was going to become a doctor. I am the eldest and first-born American child in my family. Much of those expectations came from my paternal grandmother, who I would spend early summers with, and was a constant presence in my life. Never in my youth did I think I could become an artist, or that my family would approve of me becoming an artist. I don't think they ever said anything like this, however, it was a strong feeling felt by me, my little sister, and little brother.

As the oldest child, I was definitely the one to test all the boundaries. While I was often complimented for my artistic abilities by teachers and friends, I don't think my parents ever thought I was serious about it. Because I was able to test these waters, I paved the way for my sister and brother. While in college, I drove back home to drive my sister to an art portfolio review while she considered if she would attend an arts college. Looking back, I don't know why my sister didn't ask our parents - possibly she internalized the expectations as well. Around the same time, my little brother had his school artwork (pastels I think) selected as a finalist for a country art competition. I think this is when all three of us realized that our parents would accept us as artists if we chose.

In hindsight, I think if my parents encouraged my dabbling in the arts, I might not have pursued a pre-med degree - then changing course to STEM education. I'd like to think that I could have been a web designer and coder - an area where I was self-taught and did make some money - however, not anywhere near the level of current programmers.

Overall, I think of the arts as an appreciation and communication through the senses - visual arts, music, and performance. All are mediums to communicate ideas as well as emotions. In STEM and the sciences, the visual arts are the most natural connection - from naturalist sketches to life-sized and miniature models. It's also found in engineering as it is used blueprints to communicate plans and motions. Music and sounds are also a connection between arts and STEM. The understanding of vibrations, pitch, tone, and loudness. Without the arts, communicating and understanding the world around us would be infinitely more challenging.