Borinqueña Global: A Conversation with Dr. Dianne Chong [1]

Submitted by Marvi Ann Matos [2] on 26 March 2015 - 6:54am

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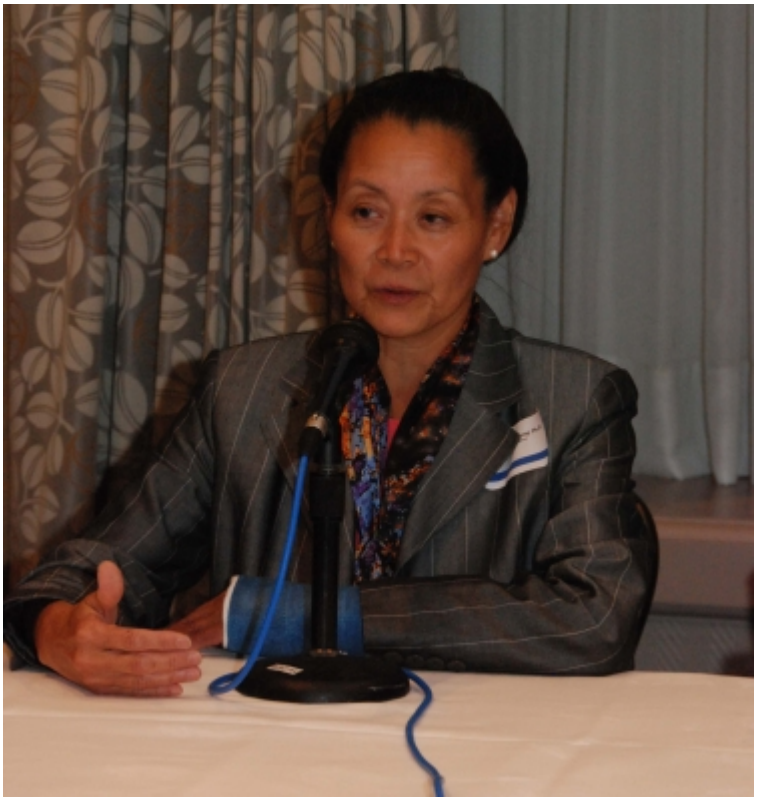

Dr. Dianne Chong

In this especial edition for Borinqueña we interview Dr. Dianne Chong, a mentor of many engineers, managers and executives, an outstanding role model and one of the stars at the Boeing Company. It is impossible to measure the impact of someone like Dr. Chong in a career devoted to the advancement of the aerospace industry because her visionary ideas are not only found in the products, they are also found in the minds, mission and goals of so many of us that

benefit from her wisdom. She has served on the Board of Trustees, is a Fellow of the American Society of Metals (ASM) International and in 2007 was President of the society. In fact she was the first woman to be president at the Society which was established in 1913. She currently serves on the National Academy of Science (NAS) Board on Global Science and Technology and is a Commissioner of the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, Engineering Accreditation Commission (ABET EAC). At Boeing, Dr. Chong is Vice President in Boeing Research and Technology and in her free time she contributes to the community in the development, coordination and execution of outreach programs for students interested in STEM. It is my honor to share with you my conversation with Dr. Dianne Chong.

Dr. Chong, can you tell us about your education background?

“My undergraduate is in Biology and Psychology with a Masters in Physiological Sciences. My first job was in the field of neurobiology, similar to Amy Farrah Fowler role in The Big Bang Theory, dissecting tissues. I quickly realized that in order to be in control of my research I needed to pursue a doctorate degree. The decision on the PhD field was made with mentoring from my brother, who view in me my passion for technical work, math and analytical problems. Eventually, I completed a Masters and PhD in Metallurgical Engineering.

Typically, people see a career path in a linear fashion. However it is important to consider alternative careers and recent studies have shown that women in their early 30’s tend to consider career changes.”

Yes, I was actually one of the statistics, changing my career path from academia to industry also in my early 30’s. Every career bring challenges and opportunities, can you tell us about the three of the greatest external challenges you had to face in your career?

“There was a big stigma for people that changed careers paths, it was a cultural barrier, and most people tended to stay in a linear path. It still takes a lot of courage to go through profound career changes, however the person has the opportunity to learn from every experience. Changing career paths was a challenge, not technically, but culturally.

Another challenge was the underrepresentation of women in Engineering. There were women in my class, but in very low percentages. This persists today. In part due to underrepresentation, women were treated as second class and tended to be underestimated by peers. However, I never doubted my abilities and skills and this helped me in the pursuit of my goals.

A third challenge is around transitions. Every time a person starts a new job, whether it is a large organization or a technical stretch, the challenge is to adjust your skills. The challenge in transitions when managing big organizations is rooted in the feeling of being overwhelmed while trying to do the best for everyone.”

As we move forward in our paths, there are experiences that are highly rewarding. In your career, what have been the most rewarding experiences so far?

“From a big picture the biggest reward comes from helping others, but that comes after years of work. As an independent contributor it was very rewarding to solve problems and apply what I

had learned. In my management path and as groups grew, it was incredibly rewarding to help people by building their networks, providing the right opportunities and finding paths."

There is certainly a lot of juggling with life-work balance, however, you always find time to help others at the company and in the community. Why is outreach important to you?

"I care about the profession and to keep it strong into the future we need diversity. We need to reach out, to communicate with the community and to share what engineers do and how we serve society. Women engineers need to reach out and help young girls visualize themselves in the role. Children need to see role models in order to think: "I can do that". Outreach is important to me, because I can be that role model."

Finally, what would be your advice to young women interested in STEM?

"Find out as much as you can in STEM. If you want to talk to professionals and role models be encouraged to ask, to find mentors and to connect with professionals in the fields of interest. There are many programs available to students. Programs in which professionals will come to talk to you. Take advantage of these programs and you can learn a lot about the field. In college, be a part of professional societies, be a member and be a leader. Societies can become a bridge to the profession."

Learn, be courageous, be a leader, look for information, look for mentors, be strong and believe in yourself, these are the words of a great woman, Dr. Dianne Chong.

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