

Anika
Sidrah

Good evening, everyone. This is my beautiful twin sister, Sidrah.

And this is my favorite twin sister, Anika.

We want to start this speech with a joke.

Three scientists walk into a bar

Bianconi, Ghez, and Rubin.

Bianconi, the scientist studying entropy, orders a whiskey straight. But when the whiskey arrives, everything descends into chaos.

Ghez, who studies black holes, orders a pint of beer. Thereafter, everything sucked.

And when Rubin, who studies Dark Matter, wants to order a martini, nobody notices.

It turns out these three professors had a rough night, not because of what they study, but because most people still imagine them to be men. All three are women who have made significant contributions in the fields of physics, mathematics, and astronomy.

We are both incredibly honored to be here today as recipients of the Zonta STEM scholarship. This scholarship means so much to us and our family. Beyond that, though, it shows how women throughout the ages have banded together and lifted each other up.

We are surrounded here tonight by courageous women who have trailblazed a path for us to walk on. The reason we are standing before you today is because of the badass women in our own lives who made us believe we could do anything we set our minds to.

Our oma, whom we are lucky to have here tonight, grew up in East Germany during the Soviet occupation right after World War 2. She tried escaping across the Baltic with my Opa for a chance at a better life. They were captured and became political prisoners. She wanted to become a doctor, but they blacklisted her for her pursuit of freedom. From our oma, we have learned to always finish the food on our plate, and there is always something worth fighting for.

Our mom immigrated to this country when she was eight. She pulled herself up, clogs and all, with few resources at her disposal other than a big sack o' gumption. She was installing windows and remodeling houses without the education required, and in a time before YouTube. She is the reason why nothing feels impossible. We have her blood running through our veins and her work ethic indelibly handed down to us.

It is the women in our lives who showed us what could be. It is our father and Opa who saw two little girls and only thought of possibility. Our papa spent thousands of hours, years of teaching us math, science, and reading every day. And our Opa fostered our love of math and science through teaching us chemistry and giving us ridiculous math problems involving cups of water and leprechauns.

Our family showed us we could become scientists or doctors or mathematicians as women. But often the world around us did not. Even now, girls are not encouraged to be in STEM; often, we were the only girls in our class who were even remotely interested in becoming a scientist or doctor. And that's not because we girls are somehow inherently less inclined to be in STEM. It's because the structures around us do not adequately support girls interested in science.

I remember growing up, I was called a "try hard" for being good at math, and often, boys would turn off my computer when I was working on online homework and quizzes. I especially remember this one boy who used to erase my work in peer graded tests and write down the wrong answers so I would get a worse score.

And it was boys more often than girls who were called up to solve math and science problems. And these examples are trivial compared to much of the discrimination that girls in STEM face.

Sexism and misogyny are not dead. But it has gotten better because of the work of the women before us. We can now vote and go to college and take out loans for a house, something we gained protection for in the living memory of many here.

But these hard-won improvements are not enough. Although the same doors are technically open to women in this country, the rooms on the other side are often full of men. And this environment is not often very welcoming or supportive of women.

This sexism has a profound impact on outcomes for us girls. Last year, I was in a vector class with 21 students total, and only 3 other women.

This year, we are in the first physics with calculus series with 5 women and 25 students total. For both of these classes, the percentage of women was less than or equal to 20%

And I've heard from many of the people in my sorority for Women in technical STEM and engineering that the ratio of women to men in engineering classes is even worse, with 4 girls in a class of 30. The lack of women in important places reminds me of a story from HS.

Sidrah and I did Constitution team in our senior year of HS. One of our topics was how the 3/5th clause was created and how it shaped the next 70 years of US history. How constitution team works is you give a 5 to 6 person speech on the given topic, and then the judges ask you questions.

We had just finished our speech when the judge asked us whether the 3/5th clause and other constitutional provisions to protect slavery were

worth a nation united under one constitution. If we were in the room, making the decision, would we keep the 3/5th clause and have history play out the way that it has, or would we decide to deny the South its abhorrent constitutional provisions, and potentially allow slavery to continue in the South indefinitely?

He asked this to a group of women, of all different races and origins, coming from one of the poorest schools in Portland. We assured the judge that if we were allowed in the room where it happened, such a decision would not even be on the table. If we were allowed in the room where it happened, there would be more equality than we even see today. If we were allowed in the room where it happened, it would mean that women, queer people, and people of color could walk freely and without fear.

But we were not in the room where it happened. And that is a problem we are still facing today. Our rights to bodily autonomy and privacy are getting stripped away by people who do not represent us. We need to get to a place where the people in power look more like our little constitution team and less like bigoted men. That journey starts by supporting women and other marginalized groups.

This is why Zonta is so important. We can't stop working and fighting for equality. In this room today, there are so many women and men who know this and are making an impact in their community, and for us students.

On October 7th, there was a dinner for all of the scholarship winners, where we were able to give a little speech about our stories and what the scholarship means to us. The stories we heard there were wonderful and moving. A mom going to school to become a nurse, a veteran going to community college, and a woman working to become a welder were just a few who stuck in my mind.

We talked about how impactful Zonta's mission is for the world. Now we each want to say what this gift Zonta has given towards our education and our future means to us.

This scholarship goes towards my dream of becoming a neurologist to study the abnormalities in the brain that cause mental illness. Growing up, I always struggled with my turbulent emotions; it always felt like I was always out of control, unable to keep up. The systems around me were not able to adequately support me. My school could only give me a room to cry in without counseling or resources. My family was unable to fully support me due to ignorance around mental illness, and as for the medical system, the soonest I could see a psychiatrist was 2 months out from when I wrote on their mental health survey that I wanted to die. As anyone who has experienced depression knows, that is too long. Every day that I get to live is a gift, and I want to do something with the time I have. I want to improve our treatment of mental health. That starts with a better understanding of what causes mental illness, so we can make better treatments for it. I am not passive in my pursuit of my dreams. I am putting in the work every day to get there. I work hard in my classes and try to give back to the community as much as I can. What this scholarship has given to me is not only the incredible gift of being able to continue going to college without crippling financial debt but also encouragement to keep going. It means that people who never saw my face, or even heard my voice, believed in me and my story.

And this is what the scholarship means to Anika

I stand before you today in pants. I just voted a few months ago. And I am currently getting a college education. These are pretty basic rights that took decades of activism to receive. To me, this scholarship and this organization as a whole are a continuation of that fight. I want to become a surgeon. I love working with my hands and want to have a career in science. So far, I have not shadowed a single female surgeon, and I have only seen one in person. Your support shows me that I am not alone. That even if I am the only woman in the room, there are countless women

standing beside me, cheering me on. On a more basic level, this scholarship has allowed me to pursue my education with less worry over finances, and it has given me the time to get my nursing assistant certification. The cost of college is a constant source of anxiety for me, and this scholarship has lessened that ever-present worry.

Zonta means a lot to this community. It supports organizations that help keep women and children safe from abuse and violence, and organizations that help provide families and people with basic needs.

But it can't do this good work without the help of the people in this room, the members who work tirelessly to raise money for these causes, and the supporters who have donated money to this amazing organization.

So, to end this speech, we want to say thank you to every single person in this room.

For being the leaders we need, for supporting the community we are all a part of, for helping women and girls believe they can, and for the gift you have given each of us.

Thank you.