

## Women in Business and Technology

Transcript of Episode 031 - Celebrating Grace Hopper with AnitaB.org CEO Brenda Darden Wilkerson

Guest: Brenda Darden Wilkerson

*Summary:* Sonia returns from the launch event for four new Surface devices. Then, women of Microsoft share their stories from the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing. Colleen speaks with the President and CEO of the AnitaB.org, Brenda Darden Wilkerson. Our hosts wrap with a conversation about the California state law that mandates female board directors.

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**VOICEOVER:** One of the very important things we do at the Celebration is to showcase powerful technical women. We showcase where they're making a difference today, and we also showcase the history of women in tech, uncovering the important impact we as technical women have had on the industry from the very beginning, and therefore on our way of life.

**VOICEOVER:** You are listening to the *Women in Business and Technology Podcast* from Microsoft. In each episode, you will hear from women in amazing technology and business roles, as well as male allies who are helping make the industry more inclusive, and bringing you tips on how to build a successful career in a supportive community. Welcome to *Women in Business and Technology*.

(Music.)

**SONIA DARA:** Welcome to Episode 31 of Women in Business and Technology. I'm Sonia Dara.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** And I'm Colleen O'Brien.

**SONIA DARA:** We're dedicating this episode to the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing. While the event hosts over 20,000 attendees, the conference is one of the hottest tickets in the industry, and admission can be hard to come by.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** So, with our goal in mind of scaling access and mentorship, we wanted to put together a show that featured some firsthand accounts of the conference, to bottle up all of that inspiration and motivation, and to bring you into the GHC family.

**SONIA DARA:** While Colleen and I weren't able to attend GHC this year, our amazing producer, Lexi Swanson, sat down with a few Microsoft employees who had just returned from the trip. You'll hear their firsthand accounts of the conference, including key learnings and advice for attending next year in our Community Connect segment.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** And then, we'll hear a conversation that I had with the President and CEO of the Anita Borg Institute for Women in Technology, Brenda Darden Wilkerson.

The Anita Borg Institute or ABI is the organization that produces the Grace Hopper Celebration annually.

Brenda shared an amazing retrospective on this year's event.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Sonia, I have not seen you in a minute, and I'd love to hear what you've been up to.

**SONIA DARA:** Yeah, I think last we saw each other was at Ignite in Orlando on the show floor, which was awesome, where we recorded our 30th episode live.

I have traveled a little bit since then, spent a few days recuperating in Atlanta where my parents are still. Then I was up in New York where we actually had our big Surface launch day, which was awesome to be part of.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Yeah, congratulations.

**SONIA DARA:** Yeah, so we launched four new products in one day. So, that was really cool getting to be onsite. And then I came back to Seattle for a hot second, and then I was just in New York again for a Create and Cultivate event that Jacqueline Johnson, one of our future podcast guests, was hosting. So, you got to interview her while I was in New York, and then I went back to New York to see her the second week, which was cool.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Awesome. Well, I am glad that we have this podcast to help us touch base every couple of weeks.

**SONIA DARA:** Keep tabs on one another.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Yeah. Well, welcome back to Seattle. Fall is here and we're excited to have you.

**SONIA DARA:** Oh, thanks.

(Music.)

**VOICEOVER:** Community Connect. Get involved and stay connected.

**SONIA DARA:** The Grace Hopper Celebration is the world's largest gathering of women technologists. Named after computer scientist Grace Hopper, the Celebration is produced by the Anita Borg Institute, and presented in partnership with the Association for Computing Machinery.

The conference aims to provide a platform for research promotion, career exploration, skill sharing, and, of course, networking.

This year the conference was held from September 26th through the 28th in Houston, Texas.

Mariia Mykhailova is a Senior Software Engineer in the Quantum Architectures and Computation group. GHC provided her an opportunity to share her work with a broader audience, and hone professional development skills.

**MARIIA MYKHAILOVA:** As the most important thing I learned was that I can actually do public speaking. It was my second public speaking engagement, and the first one of that scale. And it's great that I know now that I can do it.

The favorite part of the experience was like five minutes right after our workshop, which was a great feeling, we did it, kind of we can relax and enjoy the rest of the Celebration.

**SONIA DARA:** Attendees enjoyed hearing from renowned speakers, including founder and CEO of Uncharted Power, Jessica O. Matthews, and attorney and academic Anita Hill.

Nandini Bhattacharya is a Senior Software Engineer on the Edge Engineering team. She explained the motivation that she experienced witnessing CEO and Chief Development Officer of NIO U.S., Padmasree Warrior, onstage.

**NANDINI BHATTACHARYA:** As an Indian woman who came for her master's in the U.S. and like, you know, charted her path as like CEOs of different companies, fairly heavyweights, and then changed tracks to, you know, start her own company, be on boards, I thought she had like a very relatable path, at least background-wise, not definitely like stature-wise, but I really thought like some of the things that she had to say were very inspiring and like very actionable.

**SONIA DARA:** While the keynote speakers were a major draw, the energy in the room was a recurring takeaway for attendees.

Megan Woodruff is a Software Engineer on the Office 365 Groups and Yammer Team. She explained the feeling of sitting in the keynote room surrounded by the 20,000 conference attendees.

**MEGAN WOODRUFF:** It's pretty indescribable. I would say exhilarating would be the main word I would use, just because when you go around your day-to-day, you have these feelings and thoughts and you kind of forget that there's all these other women out there who are going through the same things. And so, to just all be in the same place and sort of on the same page is just exhilarating and inspiring.

I think it comes back to sort of the community aspect of it, and just as a reminder of the sisterhood that exists in tech, which is not always visible in the day-to-day.

For me I know that like coming back from the conference, I was even more determined to do well in my own work, but also keep seeking opportunities to support other women in the company.

**SONIA DARA:** Maradelyn Root is a Program Manager on the Azure Production Infrastructure Engineering team. She echoed Megan's sentiments and explained the importance of this community connection.

**MARADELYN ROOT:** I learned if we are together, if we bind ourselves together, if we strengthen our communities, if we lift one another, because isolated we are not going to be effective in making changes for those that are coming behind us for our future generation. But being there, it was amazing.

My early years in elementary and college have been lonely, to say the least, you know, being in computer science. The organizations that I worked they were just about 10 to 20 percent women. It's a bit lonely.

But being there, it was amazing, just really amazing. You really literally can feel the power for us to be able to do something big, and I believe it.

**SONIA DARA:** Dithi Bhattacharya is a Software Engineer on the Azure Archive Storage team. The conference imparted on her a similar sense of collective hope.

**DITHI BHATTACHARYA (ph):** I can say it's amazing, fantastic, like a city under one roof, 20,000 women technologists under one roof. It like gives immense self-confidence. And it feels like I'm not alone, that's what I can say. It's like awesome experience.

You know, I started believing individually we are powerful, but together we are unstoppable. So, that's one thing I started believing.

**SONIA DARA:** If you're feeling motivated to attend the Grace Hopper Celebration next year, be sure to consult people who have attended previously to get the most out of your trip.

Microsoft Managed Desktop Senior Program Engineer Rekha Nair shared some advice in this vein.

**REKHA NAIR:** I would say go with an open mind, go with a very, very open mind. Don't plan for sessions that you are very used to. Just set aside some time in the conference to go to things that you would typically not go to. And go to sessions that are not in your area, because you will see there are tips and tricks that you can get from there. And so, always go with an open mind. There are so many speakers and so many sessions. That is an experience that I would not trade for anything else.

**SONIA DARA:** For more information about the Grace Hopper Celebration, and to watch recordings of the keynotes from this last year's event, visit [GHC.AnitaB.org](http://GHC.AnitaB.org).

And now, let's get on with the interview.

(Music.)

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** I am thrilled to welcome to the studio the President and CEO of the Anita Borg Institute for Women in Technology, Brenda Darden Wilkerson.

Brenda, welcome to the show.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Thanks so much, Colleen. I really appreciate being here.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Excellent. Will you tell our listeners a little bit more about the Anita Borg Institute and what your role as the leader of that organization entails?

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Certainly. So, we are a women in tech empowerment organization. Our work is to bring about the day when tech truly is reflective of the societies it serves, down to all intersections.

So, we work with women to support their multiple pathways into and throughout the tech ecosystem, anywhere from being a seeker to entry level, midcareer women, executives, and our new focus is on founders and creators.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Wow.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** And we also work with companies and groups to ensure that they have the tools they need to create inclusive cultures that attract and nurture

an intersectionally diverse workforce, which we know is not only good for the workforce, but it's good for each company's bottom line.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Absolutely.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** So, in my role it's my job to make sure that we have a true understanding of the opportunities that we're presented with to make all of those things happen, and to keep them ever present and urgent to our staff, and to also be that place where women know that they can get any of the support that they need to be successful in tech.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** You want the Anita Borg Institute to be synonymous with a trusted mentor, an amazing community, a place that you can go to get the answer.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Yes, absolutely, because that's what we need as women in tech. I started off as a woman in tech. I left because I didn't have that, if I had to put it in one sentence. I didn't have that place, I didn't have that connection. I know the difference that that makes for women, and we want to make sure that we provide that.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** You used a term that I haven't heard before: seekers. Is that people who are curious about getting into the technology industry?

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Those are people who want to get in. They're interested or they might be interested, right, they're seeking. And that's a huge group, right, because you could be a young girl who is in high school or junior high school seeking and thinking about, you know, I never thought about it before but maybe I'm interested; can you help me understand is this for me?

It could be a woman on her fourth, fifth or sixth career, who's done 10, 20 years at something else totally separate, and thinking, wow, that's kind of interesting, I might want to see if I can try my hand at it.

And so, we want to make sure that everyone inclusive, everyone in between, has the information they need to make that decision, because let's face it, we need all kinds of people to approach tech to solve the problems that we have.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Right. And, you know, something that we've explored on this show is how sometimes that information is fairly low lift. It might be someone coming to your classroom and talking about a job that you didn't know before, and that is it, that is what triggers your curiosity, your commitment to knowing more about technology.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Absolutely. It doesn't have to be six classes and a degree to get people who are seeking to figure out whether they're interested or not. It

could be just seeing someone who turns out to be a role model, because that person, you could see yourself in her, you can see yourself in her journey.

It could be someone who started out in music or some other topic totally separate from what we think tech is, who has found her way into tech and is solving problems for people or creating things that she finds interesting, and all of a sudden, you go, wow, that could be me.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** The Anita Borg Institute of course organizes an annual conference, the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing, which happened just a few weeks ago.

I personally know the joy of getting a coveted Grace Hopper ticket, but I would love to hear in your words why is this annual gathering so important.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Well, it is so important, because there is just something so very powerful about being in a room and learning together with over 21,000 technical women.

I mean, and this year it was representative of 90 countries.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Wow.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** I mean, just the physicality alone of being in a space where you experience the truth, the truth is we exist and there are a lot of us, which is not necessarily the narrative. And so, being there is life-changing.

And, you know, one of the very important things we do at the Celebration is to showcase powerful technical women. We showcase where they're making a difference today, and we also showcase the history of women in tech, uncovering the important impact we as technical women have had on the industry from the very beginning, and therefore on our way of life.

You know, many times that's been hidden, it's been erased, it's been unknown. And that's impactful to a woman who might be alone in her environment where she's learning or working in tech. She may think, wow, I'm trying to do something that no one has done before. That's just not true.

And so, to be at this conference amongst all these other technical women where you can make new friends, you can create a new network, it's just life-changing, it's encouraging, and they take it back to their spaces and hopefully, they're better for it.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** That experience of sitting in the large keynote arena surrounded by so many women is unlike anything that I've ever experienced before.

And as someone who has worked in technology for my entire career, I started working at Microsoft right after college, it is in such stark contrast to this experience of going to your job, walking into the bathroom, and the light is triggered on because you are the only woman on that floor.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Yes, I know that feeling. I know that feeling.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** It is so powerful and inspiring and like soul filling to be in that room.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Yes. And we need those experiences, we need to be able to see each other, and again, like I said, know the truth: we exist, we're successful, we work hard, we have an impact. Regardless of the fact that the stereotypic tech person doesn't get presented as a woman, we know she exists.

And so, we have to have this celebration, we have to get together and to be able to see that truth to be able to go back and stand another day, not close that laptop for the last time and say, I'm out, right? So, we're really encouraged that those good type of things that we hear women say when they come away from the conference.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** And unfortunately, I was not able to attend this year's conference, but I did follow along with the hashtag #GHC18 trend on Twitter. And I was incredibly struck by one of the key messages that so many of the people in the audience were tweeting out, something that you had said: "The status quo does not change quietly. Insist your voice is heard."

Can you share more of the messages that you delivered onstage for our audience here?

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** So, what you should know about me is that I'm very much a problem-solver. And I'm a problem-solver about people problems. And I'm also quite eager to solve the problem at hand. And, you know, it's very hard to fix something if you don't really understand what you're up against. And the last thing is, I'm not the most patient tool in the chest.

And so, we talk a lot about needle moving, what it means to move the needle about women in tech, and making intersectional gender and pay equity a reality. And not just in the sweet by and by.

So, my goal at GHC last week was to not only provide inspiration to our attendees but to also give them an accurate picture of what I believe they're up against, and what it will take to improve the tech ecosystem to be inclusive of women and underrepresented groups.



So, let's just face the fact, tech is just about the most impactful force in our world today. Anything that powerful must be harnessed for good. But it's powerful and controlled by those people who have it, who have control over it right now.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Right.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** And so, our work is to change that dynamic.

That's why the table where the problems get solved, where it's decided which problems get solved, they have to be diverse.

But power dynamics in any system don't change easily. People aren't just going to go, okay, it's your turn to have this power now.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Here is all of my power.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Here you go, right? They're not going to do that.

And so, that means we have to be prepared to iterate, we have to be aligned together as women in tech, and we have to be prepared to make our voices heard over and over again.

So, last year, what we did is we helped women to speak out and self-identify their whole authentic selves in tech with our "I am" campaign. We helped women understand that they aren't just technologists but they are uniquely impactful as whatever else they bring as part of their identity. And so, we helped them say, I am a technologist with an agenda, or I am a mother and a data scientist, and really own that.

And so, this year, we wanted to take it to the next level. We wanted to take all of that hopefully power that they gained from understanding who they are, and bring it into the collective of we, because we together have a much bigger voice than each of us alone. We together can set priorities and agendas, and we can move the needle. And we can move it faster together than any one person can alone.

So, that was a lot of what I wanted people to understand their power, not only singly but as the group, if we work together in all of our intersections to make sure everyone's at the table, then we're definitely going to be that bigger force for change.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** I really appreciate this iterative year-over-year approach, because, you know, I strongly feel that your competitive advantage as a person, as a contributor to this world, lives at that intersection of who you are and what you do. And to bring an awareness of your identity and what we as women are up against in technology in general is like a rallying cry. You are building an army of inclusion and soliciting so much more support in this pursuit of greater equity.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Absolutely. And, I mean, that's definitely the goal. And at the end of the day, change is hard and change takes time, but change is so much easier if you have a vision in mind and you know there are other people around you who believe the same things.

And I think what we've seen historically is each individual woman has been in her space believing really similar things alone. And so, what we don't want is alone anymore. We want the power of we.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** So, this year, you had really big names on stage, including Megan Smith, the CEO of Shift7, and the third U.S. Chief Technology Officer, attorney and Professor Anita Hill, and journalist Emily Chang were among some of the people presenting.

As you reflect back on the program, what were some of the most significant key takeaways from these thought leaders?

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** So, yes, great women, exciting to have them on our stage. And I was especially honored to have Professor Anita Hill on our stage for the very first time.

But one of the things that I really, really liked was the hope that she gave us. She really believes that things have changed. You know, women have come to understand their rights. There are laws that are on the books that weren't on the books before, and a lot of it is because of her hard work. It's again that power of what we can be together.

And one thing that she said that I really will take with me is she asked a question about what can leaders of companies do. She believes that CEOs of companies can really set an example by how they run their organizations.

One of the comments that Emily Chang made that I'm so aligned with is the challenge to tech about what's hard. You know, tech, we do so many things that other people feel are hard. We are challenged to step up and innovate. We'll put rockets on Mars, we'll solve really hard problems. But all of a sudden, when it comes to diversity, that's too hard.

And it's just really ridiculous, right? It's what we do. And so, if anyone should be able to solve this problem, we should. So, I totally concur with that. And she had many, many other really great things to say.

And finally, of course, Megan. You know, Megan is a force of nature. And she always brings the power of the collective to bear, and really shines a light on the successful things that women have done that people don't even think of as technology, you know,

for decades, and helps women to really understand that we are not trying to do anything new, this is what we've always done. We've always been powerful in this way in solving problems. We just haven't been recognized.

And so, what Take Back Tech does is say, not only are we going to recognize the powerful things that women do, we're going to take back the opportunity of deciding what problems get solved, we're going to step in and say, you know, why do the boys get to decide what gets worked on or what's important, we're going to step up and we're going to come together, the power of we, and decide, okay, I'm going to find problems that should be solved, that really will impact the human condition, and I'm going to get together with other powerful tech women and we're going to solve those.

And I think that's great. Again, that's the empowerment of I'm not sitting waiting for someone else to recognize me and recognize my hard work, I'm taking decisive steps forward. So, just really powerful things, and I really believe the women were rallied by all of them.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Oh, I love that message of taking on that responsibility for ourselves of charting the future that we want to see.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Absolutely.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** And I actually had the pleasure of hearing from Megan Smith when I attended Grace Hopper in 2015, and she spoke about this concept of a tour of duty. You know, she acknowledged first and foremost that if you have this very important skillset, that there are very lucrative paths in corporations that you can pursue. But she really encouraged the audience to consider how much impact they could have in the public sector, as well. What are your thoughts on this concept of a tour of duty?

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Oh, I totally agree. I totally agree.

And, you know, just as a side note, I think that that's how I would characterize my career after I left mainstream tech. And at this point, I can't see ever going back, because it's been an opportunity to take the skillset of tech and apply it really and truly to solving problems of the human condition. And, I mean, it's the best type of a drug. I totally recommend it.

And I think in another way it's really important because it gives women other choices. You know, so for so long it's been, go into tech, go to work for some high-tech company on the coast. That's the goal, everybody wants to do that.

And that's fine, those are perfectly good opportunities, but I believe when you define freedom, you define it by choices. And so, we need to have choices of other places to go. I think a tour of duty in the public sector is a perfectly good choice. There are places

outside of the coasts where people can live and work, have a career, have an experience of really having a deep impact on the way we live, and learn some things that they can then decide what they want to do next.

So, I am all for it, totally agree with it. I love the opportunities that the Obama administration created for really great thinkers to come in and do their tour of duty. And so, you know, I concur.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Yeah, I will never forget, you know, Megan Smith brought some of her team onstage, and they went down the line and talked about some of the innovation that they had brought to our otherwise bureaucratic governmental systems, even this process of streamlining like the user experience of being an immigrant in this country. Bringing technical skills to that problem just changes the game.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** It really changes the game. And we have a census coming up, and to be able to get in and innovate around what happens with that data, who sees that data, what they can take and do with it to solve other problems, I just think it's an exciting place to be and a critical place for people who really want to have an impact on other folks' lives for good.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** I know that some men attend the Grace Hopper Celebration as a demonstration of their commitment to learning more about male ally-ship. And, you know, personally I'm a little torn about this, because as I mentioned before, a ticket to Grace Hopper is a hot ticket. The conference is selling out within minutes of going live. So, when a man is in attendance, that is one less spot for a woman to get access to that inspiration and to those resources.

Is there an official Anita Borg Institute point of view on this, and is male ally-ship really an important focus for the Grace Hopper Celebration?

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** I really hear what you're saying about the conference and the fact that it does sell out, and no matter how big we've made it over the past few years, the appetite remains huge. And, of course, we're really grateful for that and the opportunity to impact people's lives.

But male ally-ship is very, very important. So, I mean, look, we didn't create the imbalance in tech as women. We shouldn't have to try to fix it all by ourselves. It's going to take everyone that's inside these organizations to create the culture that's conducive to success for that corporation and for everyone that works there. And so, that includes the men.

When I was in my previous career in education, the first time I went to a Grace Hopper conference, I think there were 8,500 people, right? And so, I was blown away, 8,500 people, 8,500, mostly women in the room.

But it was actually a male teacher who had come to me for funding and asking to go to the conference. That's how I even learned about it. And I was like, well, what is it? And he described it, and, I mean, just with awe, awestruck, as he described it.

And I said to him, so, why do you want to go, why are you interested in that? And he understood the importance as a male teacher of really coming to understand the condition and the experiences of the girls that he was going to be teaching.

And so, after that, I made sure that many male teachers attended Grace Hopper. They need the physicality as well of being in the room where they are in the minority. They need to understand what it feels like to not have to stand in line for the bathroom at a big event, and there's a big line of women.

And they always come back going, okay, now I get it. And it's very, very important. And so, those men would come back and create a much more equal and better experience for their female students now that they understood.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Oh, okay, you've convinced me. (Laughter.)

So, prior to joining the Anita Borg Institute, you were the Director of Computer Science and IT Education for Chicago Public Schools, where you founded the original Computer Science for All initiative. Can you tell us a little bit more about that program and be sure to touch upon the fact that you were acknowledged by the Obama White House?

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Yeah, I definitely can share, because that was a program that still is near and dear to my heart. And it really was born out of my showing up in a position where I was to shepherd at that time just IT education and having bosses who really didn't understand the need for that education. In

fact, after a while, I got to the place where I felt like I was brought in to shut it down, because they believed the numbers that said, you know, computer programming, the numbers of programmers were going down. They looked at BLS and that's what it said. And so they thought, well, we don't need that, everything's offshore, you know, the whole list of fallacies.

And having come from a situation where I knew the power of the skillset that I had gained accidentally, by the way, and what it had done for my choices in life, and here I am at the third largest school district in the country, and there were only six high schools that had computer science taught in it. And they, of course, were the very highly sought-after high schools where those who already had privilege attended. And out of 176 high schools, to only have it in six high schools, I thought, okay, that's a travesty.

Couple that with the fact that we needed more people, the gap of unfilled high-skilled tech jobs was growing, and we had 400,000 students who were not getting access to it.

And so, this was really born out of my own background of only accidentally finding computer science in college, because I wasn't exposed to it in high school, coming to a district where there were students who I just believed if they had access, would be able to have it as a choice, and that's again what freedom is all about.

And then, you know, I found some comrades in arms. I found some teachers who believed the same things, I found professors in area colleges, and together we worked to say, no, everyone should have this, everyone should have access to this, it really should be the new core.

And so, in Chicago Public Schools now it is its own core. It's not a math, it's not a science.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Whoo!

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Yeah. It's its own graduation requirement. You have to have at least one course to graduate. And we start as early as pre-K.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Oh, that's amazing.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** It was a lot of hard work. We're still not there yet, but we're really excited, because it's become an example for others across the country. I've worked with many, many districts across the country to implement their own Computer Science for All initiatives.

And as you mentioned, the Obama White House picked up with the leadership of President Obama, who understands the concept of STEM education like no president before him, and was willing to put his money and his backing behind it. And with Megan Smith and others that were onboard, it was really, really an honor to get to work with them as they created a national Computer Science for All initiative. And, of course, you know, the fact that it was the same name, I was just, you know, beside ourselves with excitement.

But I can't wait for the day when more schools have that same core requirement. Right now, I think we're still the only district that has that as a core requirement. But I don't want another student to be in the position I was in, to not have it as a choice. I could have been something else. And I probably would have been successful and happy at it, but I needed to have this as a choice, and every student should.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Oh, you're really speaking to me right now. I've told this story on the podcast several times. But I self-taught HTML growing up. I was developing my own

X pages. But my computer class at Woburn High was about Microsoft Word and Microsoft Paint, both great products, but that was the extent of it.

So, I am so proud to say that I have engaged the TEALS program, and this past September computer science was taught for the first time at my high school.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** I know exactly how you must feel. That is so exciting.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** I am so proud, I'm just so proud and so hopeful for a seeker to be born --

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** That's right.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** -- in taking that class.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** That's right, that's right. And I have so many examples of girls who had never heard of computer science before, who were in those schools where those pioneering principals were willing to go along with us and try it out on their students.

And they've now graduated with computer science degrees, they've started companies, they've done amazing things they probably never would have done because they didn't have access and they did not have the opportunity to even get the choice to learn it.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Right. And, you know, you've mentioned that you stumbled upon computer science as an undergrad at Northwestern University. You were pursuing your pre-med requirements there, but took a couple of computer science classes. What happened in those classes that caused you to majorly pivot your life goals?

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** So, you know, the interesting story is just about all my life as a kid I wanted to be a doctor. I've always wanted to be impactful on other people's lives, to help them, and I thought that that's how I would do it.

My undergraduate degree, there was no pre-med major, so you had to choose one. And, of course, I grew up in a house where you were going to be doctor, lawyer, engineer, right? We were going to do one of those things.

And so, I thought, okay, well, let me major as a biomedical engineer and then I'll get my pre-med requirements and I'll get this degree. And so, we had those programming classes, and at the same time, I sort of became disenchanted with wanting to approach medicine for various reasons.

And so, there I was going, wait, my whole life I wanted to be a doctor. Now what do I want to do? What could I possibly do?

And so, as I started to examine what I knew to do and what I was good at, I had these couple classes that when I was in it, I would stay up all night creating programs, because it was just interesting to me and I could do it and I was relatively good at it, though it was very intimidating because all of the men in my class, and there was one other girls, just two of us, right, all of the men in the class had had computer science classes before. So, I had so far to come to catch up to them. It wasn't all fun and games, but I could do it.

And I saw, even though we were doing dumb stuff like programming rats through mazes, right, that I could take those skills and really create something. So, it struck the creator in me and it helped me figure out what else I could do that might be something I could do for a living or do with my life.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** And you've previously stated that computer science education maximizes the innate potential of every student to become upstanding citizens committed to lifelong learning and able to transform and advance their community, nation, and the world.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Yeah, just that, that's all.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Just a little wave of impact there.

When you were up late programming your assignments, what became clear to you that was unique about computer science that activates all of these other superpowers?

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** So, I was always a math person. I'm very logical. But this was logic that I could see translated into solving problems. Not that math couldn't, but the way math is taught and the way you learn it, it can be very esoteric, out there, I don't know what this is doing but I know how to do it.

But what computer science did was I could see where I could actually create something that could impact people's lives, which is again who Brenda is. And so, that was the connection that I made.

So, going to the next level, by the time I got into education, first at the college level, I got to work with people who were coming to tech because it was exciting, it was new, they, like me, had never been exposed to it earlier in their lives. They might have been 30, 40, 50, but they were willing to step out and try something new.

And that excited me that I could be that bridge between their desire to do something new and exciting and different, and where they were and what they believed of themselves, and even more importantly what other people had told them they couldn't do.



All of that was part of what happened that I brought to the table when I was developing Computer Science for All. I thought, wait, if a 40-year old, who might have chosen tech if she had had that choice earlier, wants it now and is willing to go after it, what if I go after this 5th grader and give her the opportunity so she doesn't have regrets and she doesn't waste her time and she can have an impact on society? Wow.

You know, and you know how to think. You know. I mean, you know better how to create and iterate and understand the possibilities and understand how to look at a problem with a different lens that's right in front of you than if you didn't have that training.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Right. I am curious about this commitment to being a champion for others. You know, your LinkedIn headline reads, "Advocate for access, opportunity, and social justice for underestimated communities in tech in search of public good." Where did that come from, that passion to serve others at this intersection of humanity and tech?

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** I have to point to my parents. Both my parents were high school educators. My dad also was a journalist. And everything that they did had an impact on other people's lives. We were big on social justice in my house. I have two siblings that were 10 and 12 years older than me, so I was always engaged in stuff that was older than me, in the civil rights movement, and it was always about, is this the right thing to do, is this how people should live, what can I do to change that. So, that's the cloth I'm cut from. I just grew up listening to and hearing them make a difference in people's lives.

And so, when I found this thing that I had, I had this unique experience, it was the intersection of not having had that background because I was in a school where they assumed kids didn't need to learn computer science, and then accidentally or providentially happened upon it and it changed my trajectory, and then to be able to understand what it feels like to know that you could create something, you could see a problem and you could create a solution for that, what kind of world could we have if more people could do that? From their own experiences, from out of their own empathy create solutions.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Yeah. Like you have seen the other side -- (laughter) -- and want to bring more people along earlier on.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Yes, absolutely.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** I like that. I'm going to use that. (Laughter.)

So, I recently connected with Claudia Galvin, who worked as a Senior Director of ABI.local in Palo Alto. She is actually doing research at Drexel University on the path to publishing her dissertation about the importance of sharing amazing stories of women in tech and not just those stories of struggle and isolation.

And I know how cathartic it can be to sit in a room and share those stories and see that those experiences are happening to other people, to feel a little bit validated, to know that we are being strong together.

But I love this notion of sharing more stories, of ways that our work in technology has felt powerful and impactful and like ourselves in a way that we've never felt before.

Can you share an anecdote of a time when it was truly awesome for you to be a woman in tech?

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Well, I mean, it's just what we've been talking about. I mean, when I got to the district and knew that in order to make computer science a reality for 400,000 students, I had to be an example for people.

Again, that stereotype doesn't look like me. And so, when you're in a district with administrators who get to make a decision like some administrator thousands of years ago in my school did, who gets what, they make it out of a lot of different images that they've seen. And so, if they've not seen people who look like me as technologists, and there's a whole school of folk who look like me, then they're going to make Microsoft Word and Paint, they're going to make that technology for that group of people.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Right.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** And so, being a woman in tech, I could go in to principals and administrators and decision-makers and say, look at me, here are the things that I've done as a technologist, here are the products that I've created, here are the companies that I've worked for, the roles that I've had, don't you want your little girl who I looked like that once upon a time, don't you want to give her that opportunity?

And so, that was my opportunity to be a role model in a lot of different ways. It was a role model for people who needed to believe that that population of students could benefit from having computer science education.

I also was a role model for female teachers, because, you know, when we started this, there weren't very many computer science teachers, because there wasn't any demand. So, we had to make them, we had to convert them, we had to take them back to school, we had to train them. It was a lot of work. But we knew how important it was to have female teachers over male teachers or just male teachers. And so, again, I got to be a role model for them. It's like, you can do this. I've done it, you can do it, right?

And so, it was really out of my experience, and many times, when I would stand up to speak, I would say, "Hi. My name is Brenda Wilkerson, and I am a computer scientist," and I would wait for that to settle on people, because there the eyes would blink and they just weren't used to it. But because of my experience, I could be that picture of inspiration that, yes, we can get this done.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** It sounds like you had access to so much pride and power in these moments of you can't be what you can't see, and you can see me right now.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Right, you can see me. Yeah, I'm real. I did that stuff. There are others. And, of course bringing other people around.

And that is so important. In companies today, you know, there's this conversation about the pipeline, right, oh, if girls would just be more interested? Well, here's how girls could be more interested: hire their mothers who got those degrees and you didn't hire. Show them that that hard work pays off with a career in tech. That will solve that pipeline issue.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** That is a perfect answer to that equation.

Brenda, what advice do you have for our listeners who are those seekers who are considering careers in technology?

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** I would say first of all, we need you. If you are worried that we don't need you, we do. So, do whatever you need to do to find out if this is right for you. There are so many resources that are available now to help you learn and grow that you can try out, to figure out what part of the tech ecosystem you want to be a part of. There's not one way in, there's no one pathway. We talk about pathways instead of the pipeline.

I'd also say, please find a mentor, find people who will help you navigate from where you are to where you want to go. They exist. When you want something bad enough, the people show up somehow. Make sure that you stick with it and persist.

And don't discount the type of experiences that you get. Many people will learn through volunteer experience or doing things for fun on the side, solving someone's problems. That's real tech experience; don't discount that.

And one of the things we're doing at AnitaB.org is we just announced an AnitaB.org 365 membership initiative we're launching. We will open it in spring. And what we're going to do is have a space where people can find training, they can find mentors, they can find people in their local area, who can give them the type of information that they

need to make decisions about coming into tech. And that's going to be hopefully something that's really going to be resourceful to seekers.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** I think it's going to be such a powerful resource.

You know, thinking back to my middle school, high school days, no one around me was doing what I was doing. And if there was a place on the Internet where I could find those people, I think my life would look a lot different than it does right now.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Mine, too. Mine, too. And, you know, it's so exciting to be in our shoes, right, because we can now make a difference for all those little girls -- and the big girls, too. So, I'm a big one for women who are already in your company -- I've shared this with many of our partners -- that they know your business, they know your culture, they are loyal, they've been with you five, ten years. If they're interested, they can learn the tech. They can, right? So, there's so many ways to solve this problem and to make sure that people who want to be at the table can.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** And I'm sure that all of our listeners are so disappointed that this conversation is coming to an end, and I'm sure that they'd like to learn more about you and continue to follow your journey. Where can they find you on the Internet?

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Well, of course, our website is AnitaB.org, like the name Anita, and B and a dot and an org. So, you can find me there.

I'm also, of course, on Twitter and my Twitter handle is #BrendaDardenW. I'm about to be on Instagram. I was kind of slowly get out there but I'm about to be out there.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Wow, you heard it first, the launch of an Instagram account.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** And, of course, a lot of people reach out to me on LinkedIn, and I'm happy to respond.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Thank you so much for being here today and for all of the work that you're doing.

**BRENDA DARDEN WILKERSON:** Thank you so much for having me. This has been great.

(Music)

**VOICEOVER:** Cutting Edge, our take on stories in the business and technology world.

**SONIA DARA:** In this week's episode, we're discussing an opinion piece authored by Ellen K. Pao that was published on October 4th in *The Washington Post* titled "California is forcing the issue of diversity in corporate America -- finally."

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Ellen K. Pao is a name that you've heard on this show before. She's the author of *Reset: My fight for Inclusion and Lasting Change*, and the co-Founder and CEO of the nonprofit Project Include, as well as a startup investor. She really does do it all.

**SONIA DARA:** She does it all.

Pao addresses California's new law, which requires public corporate board to include women. She states "The rule will finally bring the 26 percent of California's 445 publicly traded companies with all-male boards out of the Dark Ages."

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Yes. While the effect on public corporations in California is imminent, the law is also a signal outside of the state of the California to the 71 percent of startups around the globe with all-male boards.

The message here is, quote, "Change now before it's too late, before you get regulated, and before you must scramble for a more diverse board."

Pao also cites that 74 percent of private tech company boards are all male and 93 percent of board seats more generally are held by men.

**SONIA DARA:** While technology is often heralded as a place of meritocracy, these stats demonstrate that there is still a long way to go toward greater diversity and inclusion, and hopefully this law will get companies rolling toward that mission.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Yeah, there's a huge opportunity here for a trickle-down effect. If your board is more diverse, they can help the company more broadly on their pursuit of greater diversity and inclusion.

I was really struck by this quote in Pao's article: "Think of all the scandals, product failures, harassment and discrimination we might have avoided if public company chief executives and founders had taken diversity and inclusion seriously from their early startup days."

There's a huge opportunity, companies out there. Get the ball rolling, diversify your boards.

If you're interested in reading more of this opinion piece, visit [TheWashingtonPost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com).

(Music.)

**SONIA DARA:** Well, listeners, we hope you enjoyed this Grace Hopper Celebration retrospective. Thank you to all of our fellow Microsoft Women who shared their stories from the conference, and to Lexi for recording those interviews.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** And thank you to Brenda Darden Wilkerson for making the trip out here to Seattle, and for sharing more about your life's work advocating for access, opportunity, and social justice for underrepresented communities in tech. It was such a joy to meet you.

**SONIA DARA:** And thanks to our listeners for tuning into another episode. This is number 31. Please remember to rate, review, and share our show on Apple podcasts or anywhere where you listen to wonderful podcasts.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Yes.

If you have any feedback or questions, you can email us at [wibt@microsoft.com](mailto:wibt@microsoft.com) or tweet us @MicrosoftWomen

**SONIA DARA:** Listeners, did you know that October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month? That is NDEAM for short!

Your mission for this episode, if you choose to accept it, is to dive into the resources provided by the Office of Disability Employment Policy. The office hosts information about NDEAM's history, as well as materials to help you and your organization celebrate the month.

For more information, do a quick internet search for "N-D-E-A-M" and click through to the [dol.gov](http://dol.gov) website.

Let us know how you're observing National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

(Music.)

END