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Living a Life of Significance

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Life to a Computer Science Professor

Coding is everywhere in technology; hundreds or even thousands of lines of code is used in all sorts of devices, programs within devices, websites, etc. With so many different coding languages it can be extremely difficult to figure out how to write even the smallest of lines, but the satisfaction of finding a solution is worth it. That is part of what Dr. Amber Wagner, my CAC 180 professor, loves. She predominantly teaches computer science, but on the side, teaches a class about living a life of significance and winter term dance class. I refused to miss the opportunity to interview someone who is both passionate and great at teaching her students. Her teaching skills can make most, if not all, students feel a spark within themselves through computer science. I know she helped me find that spark and that has made me wonder how she is so invested in what she does.

I approached her after class to ask how she felt about doing this interview and she agreed. I sent a quick email and we set a time and date for a zoom call. She smiled at me through the camera, looking excited to talk about what she loves. I smiled back with my questions ready, paper and pen, eager to write.

To start, I wanted to ask how she came to be in this position. She explained that throughout highschool she danced and as a side job she taught dance. Teaching dance class was the first thing for her to bring out her love for teaching. While she loved dancing, she remarked, “I did a lot with dance, but I knew it wasn’t rationally somewhere I could make a career.” So she chose to move on to something else for a major. She did not know exactly what she wanted, but computer science felt like a safe place because of the fact that it is found in so many fields. I asked what made her stay and fully commit to computer science. When she took her first programming class, something clicked and she knew it was the subject for her. The aspect of solving problems satisfied her. She told me, “That feeling when you solve a program and it works, I love that feeling. It’s gratifying to me.” During her time at college, she worked in a lawyers office and the attorney that she worked under almost convinced her to go to law school. She even got accepted with her computer science degree, but when it came down to it, she actually felt inclined to teach.

Unfortunately, roadblocks line up on the path for teaching computer science. I asked her what kind of problems there were and she told me, “There was no computer science to teach back then… high schools didn’t teach computer science,” or at least there were very few across the country. So she went back to school to get her masters in math education and a job for Alabama School of Fine Arts fell in her lap. The school needed a computer science teacher and to receive this kind of job was a rarity. Later when she left in 2007 she explained that she was probably one of five high school computer science teachers in the state of Alabama.

She endured several roadblocks, so I asked her where she got her support. While going through different schooling, she had a PhD advisor. She started working with him while at the Alabama School of Fine Arts. She explained that he has always been motivated to push computer science into K-12 and they connected on that. She would send students his way and he would help her with her students and their projects in return. He pushed her in many ways, making sure that she was showing her talent when she did not have confidence in herself and telling her to get her PhD. Another important person was her mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law, who passed, also worked in computer science and had wanted to get her PhD. They would talk about it and she pushed Dr. Wagner to feel confident enough to get her PhD too.

With so much time spent as a professor, I asked what kind of things she does when she is not working. Outside of teaching in the classroom, Dr. Wagner is a mom. She explained she is not actually great at making time for herself, but with so much satisfaction with her job and being a mom, she does not mind. She sees so much value in what she does and accepts that having a lot of work means failing sometimes.

Years were spent to get Dr. Wagner to where she is today. This led to me asking if she felt like it had all been worth it and what she believes living a life of significance to be. She answered that to her it is more than just computer science, to her it is “Taking what you have and leaving something better. Leaving it better than you found it”. Her love for teaching is just as great as computer science and she loves that she gets to help students. The classroom feels fulfilling because she can provide service and opportunities to students that she did not feel she had. The fact that she can teach computer science is even more satisfying because she says she gets to watch students grow and learn as she did. She feels joy watching student’s faces light up when they accomplish goals and overcome challenges. I asked what she might change in her formative years. She told me she would have looked for and taken more opportunities like the ones from her PhD advisor. She wishes she would have grown close with her professors to talk about interests and what she can do. However, it makes her happy to be able to do just that with her own students.

Works cited