

Teamwork Makes the Dream Work: How Collaborative Efforts between Groups with Shared Missions Can Accelerate Success

By Danielle J. Tan, PhD, President of AWIS East Bay
AWIS member since 2014

The first Northern California Chapter of AWIS was founded in Palo Alto, and more chapters followed in East Bay, San Francisco, and Sacramento Valley to accommodate the needs of members in growing science and technology regions. The primary goal of the chapters has always been to provide high quality programs to support women and girls in science.

With multiple AWIS chapters in a relatively small, but dense



East Bay • Palo Alto • Sacramento Valley • San Francisco

geographical area, the Northern California chapters formed a joint committee known as AWIS-NCC almost 30 years ago. The purpose of the committee was to coordinate professional development workshops, recognize women who have assisted other women in establishing careers in science, and plan all-chapter social events.

By combining our resources, we were able to take on projects that would have been challenging for individual chapters to sustain. Our collaborative effort also provided continuity through the years, as members and volunteers changed, by transferring institutional knowledge of a chapter's operating procedures and history effectively.

The AWIS-NCC committee includes an NCC representative from each of the four chapters (voting members), the



L-R: Atefeh Taheri and Barbara Smith, photo taken during the fireside chat with Barbara Smith at Chevron in January 2020.



L-R: Barbara Smith and Danielle J. Tan, photo taken during the fireside chat with Barbara Smith at Chevron in January 2020



Atefeh Taheri, Lead Research Scientist at Chevron Oronite

NCC chairperson, and the treasurer. Other chapter board members may be included, as desired. AWIS-NCC meets quarterly to coordinate the planning and execution of our upcoming programs for the year and to debrief and share lessons learned at previously held events.

These meetings provide a great forum to share details on upcoming events in our individual chapters. Information is then shared with all members of our respective chapters, broadening the reach of our advertising to the largest number of members within Northern California. Our members then get the maximum benefit, not just from their chapter, but from AWIS-NCC as a whole.

For example, we collaborate on an annual Winter Workshop. Past topics have included:

- “Unleash Your Leadership Potential” (2018), a workshop led by Laura Gates, founder of Gates Group LLC.
- “Cultural Competence—Organizing Intersectionality in the Workplace” (2019), with a keynote speech by Bahija Jallal, former President of AWIS National
- “Beyond Unconscious Bias” (2020), with a keynote speech by Carin Taylor,

Chief Diversity Officer at Workday, and a workshop led by Marilyn Nagel, Chief Learning Officer at SAMI and CEO of Ready, Aim, Inspire

In February 2021, we will be having a virtual workshop led by Kim Scott, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Radical Candor*, centered on information from her new book (to be released in March 2021), *Just Work: Get Sh*t Done, Fast and Fair* (go to www.ebawis.org/2021-winter-workshop for more information).

Out of One Collaborative Effort Was Born Another

At the AWIS NCC Winter Workshop in 2019, I met Atefeh Taheri, Lead Research Scientist at Chevron Oronite. Shortly after that, Taheri participated in another AWIS East Bay event and immediately offered to help run our registration desk. I was impressed, and we grabbed coffee together, giving Taheri the chance to tell me all about her work as an already active volunteer in Cal ACS (American Chemical Society).



L-R: Danielle J. Tan, Atefeh Taheri, and Barbara Smith.

As racially motivated acts of violence rocked the country, we created a speaker series focused on breaking down the systemic barriers that limit the advancement, equity, and participation of women in STEM.

She identified many shared objectives between our groups: creating a supportive local community for women in STEM, providing a forum for networking, and developing career and personal skills. She made it clear that all these efforts were driven by the core values of diversity, inclusion, and belonging. As we shared our organizations' goals, it seemed natural to us to combine AWIS East Bay's and Cal ACS's efforts.

Taheri has all the characteristics of a great collaborator and volunteer: she has a fearless approach to the task at hand, is resilient, and is a passionate believer in the goals of our groups. She is undeterred by the inevitable rejections that accompany asking famous speakers and leaders to donate their time and expertise for free. Her determination is the powerful motor that drives the success of our collaboration.

*"Alone we can do so little;
together we can do so much."
— Helen Keller*

We have cohosted a variety of events, including a fireside chat with a local leader of a global company; a discussion on career development for women led by a world-famous author; a panel discussion on a specific career path; a variety of webinars on the importance of diversity and inclusion in STEM; a film screening; and social happy hours.

As racially motivated acts of violence rocked the country, we created a speaker series focused on breaking down the systemic barriers that limit the advancement, equity, and participation of women in STEM, including:

- **Leland Jourdan**, Chief Diversity Officer of the Chevron Corporation, who joined us for a discussion on "The Case for Diversity and Inclusion," with introductory remarks by Sandy Robert, AWIS National CEO;
- **Dr. Sherine O. Obare**, Dean of the Joint School of Nanoscience and Nanoengineering at the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University and University of North Carolina at Greensboro, who shared her personal experiences with us and taught us why and how "Successful STEM Women of Color Must Network Differently";
- **Dr. Kirk Nass**, R&D Team Leader at Chevron Oronite and Founding Board Member of Chevron PRIDE, who shared his journey in establishing LGBTQ inclusion at Chevron in the 1990s and how his effort paved the way for Chevron to add sexual orientation to their non-discrimination and non-harassment policies, extending domestic partner benefits to employees and officially establishing employee diversity networks; and
- **Dr. Barbara Belmont**, an analytical chemistry faculty member at CSU Dominguez Hills, who shared her

journey from shy and humble beginnings, her decisions about education and career, and her quest to find and support queer people like herself in STEM. This event, "Queer in STEM: One Person's Journey," was also sponsored by Chevron PRIDE.

To further help our member's career advancement in STEM, we also arranged presentations by the following:

- **Dr. Barbara Smith**, Vice President of Products and Technology at Chevron Oronite, who shared highlights of her journey from graduate school to becoming VP of a global company;
- **Dr. Lois Frankel**, who shared engaging stories, career tips, and key messages from her book *Nice Girls Don't Speak Up or Stand Out*, a talk that was followed by a lively post-presentation discussion; and
- **Dr. Tess Schmidt** (Postdoctoral Fellow, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory), **Anjali Rao** (Vicarious AI, Robotics Engineer), **Dr. Junling Hu** (Question.ai, Founder and CTO), and **Hayley Ritterhern** (Vicarious AI, Integration Engineer Manager), who participated in a panel focused on Women in Artificial Intelligence. Attendees ranged from undergraduate science students considering future career paths to seasoned industry professionals looking to expand their networks and learn about the latest developments in the field.



Lastly, we hosted social activities, such as a happy hour with discussion of the film *Radioactive*, a biographical drama based on the life and work of Marie Curie, a chemist who conducted pioneering research on radioactivity and who was the first woman to win a Nobel Prize, the first person and the only woman to win the Nobel Prize twice, and the only person to win the Nobel Prize in two scientific fields.

"A rising tide lifts all boats"
—John F. Kennedy

The Why and How of Collaboration

The AWIS East Bay collaboration with Cal ACS allows us to cohost events on topics of overlapping interest to both groups, expand networks, and, most importantly, build our community of woman-identifying scientists in East Bay, California.

We are increasing brand awareness of both groups and reaching new audiences, which strengthens our advocacy voice and allows us to expand our programming. Linking with other groups gives us strength in numbers and has been the springboard for working with even more groups in the geographic region, including Chevron PRIDE and the Silicon Valley chapter of ACS. Our collaboration also gives us the opportunity to cross-pollinate the

advertising of our events to many more people, which benefits everyone in our community.

Collaborative efforts like ours also result in an accumulation of ideas, skills, experiences, and opinions. Our joint effort allows for a bigger-picture view of what members in our local STEM community want and need. Our collaboration has provided us the opportunity to expand our resources, tools, programs, and even our fundraising efforts.

For example, one of our recent joint events was a film screening of *Picture a Scientist*. AWIS East Bay, Cal ACS, and Silicon Valley ACS cohosted the event, which was free for all to attend, but with the option of donating to a new scholarship fund, an opportunity that raised over \$5000. Together we'll celebrate awarding this new scholarship fund to women in STEM in our local area. By having multiple organizations working together, we can make bigger and better strides in serving our communities and in improving resources for all.

In addition to providing for our members, this collaboration has also helped us to grow as individuals. By balancing the needs and objectives of both groups, we've exercised open-mindedness. Scheduling around the

speakers' calendar, our chapter, and our collaborators has required top organizational skills. Communication has been key when working toward a common goal, as has long-term thinking and adaptability (something we've all had a big practical lesson in throughout 2020!).

Working together toward a common goal often has the unintended but most welcome side effect of creating long and lasting friendships. One of the best benefits of volunteering for AWIS is the new family we gain in the community we foster together. I look forward to seeing what we can achieve together in 2021! 🌟

To learn more about the chapters and committees mentioned in this article, please visit:

AWIS East Bay: www.ebAWIS.org

AWIS NCC: www.ncc-awis.weebly.com

CalACS: www.calacs.org



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made the switch from academia to industry in 2018 and is a scientist at BioMarin, a world leader in developing

and commercializing innovative biopharmaceuticals for rare diseases driven by genetic causes. Danielle is current President of AWIS East Bay, former Vice President of AWIS Sacramento Valley, and former volunteer and committee chair at AWIS San Diego.

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