

Grandma Got STEM turns 100 posts old!

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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Jacque Wernimont, Sam Kome, all of my librarian allies, and the contributors to Grandma Got STEM.

Grandma Got STEM turns 100 posts old!

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Grandma Got STEM turned 100 posts old on June 7, 2013, noted by a special entry: <http://ggstem.wordpress.com/2013/06/07/post-100-dodi-levy-minnie-levy-and-miriam-levy/>

The Grandma Got STEM blog, found at <http://ggstem.wordpress.com>, was created in March 2013 by Rachel Levy, associate professor in the Mathematics Department at Harvey Mudd College. Although not all the women included in the project blog are technically grandmothers, each post features a “STEM-ma,” and shares some aspect of her work life. The collection of personal narratives, remembrances, and stories serves as an existence proof of the long history of women’s contributions to fields in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. (STEM).

Why do we need such a proof?

You may have heard the phrase “That’s so easy, even my grandmother could understand it.” Or perhaps you have heard a professor ask “How would you explain that to your grandmother?” Unfortunately these phrases can be heard in lecture halls and seen in commercials for technology as well as encountered colloquially. And while people probably don’t mean any harm when they refer to grandmothers this way, the attitude that age + gender + maternity inherently implies a lack of understanding or ability has the potential to do harm. Consider, for example, how these attitudes might affect senior women on the job market in a hot technology field. How do these attitudes affect women considering a significant change in career direction? The median age at many startup companies is quite young, but we are living longer, and will likely be working longer. Is some particular age too old to reinvent our work life? Is there a particular age when we should all stop doing mathematics?

The blog presents examples of people in many fields who have contributed throughout their lives and are still active. Grandma Got STEM celebrates the fact that with age comes experience and in many cases, wisdom.

Sparking new conversations

Soon after the blog was created, a popular website called Boing Boing featured the Grandma Got STEM project using the headline “Grandmothers who are Brilliant in Technology.”¹ In the article blogger Cory Doctorow made the provocative statement, “*I don’t know why geeks have such contempt for their grandmothers.*” His post caught a lot of attention and sparked a thread of interesting discussion in the comments.

To give you a sense of the impact of this online coverage, the site averages about 150 pageviews each day, but after Cory’s post the site received 10,000 page views on that single day! The Boing Boing article was followed by coverage in [Slate.com](#) (France and US), Australian radio (ABC), an Israeli newspaper (the Calcalist) and word has continued to spread via blogs, tweets and Facebook posts. (For more details on press coverage of the project, see <http://ggstem.wordpress.com/press/>, updated regularly.)

In response to the Doctorow comment about geeks, Alex Lion commented:

“At first I too was pretty offended by the “contempt” troll bait. Then I realized that within the last week I referred to a non-expert part of my own (million-plus) user base as “grandmas” and the sys-admin and I had a good chuckle.

“So while I am offended at the generalization, I also realize that I need to check my lazy use of sexist, ageist language. Especially in a professional context.”

Kendra Billings commented:

*“That website is fantastic! As a young, female Math and Computer Science student, I’m beginning to see the kinds of discrimination against women in STEM fields who don’t live completely within the male stereotype. Maternity, especially, is seen as a failing of your nerd cred, which I find utterly ridiculous. Just because I want to someday activate my own incredibly efficient Von Neumann machine capabilities, doesn’t mean I kick any less a** in the STEM world. I proudly salute the incredible ladies who came way before me, blazing the train to not only gender parity, but reevaluation of stereotypes and gender. Thanks, Cory!”*

¹<http://boingboing.net/2013/03/23/grandmothers-who-are-brilliant.html>, accessed July 31, 2013.

A physics professor submitted a post to the blog and then commented:

“I have used the grandmother line to emphasize the importance of really understanding to my students. I must get another one.”

The site is having an impact. When less than complimentary articles and phrases about grandmothers appear on the web or in advertising, Grandma Got STEM readers have begun to contact the authors and cite the blog as a reason to rethink the communication. The very existence of the blog has provided a way for people to answer perhaps well-meaning but thoughtless remarks about senior women.

International readership has been strong, with views from over 128 countries. The project began in March 2013; see Figure 1 for a map of the readership by country as of mid-July 2013.

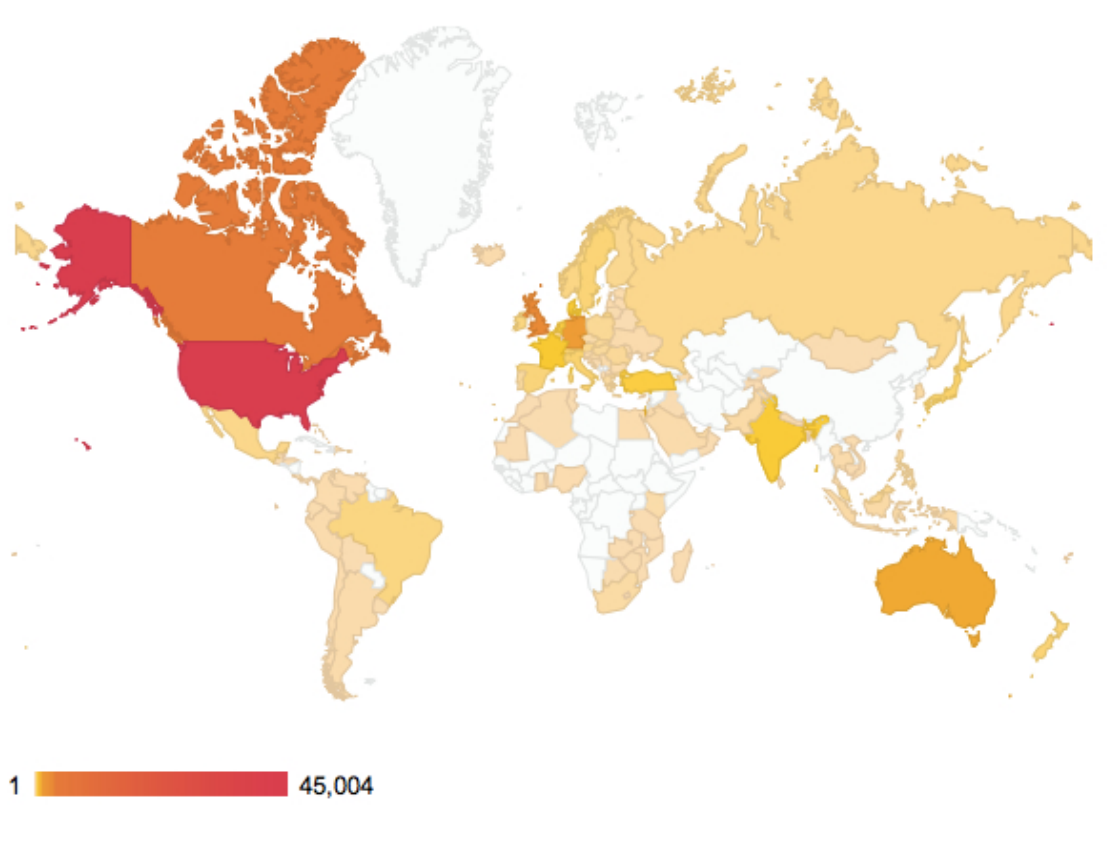


Figure 1: The readership by country for Grandma Got STEM, as of mid July, 2013.

How can you contribute?

The project is ongoing and submissions are welcome. International submissions are especially sought and encouraged. A goal of the project is to feature stories and photographs from people with personal connections to the featured woman and her work. Many posts are written by the women themselves. Other posts are written by family members, including grandchildren, sons, daughters, and partners. A fabulous unexpected consequence of the project has been intergenerational conversations. For example, a father recently emailed that he decided to make a video of his six-year-old daughter interviewing his microbiologist mother about her work to submit to Grandma Got STEM. Another woman wrote a post about her family and after sharing it with relatives, learned she had remembered some stories incorrectly. She then submitted a new and improved version! Sometimes posts have been written by colleagues; people whose work has been influenced by a STEM-ma. Jill Tietjen, who has nominated many women in STEM for national awards, has written about many women she met as they accepted their awards. High school students have conducted interviews and submitted posts as school assignments. People seem hungry to share their stories and remembrances and to honor women who have influenced them.

The process to submit a blog post is simple. The woman does not have to be famous. The posts have no required length. Each post should contain remembrances and stories about the woman's experiences in a field related to science, technology engineering or mathematics. In a separate file from the text, please include at least one photograph relevant to the post. If the featured woman does not write the post, it should include the connection between the writer and the featured person. The posts may include celebrations of women who are no longer living. There is no deadline — the project is ongoing. You can contact Rachel Levy at ggstem@hmc.edu to make a submission or ask questions.

Acknowledgments: Thank you to Jacque Wernimont, Sam Kome, all of my librarian allies, and the contributors to Grandma Got STEM.