



SUSANA BENAVIDEZ

NON-TRADITIONAL PATH TO TECH:
A JOURNEY OF BELONGING



// agenda



1

My story in a
byte

2

Normalizing
Failure

3

Building a
Sense of
Belonging

4

Leveling UP

1

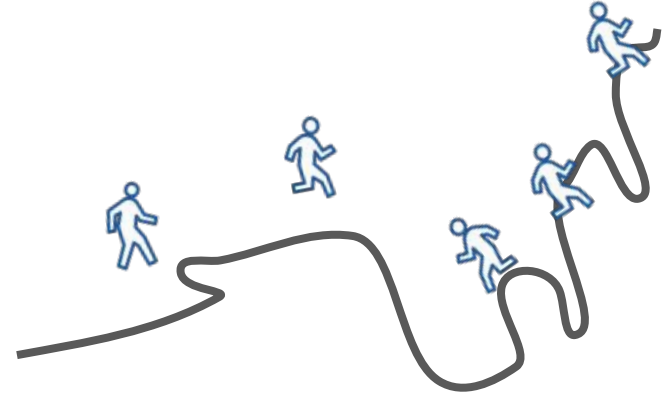
My Story

Many roads lead to the same
destination

// my windy path



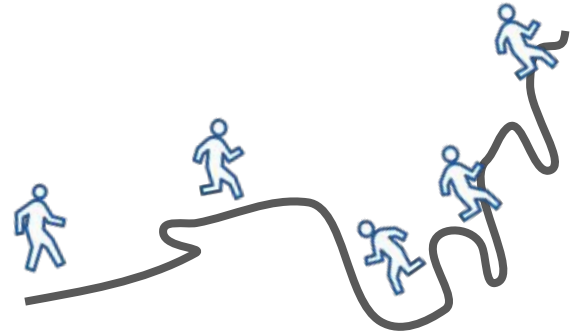
- College dropout
- Married at 18
- Single mom of two 2 yo's at 23
- Accounting clerk @cityOfLA



// my windy path



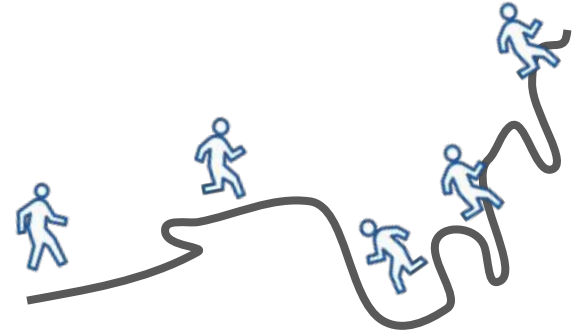
- Freelance writing & community activism at 25
- Business Development @ global top 3 law firm at 29
- Night school @CañadaCollege



// my windy path



- Stanford CS AI Track
- Presented my NLP research at the Latinx In AI workshop at NeurIPS
- Working on startup



Holding Failure at Arms Length:

You can't learn from your "failures" if the thought of them alone overwhelm you

// failure does not define you



- It's not just you
 - *We all stumble and fail constantly - it's just that nobody talks about it*
- Go easy on yourself
- Paralyzing Fear of Failure
 - *What's the worse that can happen?*
- Sweet deceptive avoidance
 - *If I don't try, then I can't fail right?*
 - *This just wasn't meant for me*
 - *It's not really what I want anyway*

// contextualize your failure



- Dropped out of school
 - *To help my family financially*
- Failed marriage
 - *I made the brave and difficult decision to leave my abuser*
- Failing at parenting
 - *I worked three jobs to support my babies when I had to raise them without help*
- Failing at school
 - *I had a 4 month old, was depressed, untreated PTSD, and CS IS HARD! :)*
- Contextualize Your Failure!

Building a Sense of Belonging: Tech Can be Painfully Isolating for WOC

// communities that welcome + empower + inspire



- Look around you - we are your community!
 - *Be a receiver and a giver*
- @writespeakcode
 - *First tech space where I felt welcome*
- @techqueria
 - *Woah! There's a lot of us???*
- Black in AI, Latinx in AI workshops at NeurIPS
- Students: SOLE, SBSE, AISES, WiCS, El Centro, Office Hours, Professors who are allies + advocates

Leveling UP:

Getting comfortable with the
uncomfortable



- What does success look like to you?
 - *My own startup in the social impact space*
- Setting Goals
 - *Have an honest conversation with yourself - what do you want?*
- Break it down
 - *What can you do today? This week? This year?*
- Do the uncomfortable
 - *Hard things don't come easy to us - step into the discomfort*
- Don't close your own door
- Document, celebrate, and reflect on your successes

Thank you!

On the Fast Lane with the Flying Monkeys

<https://susanabenavidez.com/>

@susanabenavidez