

INTERVIEW

VICTORIA CHAVEZ (they/she) is a Joint PhD student in the Computer Science + Learning Sciences Program at Northwestern University. Victoria's research interests stem from asking "How can we make computer science a safe and joyous experience for Black, Disabled, Indigenous, and Latine/x college students?". They are also broadly interested in issues of accessibility, civic tech, equity, and social justice.

& ADVOCACY ACTIVISM

IN THE DISABILITY COMMUNITY



RE: First, I'd love to hear a bit more about you. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself and your background?

VC: For starters, I go by Victoria and use they/she pronouns. I'm currently a PhD student at Northwestern University, in the Joint Computer Science + Learning Sciences program. I'm broadly interested in computer science education, accessibility, civic technology, and social justice. Most of my research interests stem from asking "How can we make Computer Science a safe and joyous experience for Black, Disabled, Latinx, and Indigenous college students?" Before starting my PhD program, I was a CS lecturer and before that, previous lifetimes include me as a high school CS teacher as well as working in industry. I think I've done a lot of the possible CS career routes at this point, spanning education, non-profit, for-profit, and startups.

RE: What initially attracted you to tech?

VC: Some of my origin story into STEM is in the Technolochicas video and in the Wogrammer feature. A lot of my attraction to math in particular came from being an English language learner and finding a refuge in numbers. I first encountered CS in high school, taking it on a whim to avoid taking the music and art classes I had to take (and my mom wanted me to take). I had always had an interest in cars and was curious about the new technologies that were starting to make their way into vehicles at the time. I fell in love with CS from the moment I encountered my first bug while programming in Alice. For the first time in my schooling experience, I felt challenged in a way I didn't know I needed. Rather than being challenged to memorize terms, dates, and formulas, I was being challenged to solve a problem for which there was no 'right' answer (beyond expected behavior).

RE: Are there role models in tech that you particularly identify with? What about them fuels your passion?

VC: There are SO many people I look up to, in tech activism, education, and academia, whose passion and advocacy inspire and energize me. I have so much

love and respect for my Papaya Project (<https://the-papaya-project.github.io>) friends, peers, and colleagues, who remind me often to rest and practice self-love while working together to identify, disrupt, and prevent harm in our field. In tech more broadly, Dr. Ruha Benjamin, Dr. Timnit Gebru, and Dr. Safiya Noble are paving a path toward a more just technological future. And in CS education, Dr. Nicki Washington, Dr. Shani B Daily, and Shana V. White work relentlessly to foster a more inclusive and equitable field.

RE: What are some challenges you've encountered along your journey, and what are some strategies that helped you overcome those roadblocks?

VC: I always struggle with this question because when you're a queer, non-binary, disabled person of color, existence is a challenge in and of itself. We're constantly fighting to justify or even prove our existence, and those fights multiply tenfold in heavily white-, man-, and abled-dominated spaces like tech and academia. And now, the (ongoing!) pandemic has exacerbated the ableism and exclusion many of us face. Things that are already challenging, like grad school for example, become intolerable when I've got to constantly fight for bare minimum accommodations that continue to get rejected and then fend for myself with no institutional support. We spent two years normalizing virtual and hybrid accommodations, and suddenly they are no longer available because they're 'too expensive' or 'logistically challenging.' We're told to 'stay home' while the world passes us by, pretending we don't exist or aren't worthy of a full existence: It's exhausting, dehumanizing, and humiliating.

I'm incredibly grateful for all of the advocacy and activism in the disability community. So much, if not all, of the progress we've made has been thanks to the relentless fighting of our community. We need more allies who will join the fight! For me, being in community with amazing groups and organizations like Covid Safe Campus, The People's CDC, and The Disabled Academic Collective has been a huge source of validation and support. ■