



Susan Bulkeley Butler Center
for Leadership Excellence

The Susan Bulkeley Butler Center
for Leadership Excellence presents:

Untold Stories

Our hope is to inspire, celebrate, and connect
through the power of untold stories of
exceptional Purdue women.

Anonymous
Impactful Purdue Woman

I was finishing my undergraduate degree in mathematics, trying to figure out what was next in life, and taking care of the 100 other things I wanted to do. I was simply struggling under the weight of everything I had created. I was talking about my distress with some of my classmates before the start of my 300-level geometry course. Our faculty instructor was a diminutive person in size only, and someone I had known for several years. She looked at me but said to the entire class “I think if you stop complaining, and start working to resolve each solvable issue, you will find solutions. They may not always be perfect solutions, but things are rarely simple. Control the things you can one piece at a time, and the rest will follow. Now stop wasting your time.” Sadly, she has since passed, but her wise words, and slight rebuke to my self-pity have stayed with me whenever I am feeling overwhelmed, and they have never let me down.

Brandon Sorge
Purdue Storyteller

*Aparajita Jaiswal*

Impactful Purdue Woman

I first met Dr. Jaiswal last spring when I signed up for her class, Storytelling with Data. Dr. Jaiswal was a phenomenal teacher, and I loved the class.

What really stood out to me, however, was when I showed up to class ten minutes early, and I stood out in the hallway waiting to enter class. Dr. Jaiswal was there too, and after exchanging casual pleasantries, Dr. Jaiswal asked me why I was interested in her class, and I told her the truth: I don't really know. All I really knew then was that I loved data and numbers and yet I also loved to write.

And normally, when people hear about my two passions, I typically get a comment about how I have to "pick one" or how "funny" it is that I have interests so vastly different from one another. But, Dr. Jaiswal celebrated the dichotomy that I was. She showed me that it was okay to love both and want to grow both passions.

From there, I started working with Dr. Jaiswal and helping with some of her research projects, and I realized how two things that I love can truly go hand in hand despite exercising different skills. From her, I learned not just more about research and data journalism, a field I realized I want to pursue, but I also learned so much about who I am and how to nurture my skills and fit them together like puzzle pieces.

Vidya Madana
Purdue Storyteller

Marquetta Strait

Impactful Purdue Woman

As an international student, arriving in the U.S. was a mix of excitement and uncertainty. One of my biggest challenges was securing accommodation. Just when I was feeling overwhelmed, a friend introduced me to Dr. Marquetta Strait, who became a beacon of hope. Through her, I was connected to a generous family who hosted me for two weeks. She also provided supplies for me. It was an immense relief during a crucial transition period.

Dr. Strait has been more than a mentor; she has been a guiding light. Her journey has inspired me, reinforcing my commitment to paying it forward. As a senior colleague, she is someone I can always turn to for mentorship, and her willingness to listen with empathy and wisdom has been truly exceptional.

Rosefine Adewuyi

Purdue Storyteller

*Leah Jamieson*

Impactful Purdue Woman

Early in my tenure as Director of Women in Engineering, the College was experiencing a decline in women in the incoming engineering class. My boss at the time was Leah Jamieson, and I expressed to her that I was frustrated, stressed, and felt like maybe I wasn't the right person for the position. I remember that she looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Yes, you are." I didn't realize how much I needed to hear that until she said it. Her confidence in me was what I needed to take a fresh look at the situation and keep working. I was completely and totally honored when years later, the directorship of Women in Engineering was named in her honor (after she stepped back from being Dean of Engineering).

Beth Holloway
Purdue Storyteller



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Carolyn Johnson

Impactful Purdue Woman

I started my professional career at Purdue after earning a PhD and was excited to begin this journey to put my biological knowledge to use. Years later, I mentioned in a meeting with Dr. Carolyn Johnson that I was interviewing for another job on campus and she asked me whether I had carefully researched the position to be able to negotiate a salary that was commensurate with my experience, as she felt I had been low balled for my first position, according to the Exponent salary guide. In my naivete, I did the research and learned of the pay discrepancy between my colleagues hired at the same time for similar positions. Dr. Johnson planted a seed that I now pass on to all recent graduates as they start their professional careers. Over the years, Dr. Johnson continued to mentor me and so many others by challenging me to ensure that I learn as much as possible, dream as broadly as I can, and above all be prepared to do the real work to be as successful as I can and want to be. I am so glad that I thanked her and gave her flowers while she could smell them!

Dr. Carolyn Johnson passed in November 2024.
Her deeply positive and impactful legacy lives on.

Zenephia Evans

Purdue Storyteller

*Jen William*

Impactful Purdue Woman

Jen William (Head of SLC) is a good example of a strong, caring, and fair leader. In my case specifically, she has supported me in ways that let me see my value for the institution, and in ways that show that she knows exactly the kind of support I need. At times, this has been through data that show my productivity at work or through a free pass to try a workout class at a new gym. This individualized approach to motivation and support of her team members as whole people is one of the reasons why she is a great leader.

Lori Czerwionka

Purdue Storyteller



Anonymous
Impactful Purdue Woman

As someone with daughters, I have a passion for women's professional concerns. I've often also found myself struggling to meet professional demands and expectations. After being at Purdue for a while, I left to pursue another possible career opportunity. I came back to Purdue because of a role where I felt I could benefit the cause of lifting other women in their professional careers. In this position and during my many years at Purdue since then, there have been so many women at Purdue who have lifted me as well! I can't begin to note all of them, but there are two women who are true mentors and advocates for me. These two women have been there for me over the span of several years. One is a peer, and the other one is someone at a senior administrative level. Both have provided advice, insight, guidance, and needed nurturing and uplifting.

De Bush
Purdue Storyteller

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Leza R. Dellinger

Impactful Purdue Woman

When I first transferred to the School of Industrial Engineering, I felt incredibly small and out of place. Drowning in anxiety and battling a deep sense of not being enough, I vividly remember my first meeting with Leza in her office. She told me, “You belong here. You’ve worked hard to be here.” Then she added, “I’m going to print a name tag for you. Every time you walk by your cubicle and see your name, you’ll remember that this is your space.” In that moment, I broke down in tears. Leza gave me a warm hug and continued reassuring me.

The next day, I found that Leza had placed a monitor there to make the space feel more like an office. For the first time, I began to believe that I had what it takes to earn this doctorate degree and become a research scientist who makes a meaningful impact in the world.

Over the past three years, Leza has continued to cheer me on, remind me of my strengths, and lift me up with her unwavering support. She is a source of light and encouragement for so many graduate students, listening with compassion, speaking with kindness, and empowering us with the courage to tackle challenges head-on. She has created a culture of safety, empathy, and genuine care within our department, where we are seen, supported, and celebrated. Leza is not only my most impactful Purdue woman, but also the most impactful Purdue woman for countless others in our department.

Nwela Chidubem Enebechi

Purdue Storyteller



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Luanna DeMay

Impactful Purdue Woman

When I began my professional journey at Purdue, I was hired by a woman named Luanna DeMay. I remember her emailing me even before my first day asking for my passport number. I asked her why she needed it, and she said, “For our trip to Argentina!” I was like, “What?!” And she said, “Oh we didn’t tell you? You’re responsible for planning a trip for about 30 graduate students to Argentina in 3 months.” Wow! What a welcome to Purdue that was! Little did I know that this would open up several opportunities for me to travel and lead to some amazing experiences that would shape my professional journey. I am grateful for the door that Luanna opened for me. I am grateful for her time and care in welcoming me to the Purdue community. I am thankful for her investment in my future. I wouldn’t be where I am today without her.

Katricia Sanchez

Purdue Storyteller



Impactful Purdue Woman

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Christa Pazera

Impactful Purdue Woman

Christa worked with me when I was a Resident Assistant over 20 years ago at Meredith Hall. What I found remarkable about Christa is how she remembered me (seeing me for the first time in 20 years) and made me feel included immediately. This included networking me to others on campus. I feel like her continued ability to connect me to Purdue is a wonderful gift that makes Christa a truly remarkable person.

Anonymous

Purdue Storyteller



Aparajita Jaiswal

Impactful Purdue Woman

At the end of any project, we often hear words like, "I hope we will collaborate again in the future." Often, these are just polite gestures. But how often do we follow up? Rarely.

However, in my first year, while I was still figuring out what it meant to work in a team, to be a mentee, and to be a mentor in a cross-cultural setting, something different happened. I was fortunate to meet Aparajita during my summer undergraduate research at Purdue's CILMAR. Interestingly, Aparajita had also just begun her position and was learning how to be a mentor herself. I found myself in a similar position—mentoring undergraduate students while Aparajita mentored me.

We both grew and learned together. Aparajita didn't just exemplify what a supportive mentor looks like; she also actively taught me how to be a mentor by guiding me in collaborating with undergraduates. Even after our project ended, she continued to reach out whenever there were research opportunities aligned with my interests.

Now, in my third year, whenever I meet Aparajita, I feel comfortable sharing my updates, progress, and even my confusion about graduate life. A month ago, she emailed me to catch up. I assumed it was about a new project, but to my surprise, she was simply checking in. That moment made me feel truly supported. Having a caring mentor like Aparajita throughout my graduate journey has been invaluable.

Muna Sapkota
Purdue Storyteller

*Anonymous*

Impactful Purdue Woman

When the pandemic hit, my career came to a sudden halt. I lost my job and had to move back home, feeling lost and uncertain about the future. But then, I remembered advice I had received from a friend at Purdue years earlier at a conference—encouragement to consider a career in academia. Seeking guidance, I reached out to a trusted mentor at Purdue who shared wisdom passed down from another amazing woman leader at Purdue: “If you work for a widget factory, you need to get yourself a widget.” In other words, if you want to work at a university, get a degree.

That simple insight gave me the push I needed to apply to graduate school. With the support and encouragement of those who believed in me, I found my path. Today, I’m in a career I love, forever grateful for the mentors who helped me get here.

Anonymous
Purdue Storyteller



Darcy Allen

Impactful Purdue Woman

I had too much on my plate during my sophomore year. From being a student to being a leader on campus, teaching, and research; it was hard to find a safe place. A place where I could vent if I needed or get good advice; or sometimes just a quiet place to do work with someone there for emotional support. But my advisor held space for me. She would send an encouraging email, letting me know that I was supported. We would schedule meetings just for us to talk through the difficulties of my classes or troubles I was having with life, she was always there when I needed her. My advisor held space for me to grow, to lead, and if I needed, to rest. She was a constant support for me as I juggled a million things. Sometimes what you need is for someone to hold space for you.

Morgan Murff

Purdue Storyteller

*Cara Putman*

Impactful Purdue Woman

Growing up, I believed mistakes meant failure—that I wasn’t good enough. That fear followed me for years until it finally caught up with me. In the most important leadership role I’d ever taken, I made a mistake. A big one. One that made me question everything—my ability, my leadership, even who I was.

Desperate, I turned to Cara, a woman I deeply admire. My voice shook as I asked, “How do I fix this?” She listened—really listened—then said something that changed me: “True leadership isn’t about having all the answers—it’s about having the courage to be vulnerable.”

Vulnerable? That wasn’t what leaders were supposed to be. Leaders were supposed to be unshakable and always in control. But looking at Cara—a woman who led with grace, who commanded respect by being real, not perfect—I saw something different. Strength in honesty. Power in admitting when things go wrong.

Cara didn’t just give me advice; she gave me permission to be human. To let go of the impossible standards I’d set for myself. To understand that mistakes don’t define us—how we grow from them does. Because of her, I’ve learned that leadership isn’t about never failing. It’s about owning our mistakes, learning, and becoming better.

Filippa Rodriguez
Purdue Storyteller



Patrice Buzzanell

Impactful Purdue Woman

When I started working on a PhD, I needed to assemble an advisory committee. I had met Patrice Buzzanell through EPICS, as she was advising a team that had some connection to my staff role. I knew that she was faculty in the School of Communication and had a courtesy appointment in Engineering Education. She was always so encouraging and positive, and I thought she would be a good fit. In preparation for the big ask, I asked her to lunch. When we sat down, before I said anything, she said, “Whatever you are going to ask me, the answer is yes.” I responded that she didn’t even know what it was. And she said it didn’t matter. It was such a wholeheartedly supportive response, and it was just what I needed at a time when I was unsure if working toward a PhD was feasible for me.

Beth Holloway

Purdue Storyteller

Anonymous

Impactful Purdue Woman

I was drowning in stress, struggling to publish papers and meet the demands of my tenure-track position. One day, the weight of it all felt unbearable. I shut my office door, wanting nothing more than to be alone and cry. But a senior colleague noticed. She saw the exhaustion on my face and, instead of walking past, she stopped. She sat with me, listened—really listened—with deep empathy. She asked thoughtful questions, shared practical advice, and reminded me that I wasn’t alone. As we wrapped up, she gave me a big hug and said, “I’m here for you.” Years have passed, but I still carry that moment with me. That simple act of kindness made all the difference.

Anonymous

Purdue Storyteller



Lin Nan & Zenephia Evans

Impactful Purdue Women

Reaching Through the Unknown:

Leaving behind nearly two decades at an institution where I knew every hallway and every familiar face was daunting. I was not just stepping into a new chapter of my academic career. I was navigating a rare and complicated mix of grief and anticipation. My mother passed away just after I received the verbal offer to come to Purdue. The weight of my loss, entwined with the uncertainty of such a monumental change, made those first weeks feel impossibly heavy.

Then, along came Lin Nan and Zenephia Evans.

Lin was one of the first to extend her hand in friendship, not out of obligation but out of genuine warmth. Zenephia made sure I was not just welcomed but embraced, ensuring I was connected to a community that would support and uplift me. They did not simply introduce themselves. They made it clear, through words and actions, that I belonged. At my very first introduction in my new role, they were both there. Their presence was a quiet but powerful reassurance. Even though I had just arrived, I was already part of something larger than myself.

In those early days, when the ground beneath me felt unsteady, their kindness gave me footing. Their support was not just a moment. It was a gift. A reminder that even in times of profound transition, we are never truly alone.

Felisa Del Carmen Higgins
Purdue Storyteller

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Jackie McDermott

Impactful Purdue Woman

Dr. Jackie McDermott was my first supervisor at Purdue, and her impact on my journey is something I carry with me to this day. I vividly remember a moment after my first class in graduate school. As the only Black student in the class, I began to feel isolated and unsure of whether I truly belonged. I confided in Dr. McDermott about my doubts. Without hesitation, she responded, “You got into graduate school. If you made it into the program, you have everything it takes to succeed, and you absolutely belong here.” Her words, simple yet powerful, transformed my mindset. At a time when I was struggling with imposter syndrome, she provided the reassurance and belief in me that I needed. Her unwavering support not only strengthened my confidence but also motivated me to pursue opportunities I would have otherwise shied away from. In an environment far from home, where I had no family, Dr. McDermott became my family, offering guidance and encouragement when I needed it most. This conversation, this specific moment, was a turning point. It reminded me that I was worthy and capable, and it continues to guide me whenever self-doubt creeps in. Dr. McDermott didn’t just lead; she uplifted, and her impact on my journey as a graduate student and beyond is immeasurable.

Lexy Arinze

Purdue Storyteller



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Stacey Connaughton

Impactful Purdue Woman

Dr. Stacey Connaughton has been an incredible mentor and source of support during my graduate studies. When I first arrived at Purdue, I had just lost a loved one and was struggling with imposter syndrome, which was amplified by some things I heard during my first year. I doubted myself and wasn't sure who to turn to without feeling like a failure. I had heard wonderful things about Dr. Connaughton but hadn't met her—until a friend suggested I talk to her about an internship.

That first meeting changed everything. Despite not being my advisor, she listened, encouraged me, and created space for me to thrive. Since then, she has been one of my biggest cheerleaders—checking in regularly, creating research opportunities, and offering unwavering support. During difficult times, like immigration challenges or the loss of a colleague, she was there, present, and compassionate. She called students, stayed with us for hours, and continued checking in.

Dr. Connaughton has a warmth that makes you feel valued. Her kind words—“Prudence, you are wonderful. You did great!”—remind me that I belong. Even when offering adjustments, she frames them constructively, guiding me forward.

Through her, I've learned the power of servant leadership and strong work ethics. She leads by example, going the extra mile and inspiring me to do the same. I often tell her she's one of the blessings God placed in my path at Purdue, ensuring I had the support I needed.

Prudence Mbah

Purdue Storyteller



Anonymous

Impactful Purdue Woman

I hesitated when I was asked to take on a new role at the college, unsure if I was ready for the challenge. But one of my closest colleagues and one of my dearest friends at Purdue saw something in me that I hadn't fully recognized. They believed I was someone who brought people together rather than divided them and reminded me of my intelligence, thoughtfulness, and dedication. Their encouragement stayed with me, giving me the confidence to step forward each day. Even now, I continue to find the courage to embrace new opportunities for growth—knowing that their support and belief in me remain unwavering.

Sunnie Lee Watson
Purdue Storyteller



Jenna Rickus

Impactful Purdue Woman

Higher education can feel very lonely at times, but I have found that when I reach out, people are very willing to make time and space for me. A great example of this is Jenna Rickus. Jenna operates at the highest levels at Purdue in the Provost's office. A couple years ago, I was exploring what opportunities might be available for someone like me in administrative roles. The then provost suggested that I connect with Jenna. Jenna made time to meet with me and connect about my goals and questions. It would have been very easy for her to say that she was too busy with a million tasks to complete. Instead, she created time to share her experience and answer my questions, some that were artful and some that were as ambiguous as my lack of direction. She was kind and honest. It was helpful and exactly what I needed. I felt seen and heard. No door magically opened for me, but that wasn't what I expected or wanted. What I longed for at that stage in my career was knowledge and information, and that was what Jenna so graciously shared with me. I'm grateful to this day.

Cara Putman

Purdue Storyteller

*Dorothy Mennen*

Impactful Purdue Woman

When I joined Purdue's faculty in 1998, I had the privilege of knowing Professor Dorothy Mennen, a trailblazer in the Department of Theatre and Dance. Though our fields differed, we crossed paths through the music committee at church. After one meeting, Dorothy pulled me aside.

"You are a leader!" she said with conviction. "This will serve you well at Purdue."

At the time, I was a young assistant professor, focused on building my academic career. Leadership wasn't on my radar. But Dorothy's words planted a seed. She knew leadership well—breaking barriers as the first woman to chair the Purdue University Senate and shaping voice and speech training nationwide. But beyond her achievements, she had a gift for seeing potential in others. She saw something in me that I hadn't yet recognized.

As years passed, I often recalled her words. They made me more willing to step forward, more open to leadership opportunities. Her encouragement shaped my path, influencing my decision to take on new challenges at the university. Dorothy's legacy wasn't just in the students she taught but in the quiet, powerful ways she inspired those around her. With just a few words, she lifted me up—and set my leadership journey in motion.

Eric Barker
Purdue Storyteller



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Mady Henry
Impactful Purdue Woman

About twelve years ago, my department head and mentor, Dr. Mady Henry, was reviewing my draft of a cover letter as part of my application to serve as a provost fellow. As she read, she said: “The voice of this letter writer doesn’t match up with the person I see here at work every day...in the letter, you portray yourself as competent and experienced, but your passion and enthusiasm for what you do doesn’t shine through enough. I have seen how you love to mentor people – show them some of that excitement!” I realized she wasn’t telling me the cover letter equivalent of “you should smile more.” Instead, she was encouraging me to find a way to convey in the letter, through tone and content, not only what I’ve done, but why I do it. Today, I still think about Mady’s advice to foreground my motivational “spark” and this is something that I pass along to others who ask me for advice on their cover letters, or who are preparing for interviews. (By the way, I got the provost fellowship!)

Jen William
Purdue Storyteller

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Felica Ahasteen-Bryant (Diné)

Impactful Purdue Woman

There are times in my life where the weight of professional and personal lives become heavy, and early this year was the case. My family informed me that my mom was unwell, and I wanted to travel abroad to care for her, even briefly. When I shared this with my colleague and mentor, Felica Ahasteen-Bryant, Director of the Native American Educational and Cultural Center, she immediately encouraged me. She reassured me that time spent with loved ones is never a regret and offered to oversee AAARCC as needed. Her kindness and support made me even more grateful to have her as a mentor.

While I was abroad, Felica continued to check in, sending messages of encouragement, updating me on work, and even meeting with AAARCC staff to support the team. More than anything, she reminded me to focus on what mattered most—my time with my mom. Her words touched my heart, reinforcing the importance of holistic support in both personal and professional spaces.

Though my mom's health remains a lingering cloud of sadness, I returned with a renewed appreciation for my work and the power of teamwork. Felica's example showed me how genuine care can uplift both individuals and the community. Her unwavering support reminded me that leadership isn't just about responsibilities—it's also about compassion and lifting others up when they need it most.

Pamela K. Sari
Purdue Storyteller



Anonymous
Impactful Purdue Women

As an African American woman on a predominantly white campus, I hit a rough patch. It was a combination of stress, invisibility, loneliness, feeling underappreciated and undervalued. At this moment of despair, I knew that I needed my “sister-friend circle.” My sister-friend circle consists of multiple sources of support including a select group of Purdue staff, church family members, and colleagues in similar roles at other institutions. I reached out to them individually. My sister-friends always listen empathically, each affirming my work in their own unique way. Individually, their warmth and positive energy bolstered my own confidence as each reminded me to be my authentic self and that I have something important to contribute. One told me to find joy outside of work, another reminded me that it is okay to be transparent and vulnerable. A third sister-friend came to my office, took both of my hands in her own hands, and prayed for me. As she quietly departed my office, she told me to read Numbers 6:24-26. It was because of my sister-friend’s circle that I was able to put this difficult work season behind me and know that I can be unapologetically Black, beautifully Black, smart, and fierce. These conversations bolstered my own confidence, and as a result, I will continue my work with grace and humility.

Renee Thomas
Purdue Storyteller

*Anonymous*

Impactful Purdue Woman

Early in my career at Purdue University as an Assistant Professor, I was often asked by senior colleagues/administrators to serve on multiple committees and take on new assignments. I was thrilled to be asked to be part of these opportunities and was often tempted to accept these assignments. However, they took a significant toll on me, distracted me, and stripped me of my energy...

Around my third year at Purdue, I shared this frustration with other women colleagues (very few in those days from my college). A senior woman colleague offered me the following piece of advice – “When anyone asks you to take on another assignment, show them your current plate of assignments, and ask the person which current assignment will be replaced by the new ‘ask.’”

An excellent piece of advice... that I use myself and share with others – to this day!

I was also blessed to have additional support from an Administrative Assistant from my department, who provided advance warning of such requests, and gave me time to prepare a calm/cogent response when such requests were presented!

Dulcy Abraham
Purdue Storyteller