I recently had the opportunity to attend the Society of Women Engineers National Conference, WE19, which took place in Anaheim, California November 6th through 9th. This conference was three days full of incredible speakers, inspiring workshops, and endless networking opportunities. Through those hectic three days, I learned so much about what it means to be a woman in engineering, gained confidence in my ability to succeed, and was influenced by so many amazing women who shared their knowledge and their stories.

I was joined by a dozen other officers and members from CSU’s SWE section, and I felt a deeper sense of community with these women than ever before. Throughout the conference they constantly encouraged me, learned with me, and celebrated with me. On the first day, we all sat down to listen to the first keynote speaker, Carol Malnati, who currently works at Medtronic as president of research and development in the cardiac rhythms and heart failure department. She shared her incredible story of how she overcame adversity in college as the only woman in her electrical engineering class, while simultaneously struggling as a single mother. As a young woman she faced her fears by summiting El Capitan, the youngest person in the world to do so at the time, and used that experience as a metaphor for overcoming life’s challenges: don’t be intimidated by the whole journey. You must simply take the first step, get your feet off the ground, and focus on what is in front of you, what you can do. Reach for the footholds and handholds that are within range, and don’t quit just because of the fear of what lies ahead. Trust yourself, have confidence in your skills, and before you know it, all those little steps add up to one incredible feat.
Feeling refreshed from the first keynote speaker, we dove immediately into workshops and networking. We joined the crowd of thousands of other job-seeking engineers at the largest career fair for women in STEM in the U.S. Despite my insecurity with networking, I spent over four hours at the career fair, confidently walking up to a multitude of civil engineering companies and handing out one resume after another. I even landed an on-site interview, which resulted in on-the-spot a job offer.

I could write several pages on what I learned from the various speakers and about the experiences I had with my fellow “SWEsters,” however I will conclude with this: I have never been a part of such a massive community of brilliant and resilient women, and I am grateful to have spent three days in sunny California learning from and sharing life with them. I hope one day to inspire young engineers-to-be in the same way that these women inspired me.