



Sisters supporting STEM

SISTEM UK

Having kept each other motivated through their degrees, sisters **Dr Abigail Otchere** and **Donna Otchere** know the power of encouragement and the sharing of stories. Their own experiences have led them to form **SiSTEM UK**, inspiring and supporting girls and women in STEM.

Where does your passion for STEM come from?

Donna: Curiosity. I was really interested in maths when I was younger, and I was very creative. I wanted something that combined both my interests, and engineering came up through a Google search! Having studied mechanical engineering, I'm now studying for my PhD in gender equity in STEM.

Abigail: I was really excited about science at school, and that was because my science teacher made it intriguing and engaging. She would even make up dance routines to help us understand complex information. I was really interested in diseases and learning about what happens as we grow old; I've always wanted to find the answers to difficult questions. I studied biomedical science, followed by neuroscience, and now work in medical communications.

What motivated you to form SiSTEM UK?

Donna: SiSTEM UK was formed through our struggles. I was doing my mechanical engineering degree, and Abigail was doing her PhD. We were in two different fields, but facing the same struggles of feeling alone and isolated. We decided to call each other every night and motivate each other



with a pep talk. That would give us the energy and momentum to get back into the classroom and face tasks the next day. Once we graduated, we realised it had been that support system – the two of us – that had got us through our degrees. We wanted to give that support to other people, and so we started an Instagram page.

Abigail: We wanted to highlight different types of careers in STEM and to show girls and young women that you can look like

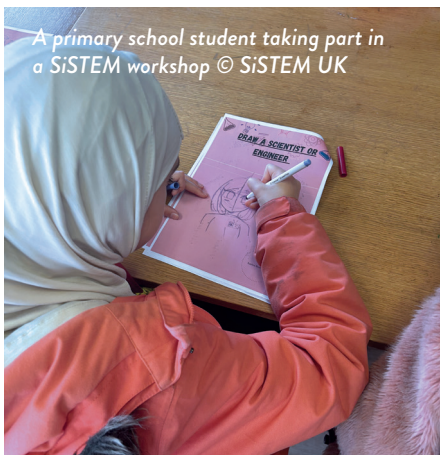
us and be in STEM. You can have other interests and still be in STEM! And that turned into this amazing community of SiSTEM UK.

What barriers are faced by women in STEM?

Abigail: For me, retention of women in STEM is as important as, or even more important than, getting women into STEM in the first place. A lot of women are going to university to study STEM subjects but then leaving STEM fields afterwards. We really want people to feel they have a safe space, that they belong and that they are capable. I think for women in particular, imposter syndrome comes into play, and you can feel out of your depth. Also, as they grow older, women often need to have a flexible job – not having that can cause retention issues.

What does the SiSTEM UK network look like in practice?

Donna: We support girls from age five to professional adults. We have learnt that young girls are not always introduced to STEM subjects early enough. We support girls of a range of ages by running workshops in primary and secondary schools. We show them that you can look like us and be in



A primary school student taking part in a SiSTEM workshop © SiSTEM UK

STEM, and we tell them our stories. We didn't have the easiest of journeys into STEM, and didn't have the best grades, but we were able to break through the barriers we faced. That inspires them because they can see themselves in us – representation is important.

We run a confidence workshop because there is a confidence gap between boys and girls, which prevents girls from excelling. We teach them that confidence can be learnt – we didn't start off being the most confident of people, but here we are!

Abigail: Another of our workshops explains different STEM careers. We show students that to be a scientist, you don't have to be in the lab. You can work in tech, in business; science is everywhere. And science is progressive, so there are many new, cool jobs becoming available.

We also run networking events, where we try to change the narrative and move away from the corporate idea of networking. We make our events relaxed, so girls and women can feel comfortable, have fun and celebrate, as well as network, with each other. We also work with companies to educate their workers on diversity and inclusion. ➔

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Abigail and Donna working with college students © SiSTEM UK



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Donna Otchere and Dr Abigail Otchere leading a SiSTEM UK workshop © SiSTEM UK

What is your advice to anyone who does not see themselves in STEM?

Donna: We believe it's always important to share stories – our stories and the stories of women who've gone before us. We highlight that you might not be getting the best grades at school at the moment, but that doesn't mean that STEM is not for you. You can still succeed and have a great career. It's not that you can't do it, it's just that you don't believe in yourself enough to do it.

Abigail: From my personal experience, I can think of times when I didn't apply for a job and I didn't go for an opportunity because I thought that they wouldn't pick me. I disqualified myself before even trying. And that's what we really try to encourage women and girls to see – that we can be our own worst enemy at times because of what we have learnt to 'expect'.

Who is SiSTEM UK collaborating with?

Donna: We've always said collaboration is key. We can only do so much, and the barriers facing women in STEM are not going to be broken by just Abigail and me! We need to work with more people to be able to make effective change. One organisation we work with is **In²Science**, which has been phenomenal for our progress in schools. Through them, we're able to reach more schools at a faster rate. Our collaboration with In²Science is enabling us to help train their ambassadors, getting more people into schools, in front of girls. Collaboration helps us spread our message faster.

Abigail: We're going to schools that are close to our hearts. We've gone all over the UK, but our focus has been in the Lambeth area of London. We're looking to spread our reach; training ambassadors will help us to do so. And each ambassador has their own story. Many are university students or early career scientists, and we see their confidence increasing.

What have been the highlights for you so far?

Abigail: For me, it's meeting young people. Before a workshop, you can see they're quite shy, 'in their shell'. And at the end of it, they've broken out of their shell. The room becomes a safe space where everyone celebrates each other. Just to watch that is amazing.

Donna: You see yourself as that young girl – and now we're giving something back to other people. This year, we're celebrating SiSTEM UK's two-year anniversary. In a short space of time, we have already made a positive impact. We've proved to ourselves that we can do it, and we're incredibly proud of that.

What has SiSTEM UK got planned for the summer?

Abigail: We are going to be holding two main events in August 2024. Firstly, we'll be running our annual 'big picnic', which is a collaborative picnic event in London where young people and working professionals will come together as women in STEM. It's called the big picnic as it's a collaborative initiative with different, mainly female-led, organisations from the STEM space. It gives people the chance to meet others

from different communities. It's a lovely day, showcasing organisations that are out there and showing women and girls that they belong in the STEM community.

Donna: And then we have our brunch, which is for over 18s, for professionals and students to get dressed up, get together and network in a more relaxed way. The brunch includes a panel of fantastic women who share their stories. We're excited about our events because they're opportunities to see our community coming together in one place, sharing advice and support.

What are SiSTEM UK's long-term goals?

Abigail: Reaching more women and girls. Our goal is expansion, which means more collaborations, more social media campaigns and more events!

Donna: We also need to train more people to support our work. We have an internship programme, where we train our volunteers in different areas such as social media and blog writing. Our aim is to give girls and young women the chance to do what they are passionate about.

How would you sum up the SiSTEM UK community?

Donna: Vibrant.

Abigail: Beautiful!



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