

I AM STEM

Me'lani Labat Joseph

Me'lani Labat Joseph is an MIT-educated engineer, but her passion lies in helping her community. Drawing from a wide array of life experiences, Me'lani works to maximize educational and personal outcomes for Black and Brown youth and their communities through her company, Transformative Innovations, LLC.

Were you aware when you were growing up that Black and Brown people are underrepresented in STEM professions?

I don't think I was really aware that Black and Brown people were underrepresented in STEM professions. I think I became aware of this fact once I started having internships in engineering companies. That fact is one reason why I decided not to be a professional engineer after I graduated from MIT, with a degree in mechanical engineering. I wanted to work in professional spaces where I would be in contact with a diverse group of people. I also wanted to be outside, building relationships in neighborhoods and having an impact on the community level. That's why I've dedicated my personal and civic life and professional career to exposing youth to opportunities that expand their horizons and give them the space to dream of a future in science, technology, engineering and math.

What obstacles have you overcome?

When I talk to young people about working in a STEM field, I talk real talk, and I tell them that there may not be many people that look like them on their jobs and that their work environment may not be the most welcoming place to work. To work in a STEM field, you have to have really high self-confidence because people are going to be doubting you just because of the color of your skin. And I know the fact that I'm a female also plays into how I am treated sometimes. I've been in meetings where people may not look at me, or may use the comments that I made and take them as their own. Working in a STEM field requires you to have a passion for what you do, a mastery of the content you are working in and a resiliency to persevere against all challenges. Having mentors and supportive family and friends to navigate life is important too.

What advice do you have for kids considering STEM fields now?

Be curious. Be curious about the world and everything around you - take opportunities to travel the world. STEM is all about solving problems. Don't be afraid to ask questions and surround yourself with people who also share that curiosity and interest in learning. Learning never stops. Working as a STEM professional is something you can do, if you so choose. It gives you incredible life skills and experience, exposure to cutting edge technologies and it provides good economic stability in your life. It doesn't come without hard work, but it's totally doable. I believe that all young people are capable of doing great, great things and we are counting on the next generations to make the world a better place.

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The NeoSTEM Ecosystem is a collaboration of organizations throughout Northeast Ohio who partner to improve STEM educational opportunities for all students. Formed in 2014, the NeoSTEM Ecosystem's goals are to improve meaningful STEM learning opportunities for all students in the Northeast Ohio region. As one of 94 ecosystems operating as a part of the STEM Learning Ecosystems Community of Practice, the NeoSTEM Ecosystem holds regular virtual and in-person meetings to learn about what community educational needs are and to develop solutions for those needs. For more information, please contact us at info@neostem.org.

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