

## Who's in the Academy

– Page 7

## Beyond Gender Bias

– Page 16

## Gendered Organizations

– Page 30

## **PLUS:** Meet the Board

– Page 42

## AWIS Spotlight on Women in Art & Science

# Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya

Empowering the World through Science and Design

# Defining Leadership through Action: An Interview with Dr. Yesim Darici

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AWIS Professional Member Since 2015

Leadership and talent development remains one of AWIS' strategic pillars into 2018, as AWIS champions the idea and practice of increasing the number of women in decision-making roles within organizations to ultimately impact workplace culture, practices, and performance in positive, inclusive, and constructive ways.

Also, as our scientific community grows and becomes more connected across genders, races, cultures, etc., our community is also forced to face the uphill battle of becoming more socially aware, responsible, and progressive for the sake of moving science and science policy forward. AWIS members have seen and continue to fight this battle every day and in myriad ways.

## What is Leadership

As every battle inevitably requires a leader, the definition of leadership also comes into question and continues to evolve to incorporate the most important and timely elements of social evolution. In his book, Peter Northouse (2018), Professor Emeritus of Communication at Western Michigan University, says that individuals and groups have struggled to answer this simple yet seemingly ambiguous question for many decades: "What is leadership?" One might say, from a purely reductionist standpoint, that leadership means leading an effort. However, from abstract or instrumentalist standpoint, one would likely say leadership means being the change you want to see in the world.

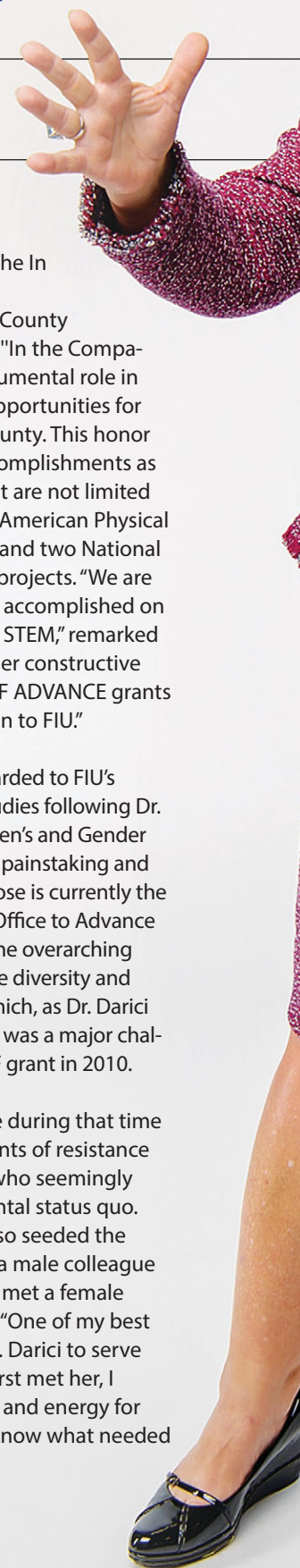
Leadership is often defined by example. Here, I define leadership by the example of Dr. Yesim Darici, Professor of Physics and Director of the Center for Women's and Gender Studies (CWGS) at Florida International University (FIU) in Miami, Florida. Being a champion for gender equity and diversity, and more notably, the first female university-level physics professor in the state of Florida, Dr. Darici is esteemed as a leading advocate for women and gender issues at FIU and within the entire state of Florida.

## ADVANCE

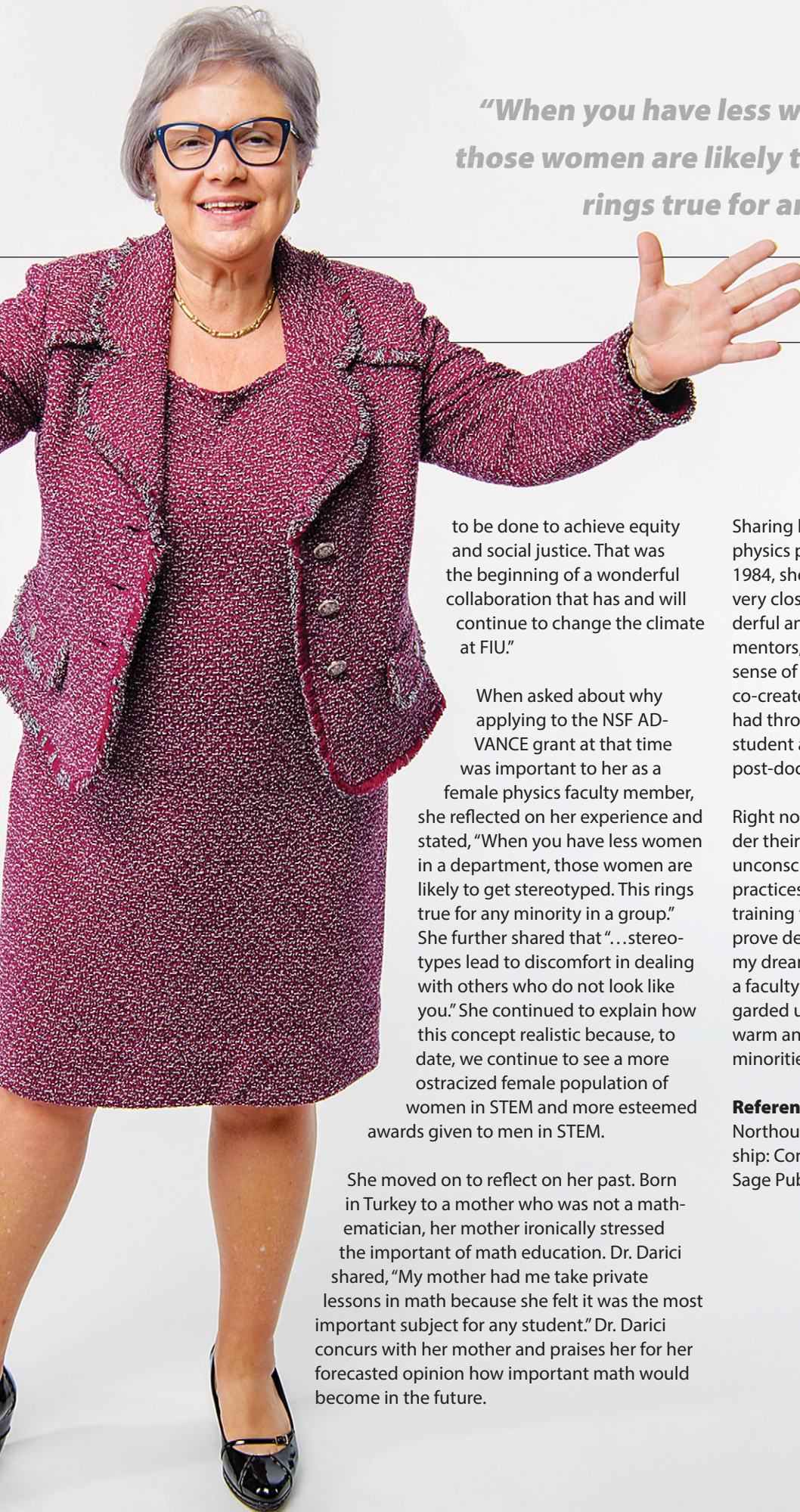
In March 2017, Dr. Darici received the In the Company of Women Science & Technology Award at Miami-Dade County Park's Women's Park's 29th Annual "In the Company of Women" Awards for her instrumental role in promoting diversity and growth opportunities for women in STEM in Miami-Dade County. This honor followed Dr. Darici's numerous accomplishments as a leader in STEM, which include but are not limited to her committee membership on American Physical Society's committee on minorities and two National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded projects. "We are very proud of all that Dr. Darici has accomplished on behalf of women and minorities in STEM," remarked FIU's Provost Kenneth G. Furton. "Her constructive leadership in CWGS and on the NSF ADVANCE grants has been an enormous contribution to FIU."

The NSF ADVANCE grants were awarded to FIU's Center for Women's and Gender Studies following Dr. Darici's and her FIU Center for Women's and Gender Studies partner, Dr. Suzanna Rose's, painstaking and monumental efforts. Dr. Suzanna Rose is currently the Founding Associate Provost in the Office to Advance Women, Equity & Diversity at FIU. The overarching goal of the NSF awards is to increase diversity and inclusiveness among FIU faculty, which, as Dr. Darici described in an exclusive interview, was a major challenge when she applied for the NSF grant in 2010.

Dr. Darici described her experience during that time as "frustrating," as she faced moments of resistance from her male-faculty colleagues who seemingly wanted to maintain the departmental status quo. She shared a prior moment that also seeded the frustration: upon her arrival at FIU a male colleague told her that he'd never personally met a female colleague in physics. Dr. Rose says, "One of my best strategic decisions was to invite Dr. Darici to serve as Director for the CWGS. When I first met her, I recognized that she had the talent and energy for leadership and the experience to know what needed



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to be done to achieve equity and social justice. That was the beginning of a wonderful collaboration that has and will continue to change the climate at FIU.”

When asked about why applying to the NSF ADVANCE grant at that time was important to her as a female physics faculty member, she reflected on her experience and stated, “When you have less women in a department, those women are likely to get stereotyped. This rings true for any minority in a group.” She further shared that “...stereotypes lead to discomfort in dealing with others who do not look like you.” She continued to explain how this concept realistic because, to date, we continue to see a more ostracized female population of women in STEM and more esteemed awards given to men in STEM.

She moved on to reflect on her past. Born in Turkey to a mother who was not a mathematician, her mother ironically stressed the important of math education. Dr. Darici shared, “My mother had me take private lessons in math because she felt it was the most important subject for any student.” Dr. Darici concurs with her mother and praises her for her forecasted opinion how important math would become in the future.

Sharing her experience as the only female physics post-doc at West Virginia University in 1984, she states, “It was very intense — I came very close to quitting, but because I had wonderful and progressive-minded male friends and mentors, I stayed.” She expressed that this very sense of belonging inspired her to move on to co-create other “safe-spaces” like the ones she had throughout her early STEM career as a PhD student at University of Missouri, Columbia and post-doc at West Virginia University.

Right now, FIU offers, among many programs under their NSF institutional transformation grant, unconscious bias awareness, workshops on best practices for hiring, and bystander intervention training to reduce gender and race bias and improve departmental climate. Dr. Darici quotes, “... my dream is for women and minorities to choose a faculty position FIU over another highly-regarded university because they know FIU has warm and inclusive environment for women and minorities in STEM.”

#### References

Northouse, P. G. (2018). Introduction to leadership: Concepts and practice. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.