CAN-CWIC 2023

Day 1: Friday, October 20

Welcome to the

Computer Science Canada/Informatique Canada

Canadian Celebration of Women in Computing Conference
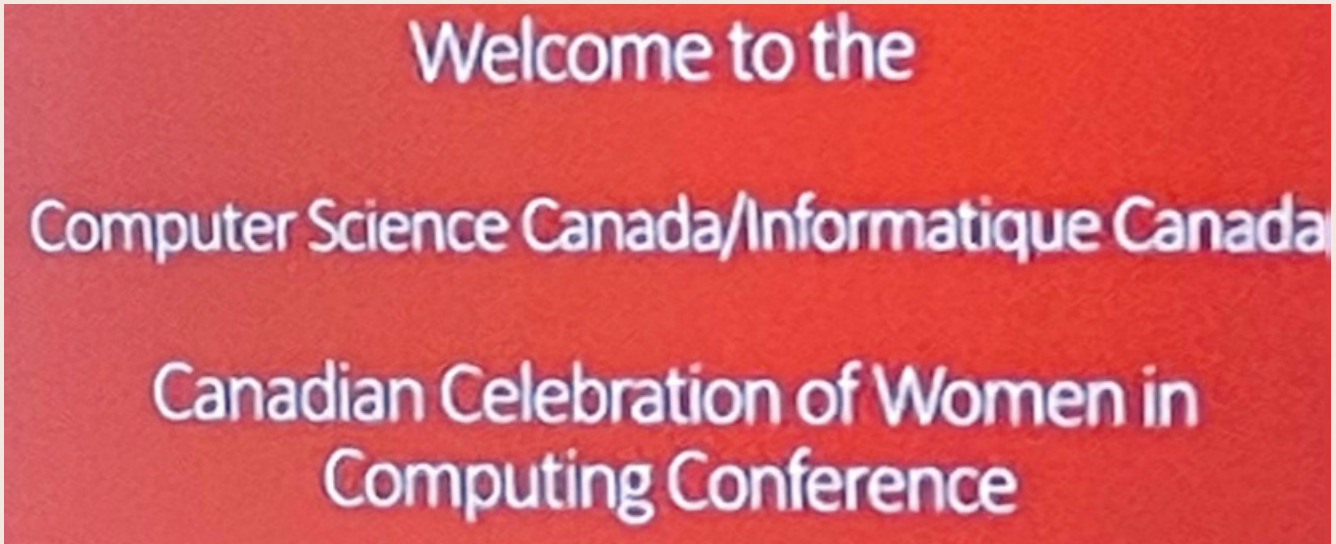
On the afternoon of my arrival at the Delta Hotel, I promptly proceeded to pick up my registration badge and hotel key, scheduled for 3:30 pm. After checking into my room around 4 pm, I began preparing for t presentation and the Friday Night Banquet, which was set to commence at 6 pm. Sharing the room with three other girls, I took the opportunity to introduce myself, inquire about their schools and majors, and we even connected on LinkedIn and Instagram – a delightful way to meet like-minded individuals. What pleasantly surprised me was the abundant presence of young women in STEM fields at the conference, far exceeding my expectations. Although initially scheduled to start at 6:30 pm, the conference was slightly delayed due to attendees needing dinner. We enjoyed a dinner that included a salad and pizza, with the added bonus of vegetarian pizza, which was quite satisfying. Following dinner, we all gathered in a room filled with attendees, and the conference officially commenced at 7:30 pm.

Students/Schools Represented Here Today

School	Count
Carleton University	79
Concordia University	4
Dalhousie University	14
Georgia Institute of Technology	1
McGill School of Computer Science	19
Ontario Tech University	54
Queen's University	60
University of Alberta	11
University of British Columbia	20
University of Calgary	5
University Of Guelph	40
University of Montreal	20
University of Saskatchewan	8
University of Ottawa	13
University of Toronto Scarborough	24
University of Toronto St. George	53
University of Waterloo	30
University of Windsor	12
Simon Fraser University	2
St. Clair College	6
Western University	4
York University	48
	527

Professor Ouldooz Baghban Karimi, one of our SFU professors with whom I had the opportunity to take a course and collaborate on a research project during my time at school, was among the distinguished figures at the conference. Her presence added a sense of familiarity and gratitude for the valuable learning experiences I've had under her guidance. Notably, she warmly welcomed us, introduced the agenda, and spoke about the diverse schools and students participating in the event. Impressively, she informed us that there were a remarkable 527 students in attendance, a testament to the growing influence of such conferences.

Ouldooz introduced us to the speaker, Tanjulia Akkter, a software engineer at Electronic Arts and the youngest senior at EA. She graduated from the University of Victoria in 2019 and shared her inspiring journey, spanning from Bangladesh to Korea and back, and then to Canada. Her story of perseverance and determination, from initially not knowing how to code in her first year of university to working at esteemed companies like Microsoft and IBM during her co-op, was truly motivating. She emphasized the importance of consistency, self-belief, and facing one's fears as key factors in one's journey, leaving a profound impact on all of us.

After her speech, there was a session for questions from the audience, which she eloquently addressed, providing further insights into her remarkable journey. The engaging Q&A session allowed the audience to delve deeper into the topics discussed. Around 9 pm, as Tanjulia Akkter concluded her inspiring talk, the atmosphere shifted to networking and mingling, where students and professionals engaged in meaningful conversations. I had the pleasure of connecting with my SFU fellow mate, Kimia Hashemi, and we shared our experiences and aspirations. Throughout the evening, I had the opportunity to meet a diverse array of people, each with their own inspiring stories and backgrounds. Their journeys were incredibly motivating, and I left the event feeling deeply inspired and motivated. At 10 pm, the event came to a close, and we all retired to our respective rooms, eagerly looking forward to the continuation of this enriching conference.

Agenda for tomorrow

Start Time	Location	Activity
7:30 (end by 8:30)	Plaza C	Breakfast (coffee/tea/muffins)
7:30	Luggage Room – **You have to check out all your luggage before going for breakfast!!!**	Drop luggage!!!!!! LONDON or WINDSOR ROOM
8:15	International A & B	NCWIT Awards
9:00	International A & B	Keynote Speakers
10:00	International A, International B, Montreal, Toronto, New York, Ottawa	Parallel Sessions
12:00	Plaza A & B	Exhibits
12:00	Plaza Lobby	Lunch
12:00	Plaza C	Eating area
2:00	International A, International B, Montreal, Toronto, New York, Ottawa	Parallel Sessions
4:00	International A & B	Industry Panel session
5:00	International A & B	Wrap Up
5:00	Luggage room open	LONDON ROOM (DOWNSTAIRS) and WINDSOR ROOM (UPSTAIRS)
5:15 – 7:00	Side Entrance	Load Buses

Day 2: Saturday, October 21

I woke up at 6:30 am to prepare for luggage drop-off since we were required to check out from our room early due to the conference starting at 7:30 am and lasting until 5:00 pm. After getting ready for the day, I dropped off my luggage at one of the designated rooms at 7:30 am and then headed to the breakfast area, which remained open until 8:15 am.

At 8:15 am, the conference commenced with the NCWIT awards, celebrating the Aspirations in Computing Science awards for high school female-identifying or non-binary students. The focus of the day was on recognizing national winners. I felt a tremendous sense of pride when Louise Ho, a first-year student at SFU, was introduced as one of the three students who received the national award for aspiring women in computing science.

Following the awards ceremony, at 8:30 am, the keynote speaker sessions began with our first speaker, Victoria Granova. She addressed the topic of "Breaking Gender Biases." Victoria serves as an AWS Security Technical Program Manager and has been honored as one of the "2021 Canada's Top 20 Women in Cybersecurity," among receiving numerous other awards. She shared valuable statistics regarding the representation of women in STEM fields and underscored the importance of breaking gender biases by inspiring more women to join these fields. Victoria also recounted her personal journey, which began as an accountant with zero computer science knowledge and led to her current role in cybersecurity, exemplifying that women can excel in leadership positions within the industry. Her presentation offered insightful perspectives on diversity and inclusion, as well as her path to achieving various awards. She emphasized the significance of embracing opportunities, building networks, seeking mentorship, and sponsorship in one's career development.

Following Victoria's presentation,at 9:00 am, our second keynote speaker, Nailah Ogeer, a Senior IT Manager at TD specializing in Big Data Ingestion, Data Engineering, and DaaS, shared her journey. She started by describing her first computing science course in university, which sparked her passion due to her love for mathematics. She recounted how she balanced her studies with teaching mathematics to support her family. Nailah candidly discussed her challenges as a migrant in Canada, from living alone in a basement to becoming a leader, wife, and mother. Her key advice included listening to your inner voice, creating opportunities, managing finances wisely, and proposing innovative solutions. Her journey took her from managing one person to overseeing a team of 50, all in the field of data and mathematics. It was a powerful testament to perseverance and growth.

Our third keynote speaker, Christina Fung, from CGI, took the stage at 9:20 am. Christina provided a detailed exploration of the differences between traditional and generative AI, while also emphasizing the profound responsibility that AI holds in our world. She drew attention to the book "Invisible Women" and presented stark statistics, such as the higher mortality rates women face in car accidents due to seatbelts originally being designed for men. Her presentation underlined the critical importance of reducing bias in both technology and AI. Christina's passionate message resonated with the audience, highlighting the urgent need for more women to actively contribute to and influence the tech world.

At 9:30 am, our fourth speaker, Pauline Keeton-Curtis, who has devoted 42 years of her career to BMO, beginning in January 1982, commenced her presentation. She shared her remarkable journey, starting as a tape operator responsible for mounting tapes and progressively climbing the ranks to eventually become the Managing Director of Portfolio Technical Support at Bank of Montreal. Pauline emphasized the significance of curiosity and inquisitiveness in one's career. She stressed the importance of maintaining a sense of wonder and connecting the dots. This involves asking fundamental questions like "Why are we doing things?" to drive innovation and progress.

According to the agenda, from 10 am to 12 pm, parallel sessions were scheduled, offering a variety of options to choose from. Starting at 10 am, due to my interest in cybersecurity, I attended the session on "National Cyber Threat Security Assessment '' led by Anne Marie Salter, a data science and machine learning researcher at the Canadian Center for Cybersecurity - Communications Security Establishment (CSE). During this session, Anne Marie delved into topics such as cybercrime, misinformation, ransomware, and the disproportionate impact of deep-fakes on women. She also educated us about how machine learning algorithms can be easily deceived. In a fascinating interactive session, she demonstrated how one such AI tool called "Gandalf'' could be tricked into revealing a password through a creative approach with seven intriguing levels. It was a highly engaging and informative experience. Following this session, there was a 10-minute break before the 11 am session began. Influenced by her impactful talk and her ability to secure a job in a gaming company despite not being a gamer, I attended the session "Unlocking the Gaming Industry : Your Non-Gaming Experience is the Key" featuring Tanjulia Akter, the speaker from Friday night. She initiated the session by asking attendees about the games they played and their motivations behind gaming. She went on to explain how the game industry pushes the boundaries of various aspects of technology to create immersive gaming experiences, including animations, graphics, load times, storyline, cloud computing, databases, and more. She emphasized how the knowledge she gained in university was directly applicable to her role in the industry. Tanjulia shared insights on the diverse roles within the gaming industry, career recommendations, how to apply for positions at EA, and the essential skills to demonstrate. She highlighted the importance of collaboration, curiosity, creativity, determination, inclusion, impact, and entrepreneurship in the gaming industry. Tanjulia also emphasized that being a gamer is not a prerequisite to enter the gaming industry.

After the informative sessions, a lunch and career fair took place from 12 pm to 2 pm, providing students with the opportunity to connect with various companies. These companies had booths where they shared details about their roles and answered questions from students. The lunch was served as a buffet with a diverse selection of options, complemented by a delightful array of desserts. During this time, I eagerly participated in the networking session, actively engaging with the representatives at the booths, inquiring about their roles, and learning more about their respective companies. This experience was enriching, and I gained valuable insights through these interactions. Notably, during lunch, I had the pleasure of meeting Celina and Louise, both fellow SFU attendees, and we engaged in discussions and even had the opportunity to take photos with Professor Ouldooz.

During the 2 pm to 4 pm session block, I had the privilege of attending a session led by our esteemed professor, Ouldooz Baghban Karimi. The session was centered around the theme "Computer Science Research: Areas, Methodologies, and Resources." Professor Karimi shared valuable insights into the wide spectrum of research projects taking place at SFU, providing an overview of the diverse areas of computer science research and the methodologies employed in these projects. She also highlighted the opportunities for students to actively engage in these research initiatives, emphasizing the significance of research exposure programs. This session served as an invaluable resource, offering students a clear understanding of the research landscape at SFU and the pathways to involvement in innovative computer science research.

At the 3 pm session, I had the opportunity to attend "Navigating the AI Era: Preparing for the Future" presented by FeiFei Han, an AI Consultant at Deloitte. Her enlightening talk highlighted the profound impact of AI on the skills required for the future workforce and stressed the importance of adaptability and lifelong learning. FeiFei encouraged the audience to embrace change, maintain a multilingual mindset, and evolve their skills while preserving their core qualities. She also delved into the role of AI in tutoring and presented her projects, "Personalized Learning Squared (PLUS)" and "UPlanner," as innovative solutions to challenges in education, providing valuable insights into the future of AI and its role in shaping education and the workforce.

Panelists for the 4 pm session, moderated by Joanne Atlee, a Professor at the University of Waterloo, included Alicia Greeley, Manager of Cryptographic Services & Operations at the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security; Sonia Kulwant Singh, Team Product Owner, Scrum Lead, and DevOps Engineer at SAP; and Kelly Lyons, Professor at the University of Toronto and Associate Director of the Schwartz Reisman Institute for Technology and Society. This panel discussion delved into leadership in the tech industry, exploring various career paths and offering valuable insights. The panelists stressed the significance of intentional career choices, problem-solving skills, and promoting gender equality and awareness. Attendees had the opportunity to ask questions, and the panelists provided informative responses, making for a highly engaging session. This was the last session of the conference, after which I was able to collect my luggage and head to the airport to fly to Vancouver.