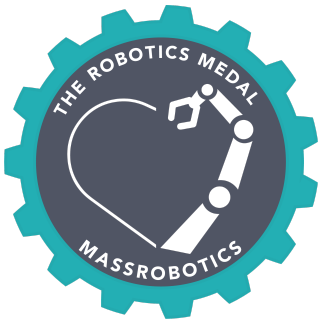

Women in Robotics Gala 2025

Dear colleagues and friends,

I am so honored and just so happy to be standing here tonight, in the company of amazing women who preceded me on this stage and in the field, and who are following me, and with the support of the whole community.

It is a joy to hear people's stories, so here is a little bit of mine. I moved to the US from Yugoslaiva at 16, to Wichita, Kansas. My dad, who was an engineer, had just unexpected died of glioblastoma and my mom was single-parenting and struggling to get a job with a PhD in English literature. That certainly motivated me to go into STEM, as did the engineering way of thinking which I got from my dad (not my Mom, she was a writer) and my uncle's advice: "As an immigrant, you must have a skill. Go into computers, they will be big!" He was right!

At the University of Kansas, I majored in Computer Science when there were almost no women in the major at the time, but I lived in an all-women's scholarship hall. We used to do our programming homework debugging in pajamas and slippers using the single dialup terminal in the basement, and I still remember the joy of our compiler compiling itself. If you are a CS nerd, you get that. I started minoring in art and realized the subjectivity bothered me compared to the objectivity of CS, so I minored in Psychology and Behavioral Science instead, which I loved and which is now a major part of my lab's research. Somehow the subjectivity of human behavior is fascinating. There were no robotics courses at KU at the time, so I chose to do Directed Reading with Prof. Akritas, who kindly agreed thought it was not his expertise. By the way, there was one AI course, and it was taught at 8am, so of course I didn't take it. And then I got into MIT's AI Lab for grad school (without having had AI!), which shaped my career trajectory. And Boston felt like coming home to Europe, the way Kansas never did; my first experience of the T, with all the people, noise, and the mice just made me smile with joy of familiarity….

Being at MIT really was like drinking from a firehose in every respect: yes the research, but also the people, the conversations, participating in and then running the AI Lab

Olympics, two Boston marathons with friends, the infamous Halloween Labyrinth party at our apartment, all with an amazing cohort of PhD students and contemporaries who are still really good friends. Some of them are here: Holly, Cynthia, and Daniela (my contemporary at Cornell), thank you my dear friends! We bonded, we learned, we worried, we grew up, we challenged and supported one another. It was an amazing 7 years. That was average for MIT at the time and included the MS thesis (on rat-brain inspired topological navigation) and PhD dissertation (on distributed robot swarms). Rod Brooks was a unique advisor: he expected great things (literally, he said "go have a great idea!") and he worked around the clock to support anything his students pursued (he got me 20 robots, nobody had that many! They mostly didn't work, but that was and still is a big part of robotics 😊). Doing hard things never becomes easy, we choose the work because we want the challenge.

And then real life began, and the real challenges. I got a faculty job at Brandeis, and then moved to USC 2.5 years later and have been there ever since. USC's Viterbi School of Engineering has been a great place for intellectual growth: discovering and creating, (re)inventing oneself, mentoring and collaborating with wonderful colleagues across campus. I started by continuing research on robot teams, humanoids, and robot learning, and after tenure and the first of my 3 children (by far my best work!) I took a major turn to do something that it did not yet exist as a field: socially assistive robotics.

The story I have often told is that I wanted to be able to have a really good answer to the question: "Mama, what do you do? Why do you do it?" The "why" is key. I believe that if a child cannot understand and appreciate your answer to that question, it is not a good answer. I wanted my answer to be "Mama makes robots to help people" so I had to make that come true. Btw, during COVID quarantine, I had the honor of doing a shared BBC Zoom interview with a young girl from Ghana and she stunned me by saying: "I think you want to be everyone's Mom, but you can't do that so that is why you make robots so they can do for you." What perfect insight! So it is profoundly satisfying to look back and say that what we started 25 or so years ago is now an established human-centered research field of socially assistive robotics that I hope will grow and help young people see that there are many faces of robotics, and many faces in robotics, too.

The most important faces in my career have been the many generations of dedicated, creative, hardworking graduate and undergraduate students. They embrace complex problems at the constantly evolving intersection of AI, robotics, machine learning, and human behavior and cognition, and they spend years in the lab (but not as many as 7!), and more importantly they spend time in schools, hospitals, elder care centers, and

homes, working with real people with complex needs, to ensure that their research is contributing to real, pressing societal challenges such as early child development, autism, anxiety, depression, and rehabilitation. It has been an honor to be their advisor and it continues to be the best job in the world (in spite of everything going on right now…) because of them.

I work in robotics, but people, starting with family, are who matter and who shaped my life and career. My dad's engineering mind, my mom's incredible resilience. When I was a teenager in Old Country, I watched my mom get a PhD while she worked full time, and I swore I wouldn't do it (but I did 😊), I watched her navigate being an isolated immigrant, a widow, a single parent, yet never cease to be a force of nature. She passed away in April of this year, at 91, but she is always with me and would definitely approve of this outfit. She loved bling; these are her earrings. My three children, Helena, Nik, and Em, who are at this moment in grad school, post university, and high school, respectively, are the wellsprings of joy for me, and teach me daily what really matters in life and that challenges, surprises, and joy are never-ending.

It was a joyous surprise in early spring to get a cryptic email from Tye asking for a Zoom meeting, then join the meeting expecting an interview, and instead be told by Tye and Daniela the wonderful news about the MassRobotics Medal! I was really shocked and touched and a little teary too. Joyce and the whole MassRobotics team have been amazing about this experience; I think it's like getting an Oscar (I am an LA girl after all 😊) but even better: you are treated like royalty, you take a long time to pick a dress, and the thank speech is much longer. But not endless, so I will stop here and express once more my HUGE LOVE AND GRATITUDE to all the amazing people who helped to get me here today. Thank you!