Black History Month Tribute
Season 3: Episode 11

Welcome to Stayin' Alive in Technology. A series of conversations with Silicon Valley veterans touching on war stories from the past and practical advice for today. And now, here's your host, Melinda Byerley, founding partner of Timeshare CMO.

Melinda Byerley:
Welcome back to another episode of Stayin' Alive in Tech. It's February 2020, and that means it's Black History Month. So we are going to do our first ever clips show. I hope you'll enjoy this as much as I've enjoyed, and our team has enjoyed, putting it together.

We'd like to take this moment, this month, to celebrate the stories of five women of color in tech who have been guests on the Stayin' Alive in Tech podcast. We have scientists, developers, founders, and authors; a designer and venture capitalist, a data analyst, a CEO, one of the first black female programmers at IBM, and a woman on the forefront of an emerging industry, biomedical informatics.

These women are not only advancing their fields, they are no-nonsense problem-solvers with stories to tell and stories to inspire us all.

Here are some of my favorite moments with Paula Buchanan, Dr. Tiffani Bright, Sian Morson, Jacqueline Harper, and Dr. Roshawnna Novellus.

I'd like to start with Jacqueline Harper, who is a treasure, and one of my favorite episodes on this podcast. She is, as I'll tell you on this podcast, one of the reasons I started it, which is the ability to talk to people who have a living history of technology. She started at IBM in the 1960s, was sent home when she was pregnant, came back, failed her first engineering class, and went on to become one of their first black female programmers at IBM—a job that she did for over 25

years. Just listen to her describe what it was like to wait in line to use the computer and go through mounds of paper as part of your programming work.

- *J. Harper:*
- *You would spend hours and if you had to stay, not overnight, but stay until you find it, that's what you would do. Not only that, we only were, we had a computer room which had about 12 systems. And you had to take turns or wait in line or come early or stay late to be able to get on the systems.*

- *M. Byerley:*
- *And so if you got a dump, you had a problem because you would have to get back in line.*

- *J. Harper:*
- *Yes. But you would take a dump which was wads and wads and wads of paper and go through it at your desk. Try to find your program, identify it, go back, stand in line, get on the computer, and we had TSO. Time sharing option. We'd get on the system and then maybe wait, wait for it to come up. You had to wait and find your program, get on, log on, find your program, fix the problem, run it again. And you would, then walk up to the data center, get your program, hopefully it didn't dump. If it works, fine. If it didn't, you have another dump. You keep dumping until it worked.*

One of our First Season guests was Sian Morson, a woman who wears so many hats and is the epitome of a person pursuing what she's most passionate about. She's written books, developed a beauty app, won awards for her contributions to tech, she is the CEO of Kollective Mobile, a mobile development agency in Oakland, CA, and is a limited partner and mentor for Backstage Capital, which is a dynamic seed-stage fund that focuses on underrepresented founders.

Our favorite part of her episode, besides sitting in awe of all she has accomplished, was to hear her advice for founders who are seeking funding. Enjoy this clip from Sian Morson:

- *Perhaps the first thing I would say to founders is it's more art and less science, and a lot of the times it's just your gut feeling. Particularly when you're talking early, early*

stage investments. Another thing that I would say that I'm not sure, I think some founders know this, but I don't think all of them do is that they all talk to each other. And there are conversations happening in the background all the time. And so, it really blows me away when a founder is less than polite or less than gracious or when they misrepresent the truth because it's really, really, really easy to check that. Like never drop a name, never drop a name that you … You know what I mean? Never mess with…

- *Melinda Byerley: Because they'll just call the person. Yeah.*
- *Sian Morson: It's so easy to do. And that's something that I think happens way, way too often. Again, I think part of it is, founders, they get excited and they really want you to invest and so they embellish and it's like don't do that. Just be honest. I know for me, personally, with the few angel investments that I've made, it really just comes down to whether or not I like you and I think that you can pull this off and sometimes I don't even think you can pull it off, but I know that if you don't pull it off, you're going to do something else. There's that tenacity. That's what I look for, really.*

For those who are seeking funding as an underrepresented founder, Sian shares her perspective of the sobering statistics—and her advice for black women in particular who may feel discouraged, with good reason, from getting out there and seeking funding or starting their own venture.

- *Melinda Byerley:*
- *And so now, we call it democratic except that if you come from less privileged means, if you don't have those skills for whatever reason, suddenly…you may have a lot of other great skills, but suddenly you're blocked from entering. And then I wonder how democratic the process really is, because those things that go into having that privilege we know are very complicated. They can be class, they can be race, it can be gender, sexuality and so on.*

- *Sian Morson:*
- *Well, look at the numbers. The numbers speak for themselves that the number of women who receive VC funding, the number of black women who receive VC funding, it's dismal. Melinda Byerley: What are the numbers today? I have the 97% number, which is that 97% of venture capital, as I understand it today, goes to men.*

Sian Morson:
- *I think it's 2% to women and 0.02 to black women. As far as I know, only 34 black women have raised over a million dollars or more in venture capital funding.*

- *Melinda Byerley:*
- *That's me. I started from my ... I know I think three or four of them and the idea that I know 10% of all the black women that have raised this money is it's ridiculous.*

- *Sian Morson:*
- *Yeah. I'm actually trying to put together a documentary around that very fact and featuring some of those women. There is a lot of talk in the entrepreneurial community, particularly among black women entrepreneurs. And some of them are just like, "Forget it. I'm not even going to try to raise venture capital because it's a waste of time." I can't say that I blame them, but I think there's two sides. I think exploring some alternatives doesn't hurt either, and there are a few entrepreneurs that have gotten grants and gone the government route and crowd funding and just plain old bootstrapping, which is what I did, but I do think that we still need to make inroads, so I wouldn't say just give up completely. I think as that number increases it's a good thing.*

So we just heard from Sian one theme that all of these episodes have in common: a spirit of tenacity and a desire to encourage others, especially girls and young women, to embrace challenges, pursue the education or the career that interests them, and to not feel discouraged when they run into systemic or local problems. Even if they're the only female or the only black person in the room, to know that there are entire networks out there to support you.

Listen to this clip from Dr. Tiffani Bright, the Biomedical Informatician Evaluation Team Lead at IBM Watson Health, who is an ardent STEM advocate and uses her platform to advance diversity and inclusion in STEM education.

- *Tiffani Bright*
- *I try to tell my story that weaves in nuggets that they'll get them. When I'm talking to African American women, a lot of times I might toss in this idea about not carrying the weight of the world. It's really important that you do well, and not listen to the negative voices. I think especially as an African American woman, you have a lot of commentaries of messages of what the world thinks.*
  Some days it's the plight of the single black woman, then it's the overeducated single woman. There are just so many narratives out there. So I try to focus when I'm speaking to those young students, about being true to themselves, finding their passion, staying their course. It's a variety of things, but I think I, at the end of the day, I want them to understand that they have been gifted with a unique skillset, and it's important that they stay true to it. Because then they'll love what they do.

This encouragement is echoed by our guest Paula Buchanan, whose personal motto is "Never Stop Learning"—she is a self-proclaimed visual analytics nerd who focuses on helping scientists accomplish what they need to do by better understanding data, particularly in the public health system through the design of user-friendly health information systems.

- *Paula Buchanan*
- *You're not going to be perfect. We are human beings, we are fallible. But you have to learn how to learn from that failure. If you, as a girl, feel uncomfortable sitting around a whole bunch of boys the first time you go in a coding class, and you decide to drop out, go back again. Maybe you didn't have brothers, or you're just uncomfortable around boys or whatever. You've got to get over that.*
  Most of my life, I have been "a minority" in some way. The only black person in the room, the only woman in the room, and I've succeeded. I'm not rich and famous, but I'm very comfortable, and I won't be eating dog food in my senior years because I have a retirement account, thank you very much. And I think parents at times set their kids up for failure by almost conditioning them that they can't fail, and that's wrong. So get used to failing.
  Get used to failing. I'm not saying don't do your homework. But if you're having trouble, ask for help! I am not the smartest person in the room, but if you look at the people I know, a lot of them are. And if I don't know, for example, how to code an R, I know 3-4 different people who can help me. It teaches you how to work collaboratively as a team. As an individual, you have to learn to constructively fail.

I'd like to now re-introduce you to our guest Jacqueline Harper—a fan favorite and as I said earlier, one of mine too—one of the first black female programmers at IBM. She has a story of incredible persistence, and recommends education and then *doing something with it* to move yourself and your community forward.

- *M. Byerley:*
  What advice do you have for young people today getting started as programmers, engineers? And I think it's also important to ask if you have any special advice for young black women who are coming into this profession today.

  J. Harper:
- *Actually, I feel that young people should always follow through what they want to do. And get the education and get the support and open your mind to new and exciting things because it's out there and there are people willing to follow through with you.*

- *Now let me give you one example of a young person who came into a certain organization I was in. I belonged to many black history groups but it's one thing to know black rhetoric. To know black facts. To know black history. But it's another thing to implement, begin to go forward and develop something. Begin to research, educate, and know others who are in the same field. I would say that would be true of anything that you need to do in life.*

Some of our favorite moments of Jacqueline Harper's episode were her stories about working at IBM in the 1960s, when nearly all women were in the typing pool and you could smoke in the office—but not, she will tell you, wear mini-skirts or go-go boots! Here are some of our favorite stories from Ms. Jacqueline.

- *J. Harper:*
  IBM came along in the early '60s and recruited many, many blacks. And my husband was one of them. So that's how we got to upstate.

  M. Byerley:
  Were there black women being recruited by IBM at this point or were they mostly men?

  J. Harper:
  Some of the women, they were in college. And they had the mathematical background. They were recruited.

  M. Byerley:
  What was IBM like? Because I have in my notes that you started in 1964. Is that right?

  J. Harper:
  Yeah, it's true. Yeah.

  M. Byerley:
  What was it like to work there? Do you remember it?

  J. Harper:
  Yes, I do. And what I really remember, I had to make an important decision. Because I started my family. IBM did not wish to have women walking around in maternity clothes.

  M. Byerley:
  The horror!

  J. Harper:

Yeah, so the choice was either you resign or you agree to return after the baby is born. So they really didn't like that look, that maternity look, big tents.

M. Byerley:
So once you started showing, you had to go home.

J. Harper:
Absolutely. Go home. Go home.

M. Byerley:
So did you go home?

J. Harper:
Yes. Because, in this upstate area, infants were really hard to find home care for. If you had a toddler, potty trained, you could have care for them. So I went home and I went home for eight years because I had two more kids.

M. Byerley:
Did they give you a choice to come back?

J. Harper:
Yes. If you came back, it had to be six weeks after the baby was born. Funny. I just knew, I said, I knew I couldn't do that. It was like, resign, I had to resign.

M. Byerley:
Did you resign before your first baby was born or was it something you understood after your baby was born?

J. Harper:
No, I resigned. I worked for IBM six months and resigned.

M. Byerley:
Wow.

J. Harper:
I had to. I had no choice. Because I knew I couldn't return.

So, there's been a lot of discussion today about how women who were pregnant were asked to leave work and how they weren't necessarily fired, but it was just something the way it was done. And how the impact on women, in particular Elizabeth Warren, as we speak campaigning for President of the United States, faced a similar type of discrimination, in her words, when she was first pregnant.

And so, it's important to understand that all women are facing this type of discrimination, but women of color are going to have it and feel it even more intensely.

Here is another clip from Jacqueline Harper about working in the typing pool and how she was actually able to become an engineer and how the people that she worked with helped her.

- *M. Byerley:*
- *You mentioned working in the pool and then getting the tapes and being able to start to move things faster. Did you bring this to someone's attention or did one of your managers notice? How did you come to take the courses that you took?*

- *J. Harper:*
- *I actually initiated the conversation. Expressed a desire to move into programming. Now, my support came from managers outside the pool.*

- *M. Byerley:*
- *Interesting.*

- *J. Harper:*
- *They were already programmers and engineers. I initiated the conversation with them, with the hope that if I became a programmer, I could join their functions. That was the idea. And they encouraged it. They really encouraged it and they were happy to see it happening.*

If you haven't listened to Jacqueline Harper's episode, we'll have a link to it in the Show Notes. Go over, hear living history from someone who saw it from the beginning. We just loved hearing Jacqueline's stories.

Finally, let's talk about Roshawnna Novellus, one of our most recent guests. Dr. Novellus personally, to me, is one of the most inspiring people I have ever met. I have never met a woman who has more confidence and certitude, in a good way, a clear sense of self-worth and value and initiative as Dr. Novellus. She reiterates that same theme we've been hearing, to keep seeking the support you need to reach your goals in tech--or really any career--because support is out there. In her case, it's her company. Roshawnna is the founder and CEO of EnrichHER, a network of successful women-led businesses that helps accelerate business growth through funding and by cultivating a thriving ecosystem for its members.

Let's listen to her talk about how she recommends finding your own network, your "tribe," as she calls it, and how part of EnrichHER's mission is to act as a support network for female entrepreneurs.

- *Melinda Byerly:*
- *So, what advice do you have for women? And I think it doesn't have to just be for women of color, but I suspect that women of color have their own challenges too, that are separate from white women's challenges. What advice do you have for those of us out there with an idea and getting started?*

- *Roshawnna:*
- *Well, I think this advice works for everyone. It's really to figure out your own tribe. And that doesn't have to mean that these people are from your city or in your industry, but you need to figure out what people will support you when you're going through your ups and down. So my tribe include people from many different cities, so I have other people in, that are Fintech founders, that are in Charlotte, or people who are in California doing different things. I have mentors who focus on helping women in entrepreneurship. So, as long as you can figure out what people really care about your growth, you can kind of ignore the rest because most people are naysayers and you don't want to give them too much of your energy.*

- *Melinda Byerly:*
- *That is so true. I think, as a founder, finding out when to listen to other people and when not to is one of the biggest challenges.*

- *Roshawnna:*
- *Yes, I agree.*

- *Melinda Byerly:*
- *Like yeah, that's a fine line. Like the longer I go, the less I listen to other people, but the more dangerous that could be. Like the more I trust my own judgment, the more you realize you might be in danger if you're not taking in that information. And it's a good chance to talk about, when is the right time for a founder--no matter what their business is--to come to EnrichHer? When, at what stage in your growth, in a founder sort of starting a company or in its lifecycle, should they come to your website and find out more about funding?*

- *Roshawnna:*

- *Yes, so our focus is on women-led businesses that have been in operation for at least a year in the U.S. and they've reached 100,000 in revenue. Once someone reaches those two metrics, we can help you with different financing options. And even before that, we can help you with the community and resource piece. But that is, that's who we're focused on.*

- *Melinda Byerly:*
- *And they don't have to be in tech. As you said, this isn't just, this is debt, so it can be any business that you're running. Services business, local business.*

- *Roshawnna:*
- *Yes, we funded hair salons and wedding planners and doggy anxiety treat companies and high growth companies.*

- *Melinda Byerly:*
- *That's awesome.*

- *Roshawnna:*
- *So there's a spectrum.*

What I love about what Dr. Novellus is doing, is she's helping women of all different types of businesses, not just in tech, find funding. A statistic I learned was that 97% of women-owned businesses never cross a $1 million in revenue because the funding issues are so hard. But also because in some areas where women are innovating, they are not global, venture capital-led businesses. But who's to say they couldn't be if they did receive the right kind of funding?

I hope you've enjoyed the clips that we've shared with you, and I hope they encourage you and inspire you to go listen to the full episodes with each Thank you for listening with us and for allowing us to share these stories. Of these women. I know that I have been inspired and motivated and given hope by hearing their stories and empathizing with their struggles of what it's like to not only be a woman in tech, but specifically a black woman in tech. Thank you for listening to this show; thank you for listening to these episodes and letting us share these stories with you.

 Black history is embedded in the history of tech, and we're excited to highlight these women's experiences and what they're working on now. To listen to any of

these episodes in full, visit stayinaliveintech.com or see the show notes for this episode. Thanks again for joining us.