



Name: Shireen Mitchell: “You Can’t Stop the Girl” Part 1 of 2 Season 4: Episode #7

Speaker 1:

Welcome to Stayin' Alive In Technology, a series of conversations with Silicon Valley veterans talking on war stories from the past and practical advice for today. And now here's your host, Melinda Byerley, founding partner of Fiddlehead, a digital marketing consultancy.

Melinda Byerley:

Welcome back to another episode of Stayin' Alive in Tech. The seventh episode of our fourth season, to be exact. And I am thrilled to introduce our next guest, Shireen Mitchell.

So, just a bit about her: Shireen began designing bulletin board systems and Gopher protocol sites at a young age, prior to the advent of the websites we know now. She later became the webmaster for PoliticallyBlack.com, a site that was eventually sold to Netivation and later ended at Politico.com.

Shireen formed the first woman of color web management firm in 1997, known as the Mitchell Holden Group. She then founded Digital Sisters/Sistas in 1999, the first organization created specifically to help women and girls of color get into the STEM field and use technology in their daily lives. Shireen also created the game TechnoDemic, a multimedia competition to help youth learn technology and programming terms.

In 2010, she formed Tech Media Swirl LLC, a digital social strategy company focused on integrated media strategies for outreach to diverse communities. In 2013, she founded Stop Online Violence Against Women. And in October of 2020, Shireen was named as one of the 25 members of the "Real Facebook Oversight Board", an independent monitoring group over Facebook.

It would take me several more minutes to go over the full list of Shireen's achievements, so I think that's a good stopping point for now.

During this first half of our conversation, you'll hear Shireen discuss what it was like getting into computers and coding during the 1980s as a young black girl from the projects—specifically in Harlem and the Bronx.

And while her journey may seem like the familiar underdog story of a poor, young minority taking an unlikely path to success, especially for this time period, it's actually much more nuanced and unique than you may initially think—an aspect she's continually had to work through during her education and



subsequent career paths. After all, not many young girls living in the projects back then were happily given an Atari and Commodore 64 by their mother, who viewed them as a literal investment into her daughter's future. She was right, of course.

Shireen's experiences have given her plenty of first-hand insights into what minority women have constantly faced within the evolving history of tech. This led her to start Digital Sisters, along with Stop Online Violence Against Women, a project that addresses laws and policies to provide protections for women online.

What a dynamic, right? Shireen first started an organization aimed at bringing women and girls of color to online spaces and the realm of coding, and then recognized a glaring need to protect these very same women from the vileness, sexism, racism, and oppression that's since become commonplace on the internet and social media. And that's really not even the half of it.

Our conversation is one of the longer ones we've had on this podcast, if not the longest. So, as you've probably noticed, this is part one of two. And the second episode veers into a very different but natural trajectory from where we start, so you're really going to want to listen to where this all ends up. It's quite candid, to say the least.

So let's get started. I hope you enjoy this time listening to and learning from Shireen as much as I have.

Melinda Byerley:

Shireen, welcome to the podcast.

Shireen Williams:

Hi, thank you for having me. I really am so thankful that we finally got to do this together.

Melinda Byerley:

I know it's been more than a year in the making, but we're here now. So, Shireen, I learned that you grew up in New York, and your website—

Shireen Williams:

Yes.

Melinda Byerley:

... says that you grew up in the projects. But I think, because I've lived in New York, I want to hear where exactly you grew up in New York.



Shireen Williams:

I grew up, originally, in two projects, but the main one is Harlem. I grew up in Harlem, literally, in a place that if I tell you the streets, people used to laugh. When I got older I didn't understand. It's between Madison Avenue and Fifth. So the concept... (Laughs) right—You laugh!

Melinda Byerley:

(Laughs) You can tell I lived in New York!

Shireen Williams:

Right?

Melinda Byerley:

I lived on the way Upper East Side.

Shireen Williams:

(Laughs) The concept that there's a project between Madison and Fifth.

Melinda Byerley:

On the waaay Upper East Side, right?

Shireen Williams:

We're talking waaay up, right?! But the point is, the fact that they named those two streets, Fifth Avenue. That's a Lord & Taylor, so it's like people not understanding there's a complete throughline from places like that, to where I live. There's a straight road that gets you to where I live and it's a straight road for me to get to see that. But that somehow those two worlds stay so separate from each other.

Shireen Williams:

When I was growing up—just so that we're clear—when I was growing up, I was ashamed of growing up in the projects. I was ashamed because it was the way I was being treated. I was ashamed at even the way the education system operated about, like, "Oh my God, we have a girl like her with grades like that there." It was like a shock and awe of it all.

Melinda Byerley:

Like, "poor people can't be smart. Poor black girls, especially, can't be smart."

Shireen Williams:



It's, "poor black girls, especially, cannot be smart." Cannot, it's like impossible. That the fact that I'm poor is a dictation on my thought process, my education, all my "opportunities." And so when I used to say... Seriously, I'm not even joking, I had people who knew me later, who didn't even know I grew up in the projects. There was a book that came out some time ago, where this woman wrote about being a project girl, and ended up in France. And I saw this book and I was like, "Oh, this is my story." And then when I said it out loud, somebody was like, "How? How was this your story?" It was like, people were just that shocked. And that's what changed my tune about saying it, because I was like, "Wait, how were y'all this shocked?"

Shireen Williams:

So it's both sides of it. It's like when you hide it for so long, because it's the thing that people are using as a weapon against you. Then you get past it all. And then people can't even imagine you came from it. And I'm just like, "Wait, wait, wait, wait, what's happening?"

Shireen Williams:

And it's not just the people that I am in college or in career spaces with, I'm like at some point teaching with Digital Sisters—which I know we're going to get into—I'm in school programs, trying to teach kids to code, and using the school system to kind of get there, to do that. And the children can't imagine that I came from anything close to what they lived through or what they're living through.

Melinda Byerley:

Wow.

Shireen Williams:

The amount of times I had to say, "I grew up in the projects." I'm like, "What are y'all talking about?" And even they're going, "No way, it's not possible." And so that was like, probably, especially during my time with Digital Sisters, was the moment where I was like, "Okay, there's something wrong now with this concept that somehow I can't come from this, and then still be the person that I am. There's something wrong with us distance, and the way that we see each other."

Shireen Williams:

So there were multiple instances where these two things were happening, during that time period, that I really was like, I had to sit with this. So I grew up partly in the projects in Harlem and then partly in the Bronx. And then finally right around my last couple of years before leaving to go to college, my mother moved back to the Bronx, and I finally had my own room, because in the projects you don't... And I was able to have this moment of my own space.

Shireen Williams:

It's not even long before I'm leaving, that I get the space to myself and have this little bit of a different worldview about like, "Oh, this is what it looks like to not live in the projects." And I only got a couple of



years of that before I went off to college. But it is very interesting to me that, when I think about that, the core of my upbringing was the projects. I mean, I only got a couple of years of outside of that. So for me to not claim it, just doesn't make any sense.

Melinda Byerley:

It's like hiding a big part... It's like, I grew up in the Midwest. I went to college there. I haven't lived there in 30 years, but for the first 20 years of my life, that's where I lived. It's who I am. Yeah. That makes sense. It's a part of your identity.

Shireen Williams:

You can't erase it. So now it's like literally, part of what I... You see my Twitter profile, it says, Harlem's Shuri in political Mecca. And the point is, I am the original, the one that eventually turns 16 years old into tech. Grew up in the projects. I'm Harlem's versions of Wakanda Shuri.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah, for sure.

Shireen Williams:

That's who I am.

Melinda Byerley:

That's an awesome identity to adopt. I love that.

Shireen Williams:

Yeah. I was like, "I'm never changing this." Once I adopted that, I was like, "yeah, this is it." There's no way to change this... Because those three, four words actually encompasses my whole trajectory, all the way up until where I am right now, and it's the best descriptor. I've gone through my own personal descriptors. At this point, there's literally no reason to change that, at this point. If you do not read that and not kind of go, "aha," then you and I should not meet.

Melinda Byerley:

"If that doesn't speak to you, I'm not going to speak to you."

Shireen Williams:

Right. I'm not going to be the thing that's going to make sense to you. That's the key to that. If you can't relate to these pieces right here, that's being connected, then yeah, we're not going to be connected. You're going to miss the whole boat.



Melinda Byerley:

When you were little, growing up in the projects—and I don't want to make assumptions as a white lady who grew up in the Midwest, so feel free to talk to me like, I don't know what I'm talking about, because I don't when it comes to living in the projects. What'd you want to be when you grew up, when you were little?

Shireen Williams:

So two things. One was, I've said this in a different podcasts, and I'm just going to say it here. I was a very sick child and I went through two versions of what I wanted to be. And one was to be a teacher. And then, one was to be a doctor, but I wanted to be a doctor after I died. I had to have... It's a long story, but I'll shorten it. I'm living in the projects, the family doctor in the neighborhood just didn't think they should reveal to my mother I was going to die. There was no way I was *not* going to die. That's the ramifications of living in the projects. It's the, "Well, this is a child in the projects, what is her life going to be like anyway? So why tell her mom she's going to die?"

Melinda Byerley:

Wow.

Shireen Williams:

And so years of this, my mother just got sick of me being sick, that she took me to a hospital. And literally, the doctors listen to my heart. One turns red, goes out and get another doctor, that doctor comes in, turns white. They take my mother out, and she's doing her damndest not to cry. And I'm sitting here, as a child going, what's wrong with me? I have three adults acting weird.

Melinda Byerley:

Freaking out.

Shireen Williams:

Something's wrong with me. And they don't really ever tell me the full truth of it. But the truth of the matter was there was no way a doctor could have listened to my heart and walked away without realizing I was destined to be dying. And I was literally dying. And so it was either die at 18 or do an experiment to try to save her. And so that experiment was a 50/50 experiment, because they were going to have to kill me and pray they can bring me back.

Shireen Williams:

So after that experience and being in the hospital so much, I then wanted to be a doctor, because I felt like, you know, black children got treated horribly in the hospital, from my own experience, and then all the things I saw. Then I was also sad about other children and parents would leave them, and I went through my emotions about that.



Shireen Williams:

So originally it was to be a teacher, and then it was to be a doctor. And I actually did kind of go off to college thinking I was going to be a doctor. And that has a mixed bag of things. It was funny that I thought I could go off and be a doctor, but my counselor was telling me I could not be a coder. Those two things were not realistic. It's a really interesting thing to think about, because I did go off, finally, to college going, "Okay, I'm going to be a doctor at least." Right?

Melinda Byerley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Shireen Williams:

And of course, I can't do it, because what can Shireen not do? She can't stick children with needles. (Laughs) She wants to take care of children, she don't want to hurt them.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. I feel that way about being a veterinarian too, for the same reasons. (Laughs) Like, yeah, I hear you.

Shireen Williams:

So this was a really weird moment. So I think about that sometimes, it's like, what was that trajectory? I was busy being told I couldn't code, this entire time. But me growing up wanting to be a doctor was like this fine thing. And I don't know if that's a social thing or a societal thing or whatever the expectations are there, but I did go through...

Shireen Williams:

So the thing that you were asking about growing up in the projects is that, by the time I was in the fifth grade... So this age range is about the same—I always mess up ages, when I think about like, how old are you in what grade?—But the surgery happened when I was around 10. I was coding right around 10. And I was also testing above math and reading levels to the extent that there was no score.

Shireen Williams:

So whenever I took a test, they didn't have a score for me. The score was above high school, because they didn't have numbers that match anything past high school. And if you think about it, above high school means college. If you think about the words... At the time, as a child, I don't know what that means, but by the fifth grade I was testing above high school level reading and math levels. So it was this really weird space to be in, because teachers were like, "I don't know what to do with her." One teacher told my mom, "I would give assignments for pages 13 to 21, and Shireen would come back with a whole book done." And so you would think that that was not a bad thing, but it was.



Shireen Williams:

And so my mom was like, "It was clear that teachers didn't know what to do with you. And then you got bored and then you got in trouble. And then like the whole drama happened." It's not about my ability to pay attention to school or anything like that. It's basically teachers are like not calling on me, because they were like, "You have the answer. We know you have the answer, because we've read the book that you filled out. So I'm want to teach the rest of the class, and you have all the answers. So I'm just going to ignore you."

Shireen Williams:

And that was kind of my existence from like fifth grade up until right about sixth grade, where my mom had finally decided to go down to the superintendent, and basically... Believe me, it's such an interesting thing, because the thing that was happening during that time in my life was I was either sick, because of the surgery and my body trying to repair itself, or I was being kicked out of the class, because I was in trouble for knowing too much.

Melinda Byerley:

Let me guess, were you talking too much, like I was? Did you get in trouble for—

Shireen Williams:

Yeah!

Melinda Byerley:

We're going to start a club for women who talk too much?

Shireen Williams:

(Laughs) I was trying to answer the questions. The teachers didn't want me to. And then you got the conflict in between. And I remember as an adult, my mother had made a comment to me and I was so distraught about the comment. My mom said to me—as an adult, as a child, you don't always catch the things that adults are doing.

Shireen Williams:

But when I was older, she said something along the lines of like, "You knew you were smart. You didn't let anyone tell you weren't smart." And so any adult that came to present themselves as if they were trying to dismiss me or make me look like I don't know what I'm talking about, I would step up and be like, "You can't do that. That's not possible."

Shireen Williams:

Whatever way I did it, it was like, as a child, it was not what you were supposed to do. And so my mother was like, "You would never let anyone, any way—it didn't matter who it was—tell you you weren't smart.



You knew you were smart and you made sure everybody else knew too. It was not acceptable." And so that little bit of that confidence, whatever that thing was in me got me in trouble constantly. So I was either being sent home, because I was sick, really sick, like really, really sick. And she had to figure out what my tricks were, because I had tricks. Of course, you figure out what the tricks are. Because she would be like, "If I had two broken legs, I would figure out how to crawl to school."

Shireen Williams:

There was no way for me not to go to school. So for me, it was like a complete thing about being in school—being sick in school and being sent home was a big deal. And for her, she knew that the teachers or the principals thought that she was a bad mom sending her sick child to school, not knowing that I would have done anything not to miss school. (Laughs) And so it was like this mixed thing that my mom's even doing. She's a nurse at the time, by this moment in my life. And so it was a very mixed thing, but yeah. So the thing about that time period is that you have to deal with projections about people thinking about what your existence should be. The doctor basically-

Melinda Byerley:

Tell me more about that.

Shireen Williams:

Say again?

Melinda Byerley:

Tell me more about that.

Shireen Williams:

Yeah. I mean, just think about it. It's like the doctor dictating the fact that my life could end and my mom's not going to worry about it? Think about even processing, having some kind of autonomy over that. Just because I'm a poor black kid in the projects.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. Like, "she's going to die. No big deal, but"—

Shireen Williams:

No big deal.

Melinda Byerley:

Yes. Just, yeah, no big deal.



Shireen Williams:

No big deal. And then the other part that was like, "you're a kid in the projects, you can't be the smart, just get into your place," and adults trying to dictate what my place is supposed to be. And I'm just like, no. And the others were like, "you can't code that or you can't play video games," which is one of the other things I was doing at that time.

Melinda Byerley:

That's a question I want to ask you, which is how... I mean, we're about a certain age. I think we're not far apart in age, looking at your background. Do you remember the first time you got your hands on a computer? I sure do.

Shireen Williams:

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. So the way that the computer thing happened was every day after school, I would go down, one block away, it wasn't even that far,. Actually the game room was diagonal from my actual building. You have to come home when the lights get dark, when the lights go out. Every day after school, I would play in the arcade room until it got dark and then come home. And so another example, the store owner didn't want me there. Why? Because I could play on the one quarter, and they couldn't make money.

Melinda Byerley:

What game was this?

Shireen Williams:

This is the early days. So we're talking Pac-Man and Frogger, we're talking Space Invaders. We're talking Centipede.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah, Frogger, that was mine. Galaxian, all of that. Yeah. Nice.

Melinda Byerley:

So you're hogging the machine on one quarter and he can't make any money on it. Okay.

Shireen Williams:

Exactly. Especially Pac-Man, which was my thing. At this time, I'm oblivious to the fact that I'm the only girl. So the two things that happened at that moment—which is why it's so vivid to me—is that I realized the boys are mad, because they don't want to lose to a girl. So they don't really want to play, if I'm



playing. The owner is like, "I'm not making money because I want the boys to play, but I don't want you to keep them from playing, because you've beaten them on the one quarter." Right?

Melinda Byerley:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Shireen Williams:

So there's that. And then it's my mom, who's like, "you must be there because there's some boy that you think is cute there," and I'm playing to be near the boys.

Melinda Byerley:

Wow.

Shireen Williams:

And the mom part is the interesting part, because I was just like, "Wait, what?" And actually, my boyfriend was on the other side of the projects.

Melinda Byerley:

You were like, "Well, I do have a boyfriend, but it's not this."

Shireen Williams:

It's not there. I do have a guy I like, but he's on the other side of the project. So it was a really interesting thing, because I thought about it when that was what was going through my head, honestly, because I was like, "Nah, that's... What?" And it was just so weird. When I'm ever in competition with guys, usually the guys don't me there. So it's not like a comradery that gets into anything like, "oh, we want to hang out together and be friends." That's not what's happening. They don't want me there. So this is a battleground. This is not—

Melinda Byerley:

Wow. I mean, you're getting it from all sides. You're getting it from teachers, from parents, from the people in the community, and from your own mom, like criticism.

Shireen Williams:

I am. Isn't that weird.

Melinda Byerley:



Just wall-to-wall criticism.

Shireen Williams:

Isn't that weird to say out loud? But yeah, I was. I was getting it from all sides. By the way, that hasn't changed. (Laughs) I'm just saying, in terms of the way communities still come at me and then groups of people come at me, it's all sides. It's like that was probably the beginning of why I can do what I do now, because that part didn't change.

Shireen Williams:

I've gone decades with that same kind of behavior in one form or another. But my mom really did... I had done an interview when I talked about founding Digital Sisters, and she heard the interview and I made the comments about the video games and this is how I got started. And she literally came to me and she was like, "Do you know how much we fought over that?" And I was like, "Kind of."

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah, I was there.

Shireen Williams:

"I was there." And then she's like, "But I didn't..." And she paused. There was this pause, because she didn't want to say out loud that she never believed me. So it's that really weird moment when even she's pausing, I know she's pausing, we both know why she's pausing, because she doesn't want the words to leave her mouth, but she didn't believe me. So what she did, because she didn't believe me—and this is where my age comes in—she bought the Atari.

Shireen Williams:

And so the goal is, if I really do love these video games, I'm just going to come home instead. I get to play without the competition and do the things I want to do, without the store owner upset with me, without the guys upset with me. And I get to play at my own leisure, whenever I want to. So when she did get it, I was just like, "Oh yeah, I'll do this. Why not? Why wouldn't I? Right?"

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah.

Shireen Williams:

And then shortly after that was the first computer, which is the Commodore 64. And at that point, that was it. This is my world.

Melinda Byerley:



Did you have one at school? Mine was at school. That was the first one.

Shireen Williams:

No, no, no. See, this is the weirdest part of the story, my mother bought this.

Melinda Byerley:

This is amazing.

Shireen Williams:

We were poor!

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. That was a lot of money.

Shireen Williams:

But I'm telling you at this time period, that's not a little piece of change. No, we were poor. We lived in the projects and my mother bought the Atari first, and then a Commodore 64 second. She invested. So it was like, there's a part that you have to also understand that my mom, despite the conflicts that we were having, that she actually invested enough in me.

Melinda Byerley:

By this point, "she's clearly destined to live after that surgery, so we got to do something with this."

Shireen Williams:

"We want to keep her around."

Melinda Byerley:

"It looks like she's going to hang around, maybe we should do something about that."

Shireen Williams:

"Maybe it's a good thing that she's still here." (Laughs) Anyway, I think that's funny, but I didn't even think about it like that. But the point is, at that juncture, what's happening is, I am now not catching the fact that I'm no longer in conflict, but also what's happening, which I thought about later, was the boys now have a domain where no girls are present. When my mother took me away, because she was "trying to save me from the boys" and the darkness or whatever else could happen outside, she also opened the



space to make boys believe that they were the only ones that could be good at these games. They were upset with me beating them. Just think about that.

Melinda Byerley:

I played competitive chess in high school. It was not dissimilar.

Shireen Williams:

Yeah. But now we didn't have to worry about that, because there was no other girl who was coming back in there to play with them or compete with them. So I get my own space. Don't get me wrong, I build my own confidence, both with my games and my computer, but there is a realm out there now that's being developed with this concept that it's a boys only spot. And I think about that later. At this moment in my life, I don't catch it. I don't understand it. I'm just kind of navigating the world as best I can.

Melinda Byerley:

And it was really about this time that computer advertising started to change. I mean, like you, again, we're about the same age, and so we didn't see it, we were too young. But in hindsight, I think I've learned that that's when Commodore and Apple, their advertisements all started to show boys playing.

Shireen Williams:

Oh, yeah, everything.

Melinda Byerley:

Early computers did not, but then they did.

Shireen Williams:

Everything. If you think about... I'm so sorry, I'm trying to turn the thing off, because it keeps going off. So please, I'm a pause for a second, so I can turn this phone off, because I just know this is still pinging.

Shireen Williams:

One of the things that I noticed was—which I say to people all the time when I talk about the history of gaming—Pac-Man, even though it's called Pac-Man, was originally designed by the creators to get girls involved in games. It was the one game that they created, and Pac-Man—if you honestly think about the history of this, I'm going to do a little bit of history lesson here—is that it's the first time "man" or an identity is in there.

Shireen Williams:

Because when we're doing Centipede, Frogger and everything else, there is no identity to anybody. But Pac-Man was first one that was created, basically—focused on girls, by the way—but it had a sort of



identity. And so the creators originally were thinking, girls like to eat, they like dessert or whatever. And then they took that pizza slice out, and that becomes what Pac-Man is.

Melinda Byerley:

It wasn't shooting. Yeah. It wasn't killing things.

Shireen Williams:

It wasn't shooting. It was eating. It was eating!

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. Because that's what girls do, right? We just eat.

Shireen Williams:

We eat. (Laughs) And we go after dessert, because the cherry... Think about it, cherries, remember?

Melinda Byerley:

Yep.

Shireen Williams:

All the things you got points about. Yeah, it's like—

Melinda Byerley:

But, it's still had to be Pac-Man.

Shireen Williams:

So it's funny that they call the Pac-Man, because eventually it's—

Melinda Byerley:

Ms. Pac-Man.

Shireen Williams:

Ms. Pac-Man, Jr. Pac-Man, pirate Pac-Man a whole bunch of other Pac-mans that come after that. But when the global phenomenon happens, the purpose of the original game was to get girls' interest. And I find it really interesting that it turned on his head completely opposite of that after. It got into way more gender-related roles. And that includes like when we started getting into the fight roles or even the Lara



Croft stuff. Now we're very gender-specific. But originally, during our time, my time, especially, it was not gender... We have Pong, Pong has no gender. You know what I mean? Centipede-

Melinda Byerley:

We had Zelda. And we had Zong and we had the RPGs.

Shireen Williams:

And then after that we get Donkey Kong, which is Mario Brothers and everything else like, and then it starts to move. And Donkey Kong was the next phase of that. Why? Well, it is Donkey Kong before it's Mario Brothers. But, anyway, it's the Mario Brother trying to save the girl. Now we have a very gender-specific savior model.

Shireen Williams:

So I always thought about that, in terms of timelines, but, yeah, I mean, Pac-Man was the original and it was designed... People get so bent out of shape every time I say that out loud. They're like, "What do you mean it was called Pac-Man? The name is man." I have the clips of the history of video games. It's actually on my Vimeo channel, every once in a while, I go get it and send the link out, so people can hear him actually say, it was—

Melinda Byerley:

And we'll put a link in the show notes for everybody too.

Shireen Williams:

Okay, yeah. I have the link, so you can put it in the show notes, where I basically, grabbed that clip just so that people can hear him say out loud, "We were designing this for girls." People get so mad. But that was the original design. And then further, when we started having these audio game things like diaries and others, a lot of that original design was by a mom and daughter team. And then whenever they sold their product, it was turned into a marketed thing to boys. It turned brown or blue or whatever color, and the whole purpose of it turned into, "this is something for boys." And so I always felt it was the marketing that's shifted the industry more than it was anything to do with girls being interested ever at all.

Shireen Williams:

My opinion from my own proof of my existence, it's part of that. It was never about gender specific—

Melinda Byerley:

Inherent interest. Yeah.



Shireen Williams:

It was not inherent that way. They were designing it... The marketing was doing that. One of the things I used to do a long, long time ago was go into bookstores and look and see where the computer magazines were and where the gaming magazines were. And they would literally have them in like titled "men" sections. So if I'm a woman, I have to go into the "men" section to go get those things. That was not only in design of PR, but it was like even design of where those magazines sat. You had to walk into "men's" interests.

Melinda Byerley:

This takes me back to... you mentioned going into college between thinking about being a doctor and then being told you couldn't code. My niece is in college, and so I'm very curious about how people choose their majors these days, because she and I were talking about it, and I said, "You should listen to some of the podcasts, because people talk about this." How did you pick your major?

Melinda Byerley:

And I have a theory. I could be wrong. You can totally correct me. That our major is less about what we want to do with our lives than it is about learning a way to think. And the humanities teach us one way. Sciences teach us another. Engineering teaches us a third. There are different ways of thinking and value systems and thought processes, so that's the reason I ask the question.

Shireen Williams:

Yeah. I would have to say, I think that everybody who goes off to college with the thing they're thinking they're going to go do, I always feel like you're thinking that for a reason, that is probably not yours.
(Laughs)

Melinda Byerley:

That's fair. That's really fair.

Shireen Williams:

It's really not yours.

Melinda Byerley:

How can it be yours at 18? I mean, it's rare.

Shireen Williams:

It's not really yours. Sometimes it happens and you go through the whole process and you do the whole thing. But on average, most of my friends and people around me, they went in, because their mom told them they should do with this thing or something they saw.



Shireen Williams:

I had a cousin who wanted to do something because she saw Law and Order. There's a reason, and it usually isn't a reason that has to do with what you think you want out of this. So when I went off to college, no, I didn't think to go in to do computer science, originally. And the thing that my college was is that it didn't do medicine in undergrad. You had to go into zoology—

Melinda Byerley:

Or biology or chemistry, or pre-med. They used to call it, pre-med.

Shireen Williams:

They call it pre-med, but it's not pre-med-

Melinda Byerley:

No, bio or chem or whatever.

Shireen Williams:

Something along those lines. Anyway, so I think what changed me was my mom being as the mom that she is, trying to help me out, had me go be a lab tech. If you're going to be a doctor—

Melinda Byerley:

If you're interested in this, go find out. Pretty smart.

Shireen Williams:

Go be a lab tech. And I was like, "Oh no, I can't do this." When I went in there to go do that, I was like, "This I cannot do. If this is what doctors have to do on a regular basis, this is something like..." This was the moment I was like, "Okay, I went to school for the wrong reason. Now I got to figure out what I'm going for."

Shireen Williams:

And the thing is, I didn't go for the exact wrong reasons, but because I was a sick kid, I wanted to help children. And so I had to focus on the fact that I wanted to help children, but did I have to be a doctor to help children?

Shireen Williams:

And so I shifted from there. And so what I tell people is like, "You will shift a couple of times until you find a place that fits you." But what happened for me was two things. One, is I do go off to college. I go



thinking I'm going to be a doctor. I'm going into pre-med. I'm still coding and hacking. So I find a clique from school. Again, I realize I'm the only girl. So I have my clique. I'm hacking on the side, but I'm going to school. And most of us are actually in school at this time. We connected, because we were all in school.

Melinda Byerley:

Which college are you in at this point?

Shireen Williams:

Which one did I go to first?

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah.

Shireen Williams:

I always get nervous about telling people the truth of where I went.

Melinda Byerley:

You don't have to. You can just tell me whatever school you're in at the time. That's okay.

Shireen Williams:

Can I just say it was a HBCU?

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah, because they're amazing.

Shireen Williams:

I went off to Washington DC to a HBCU. How about that? That's good, because I have my issues about claiming my university. That's the whole story.

Melinda Byerley:

Yes. So that's the thing, right? That's like, there's a religious war there. So I don't want to get you in trouble with either side of that. You can look that up on her LinkedIn. (Laughs)

Shireen Williams:



(Laughing) There's a whole thing that goes on there, in so many different ways. So I'm just going to say, I went off to college to Washington, DC, and went to a HBCU. And so even that is a shocker for me. Because now I'm amongst, I'm going from the projects—

Melinda Byerley:

People like you, it probably felt like people... More people like you, I should say.

Shireen Williams:

No, opposite.

Melinda Byerley:

Really?

Shireen Williams:

Yes, because what happens in this particular moment as I'm navigating through this, now I have people who look just like me, which is why I say I'm always cautious about the things I say. I have people who look just like me from all across the nation, and I'm assuming that, because we all look alike, that we have some kind of simpatico going on. And, boy, do I find out that's not true. (Laughs) Why? Because—

Melinda Byerley:

You mean black people are not a monolith. They're not all alike?

Shireen Williams:

We are not a monolith! (Laughs)

Melinda Byerley:

You're not all alike?

Shireen Williams:

(Laughs) That's the moment you find out, "oh, no, we don't all actually get along either. It's like, oh, I'm going off to school. I'm going to be... No, no, we also don't all get along. And we have our factions, whether it's the football team, the arts school, the school of B, the the school of C, engineering, wherever it is, we would go off into our own factions, even on campus.

Shireen Williams:

My campus wasn't even that big. And I was just like, what is happening? And within that, we go into our factors about geography. So, New Yorkers are a very different breed and I would get on campus and



people would be like, I hate you, or I love you. They would immediately knew you were a New Yorker because your tone, your dress, your appearance, whatever it was. And people would have the immediate reaction to me. You wouldn't even know who I was and people would have reaction about love you or hate you immediately. And I was like, this is kind of weird.

Shireen Williams:

But it was one of those moments where you're just like, "oh, people do this." People just make their own judgements again. Here I am with people that look like me and they're also making judgements. So to me, it wasn't a bad experience in the sense that I should have never gone through this. It was like the moment that I realized that when you were a kid growing up in poverty and you're struggling, and you're fighting with the aid building and you're protesting, you do all this stuff because the school ain't treating you right because of your income. And you've got people who you can hang out with where they're getting their registration sent to them. Because everything is paid for in full.

Shireen Williams:

"Yeah that's the dichotomy of being on that campus. And I was like, "I don't know how I'm feeling about this bit of dichotomy that I now have to exist within." Because it should have been more simpatico to me. And it wasn't. And I was like, "now I got to figure something out about myself and about my own culture." Does that make sense?

Melinda Byerley:

"Who am I? I thought that because I was these things that I'm this person, but then I realized that these are labels." Am I framing that right?

Shireen Williams:

These are labels that don't actually fit any of us. And so you're going through the identity thing, a coming of age, but yeah, you're going through that. So you're going through choosing what career you want, then you're going through your own identity thing, and then you have your cluster of people that you hang out with. And so I still ended up with a tech crew that I met mostly from school, but a key portions of them did not stay in school.

Shireen Williams:

So in some of the ways people talk about people like Zuck and others who drop out after two years or so, a couple of them did that. And I always say I was a dummy, because two of them went to go work for AOL when it first came out. We were doing all this stuff that we were trying to build before AOL came into existence, and AOL comes into existence and they go get stock options and go work for them. And they're like "Shireen, come." And I'm like, "No, I'm finishing school." Coming from the projects is like, the concept of not finishing school was like a big freaking deal.

Melinda Byerley:



You can't take that risk. You can't. I grew up poor too, you couldn't take that risk.

Shireen Williams:

It's like, you know that's not a thing, that's not an option on the plate. Despite the fact that they ended up being well off enough that they could pay for a house with cash. (Laughs)

Melinda Byerley:

But you had no way of knowing at the time.

Shireen Williams:

No, I don't have that trust system in place.

Melinda Byerley:

And this was AOL, one of the very first tech companies, it's not like now where a bunch of them are there. And no, I don't know how anybody could have come to a different conclusion given what you've been through. No, you got to finish school.

Shireen Williams:

I was like "No." I was like "No, no, no."

Melinda Byerley:

For what it's worth, I know somebody who turned down one of those early roles at eBay, and he was wealthy, he was at Stanford and his roommate called him and said, "come on over. I got this gig over here." Their roommate was Jeff Skoll.

Shireen Williams:

Oh, really?

Melinda Byerley:

And the guy said "No man, I got to finish school." He was at Stanford in the MBA program. "I got to finish school. My mom's going to get really mad at me if I don't finish school." And we know how that worked out. So you're not the only one that made that decision.

Shireen Williams:

No, no, no. But I was the only one in my crew basically. That's one, the crew. So just to explain it, before I go into the AOL thing was we were trying to one—we're still talking early days of building—I'm building



my own equipment at this point. We're talking early days of hardware, internet connection that's like 24K dial-up, we're talking 10 megabytes for a hard drive. You know what we're talking about? We're talking really early stuff.

Shireen Williams:

But we were trying to, in my mind, what we're trying to design was something that was kind of would have been a pre-AOL, right? So at that time you could do BBS boards. So you would dial into BBS boards. And so what we were thinking was that, especially two of us, the rest of the crew, I'm not sure how much they were committed to what my vision was.

Shireen Williams:

But what we were thinking was there'll be an essential number, it'd be one number. So the way BBS boards work is you have a number for whichever topic it was. So you would have to dial X, and even that wasn't sent central, right? You had to have someone to tell you which number was the horse-riding crew or the digital crew, right? You had to have someone who knew those numbers or where you could coalesce to get the BBS numbers, to do the things like getting in, getting online and doing a text version only of chatting basically is what it was, a crew of people. And so this is still early days, but enough that if I had my identity checked in any way, I would get harassed.

Shireen Williams:

So if I identify as a woman, if I identify as black, I still got harassment back then, I tell people that all the time. The minute I turned on the net, I was harassed. But remove that, I was able to hack in peace. And so I had my crew and we were trying to build what was going to be a central number. You would have one number. And once you typed into that number, once you got into the system, in the system, you can choose which categories of crew people you want to go hang out with. And then you can leave one group and go to another. You didn't have to hang up the phone and redial. That's what we were trying to build.

Shireen Williams:

Well, AOL comes along and you got GUI, you got images, you know what I mean? You got a system that you can just navigate in a way that blew our idea out of the water. So even we were like, "wow!" (Laughs) We were trying to get here. And someone was already doing this part of it. And so of course we start off paying, what was it, \$14.95 a minute?

Shireen Williams:

Well, I can't remember what it was per minute, but they were expensive with those high phone bills. And two of my friends eventually go apply. Because because AOL was local. See, the difference with some of the other tech companies that people don't realize that AOL was local here. That's a Virginia-based company. So that's the company I could've gone to go work for. And this is still early days. This is so funny to me that people talk about how you had to be in CV for everything. I was like "No, we were present for



what was happening in the corridor here." And the corridor was complicated. But some of that original start was here, not SV.

Melinda Byerley:

That's right. Because the military too.

Shireen Williams:

Military? Awesome.

Melinda Byerley:

The government defense.

Shireen Williams:

Because of DARPA and everything else, that goes with ICANN. And at the time with Network Solutions. Network Solutions are still based here. So all the domain name debates, right, that was all based here. So I didn't have to go to SV. And it used to always kill me when people were like, if you want to get somewhere in the industry, you got to come out to SV. No, I was here when AOL started, what're you talking about "I got to go the SV?" This is absurd. And some people still say that. I'm just like, that is crazy.

Melinda Byerley:

Well, now they're telling us we all have to go to Miami.

Shireen Williams:

They come up with all... What was the New York one, "alley," for New York?

Melinda Byerley:

Silicon Alley.

Shireen Williams:

Silicon Alley, right. In New York it's Silicon Alley versus Silicon Valley. Yeah. They'd come up with their versions of where people can go for that. But in my opinion, I'm going to say the original tech was here, and then it started spreading across the nation. East Coast is still the best coast, huh?

Melinda Byerley:

Well the University of Minnesota, our other guests, Bob Alberti, who was on the team that invented Gopher, he might have an opinion about that.



Shireen Williams:

(Laughs) I know!

Melinda Byerley:

But I think he'd definitely agree that it didn't have to be the Silicon Valley, that with any sort of age of discovery, things are happening all over the world.

Shireen Williams:

It's so weird that people like want to pocket it, but don't get me wrong, I can be guilty of this if you want to ask me about hip hop. Hip hop is still originally from the Bronx. (Laughs)

Melinda Byerley:

We're going to get specific. So Shireen, let's talk about Digital Sisters. So you're in school and things happen. So tell us about the journey to founding Digital Sisters and what led you to found it.

Shireen Williams:

So this crew actually is the reason that this sort of comes about. Because they go off, I'm still in school. Again, I'm going through these dichotomies about what I want to do next. So I realized I can't be a doctor. I'm doing this whole thing where I'm going into, maybe I'll be a pediatrician, maybe I'll be a child psychologist.

Shireen Williams:

In school I'm going through a whole bunch of iterations of what the degree should be finally when I get out of here. So I ended up after my first year just taking electives because I was still trying to figure... I was like, don't take any core courses until you freaking figure it out. So I ended up just doing like a whole bunch of electives, required electives instead for the second year.

Shireen Williams:

And so, as I was going through these iterations and hanging out with this crew, by the time they went off to go do AOL, I was still kind of like, "I don't think I know where I'm fitting anymore." And so one of them goes off to become the CTO of Granada by the way, which is like a big freaking deal if you think about that for a second, just pause about the people who were around me during that time period. This dude went off to be CTO. He never went to school, by the way, he was the guy who would be like, "I'm studying the manuals." While I'm studying textbooks, he's studying the tech manuals. And we would battle with each other about who was studying when or the most.

Shireen Williams:



Anyway, he goes off, they go to AOL. My dream is busted about BBS boards. And I'm just kind of not knowing what I'm going to do next. I'm going to school still kind of out in the air, and then the CTO guy says to me "There's this thing, you know, this happening, you know, the World Wide Web." And I was like "Yeah, what?" He was like "I think this might be something you might be interested in." And he's telling me, because, of course, that's probably when he's experiencing it, right? And he was like, I'm doing this, but I think this is something you would be interested in. So I went to go dig into it a little bit. And I was like, yeah, I'm not doing this. And so interesting that I did that because I was just like, "this is just not the thing I want to do."

Shireen Williams:

So I of course delved into it, and I found people who were building sites. I found this woman who was building a site called Sister Circle. It was still early, early coding days, about even web design. And I decided to help her. And so I was like, I'm going to do this. I lost my thing, right? I don't have a thing, but at least I can have this little thing on the side again, it's always on the side. And so I'm helping her and she's just like "Why are you helping me?" And I was like, "No." Because this environment, Sister Circle, which is basically for women of color, and having an environment where content was being presented or whatever, I was like, "I would love to like help with that because that's right up my alley." And she was like "Yeah, but you could probably do all this by yourself." And I was like "I could, but I don't want to, because I'm doing this other thing."

Shireen Williams:

But as that progresses, and she's pushing, I can't remember the exact moment, but then I eventually form a web firm. So I become the first woman to call a web firm that exists.

Melinda Byerley:

Wow.

Shireen Williams:

This is 1997 now. And I don't even know how, I can just tell you, these are the moments before, but then like I finally say "Okay, I'm going to do it." And this is what I eventually do. And then doing that, I started doing promo classes, trying to get people to understand the business model of why they have a website, what benefited them, going to businesses, going to events. And then I showed up at this place called Social Space in Books, which was a place that was focused on black women authors, and a space for black women authors. And they would have events there.

Shireen Williams:

And so I started doing little training sessions to get people to understand the differences between domain names, web building, that kind of stuff. The first thing that happens is I get a phone call where one of the owners calls me and says "Can men come?" And I was just like "Can men come? I've never heard that one before."



Melinda Byerley:

(Laughs) Was it that he was asking for permission or that no man had ever asked if they could come?

Shireen Williams:

No no no no. It was a women's space, African-American women's space. So men were asking to enter...

Melinda Byerley:

The space.

Shireen Williams:

The women's space, specifically African-American women's spaces. So the owners were women. And so they were asking me what I was doing, could men come? Because they're getting phone calls from men and they were like "Is it okay if men show up to your classes?" And so it's the first time in my life I was like, is that a distinction? But sure, I can't imagine men not coming.

Melinda Byerley:

Interesting.

Shireen Williams:

And so when I started having these classes—because that's the first bell. I'm not catching the bells yet, but that's the first bell. And then I'm having the sessions, and the men are in the room saying stuff they don't know nothing about, making up terms, don't know the definition of terms. I'm just kind of like "Dah dah dah dah dah, move on." I tell people there's no stupid question. I will try to answer women's questions and do my best to navigate that. And one of the owners came back to me and she said "I've watched you in this room. You've shut these men down in a hot second. Like, it's not even a question. They don't even know what they're talking about." She says "But the women are feeling intimidated. And they think that they're in a class that's not for them. And I was like "What? These men don't know anything more than they know."

Melinda Byerley:

But the women don't know that. But the women don't know that at this point.

Shireen Williams:

The women don't know that. It sounds like they know more.

Melinda Byerley:



Because they speak with confidence or whatever it is that they do.

Shireen Williams:

They didn't even know the terminology, the words they were using.

Melinda Byerley:

I believe you.

Shireen Williams:

It was so absurd. You hear my tone? That's how annoyed I was. (Laughs)

Melinda Byerley:

It was, yeah. What did you think when she said that to you? It took you a minute to process, it sounds like.

Shireen Williams:

Of course it did because I'm now processing this. Now I have to process something different about Shireen, not about the women. I have to process something different about Shireen. And that's the moment I go back and ask my mother questions, start going back to the crew, everything in between. And I finally realized I had always been the only girl, woman, girl, woman at this point, but girl in general. And I didn't even catch it. I had no concept of all the little nuances about being the only girl. And I can go back now and look at all the little moments where the guys were jiggling and jiving, and the moments where they were trying to not let me know about the latest, greatest thing because they wanted to have it before me.

Shireen Williams:

The behavior changes that would happen. I didn't catch it until this moment where I'm dissecting. And so, I start to break the classes up. I try to do men only, women only. I try to do beginning, intermediate and in-between. And I realized that there's something fundamentally wrong here. Even then I'm just like "Okay, something's wrong." So now I have to figure out why. Because if I go back through my own trajectory, I'm poor. I had the assumption that everyone poor could get the same tools I had, right? The game, the computer, whatever. So why am I unique?

Shireen Williams:

Again, going through the university was another example, right? All of this is showing me, okay, you're not unique really. And then there's like, oh no, actually you are. There's something different about the through-line that's happening. And you're looking at everybody else like they should be on your track and it's not true. So once I started breaking it down that way, I realized that there was a gender problem.



Shireen Williams:

And the next thing I did after kind of doing my own diligence about myself and then trying to process these classes, was, I sent a survey out throughout DC.

Melinda Byerley:

What was that?

Shireen Williams:

A survey.

Melinda Byerley:

Oh no, but the name of the organization, through LDC?

Shireen Williams:

Oh no, no, no, no. Throughout DC.

Melinda Byerley:

DC. Got it. Okay.

Shireen Williams:

The entirety of DC. I sent it to schools, after school programs, looking for computer training segments of the schools to see what was being presented. Because I thought it was a DC thing.

Melinda Byerley:

Interesting.

Shireen Williams:

So I'm doing the thing where I'm sending out surveys, trying to get responses. I'm getting nasty responses from some people. I'm still confused.

Melinda Byerley:

Nasty responses about what?

Shireen Williams:



Because the questions lent to the fact that if you answered them you had to own a little bit of bias. If the question says, "what percentage of boys are in your class," if it's a computer class, and you say 80 percent, or you say a hundred percent, then you have to acknowledge—

Melinda Byerley:

Right? So you might have to acknowledge that there might be a problem. No, but yes. And nobody likes to know when there's a problem.

Shireen Williams:

Right? So my survey started doing a little bit of an uproar because now they're processing are all the teachers male who are teaching computer science?

Melinda Byerley:

So you opened a hornet's nest again.

Shireen Williams:

I opened a big hornet's nest when I did that. It was the most amazing thing, trying to get the surveys back and calling people and asking for like, I can do it over the phone. I thought it was a simple thing. It wasn't. I opened up a Pandora's box. And that's when I knew this wasn't just a DC thing, that this was a bigger problem. And that's why I formed Digital Sisters, it was after that survey.

Melinda Byerley:

So tell us about Digital Sisters, and then how you've transitioned into what you're working on now.

Shireen Williams:

Yes. I formed Digital Sisters with a goal to provide information. It was so funny the way I started, it was like, the goal of this is to create a website. Remember, I was a web firm. To create a website...

Melinda Byerley:

This all started with "I like doing this and why doesn't everybody else like doing it?"

Shireen Williams:

So I'm going to create a website, focus on Digital Sisters, focus on trying to get girls to code, and give them information necessary to find the places where they can go for classes and dah, dah, dah, and being able to code. Now, this is now 1999. So putting the website up was cute.

Melinda Byerley:



Right, what a neat little hobby you have there.

Shireen Williams:

Cute little hobby. You know why? Because there's a digital divide that exists. How many people have computers?

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah, yeah. Still, even today, but at the time it was incredible. It was even worse.

Shireen Williams:

At the time it was worse.

Melinda Byerley:

I was the only person I think in my high school that had a computer at home. It was only because my dad worked on robots at Chrysler. He was like, "the computers are going to be a thing," and the people in my high school were like, "what?"

Shireen Williams:

I had one because my mom just wanted to make sure we had it, she invested in it, but yes. So now we're talking, it's cute that I built a website, but how will the girls get into it?

Melinda Byerley:

Right.

Shireen Williams:

How was this working? So at that point I started doing programs and creating programs, and then going to schools, trying to do partnerships. One of the people who got the survey, he had 70% girls. It was the only one that had a different ratio. And he was like "Can you come? Because actually, I have 70%." That was the first place we started. And then we expanded from there and it was heaven to me. But there was a struggle overall because the concept of teaching girls to code, especially girls at college to code, was still a phenomenon that was not understood or accepted.

Shireen Williams:

And we're dealing, again, with these two things going on. And then you have parents who can't afford computers at home. So a lot of the interaction these girls are getting are from school, and the boys are commandeering... We're still talking early days. How many computers are there per school during that time? You know what I mean?



Shireen Williams:

So there was a lot of work that had to happen than just to simply build a foundation for it. And over time, despite how much we did in the city, and partnerships we built and other groups that started doing the same similar things. I realized that the problem wasn't the girls. The easiest thing for Digital Sisters was teaching the girls to code. Once they figured it out, it was masterful. They were great at it, but the trajectory for them would diminish over time.

Shireen Williams:

And that's what it became clear. It was like, as much as I could build their confidence while they're all in the room together, the rest of their world existence was going to be them by themselves. And that's different. And that changes what Digital Sisters was built for, which is to give the girls an opportunity to feel like someone other than me. Because I figured out, I was a unique one. I didn't care if I was the only girl, but that wasn't the same for everybody else. And that sense of safety and security was important.

Shireen Williams:

And so then we started expanding into policies and legislation and trying to deal with the school systems. For DC, we learned that every principal has the autonomy to create or not create courses, or classes, or roles at their schools. And it was so painful to realize that the problem isn't the girls, the problem is the system. From the schools to the colleges, to the tech companies. And so I spent way more time afterwards, focused on the policy side of it.

Melinda Byerley:

I love this part of the conversation—I have to stop you, because we've heard so much—I mean, I've been in tech 20 years. And until very recently, it feels that the entire conversation was about pipeline. Pipeline. We have to get more girls in the pipeline. Pipeline, pipeline, it's a pipeline problem. Oh, girls aren't interested in tech. And your whole life story proves that that's wrong.

Shireen Williams:

It's a lie, not wrong. It's a lie.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. So let me clarify, just in case anybody's wondering, a lie implies a deliberate choice, in my opinion. Would you agree with that definition?

Shireen Williams:

It's a wilful lie.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. Say more. Tell me more why you think that. I don't disagree. I think it's instructive to say why.



Shireen Williams:

No, it's a wilful lie. Okay. I can tell you that because I've, I've dealt with this. I've been in the space since 10.

Melinda Byerley:

For real. That's why I'm interested.

Shireen Williams:

So first off, that's part of the reason—but not just me one-off, but in the industry—trying to do diversity in the tech companies, trying to train girls to code. I've done the whole line of spectrum by this point at my age. And what I come away from all of that, is there's an intent to break the pipeline. The pipeline is fine, as long as you believe it exists. But there are people who on the lines, it was ripping tears into the pipeline so that we seep out of it. And I can honestly go all the way, the distance, but I'm going to use the example right now of Timnit, degrees, AI and ethics, papers, awards, and somehow she's wrong for putting the paper together that shows that AI ethics is problematic in the system.

Melinda Byerley:

We'll put notes to Timnit in the show notes. But for those that don't know who Timnit is, she was the head—as I understand it—of the ethics part of AI. So of Google's AI program she was leading up, how do we use AI in a way that is ethical? And for those of you who've listened to other podcasts guests, we've had Mar Hicks talk about sort of the dangers of AI. So that little editorial note, now let's go back to Timnit.

Shireen Williams:

Perfect editorial note, because it's true. Here's the problem I have with it. So let me frame this so that it's framed perfectly. If you can "lord" Bill Gates and Zuckerberg, who are college dropouts, but this woman had a PhD—which means three degrees—and it was treated that way, about her understanding about her expertise. Mostly in my opinion, because she's black, and trying to change the system, you'll understand why I'm saying that the reason that the pipe keeps leaking, it's because ya'll don't want us there telling you what you do is wrong.

Melinda Byerley:

It has to be that at some point, it passes from ignorance to malice when it continues. At some point, people have to ask, "are you serious about this?" I think that's what you're trying to say. You can't be serious because if you were, this is not what you would do. If you want people in the pipeline this is not what you would do.

Shireen Williams:



If he was serious about it, and if he thought the pipeline was really a problem, you couldn't have someone with three degrees and still complain, right? If you're serious about it.

Melinda Byerley:

She passed all the tests. I felt this way by Ellen Pao at Kleiner Perkins.

Shireen Williams:

Yes, Ellen too.

Melinda Byerley:

I always said she was the perfect test case because she's an engineer from MIT, right? Harvard educated lawyer. Extensively on paper, the perfect candidate for a venture firm. So what's the problem? Not, you, I'm not asking you, that's a rhetorical question. I'm asking you, Kleiner Perkins, what's your problem?

Shireen Williams:

You have to accept your culture change, because if we still have the model that the best, the greatest new tech is going to come from a white male dropout from Stanford, then the reality of a girl like me, that exists, is that you can't imagine who she is and what she would come up with. Because it wouldn't even fit in your mindset.

Melinda Byerley:

Right? By definition, you cannot imagine it because you have not lived her life.

Shireen Williams:

By definition. And it's a very interesting thing because then people are like, "well, are you talking anecdotal stuff?" No, I can use Timnit now, she's the perfect example, but anything else in between, I can also give you datasets. From the eighties to present, the numbers of brown and black women employed by these companies? It's still around 2%. Wait, no. It's 2% for all women. For brown and black women, it's lowered to like 0.01% or something like that.

Melinda Byerley:

It hasn't changed meaningfully. I've been watching this and given all of the vocalization, even pre-pandemic, pre-Trump, when we all had to go sort of deal with that dumpster fire for a while. When we were talking about this, that was years and years ago. Now, it's five years before, if you think about it. And it was for years before that, it hasn't changed in 10 years really.

Shireen Williams:



Listen to me. The people who are still trying to organize to get girls to code and all the things they're doing PR around. Most of the models that they're using is the model I was using in 1999. That's why I'm telling you nothing has changed because I'm still looking at the same models. My model should have evolved.

Melinda Byerley:

Right, by definition you evolved, you kept moving up. If I think about it from a marketing perspective, you went vertical, you just kept moving or deeper. You kept going. You're looking for root cause analysis, you start at the top, okay, it's pipeline, wait a minute. It's not really this, it's access. Okay. We have access. Now, if people are in the pipeline, now what's stopping them? Now we've come up across systematic racism, bias, sexism, combinations thereof.

Shireen Williams:

And policies and legislation. And there's the list of that that goes on, right? That's a trajectory that's different for me. That's why my story is unique, right? Because I didn't stop at just trying to teach the girls the code. Because that was the easy part of my job. I keep trying to tell people that. The easiest thing I could do was teach the girls to code. It was the easiest. We were teaching as low as a second grade. Second grade. Imagine if I could teach those same second graders all the way up until college. There would be no problem. So it's not a pipeline problem.

Melinda Byerley:

It's not a pipeline problem. So now, what are you working on?

Shireen Williams:

So now I'm working on just the position of what I was doing then, which was one of the things I did, and trying to convince moms to allow the girls to come to my program, to stop commandeering the computer from the girls, and unplugging the daughters and giving the computer to the sons, because that started happening over time.

Shireen Williams:

Which happened a lot, by the way, that you had to do separate training for parents. I had to do a separate training for moms. I did a single mom web teams. I did teen mom teams. I did, believe me, I'm telling you, I went the distance of trying to come at this in a way that most people can't even imagine. So yes I had single mom web teams. I built teen mom web teams. I went to group homes, afterschool programs. I went—I'm telling you—the gamut. Even the people who were in the systems of which they were in foster care or other, I could still train them.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. I think this is the part I want to underscore about what you're saying for the audience. I think what Shireen is saying is, it's not about IQ. It's not about IQ. It is not about gender preference, it is not about



class, it is not about race, it is not about anything. People like to code and can be taught to code at any stage in their life, regardless of their background. Obviously, there are nuances and degrees to which people can succeed, but if you think of it as a skill, like math reading, writing, it can be taught. Is that what you're saying?

Shireen Williams:

No, absolutely.

Melinda Byerley:

To anybody.

Shireen Williams:

To anybody, and to me—

Melinda Byerley:

It's no priesthood. It's not a magic priesthood.

Shireen Williams:

It's not. Okay, I was going to say a different word, I'm going to remove that word. I'm going to say, it's not a class of people that could only do this thing.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. Priesthood. It's not a secret code that you have to learn.

Shireen Williams:

It's not secret society or anything like that. And to me, a lot of what's happening is that's what people want. They want it to be a secret society. The funny thing is, I've been in scenarios where someone invited their boy from college and who didn't know anything. And then they cultivate the environment for him to learn. It's so funny, you can cultivate an environment for this potential of someone to learn. But somehow that potential is only granted to certain people. That's the point I'm making. The potential is granted to only serve a certain group of people. That's what's different. Because I've had people introduce people to me—

Melinda Byerley:

This gets into VC (venture capital) too, right?

Shireen Williams:



Yes. Funding and the like.

Melinda Byerley:

I always say, it's a meritocracy once you have traction. Once you can show them how they make money, they don't care. But it's the chance to try that's only given to a few people.

Shireen Williams:

But Melinda, can we also be honest?

Melinda Byerley:

We can always be. Tell me what I don't know.

Shireen Williams:

Someone can fail five businesses and make those VCs lose money and they will still give that person money for the sixth venture.

Melinda Byerley:

Yep. Standards are different. Women don't women filmmakers have the same problem.

Shireen Williams:

Yes, exactly. Let's just be honest. It isn't just the potential. It's like, these guys can actually fail five times and they will still give them money from the sixth try. That is not granted to us either. First mistake, first loss of money, and all of a sudden the money dries up. You and I both know that's not true across the board in the VC world. You know that's not true.

Melinda Byerley:

No. It's so obvious, you can just look up the data. I bet by the time we publish this, we could show you where it exists, because I know I've seen it before. They get more chances at bat.

Shireen Williams:

I've heard people bragging about the fact they failed four companies and then they finally found the successful one.

Melinda Byerley:

Not only who's given a chance, but who's given plenty of chances.



Shireen Williams:

Plenty. Over and over again. "Tell us what you learned from that, you lost our money. Why should we give you our money again? We're going to give it again, but we just need to know that you're thinking about this differently." That's what they're doing and they're not affording that same thing to anyone else. As much as I talked about like, it's not about class or anything else, it's also about the same framing that I'm talking about in terms of policies or expectations or where people are willing to quote/unquote, "take risks and where they aren't." But also the people who were being punished, even when they do the right thing, like to admit. Three degrees, still. That should not have happened. That whole department was dismantled. To me, now I'm in a whole different phase about the work that I do.

Shireen Williams:

I tell black women, if you want to get into the tech world, just do it. No matter which way you want to do it, because it don't matter what you have. Don't matter where you came from. It doesn't even matter how many grades you have. They don't care. It still won't matter. You do it the way you think you need to have it done and keep moving, because it will not matter. The only thing that matters about the product you design or whatever you want to create and go from there.

Melinda Byerley:

Whew. And that's where we'll have to stop for now. Please join us on our next episode for part two of our time with Shireen Mitchell. You're not going to want to miss where this conversation ends up taking us, because things get very, very candid. We'll see you then, thanks so much for listening.

Speaker 1:

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