



Name: Shireen Mitchell: “You Can’t Stop the Girl” Part 2 of 2 Season 4: Episode #8

Speaker1:

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 Fiddlehead.

Melinda Byerley:

Hello again and welcome back to another episode of Stayin' Alive in Tech. We're now on the eighth episode of season four, and I'm going to re-introduce our guest, Shireen Mitchell, as we finish the conversation started in our previous episode.

If you have not yet listened to episode seven, you really need to do so, because it provides better context and it sets the stage for where our conversation ends up with this second part.

During part one of our time with Shireen, you heard about her backstory of getting into computers and coding during the 1980s as a young Black girl from the projects of New York, her time spent at an HBCU (a Historically Black College & University) after high school, and her early career experiences in Washington D.C. that gave her some stark first-hand insights into what black women and minority women constantly face within the world of tech—all of which pushed her to help other women enter—and thrive—in a largely white, male-dominated sector that is still far away from where it needs to be in so many ways, to say the least.

In part two with Shireen, we pivot to a frank discussion of the threats, harassment, and sexism women face online—especially women of color—and how so many social media platforms are wildly counterintuitive when it comes to policing abuse directed at white women and people of color.

We'll also talk about the consequences of deeming conversations about racism and sexism as merely “political” conversations. This ultimately leads to a look at how social media platforms have now created special protections for politicians that don't extend to ordinary citizens.

And then there's Shireen's thoughts on hiring practices regarding diversity and inclusivity and the traps that many are still falling into while trying to address it. Are you curious about Shireen's views on what



true allyship actually is? We'll cover that too, along with some closing remarks about voter suppression and the ongoing issue of weaponized disinformation.

Yes. There's definitely a lot of ground to cover, and Shireen and I both talk fast, but let's get started. We'll pick back up with what prompted Shireen to found Stop Online Violence Against Women and go from there.

Shireen Mitchell:

So that leads me to why I started Stop Online Violence Against Women, because around 2013, there was an incident that happened. I would say to people—and this is an editorial note too—I know everybody knows Gamergate. I'm pretty sure there's going to be a link here about Gamergate, but the majority of people don't know Donglegate, which is before Gamergate.

Melinda Byerley:

Oh, yeah. Let's talk about Donglegate.

Shireen Mitchell:

Okay. It's interesting too, because it's a tech example of society's expectations, right? Gamergate was an important conversation to be had because it was about ethics and gaming... which I always found really ironic as an original gamer. That whole thing unfolds and I'm thinking, "What? What is happening?"
(Laughs)

Melinda Byerley:

No, it was not. But, yes.

Shireen Mitchell:

But it wasn't.

Melinda Byerley:

Well people, and it's funny because you said early in the episode that from the time you went online, you were harassed. When I was a young woman working in tech in my early career, I remember Kathy Sierra's blog. I remember to this day, the day that Kathy Sierra left the internet. I remember the pictures that were on her website, I don't know if they're in the Wayback Machine, but they're horrific. Horrific what was sent to her, the death threats and the rape threats. That has happened, has been happening since the beginning of time. Since we got on the internet, women have been harassed and it's a problem.



I'm passionate about it, I'm someone who's experienced it myself as somebody who has a feisty and vocal Twitter feed. I have felt it, I'm sure you have, Shireen.

Shireen Mitchell:

You know I have.

Melinda Byerley:

I don't know a single woman in any public space on the internet that has not gotten a death threat or a rape threat or both. Think about that, guys. Think about it.

Shireen Mitchell:

Well, actually for black women, we get threats to our children—even if we don't have children. We get that first and then we get the rest after.

Melinda Byerley:

I'm going to editorialize for the white folks in the room. And then as a black woman, the racism is sexualized. The sexism is racist. What's coming to them is exponentially bigger and more.

Shireen Mitchell:

Yes. And more and impactful. In a way that's, the few times that I saw white women who were like, "I'm now getting off, because now they're threatening to rape my daughter." I was like, "Wait, do you understand what you're saying?" And they don't know what they're saying.

And I realize that at the moment when they do it, because I understand why they're saying it, but they don't realize is that black women are getting all of that for their children before they even attack them. And it's a very different model. I tell people, "Go look up the guy", I think he was a Kansas police officer. I might be wrong, we might have to do editorials on this part, literally threatens a five-year-old girl because her mom had said something that he didn't like. He didn't threaten the mother. He went to the five-year-old! And people don't understand that. The same way that we're dealing with this world of like, I know black lives matter can make people uncomfortable... But when someone's basically saying out loud to a black woman, "I hope your child has become a hashtag?"

Melinda Byerley:

Jesus.

Shireen Mitchell:



We're not having the same conversation as mothers, women. Just want you to know that.

Melinda Byerley:

You made me think, Shireen. I'm taking a pause from Twitter right now. I didn't leave, but I've locked my account and I'm taking a pause. I have reasons, but I have always known that at some point I'm going to have to go back in a productive way. I've got to figure out what that is and I'm in the middle of sort of figuring it out.

Melinda Byerley:

But I think to your point, white women, we white women have to understand that we have the luxury of going away and people still need help and there still need to be voices. And I think running away and sticking our head in the sand, Kathy Sierra has found her way back online. She's found the way that works for her. She has a blog. She still writes and she still speaks, but she manages the internet in a way that is apparently working for her, which I say without judgment. It seems to work for her. This is a burden that women on the internet face. I can only assume, because it's true for everything else, that

black women face that burden even more. The work that you're doing now, Shireen, sounds like it's focused on a lot of these concentric circles.

Shireen Mitchell:

Right. I'm glad we were able to talk about these details in the way that people understand as to why Stop Online Violence Against Women exists. Because once we started tracking what was happening and how...

From my perspective, the true story of my perspective is this: I told those moms that their daughters were going to be safe once they got online, because I had to deal with them worried about predators and this, that, and the other thing. And the truth is, present day, that's a lie. Their girls were never going to be okay. They still needed to be protected in some ways, they need to be prepared for what they would have to deal with.

So when I formed Stop Online Violence Against Women, I was thinking about those moments that I had those conversations. Because the truth is, what I saw in the online harassment was the ways in which the tech industry was harassing black and brown girls to make them not want to enter. That's why Donglegate is important because the black woman who spoke up at a tech conference about sexism in general, not even racist versions of sexism, but just in general, was ostracized and attacked.

And the guy who did it—the average person does not know this man's name—he went on Reddit to have people go after her. He complains about having children and losing his job. She even said he had problems with his job before this incident. This just became one of the many. But then she got under



attack. Her job let her go on Facebook and Twitter, by the way. Let me just tell you the disrespect for black women in tech: they didn't even tell her. They did it through a post on Facebook.

Melinda Byerley:

They chickened out.

Shireen Mitchell:

Basically, they kept promising her they were going to have her back and they just dropped it and just walked away. They didn't even have the audacity to go to her directly and be like, "Hey, this isn't working, we got to do something." No, they put an announcement on Facebook, on Twitter. Her friends had to come to her and tell her that she lost her job. She was finally sleeping after collecting all the death threats and everything against her. And then she, of course, didn't have a place to live, she was doxxed. All the things that you can just even imagine. The guy who did this, two things happened: He got to walk away and get a job where clearly there were no women. He actually made a statement about, "Finally, I'm someplace where I don't have to worry about this ever happening again," which meant in so many ways—

Melinda Byerley:

Could you imagine? I'd like to be like, "I want to work somewhere where there are no men."

Shireen Mitchell:

Seriously.

Melinda Byerley:

Does that even exist? A tech company with no men.

Shireen Mitchell:

Well, my organization—(Laughs)

Melinda Byerley:

Well, right. And here's the other thing, I feel like I always have to say, well, I don't mean all men. Of course, I don't mean all men.

Shireen Mitchell:



Seriously. It's the same thing. It's the concept that they could have the opportunity to be in an environment that's predominantly their culture and then tell other people, they can't bring their culture into the office. Right, that's what they're saying on a regular basis. So I can go get a job, where I can have a job of mostly white males. I don't have to worry about dealing with anybody else's culture. So that when I go to work everyday, I feel comfortable. But the minute someone brown walks in the door to work with us, I'm uncomfortable and I don't want to be uncomfortable. It's a very weird thing to say, without saying out loud that what you're saying is that you're racist.

Melinda Byerley:

Well, look what's happened at Base Camp just this week. I don't know if you've seen this but it's just astonishing. They made all of these progressive comments over the years, oh we're progressive, we offer this, that, we have a huge progressive staff. Well, it came to light that they had been having a, it was probably started out just as a joke, but they called it "funniest names ever." And you can imagine how racist that got pretty quickly. To the point where I think the reporter who was covering it said that the employee he talked to would not tell him what names were on the list, because they were so embarrassed, that bad. But he said it was along the lines of on the Simpsons when Bart calls it, Amanda HugandKiss and stuff and I.P. Freely and all that stuff.

But that's how bad it was that the person who was talking to the reporter would not even tell him how bad it was. So a group of employees decide on their own free will that they're going to make this right. They want to examine the company, they decide to do it as 20 people on their own freewill, their free time. They examine the company's hiring practices, their promoting practices, recruiting, try to say, how can we be better? How can we be a better company? The founders of the company shut it down and said, "We will have no more political discussions whatsoever." And now this week 20 people have quit, including the chief marketing office. Many executives have just walked away because they're like, we don't want to be part of this company.

Shireen Mitchell:

Do you understand what they're doing though when they do that?

Melinda Byerley:

Tell me, tell us. I love it. Please comment.

Shireen Mitchell:

I don't know how your podcast is going to go, because girl, we're going to talk.

Melinda Byerley:



They follow me on Twitter. They know, it's okay. Be it, say it.

Shireen Mitchell:

We're going to talk.

Melinda Byerley:

We're going to talk. Straight talk. I'm good.

Shireen Mitchell:

Because seriously, when all of a sudden calling out racism is political, we are operating a whole different conversation. And you all know that. Calling out sexism is political, we're having a different conversation too. The fact that anyone tries to flatten those two things—as if this isn't about a human rights issue—and turn it into a political issue in itself is part of the narrative to deflect.

Everytime I hear someone say (this is my whole thing about the things I deal with Facebook, for example), we have the AI that can remove hate speech, but one political party is going to be removed in terms of content versus another. You're jumping over the first part: hate speech. Right? When you turn hate speech or anything like that into "this is a political conversation," as if this is the party affiliation debate, then you are purposefully and willfully dismissing what the real conversation is about.

And also in some ways, believe it or not, operating illegally in the concept of protected class, but you're coming up with a different class. Using diversity of thought, using political thought is the way to jump over protected class and to add it to the mix. It happened during the impeachment, which I don't want to get into. But anytime I see someone say, "political speech is more protected over any other speech," that person is intentionally changing the first amendment, on its head. Because—

Melinda Byerley:

I'm listening.

Shireen Mitchell:

Why? If you're saying politicians' political speech is not government speech—when the first amendment says that we as Americans have the right to grievances and redress against the government—but you term political speech as if it's not politician speech, as if it's an individual conversation, we're not having the first amendment conversation anymore. As a matter of fact, we're turning the first amendment on its head. I have the right to speak against my government and not be punished.

Melinda Byerley:



Yeah, Correct.

Shireen Mitchell:

These platforms should not be setting up policies that protect politicians over me. That turns the first amendment on its head, in every form. The second part of this is, you and me debating as Americans are not protected by the first amendment, first of all.

Melinda Byerley:

Correct. That is correct.

Shireen Mitchell:

Me and you disagreeing and having political debates, ain't a first amendment protection.

Melinda Byerley:

There's nothing protected about that. That's the other thing. Why people get into that, because-

Shireen Mitchell:

They do it all the time. It doesn't make any sense. You are not protected from the consequences of stuff that comes out your mouth no more than I am.

Melinda Byerley:

For real. And by the way, I've lived that. I can tell you, that's the God's honest truth. I'm not protected. I've certainly not been protected for the words that have come out of my mouth.

Shireen Mitchell:

You get to say it. I'm not telling you can't say it. You are not protected from the consequences for what comes out your mouth though. But political speech, especially coming from politicians, nuh-uh (negative). The government does not have more power over the American citizens. We have more power in the first amendment. At some point you should probably add that link about the first amendment, because it always drives me crazy because there are people need to read it. Congress should make no laws. Congress should make no laws. You don't make a law against me. And it also protects the press in the way that you like attacking the press. No, they actually have their own redress.

Melinda Byerley:

I'm listening.



Shireen Mitchell:

But the point that people somehow confuse this all about... We're all protecting free speech by allowing people to be racist and sexist. No, but let's be clear. Let's be clear. These platforms have been participating, which is why Stop Online Violence Against Women operates, is that these platforms is actually operated that, I can get banned, other people of color can get banned for using the term, white people.

Melinda Byerley:

Which is bizarre because that's what I am. I am a white person.

Shireen Mitchell:

First of all, it's an identifier. It's also something that white people define.

Melinda Byerley:

If I commit a crime, the first thing that police will ask is, describe the person, and they'll say she's a white female. That's what they'll say.

Shireen Mitchell:

White female. Caucasian, if you want to say Caucasian. It's the same identifier that law officers operate from.

Melinda Byerley:

Right, it's the same as height.

Shireen Mitchell:

I get the whole medium or dark. (Laughs)

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah, exactly. But yes, white is a descriptor. It is a neutral term of description. This is the whole thing too. I've been put on temporary ban on Facebook for saying men are trash.

Shireen Mitchell:

Yes. It's such a ridiculous thing. But also the whole thing about just even saying "white people." We get banned for saying white people—anything. As if what we're saying is hate speech. As if we're saying the



same thing white people are saying, i.e. the N-word, or anything in between. And believe me, we have actually reported on the fact that we have women who were showing images of people saying the N-word to them and letting everyone else know who these people were, doing it. And the person who did it was not banned or suspended. But the person who was sharing the content saying this person called me the N-word, was.

Shireen Mitchell:

That's why we do this work, because it's not just the online harassment in general. It's also the policies and the moderation policies of these companies that are bent on the same lens that says, "anyone who's speaking up against racism and sexism or isms, homophobia, and the like, are the real violent people—not the people committing the opposite version of that."

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. In the upside down bizarro world.

Shireen Mitchell:

That's where we are. The same way they're trying to turn the first amendment around. That's why you use the first amendment first, so you understand where I'm going, where I came next. That for us to speak up against it, to say it's wrong, to challenge it, we're seen as the dangerous, violent and obnoxious ones and not the people who were spitting, the racism, sexism, and other phobias of homophobia and the like. I don't want to do the like—but I can't do the list.

Melinda Byerley:

Well, it's a long list. So stipulated counselor, that this includes all hate speech.

Shireen Mitchell:

Yes. All hate speech against all other identities that should exist freely without this level of attack.

Melinda Byerley:

This is a hard problem, obviously, or feels like a hard problem. Maybe you'll tell me how it's not—I don't want to put words in your mouth—feels like a hard problem. If you could wave your magic wand, queen—and I say that in a compliment way—if you become queen tomorrow and you're able to change it, what has to get done? And what should we be advocating for? People who agree with you, people who are of like mind, what should we be fighting for?

Shireen Mitchell:



The first thing I'm going to have to say is that I think we need to have an honest conversation about the first amendment with some of the things I've just said. I think that there's a lot of revisionist conversations happening there. There's also, in my opinion, people need to stop using the cudgel that if we target free speech, that somehow the most marginalized people will be effected. The truth is, it's not been protecting us now. Whatever cudgel you think you're holding onto, hasn't been happening. Wherever you think it's going to go next, it isn't worse than what we're already dealing with because you ain't protecting us now. Just be clear when using that as your cudgel—

Melinda Byerley:

Your shield.

Shireen Mitchell:

Yeah as a shield, because the harms are happening and some of us are dying. I'm not just saying it as a random thing, but some of us are dying and you all are still trying to use that as a cudgel as if you're protecting us, which I find absurd. That's a little soap boxing there.

Shireen Mitchell:

The rest of what I would do honestly is, I would honestly in my head, talk about the ways in which we look at policy. What I see as pushback on things like wokeness, cancel culture, and the like, are all push backs on versions of policy, right? The moderation process has always operated that white men were more protected over black and brown boys. We should have a conversation about that and turn that around.

Melinda Byerley:

Just to be clear, you're not advocating to silence anybody. Everybody should be free to speak. Am I capturing what you're trying to say, accurately?

Shireen Mitchell:

I'm saying that everyone should have the right to speak, even those who are speaking against racism and sexism. Here's a great example of this moment. When Twitter decided it was going to take down Uncle Tim because of the way that people were going out to Tim Scott, isn't that an interesting choice to make?

Melinda Byerley:

Because he's conservative.



Shireen Mitchell:

Just think about it.

Melinda Byerley:

Why was it suddenly bad to go after...

Shireen Mitchell:

And was that hate speech all of a sudden? Because remember, we say white people and nothing happens. Why is Uncle Tim taken down?

Melinda Byerley:

Now this is part where I don't know. Is "Uncle Tim" people of color referring to Tim Scott?

Shireen Mitchell:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). People of color, talking about people of color.

Melinda Byerley:

This was an organic movement and I think it's important for us white people to know when to keep our mouth shut and when to listen. This is an example of one of those times.

Shireen Mitchell:

You banned us of saying "white people," but then you banned us for even talking about our own people.

Melinda Byerley:

Exactly. You're not allowed to talk no matter what, it sounds like.

Shireen Mitchell:

No matter what. That's the point I'm trying to make. The fact that you decided to interfere in that, really? When black women are being harassed and threatened all the time, no actions are taken, but you want to do that?

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah, interesting choice.



Shireen Mitchell:

Like the whole thing that happened with Leslie Jones. They literally had Harambe's head on Leslie Jones' body before she left, which was a death threat because that ape was killed. Not only was she being called an ape, but she was being called a dead ape and hands were up in the air. But Uncle Tim, you got to do something about. That's why we do this work because I'm telling you, the decisions being made are being made in a very biased way.

Melinda Byerley:

You're not freaking me out. I'm listening. I'm here.

Shireen Mitchell:

And that is part of why these conversations are also problematic, because people need to understand the nuances of that. Even Twitter didn't know that the ape head meant death. Just like they can't imagine the whole, "I hope your child doesn't become a hashtag," isn't a death threat. We're operating with this free speech model as if it has no nuance that has complications of incitement and depth in it. But because it doesn't look like the way it would be said to a white person, all of a sudden, it's not that big of a deal. We don't have to dig deep in that.

Melinda Byerley:

People have opinions about this stuff online, and they don't even know all of the history or things that goes into it. I'm pretty good about a lot of the stuff that's going on, but even I had to ask you, what is Uncle Tim? I don't know. We sort of stop being able to say, "I don't know, can you explain?"

Shireen Mitchell:

Right. Instead, take an action, though. You're not asking, you just taking the action. Don't get me wrong, the spinoff of Uncle Tom, which is again, historical frame on slavery. I literally had someone from another country who was supposed to be focusing on trying to dismantle... Because he was radicalized and got de-radicalized. I won't mention his name on this, but he got on Clubhouse and was trying to say these liberals who were calling him Uncle Tim... I'm like, you're an outsider, first of all.

Melinda Byerley:

You don't even live here.

Shireen Mitchell:



You don't even live here in America to even know the history of the slavery part of why Uncle Tom, Uncle Tim conversation was even evolving to. That's the first thing you did wrong. Then the second thing you did wrong was say that somehow black people having the conversation about this is liberal or leftist.

Melinda Byerley:

Just because black people are having it doesn't mean it's liberal. That's an incredible generalization.

Shireen Mitchell:

That in itself was a racist thing to say. And it's not a generalization, it's racist.

Melinda Byerley:

Thank you.

Shireen Mitchell:

It's not generalization, it's racist.

Melinda Byerley:

Thank you for that.

Shireen Mitchell:

It's racist. You're basically saying you don't understand why black people were upset as a white male outside this country, but you're still going to say that this was wrong.

Melinda Byerley:

Right, and you don't have the right to tell people what to be offended about. That's the other thing that's true of white men and white women, anybody. I think we need to stop putting words in each other's mouths and listen.

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:39:04]

Melinda Byerley:

Hi, this is Melinda here, your host for Stayin' Alive in Tech. We are the only podcast to feature long form first person oral histories of Silicon Valley. We're now heard in over 60 countries and our average listening time is over 45 minutes. If you're enjoying this episode, we could use your support. You could



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Melinda Byerley:

I have to thank you seriously because it should not be Black people's job to educate me as a white person. I truly and sincerely believe that. I can only tell you that it's clear that you know, I have been... I feel misled by my education. I feel that my education did not tell me what I needed to know. And at the same time, I wasn't curious enough to go find it out for myself at the time when I should have. And so I thank you. First of all, for answering the questions I'm about to ask you because it's not your job to do so. So thank you.

So I want to ask you, for people like me... Well-meaning, I'd like to describe myself as a well-meaning white person. That doesn't mean I can't be misled or that I know everything, but I believe I'm well-meaning and I'm obviously white. What do we get wrong about inclusion in tech? What do you wish that people like me, who mean well, but may not know everything. What do we get wrong, when we want to build more inclusive companies? I own my own company. I have 25 people who work here. I desperately want to do it right, to not... As I often say to people like the Hippocratic oath, at the very least, can I not add to people's misery? That would be a good start, it feels like. But if I mean well, what can I do? Whether I own my own company or whether I work inside of a big company, what did we get wrong about this?

Shireen Mitchell:

I think one of the first things, especially white women get wrong, is that they are part of the problem. Let me just... I'm going to be flat out and clear about...

Melinda Byerley:

That's what we need to hear.

Shireen Mitchell:

Seriously, I've had to have many conversations with women, particularly women in tech about the battles between, again, Digital Sistas to present. And I have to say the same thing to them. How many women of color have you hired? And are they all Asian? Have you hired a Latin woman? Have you hired a black woman? And on average, either they have not had hired any women of color at all. Or the only woman of color they hired was an Asian woman. And so when they're talking about diversity in tech and



trying to get women in tech and that kind of stuff, there are multiple instances I have to show up and say, "Who's on your team that's Black?"

Melinda Byerley:

So the first thing you're saying is hire more people.

Shireen Mitchell:

First thing to do is hire... But you can't hire... Okay, let me say this: Hire them, but don't hire them in an environment where you're like, "Teach us how to hire more." (Laughs)

Melinda Byerley:

No, no, that's different, but that's different. Yeah.

Shireen Mitchell:

Especially if you're a startup, right? If you're a startup and you're trying to create the culture of the organization and you can't hire women of color in a startup environment, you're not helping the process in anyway.

Melinda Byerley:

The data shows that after 5, 10 people, forget it, the culture is set.

Shireen Mitchell:

It's set. So if you can't hire women of color in the first five, then the culture gets set. When you finally realize you're looking around and you're looking at five white women, right? The culture is not only set, but if you then start to add other women of color with their own cultures, then it becomes a tense environment. Then you can go through the tense environment if you want to, but you're going to tell me next, but you can't hire an HR person because you don't have funding to do so.

Melinda Byerley:

And now you've put the pressure on the black woman. Let's be clear.

Shireen Mitchell:

Whoever it is.

Melinda Byerley:



Whatever person of color it is—

Shireen Mitchell:

You want them to do the work you didn't do, on top of doing their job. It's not their job. They don't want to come in there and do diversity for you for your company. They want to come in and do their job. They really, honestly, there was no woman of color that wants to go work for a tech company, whether it's woman-owned or other, that also shows up going, "I want to do something other than the skill sets that you hired me for."

Melinda Byerley:

Please draw attention to my race over and over and over again.

Shireen Mitchell:

Everyday.

Melinda Byerley:

Like it's not hard enough.

Shireen Mitchell:

Like I don't have to deal with this.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. They want to go to work. Yes, they want to go to work and do their jobs. Like the rest of us.

Shireen Mitchell:

They want to go to work and feel just as comfortable as you are. But the thing is, if your goal is to say that everybody else gets to feel comfortable and she comes in, and she needs to check her culture at the door, and you're setting that up, then yeah. Not only are you not setting up a hostile work environment for anyone of color coming in the door, but in my opinion, whatever product you're about to develop, you're about to have a couple of major PR missteps.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. For all the reasons that I feel like...

Shireen Mitchell:



For all the reasons that we talked about before. You're about to go through a whole bunch of major PR missteps that you're going to have to say, "Please, we apologize." Which we're going to hear as non-apologies by the way, but go ahead and do it.

Melinda Byerley:

So what I love about the hiring discussion is that it is within your control. I can say this as even a small business owner, a couple of things I've learned is that we have to take our time. I think there's a real rush to... Oh, the head count window is open and you have to fill it. And if you have to fill that head count in a hurry by definition—and this is true of all bias—when you make decisions under stress, you will go to the most biased decision because that's how brains work. So if you want to hire inclusively, you have to give yourself time to find people.

Shireen Mitchell:

I also think there's a couple of things about—I've done this work before, before you go to the bias decision—And then the thing I want to answer... I think I jumped over you a little bit. I apologize.

Melinda Byerley:

It's all good.

Shireen Mitchell:

It's not just the most biased decision. You're still going to go with the most comfortable decisions. Own up to the fact that the reason why you're making these choices, is because this is comfortable for you. Maybe not the employee, but for you.

Melinda Byerley:

Right. It's a shortcut. "I'm in a hurry. I don't have time. So I'm going to hire the son of my best friend, because I know him."

Shireen Mitchell:

Yes. And I know somebody else who will... If he doesn't do it right, I can groom him or her or whatever.

Melinda Byerley:

Or, we went to the same college or they go skiing in Gstaad, or whatever it is that makes them like you.

Shireen Mitchell:



And gives them potential.

Melinda Byerley:

That makes you give them the benefit of the doubt. Wow. We were talking about earlier.

Shireen Mitchell:

You set out the potential, the potential of, like, "Oh, there was a misstep, but it's not that big of a deal." You get to have that balance. That's what you're actually asking for, which is not how this works.

Melinda Byerley:

Powerful.

Shireen Mitchell:

Especially if you want to be in a productive environment, because unless you want to be king or queen, and "what I say goes in everything I do in my business," good luck with that. If you're setting that up, good luck with that. That's how this whole thing unfolds in these really problematic ways and I can take that all the way through, up to the Facebooks of the world, but that's kind of what you are setting up.

Shireen Mitchell:

And the second part of what you said was this concept that not only do you have the power to change it, but the truth is, even in your job description about who you're asking for... I've done this work before, helping people frame their job descriptions differently. Because even in the job description, you're telling whether me or not I could be happy there or not as an employee. The assumption that someone just wants to be employed by you is arrogance in itself too.

Melinda Byerley:

"Tell us why, we should hire you?" Well, tell me why I'd want to work here?

Shireen Mitchell:

Right? Because I do that all the time, tell people all the time, I do that too. If I wasn't doing my own thing, I'd be like, "Why would, what would be the thing that would make me even want to work for you?" Because that's what I really want to know.

Melinda Byerley:



I recently went to a seminar that Google—I know, Google, we'll asterisk that in a second—was doing on helping women or all underrepresented people really talk about their accomplishments more. But one of the reasons I thought it was instructive was the data they had that said that when job requirements for the job were over a certain number of words, x-percent women were less likely to apply.

Melinda Byerley:

And I call to my fellow white people or my fellow like-minded people of any color who care about this stuff to go look at the data. It's not just opinion. It's not moral.

Shireen Mitchell:

Absolutely.

Melinda Byerley:

Even if you can live with yourself ethically or morally, the data shows that you will be more successful, your company will be more successful. And there are ways to do this that are backed by science. It's not a guessing game.

Shireen Mitchell:

It's not a guessing game.

Melinda Byerley:

And there are people that you can hire, that will tell you this stuff. Shireen is one of them, and there are others, but there are people that you can hire to tell you how to do this. You don't have to make it up out of nowhere. And I was shocked, frankly... You do a Google search, there's a lot of information out there. How to write—in your case—a job description.

Shireen Mitchell:

You're raising the fact that they came from Google, but kind of like, questionable. But it's not that they're wrong about that. That was always the case. Women will go through the check boxes to see if every one of the requirements can be checked off. And so you have to think about women of color are doing the same thing. Because they have to be a hundred percent. If you think about the way they go into the door, even if the employer is a white woman, they're still going through the door expecting to be over a hundred-percent qualified because they're going to be questioned about everything they can and cannot do if they decide to take that job. So that's part of it.



Shireen Mitchell:

And then the last part is we were talking about, that you hinted on, was time. What's the rush?

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. Why the rush, people?

Shireen Mitchell:

Point the rush out. Why is there a rush? Dissect the rush, figure out why there's a rush where you don't actually do the work to expand the reach as far as you can expand it, because what you're normally going to do, if it's a rush, is only send it to your own networks.

Melinda Byerley:

By definition... that's what I've always loved about the implicit bias test is that it shows the faster you're forced to work, the more mistakes. The more you rely on cognitive bias, essentially. Because that's the purpose of cognitive bias, evolutionary-wise, was to save time when you were under attack by a saber-toothed tiger. We are not under attack by saber tooth tigers, at least as far as I know. And so why the rush? If you slow down, you can actually address it.

Another quote I heard recently was that the first thought you have around a situation—I think it's true for me, at least, I can't obviously speak for the whole world—but the first thought that you have around these conversations is the thought you were trained to have by society. The second thought is yours. And the time I feel relates back to, "Give me time to have that second thought. Give me time to examine—wait a minute, that's my first thought, but what do I really think?"

What's really going on here? I mean, just as an example, I ran across the hiring process where they were including an X-factor. They had done a good job, had the candidates and the requirements and the job description. And they got down to like, how are we going to measure them? We're going to ask everybody the same questions. And then there was this thing called X-factor. And my thought was, that is where bias lives. That's the rock it crawls under and hides. The X-factor. Do I like this person? Do I feel comfortable with them?

Melinda Byerley:

And the simple fact was that when the weight was lowered for the X-factor in the rating, it helped a ton. You don't weigh it any more than anything else, or you weigh it less, you underweigh it because you know, it's where bias crawls. It's the rock it hides under. If you can't quantify why you like this candidate, if you can't articulate it, I feel like you have to be very careful.



Shireen Mitchell:

Yeah. I think that there's more than just... I think there's certainly layers to that, the resume to the interview, to the spaces in between, but yes. Why would you remove this person? Is it the name?

Melinda Byerley:

Really, why? Yeah be honest.

Shireen Mitchell:

Is it the fact that I have an HBCU as a university instead of Harvard? Like those are all the things...

Melinda Byerley:

Which is ridiculous, all the amazing black women I know went to HBCUs. Okay, sorry, they went to other colleges too. But...(Laughs)

Shireen Mitchell:

But... It's such a complicated thing to say. I will say though, that as you're asking me these questions, I think it's important to understand that what I'm saying does not dismiss the challenges that white women have with white men in this space.

Melinda Byerley:

Nope. we need to get over that. It's silly.

Shireen Mitchell:

But it doesn't mean that you get to oppress. Because you are going through oppression. And it also doesn't mean that we can't both be working together against the white men who are doing messed up stuff in the space. If you want to claim allyship, there's a part of work that you have to do, to do to that part as well. So that part is the other part I want to say.

Melinda Byerley:

And maybe you can tell me if I'm crazy about this, but I always say that ally is a word that's like having a sense of humor that you should not apply to yourself. You don't tell people you have a sense of humor. You're just funny. If you're an ally, be an ally, show it through your actions and let other people call you the ally.

Shireen Mitchell:



It's a verb and it's not a statement. And you can't claim it. Like I'm not the person who made that one up. But I feel strongly... I can't remember who made that.

Melinda Byerley:

Oh, good. I read that somewhere too.

Shireen Mitchell:

But the point that I'm trying to make is that if you have to make the statement, that means you're not.

Melinda Byerley:

You don't get to use it on yourself.

Shireen Mitchell:

You don't. If you are that, then people see that and experience that. But if you have to make the statement and announce it, you're not. And allyship is one of those things. Someone can call you an ally. Right. But you don't get to call yourself one.

Melinda Byerley:

Right. I think in the Jewish tradition that they have a word called 'mensch' for men who are very kind and very giving as my understanding of it. I'm not Jewish. It's my understanding. It's also my understanding you cannot call yourself a mensch by tradition. It is something that is applied to you by other people. And it's considered a great compliment as a result. It's considered a very high compliment because you cannot describe yourself as that. And I guess I would say from experience, I share with my fellow white people, that black people are very... The minute you say you're an ally, they're very suspicious.

Shireen Mitchell:

Yes! Whether you know it or not.

Melinda Byerley:

Whether they tell you or not, whether they show it in your face or not.

Shireen Mitchell:

Also the other thing that you can't do anymore. Not anymore. Not anymore. Let me just say in general, is that if you have to say some version of "not all..." Yeah, you went down the path and you shouldn't have gotten onto the path. Whatever the conversation is, that's happening, if you have a visceral reaction to



say, "I'm an individual, I don't do this, I'm not like that. "Not all da-da-da." "Don't generalize, yada, yada, yada," you're already going down the slippery slope. And the reason that you're going down the slippery slope—just so that we're clear on this end of this conversation that you're asking me—is because black and brown people in this country do not get the option of being an individual.

Shireen Mitchell:

They never will. So if you think you can claim an individual to a black or brown person, you're saying to them, "I am asking for something." You will never be granted. Even from me, out loud.

Melinda Byerley:

I am just sitting with that.

Shireen Mitchell:

Because if you didn't know who I was, if you didn't... Let me tell you, I've been in the feminist movement and all the kind of stuff. And let me tell you how many times I went into a room about feminism and diversity. And I went in to sit in the back of the room and people had their purses back there that got up to come grab their purses.

Melinda Byerley:

Oh, when you walked in?

Shireen Mitchell:

When I walked in.

Melinda Byerley:

Oh God.

Shireen Mitchell:

Why would I be at this conference or this event? Right? So no, I'm not granted that, I'm not, I will never be granted that. When I walk in the room and I might be a speaker, same thing. Now, when they find out I'm a speaker, those faces frown because they realize what they did. But me walking in the room, it's not granted to me. So I can stand in the back of the room and watch people come get purses because they worry that I'm going to steal from them.

Melinda Byerley:



Or they'll ask you where the bathrooms are.

Shireen Mitchell:

One or the other. Mostly for me it's stealing. They think I'm going to come dip in their purse somewhere. Like I need to dip in somebody's purse.

Melinda Byerley:

Somebody would go to a diversity conference to pick pocket?

Shireen Mitchell:

Seriously, and the problem is it happened too many times. I can't tell you how many times it happened.

Melinda Byerley:

I believe you. I believe you. I'm laughing with sadness. It's not, I'm just... It's overwhelming. But it is the truth. I believe you. I believe you. This is a question I've asked a lot of women who have been activists. And I know that you don't have a choice to a certain degree, but for those of us who are new to this journey, we're figuring out, "How do you take care of yourself? How do you make sure that you have the energy to keep going? Given what you facing?"

Because this is decades is what I'm hearing of your life that has been spent bashing your head against... It's more than a glass ceiling. I heard somebody describe it as a concrete ceiling because you can't even see through it. It is a systematic oppression and it is backbreaking work. How do you...

Shireen Mitchell:

It is. It is stressful work.

Melinda Byerley:

Women, our hands are soft, because we're not doing enough work. Right? Our emotional hands, if you will. Like... "Oh, this is tiring, four years of Trump, man. I'm tired." Well, this woman has spent decades of her life—

Shireen Mitchell:

Decades of it. Yeah. People kill me with the whole, "Trump exhausted me." I'm like, "Do you understand what you're saying to me?"

Melinda Byerley:



So, thank you again for answering that question, which is, how do you take care of yourself?

Shireen Mitchell:

And especially Trump, by the way, because the Exonerated Five happens in Harlem, where I was a teenager, where they came and sent the army of blue, and that man put out an ad for \$85,000 to basically kill and hang those brown and black boys. So I lived through that and still have to deal with having him sent to the Mecca of where I live. Again, Harlem, it's a political Mecca, and then they send that man here to D.C. So I have to live with another existence of him where I ran away to. So I was like, "I'm not running again. I'm stopping this man as best I possibly can." But like, I am not running again. I ran once, I am not running again.

The point is though, that's the piece that people don't get, it's like, you may not have understood who he was when I was a teenager. You may not have understood who Giuliani was, when my family had to live through the quote-unquote, "cleaning up of New York City."

Melinda Byerley:

Amadou Diallo, I ask people go Google that.

Shireen Mitchell:

All the things that were basically targets on black and brown peoples' heads and backs. To come in here to say, "Oh, four years." Are you serious?" And some people want to, to say, "Oh, the four years are over, I don't have to do anything anymore. And that's the point of privilege. And if you don't understand what privilege is, that's literally the epitome of privilege, because the pain that you were feeling was the obvious pain, that you were either dealing with or watching happen, to now, the versions that you may not see so clearly. And to me, that's part of the challenge that we have in this country.

Shireen Mitchell:

Because if you're not watching the anti-woke, anti-cancel culture, anti-1619 or whatever else, if you can't now translate: four years have passed, voter suppression, and all these anti-things, and not understand it's anti-black? Understand that the target is us? I don't know what else to do. If you walk away going, "Oh, bye," well, then thank you.

Melinda Byerley:

We're done here.

Shireen Mitchell:



And you're not watching this...

Melinda Byerley:

"We're done here." Right?

Shireen Mitchell:

We're done here. And you're not watching the 47 States with 361 bills that basically are trying to take our vote again. As if Jim Crow didn't exist in this country, what am I supposed to do with that?

Melinda Byerley:

Here's the next thing you can do. If you're a white person, all that energy, you brought to the midterms in 2018, you need to bring it again because I guarantee you...

Shireen Mitchell:

It's going to happen in 2022.

Melinda Byerley:

What could happen to Barack Obama? I tell people in 2010, the thing that happened to him was that in 2010, the midterms came and the vote didn't come out and the Republicans did not give up and they will not give up.

Shireen Mitchell:

They're never going to give up. They can still come up. Like if you want to help me now, help me stop those freaking bills. We have 361 of them. Let's stop them. The other thing I'm going to ask you to do—because the work that we do is stopping digital voter suppression—help me stop these social media companies from continuing to spread this information that target us voters, particularly black voters. "Stop the steal" was a disinformation campaign from 2016 by Russia that took on domestic framing that led to an insurrection and then turned into 361 bills. But please, tell me disinformation is not that important.

Melinda Byerley:

That's right and you know how I feel about disinformation....

Shireen Mitchell:

All that harassment for black and brown women is not that important?



Melinda Byerley:

Yeah, it is. And it is known. This is also something we can refer to in the show notes, that Russia actively posed as black people to infiltrate black groups and to provide and to stir up, if you will, to exacerbate the problems that already exist in our society.

Melinda Byerley:

Putin is a smart guy and he knows we have a gaping vulnerability in this country and he's exploiting the hell out of it.

Shireen Mitchell:

And they did this in the sixties. It's not new. They're just doing it in digital version here.

Melinda Byerley:

It's cheap. Why wouldn't you. If you're Putin, you'd do it too.

Shireen Mitchell:

Yeah, of course. And the other thing is we have several reports, which I'll make sure we put in the show notes too. I'll send to you. That includes our first report that identified those 3,500 ads that Russia IRA sent to the Senate Intel Committee. They literally put their report out a whole year later after the fact to admit what we had already written that no other group was targeted more than African-Americans by the Russia IRA.

Melinda Byerley:

During the 2016 election, Shireen, I remember the night, it was during the summer after the midterms but before the general. And I remember having a conversation, there were 11 black people in Iowa who were all Trump fans coming after me on Twitter. Now, I grew up in a small town in Illinois. I mean, like the percentage of black people in Iowa is very small. And the idea that there were 11 people magically all on Twitter at the same time that were all voting for Trump. No, it's just not real. It does not exist. It does not exist. It is manufactured and you can see it in the turnout. You see it at the rallies. If you ignore what's online and look what's going on with the rallies, it doesn't pan out.

Shireen Mitchell:

It doesn't translate. The false amplification does not translate to real people. I say this all the time about the electoral college. You know, 299 people don't show up just because you can vote as 300 people.



Melinda Byerley:

Correct. Correct.

Shireen Mitchell:

And that's what we're dealing with, a digital version of that. And we can, oh my goodness. We can go into a whole other world, but that was the one important thing I almost left out of this conversation about the work that we do. We have a campaign called "Stop Digital Voter Suppression." Please support that work and go to our website because we've been working on this before 2016, and we'll be working on this forever, as far as I'm concerned, because it's going to be necessary. That's the other side of this conversation.

Melinda Byerley:

I'm going to support the hell out of this. And I'm going to put this not only in the show notes, but you're going to find the links in my Twitter feed and on LinkedIn, because anybody who follows me on Twitter knows that auditing the vote, the impact of Russian disinformation on America, even beyond what's happening with black people, people of color is a passion and concern of mine.

Melinda Byerley:

As someone who's been in digital marketing for 20 years and has bought ads at mass scale, I know what they're doing. And I understood it long before many people did. So what Shireen says, I can tell you is the truth. It is happening. It is continuing to happen. We are being attacked. It is a cyber war and we are under attack. Our government is not doing enough in my opinion, to tell us this and help us understand this as a country, to be skeptical about what we read and see. So please, I encourage you all to visit the links and the information that we're going to give you about what Shireen is doing in the show notes.

Melinda Byerley:

Shireen I think I'm going to have to have you back before the midterms, or certainly whenever you're ready to talk about what's next. But before I let you go, I think we're going to have to do at least two episodes out of this. Because it's been two hours.

Shireen Mitchell:

I know. I was just thinking about, I was like, it's been quite some time. So the next time we do something, it should just be on us having a broader conversation about the digital voter suppression stuff with the work that we did. I think you did a really good job of asking me all the questions that led me to where I am and like to tell the full story, because I think it's important. Because I think people just think I come



out of nowhere. There's a history here and it is a full breadth and depth here. And so I just appreciate you inviting me so that we can like at least get to some of it.

Melinda Byerley:

So, I'm glad you came. I mean, I'm fascinated with people's stories and I think because it's not linear and especially for those of us of a certain age, we didn't get to meet. A lot of times there wasn't a CS major. So the story is interesting and I think there's more to talk about in terms of the digital suppression. So with that, I will let you go. It's probably cocktail hour in Washington, DC.

Shireen Mitchell:

It is! It is. Happy hour is about to happen in like 10 minutes.

Melinda Byerley:

I hope you enjoy that. I thank you for coming. And we're going to have you back again soon.
Thanks, Shireen.

Shireen Mitchell:

Thank you.