Women's History Month Episode
Season 3: Episode 13

Speaker 1: Welcome to Stayin' Alive in Technology. A series of conversations with Silicon Valley veterans touching on war stories from the past and practical advice for today. And now, here's your host, Melinda Byerley, founding partner of Timeshare CMO.

Melinda Byerley:
Hello. It's March 2020 and we have an incredible episode to celebrate Women's History Month. It was entirely conceived of and produced and edited by our incredible Production Coordinator and Editor, Michelle Sanchez, who also did last month's really popular Black History Month show. As you can probably tell from listening to me, my voice is a little rough as I recover from a cold, so I thought it would be really fun to treat you to hearing from Michelle Sanchez herself. Michelle edits every episode transcript, she writes most of our show notes, she's the person who makes this podcast run on time. So she knows these episodes almost as well as I do. I'm so excited for you to hear from one of the most important people on the Stayin' Alive team. Enjoy.

Michelle Sanchez:
Thank you to Melinda for such a nice introduction. I'm Michelle Sanchez, production coordinator for Stayin' Alive in Tech, and I'm happy to be hosting this special clips episode celebrating "Women's History Month."

Just like Black History, which we highlighted last month, Women's History is so much a part of the history of tech that we're really relishing these opportunities to look at the history of tech through a particular lens.

And we hope you're enjoying that too, and will come with us as we do more of these clips shows.

The women we have welcomed on the podcast, and there have been 18 in all, so far, have pretty diverse perspectives on working in tech and just being a woman in the workforce.

Among these guests, we have some who grew up in the 60s and some in the 90s. We have some with Computer Science and programming backgrounds, and some who started out in

art, theater, or journalism. We have some who are mothers and some who are now grandmothers, talking about balancing raising their children and pursuing their career.

We won't have a chance to hear clips from all 18 of these amazing women, but we encourage you to check out our past episodes wherever you listen to Stayin' Alive in Tech. We've also provided a link on this episode page to every interview with a woman in tech that we've done on this podcast.

Today we'd like to share with you two themes that stuck out at me from these women's stories, which I think men and women listeners alike will find compelling:

- First: Entering this field at different times in history made for wildly different experiences. We'll share with you some stories about women being told that they'd never make it in tech anyway, so just "go home"; another was told to go home because she was pregnant and wearing maternity clothes; women who looked around their workplaces and watched the numbers of females dwindle as time went on; or the opposite, we'll also hear from women who have not experienced much adversity in this industry, which makes us both hopeful and happy for them.

- The second theme is just sharing the wisdom from some of our guests about how we can advocate for others in the workplace. This is not just women speaking to women; this is for all listeners. And part of being a good advocate is first hearing stories from women about how they have encountered bias.

So, with that, I'd like to start out by introducing you to one of our Season 1 guests, Ellen Petry Leanse. She starts us off with her experience growing up in San Jose in the 60s and 70s, when the culture was just starting to shift from expecting women to stay near their hometowns and not venture out too far, versus pushing them to branch out, try college, and reach a greater potential. She talks about wondering what might have happened if the culture around her had been more encouraging and challenging to her, but then walks us back from focusing on the *what if*'s in your life. Ellen's episode was so refreshing; have a listen:

Ellen Petry Leanse [4:13]

Ellen Leanse:
I'm going to shock you and the listeners by telling you a couple of things. I grew up in San Jose and I was a good student, I worked really hard in high school. I loved school, I was kind

of nerd, a geek. And I received a letter from the school in Palo Alto called Stanford saying...an invitation to come and participate in a discussion about scholarship opportunities at Stanford. And I did not know where Stanford was.

Melinda Byerley:
Wow.

Ellen Leanse:
So, I think what might be hard for people to imagine now, it's certainly hard for me to imagine now and certainly might be hard for listeners, even global listeners, to understand now, is how insular life and culture really was. I grew up in the farmlands of San Jose. I went to what was then a small all-girls Catholic school, where more students, more of my classmates got married after graduating than went on to continue their education. So I think I graduated from high school, really that turning point before Title 9, which provided athletic opportunities and support for female students and before many other things.

Ellen Leanse:
I mean, I think I was probably the last year of a moment in our culture, it was very much about sort of staying put where you were and doing what the people before you had done rather than challenging yourselves to think what might be possible. So I literally will tell you that when I talked to my college counselors at the time and when I talked to my parents at the time, nobody in my community around me was willing to say, "Well this could be really great, let's take you up and have you talk about a scholarship invitation at the school called Stanford." That's astonishing to me.

Melinda Byerley:
When you reflect on that, how do you think things might have been different? Do you ever think about that?

Ellen Leanse:
Well, I think it's easy to think about how things might have been different but I've never found it productive. I mean, I could concoct a story in my head of you know having gone to Stanford and all of this, but when I look at where I was at the time of my own naivete about the larger world, my own potential, my own opportunities I am not sure I would have made any better use out of going to Stanford than I made out of going to San Diego State, the school that I ended up putting myself through because it wasn't culturally supported in the place that I came from, for me as a girl to go to college.

Ellen Leanse:
There are other stories about that but I ended up putting myself through school, and I made very good use out of San Diego State in many ways, and it served me very well. But I

am not sure I made as good use of it as I would have made if I'd been guided to, pointed to, and supported to go to college and see that as a step to realizing my fuller potential. That had not been part of my narrative up until the time I graduated. And I don't fault anyone for that, it's simply where we were in the culture at that time.

Michelle Sanchez:

Around that same time that Ellen was deciding where to begin her studies and her career, our Season 3 guest Jacqueline Harper, who you may remember from our Black History month show, was just starting out at IBM. Jacqueline tells the story of being asked to leave her job at IBM when she became pregnant with her first child and started wearing maternity clothes. This story is really worth repeating--because it shows the culture at the time--of not only being hostile to new mothers, but to women who were perfectly capable of working for the nine months before baby was born.

Jacqueline Harper [7:57]

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

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

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

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

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

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

J. Harper:

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

M. Byerley:
The horror!

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

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

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

M. Byerley:
So did you go home?

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

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

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

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

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

M. Byerley:
Wow.

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

Michelle Sanchez:
Jacqueline did end up returning to IBM, although it was after her three children were born, and she then went on to train to become one of IBM's first black female programmers. It's a fascinating episode, one of our fan favorites, and I highly recommend it.

I'd like to turn to one of our guests who has a unique perspective as someone who did not grow up in the United States, and had a very different experience as she was choosing her career. Sherry Wei, who is the founder of Aviatrix, grew up in China, where both of her parents were electrical engineers and university professors. And she describes feeling valued as a female, even if it was expected that she enter the field her parents had been in.

Sherry Wei [11:34]

Melinda Byerley:
You came to the United States and you studied electrical engineering at Purdue. How did you come to study electrical engineering, communication circuitry, and computer science? Was it something that you wanted to do when you were younger? How did you find your way into the field?

Sherry Wei:
So that has to do with my family background. I grew up ... my parents were actually professors in the university. I was already conditioned growing up that this is something I was gonna do, and my kids don't believe my parents are actually professors because they don't speak English. Suddenly, their status has lowered to very low. They can't believe that they're very knowledgeable people, but my parents were professors in that school. They taught those things, so I grew up ... we didn't have ... not like today's kids. You can do anything and there's so many choices. I think, at our time, my time, there wasn't a lot of options. You grow up in this family, and this family does this. Therefore, it's natural for you to continue doing that, so that's how I ... I was exposed also growing up to my parents talking at the dinner table about electronics and stuff like that.

Sherry Wei:
It wasn't very strange to me, it wasn't like ... today, people talk about ... what is it? STEM. That you're heading to STEM and stuff like that. But, I grew up in a household of parents who know electronics, and technology, and stuff like that. It was natural and easy for me. I didn't even know that ... and also, I grew up in an era where women are encouraged also to take engineering rather than sewing, and cooking, and stuff like that. Because, at that time,

Communist China has the philosophy or teaching that women is half the sky, right? If you think of the whole sky, women is half of it. Because we're half of it, there's no limit to what we can do. It wasn't strange. In fact, you see a lot of women engineers of my age coming to US to study technology. That's because, especially coming from China, because that's how we grow up, with this teaching and this ... I wanna say philosophy. It's more like an ideology.

Sherry Wei:
But, in a way, it wasn't very difficult. It turned out that it was a blessing. Because, coming to US without speaking the language and also, the cultural background, the technology has a common language, right? It became our advantage; it became the easy entry point. If I had studied, let's say, finance or liberal arts, I would not be able to come here and survive. But, technology, engineering things, they're common. Even if you don't understand language, you can still solve problems. You can design a circuit or write a piece of software that it's a much limited scope, so it turned out to be a blessing to be able to function in this new place.

Melinda Byerley:
You didn't even think twice about it. It also sounds like because your mother ... what an influence that must've been to have both your mother and your father be in the profession.

Sherry Wei:
Yes, and my kids cannot believe.

Melinda Byerley:
Which is probably true in many ways. That's really fascinating to me because it's such a different perspective from people who grew up here in the United States and entering technology. While I'm talking to you not just because you're a woman, I think, since you brought it up, it's really fascinating. When you come to the United States, you sort of, "Of course, I'm studying circuitry and electronics."

Sherry Wei:
Yeah.

Melinda Byerley:
Was there a point where you encountered people who didn't assume that about you or was that ever a problem?

Sherry Wei:

Yeah, that was much later. When you first go to university, it's still sheltered because I came here for graduate school. Graduate school, so there's lots for foreign students already. I took it for granted. Only much later, when I went to work and I learned more American culture, American things, and they're all TVs and movie stars, and I realized that it is not very common in US for girls or for women to go to the technology space. Women or girls, maybe they grow up either with the freedom or they grew up with a different nudge or push upbringing. We definitely didn't grow up where the girls are like that, boys are different. We grew up in a half sky environment. Yeah. Only much later, people asked me. I was always surprised because to me it had never been something I try very hard, people turn me down, reject. It has the ... I guess I'm very lucky in that sense that it just came that way.

Melinda Byerley:
I think it's an important experience, I've had difficult experiences. It's not to diminish anybody who has had difficult experiences. But, it's just as important for us to tell the stories of women who've had success and who have had a good experience coming through because that's true, too.

Michelle Sanchez:

Sherry's sense of equality and support she had growing up isn't an experience that all of us share. We love hearing stories like hers where individuals did not have to fight through stereotypes.

But I'd like to talk a bit about the women who have... the tough experiences our female guests have shared with us about bias in the workplace.

Part of learning how to be a good advocate for the other human beings around us is to first hear stories about how they have encountered bias--whether in interviews or around the boardroom table or on the job. In order to do something about it, we need to hear what's really happening out there.

I'd like to introduce you to April Wensel, who is the founder of "Compassionate Coding," an organization that trains software development teams in emotional intelligence skills. She started out as a programmer and got so tired of the *lack of* compassion around her that she set off to do something about it through her consulting service.

April Wensel [18:49]

Melinda Byerley:

so you've got this degree in computer science and it's clear that once you get out of college, you have to learn the way to apply that knowledge in the workplace. What surprised you? In terms of your expectations about what your life would be like after college and what they turned out to be, maybe talk a little bit about that.

April Wensel:
It was interesting because I mentioned that I started computer science in high school, and all of my computer science teachers in high school were women, and a few of my professors in college, computer science professors, were women. As I started to do interviews for jobs when I was about to graduate, that's when I first got exposed to a lot of the bias in technology and the bias in interviewing. I was interviewing for a job at a game company. I loved video games back then so I was all excited. They said, "We really like to hire women when we're working on family games, but right now, we're working on these action games, so we're not really"-

Melinda Byerley:
Wow.

April Wensel:
Yeah, they said that straight up. I was like, "Oh, okay." I was the very insecure college student, so back then, I wasn't ready to challenge them on the spot, and I was just like, "Oh." This world that I thought was going to be women and men equal and all of that, I got that rude awakening early on when I started doing the interviewing. I think that was one of the big shockers, was like, oh, so although like things felt equal in school, in the real world, not yet.

April Wensel:
I think, too, just, I don't know, I guess it was just totally ... I didn't really know what to expect. I thought I would get a job solving interesting problems as people like to say and sticking to my computer world and not having to deal with the human world. That's also not the case. You're thrown into these teams and you have people all around you and so you can't hide out in the basement coding anymore. It's just really not how it's built up. That was another thing that was different. Because in school, I spent most of my time alone, on the computer, coding, and then I got in the workplace and it's like, oh, we actually have to talk to each other and I need to learn how to get along with people.

Melinda Byerley:
That's fascinating because there might be people who struggle through computer science in college and have really good people skills and then that can help them, so if they can make it through that period of aloneness. There are people who are comfortable being in

the basement, as you said, coding, they need to know that this is coming, that this will be waiting for them when they come out. It helps both people, I think.

April Wensel:
That's a good point. That is a very good point. Yeah.

Melinda Byerley:
You mentioned some of the bias that you encountered when you were interviewing. I think it's a good question to ask, what some of the professional and personal challenges that you encountered in software engineering and how that led you to start Compassionate Coding?

April Wensel:
I think I got disillusioned I guess as I jumped from job to job. I kept thinking, I'll find that job where I won't have bias and it will feel like we're doing good in the world and all these things. I'd keep getting a few of those needs met but not all of them at once. I had worked for a company that was doing good in the world or I liked the product, but then they'd do something unethical or the boss would say something inappropriate to me and it's like, oh, I was so close.

April Wensel:
Probably an example, I was at one job and I liked what we were working on. It was a product to help children. The boss that I had at the time, the male boss, I was challenging him in a meeting about I wanted to approach something differently. His response back was to take on a high-pitched female voice to repeat and mock what I was saying.

Melinda Byerley:
Wow.

April Wensel:
Yeah. I was like, whoa, that's not cool. That was an overt thing that happens and I was just like, oh, that's interesting, that sort of thing. I think so much of it that happens, and this is why I think a lot of women say, "Oh well, I've never experienced bias," so much of it is unconscious or subconscious or whatever where it's like how you're perceived in an interview. I think that definitely affected me where if I walk into an interview, the interviewer already has in their mind what a coder looks like, and it's not me, coming in dressed feminine as I do and not taking on that masculine persona that a lot of times is associated with coding. That's already working against me. It's like when you're an empathetic person, you can pick up on that energy in an interview because you can feel it's adversarial and they're assuming there's basically-

Melinda Byerley:

They're looking for reasons to get rid of you. You can feel it. I felt it, too.

April Wensel:
Yes. You know exactly what I mean. Imagine that energy and then being asked to solve really challenging problems that you know how to do but add that extra layer of anxiety about, oh, they're looking for me to slip up and make some little mistake. It was a nightmare. I've cried so many times after those interviews just because you leave feeling like, I don't know, just worthless. It's like they tear you apart. There are these really hostile interviews. That was another thing. I think it doesn't just affect women and people from underrepresented groups, but I think we experience it worse because of all the stereotypes working against us.

Melinda Byerley:
I'm fascinated by this story of you being mocked in a high-pitched voice. The reason I'm fascinated by it is I have too encountered bias but maybe because I'm tall and I'm a big woman and I have a deeper voice and it's loud. No one has ever mocked me that way. I'm fascinated at the form and the tone. I have felt it differently. I think that's such an important point to explore that bias doesn't just look like one thing. Often it's absolutely related to the traits that you either express or in some cases don't express as a woman. I tend to be less feminine in the way I dress and less feminine in my appearance, and so the response I get, I bet, is remarkably different from the one you get, and yet they're still both forms of bias.

April Wensel:
Yes, you're so right there. It's very true. Actually, I have seen both sides of it because I did use to present in a more masculine way, and I think it was partly survival instinct of knowing that that's what I was supposed to look like to succeed. I would wear the hoodie. I wouldn't wear any makeup. I'd always wear jeans and a t-shirt and like I said in a hoodie, and I took on a lot of those traits I think. It did work. I was accepted as one of the guys a lot of the time early on in my career, but it worked. Although, inside, I was denying who I really was, and that's a very painful thing psychologically to do, to suppress who you are in order to fit in. It wasn't sustainable.

Melinda Byerley:
If you want to wear a frilly dress, no matter what your gender, what does that have to do with your code? That seems obvious to me.

April Wensel:
It just seems obvious to me too. I'm in this private Facebook group for women in tech, and somebody was sharing, this woman, because she's analytically minded, she's a coder, she did a little experiment with her dress at work. She liked to wear dresses and that thing. She

stopped doing that and did dress more masculine. She's like, "Yeah. I find that all my male teammates talk to me more and come to me more with questions and all that thing and include me more. Should I just dress like this from now on?" I was just like, "Oh my, gosh. This is still a problem." We're not past these things. These are still active problems in the workplace, which is unfortunate.

Michelle Sanchez:

April's episode--and actually her company Compassionate Coding--are focused on bringing to light the bias that is still a part of working in this industry, and our next clip shows this in a dramatic way: the imbalance between male and female CEOs.

This clip comes from Laura Yecies, who is a strategic technology leader and experienced CEO of two venture-backed startups. Currently the CEO of SyncThink, an eye-tracking technology with implications for neurological health, she's been the recipient of many awards, such as the 2012 Silver Medal for Female Executive of the Year for the Stevie Award for Women in Business, the Top Female CEO of the Inc. 500 in 2012, and was a U.S. Department of State TechWomen Mentor.

Laura Yecies [27:15]

Melinda Byerley:
You told me about an experience that you had as a woman in tech at an investor meeting. I was wondering if you would be willing to talk about that and what you learned and how it affected your perception of being a woman in tech.

Laura Yecies:
People will sometimes say, "What got you interested in women in tech? Or promoting women in the tech field, or encouraging more women in tech?" Because, frankly, for the first 20 years of my career, I didn't think a whole lot about it. In my early days in marketing there were... Marketing typically had a fair number of women. I had plenty of female colleagues at Informix and Netscape. There weren't that many women engineers, but in the other functions there certainly were. At checkpoint, our VP of engineering was a woman, the CFO later during my time there was a woman. It felt like a very egalitarian environment. It frankly, it was not top of my mind as a big issue. By the way, there are a number of women my age who have blogged about the fact that the environment has gotten a bit worse, like the brogrammer culture, and I think there's some truth to that.

Laura Yecies:
But the main point is that, this was not top of mine I've had, if not, it certainly wasn't 50/50, but I had plenty of great female colleagues. I even knew a decent number of female CEOs. I knew Diane Greene and Meg Whitman and Donna Dubinsky. I saw a number of successful women CEOs, and after I got my first CEO job for SugarSync, one of my investors had their annual CEOs Summit. It was the first time I was going to be meeting many of the partners and certainly all of these CEOs. When I walked into the room, after being greeted by the female receptionist who gave me my name badge, I was the only woman in the room, and they were at least 40 or 50 people. So, probably eight or 10 partners, and probably about 40 CEOs. I was just shocked. I was like, "Is this going to be like a really boring meeting? Maybe the women may not have come."

Laura Yecies:
It was really very shocking to me, and to them too. I certainly... they looked at me as an outsider, when I came in. When we broke for lunch, I went up to Greg, who was the investor and I said, "Greg, where are the women?" Then he said, "Laura, well, you're our only one." I said "How can that be?" He goes, "Well, Laura, actually it's more than that. Not only are you our only one, you're our first." And this was a firm that was a respected VC firm that had been investing for, I think 20 years. They've since gone on, by the way, to have a couple of other female CEOs, and one founder who I think the next year was made CEO of her company.

Laura Yecies:
That's all great. I am not picking on this firm because as we know, it's a ubiquitous problem. My first year in that role was very, very intense. I joined the company at the end of '08 during a huge financial crisis, needed to raise money, needed to get the business going, and so... But about nine or 12 months into it, I had made up my mind that if anyone was going to listen to me, I was going to try to do some advocacy and support for women in tech.

Melinda Byerley:
How has that impacted you since? How have you... what have you done to address, not address it, not that it's your fault, but more like how has that impacted the choices you've made going forward?

Laura Yecies:
I mean, primarily I view it a couple of ways. Number one is, try to lead by example, try to be, not outspoken but transparent or visible with what I'm doing and where there's an opportunity, if someone wants any mentorship or if I can share content and experiences, to do that as well. It's not my day job.

Melinda Byerley:
I know. You've got another one we're going to talk about in just a moment.

Laura Yecies:
But yes I've done some blogging on it. I've certainly given some interviews. I look forward to opportunities such as here to share that part of my experience. I think it's something that should be shared. You're right, the question gets asked of women more than of men, but I think it's important that women who have had diverse experiences share those so that other women will listen and say, "Oh, I want to be a CEO of a tech company, and I also want to have four children." I guess that's actually possible.

Michelle Sanchez:

I love how Laura uses her story to inspire other women who want this for themselves and encourages them through mentoring and just sharing her own experience.

Our next guest has a unique perspective on being a woman in tech. Coraline Ada Ehmke is a trans-woman who was treated differently when living male and working as a software developer versus after the transition to living as a woman. This episode was a fascinating look at identity on the internet, and Coraline's stories illustrate just how your identity absolutely affects how people can perceive you.

Coraline Ehmke
[33:25]

Melinda Byerley:
Are there any ... Not to, we don't have to go too far down into the weeds, but I think it'd be interesting to hear some of the things you learned about interacting online as a woman, not interacting online as a woman, if you feel comfortable sharing that. Because I think there's a lot for people to learn from people who have lived in both worlds.

Coraline Ehmke:
Yeah, I definitely have some perspective on that. I don't remember a lot of those early days. There was a lot of fear and a lot of anxiety, but I can tell you that when I did transition finally in my 40s, I was not terribly well-known when I was living male and as a programmer. I was accomplished in my career, but I didn't have any degree of like Internet notoriety or anything like that. I was universally, almost without exception, accepted as someone who knew what they were talking about.

Coraline Ehmke:
I didn't find myself challenged. I didn't find myself having to defend my opinions on technical matters or other matters. All of that changed when I transitioned. Suddenly, well, for one thing, I did become Internet famous, I guess, so there's an aspect of that. Being a woman with an opinion on the Internet is very different from being a man on the Internet with an opinion. I am subject to ridicule, I'm subject to harassment, I'm subject to doxing and impersonation and my technical credentials are constantly being questioned.

Coraline Ehmke:
That's not just by bad actors. Bad actors, of course, are going to be terrible. It's full of trolls and there are awful, awful people out there, but even by people who are my peers. I don't have the same voice, I don't speak with the same authority that I used to, and all of that is because I have revealed my identity as a woman, online.

Michelle Sanchez:

I'd like to share one more story about women having to prove themselves before they were respected. And we do this not to wallow in difficult experiences, but to celebrate just how much grit and self-confidence these women--and indeed probably the women who are sitting around you right now--have had to have in order to get to where they are now.

Let me tell you about Linda Popky. Linda is the founder and president of Leverage2Market® Associates. She began her career at Sun Trust in the 80s, and tells a story of being told she would never make it in tech--only to go on to an impressive career.

Linda Popky [36:05]

So I left. I got a degree from Boston University. And I started to work for a couple of ad agencies. And then I noticed the ad agencies were kinda getting jerked around by the clients a lot. And I said, "You know what. I would rather be on the client side then the agency side." And I remember this to this day. I went to see a head hunter at the time, in Boston. I would say seven out of every ten jobs in technology, or even probably five out of every ten jobs in general were in digital equipment. Because DEC was the single largest non-government employer in Massachusetts at the time.

For those who don't know what DEC is, what did they make?

DEC made mini-computers. And they eventually kind of emerged into a couple of different companies along the way. I think they eventually wound up at HP, but there was a couple of steps along the way. But DEC was the alternative to IBM. I mean, they were the upstart in the '70s against IBM. And so, they had [inaudible 00:07:20] all over New England.
And I went to see this head hunter. And he sent me to this DEC facility way up in New Hampshire, 50 some miles from my house, and I dutifully drive up there and go to meet with someone for the interview. And they had never been told I was coming. So, everybody kind of looked at me because that person wasn't even there. And so, they interviewed me, but nothing came of it. And I went back and said, "What's going on here?" And he said, "Well, I did the best I can. But you're never gonna make it in technology anyway. I can promise you that."

And I said, "Okay, well we're done here, and yes I will." And it wasn't that long afterwards that I ended up ... I started, again, I was at Adage, and then I was at Cognition and then with Sun. And the rest, from that point, is history. In 1989, I moved to Silicon Valley and have been here ever since and don't ever listen to anyone who tells you you can't do something.

Michelle Sanchez:
Linda is a force to be reckoned with, and it was a pleasure listening to her reminisce on her episode. But I also don't want to focus solely on how tough it is to be a woman.

One of our guests, Paula Buchanan, put this so eloquently when she brought up her own "unearned privilege"--privileges that she grew up with by default--which she felt compelled to acknowledge as part of her story. I will let her give us this reminder as a sort of counterpoint to the grittier, fight-for-your-place stories we've been hearing.

Paula Buchanan
[38:30]

Melinda Byerley:
If I asked you how it impacted you, working with the community, did it change you? Or do you feel that when you went into AmeriCorps sort of who you were was already there? How did that affect you in terms of your decision to focus in the area of visual analytics in healthcare?

Paula Buchanan:
Well, I think for me, going back to what I first said about learning to read at two, which like I said is very atypical. Because I have, and I'm going to call myself on this, there's something called unearned privilege, and a lot of people have it. And I definitely had it growing up. And I think for me, I thought-

Melinda Byerley:
Hold on a second. I think it's worth explaining what unearned privilege is, especially from a woman of color. I think it would surprise a lot of white people like me to hear you say that. So talk about that for a second, just for people who don't know what it is.

Paula Buchanan:

So unearned privilege, and I could Wikipedia it, but I'm just going to use it through my brain. That was like a joke. Unearned privilege is having something not because you earned it, but you're born into it for whatever reason. A lot of people talk about unearned privilege or white people, unearned privilege of being a white male, or being a white person, or the unearned privilege of being born in the United States. As a woman of color, as a black woman, I also experience I guess, and for some people could be surprising, I experienced a lot of unearned privileges.

Both of my parents were really hard working, so I got the work ethic from them. My mom was college educated, and all of her siblings were. So I knew I was going to college. I didn't even have to think about well why do it. It was like my mom said, you're going to college. You can major in whatever you want, you can go wherever, but it's just something you have to do. I didn't even second guess that. So I had the unearned privilege of having two parents pushing me to go to college. I had the unearned privilege of growing up in a really nice house, it wasn't fancy, but I had my own bedroom.

I had the unearned privilege of going to a really good private school, for various private schools almost all my life. So all of those things are total unearned privilege. And I do think a lot of times people do, because there are so many people of color, especially black people, who just struggle to maybe get to the point I was when I could just go the college. But there's a lot of black people who have unearned privilege, and they're not like the Will Smiths or the-

Melinda Byerley:
The LeBron Jameses.

Paula Buchanan:

The LeBron Jameses.

Melinda Byerley:
Although we could argue that he's earned it.

Paula Buchanan:
Yeah, he's definitely earned it, definitely. But yeah, I guess I am a part of the ever-shrinking middle class in the sense that I did have the unearned privilege of I didn't work my way to get to this point. I was born being middle class.

Melinda Byerley:
So going back to your experience in AmeriCorps then, you mentioned the unearned privilege, you went into it kind of unaware of that unearned privilege would you say?

Paula Buchanan:
I knew that, when I was growing up, I didn't think we were poor, but I knew that there were a lot more people who had more than what we had. And never have been very competitive, it's just some people had more, some people had less, and some people had less than that. When I was in AmeriCorps, we were 80 people, and I think maybe eight of us had a college degree. We had a couple girls who were in the Corps who were in their early 20's, late teens, already had two or three children. And I think for me, not growing up around that, it was a little bit of an eye opener, and it made me have more perspective.

Michelle Sanchez:
I want to thank Paula for this invitation to put our challenges in perspective and to recognize where we are each privileged in our own ways.

Now, I had to save these last two clips for closing out this episode and I'm very excited to share them. So thank you for sticking with us.

First, Karen Catlin, who is a leadership coach and advocate for inclusive workspaces. Her episode was this great combination of Silicon Valley history combined with action steps for making any workplace more welcoming and productive. In this clip, Karen echoes what Laura described about looking around and noticing this diminishing number of women on the job, and she does me a favor of giving us really specific ways we can help women on our teams.

Karen Catlin [43:03]

Karen Catlin:

I have to tell you, I coach a lot of women. That's what I do professionally now, and I love coaching women on trying to understand exactly the impact of their work. Many women, especially if they are engineers and early in their career and heads down, and they think, "If I just do good engineering work, somebody is going to notice, and I will get recognized." When I ask them, it's like, "Well, do you know why you were asked to fix those high-priority bugs or to develop that new feature, or why you've been assigned to this new team? What is the impact on the business?" So many of these women, especially the early career women, do not know.

Karen Catlin:
They haven't been told, like, "This is what success looks like when we deliver on this update to, with all these bug fixes or this new functionality," and so how do they really know, like in the heat of the moment, how they're supposed to prioritize maybe some of the smaller tasks that they are doing if they don't really understand the bigger picture, if they don't understand how their smaller tasks are going to contribute to that definition of success?

Karen Catlin:
I coach a lot of women. It's like you have to ask these questions and make sure that you understand how your work is impacting the quote-unquote "bottom line" for your team or your division or your whole company, and exactly that comment about like, and this helps you then position your work in terms of talking about it at your next check-in with your manager about your performance at your next more formal annual appraisal where you're writing a self-appraisal, or on your résumé or LinkedIn profile to just be able to talk about the impact of your work.

Melinda Byerley:
Yeah. You probably have a nicer way of saying it than I do, but I call it the "so what?" You have the bullet on your résumé, but so what? The answer to "so what" is what people are more interested in rather than the bullet.

Karen Catlin:
Exactly. Exactly.

Melinda Byerley:
This is actually a wonderful segue into something I was dying to talk to you about, and that is your current work. I know that you coach women in particular to be stronger leaders and men to be better allies, but I was reading some things you had written about your time at Adobe and sort of your awakening on some of these issues, so maybe we can go back in the time machine again, it's back to that, those experiences that you had that sort of awakened you to the work that you do now.

Karen Catlin:
Yes, so when I was at Adobe, and it was soon after the acquisition, one of the senior VPs of engineering told me, and I think this was in 2006, he told me, "Hey, Karen, I've been sponsoring this thing called the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing for a couple years, and I think it's a good organization, but I honestly don't know. Would you mind going to the next conference and checking it out?" I said, "Sure. Okay. I'll go do that." I went to the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing a few months later, and I was, oh, my gosh, blown away. First of all, it was tiny. Right now, I think it's like 20,000 people go to this conference, this yearly conference, but back then, it was only like less than 1,000 people.

Melinda Byerley:
Wow.

Karen Catlin:
It was this intimate conference with these incredibly talented leaders across tech, and a lot of women, and people were having these great conversations about the lack of gender diversity in tech, and all of these supports and programs and issues and all sorts of things that could be done to address the problem, and my eyes were opened wide. I feel like leading up to that, I had just been so heads down in my career and raising my kids and doing my work that I hadn't noticed this decline happening right before my eyes, this decline like when I think back now early in my career where there were roughly 37 or 38% of this computer science degrees going to women, there used to be a lot of women in the cubes next to me at mine in the offices next to mine. Every team had women on it. It was just such a different situation, and I kind of didn't notice that this decline was happening until I went to the conference and I was like, "Oh, my goodness."

Karen Catlin:
The numbers bore it out, and as I started thinking about what was going on at Macromedia and my experience just early on at Adobe, it's like, yeah, there aren't as many women as there used to be. We did not have a women's employee resource group or affinity group, so I started that. I started siphoning off a small chunk of my VPs, like kind of my discretionary budget to sponsor a book club for women who wanted to do that or some happy hours to increase networking or lunches where we could talk about different topics. I started mentoring a lot of women as well myself, so I started just trying to figure out, what does Adobe, and what do the women across Adobe need in support so that if they want to stay at Adobe, they feel that they can, and they feel that they can grow their career at Adobe even though it was male-dominated, just like every other tech company?

Karen Catlin:

I started experimenting. I started doing a lot of this sponsorship work and mentoring, and over the next, I don't know, N years, four or five years, I slowly started realizing that I am super passionate about supporting women at the company, and I want to do that full time, and I want to do it not just for Adobe, but kind of the industry overall.

Melinda Byerley:
I love getting concrete, because I tend to ... Like you, I tend to sort of think in large, abstract, and so getting right into the meat of it. Even just talking to me, like even as a white woman, like let's not bash our theoretical white men friends. Let's not talk at them. Let's get real. Myself as a white woman who runs a company, how can I, on an everyday basis, make my company more inclusive?

Karen Catlin:
Yes. I'll talk about just one area to start, and we can go from there, but one area is feedback, feedback that you give to employees and that other people within your company give to each other. There is research from Clayman Institute at Stanford that talks about how, and this makes sense, that vague feedback holds women back. Of course, if we're not getting constructive feedback about how our work could improve, how we could have a more of an impact on the company's business, how we, new skills that we should be learning, if we're not getting those concrete, constructive kinds of pieces of feedback, of course we're going to be held back, because we don't, we improve through feedback. Right? We won't necessarily know what we're doing.

Karen Catlin:
The research that was done by Clayman, they studied annual written performance reviews from three very large tech companies and one professional services company. They looked at the formal feedback by gender, and they were noticing some very different, excuse me, very big differences by gender. One is that the women were not told about new skills that they should be developing, like the hard skills, so the technical skills or some very job-related skill, whereas men were given that feedback. "We recommend you pursue or learn this new kind of technology, this new skill." That's one thing.

Karen Catlin:
Another thing, women were getting shorter performance reviews than men, so men were getting more feedback, which, again, would allow the constructive criticism to come in. Women were being told that they were, being described using adjectives that are not surprising, maybe, to you. You've probably seen some of this, but, "You're too aggressive," but at the same time, it's like it's all about the team, so the, "You and the team did this," whereas the men were getting, having reviews that had adjectives that we value in business, like things like, "You're innovative. You're a powerhouse. You're," like whatever.

Melinda Byerley:
"You're decisive."

Karen Catlin:
Decisive, all these things, so we use different language when we're giving feedback to men versus women, and what the research uncovered is, or maybe it's a different research, set of research that I read as well, but there's research out there that shows that we tend to not give the hard, constructive feedback to people who are different from us, so if we are a man, we don't tend to give that kind of constructive feedback to a woman, because we don't want to be seen as sexist. If we are a white person, we don't give constructive feedback to someone, perhaps, who is a person of color, because we don't want to come across as seeming bigoted.

Karen Catlin:
If we are someone who has a computer science degree from a four-year institution, we might not give that really constructive, hard feedback to someone from, who's a bootcamp grad, because we don't want to offend them and make them think that we are biased against people who don't have four-year degrees. Right? Whatever it is. We don't cross the lines of those demographics when we're giving hard feedback, so my ... Hopefully this wasn't too long, but getting back to your question of what can you do as a small, I assume a small business owner. I don't mean to say... Yeah, a small-

Melinda Byerley:
No, I don't mind that.

Karen Catlin:
Yeah, is, make sure you're giving equitable feedback to all of your employees.

Michelle Sanchez
Our final clip comes from Mar Hicks, who is an author and historian--they are an Associate Professor of History at Illinois Institute of Technology--and their specialty is the history of tech.

Mar sums up so much in this clip because it comes up, once again, that women were once much more present in this field, including Mar's own mother who was a computer programmer, but the culture at once pushed women out and kept women from entering.

Mar Hicks [52:40]

Mar Hicks:
Well, when I was a UNIX systems administrator, I had a woman for my boss. Her name was Peg, and meanwhile, all of the folks who were younger, in my cohort, in their 20s, they were almost all young men. And our bosses, there was Peg and another woman, so our big bosses were of an older generation, they were both women. And we would shoot the breeze and say, "Oh, isn't that funny? Isn't that interesting? Why does it seem the opposite of what we'd expect?" Right, because we had all been indoctrinated into this idea of progress, and technological progress going hand in hand with social progress, why aren't there more women around now?

Mar Hicks:
And our bosses would kind of laugh and say, "Well, you don't understand. History isn't a linear progress narrative. There used to be a lot more women around in this field." That was initially what got me thinking about it, because I actually started thinking, "Well, that's true." My mother was a computer programmer and I had never really put that in historical context. I just thought that was her job, that was a thing she did. I didn't think about it in terms of, well there were certain things happening in that era that actually kind of pushed women into certain jobs and men into certain others and then later, pushed women out of certain jobs and men into those jobs.

Mar Hicks:
At the time when I started getting interested in this, this would've been around 2000, 2001, there was very little written on it, so my first step was, "I just want to read about it. I just want to know about this." But because I couldn't find more than, I think it was one article and one dissertation on the topic of women in computing and where they all went, I realized, "Well, somebody has to do the research to figure this out." And since I sort of wanted to do that anyway, I thought, "Well, I'll apply to graduate school and I'll see maybe if that's something I want to do when I get to graduate school. If that's a story that I can tell."

Melinda Byerley:
Did you interview your mother in the course of writing your history and your dissertations?

Mar Hicks:
That's a really interesting question. I did, or rather I should say I tried to. But for the most part, and this was common. This was something that happened and still happens with my interviewees who are mostly, not all, but mostly women, the people that I interview, they don't necessarily want to talk to me. Not because they don't want to talk to me particularly, but they think that what they have to say isn't important and are just like, "Oh, well, I don't

have anything good to say, I don't have anything important to say. Why would you want to talk to me?"

Mar Hicks:
And when I started asking her about her experiences, she would tell me some things, but she would say, "Look, it's not that important. I was one of many, I was doing a job." And the fascinating thing to me is that over the years, as my books come out, as Margo Shetterly's book Hidden Figures exploded on the scene and changed the national consciousness, as all of these works have come out saying basically the same thing, "Look, women were there in the past and this is an important thing that we should reckon with." Women have started being more willing to tell their stories and now my mother actually wants to talk to me more about what she did, because she doesn't feel like it's as unimportant anymore, which I think is really interesting, how it changes how people put their personal experience into perspective.

Melinda Byerley:
I know that you told me before that you were also starting your own podcast on history and tech and this is my plug for you on your behalf and when you do, do that interview with your mother, I hope she comes on your show and please let us know, because we'll let our listeners know as well, because I'm dying to hear that story.

Mar Hicks:
Thanks, yeah. It's called the Tech Past Podcast. You can follow the handle on Twitter or Instagram @techpastpod and I don't want to give anything away, but yeah, there might be an appearance from some women programmers related to me and also some who programmed the very first computers in the world during WWII.

Melinda Byerley:
Oh, that's amazing. I can't wait to hear it. Finding you was like finding a fellow kindred spirit. To discover that there were amazing people doing this kind of research and trying to get these stories told, from everyone, and I'm sure it's not just women, but like you said, gay people, people of color, non-binary people, all different identities whose existences have previously not been covered, or in some cases, erased.

Mar Hicks:
Yeah, yeah, and I think it's honestly, for all of the terrible things that are happening now, in some ways we're in a great moment for telling our stories and having our stories listened to, because at least from my lifetime, there's now a higher level of cultural awareness about this topic in particular. What I mean by that is this issue of how technology and society interact and why it's really important to think about who's building our

technologies. We just seem to be in a really receptive moment for talking about stuff like that.

Melinda Byerley:
I think as I said to you too on the pre-call, but for the listeners, I sometimes struggle with that too, when I'm asking people to join this podcast. Men almost always say yes or they'll shift the timing, but women, and it's not uncommon, have to be convinced that we want to hear their stories.

Mar Hicks:
Yes.

Melinda Byerley:
So please encourage the women around you to tell their stories. I think it really helps when I even say to our potential guests, "I want to hear your story." And it's the truth, and I wanted to hear Mar's story. So I'm glad you're here.

Mar Hicks:
Yeah, it's sad, isn't it? Because I mean, I talk to some incredibly smart and accomplished people, I know you do as well, and yet there is that divide that's often along gender lines, where people think, "Oh, I don't have something to say about this," or "Yes, of course I have something to say about this."

Michelle Sanchez:
This last point is such a good way to end, I think. Because, it really is so important for women to feel empowered to share their stories. Not only to encourage others to find strength and wisdom in those stories, but to make your mark and know that you and your history is worth telling. And that's why we're here at Stayin' Alive in Tech--to share oral histories of the tech industry.

And with that, we wrap up Season 3 of our podcast. We encourage you to leave us a review, share the episodes you love, and stay tuned for more episodes coming later in the Spring.