Tamar Carroll- Okay. My name is Tamar Carroll, and I'm in the history department at Rochester Institute of Technology. And today is November 11, 2021. And I have the pleasure of speaking with Elizabeth Birch, who was formerly the director of the Human Rights Campaign. And we're going to be talking today about the work she did with Kodak's Lambda Employee Network. And Elizabeth, is it okay with you if I record our conversation?

Elizabeth Birch- Yes.

C- And is it okay with you if in the future I donate the recording to a historical archive such as RIT's or the University of Rochester?

B- Sure.

C- Thank you. Thank you so much. I'm so excited to get to learn more about the work you did with Kodak. But I also want to let you start where you'd like to start.

B- Sure. Well, I came in contact with Kodak in a couple of different ways. So just to set the picture, this was probably in the 1980s I came to speak at Kodak. I was already an out executive at Apple. So I had a lot of interest in sort of the whole notion of the digital convergence, both from a legal standpoint, and then from a practical standpoint in terms of entertainment, data, all of that kind of stuff. So I'm at Apple. I graduated from law school in 1985. I might have even still been at McCutcheon, Doyle, Brown, and Anderson, a major law firm in San Francisco at the time I visited Kodak. But basically what I did in both my life at McCutcheon as a young out lawyer and also when I went to Apple, is on my business trips, I would routinely schedule in one or two or three corporations to go help, go help their LGBTQ group in terms of wherever they were in their developmental cycle. And in those days, it was all about achieving really simple but fundamental protections like domestic partnership coverage or non-discrimination policy. So very, very basic benefits. We were at the very beginning of this journey with corporate America. And so this was often in my life, I would, you know, if I was coming to somewhere like Rochester, then I would fit in Kodak. So I did this with 3M company, Chevron, one company after another when I was a young lawyer. Kodak stands out for a couple of reasons. First of all, George Fisher was phenomenal. He was a lovely, really good person slash CEO. And I found overall, if I could get to the CEO of any enterprise, no matter what industry or geography, those leaders tended to be susceptible to be disarmed. Because a couple of reasons. One, somewhere in their family, it would inevitably turn out there was a gay person. Or they really, really valued some of the talent at the corporation and knew that they were just pivotal people who happened to be gay. And they didn't want to lose that talent. So for either just straight practical reasons around innovation and productivity, they didn't want to lose their gay talent, or had a soft spot in their heart, for some reason, that would come become clear years later in the life of George Fisher. Because when I heard he had a very young daughter, I don't know how old she was. I can't even remember her name, Barkley or something. Anyway, George Fisher's daughter was still a little girl, I believe, maybe 12, 13. I can't really remember. But she grew up and turned out to be a lesbian. So I

mean, his instincts about his own company, about his own team, about valuing certain talent within the company, also extended in his case, to what would end up being a precious family member. The person who brought us in was Emily, or brought me in was Emily.
Emily Jones. Emily Jones. And then I also got to know Cynthia Hess, H-E-S-S, who was at that time an executive, in an executive assignment to George Fisher. But for some reason, I thought for a minute, that was his executive assistant. And we ended up, I believe,
we actually, Cynthia ended up, I invited George Fisher to testify before Congress about the Employment Nondiscrimination Act. And he sent Cynthia, because Cynthia was a lesbian, and an executive at Kodak. So she came and testified. But she was there with other CEOs. So we had somehow amassed enough credibility to be able to put together a pretty powerful panel before Congress at the time. And so, I mean, I just remember going to Kodak. I love film. I love, and I mean film, like Technicolor. I went to NYU film school one summer. So I had a romance with Kodak in my mind, in terms of the technology, and worried early on of how do you convert, you know, from this gorgeous film, and the rich images, you know, the beautiful, beautiful Technicolor over to digital, and what will happen. So that's sort of what was on everyone's mind. The whole idea that Kodak would go through this massive transformation, and you know, historic shrinkage, that was still in the offing. No one knew that was coming. But yeah, so that's how, and I think Emily Jones was really the central early pioneer. And I went there and did, I believe I did the keynote speech for the kickoff of their LGBT group, employee group. And maybe there were a couple of other sessions, like maybe meeting with the employee group itself. But what was really important was spending that time with George Fisher. And I sat with him and his wife during the event, and that allowed me schmooze time, you know, to really connect with him. And he had been a great CEO at Motorola. So Motorola also had gone on a similar journey, or did maybe after Kodak. But you know, George Fisher signaled to his peers, this is the next right thing to do. And so Kodak was quite early and quite pioneering.

C- What was your impression of Kodak's culture before they went through this culture shift?

B- I have no idea. But the fact that the seeds were there, that was very important. They also had another company Xerox in their midst. And Xerox was fantastic at innovation around diversity and inclusion. They're probably one of the unsung heroes. They ended up having a female CEO in Canada very early on. Then she went on, I believe, to head the US. They were just so pioneering. And that was in sort of the same area as Kodak. So they probably influenced each other a little bit. But you know, and you know, the rumor about Kodak way early on is that the founder was gay and closeted at the time. So, you know, it all comes full circle. But I remember, you know, the fact that we could have that level of an event. And that kind of a very open exchange that touched on everything, race, transgender, everything way back then, it shows that there were all the right pieces in place, or such an event couldn't have taken place. So, you know, you have to understand, I would whisk in, spend the day, and then I was gone. So it's not like I have a long dated exposure to Kodak's culture. Although I did get, I got to know Cynthia a little bit over the years and saw her from time to time, because she ended up getting married to the head of, what's it called, help me, there's a big conference called Out and Equal. Cynthia

ended up leaving Kodak and marrying the head of Out and Equal. So she spent years and years and years with Selisse Berry running around doing LGBT advocacy.

C- Yes. I think that might be Cynthia Martin.

B- Oh, and then Cynthia Martin, who's Cynthia Hess? Oh, I think she's an elected official in Virginia. Yeah, Martin, that's it. Sorry about that.

C- And she was chief of staff for George Eastman. So…

B- Right. Okay. There you go.

C- I think she hadn't, I just spoke with her earlier this week, and it was wonderful. And I think she had not yet come out, but then decided to come out in the workplace to George Eastman.

B- I think that this event influenced her. I think that's what I recall. And then I think I kind of helped her by having her come to Washington. And I think all of that was a huge sort of watershed in her life.

C- Yeah.

B- Yeah.

C- So one thing I know about Kodak is that there was a women's employee network before the Lambda network and also Restore a Black Employee Network.

B- Yeah.

C- And I know that you also worked with other employee networks at other corporations. And I was wondering if you could say anything about what you see as the benefits of employee networks or just comment on your observations of how they functioned.

B- Oh, they were. Employee resource groups or employee business groups are the biggest, almost revolutionary plant within a corporation that one could imagine over the last 40 years. In a way, organizations, in essence, were on some cultural level, in essence, allowing unionization for certain purposes. So you ended up getting these caucuses or clusters. And in a way, it was like letting the camel in under the tent. It was now instead of having advocacy occur from the outside in, now you just invited almost like a cluster of watchdog organizations inside of the company. And the results have been absolutely stunning to the point where now a company doesn't even have to wait to be criticized from the outside because their own employee group is probably going to have the jump on anybody and be doing it inside. And we've seen that play out time and time again at Microsoft, at Google, at Salesforce, at Facebook, that ultimately it's going to be your own employee groups that in some

ways are your true north. And they have been instrumental in four ways in terms of advancing diversity. One, it creates a kind of a sanctuary for employees when they first come. We'll just stick with the gay theme. Young gay person comes in, feels a little insecure, a little lost. Now there's this natural sanctuary where they can go, make friendships quickly, get exposed sort of cross-departmentally because these people, these members of these employee groups are going to come from every department. So it's important in terms of sanctuary. It's also important in terms of having some key audiences to share key strategic vision with. So it's always important to have that CEO spend quality time with each employee group over the course of the year, have a quality conversation, a quality exchange. And in that way, it gives the employee face time they wouldn't have otherwise had like exposure to the executive team. And then it creates this very, really important human dimension so that the CEO is really experiencing their diverse talent up close and personal. So then it's good for exposure, for opportunity. It's fantastic for special training. So for those groups, you want them to really understand what's the strategic vision of the next decade and how does diversity play into that. And it forces the CEO to constantly be coming back to that to make sure it's integral to the vision for the company. And then finally, it's just, you know, I don't know, it's there's some kind of armor that breathes in both directions. So the employee feels more protected from an HR standpoint, but also more like the osmosis can go the other way too, that they'll feel way more understood both as an individual, but also as a member of a larger group that is strewn across the company. So I think employee resource groups have been, you know, as I said, revolutionary in being kind of a watchdog. And it extends beyond just, you know, benefits, benefits, me, me, me, you know, it's on topics like the environment. On climate change on, you know, all kinds of topics. Well, look what's going on with Facebook, you know, with the whistleblower, although all of that stuff was known. But it takes a, I think it takes a kind of a, you know, a historic pinpointed moment for it to become general knowledge. But, you know, everyone at Facebook knew this stuff was going on for years.

C- Um, your comment about it's kind of like unions is making me recall a man named Dan Sapper, who worked closely with Emily, and he was the first internal listserv manager for for their internal email system. And their emails kept getting censored by Kodak, by Kodak system, because they had union, but they, he was like, No, we're talking about domestic unions, you know?

B- Oh, that's funny. Yeah, yeah.

C- And there is like a little bit of tension in that they, you know, that they were supporting. They were supportive, but they certainly did not want the actual labor unions and negotiations over wages, you know.

B- No, that was that was that that's why it ended up being so clever, because it was just the right set of configurations around culture, not necessarily bargaining unit, but around a cultural negotiation, that was enough to not completely scare off a company. And so it ended up

working. Yeah, these employee groups. Yeah.

C- Um, it's, it's really interesting to because labor unions are at such a historic low point, you know, so to think about this as an alternative structure that is maybe better suited for the, the political economy and the time, I think that's really insightful.

B- Maybe, although, you know, at some point, you still need a bargaining unit. So, you know, it's not to, you know, unions are very, very important. And I feel like their heyday will, will come back in some ways, I do think unions need to reinvent themselves. And I think there's actually really good lessons to be learned from the, the kind of the workplace movement that's taken place. But there's no question that at the, you know, most corporations can't help themselves, they're basically, you know, driven toward profit. And if that's the marker, if that's how you're going to measure it, you absolutely need things to disrupt that narrative. And I think you're right, that but employee groups can't replace unions, because they don't have the statutory power to kind of negotiate at that level. But they can have huge impact on culture, and things like benefits.

C- Dan also told me that it was just a huge deal for him to be able to put a photograph of his partner on his desk.

B- Oh, I know. Yeah. Because that was the 80s. Yeah.

C- It was, you know, it may, for my students today, that probably doesn't make sense. You know, it does.

B- Yeah.

C- Imagine that world, right. But that was especially in a manufacturing based industry.

B- Right. People forget that film is very messy. It's like making motherboards with all the chemicals and everything. So yeah, it's a very harsh environment in terms of manufacturing. Yeah. Yeah.

C- Um, are there so you described the first time you went to Kodak, which helped launch the Lambda Network. Did you go back again after that?

B- I can't I think so. But I can't remember. I mean, we're talking about 15 years of crisscrossing the country. Yeah, I certainly saw Emily a lot at different functions, you know, conferences and so on. I think Emily got involved with HRC. Yeah, I think Kodak maybe did became a sponsor. I also remember flying up once to what's the glass company?

C- Oh, Simone.

B- No. You know, there's a town in New York,

C- Corning.

B- Corning. I remember also being flown up once and maybe during that trip, but I'm just trying, you know, I had a bunch of upstate New York. Yeah. Companies.

C- Emily told me that Corning had an LGBTQ employee network as well.

B- Yeah. And I think I did their keynote too. Yeah.

C- She said it was harder there, though.

B- It is. It was the culture was much just being that little bit of a distance from a major city.

C- Yeah.

B- Really made it like MetLife was like that, too, even though they're Massachusetts, a little more conservative, small town feel.

C- Yeah.

B- Kodak felt more cosmopolitan. I don't know why.

C- Yeah. Well, they did have offices all over the world and…

B- and so connected in the film industry that it was kind of hip and groovy, you know? Yeah.

C- Yeah. Yeah, that's interesting. I know that you you've spoken elsewhere a little bit about the strategy of corporate change, and I was wondering if you could, you know, speak about that more like as a social change strategy. Yeah. My focus on corporations.

B- Yeah, there is. I think that, you know, people like to say it has to come from the top or it has to come from the bottom. It has to come from both. But if you don't have the top, nothing is going to happen. So my goal was always to as quickly as possible, engage the CEO. And I had a rule that if I was going to visit the company, I never charged, but I was my rule was I had to spend part of the day with the CEO. Once you get the CEO's mind share, like even if it's 20 percent, it's the beginning of something and then things will eventually unfold and things can happen. If you get a CEO like Ross Perot, nothing's going to happen. I mean, he literally called me up and said, you seem like a very nice, bright lady. Now tell me what you're saying, you know, on and on. And as I talked to him about it, just he just he couldn't open his mind. He could open to me, but he could not open his mind. So that one, it took him literally eventually getting rid of him out of the company. And then it got fixed. But but someone like George Fisher was

just a gift because something in him had been around the block in life and he got it very quickly. There was not a struggle. He was very sophisticated. And so the strategy, the whole building of an employee group, that ritual of working together on that or working to achieve this benefit or that benefit, like I would often hope that nothing would come too quickly because there was huge benefit in the organizing of that and making the business case. And it brought all the LGBT folks together and their allies. So in that journey, you didn't want anything achieved too quickly or it would break up all the bonding. You know, the bonding stuff was really valuable. And then ultimately, when they would achieve a benefit, it was just like huge celebration, like huge emotional relief. I remember at Apple, we had a huge struggle to get our LGBT coverage in place. The board voted against it three times. And finally, I basically put my job on the line and said, I can't work here. You know, if this company and John Scully was shocked. But once he understood the magnitude, then he walked into this huge room. It was the final push to try to convince them to do DP benefits. And he just walked in and said, I know you have presentation, I want to hear it. But I want you to know you will be having domestic partner coverage starting January 1 of whatever year, the next year, and, you know, everyone in tears. Because it was the validation, it was the symbolism, it was the allowing of a son or daughter to come home. That's what it felt like. So it ended up there were very moving moments across every company and geography that ended up coming over the line on that decision on whatever the benefit was. And, you know, there'd be a little backlash here and there. But mostly, it lifted all boats that helped everyone's culture at a company. Because if they were going to be nice to the gay people, they're probably going to be nice to most people, so.

C- And it creates a culture of respect and inclusion.

B- Yeah.

C- Yeah,

B- Definitely.

C- And people aren't as afraid. I mean, if people are afraid
of coming out of the closet, it's, it's not a comfortable work environment.

B- Yeah. And, you know, upstate New York is not the most comfortable place on earth. I mean, it's not the worst, but it's not like New York City. I mean, it's pretty conservative and lots of Republican enclaves and, you know, and industrial. Yeah, like Buffalo, Cheektowaga, Syracuse, you know, the Niagara Frontier.

C- Yeah, yeah. Yeah. No, I think that's so interesting
what you're saying about the mobilizing people around a common goal.

B- Yeah.

C- And people have also told me that, like Emily has said, she thinks it really helped her career too, for you were talking about earlier access to leadership and that it was it was really pivotal.

B- Yeah. Because leaders want to see emerging leaders leading on anything. I mean, it's that you are literally carrying the water that that's to be admired, you know, and Emily was one of those early pioneers.

C- Can you recall a little bit about what it was like to testify in Congress for EMDA?

B- Well, I was I did testify a number of times before Congress, but I did not testify. That hearing was all about having corporate executives. So I was head of the human rights campaign by then. So our staff was basically we would have written Cynthia's statement or Cynthia wrote it and we did a lot of editing or doctoring. So for each witness, we would have prepared them, gotten their testimony completely wrapped up and done, and then help them with training on speaking out in front of Congress. But I didn't testify on that particular occasion.

C- Yeah. But you helped organize the testimony.

B- Yeah. I mean, my staff.

C- You know what? Can you assess the significance of that?

B- Um, it was significant in that the level of executive we had testifying was pretty impressive. Let's see, Rufus. What was his dad? The head of Boston Bank. His son ended up being gay. And Rufus has gone on to be very active in democratic politics. But at the time, just like George Fisher's daughter, he was like a little boy who then grew up to come out. And his dad was one of the ones that testified with Cynthia that day. Yeah. Um, so it was significant in that it was a serious. Corporate America showed up in a meaningful way, not like in earlier hearings, you might have, you know, sort of victims, you know, people that were harassed at work or people that were confronted in the bathroom or, you know, we had those kinds of hearings. These were executives answering to Congress. The other thing it inspired in those years was shareholder derivative suits. So we started doing that buying one or two shares of a company and then literally helping to orchestrate. A shareholder vote that could alter the policies, and we were successful and get amassing, you know, like a lot of shares, not to out now win a debate like that, but certainly it helped them go move much more quickly toward implementing policies when they saw how many shareholders supported those moves.

C- It was another lever tool.

B- Yeah, exactly.

C- Um, it seems like it was a milestone. The testimony seems like a milestone on the way to, for example, the Supreme Court's decision, legal, you know, legalizing gay marriage and just sort of broader, um, cultural changes.

B- Yeah, it was, it was one of many very important moments to expose Congress to a wider, to the wider issues, practical kitchen table issues that affected LGBTQ employees and people in general. So anytime we could expose Congress or the general public, I mean, in those days, when I came on at the human rights campaign, I mean, we, we used every manner of spokesperson, you know, we would, you know, we were constantly attracting, um, people that I always wanted, whoever was our person, whether it was share or an executive, you know, from IBM, we wanted someone somewhere to be able to relate to them. So my thing was always, it has to be understood by the mom in Iowa and the dad in Idaho. It, you know, if we're not connecting with the parents, we're wasting our words. So everything we said was, you know, we used focus groups and we really studied how to connect with parents while also affirming the gay person. So they might be 13 years old, whatever they're hearing coming over the television, we wanted it to be both in language their parents could understand and in a way that lifted their spirit. And if you see all the spokespeople from those days, I mean, there was a wide, wide, wide, wide variety. And I think that's what helped to broadcast, you know, some of these concepts and got them out there in a kind of fresh way.

C- It, it seems to me that this was following on the, the talent of the HIV AIDS epidemic. Well, not that it's over, but a little bit in this country, at least. And that was a time when there was rising homophobia because of AIDS. And so it seems like that strategy must have been especially important in that context.

B- Yeah, it was very true. Like what I always tried to get President Clinton to understand, which he never did, you know, never fully understood his place in history, what it could have been vis-a-vis LGBT people. He could have been a mini Lincoln, you know, but he blew it. He didn't understand the moment he had, Obama did, and Obama did it and took full advantage. But yeah, Clinton never understood the magnitude of the pain that gay people had been through, not just because of AIDS and HIV, but because of the fifties and sixties. And so, you know, Clinton could have been the kind of dad riding over the hill on a horse, like with the clouds parting and the sunlight coming through. But instead, he was just, you know, a massive disappointment. I mean, by the time he finished his tenure, we had Don't Ask, Don't Tell and the Defense of Marriage Act. So yeah, it's an important, the last many years are fascinating in terms of, you never know if widespread communication will bring about affection or more derision and more hate. But it turns out that mostly once you expose people to the gay people, they like the gay people. So whether it's in storylines or arcs of a movie or, you know, whatever it is, that's what ended up happening. More exposure meant more affection and more understanding. And also because we're so unique in that we're white, we're Black, we're Asian, we're everything. Honestly, privilege played a role because you had a number of people like Cynthia that were well placed, but closeted, who then ended up being able to come out in a much more impactful and protected position than she would have. But tons and tons of white gay men who were

executives and then discovered activism and their voice. And so, but we moved quickly because you had relative privilege wagging the dog's tail, you know, I mean a whole mix, but honestly, white privilege played a role in how quickly we advanced this issue.

C- And I know that privilege is something that you're sensitive to because you've said in other interviews that, you know, when you were 17 and you were supporting yourself, you didn't have a lot of money. And so I was wondering if you could say a little bit more about that, because one thing that I've observed about Kodak Lambda is that the people that participated the most seem to be in, come from the engineering or the, not the manufacturing, the marketing or engineering divisions, and they were all college educated, you know. And I'm trying to assess, you know, what the existence of this organization meant to people that were in the factories doing, you know, line work. And it's harder for me to have access to them at this point in time, at least. But so I was just wondering, like, if you can share anything you experienced like that, if it's relevant to your experience at Apple, when you mentioned like the motherboard process.

B- Yeah, yeah, definitely. I mean, the people on the factory floor are just way more vulnerable. And, and there were certainly organized labor ended up, you know, being down on the factory floors and, and organizing people and negotiating ultimately for LGBT benefits. So it took them a while to catch on. But when they did, they would include those benefits and so on. But yeah, there's no question, you know, so much of life is about contact and exposure. And you need both that really acute, meaningful exposure to the C-suite. But to really do a good job, the education and, and the momentum, hopefully cascades down and across. But there have been very heroic efforts at places like GM, to organize on the factory floor. And, and back then, though, you know, these decisions tended to be the employee group, which often could have a mix of members that were really cross functional. And then having that interaction, then with HR, diversity, and the C-suite. That's mostly I think, how these decisions got made.
But, but there have been heroic attempts to organize at the blue collar level. Yeah.

C- And it seems like the broader cultural changes matter for everyone.

B- Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it, it is remarkable that, I mean, I did a TED talk called From the Gutter to Glory. And it's how we came out of, we were the most detested part of society, like absolutely disgusting, mistrusted, horrible, pedophiles, hated, to the point where, you know, we're now, you practically get a show when you born gay, they hand you your own TV show now. And, you know, it's the, the, it's, it is such a stunning piece of history to really go from being an untouchable to a Brahmin. I mean, it's happened in, in just a few decades.

C- Yeah, the, the pace of change is, is, is remarkable. And I think about that in terms of women's rights, as, as well, not, I mean, not quite as fast, maybe, but also that sometimes people will say, like, the benefits are not even, you know, so privileged, relatively privileged white women benefit more from access to college, you know, then, or like, because of, you know, Title IX or something like that. So, you know, that is a criticism that, that gets raised about things like gay marriage or court, you know, organizing in large corporations that while those

are, you know, how, how is that going to help a trans youth on the street?

B- Oh, my God, like, I just find that to be so short sighted that if people don't understand the phenomenal transformative effect this organizing has had for everybody who has a job, of course, the gay person who's out of work or the transgender person that's been marked, of course, that's horrible. But the idea that we shouldn't have organized every workplace in America is crazy. The benefits have been monumental. It's almost been like the Great Society for gay people to catch up with the rest of the country. So, yeah, all that stuff about steer clear of corporations, all that silly stuff. Honestly, we would not have marriage for gay people if it weren't for some Republicans. Like we were so naive, like we, the things we fought for were very conservative values, the right to get married, which is literally about organizing women and chattel, historically, and the right to go get killed in the military. I mean, that's what we achieved. So, you know, the idea that we're fighting for some utopian values about sharing food or cleaning up the earth, that's not what we fought for. We did fight for these things that people wanted and they wanted to serve in the military and get married. So, yeah. So, hey, Tamar, I've got a call. I just want to let you know at two.

C- Oh, yeah. I'm sorry.

B- No, it's okay. We're close, though.

C- Elizabeth, it's been such a pleasure to talk with you. Before you go, is there anything else you wish I asked you or you think I should know about Kodak Lambda or this topic more generally?

B- No, but you have the chance to do an amazing kind of visual because it's Kodak. So, you know, even locally, you know, it might be in Rochester. It might be, I mean, I don't know. It has all the makings of this amazing, like, photo show, you know, to show the history and everything.

C- I have a colleague, Joshua Rashad McFadden, who's in photo here at RIT.

B- Oh, good.

C- He's an out black gay man. He just had a solo show at the George Eastman House and…

B- Wow!

C- We're in the early stages, but his family worked at Kodak. And I'm hoping he'll do portraits and we can collaborate.

B- Oh, that's awesome.

C- Yeah, but definitely I've done museum exhibits before. It's definitely part of my work as a

historian. I like to reach a broad public audience.

B- Yeah.

C- So, I will stay in touch. I won't overwhelm you with emails, but I'll, you know…

B- Yeah, no, stay in touch.

C- It'll probably be a few years before it comes to fruition.

B- Yeah. Okay.

C- Yeah. Thank you for that suggestion, though. I agree with you completely.

B- Great.

C- Well, thanks so much. This was really helpful.

B- Good. I'm glad. It's a great company. Hopefully they're doing better these days.

C- A little bit better than at the, you know, what was probably the lowest point.

B- Yeah.

C- All right. Well, thank you.

B- Thank you, Tamar. Take care.

C- Bye.

B- Bye-bye.