

Talks at GS

Kimberly Bryant, Founder and CEO, Black Girls Code

Asahi Pompey, Moderator

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Kimberly Bryant: This is not just about teaching girls about technology. This is about teaching them and giving them the tools to be change agents.

Asahi Pompey: Hi, everyone, and welcome to Talks at GS. We're excited to be joined by Kimberly Bryant, founder and CEO of Black Girls Code. Black Girls Code is a nonprofit dedicated to introducing girls of color to the field of technology and computer science with a focus on entrepreneurial leadership.

Now, in the span of a decade, Kimberly has grown the organization from a local grass-roots initiative serving just the Bay Area to an international presence with 15 chapters across the US and South Africa. Now, I'm especially proud because Goldman Sachs has partnered with Black Girls Code through our Fund for Racial Equity to support their phenomenal work. Kimberly, it's an absolute pleasure to have you here with us.

Kimberly Bryant: It's a pleasure to be here in conversation with you today, Asahi, and I'm so very grateful for your support.

Asahi Pompey: So let's dive right now. Now, I'd like to start with what moved you to create Black Girls Code because I think it's a personal story that many can relate to. Ten years ago, you had enrolled your 11-year-old daughter in a computer science and gaming design summer program, and you discovered that she was virtually the only one who looked like her in her classroom. Now, what kind of message did you fear that sent to her and other girls of color interested in pursuing a career in technology?

Kimberly Bryant: Yes, that's a great question. So interestingly enough, when my daughter, Kai, attended that very first summer program down at Stanford University, she had been surrounded by other engineers, other women in science because I was at Genentech at the time, and I would bring my daughter to work, not just on Bring Your Daughter to Work Day. I would bring my daughter to work all the time. I wanted her to know when I wasn't at home who I was spending my time with and what I was doing. She was very familiar with science and technology at a very young age.

And it wasn't until we were on our way home, after this 5-day summer immersion program, that we had this conversation, and she mentioned this feeling of isolation or that the instructors were not as attentive to the other girls in the classroom. And that's when it really clicked for me.

I was so used to being in environments where I was the only one, only Black professional, only woman, throughout my career that even going into that classroom with my daughter, it was normal. It didn't faze me at that moment until she mentioned it on the way home that there were just a few girls. And the girls were sometimes overlooked. And that was shocking for me on many reasons.

For one because that had become my norm, and now that was possibly going to become my daughter's norm. And that wasn't okay with me because I knew, even though I had gotten used to being the only one, it wasn't a great place to be for me throughout my career. And that's not what I wanted for my daughter. I wanted her to be able to find community and be surrounded by other folks that shared similar backgrounds and experiences so that she could find a really supportive environment.

Asahi Pompey: You rose quickly through the ranks of the biotech industry. And you said that, in many instances, the men who reported to you had never worked for a Black woman before. How specifically were you able to overcome the obstacles and the challenges that really come with being the only female executive of color in the room?

Kimberly Bryant: Yes, I would like to say that I have all these tips, but I will tell you that it was not easy. It was very, very difficult. I was supervising. I was supervising all men. Some were old enough to be not just my father, my grandfather. So I'm a 20-year-old, fresh-out-of-college engineer, just trying to learn the ropes and trying to learn how to navigate in this space that was very male-centric, especially in the '80s. At the end of the '80s, I was in the shop. I was in the field. I was in the factory. And so the thing that really helped me throughout my career was being able to find role models and mentors, other women that were in management, other leaders of color. That was the only way I really was able to survive, was finding that community.

I recall when I moved to Pfizer and it was in one of my very

first director roles. I was on this team, and my fellow directors, all men, we were managing this facility, the Pfizer facility. And I would often go into our team rooms and their meetings, and I would not talk. I would not share. My colleagues would, and I wouldn't share. I remember vividly that my senior director, so my boss's boss, pulled me aside, called me into his office one day, and said, "Kimberly, what's going on? What are you not contributing?"

And I was, like, you know, I don't want to say too much. I want to be part of the team. I just want to fit in. And he was like, "No, absolutely not." This is an older white gentleman. He was like, "No, I hired you to shake up the system, to come in with a different perspective. So I need you to talk. I need you to speak up. That's why you're here." And it was having that validation. This wasn't just my boss. This was my boss's boss. That allowed me to kind of even find my voice as I rose up through the ladder. And having a sponsor like that was pivotal for me in terms of my career success all through my time there and at other places.

Asahi Pompey: I want to switch gears a little bit. I was

struck by some percentages that I saw recently. The fact is that the percentage of women graduating with computer science degrees has actually dramatically declined from 35% in the late '80s, as you talked about, to today, roughly 18%. And out of the 25% of women who currently work in the tech industry, only 3% are African Americans in computing jobs. And get this, less than 1% are executives. So what do you think accounts for such a dramatic reversal in female computer science graduates? And why has there been sort of little progress when it comes to recruiting and retaining women of color in the tech industry?

Kimberly Bryant: Well, interestingly enough, I think that the industry's diversity issue is a victim, if you will, of the advancements that the industry solved. So in the late '70s or such, computing was not like we know it today. So there were computers, but they were large micro computers that were in large rooms that housed these. And there was a lot of government focus on computing. And you saw that a lot in *Hidden Figures*, in the movies. That is how the computing industry really got its roots, its start.

And so we were some of the first ones in at the time

because it was government. And the government was really in the industry at the forefront at the computing era. When we saw the dot-com era start to take place in the mid '80s, right when I was in college, that's when the industry shifted. IT industry became more personal computer driven. It became something that was more accessible. And the image of the industry really started to change with the Apples and the Microsofts of the world. And we did not see women still having a place at the table.

So whereas I meet women all the time that are much older than me and that were early computer scientists, they saw themselves spaced out and blocked out of the industry as it became more commonplace. And so I think one of the things that we're struggling to catch up with is to change that narrative of who should be and can be a computer scientist and is not just a nerdy white guy that can have this place in the industry as a creator. But that was the phenomenon that started to persist in the mid '80s and that dot-com era became, that computer one-on-one era became prevalent.

And so what we're trying to do now is to reverse that trend, to show a different perspective of who can become a

computer scientist and who can be interested and trained as a STEM professional. We see that happen, one of the things that happens for girls very early, if you ask a middle school girl, over 50-60% of them are interested in computer science before they get to high school. That number is about 12%. So it drastically decreases as we're seeing girls go beyond middle school to high school. But it's around that same thing, around these stereotypes of what a computer scientist is and who can be in the field of tech that we're trying to reverse.

And I think we're slowly starting to change that narrative, as this next generation comes into their own. But I think we still have a very long way to go to get back to that level of demographics that we had in the mid '80s when I was in college.

Asahi Pompey: Kimberly, I'm going to take you back a bit. I heard that when you first launched Black Girls Code, you actually encountered a fair amount of push back to the name. Potential funders even said they'd only consider funding your organization if you changed the name. I'm kind of curious, what names, if any, did they suggest? And looking back, what gave you the fortitude to stick with

Black Girls Code even if it meant walking away from investor dollars?

Kimberly Bryant: Well, I think one of the things that's interesting is I often run across this little index card from time to time that I have kept since 2010 or so, where myself and my friends that were helping me to launch this idea wrote all these different names that we could create this organization. So there's, like, Color Coded Kids. Kaleidoscope Kids. I think we even had something similar to, like, Girls Who Code on that list.

But it's interesting, the reason that we sort of landed at Black Girls Code and it stuck was because that was one of the things on our list. I wasn't, in the beginning, really sure. I was, like, this may be a little bit too radical, and I'm not really sure. And I went to this leadership conference. I was listening to one of the speakers. It was a young leader, very dynamic, originally from the Philippines. And I was so struck by the power of her presence and the message she was giving. And so I waited until the end of her talk, went up to her with this little card, and I showed it to her. I was, like, I'm thinking about starting this organization, and maybe I want to call it Black Girls code but do you think

that's too radical?

And she looked at me. She's like, "Oh, my god, absolutely not." She's like, "I need you to go home right now and go see if that is available. If it is, you need to start trademarking that." She's like, "This resonates with me." She's like, "I'm not African American, but I am a Black girl and I get it." And that's the very first person outside of my very small circle that saw the vision. And that stuck with me. So I absolutely went home, I looked on the US Trade Office's website. I did everything she told me. And then that's how we started.

So that has something that has never left me in all of these conversations as we grew the organization. So even though people pushed back and were, like, "Yeah, we're not so sure about that name. And can you change it? Call it something else?" I remembered that. And I remembered that it wasn't just about a racial construct around Blackness. It was deeper than that. And we were, just from the beginning, diehard that we would never change the name, no matter what. If we had to turn down the check, that was fine.

And it's interesting, and I was sharing with someone just recently that last year in the heat of all of the protests and the marches and all of the social activism that really started after the death of George Floyd, people that found Black Girls Code, they found us because we're called Black Girls Code. You do a Google search and we show up. And that's how all of these influencers, everyday folks, large companies, small companies, they found us because of our name.

We're not the only people doing this type of work right now, but one of the reasons they found us was because of the name Black Girls Code.

Asahi Pompey: Now, the nonprofit world has really struggled during COVID, but you're a bit of an anomaly. When you pivoted to virtual training, your program actually expanded exponentially. Were you shocked by how far your reach extended to different corners of the globe? And what do you think that means going forward in terms of scaling up your overseas operations?

Kimberly Bryant: We were absolutely shocked by the impact that the organization had. And we just started with

this hope to create an opportunity that would not only just serve our students, but we made that very first online workshop open to anyone. So any age, any gender, anyone could join that event. We put it online, and when we hit On for the event and turned it on and folks were allowed to register, we saw the numbers and registrants start ticking up exponentially every second. We were, like, something is wrong. We've done something wrong. Is this for real?

And over, I would say in that first day, we had almost a thousand registrants for that very first virtual event. It was mind blowing. We couldn't believe it. The very first event that we hosted, and we had all these people on, almost a thousand participants in the very first one. When we looked at the data afterwards, we saw that it was not just folks, as I said, from our chapter programs. There were literally people from all over the world. So all over Africa, the Caribbean, from Jamaica, Bahamas, and some tiny little island in the South Pacific that we can't even really see on the map. And we were blown away by the reach that this message had been able to reach these folks that were all across the world. And we were able to bring them into this one room.

And I remember watching some of the events that we did afterwards and seeing all of the little kids from all over with their cameras on learning the code at one time. It really expanded our vision of what we possibly could do as an organization.

Asahi Pompey: Now, you recently said that your organization sees girls, quote, not as a problem to be solved but as a solution to everything that the tech industry is struggling with. Now, as you know, we launched One Million Black Women at Goldman Sachs, and we could not agree with you more. Black women and girls should be the architects of the solution that will help close the racial wealth gap. Can you elaborate on what you mean about Black girls and their place?

Kimberly Bryant: Yes. So what I love so much about the initiative that Goldman has initiated is that it goes beyond just technology. It takes it really deepest about not just a particular industry, but solving one of the nation's, and I want to say the world's, issues of an economic inequality. But when you look at who does most of the world's work, it's women. And a lot of times it's women of color.

And so I think if we look at who is already the economic driver in the community and their households in the world, it is women. So empowering them to be able to create those things that we are consuming in our households and our communities, that's transformative. So for me, I have always looked at this work that we're doing with Black Girls Code very similar to the analogy and the problem statement of Goldman is that this is not just about teaching girls about technology. This is about teaching them and giving them the tools to be change agents and change agents that will impact not just their own lives, their own families but change agents who will bring these novel solutions to the world.

And so that is what I mean because I believe that if we empower those that are over 50% of the demographics in the world, who are doing over 70% of the work, we can really get at the root of some of these long-lived systemic issues and really bring in women to the forefront as leaders. And it's a solution not just to tech but in all industries and everything that we touch.

Asahi Pompey: To close, you've been credited far and wide for being ahead of your time and using the digital

space to address systemic racial and gender inequities. How does it feel to be called a revolutionary and a pioneer of this movement?

Kimberly Bryant: Hmm. I don't know if I see myself that way often because I was sharing with someone this weekend, as I'm thinking about what's next and I'm not sure what's next yet, but I'm trying to figure it out. But I know for me, it's always about the community, about the people, about the girls. And that is what moves me is not about where we have come as an organization but what really is for me is the most rewarding thing. It's seeing these girls that are now in college. They email me. They text me. They tell me they're moving into their first dorm or they're moving in their first apartment. And seeing the possibility of what they can become and to go much further than anything that I've ever achieved, that is my wildest hope and dream, is to be able to see the legacy of BGC through the eyes of these girls.

And that is what fills me way more than any label and any reward that I could ever get.

Asahi Pompey: Kimberly Bryant, I love your wildest

dream. It's a wildest dream that lifts up so many in the community and lifts up our country overall. Thank you so much for being here with us at Talks at GS. Thank you very much.

Kimberly Bryant: Thank you for having me, and thank you so much for your support.

Asahi Pompey: Absolutely.

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