

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Tamar Carroll, chair of the department of history at the Rochester Institute of Technology in the US. Tamar has recently been working on the history of the Lambda Network at the Kodak Corporation, which was headquartered in Rochester. So first, could you give us a bit of context around the origins of this group?

TC: In the early 1990s, Kodak realized in order to stay competitive, it needed to diversify. And so leaders in human resources at Kodak learned about employee resource groups, and they encouraged the formation of the Women's Network at Kodak and the North Star Network, which was for African American workers at Kodak and was named after Frederick Douglass's newspaper, the North Star, which he printed here in Rochester, New York. And at the same time that HR was encouraging these employee resource groups, which I should add was also a way of employees organizing that was very different from labor unions because Kodak was notoriously anti-labor union. And they certainly weren't about to change their tune on that, but employee resource groups were sanctioned by the company and they did not negotiate on behalf of workers. Instead, they were support groups and they did advocate for certain policy changes and they gave members of the group opportunities to interact with management. And so they could help with things like the glass ceiling. They could help get people in a position where they could be promoted, where they might not be without their participation in an ERG, as they're nicknamed. But they did not directly bargain on behalf of workers. So at the same time, Kodak was interested in building ERGs, some workers at Kodak that were gay or lesbian were getting frustrated with being closeted in the workplace because in the early 1990s, virtually everyone was closeted at Kodak's headquarters, which we're talking about like 65,000 people employed and no visible gay or lesbian presence. And some of them had begun attending other events about lesbian and gay people in the corporate workforce and also the Gay Games, which was formed as an alternative to the Olympics. And there was one in Vancouver around this time and some of them met up at that Vancouver Gay Games and then they met with HR at Kodak and HR encouraged them to form an employee resource group. So that was 1992. So some of them, about 25 people started meeting informally as a support group. There was also a group like this at Xerox, which was also headquartered in Rochester at this time. Their group was called Galaxy and they decided to hold the holiday gala together at George Eastman's house, which was very symbolic. He was the founder of the Eastman Kodak Company and he has a big mansion. And so they held an event there and it was the first time that a lot of people had come out in the context of work. And then in 1994, they asked for formal recognition from the company. They had to write a business case, they developed bylaws, and ultimately they were recognized by then-CEO George Fisher.

AT: Well, and something that I think you mention in your work is that you can't really separate Rochester, the city, from Kodak or vice versa in this time period because at its height in the 1970s and early '80s, one out of every three or four people in Rochester were employed at Kodak. And so when we're talking about whether someone is out at work or not, the community and the workplace are very, very highly overlapping here. So there was that added incentive from a community standpoint of, if you're out in the community, people at work probably know even if you're not being explicit.

TC: Yeah, absolutely, Allison, and that's a great point. And Cynthia Martin, who was George Fisher's most trusted assistant and next in line to become CEO at Kodak, was actually a closeted lesbian at this time. And she recalled, for example, shopping at Wegmans, which is also headquartered in Rochester, a very well-known grocery store now. But she said, you'd be at Wegmans and if you're with your partner, people are going to wonder, right? Or if you're out at a restaurant, people would see you. So absolutely, Rochester is a small city. And it was very hard to stay closeted in the community at all times. And so it was really stressful for people.

AT: Well, and when we're talking about the local culture, my understanding is that Rochester has a history of progressive social reform and having a vibrant LGBTQ+ community. So like the University of Rochester's Gay

Liberation Front became the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley in 1973. So Rochester, again, as a larger community, had this very active culture and social network going on even before this came to Kodak.

TC: Yeah. So a lot of people like to point out that Frederick Douglass chose Rochester as his home after he escaped from slavery. Susan B. Anthony had her headquarters for the suffrage movement here in Rochester. There's a lot of religious reform. Walter Rauschenbusch, who wrote *The Social Gospel*, called Rochester home. So there is a long tradition of progressive social change in Rochester. And shortly after the Stonewall uprising in New York City, which some people had traveled from Rochester down to New York City to attend, and they founded a chapter of the Gay Liberation Front at the University of Rochester. And it eventually spun off and became an independent organization. They began publishing one of the longest-lasting gay and lesbian newspapers in the United States, *The Empty Closet*. And that was important as a way that gay men and lesbians and bisexuals and what we would now call transgender people learned about each other. And for example, the Lambda Network put advertisements about its meetings and its event in *The Empty Closet*. So that newspaper was really an important source of information and identity formation in Rochester. There were also lesbian feminist groups that were meeting independently in the '70s and taking on issues, including violence against women and the need for women to have economic independence, among many other issues. And so Rochester has two large universities, and it has a pretty big arts community. So I think because of that, there was a relatively more visible LGBT community than in other cities its size. And also, the churches in Rochester were pretty progressive. And even the Catholic leadership allowed for there to be a gay mass said, which was not the case in many locations in the United States. So that made a difference too. And at the same time, there's also a really conformist corporate culture of not rocking the boat if you work at Kodak, because all you have to do is put in your time and then you retire with a great pension and you're set for life. And they did family hiring. So not only would you be set for life, but you could get your kid and your grandkids in at Kodak. And you had this great standard of living, and people really didn't want to upset that. So although there were these grassroots LGBTQ rights and feminist movements happening, there was also this really, what one journalist called *Smug Town*. That's what he called Rochester, this atmosphere of conformity, of self-satisfaction, and not wanting anything to change, especially if it could threaten that.

AT: This is making me think of a schism that you see in a lot of different, "we are fighting for our rights." So just in terms of the groups that you've mentioned so far, you saw this with suffragettes, you saw this with civil rights activists, you see this with queer rights activists, where you've got these separate camps of the respectability politics promoters, the ones who say, "behave, and eventually they will accept us." And then on the other side, you've got the more, say, radical militant like, "no, they're not going to just give us our rights! What are you talking about? We have to fight for it." And so it's interesting, because I feel like you're seeing this playing out in Rochester, where there is very much that, don't rock the boat, more respectability politics vibe.

TC: I think Curt Gerling, the journalist who wrote the book *Smug Town*, felt like it went beyond even respectability politics, in that even though there was a very active African-American civil rights movement in Rochester, the city was then and remains very racially segregated and unequal. And so part of what Gerling was calling out was a concentration of power and wealth and decision-making and not wanting that to change or to be more democratic and more open. So I think that all of the social movements faced that in Rochester. Certainly, the Lambda Network at Kodak did follow the rules. And they didn't confront management, they worked to persuade. So I think that there were more radical gay liberation groups for sure, especially in New York City. But also here in Rochester, there was a chapter of ACT UP, for example, here in the '80s and early 1990s. And these were people that wanted to succeed in their corporate careers. And some of them had families and they wanted to be able to adopt their children and have rights that other people had. And so I think your observation is an excellent one. But I also think that sometimes the distinction can get overblown because the rights that they were fighting for really are also basic human rights, like to be able to be yourself in the

workplace and to not have to, we saw that with Don't Ask, Don't Tell in the military. And how that just doesn't work and it's not fair to ask that of people. It diminishes their dignity and it implicitly sends a signal that homosexuality is inferior to heterosexuality, that it's somehow unspeakable and unrecognizable. And so I think that what they were doing is radical in that sense.

AT: It is occurring to me as well that how much of the traditional values are actually what a lot of the fight for queer rights has been about in terms of, "there's nothing more patriotic than serving in the military." And that's what these people want to do. And you're the ones preventing them from serving their country. Or if you're going to complain about the breakdown of the traditional family, these are people who want to get married. They want to have children. This is very much the nuclear family. It's just with two mommies or two daddies or a non-binary parent. And so it is kind of fascinating that juxtaposition as we're talking about people who are existing in a corporate culture, who want the things that that type of culture promotes. They want the family. They want to be able to buy a home, all of that, without discrimination. So it is weird if you step back and think about people who are pushing for what they say their values are, but they're actively preventing people from seeking out those same goals. It doesn't make sense.

TC: Yeah, it does. It makes perfect sense. And, you know, after the Civil War in the United States, one of the first things that African-Americans wanted to do was have their marriages recognized by law, because they had been denied that during slavery. And so basic civil rights, including recognition of your long-term committed relationship, right, that is something that many people have sought out over time. What I wanted to say about military service is whatever your own stance is vis-a-vis the military, it is a marker of citizenship and the status of being a citizen to be able to serve in your country's military. And so being denied the ability to do that is a denial of your full citizenship.

AT: All right, so to bring it back to Kodak and the Lambda Network, what was the network actually doing?

TC: Yeah, so the network put on educational events. So every year, they did a large educational event for managers throughout the company. And at these events, they shared first-person experience stories about their experiences being closeted in the workplace. Sometimes they employed humor to do this, so they would do funny skits. But the skits had a serious message. So it might be a skit about a coworker who had to stay home and said she had a family emergency. And everybody thought she was a single woman and they're speculating about what the family emergency could possibly be. Could her mother have had a stroke, etc. etc.? Well, she actually had a partner and children, but she couldn't be open about that in the workplace because she was a lesbian, right? So actually she needed to take care of her child. None of her coworkers even know that she's a mother, right? So the sketch is funny. You can watch it on our website, Remembering the Lambda Network at Kodak. But it was very effective at conveying the point that it's really not fair to anyone to not be able to be your whole self and to share the truth of your life with your coworkers.

And they would also present speakers such as Elizabeth Birch, who led the push for LGBTQ rights at Apple and then went on to found the Human Rights Campaign. She came and spoke. So they would bring in experts and talk about the significance of LGBTQ rights in the workplace, as well as sharing their own personal stories. And that was really effective in changing people's minds. They also did programs called Can We Talk? And those were done with workers. So not just with management, but including people that worked in the factories, like on the factory lines. And a group of Lambda members would sit in the center of a circle and they would talk about their lives as lesbian and gay people and the challenges they faced. And the people around them would just listen. And then they would take a break and they could ask questions and then the groups would switch. And so it's a kind of consciousness-raising that was borrowed from the Civil Rights Movement and the women's liberation movement. And again, that sharing of first person stories, it creates empathy, it fosters understanding, and it helped to break down barriers.

AT: You do mention that lesbian feminism in particular was an important influence on the Lambda Network, which employed consciousness raising strategies to change Kodak's corporate culture. So as you mentioned, the Can We Talk? workshops. But it's worth noting that the first board of the Lambda Network in 1995 was actually five women and three men. So it was actually majority women from the very beginning, and they've always been centrally involved in the Lambda network. So can you tell us some of the other ways that, specifically how were the women guiding things?

TC: So first of all, some women from the Women's Network mentored the Lambda members. So they learned from the experience of a more established network. There were women that wrote the scripts for the education events, including that sketch that I described earlier. And they sought out women speakers like Elizabeth Birch and other women - Celeste Barry, who was involved in Out and Equal, for example. And I think that compared to groups like High Tech Gays and the IBM ERG group and the Corning ERG group, there were a lot more women involved in leadership roles at the Lambda Network at Kodak. And this wasn't only important for women, but one of the things that they achieved was adoption benefits. And that was definitely important to some lesbian women at Kodak who were able to then adopt their children and have their families legally recognized.

AT: Well, and you've also talked about in your work that the activists at Kodak were more effective than their counterparts at other companies. And part of that is how they utilize the power of first-person storytelling, which as we've discussed, was largely influenced by the women's rights movement, the women who were writing the scripts and leading the consciousness-raising events. But it's also speaking to the company that they worked at, because their whole image of Kodak is about the power of memory and preserving and sharing stories. I don't know if young people today know the term "Kodak moment," but it's definitely something that I grew up with and would just use in conversation to talk about these just life experiences that you want to save and you want to share. And so both the company culture led to that, but also it sounds like the influence of having a lot of women involved created this more effective strategy of sharing stories and sharing experiences.

TC: Yeah, so I definitely think that some of the women like Emily Jones, like Kathryn Rivers, some of the women that were involved in leadership in the Lambda Network had participated in women's liberation groups. And so I think there's definitely a throughline there. And I think they were really good at using humor and using first-person storytelling and speaking out, right? Because that's how feminists address things like rape and incest and domestic violence. Women started breaking the taboo of silence around those issues and started sharing their stories in the 1970s, and abortion is another and birth control or other great examples of that. So I definitely think there's a throughline there. I have to say, Kodak was all about photography and image-making and absolutely documenting those special moments that came to be known as Kodak moments. And Kodak created massive and highly influential advertising campaigns. So Kodak literally taught Americans when and how to take photographs, right? So Kodak moments were happy moments. They were things like Christmas, like a vacation, like all of the holidays, right? And you didn't take pictures of people who were sick or suffering. That was not a Kodak moment. So you wanted to preserve and show your family and share these photographs of your family at weddings, at graduations, when there are new babies, at their christenings, things like that. And so one of the things that Lambda did that I think is very creative and unique compared to other LGBTQ employee resource groups is they always included a photo booth at all their events. And they encouraged people to get their portrait taken with their partners at the photo booth at these events. And then it would get printed out on Kodak paper with Kodak ink, and you got to take it home with you. And they would encourage people to put it on their desk at work. And that was a quiet but effective way to come out in the workplace, right? Because all of the straight people had pictures of their wedding, had pictures of their kids, maybe if they're not married yet, their girlfriend or boyfriend. But this way, gay men and lesbians could show themselves in a family context. And by now, by this time, people had been trained to read portraits sympathetically and to

recognize the human subject in a portrait. So it was a really smart way to encourage empathy and understanding by putting gay men and lesbians in this family portrait context. So Kodak did that. And then pretty quickly too, the advertising department at Kodak and the marketing people started putting gay and lesbian couples in their advertising, their national and international advertising campaigns. And they had really high-quality advertisements, and they were really influential. There's one about a dad, and he sees his high school-age son, and his son plays baseball, and he's always with this other guy. And the short film that was a television ad, we see them kiss, and then we see the son get upset. And he is visibly conflicted about whether he can be open about his identity or not. And his dad goes through his stuff in his room and finds his camera and develops the film. And there's a photo of the two young men together, like a selfie, basically. And the dad has it blown up and printed and framed and gives it to his son for his birthday present. And so it's this message, you don't even have to say a word, you can just show your acceptance through photography. And so through advertising campaigns like that, through sponsoring the Gay Games, and when other workers wrote homophobic stuff or protested, when other customers protested that Kodak was supporting gay causes, they just dropped those accounts. And they actually fired people that continued to voice their homophobia in a public way. So to their credit, management had a zero-tolerance policy for homophobia. So between the advertising campaigns and the actions, I think they really did a lot to change public opinion and to create a much higher bar. And other corporations wanted to emulate Kodak because they were beloved. And they really were an icon of American corporations at that time.

AT: So there's a lot of criticism today about rainbow capitalism, which is basically, we just slapped a rainbow on this product for Pride Month to try and sell it to people. But there is no backing up by the company of supporting these communities. They just want to sell to you, but they don't want to actually put in the work. And what's interesting to juxtapose that with Kodak, is that they were doing the work. So you've got the Lambda Network advocating for same-sex benefits and helping write inclusive policies. But even from the 1990s, their senior VP for human resources was testifying before Congress in 1996 in support of, what is ENDA?

TC: Yeah, the Employee Non-Discrimination Act, which was twice introduced before Congress, and it would have banned discrimination based on sexual identity. And unfortunately, it has never passed. So we have legislation in New York State that bars discrimination based on sexual identity. And some other states have that, but the majority of states do not. And there is no federal protection. And that's really an issue currently in the United States because of policies, for example, in Florida and Texas, among other states, telling teachers that they can be fired if they discuss homosexuality in their classrooms and not having legal recourse against that. So that federal legislation would have been very significant had it passed. And it was a big deal that Kodak sent, at both times that it was before Congress, they sent their head of HR to testify in support of it. And they said not only was it important for protecting people's civil rights, it actually built better workforces too. Although certainly Kodak was hoping to tap into new markets by marketing to gay men and lesbians, it also is significant for there to be visibility in popular culture. It really does make a difference. And so it's a both/and story.

AT: And I think you mentioned earlier that Kodak was implementing domestic partner benefits and supports as early as like 1997. And something that we haven't touched on as much, because we have talked a lot about gay men and lesbians - who are important, not saying they're not - but it's also important to know that transgender employees were part of this movement as well. And in fact, Kodak introduced a policy in 2003 to protect workers who are transitioning, which I mean, that's more than 20 years ago now, which seems pretty progressive for the time. But that's largely because transgender employees were there and they were participating and they were being active in this group as well.

TC: Yeah, actually, they were demanding to be part of the group. So it's true that the founders of Lambda

identified as gay men and as lesbians, and they did not initially see themselves as representing transgender issues or rights. And what happened was transgender people in Rochester at Kodak persisted in coming to Lambda meetings and saying, "we feel most aligned with you out of all the employee resource groups. You are the closest to us. We need representation and we want you to recognize us and recognize our issues." And Lambda came around and personally embraced the individual trans activists at Kodak. And yes, they collaborated with staff at Out and Equal to write a model policy for gender transitioning in the workplace that Kodak adopted as policy. But that was also shared through the Out and Equal network for other corporations to consider and to adopt as well.

AT: Okay. So given that Kodak is a much smaller company nowadays that we've moved away from physical film into digital, what do you think the lasting impact of all of this was, on Rochester, on the world in general? What do you think the long-term impacts of this was?

TC: Yeah, so that's a great question, Allison. And I'll answer it on different levels. So I do think for the people that were involved, Lambda changed their lives. So it gave them a great sense of accomplishment, of confidence. They made wonderful friends and it's a high point of their lives. And if you listen to our oral history interviews, you'll get a sense of that. Also for the straight people that participated as allies, it really changed their lives too. And a lot of them went on to work at other corporations and to push for LGBTQ-friendly policies there. So I think that's important. So it changed individuals' lives and those people went on to continue to make change. A lot of the Lambda members participated in PFLAG, which is Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. And they worked to implement LGBTQ-friendly curriculum in Rochester schools and suburban schools here. So they continued to try to improve LGBTQ rights, especially for young people in Rochester. But I think on a larger level, we have seen a huge cultural shift, even though it's a contested one and one that is still occurring. But the Supreme Court recognized gay marriage. That was a huge victory. They also overturned sodomy laws in the Lawrence ruling. So it's no longer a crime to have homosexual sex in the United States. So those two Supreme Court rulings are hugely important. Protective labor legislation on the state level is really important. And that extends to transgender people in some states. And again, there's a backlash that's occurring to both trans rights and LGBTQ rights. But for example, the military dropped Don't ask, Don't tell. And so I think there is, despite the backlash, overall greater LGBTQ rights, civil rights, protections, and acceptance than there were in the 1990s, certainly. And I think that Lambda and Kodak played a significant role in that.

AT: You can read more about Dr. Carroll's work at the project's website, LambdaNetworkKodak.net. Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.