



**Interview with Freada Kapor Klein
and Mitch Kapor**

Interviewed by:
Marc Weber

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Weber: I'm Marc Weber of the Computer History Museum and I am here on November 28th, 2022 with Freada Klein Kapor-- no?

Klein: I took his name as...

Weber: Kapor Klein.

Klein: Kapor Klein, alphabetical.

Weber: We'll leave it, Freada Kapor Klein and Mitch Kapor, one of whom is a pioneer of personal computer software, another one is a pioneer of diversity in the high-tech industry. So, thank you so much for doing this, really appreciate it.

Klein: You're welcome.

Weber: I wanted to-- so, Mitch did an oral history 15, 16 years ago. So, we have your background pretty well. Freada, if you could just very briefly give your background up to Lotus and-- you founded the organization for sexual harassment, I believe, during your PhD or before that, anyway...

Klein: Okay. So, briefly, I think it's fair to say I've always been an activist and I chose my colleges the strength of their political movements and so, I went to UC Berkeley and in doing field work with UC Berkeley, I was working with one of the first rape crisis centers in the US. I moved to the East Coast and continued that work and in working at the Washington DC Rape Crisis Center, we started getting calls about what we now call sexual harassment, but women themselves were making the connection that when their boss said "Sleep with me or you lose your job," that it was very similar to sexual assault or attempted sexual assault. So, I did a survey-- always being interested in research -- [I] did a survey of the 200 or so rape crisis centers in the US at the time, mid-1970s, to see if they were also encountering the same kinds of calls we were getting at the DC Rape Crisis Center and every single one of them, in fact, had gotten that kind of call within the past year. So, along with two colleagues, we started the first group on sexual harassment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Alliance Against Sexual Coercion, in 1976. I was involved in lots of things, became an expert witness. I went back to graduate school to get a PhD in social policy and research with a dissertation on sexual harassment, 20,000 research subjects, 10,000 men, 10,000 women, and I was recruited by Lotus as I was finishing my PhD. My job description at Lotus was to make it the most progressive employer in the US.

Weber: Let me back up and just-- so, Mitch, where did the impetus come from for these progressive programs at Lotus and is there a larger story of social activists entering the corporate world or was it really unique there?

Kapor: Well, in my case, it was more personal than political in the early days. I had graduated high school at 16 because I had skipped a grade. So, I was younger. I was a nerd at a time when there was no internet culture, nothing cool about it, and so, I was really a social outsider and my interest in Lotus when it became unexpectedly very successful was to build the kind of culture where even a misfit like me would feel included. So, that-- I didn't want to send rocket ships to Mars, but I wanted to have a kind of a

workplace where people could be themselves, didn't have to be somebody else, didn't have to conform to arbitrary standards. As long as you contributed to the work of the company. So, that is what initially fueled it.

Weber: And the idea of being the most progressive company, was that from you, was that after Freada came and other people?

Kapor: Well, a woman named Janet Axelrod, who was actually hired to be the office manager and, as all too often happens in tech companies, became the first vp of human resources, was very left political and had inclinations in that direction and that got me started thinking about these kinds of things and it quickly became clear that there were just significant issues. We were growing very, very, very rapidly and did people feel included? Did they have a voice? Were people well-treated? I had a very bad attitude towards authority. But more to the point, they weren't the kind of place where I felt respected and I just wanted Lotus to be different and it was clear there were going to be larger structural issues we would have to tackle about which I knew absolutely nothing, but could see that there was something important to be done there and that's what gave rise to the idea of "How do we make a good culture here? How do we have good values? How do we practice them? How do we put all that in place?" But as I said, I knew nothing about how to do that.

Weber: So, when you came in, Janet Axelrod was already doing things. I mean, you quickly became the Director of Employee Relations, organizational. Tell me more.

Klein: No, that was my job when I came in. Janet was my boss. She also had never had a human resources type position before, hadn't done anything on organizational development. As Mitch said, I mean, she was the all-around office manager and it's quite the norm for tech startups to have a young woman, usually a young white woman in that position, and then "Oh, you like people," or "Oh, you're good with people. Therefore you can head human resources." So, for a company that was going to go public, I came in when there were fewer than 300 employees and I left a couple years later and there were 2,700 employees. That's not the kind of growth that someone with no background, no experience should be running. So, Janet hired a couple of us who had some experience on how to do this and I always said I had the fun stuff. I had the employee relations and organizational development and employee surveys and all the things related to diversity and philanthropy and culture. Those were all under my purview.

Weber: I think now, forgetting which interview it was, but somebody mentioned Marion Gardner-Saxe. What was her role in it?

Klein: She worked on my team. Marion-- I don't remember what her title was. She worked in the training and development group, which was headed by somebody named Bob Nickerson and Bob reported to me and so, Marion was part of my larger team and it might be the connection that when she left Lotus, she went over to head human resources at AIDS Action.

Weber: Ah, okay.

Klein: That's probably the connection.

Weber: I think it came from the interview on the march.

Klein: Yeah.

Weber: By the way, we wanted to interview Janet Axelrod, but we saw that she had passed away right before.

Klein: Yes.

Weber: Then there's a number of initiatives that I wrote down from some of your old Lotus documents, from the email you sent me, and I'm wondering-- to go through them, I'll ask, but also, how common were these at the time? I mean, there's the Diversity Council, the Lotus Grapevine, the kind of ombudsman function, the employee surveys tied to manager compensation, which sounds fairly unusual, but I don't know-- Sullivan Principles, court sponsorship, the-- so, I mean, I don't want to read through them all. I'll get to them, but where did these ideas come from to like do a Diversity Council? Were these from you guys? Were you copying DEC, which apparently was a leader with some of this, Barbara Walker at DEC.

Klein: I don't know that name.

Weber: No? Okay.

Klein: So, the Diversity Council was something that I started shortly after I came in and I was looking at a diagonal cross-section of the company. I wanted every department or division as well as every level represented, as well as demographic groups to come talk about what was working, what wasn't working, who felt included, who felt excluded, what ought we be doing to promote diversity, to promote inclusion. People weren't talking about inclusion back then. I think someone else who's been one of the Computer History Museum interviewees, Matt Stern-- so, my first few days on the job in 1984, I went around and introduced myself to every person who worked in Cambridge and Matt was-- I don't know how long he'd been at the company in '84.

Weber: A year.

Klein: So, he's in his early 20s, early, mid-20s, and I go and he puts out his hand and he says "I'm Matt Stern. I'm gay. What are you going to do for gay people at the company?" and I said "That's great. Let's talk. There's a lot we can do for gays and lesbians at the company." I mean, that was a huge plus for me. I later found out that there were no other tech companies, no other corporations with "out"¹ gay representation on a Diversity Council. Most of what passed for diversity in the 1980s-- and this has been true of every diversity effort, whether it's 80s or 90s or currently, that the gains have been primarily by white women, much more than by people of color and certainly more than by LGBTQ+ populations and that continues to this day. So, we were very different in really having a racial equity lens, an intersectional lens, including lesbian and gay employees who-- we had ways for employees who were out like Matt to participate and we had ways for employees who weren't out to have their voices heard also.

¹ Not "without" but with "out", meaning having representation with gay people who were out (of the closet)

Weber: How could they participate if they weren't out, anonymously?

Klein: Anonymously or by using-- what we said-- we let everybody in the company know everybody who was on the Council and said "You can talk to any of these people confidentially. You can get a question, a concern, something to them, and it can come without your name attached to the Diversity Council. It also, one of the other things you asked about, the Lotus Grapevine was something that I started, and from my various research positions and looking at employee complaint systems-- that was part of my responsibilities at Lotus-- it was clear and my years of being an expert witness, it was clear that for-profit institutions and large nonprofit institutions, universities, for instance, and government agencies that had an ombudsperson had lower rates of all forms of bias, harassment, and discrimination and especially lower rates of more severe forms because they provided a safe mechanism to surface those issues early and get them interrupted.

Weber: That was different from the fact that people could talk to anyone on the Diversity Council.

Klein: Yes.

Weber: This was more embedded in HR.

Klein: Yes.

Weber: Okay.

Klein: So, we started something called the Lotus Grapevine and I had these custom made purple boxes that were in every building in Cambridge and every building throughout the world where Lotus had an office and then I borrowed some of the wiz kid engineers-- this is all pre-internet, you have to remember, way pre-internet-- so, I borrowed some of the wiz kid engineers to build a system where employees could write to me and all their identifying information was removed and so, there was also-- there was a digital as well as paper forms in a box grapevine and each person who used it could choose to be anonymous or submit confidentially. So, if it was confidentially, they told us their name. They told us whether they wanted to be contacted at work or at home because not everybody had a private phone extension and so, we were trying to anticipate everything and be incredibly respectful about how we get back to individuals. If it was anonymous and the group reviewing-- we used to call them the Lotus grapes-- the group reviewing the grapes, if we felt that it was representative or an important issue, we would put it in a monthly newsletter and say "This is what surfaced and this is what we were going to do about it." What Mitch did is at every all-- what we now call all hands meetings-- we'd remind people about it and Mitch said everybody had to answer-- we would route the grape to the highest ranking person responsible for that area. So, if it was a benefits issue, it went to the head of compensation and benefits. If it was something about how Lotus was doing its marketing and who was or wasn't represented, it would go to the vp of marketing and comms and what Mitch told his direct reports is he would hear about anybody who didn't answer within five business days. So, what we saw over and over again about the success of initiatives at Lotus is the commitment was unequivocally from the top and so, those things were answered. People got back to me. Didn't matter if it was a manager, a vp, whoever, but the highest-ranking person is who I would send it to and they would get back to me and a whole lot of things would

change and Mitch would do an annual state of the grapes stand up report about what had changed in the company due to employee suggestions.

Weber: Of course, this is for many topics, not just diversity/inclusion, but that was a significant portion of it.

Klein: Yes, many of them were. But it was also-- I mean, it was totally random stuff like-- Lotus had shuttle buses between the buildings in Cambridge and one of the engineers, because he signed his name-- one of the engineers asked if we could make the shuttle buses available to take any employee to any Boston area restaurant for lunch, which we thought was one of the indicators of the entitlement of the culture.

Kapor: So, I'm just going to annotate this and you can use this or not. There's a couple things to understand about why all this happened. One part of it was we had no adult supervision at Lotus. So, it was like just us. So, there was nobody to tell us we couldn't do these things or actually, nobody to say "Things just aren't done that way." I literally had no idea and the board was actually, for better or for worse, not really engaged in these kinds of issues. So, we had a lot of running room to innovate and do things like a Diversity Council. The second thing I want to say is that the kind of people who came to work at Lotus in those early years were typically not people who had been in the tech industry and not in senior positions because we were still too new, different, and flaky. So, there wasn't a change, but there wasn't a lot of pressure to do things the way things are usually done, and then finally, your background and the training you got as an undergraduate in political thought and you can characterize it how you want to characterize it, but it was very concerned with issues of distribution of power and representation and that training and that kind of thinking entered into how you wanted to structure things at Lotus. It certainly didn't come from Harvard Business School.

Klein: I did take some business school classes in organizational development and all that and I'd been working for ten years prior to going to my PhD program.

Kapor: But the intellectual tradition was much broader than what you would get at a business school.

Klein: It was more Berkeley and less business school.

Kapor: Yeah.

Weber: And there were no particular companies to look to as a model.

Klein: No.

Weber: IBM had some reputation for being concerned with diversity, so did DEC, but there were not direct things that you could learn.

Klein: No. What was interesting is, again, no internet. So, when I wanted to find out what anybody was doing, I was reading management journals, I was reading tech literature, and I would call people and I would say "Can you tell me about your..." What we now call employee resource groups used to be called

affinity groups and so, I would call somebody at Apple or Compaq or Digital, companies that don't exist anymore, and say "What are you doing about this?" or "Tell me what kind of-- how you incorporate diversity into management training." I'm a researcher by training. I was always reaching out to find out what's going on and they were little things, little initiatives various places. Nobody had a strategy.

Weber: And like the Sullivan Principles and other guidelines were actually in the rating of managers from the-- I mean, they were held accountable.

Klein: Well, the Sullivan Principles-- do you want to talk about...

Kapor: No, no, go ahead.

Klein: The Sullivan Principles were about not doing business with South Africa under apartheid.

Weber: But they also-- there's a whole list of things that South Africa couldn't meet, but aren't they a broader set of like employees should be absolutely equal in the workplace, no discrimination...

Kapor: Two separate...

Klein: Yeah, separate.

Kapor: Two separate initiatives.

Weber: Okay.

Klein: Yeah.

Weber: When I look up Sullivan Principles, I see both, but all right.

Klein: Oh, okay.

Weber: Okay. So, you were saying that in the context of...

Klein: Of apartheid.

Weber: Yeah, got it.

Klein: About not doing business with South Africa.

Kapor: But we had these employee surveys that Freada set out that were anonymous and confidential and aggregated kind of together the attitudes and feelings of people about workplace issues. Did you have the resources you need to get your job done? Were you planning to stay or were you thinking about leaving in the next year? Covered a very broad range and it was-- the results were all aggregated together by department and people got the feedback and it was highly revelatory because people trusted it and they were very honest and they could show you where the issues and problems were, either locally or globally. One of the things that Freada did was to ask individual employees to evaluate how well their

particular manager and also their VP lived the corporate values in their day-to-day work and day-to-day relationship and then we tied a portion of that manager's bonus to those ratings. So, we closed the loop. That was very bold and shows that it was taken seriously and it's still not done elsewhere, to my knowledge, certainly not widely done, but that's called put your money where your mouth is.

Klein: Not systematically.

Kapor: Yeah. The other thing we used to do to keep it real was we would make every manager go on the customer support lines and listen to the calls that came in from people to feel their pain. People, they wouldn't do it. They hated it because it was like really hard because people would call up and they were unhappy or they were stuck, but it was incredibly useful for trying to keep alive a sense of empathy about what the end users of the product were actually going through.

Klein: Well, I thought it was very important on the non-engineering side of the house to understand who's responsible for our paychecks and everybody ought to feel connected to the customer and to the product and so, one of the ways that we put all this together is that if you were a manager and had not signed up to listen in on the customer support line or if you were a manager and had not turned in all your performance reviews, by the end of the year, you didn't get a bonus. It doesn't matter what you knocked out of the park and so, again, we were trying to align all incentives to do the right thing and again, highly unusual then and unfortunately, still too unusual. You see all kinds of instances of bad actors who are great salespeople or great coders. They're just "Well, that's just so and so. That's what he's like. That's what he does. We don't want to lose him."

Kapor: Or great CEOs, even worse.

Klein: Yes. They're usually he. Unfortunately, there's some shes joining the ranks.

Weber: So, do you want to talk-- my colleague, David Brock, did a great blog on the AIDS-- support for the AIDS Walk. Do you want to just very, very briefly talk about that and about the Lotus philanthropy?

Klein: Okay. Well, so, the AIDS Walk was something very specifically I called around and I remember talking to somebody at Levi Strauss because they were at-- sort of the epicenter of AIDS activism had shifted to San Francisco and Levi Strauss was a progressive employer in general in that era and so, I was trying to track down what they were doing, what kind of employee policies and benefits, what they were doing educating folks and talk to them about sponsoring a local Boston AIDS Walk and they said oh, no, they would never do that because they would lose shareholders, customers. They did not want to-- they were doing all kinds of support with their employee affinity groups and community work and volunteer work and all that. They did not want to come out, pun intended, in public support in a way that would hurt their bottom line and so, I couldn't find anybody who had sponsored any corporate AIDS Walk and reported that back to the management team and thought that we should still do it.

Weber: And you did and...

Klein: And we did.

Weber: Did not get pushback from-- you got positive...

Klein: No. We did it and we were right-- there's some photographs you've seen of big Lotus banner.

Weber: And I mean, so, early on, you were dealing with race, LGBTQIA, agism, I believe, accessibility. I mean, were there any things you didn't do that have become important now and how much ahead of the curve was this at the time?

Klein: I think we were way ahead of the curve on LGBT issues on racial equity on childcare.

Weber: Yeah. You started that.

Klein: It's pretty pathetic that all of these issues are still important issues and places where companies fail their employees.

Weber: Well, daycare, but also equal benefits to same sex partners was fairly new at the time, right?

Klein: Mm-hmm.

Weber: For the Lotus philanthropy, what were your other-- what was a typical thing to support?

Klein: Well, philanthropy had sort of two buckets. One bucket of philanthropy was about donating products, services, including training and so, we were trying to get nonprofits to become much more digitally literate, to use Lotus products and everybody else's products also, to look at ways to be more efficient and gain scale. Nonprofits who were trying to make the world a better place, that's really where you want to leverage technology and that was a bit of an uphill battle, but we offered that. We offered products and training classes to nonprofits and tried to get the word out about that and then there was outright grants of money and some of those were locally focused in the Cambridge area and some of those were responsive grantmaking to things that came over the transom and so, it took a while to evolve a sort of established set of philanthropic concerns.

Kapor: But there was a strong employee voice in it.

Klein: Yes.

Kapor: Because it was largely employee-driven.

Klein: It was another sort of employee committee that...

Weber: Separate from the Diversity Council?

Klein: Separate from the Diversity Council.

Kapor: So, one thing we didn't do is we didn't have a dot-org, but there were no dot-orgs because it was the 1980s. We've asked how things evolved...

Klein: We didn't have a dotcom then either.

Kapor: No. We didn't have a dot-anything, but the idea of having a sort of separate but parallel organization or a subsidiary or a distinct organizational group that was impact-focused within the context of the larger thing, that was an idea that really took the internet to bring about.

Klein: So, big tech companies had a separate foundation.

Weber: But that was often later as-- when they were very mature companies.

Klein: Much later, right. We got an endowment and it was over there.

Kapor: Ford Foundation was family money, not the...

Weber: True. That's not coming from the company.

Kapor: Not the company.

Klein: But if you think about Intel or some of those...

Weber: Packard-- well, those were...

Kapor: No, those were...

Weber: Those are the founders.

Klein: Those were family.

Weber: Hewlett...

Kapor: Corporate Foundations were-- I don't know the history there.

Klein: Yeah. They were usually donations of stock when the companies went public to establish the foundation.

Kapor: Right.

Weber: Education, were you thinking also one of the ways with diversity to try to get more people trained and might be future employees, was that...

Klein: We weren't doing access at that point. One of the things that's pretty interesting is that there were more women studying computer science in the 1980s and almost anytime since until very currently. Those were overwhelmingly white women, but it was not-- because software was packaged and it was packaged with documentation, documentation departments were overwhelmingly female, but these were technical women and so, it was interesting because there was not-- there was not the same gender split that you see more recently since packaged software went away and it's just downloaded. So, the only

technical women people see now are programmers and there was just not a sense of a different path for technical people.

Weber: And testing used to be more of a thing too. So, how did-- in terms of outcomes, how did you measure or did you try-- I mean, I'm sure you tried, but how could you evaluate the impact of this program?

Klein: Well, in different ways. One of the things that made it incredibly difficult, speaking as a researcher to measure impact, was the insane growth because there were just too many variables and there were too many new people who hadn't participated in a survey or whatever it was, but we do know that a lot of the Lotus firsts attracted talent. We do know that people came to us because we did those things, because we cared about those things and just as you see today, diversity begets diversity. If the world sees that you've got a senior person, be that a black person, be that a gay person, be that a Latinx person, whoever, who's doing well and speaking out and taking a stand on issues, it drives-- it's a great recruitment tool and retention tool.

Weber: Also, the network-- just networking from the people that are there.

Klein: Yep.

Weber: But did you formally track the percentage of women in different levels or percentage of minorities?

Klein: We did and we cared about it in hiring, but again, because we were growing so quickly, it was hard to attribute the growth of women in a particular position or black programmers. It was hard-- what did we attribute that to? Because these-- I can't remember. We had-- at one point, there was somewhere north of 20 contract recruiters sitting opening mailed-in resumes. You've got to kind of remember what those days were like.

Weber: It's hard to track the effect when everything is just exponentially... sure. So, moving toward impact and partly when you left to become a consultant, but how did Lotus' innovations get adopted by others or did they and also, the Boston-- DEC certainly considered themselves a leader in this. Is there something about some of the progressive values in New England that was unique to the area? Do you feel that other companies did follow directly, copy...

Klein: I think Lotus alumni were the best culture carriers and for years and years, I heard from former employees who were now-- whether they were vp of engineering or whether they were the vp of human resources or wherever they went, different positions, they would call for advice or "Can you help me adapt the Lotus policy on whatever?" or "How would you handle this situation?"

Kapor: Yeah. The Boston software scene, it was like a very bright meteorite. It flared up like a meteor hitting the atmosphere, but the center of-- things moved to Silicon Valley and the impact that Lotus had, I agree with Freada, very much happened through its alumni who spread out over the tech universe and had influence at all the different companies that they subsequently went to.

Weber: What made efforts at other companies succeed or fail around diversity and inclusion?

Klein: Well, I think two things. Most importantly, as I mentioned previously, whether there was unequivocal commitment from the top. That made the single greatest variable to predict the success or failure of any culture effort or diversity effort is really the commitment that-- the sophistication of the CEO and the commitment and what I talked about before in terms of aligned incentives, that's one practical manifestation of commitment from the top; and then look, unfortunately, the economic climate makes a huge difference about whether the budgets are sustained, whether if you're in a quote-unquote "war for talent," diversity is much more important than if you're in a hiring freeze or a layoff mode.

Weber: So, were there other companies you're aware of that did directly compensate like bonuses?

Klein: There were-- I mean, I know that there were-- I'm trying to think of all the people who contacted me and said "How did you do this? How did you set it up?" and the other piece that goes side by side with the commitment from the top is a risk tolerance. A tolerance by pushback by customers or board members or shareholders or somebody, and some of the places where Lotus alumni went and tried to copy things, they didn't have the support of their senior managers, and so they were either kind of check the box performative measures, or they were just outright told "No."

Kapor: Well, and not just the senior management, but I think the larger context is that Lotus's people policies were really driven out of a sense of what was going to work for people, not what was going to minimize the risk to the management, but the entire employment law profession is organized around that latter principal of minimizing risk, and so in order to really have a progressive culture you have to tackle that, because the minute you try to do something, if the lawyer says, "Oh, you can't do that," or, "That's risky," and the CEO says, "I got to do what the lawyer says," and game over, and that's a battle that we're still fighting 40-some years later.

Klein: Mm-hm.

Weber: So you have to have some risk tolerance--

Kapor: Well, you--

Weber: --to actually do the right thing. Yeah.

Kapor: That's right. You have to believe that in the long run doing the right thing is actually good for the business, that sort of short-term risk mitigation is long-term not a good idea.

Weber: Penny wise and pound foolish.

Kapor: Penny wise and pound foolish, but that is-- yeah.

Klein: Well, right. Over the years we've had employment lawyers, and we-- I get this question still from the founders that we back in Kapor Capital, and say, well, you know, we decided to do this survey and our employment lawyer said, "No. You can't collect that data."

Kapor: Right.

Klein: It's well, if you think it's a bad idea to know how your employees are feeling, like, your business isn't going to survive. I don't care what your lawyer says.

Kapor: And the mere idea that collecting data gives you unnecessary exposure is--

Klein: Nuts.

Kapor: Nuts.

Klein: <laughs>

Weber: Yeah.

Kapor: But prevalent.

Klein: Mm-hm.

Kapor: Yeah.

Weber: No, I can see. But if you don't-- business might make it but you're losing out on things that could make the business stronger.

Klein: Mm-hm.

Kapor: You are.

Weber: And, you know, so in our collection at the museum we have a few things from Fairchild, a few from Lotus, a lot from DEC. Unfortunately we have all their kind of PR and press stuff and around the documentary they did, but we don't have the actual records of the valuing diversity program there. So it's very disappointing. We thought we had, you know, where we went through, but DEC certainly portrayed itself as being a pioneer in this and that they tried to make a number of arguments that made business sense, that it was this is what gave them business strength.

Klein: Yes, they did.

Weber: So, I mean, you did consulting to them after--

Klein: Yes. They were a client of mine after I left Lotus. Yes. And they did take it seriously. By the mid to late '80s when they were trying to implement a lot of the diversity initiatives, their culture was set, and that's another point here, which is the most successful initiatives are baked in at the beginning, and so there were some very senior managers at DEC that were not bought in at all, and so unless somebody was going to tie their promotion and bonus and everything else to, "You got to do this," there were pockets that functioned with a high value of diversity and pockets that functioned with a disregard.

Weber: And with Ken Olsen, how much did he believe in?

Klein: He believed in it, and you met him in a different context.

Kapor: Totally.

Klein: And I know a conversation I had with Mary Rowe, who was the ombuds at MIT who talked to Ken, and many of Ken's values were driven by his religious beliefs, and so it gave a very strong moral fiber and a very strong emphasis to the culture, but it also meant that there was a certain rigidity to what was forever off-limits.

I do remember lots of discussion <laughs> about alcohol, <laughs> for instance, and no alcohol at any company event. Now, you know, I mean, I wouldn't put having alcohol at a company event at the top of my list of progressive whatevers.

Weber: So, I mean, race, age, things like that, he would supporting but--

Klein: Yes. Veteran status, you know, military. Yeah.

Weber: And who are your other clients in that...

Klein: Oh, goodness.

Weber: Or typical ones if...

Klein: Well, lots of startups that came from Lotus founders. I was also-- lots of my clients were also big international firms and not just tech, and so everybody from Goldman Sachs to McKinsey to Harvard Business School.

Kapor: The UN, the World Bank.

Klein: Mm-hm.

Weber: And, I mean-- go on.

Kapor: No. Any place that, you know, these elite institutions run largely by white men who would periodically have “zipper problems,” she was the final common pathway. She would sooner or later get the call to-- that’s when they would pick up the phone. “We have a problem.”

Klein: That’s right. That’s often what prompted it, but not always.

Weber: And who would be calling, the corporate counsel or the PR or...?

Klein: Sometimes corporate counsel. Sometimes board. If it was the CEO. Often The Wall Street Journal.

<laughter>

Weber: So you were-- your firm was providing help with whatever issues they might...

Klein: Well, because of my research background I wouldn’t go in unless I was allowed to do a rigorous, both quantitative and qualitative fact finding of what was going on, and so there were a bunch of places that just wanted, you know, PR or performative nonsense or something and I would say, “Wrong person; wrong firm,” so--

Weber: And how would you do quantitative?

Klein: How would I do-- surveys.

Weber: Okay.

Klein: So to go in and to find out, “Okay. Is this an isolated problem or is there--”

Kapor: You would go in and first always do focus groups--

Klein: Yeah.

Kapor: --to find out what you should actually be surveying on.

Klein: Yes.

Kapor: So it was a very rigorous, multi-step process and you had certain standards about who had to be in the focus groups. If the company wouldn’t make a representative set of people available to the focus groups, you would say, “I can’t design the--”

Klein: Right. I had to have the employee rosters and pick the focus group participants myself, and I would do it random, so, you know, if it was a 40,000-person company, I put everybody into their various departments and demographic groups and said, “Okay. For this group I need every 50th person. For this

group I need every fifth person,” and literally I went through their employee rosters not knowing anybody and picked them, picked out the names, and then I’d submit them for-- and I would send out the invitations and companies that would say, “Oh, no, no, no, you can’t have this person, you can’t have this--” and the only, you know, if they’d say, “Okay. This person’s on medical leave,” or, “This person gave notice,” I’d say, “Okay.” But if they say, “No. This person’s a troublemaker,” I’d say, “I want them in. That’s who I want. Tell me who the other ones are.”

Kapor: So a lot of companies would call you and what they wanted was for you to just do your thing, come in and deliver your thing, your--

Klein: Right.

Kapor: You’d say, “I don’t have a canned thing. I only do customized work that fits your particular situation, your employees.”

Klein: Right.

Kapor: And that-- yeah.

Klein: Yeah. I need to know what’s going on.

Kapor: Right.

Weber: And this was, I mean, sexual harassment was a common reason to be brought in but were some also around diversity more broadly?

Klein: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. All kinds of--

Weber: Okay.

Klein: All kinds of what we think of as a broad definition of diversity issues. Sometimes it was turnover. Turnover in a certain department or turnover of, you know, we can’t retain black employees, or...

Weber: Polaroid had been an example of a progressive company at one time; is that right?

Klein: Yes. Yes. They had been, and we had some-- we had a couple of Polaroid managers in the ranks of Lotus managers, and that is actually one thing I did is, you know, I would-- welcomed any manager who’d come into Lotus. Like, “What worked at your last company? Tell us.” Or once we had a big salesforce. They were almost all IBM, so we had a lot of fun undoing the IBM culture.

Kapor: <laughs>

Weber: Did they sing you the song, the “Ever onward IBM”?

<laughter>

Klein: Most of them said IBM stand for "I've Been Moved."

Weber: <laughs> And--

Kapor: Well, it was not just the IBM culture. It was the IBM sales culture.

Klein: Yes.

Kapor: They were-- it was a, you know.

Klein: Yes. Their-- the--

Weber: It was a big part of IBM culture overall.

Kapor: Yeah.

Klein: Yeah.

Kapor: But it was about, you know, making your quota.

Klein: It was an army of navy blue suits.

Kapor: Yeah, yeah.

Klein: Yeah.

Weber: But they were good salespeople for Lotus.

Kapor: Well, for a certain definition, yes.

Klein: Yeah.

Weber: For a certain market.

Kapor: Yes.

Weber: I mean, for major corporate clients, right?

Klein: Yes.

Kapor: Yeah. Yeah.

Klein: Well, and the system's architect. I mean, they did know how to integrate technical people into the sales organization, and I think that was not as well-known or understood at the time.

Kapor: Right. Yeah.

Weber: Technical pre-sales kind of.

Kapor: Sales engineers. Yeah. Right.

Klein: Yeah.

Kapor: Now we have customer success managers.

<laughter>

Weber: And Wikipedia said you, Freada, were involved, gave input on the Civil Rights Act of 1991.

Klein: I did.

Weber: Did that-- I mean, most of the major law had been set by the '70s, is that right, for, I mean, the framework--

Klein: The-- yeah. The civil-- right.

Weber: --of affirmative action, the equal opportunity employment.

Klein: Civil Rights Act of 1964; '91 and some of the other things--

Weber: Right.

Klein: --modified it, but yes, I testified in Congress in-- for the Civil Rights Act of 1991, which was right after Anita Hill had been subpoenaed and testified. She did not come forward voluntarily. People say she came forward voluntarily. That is not what happened.

Weber: I remembered she was subpoenaed. I thought-- but she ha--

Klein: She-- pardon?

Weber: I-- my vague recollection she was sort of asked to--

Klein: Yeah. She was subpoenaed.

Weber: Yeah. But did that, over the course of really from the '70s until now, how much has the legal framework change in a way that really has impacted this work day to day?

Klein: Not all that much and not all that positively. I often say, with a little bit of hyperbole, that discrimination law is the worst thing that ever happened to diversity because-- I don't mean that entirely. There were very important protections that got put in place in the '60s in particular, but as the example Mitch gave earlier of employment lawyers use the threat of a discrimination lawsuit to not do things that need to be done in terms of making workplaces more welcoming.

Weber: It becomes an excuse. Mm. Or they're genuinely fearful.

Klein: Right. Right.

Weber: But either way it doesn't happen.

Klein: Well, if an employment lawyer sees employees as enemies who might file lawsuits against the company, you've already lost.

Kapor: Yeah. Didn't you also have an objection to sort of the fundamental definition or the way sexual harassment law is framed?

Klein: Mm-hm.

Kapor: Which is its own issue.

Klein: Well, it wasn't ever-- sexual harassment came in the side door or sex discrimination law, so there wasn't-- nobody ever debated what it should cover, what it shouldn't cover. It was not-- it evolved through case law in a not very helpful way.

Weber: In what way?

Klein: Well, and again, it is-- there is a range, a very wide continuum of behavior, that falls under the definition of unwelcome sexual attention, and for it all to be lumped together-- and so the worst things about how sexual harassment law has evolved is sort of mandatory reporting, mandatory investigation, and so if you're, you know, a black woman engineer and your vp of engineering makes an offensive comment in an all-hands, you don't want to file a formal complaint and have an investigation. That's the end of your career. And so there's no nuance about how might I get the message that that comment or so-called joke was inappropriate so that the person understands the impact of their behavior as a leader, but it's not necessarily a-- especially if it's done in a setting like an all-hands and it's not attached to any one person.

Weber: And I'm assuming that something like the Lotus grapevine was designed to deal with--

Klein: Yeah. Exactly. Exactly. And for years I looked for a tech-enabled ombuds, and we actually found someone. She's been in the Kapor Capital portfolio, a company called tEQuitable, and that's exactly what they do. They are a tech-enabled ombuds.

Weber: And they're-- they contract to a company to--

Klein: Exactly.

Kapor: Yeahright.

Weber: Because it seems like something that makes sense to outsource.

Klein: Yeah.

Kapor: Right.

Klein: Yeah.

Weber: And, I mean, in-- at DEC you did, I presume, some sort of training of employees. But, I mean, that's become its own whole kind of world, but were you doing that in-house, bringing in outside people?

Klein: When I was doing it at Digital?

Weber: Yeah.

Klein: Well, I was a consultant to Digital.

Weber: Oh, no, but-- sorry. Back up. At Lotus, which--

Klein: At Lotus.

Weber: What I'm saying is today there's firms that do nothing but come in and do training..

Klein: Right. Right.

Weber: Did that exist--

Klein: No. No.

Weber: --in the early or mid-'80s? And when did that...?

Klein: Well, there were-- management training companies have always existed, and so in terms of what they included, and we did work with some and required them-- <laughs> we required diversity of their trainers, and we required a customized curriculum.

Weber: So they could add that if you basically insisted.

Klein: Yes. Yes.

Weber: But, I mean, when you were doing consulting, was there-- were you providing some of that or not?

Klein: Yes.

Weber: Okay.

Kapor: You and your associates.

Klein: Yes. I had a whole--

Kapor: The associates of Klein Associates.

Klein: Yep. I had a team that did--

Weber: How many people was the...?

Klein: I had teams of people that were-- some were employees but most were specialized by geography and/or by industry. So if we were going to go into a hospital network, I wanted people who not only understood about diversity but they also understood about healthcare, and so same thing, about educational institutions or tech, so some domain expertise was important. Financial services, law firms.

Weber: But services-- ombuds-like services have never become a niche like that essentially.

Klein: They haven't and they should. It's baffled me because there's plenty of data about how effective they are.

Kapor: If there were an ombuds privilege so that certain classes of communication were privileged it would ease the fears and concerns of management about putting in an ombuds, because now some are worried that the stuff comes in and it's going to--

Klein: Get subpoenaed.

Kapor: --get subpoenaed and they don't want it on the record, and so that is one piece of policy improvement of if there were a legal privilege for--

Klein: There used to be.

Kapor: Right.

Klein: And it eroded.

Kapor: Eroded, but if it came back that would actually make a difference.

Weber: So now--

Kapor: I learned that from her.

<laughter>

Kapor: Everything I know about this, actually.

Weber: <laughs> But now it's not only not privileged but it can be subpoenaed and also some of it triggers mandatory reporting, right?

Kapor: It could.

Klein: Could.

Weber: But that's only in certain circumstance.

Klein: Right.

Weber: But yeah, it's all a chilling factor.

Klein: It depends how it's constructed and-- yeah.

Weber: So can you trace kind of the, in really broad, broad strokes, how have diversity, corporate diversity programs, changed?

Kapor: <laughs>

Weber: '80s we've talked about more, but '90s, 2000, 2010s? What are the big C changes?

Klein: Well, mostly corporate diversity in tech, especially, I would say, gets a failing grade. There's been no sustained effort that has made a measurable difference. I think that's sort of the headline. I think there're many people, many academics, who've documented that literally billions of dollars have been spent and over decades with really rounding error kind of improvements, and what's remarkable to me is for any other business issue, you would see boards and shareholders and others up in arms. How can

you spend all this money? How can you say that these are your priorities and you fail year after year and the people heading the efforts and the CEOs stay in place? So I think it is a, you know, a conspiracy, if you will, of the culture, which is to say it just isn't that important.

Kapor: Well, or that there are other things which are more important, and they take-- wind up taking precedence. I mean, if you talk to well-meaning CEOs, I mean, they will talk about if you really want to bring about change, you have to change a lot of things internally. You have to change the culture, and culture change is--

Klein: Hard.

Kapor: --is really hard, and business is already tough and most people just give up.

Klein: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. And it's not clear when and how to do it if you've already built a company that isn't diverse and now, how do you retrofit it? How do you turn the Titanic around?

Weber: But, I mean, if your hiring includes more diverse people, just natural turnover would push you toward more diversity, right?

Klein: No. Not if the culture is one that isn't welcoming.

Kapor: Right. If there's a revolving door. So companies have, in fact, upped-- they've done better at increasing the diversity of new hires than they have at the diversity retention, because--

Klein: Retention or promotion.

Kapor: Right. People, they come in, they go out.

Weber: That's-- universities have some of it.

Klein: Mm-hm.

Weber: So '90s, 2000s, 2010s. Any particular milestones or landmarks that change things?

Klein: Look. I think along the way there have been many big events. You know, whether you talk about Anita Hill. Then we saw a repeat with Kavanaugh's hearing. Then you talk about George Floyd being murdered. Then you can talk about Timnit Gebru and the other ethical AI people being fired from Google. There are there's events that happen and there's periodic uproar, sometime very localized and sometimes industrywide and sometimes national, and there's a burst or a flurry of activity and then it dies down without much lasting change. There's a study done, I want to say it was The Washington Post. Many people tried to track the corporate commitments made after George Floyd was murdered and what's actually happened. There was about 50 billion in commitments; 0.5 percent has been spent.

Kapor: Okay. So I do think some things are different. So there is now a vast body of well-accepted research within the academic and practitioner community that documents all this and explains a lot of it. In fact, you started Level Playing Field Institute in '99 with an explicit mission saying, "Corporate efforts at diversity have failed. I want to understand why," and so <laughs> the studies is the-- the Leavers Study--

Klein: Corporate Leavers.

Kapor: It's the Corporate Leavers and Tech Leavers--

Klein: Tech Leavers.

Kapor: --that sort of analyze the experiences of different groups of people, of black and Latinx and LGBTQ and why they stay or go, for reasons of unfairness, and the patterns are different but they're all very predictable. That's all, you know, that research and other research done not, I mean, by a variety of people, is widely cited in way, and it didn't used to exist. So now nobody can say, "Oh, we didn't know there was a problem." <laughs> I mean, that's not a good faith thing to say anymore. So that, that is different. That potentially sets the stage--

Klein: Mm-hm. What--

Kapor: --for better things--

Klein: Action.

Kapor: For action.

Klein: Yeah. Well, the changing demographics in the U.S. in particular is something that I think of as a positive and that has had-- definitely had an impact. There's been some tension along the way but I think everybody recognizes the growing diversity of the country. The majority of kids in K-12 education for more than five years now has been, you know, black and Latinx and Asian. It has been other than white, and so if we're talking about our future workforce, I think everybody understands that's what we've got to pay attention to. I think there's some other trends that are really totally fascinating about people doubting the value of higher education, questioning about elite institutions and who gets in and why, legacy admits versus merit, and I think all these alternative pathways into tech in particular are very promising for making a much quicker difference in terms of preparing talent for tech jobs.

Kapor: Let me also say, even the silver lining of the hyper-partisan political atmosphere now is that it's just a well-established fact that identity matters and who you are and that you have a right to that. It's just that some people and forces really don't like that. They don't like it enough that they're doing what they're doing, but it's a testament to the fact that it's-- that the landscape has changed dramatically, which isn't to say it's a good situation now, but it is one in which people who are not included, who have not been given access or opportunity, are not just going to go and hide somewhere and pretend that none of this happened, so don't know what's going to happen, but not that. They're not going back.

Klein: Well, what I do wish, and what still baffles me, is that more people don't vote with their feet and their pocketbooks. That I would've expected-- but I'm an optimist-- I would've expected by now this sort of separation of companies by culture and values, and that there would be some companies that are exponentially more diverse than others, and it just hasn't played out that way, and some I think it's confusing to figure out between, as you were talking about before, between all of the corporate PR. It's really hard to figure out from the outside, "What's it like to be a--" fill in the blank. "What's it like to work at this place?"

Kapor: I have a theory about this.

Klein: Yeah?

Kapor: Well, it's like climate change, which is that, you know, was a long time when people are talking about climate change but it was just not taken seriously. It's now taken seriously by everyone except fringe and, you know, and the rear guard, and we haven't had that inconvenient truth moment in diversity. I don't know, you know, if or when we will but it's still possible to kind of, if you're in business and in power, to sort of take a business-as-usual kind of stance, even acknowledging, "Yes, they're-- we're working on it..." But, you know, the-- I don't know what kind of event or events it would take. Some people thought it might have been George Floyd's murder, but we're not there yet.

Klein: Mm-hm.

Kapor: It could still happen though.

Weber: Having grown up mostly in Silicon Valley, worked in it, it seems that there's sort of a shadow ecosystem of employees of tech companies [that] are much less diverse than contractors and the whole support system, whether it's translators or contract testers or writers or whatever. They can be older, less white, less male, and it-- you know, in a way there is diversity but it's unequal. In other words, the more diverse people are there. They're just getting paid a fraction and they're not on the campuses.

Klein: They're-- right. They're second-class citizens.

Kapor: Second-class citizens.

Weber: Right. And--

Klein: No benefits.

Weber: So, I mean-- but I wonder if that's why the system, in a way, you get the benefit of the brains of a lot of these people. You just-- and it's even better. You can pay them less, <laughs> in a way. I mean it seems like there's an almost--

Kapor: But they're not typically in the real positions of power. Most of these Silicon Valley companies are engineering cultures and the engineers are ones who are hired and they're replicating their own eliteness by hiring more people like them out of Stanford and MIT and, you know, with certain pedigrees and credentials, and so the two-tier system, it doesn't really-- it doesn't serve the interests of diversity. It just--

Weber: Oh, no, not at all.

Kapor: Yeah. Right.

Weber: But you're saying you don't get their brains or their...

Klein: Right.

Kapor: You don't-- no. That's right. That's right. So the whole effort to recruit people of color into the Googles and other companies in non-technical roles, we were always critical of that because you're not going to be-- I learned this from her--

Klein: Mm-hm. <laughs>

Kapor: --in, you know, in the seat of power influencing the company. You're not taken seriously. I mean, heck, at Google, if you didn't get your PhD from a top-tier institution, they didn't think that you were going to succeed. They might hire you but they wouldn't, you know.

Klein: They were--

Kapor: What's that?

Klein: Google was asking SAT scores of people who were in their forties.

Weber: Yeah, I know. I did a-- interviewed people for the Google corporate history project.

Kapor: Ah.

Klein: Mm. So...?

Kapor: Yes, it was very--

Klein: Bizarre.

Kapor: Yeah.

Weber: But also-- and then we'll go to the one word-- there is a huge difference in the Bay area, at least, in diversity within federal and city IT and software departments and companies. Now, I presume that is

mostly because of what? Is that more networking? People know-- have connections there? Or is [it] that the various laws are actually being applied more within government departments? Why is there such a big difference?

Klein: Well, Mitch referenced the Tech Leavers Study that we did in 2017 out of the Kapor Center, and it looked at why different groups, demographic groups, voluntarily leave tech, and one of the things-- and the core of the study was a couple thousand engineers-- and one of the things we found is that engineers working as engineers in non-engineering companies had much better experiences. So there's something about the tech culture of a tech startup where everybody in power is in and of and from tech, which makes for a more exclusionary environment, and so if you're the, you know, you can be head of engineering of a hospital system and you can have a billion-dollar budget-- we know somebody in that position-- and how you're treated and how you feel about your workplace is dramatically different than if you're working in a tech company.

Kapor: What would be an interesting piece of research if it hasn't been done is if you controlled for not the budget but the type of technical work that's being done. Like if you had some categories like this is what it means to be working on operating systems or system software, this is systems integration and this is sort of front-end UI, and if you controlled for that across employers, I think one thing you would find is that different employers have a different mix. It's like, you know, if you're government IT they're generally not developing new operating systems, whereas Google and Meta, in effect, are, because I think some of the self-replicating elitism has to do with those, with the categories of work that are being done. Because they say, "Well, if you didn't get your PhD from Stanford we're just not going to hire you," or...

Kapor: Things to that effect. But makes sense. But I would want to see the research to see if it actually--

<laughter>

Kapor: How strong an effect it is.

Weber: Yeah, because it strikes me as two parallel worlds in some ways.

<break in recording>

Kapor: Yeah. Yeah. My word is empathy. If you're a technical person, you have the ability to manipulate these symbols, to write code to cause computers to do absolutely amazing things. I would ask you [to] have empathy with the 95 percent of the population that does not have that skillset or inclination, at least not to, you know, a developed kind of degree, and to be empathetic and understand what their experience is like in using the things that you're in the process of creating, because a little empathy goes a very long way to making products and services that are usable and enjoyable.

Klein: That was going to be my word.

Kapor: Oh.

<laughter>

Kapor: Oh, dear. I'm sorry.

Klein: No, no, no, no. You're-- <laughs> that's what you--

Kapor: You could--

Klein: You did a great job.

Kapor: Okay.

Klein: Okay. My word is bias. We all have them, and they're not necessarily bad things. We have biases towards places we like to go, foods we like to eat. The challenge is to be aware of our own biases and where they come from and whether or not they're accurate and which biases we're applying in the workplace. Can we look at removing some of those biases from day-to-day workplace practices? How we hire, how we assign, how we promote, how we do performance reviews, who we include for after-work drinks? So I think it's really about hold up a mirror and look at your own biases and decide which are good ones, which are helpful, and which are actually in the way.

END OF THE INTERVIEW