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Episode 19: Kiwoba Allaire is Pushing Silicon Valley to Move Outside of the Traditional Hiring Lanes

Mike Shields (19s):

Hey guys, this is Mike Shields. In this week on Next in Marketing. I got to talk to Kiwoba Allaire, the founder and CEO of Girl STEM Stars. We talked about why she founded the organization, which helps young minority women crack the tech industry. She also told us how Girl STEM Stars has been able to shift gears during the pandemic. The in person events were a no-no and how has the motivational speaker? She stays hopeful during such an anxious time. Let's get started. Hi, everybody. Welcome to Next in Marketing. Today my guest is Kiwoba Allaire. She is the founder and CEO of Girl STEM Stars. Welcome.

Kiwoba Allaire (50s):

Hey, thanks so much for having me. Yes, I am Kiwoba Allaire. Do you want me to go ahead and introduce myself?

Mike Shields (57s):

I think that's a good way to start. I think introduce yourself and maybe give us the brief one-on-one a history of Girl STEM Stars.

Kiwoba Allaire (1m 3s):

Yeah, sure. So, hi everyone. My name is Kiwoba Allaire. I am the CEO and founder of Girl STEM Stars. We are a 501c3 nonprofit that advances girls of color from underserved communities in STEM, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math. Long story short, I started Girl STEM Stars very



organically. In 2013, I was having what was supposed to be a routine surgery, but it went sideways and I went septic and wound up in a coma for three weeks. When I came out of it, my auntie came to my recovery bed and said, "Girl do you realize that God sent his warring and ministering angels to fight for you and to keep you, and it's not just to continue working at that tech company?"

Kiwoba Allaire (1m 54s):

You have a greater purpose on your life." And whilst in recovery, I prayed about it and I realized, you know, I was whining and complaining to HR and recruiting, Hey, Susie, with the blond hair and blue eyes, hire more people that look like me or Jose. And it always fell on deaf ears. And I realized, "Hey, stop complaining, stop fussing. Be the change that you want it to see." And I literally picked up the phone from my recovery bed and called LegalZoom and said, "I want to start a nonprofit, that advances girls of color in STEM. And it took off from there.

Kiwoba Allaire (2m 35s):

I had a lot of support. And we have touched girls all over the Bay Area, and Malaysia, and Africa, over the last few years, over the last years. And it is a blessing. It is a calling. It's an honor. And I am truly grateful to be in a position, to be able to lift girls up with my platform.

Mike Shields (3m 1s):

So you had been... Let's go back a bit. What were you doing before that? You were in Silicon Valley doing what?

Kiwoba Allaire (3m 7s):

Yes. I was actually working at a tech company, an AI Adtech company with Kenya at Rocket Fuel. That was in Redwood City, California. And I remember one of my sponsors --



Mike Shields (3m 19s):

They are the famous IPO or from not long ago?

Kiwoba Allaire (3m 22s):

Yes, they did have an IPO and I was one of the original, one of the first employees. I think I was like employee 20. And I believe we hit close to 2000 employees after that, after the IPO. So it was a super exciting ride. One of the best employment experiences of my life.

Mike Shields (3m 43s):

That's interesting. Not to pick on Rocket Fuel in particular or, but I'm wondering. Okay, 2000 employees at that time, how many women roughly, and then maybe how many non-white people do they...? Like, I know, you know, Adtech is the particular universe, right?

Kiwoba Allaire (3m 58s):

Right. And here's the -- you know, one of the main reasons why I started Girl STEM Stars is because I did not see anybody that looked like myself on a daily basis.

Mike Shields (4m 6s): Yeah.

Kiwoba Allaire (4m 8s):

I was the only -- you know, at the end of my career there I was a director in an office and there was not any other, there were a very few of us that were executives in an office, much less women. And it started to feel really weird when I would see one of my friends, Marlo, who was an African American woman, in the cafeteria and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, Marlo stay where you are. I'll come across to you." And then we would hug or I would see Kenya. And we'd be like, "Oh my gosh girl!



Kiwoba Allaire (4m 49s):

Hi!" And we would hug. And people would wonder like, "Why are you hugging?" And I'm like --

Mike Shields (4m 54s):

Right, what's the big deal? What are they sisters?

Kiwoba Allaire (4m 57s):

Right. Do you see people that looked like yourself on a daily basis? And they're like, "Yeah, of course." I'm like, We don't."

Mike Shields (5m 4s):

Right, and that's the big deal for you.

Kiwoba Allaire (5m 6s):

[inaudible] on one floor. Marlo's on another floor. We had three floors in the building. I mean, I was lucky to see one of them once every two weeks or three weeks.

Mike Shields (5m 17s):

And do you think, again, I'm not picking on a Rocket Fuel because I think it's probably emblematic of so many companies in that world. Advertising is not inherently thought of as like super conservative or closed off, but it does have a real challenges in this industry. Where are they trying to be more diverse? Was it a blind spot? Like what do you think was the big challenge there?



Kiwoba Allaire (5m 37s):

Well, you know, I'll give Rocket Fuel credit. They hired me. They hired Kenya. They hired Marlo. And as we grew, they started to, they got it. And they did make an effort. But I think this is the plight of all tech companies in Silicon Valley and not just the Silicon Valley. The norm is 1%.

Mike Shields (5m 59s): Wow.

Kiwoba Allaire (5m 60s):

That's the norm 1%. So when you're just trying to be on the average of the norm than the needle doesn't change.

Mike Shields (6m 10s):

Yeah. And I'm sure that some of those companies would have say, "Well, listen, we're trying. And these are all the resumes I get are 1% or you're like, this is the poor we have. And they probably have those kinds of defense complaints. I'm sure they are not universally, not trying, but it's a real challenge because they need to recruit, but also get a bigger pool to begin with.

Kiwoba Allaire (6m 31s):

And that's why working at Rocket Fuel was such a blessing because our CEO George John got it. When I propose to him, "Look, I don't see anybody that looked like me on a daily basis at work. We need to start from the beginning. We need to start educating children." And he's like, "Yeah, sure. Go ahead." And so we started bringing in 50 girls every Wednesday and the employees looked forward to hearing the girls just running through the office. And every Wednesday they were taught STEM. They were with us for two hours. They were fed. They were educated. Every department came down on a different Wednesday and Marketing would come in and say, "Okay, girls, we're gonna build your brand.



Kiwoba Allaire (7m 16s):

We're going to teach you about Marketing." I remember the engineering department came down one day and they brought a bunch of rubber balls and threw balls at the girls. And they said, "Okay, that's a gravity." Finance department came down and they helped the girls create a lemonade stand, and they have figure out the money to sell lemonade. It was a great opportunity. They gave me the seed to create Girl STEM Stars. Because in that group of girls that came every Wednesday, that 50 group of girls, and even when we did a summer camp. We did a six to eight-week summer camp for kids from underserved communities. I only saw like three or four black kids in that group, right?

Kiwoba Allaire (8m 0s):

So this is where I saw. "Hmm, there needs to be a change."

Mike Shields (8m 4s):

Right. But you saw with that first group, once they are exposed to this world and get introduced to coding concepts, it was paying off.

Kiwoba Allaire (8m 14s):

Oh my gosh, was it ever? I remember parents sending me emails. And they continuously do now with Girl STEM Stars. And voicemails, text messages, like, "What did you do to my kid?" We'd have these amazing speakers come in. We did a camp with boys and girls. We had executives, black executives, from Genentech, from all different types of companies and even from government. And it really, you know, these events, these STEM day's if you will change these children's lives forever. It really opened up their eyes to see what is available to them.

Mike Shields (8m 58s):

Big picture, when it comes to getting more women into tech, and coding, and software. Tell me if you agree with this. I don't know. For a long time, there was a stereotype even when I was a kid, you'd hear this more. But before that, you know, girls don't like math. Girls don't care about



computers. It's a guy field. Now, at least in my universe, you'll hear parents talking about, "I gotta get my kid to coding camp and it's out there at least." But do you think there's still a challenge just culturally that women are pushed to those areas, or drawn to those areas for any particular reason?

Kiwoba Allaire (9m 34s):

Yeah. It's that, you know, bro culture. You know, Silicon Valley is built on that bro culture, that white bro culture. And we need to break that stereotype. And this is what Girl STEM Stars is doing. We're starting the girls early. Our girls are from eight to 18. And some of the parents who are dropping up six and seven year old [inaudible] they're sneaking them in. But they're like one of the most brightest in the room asking questions. But this is where, you know, we give them the ambition and the confidence going into tech companies.

Kiwoba Allaire (10m 15s):

So what we do with these girls is before COVID we brought them to NASA, Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, you name it. And we would have them for a whole day, from 7:00 AM to 5:00 PM. We give them breakfast, and goodie bags, and t-shirts. You name it. And they would have the opportunity to spend the day with black employees at that company. And at the end of the day, well, actually at the beginning of the day I would ask the girls, "Who do you want to be like when you grow up?" And the girls are like, "Oh, I want to be like Beyonce so I can dance."

Kiwoba Allaire (10m 57s):

Or, "I want to be a veterinarian so I can play with puppies." But then after they've been at NASA and they've met the beautiful black rocket scientist with beautiful braids in her hair, talking about how she's looking for water on Mars. And they come away from an event at Google where they meet an actual black female astronaut talking about what it's like to train to be an astronaut. All of the STEM that she needs to know to be able to train to be an astronaut. When they leave out of these days at the end, I asked them, "Okay, so now what do you want to do with your life?"



Kiwoba Allaire (11m 40s):

They're like, "Oh, I want to be like that pretty black astronaut. If she can do it, I can do it." There is ambition right there. This is where we're giving them the opportunity and the exposure. One, being on the Tech Campus. Wonderful example of when we were got off the bus to go to the Yahoo campus, and the girl is going off the bus in they're like, "Oh, this is like Disneyland." This like Disneyland. Like, "Oh, look at them cute Chinese boys." Okay. What I got to learn to work here? Boom.

Mike Shields (12m 17s): Right.

Kiwoba Allaire (12m 17s):

What I got to learn to work here? They haven't even walked into the door. So giving these girls access to these tech campuses that are really like a built like Disneyland.

Mike Shields (12m 27s):

Oh yeah. They are all inspiring.

Kiwoba Allaire (12m 30s):

It gives them the confidence to say I belong here. Right?

Mike Shields (12m 34s): Yeah.

Kiwoba Allaire (12m 34s):

And then when they meet other employees that are that are executives, that are in different departments. They are successful. They hear their journeys. How they got there? The STEM they



need to learn to be at these tech companies and it's not just being an engineer. You can get into a tech company through marketing, through finance, through...

Mike Shields (12m 53s): Right.

Kiwoba Allaire (12m 53s):

You know, a lot of different avenues. And then it makes it easier. They are like, that gives them that ambition to say, "I can do it, too. If she can do it, I can do it."

Mike Shields (13m 5s):

That sounds like an incredible experience for those girls and it's inspiring and eye-opening. Is there any way to scale that? You can only bring so many kids to Google over a year. And right now, no one's going anywhere. Have you thought about, are there ways to make this world cool to kids who don't necessarily see it? Or they're thinking about like you said, they aspire to be, I don't know, Instagram stars, or sports stars or something in entertainment. Like, how do we make it cooler across the board for young girls?

Kiwoba Allaire (13m 36s):

Right. So my goal as CEO of Girl STEM Stars is to teach all of our students that STEM is an every aspect of your life, every aspect of your life. So I've had top chefs come in. You know, when they talk about. You know what kind of STEM I need to know to run this restaurant, to be a chef?

Mike Shields (13m 58s): Um-hmm.

Kiwoba Allaire (13m 59s):

I've had athletes come in. Do you know the STEM that I need to know to be able to make sure that the angle of the ball goes that way? You know, I'll show them videos of my husband and I scuba



diving underwater and we're kissing. And the girls like, "Aw, that's so cool. I wanna do that." And I'm like, "Do you realize the amount of STEM that's on my back? Do you know how many math classes and science classes I had to

take before they would let me jump off the boat?" So I tried to make them understand that STEM is everywhere. And whatever you choose to do and the more that we tell this in our media and not just social media and networking but also on television and in movies where we are just starting, which they are finally starting to showcase that women have been a part of STEM for a very long time.

Kiwoba Allaire (14m 59s):

And that we need to encourage our girls. One thing that we're doing now that we are switching after COVID, we are no longer obviously going onsite to tech companies. But what we're doing is we're partnering with tech companies and we're doing virtual events where we have a career day. Where the girls we'll get to meet panel of successful women at say Apple, or Facebook or whatever company it is that wants to help and make a difference and make an impact, a positive impact on the girls in the community and what we do. And then we also have tech days where they will learn coding, and robotics, and have hands on activities virtually.

Kiwoba Allaire (15m 41s):

And then what I have always done is shared our videos globally with all of our partners in Africa, Malaysia, Asia, you name it, Latin America, we share the videos. So then those educators sit down their girls, they play a video. And I always asked my video guy, Ken, he's amazing to shoot the video as if you are walking into our event as a child sitting down and participating in the event. So when these girls from around the world to watch these videos, they feel like there at Google, right? They feel like they're participating in all of the coding and the robotics.

Kiwoba Allaire (16m 22s):

And they get that exposure. They can see it and want to be it themselves.



Mike Shields (16m 27s):

Do you think, it's interesting, you mentioned how you try and talk about STEM in the through the lens of you touches almost every aspect of people's education or their work lives.

Kiwoba Allaire (16m 36s): Yes.

Mike Shields (16m 37s):

Again, I'm speaking totally from my personal experience. Like my kids school has all these cool STEM clubs and activities. But I don't think it's baked into the curriculum like maybe it should be. Do you think do we need to not have almost like compartmentalize this and build it into education when you're learning about Math, English, and Science, and everything else? Do we need a more comprehensive program, education-wise?

Kiwoba Allaire (16m 59s):

Most definitely. STEM needs to be baked into as you said into our educational curriculum globally. I think Europe does a very good job of that. But I don't know. But I really do believe that we need to get it together. We need to be able to teach these kids in a way that they do understand that STEM is in every part of their lives, but they -- So, you know, they're taking math classes and science classes, but it's not related to their everyday lives, right?

Mike Shields (17m 40s): Um-hmm.

Kiwoba Allaire (17m 40s):

They're not, this is like -- you know, we have a STEM class that's going to teach them like if you learn this coding, you can do anything in the world. If you become an engineer, the world is your oyster. If you learned this type of science, or this type of math, to show them what the opportunities are that are offered to them that are available to them, if they learn these types of courses from the very beginning. Like I'm talking seven, eight years old.



Mike Shields (18m 14s): Yeah.

Kiwoba Allaire (18m 14s):

And I know exactly why I have my son taking coding classes at six.

Mike Shields (18m 20s):

Right. It should be as fundamental as learning addition or something like that.

Kiwoba Allaire (18m 23s):

Exactly. Yeah, exactly. I don't tell him, that it's anything special. That I don't tell him that his friends aren't taking it. It's just this is what you're doing.

Mike Shields (18m 30s): Yeah, its [crosstalk] now.

Kiwoba Allaire (18m 32s):

Just like if you're gonna take a martial arts class, it's part of you have to get activity. You have to move your body. It's the same thing. You're going to move your brain in this way and your your world will be very rich.

Mike Shields (18m 46s): Right.

Kiwoba Allaire (18m 46s): And I'm not talking financially but your world in general, be very rich.



Mike Shields (18m 51s):

Let's talk a little bit more about your organization.

Kiwoba Allaire (18m 54s): Yeah.

Mike Shields (18m 54s):

Since you found it and it's growing. I wonder, where is your funding coming from? How do people get involved? And then maybe I love to talk to you about what you're doing in terms of global expansion.

Kiwoba Allaire (19m 5s):

So our funding comes from tech companies, individual donors, sponsors. We need everyone's help. We need your help. You know, people can donate laptops. They can volunteer for pro bono work like marketing, website development, you name it. If you're good at it, reach out to us. You can reach out to us via email at info@girlstemstars.org to offer you're a pro bono work, or you can go to our website, click the donate button and make a donation, or make a recurring donation that will continue to help us advance these young girls in STEM globally.

Mike Shields (19m 53s):

Speaking of globally, it's interesting that you're trying to, it looks like you like to expand your organization, your program. You are in the US. You, jumped to Malaysia, am I correct?

Kiwoba Allaire (20m 3s):

Yeah. It's was interesting. Somebody reached out to me on LinkedIn and they told me, "Hey, my daughter is going to Malaysia for extended learning. And she's been watching your progress with



Girl STEM Stars. And she'd like to have you host a camp, a summer camp, in Malaysia?" And I'm like, "It's been fantastic."

Mike Shields (20m 26s): Why not?

Kiwoba Allaire (20m 27s):

So we got them, you know, we sent a bunch of goodie bags and t-shirts. I sent over the curriculum. And you know, I tried to learn a little Malaysian. And I was doing it virtually. [Malaysian language] And the girls, they all had the head job on their heads, and with the little Girl STEM Stars t-shirts. And they were all screaming and yelling trying to say, "Ms. Kiwoba! Ms. Kiwoba!" It was amazing. It was a fantastic experience. And I definitely, now that we're all in a virtual world, I look forward to doing more of that.

Mike Shields (21m 4s):

Let's go back a little bit if we could to just the broader challenge in Silicon Valley with both women and minorities and just trying to expand in the talent pool. I wonder if this analogy makes sense. People talk about in Hollywood how, there's lots of great African American actors and women are getting better roles. But until you have black people running studios or women running studios, it's going to be harder to get projects launched. Like I wonder if is it the same kind of dynamic? Like, do we need more women founding companies and getting funding and minorities? Is it the same kind of thing that without really get change accelerating?

Kiwoba Allaire (21m 42s):

Most definitely. I think, it's just right now, where we are right now in the world, this is a very rich environment. You know, people are woke, at least they think they are. And they really want to make a difference right now. And they see the issues, they see the black atrocities happening across our globe. And it's peeling the scales across the from their eyes, and they're like, "Okay, we need to make a change." I think now is the time for people to pounce on this opportunity, to for our allies to pound on the opportunity to invest in like Girl STEM Stars, to invest in black businesses, black banks, black, you name it.



Kiwoba Allaire (22m 38s):

Whatever we are doing -- we're black businesses and nonprofits and banks are trying to improve the lives of the black community, the Afro-American community, in the globe, it's time. This is the time to do it. And I'm grateful to your team at Next in Marketing for providing the opportunity, for me to showcase the work that Girl STEM Stars is doing for people to see, "Oh, okay, here's an opportunity for me to invest in the education of black girls and girls of color around the world." I think that this is the opportunity for our allies to step up and look for opportunities across all industries where they see black people trying to make a difference for the community and help them, and to invest in them, and to fund.

Mike Shields (23m 35s):

Very cool. Kiwoba, thank you so much for terrific conversation. This was awesome, so interesting. I really appreciate your time. Let us know how we can help it down the road.

Kiwoba Allaire (23m 44s):

Thank you. Thank you. And God bless you all.

Mike Shields (23m 46s):

Thank you. A big thanks to my guest this week, Kiwoba Allaire, CEO and founder of Girl STEM Stars. And of course, my partners at Appsflyer. Do you like this episode, please take a moment to rate, leave a review. We have lots more to bring you so be sure to hit that subscribe button. We'll see you next time for more on What's Next in Marketing? Thanks for listening.