

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing new Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Joining us today is Elaine Montilla, assistant vice president of information technology and the chief information officer at the CUNY Graduate Center, who has just been named to the 2021 outstanding 100 LGBT Plus executives list sponsored by Yahoo Finance. The list showcases leaders who are breaking down barriers and creating more inclusive workplaces. Montilla been a Graduate Center staff member since 2005, a proud member of the LGBTQ community. She is also the founder of 5xMinority, whose mission is to elevate the voices of all underrepresented minorities in tech. She is a TEDx speaker and frequently comments on issues of diversity and inclusion within the tech community. Elaine is also a member of the Forbes technology council and a contributor. Welcome to the Thought Project, Elaine Montilla.

Elaine Montilla:

Thank you for having me, Tanya.

Tanya Domi:

It's great to have you, and we are delighted that you join us after receiving this great recognition from Yahoo Finance. Congratulations to you.

Elaine Montilla:

Thank you. I'm super excited about it.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, you were recently so elected as one of the top LGBT OUT, capital O-U-T standing executives list earlier this month. And you have been an out lesbian for some time, but this really is a bold step forward. How do you feel about this recognition and actually, how do you plan to leverage it?

Elaine Montilla:

Yeah, that's a good question. I'm actually really excited to know that I can find new ways to represent my community, the LGBTQ Plus community, and to be a role model for a younger generation that I know sometimes have a personal struggle with coming out and being fully themselves. And so my plan is to continue to use my voice, to help others to elevate their voices. And I've been doing that for a few years now. I do that through a lot of public speaking and also through my writing.

Elaine Montilla:

I write for Forbes. And if you see any of my articles, they all come with a piece of social justice in the end included. And so I will continue to do that. I also mentor a lot of young girls and I'm hoping that now they can see me as a even better role model because I didn't really have that many role models growing up. I didn't have women in tech that I looked up to and I didn't have women in tech who looked and sounded like me. And so I'm excited to be that for someone, even if it's just one person.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely. Representation really matters. And the more visible minorities come out, this really, I think not only yields to being a great role model, but gives courage to young people and faith that there are people out there like yourself who's so well regarded within the tech community on DEI work that this has got to be thrilling. I mean, I can only share my own experience of over 30 years ago coming out publicly. And there were no role models, there were no gay studies, there were no gay community centers.

Tanya Domi:

You would just look it up in a, the Webster's dictionary and you would think, "Oh my God, my life is over" kind a thing. But of course there's a lot of work that's been done and good for you. Not only do you plan to role model, and I know you mentor people as well, but are there other ways, particularly in the Latino community? As a matter of fact, I think you're really the first well known, highly visible person from the Latino community that I know within the circle of academia, in the tech industry, you stand out as well. And so I've not really talked to very many out Latinas like yourself.

Elaine Montilla:

Yeah. That's one of the reasons I'm even more excited about this because I want to demonstrate, especially to the younger generation. And by the way, kudos to you, because back then when you came out, it must have been nerve wracking. I mean, it's easier for the newer generation now than years ago. So I mean, you're amazing. But I really want to demonstrate what is possible when you don't let the opinion of others define you. And when people meet me, they put me into so many boxes. First, they see that I'm a female and they put me in a box.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Elaine Montilla:

And they make assumptions of me.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Elaine Montilla:

Then they find out that I'm Latino when I open my mouth. And even before that. And then they create all these other set of assumptions. And when they hear that I'm lesbian, sometimes they don't know what to do with me. And so I don't let people define me. I define myself. And I know that we can all teach people how to treat us. I belong to a lot of communities. I belong to Latinas in tech, out in tech, [inaudible 00:06:01] has an LGBTQ channel.

Elaine Montilla:

And so I use all of those resources, not only to share what I know, but to help them and communicate with them and collaborate. For Pride this year, I had a huge collaboration with Cadillac, where they were showcasing three members of the LGBTQ community who are making a difference. And so for me, I

want to do more of that. I want to make sure that I can use my voice so that others can see me. And I think working with Cadillac was just the beginning.

Tanya Domi:

That's wonderful. And we can share those web links for these organizations when we publish this wonderful podcast. So this is a nice segue to my second sentence. Because you talk about being in all these boxes. And you're the founder of 5xMinority. Is that five times? [crosstalk 00:06:56] Is that what that means?

Elaine Montilla:

It is.

Tanya Domi:

I want to know how you define 5xMinority? That really pops out at me.

Elaine Montilla:

Yeah. It's so funny because people never ask me this question. You're probably the first one to figure this out.

Tanya Domi:

Well, it's your branding so, Hey, I'm going to ask you, right?

Elaine Montilla:

5xMinority started as a blog. Because I made it into a CIO and I would go to conferences where girls would come up to me and say, "Oh my God, Elaine, can we take a picture? I can't believe you're a CIO and you're a female." And I was, wow, I need to share what I know so that other women can kind of use anything that I learned and the challenges that I had to make it. And I started to ask myself, in how many ways am I a minority? And I started counting. And I said, okay, I'm female. That's one. I am Latina. That's another one. I am lesbian. I'm going on number three. And then I said, you know what? I'm not Catholic. Which for my community, it's a huge deal.

Tanya Domi:

Oh, that's an exception, isn't it?

Elaine Montilla:

Yeah. I consider myself a spiritual person.

Tanya Domi:

Aha.

Elaine Montilla:

And so the fact that I worked in tech and I don't have children, I mean, it's more than five today. But when I started, I said, you know what, let me start with this five and let me start writing about each one

of them. And that's how my blog started. It got converted into a company after my TEDx talk, which really changed everything for me.

Tanya Domi:

And I watched your FedEx talk. I was really moved by it. And you could see the reaction from the audience was very, very supportive. It was inspiring. And so-

Elaine Montilla:

Yeah. Thank you. Thank you for watching it.

Tanya Domi:

Oh, absolutely. So you said that changed everything. How did that change everything for you?

Elaine Montilla:

Yeah. The first one was the number of emails and messages that I received after my TEDx talk. I was crying almost every weekend. I got so many emails from young girls who would say, "Elaine, I can't believe you're finally saying what I've been wanting to hear for a while" or, "Oh my God, Elaine, I can't believe I'm not the only one going through this and you actually understand what I'm going through."

Elaine Montilla:

And so that was the first portion. And the second portion was a lot of companies started to contact me and ask me to come speak to their staff. And so sometimes I would have private groups who want to hear about my story, who want to know why is diversity, equity and inclusion so important. And all of that just made me rethink my initial idea. And so now I know that I have a voice, my voice matters, people are listening and I really want to take advantage of that.

Tanya Domi:

So you started doing a lot of public speaking, then you said?

Elaine Montilla:

Correct.

Tanya Domi:

That's amazing. So speaking of the tech industry where you're a professional of more than 20 years now. And as you've pointed out, it's rare for a woman to be the CIO and to be at the top of that pyramid. But I was looking around and of course, I'd been following Kara Swisher for a long time because she had been in a media platform in San Francisco several years ago. And then that didn't work out. That company closed down and she got hired by the New York times.

Tanya Domi:

So she's probably one of the most well known out lesbians in tech. And now has a platform at the New York times. I mean, you can't do better than that. As well as the journalist Lydia Polgreen, who's African American. And she started at the New York Times and went to Huffington post and now she's got this

gig at Spotify. She's also out, very out. And there are some other women, but there aren't many. So I would put you in that category, my friend.

Elaine Montilla:

Thank you. I love Kara so much. I look up to her so much because she didn't really work in tech. She writes about tech. But-

Tanya Domi:

That's true. That's true.

Elaine Montilla:

Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

But probably the top journalist on tech, isn't she?

Elaine Montilla:

Oh, yes. I love her.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. Yes.

Elaine Montilla:

And I love so that she doesn't have a filter. She says what she thinks when it comes from her brain to her mouth. And I want to be more like her. And she goes after all these tech companies, which I do anytime I have a moment to do public speaking. And so I think we need to make all these companies accountable and we're not doing enough of that. I think a lot of companies now are hiring DEI practitioners, and they add information to their websites about diversity. And they think that that's solving the problem. And it's not. There is a lot more.

Tanya Domi:

So that they check that block. They check that block.

Elaine Montilla:

Exactly. Right. I'm a Latina, that's a checkbox. Let's move on.

Tanya Domi:

Right, right, right.

Elaine Montilla:

And you know what? After we do the hiring, that's when the work begins. And that's one of the reasons that 40% of women leave tech right after 10 years because of the lack of support and mentorship. So there is a lot more we need to do and I love Kara because she's so vocal about it and I follow her work and her podcast, Sway [crosstalk 00:12:18]

Tanya Domi:

Yeah. Yes. It's amazing. Sway. Yes. It's awesome. So the other thing that's interesting when you said, I had watched your Ted talk and you mentioned that women usually left at 10 years. That's almost just like it was for me in the army. Women would make captain. And I was a captain when I left and they would get out. And I was prior service so I was enlisted before I became a commissioned officer. But that shows you that that field is not supporting you and so people leave. I hear this about women FBI agents too, that there's a high turnover in really male dominated fields.

Elaine Montilla:

Yes. And this drives me insane. So a lot of my writing is related to this because I feel like we're in a vicious circle where we're spending so much time showing young girls the value of STEM and why they need to be in STEM and actually proven to themselves that they could do it. And so we're doing so much work there. We get them to go into STEM. And then when they enter the workplace, they find an environment and a culture that keeps them away, doesn't see them, doesn't give them a voice. And they just leave. I mean, I feel like we're wasting so much time.

Tanya Domi:

Sure.

Elaine Montilla:

And they don't leave because they cannot do the job, they leave because their opinions are not valued, they leave because even when they're asked to sit at the table, no one listens to what they have to say. And so our hiring practices need to change, our interview process needs to change, and we need to have maybe additional bias training in the workplace that we could do every year, because sometimes unconscious bias is something that we're not aware of. And we need to make people aware of that.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely. Yeah. And you also spoke about which I found to be really interesting and was not so surprising to me about being here at CUNY, which is the largest urban university in the country and the third largest public university system in the country. This is a training ground for so many minorities, people of color. We know that CUNY is the great social mobility engine of this city. And it may be not apparent to all these tech companies.

Elaine Montilla:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tanya Domi:

That there's a lot of great people at public universities here at CUNY and around the country that given this tech industry is probably just getting really going, there's going to be a demand for a lot more employees in the coming.

Elaine Montilla:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tanya Domi:

At least the coming 20 years the next generation, right?

Elaine Montilla:

It's already started.

Tanya Domi:

Aha.

Elaine Montilla:

The demand, it's higher right now. And I don't know any other place that is more diverse than the city university of New York. And even when I go to conferences and I speak with my peers, I'm amazed at the diversity that I have at the graduate center with the IT members. I have probably between 10 and 15 different languages in IT only at the GC. And so, what I think is happening now is that we need to focus our attention on recruiters. Because recruiters are going to Ivy league schools. They're not going to community colleges. They're not going to public schools.

Tanya Domi:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Elaine Montilla:

And we're missing out on all the talent that I know we have because I'm a product of CUNY. I have three degrees from CUNY myself. And so, we need to make more investment and connect with companies so that we have a direct connection to them instead of waiting for a recruiter to come in, which sometimes they never do. And I believe we are doing that already.

Elaine Montilla:

I know there are a lot of programs that audit this year. The chancellor mentioned this a few months ago, where we are teaming up with companies so that we can have a direct connection from the students into the workplace, perhaps starting with internships. And so, I think we're doing it. We just need recruiters to look at us more often, instead of going to all this Ivy league call, which is what they do now.

Tanya Domi:

Right. This country, and this generation of young people is the most racially diverse, the most gender diverse.

Elaine Montilla:

Yes.

Tanya Domi:

Generation in US history. And so, it's here, it's here. And employers are going to have to deal with it. It's here already, right?

Elaine Montilla:

You know what? They're dealing with it now. I attend a lot of seminars and conferences where you can hear a lot of leaders talking about how different it is to deal with IT teams now because of how vocal the younger generations are.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, yes.

Elaine Montilla:

And I love that. And that's part of the great resignation. We're no longer willing to stay in a place that doesn't value us as humans. And that's why people are leaving. And so, I think that leaders who don't take that into account, who don't think about not only technical skills, but also soft skills who, which are in high demand also are going to see themselves in big trouble.

Elaine Montilla:

We need to learn how to cater to this younger generation. And they want to be heard and they want their opinions to be valued and they want feedback, and they want to be included. And isn't that the whole point? I mean, I meet with the DGSC every semester because I want to listen to them, because I want to hear what they have to say. We need to do that everywhere.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. I agree. And I just read a really interesting article about the current workplace and about why people are leaving. And one of the big things that seems to be reported is that people want flexibility, and they want to do a good job. And I think they want more freedom in a way in how they go to work and where they work, that sort of thing. That's really coming up in these surveys. People aren't going to work for nothing. They want living wages and wages that will help them lead a decent life. And they're not going to be treated badly.

Elaine Montilla:

Yeah. COVID, one of the things that COVID did, that it showed us is that what's possible. It is possible for us to work remotely. It is possible for us to have more delegation and trust our staff to do what they need to do instead of watching them from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM. I can tell you that a lot of my technicians are working harder now that they're working from home than before the pandemic, when they were in the building.

Elaine Montilla:

I think they want to feel that we trust them and that they know what they're doing. And if I cannot complete the job between nine and five, well, maybe I'll do it between 10 and six or between 11 and-. It doesn't matter. Trust me, I will do it. And I think that we need more of that. And that's why people are saying, "You know what? I've had enough and I'm not longer willing to deal with this." And so, I think it's all based in the trust relationship that goes both ways.

Tanya Domi:

That's a really good point. We restarted the thought project from home. I was at home and Kevin Wolfe; my audio engineer was at home and we were doing it from home. And if you know how to do it, you get the right equipment, you can do it. Not only is all of this really important and relevant to our current



work and where we work and what's important about work. But besides mentoring and that's very important, don't get me wrong, and your public speaking, how do you think you can help level the playing field for all the minorities who want to join this industry? What would you, I mean, I'm going to ask you a question. If you could talk to Bill Gates or somebody like that right now, what would you tell them?

Elaine Montilla:

Oh God, that's a great question. For me, it is important that we address unconscious bias, but the biggest problem that I see keeping women and minorities out of tech is our hiring practices. I can tell you that... I mean, I don't know if you've ever watched The Voice? I love that show. And I think we need to do that. We need to remove the names of candidates when they submit their resumes. Because unconscious bias [crosstalk 00:20:54]

Tanya Domi:

Is because they don't even get through the resume screening, do they?

Elaine Montilla:

Of course, of course. You can.

Tanya Domi:

That's a really good point.

Elaine Montilla:

And there's a lot of research [crosstalk 00:21:02] There's a lot of research that already confirm that if I see John Smith and Elaine Montilla, even if we have the exact same qualifications.

Tanya Domi:

Sure. Right.

Elaine Montilla:

John Smith will move to the second round, and I wouldn't, right? And so, I feel that we need to find a way to remove the names from the resume so that we can focus on the knowledge, right? Let's focus on what they know, let's focus on the skill. The next thing that I would say is that our job descriptions are too long, and they have become wish list. I don't know if you've seen a job description recently, but it's two and three pages long. And I look at it sometimes.

Tanya Domi:

Wow.

Elaine Montilla:

And I tell myself, well, I don't know how to do all of that. I don't know how someone under me would do all of that. So, we need to rethink this job description. And at the end, the last piece that I want to share is the interview process needs to be fair. And you probably know this. When I sit across someone that looks and sounds like me, I get more comfortable.

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Elaine Montilla:

And I tend to ask them more questions than I ask a candidate that was there before me. We need to have a process that is equal. We need to make sure that we ask the exact same questions to everyone that's sitting in that chair, or now virtually. And we need to make sure we get feedback from everyone in the process. And I think those things are keeping a lot of women and minorities out, the hiring process, the resumes and the interview process.

Tanya Domi:

Well, my burning question at this point is, are you going to Lesbians Who Tech? Are you going to the summit, the Debug summit in December?

Elaine Montilla:

You want to hear a funny story?

Tanya Domi:

Because I want some swag. I mean, I want to get the swag. It's totally cool.

Elaine Montilla:

I know. Before the pandemic [crosstalk 00:22:54] I apply, I applied to be a speaker.

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Elaine Montilla:

And I was selected.

Tanya Domi:

Really?

Elaine Montilla:

Yes. And we went through a few rounds and then the pandemic came, and everything was canceled.

Tanya Domi:

Shut down.

Elaine Montilla:

I know. So, I'm definitely.

Tanya Domi:

Have they invited you back?

Elaine Montilla:

No. Because you have to apply all over again. And I'm a little bit busy at the GC.

Tanya Domi:

Got it. Got it.

Elaine Montilla:

But I'm hoping that I can find some time to go. And if not, definitely I'm going to be watching virtually.

Tanya Domi:

Okay. So, I saw the logo and then I saw Kara Swisher on TV and she had the vest on. She was talking to Rachel Maddow. And I was, "Oh my God, I can't believe this." So I was, "I want the vest."

Elaine Montilla:

Maybe you and I will go together next year.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. I would love that. I mean, I'm like the communications' person, but I can deal with that. So, before we go, and one last congratulations to you, Elaine, is there anything else that you would like to address and share with our audience?

Elaine Montilla:

Yes. One last thing. I think before the pandemic, any talk about compassionate leadership sounded like something that we wanted to do in the future, but we could never get to. And I think that that whole thing changed when the pandemic started. I want to encourage everyone to pay more attention to our staff and to try to be a more compassionate leader and listen to everyone and try to see where they're coming from.

Elaine Montilla:

And I mean, I don't want to put myself of in their shoes, I want to see how they think while they're in their shoes. I would advocate for that a bit more, more listening, more understanding, more compassion. Because we are all doing our best. And so, take care of your mental health. I'm trying to do that on my end. And I'm hoping that we don't go back to the way things wear in terms of technology before the pandemic. I hope we learn some lessons and we can incorporate that moving forward and create a better IT environment than the one we had before.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks so much, very wise words when it comes to compassion. We've all really had a hard time of it. I hope the worst is behind us. Thank you so much, Elaine Montilla.

Elaine Montilla:

Thank you for having me.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project. And thanks to our guest, Elaine Montilla, assistant vice president of information technology and the chief information officer at the CUNY Graduate Center.

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Tanya Domi:

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.