

## Interview Summary – Trans Activism Oral History

Interviewee name:	Lynn Conway
Interviewer:	Evan Taylor
Date of Interview:	February 4, 2020

### Summary:

Lynn was born in 1938 in Mount Vernon, NY. On the day of the interview, she is 82 years old. Lynn is a retired computer and electrical engineer and Professor Emeritus at the University of Michigan. She received her Master's degree in electrical engineering in 1963. She is married to a man named Charles (who is also an engineer), doesn't have any religious affiliations, and declines to talk about any kids or grandkids.

She talks about her love of adventure, the outdoors, as well as science, math, and engineering and the passion she has for intellectual and creative life. She talks about the importance of being a learner and a teacher in her life - as a philosophy and approach to life. She sees the work she has done not as "activism" per se - although she understands how it is labelled as such - but, prefers to use the words guiding, leading, teaching. She also sees her advocacy work as politics, which again, she differentiates from activism.

In her early childhood, at 4 years old, Lynn remembers Pearl Harbour and hearing about it over the radio. In high school she lacked a social life, but excelled in the STEM fields and was able to skip 2 grades and get into MIT when she was 17, although she struggled with gender issues in her final year and it affected her studies. She went to Columbia to complete her education and then, after various research work, landed a job at IBM. She talks in detail about her project work at IBM, as well as vague referees and the process of accessing illegal hormones around 1958, and the process of becoming a patient of Dr. Harry Benjamin.

After initially being accepted by her colleagues at work, she was fired in 1968 after management at IBM found out she was transitioning. Within a year, she had completed her sex reassignment surgery and was back in the job market and rebuilding a career. While she notes that she has written in detail about it elsewhere, Lynn refers to her work in making the design of silicon chips and explains it's importance in shifting the paradigm at the time as analogous to the printing press.

After this, she worked on a number of academic and research projects, including working on developing a technology foundation for intelligent weapons, and foundational work on internet and artificial intelligence technologies. Recounting her career, Lynn recalls that she very much enjoyed being a professor and the Associate Dean of Engineering at the University of Michigan, and was particularly proud of being inducted into the National Academy of Engineering. She talks about being confronted by a colleague at an event who claimed she didn't go to Columbia and how she reacted calmly to deflect the accusation and stay "stealth". In the late 1990's, as computer chips were starting to become more advanced, she realized that attention would be paid to her earlier work and that she would be outed as trans. So, she began a website to get ahead of the story and be able to use the attention to benefit her community.

Lynn talks about the impact of the article in *Scientific American* and how it led to her being contacted by other trans people and deciding to look at demographic numbers of trans people. In order to combat the idea that trans people were all miserable and suffering, she created a webpage that reflected on "successful" transitions of trans men and trans women. The website was extremely successful and proved to be an important piece of leverage in creating access to knowledge and information on the coverage and reporting of Michael Bailey's book and related resistance. In the discussions about the Bailey book, Lynn notes that the depiction of her is as if she had recently transitioned, seemingly unable to imagine that she had transitioned 30 years before. It was also important to her that she made a lot of other friends across the country during that period of her activism work. This was particularly notable to her because it was at a time when the issues affecting gay and lesbian people and the

issues affecting trans people were just starting to come together politically. Lynn talks about the role of masculine and feminine facial features in gender recognition as well as her own facial feminization surgery and putting it on her blog for others. Her blog and website are a key part of her work in making information and positive aspects of transition available to other trans people.

As she reflected on her career in the 2010s, Lynn began writing about the experiences of women and minorities in STEM fields because she could see the major shifts over time, i.e. the Vietnam war, the sexual revolution, sexism and equality. In particular, she then reflects on this in the context of her own life and the attribution of her work to other people. This concept has been dubbed “The Conway Effect” and she describes the presumptions and functions of power that underlie the erasure and misattribution of minority scholars - specifically, the expectations of innovation and it’s relationship to privilege and outcomes.

Lynn tells the story of meeting her husband and reflects on the many outdoor sporting events they participated in together over the years such as canoeing, kayaking, and supercross. She reflects on her values of not being a single-issue person, of having an adventurous spirit, suppressing fear, and learning.