WE ARE ETH – Episode 1

With Jeannine Pilloud, ETH Alumni and CEO of Ascom

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[00:00:00] Jeannine Pilloud: Our system is really giving an education basically for free to the ones that perform. And this is a good thing.

[00:00:12] **Susan Kish:** In this episode, I'm talking with Jeannine Pilloud. She is the CEO of Ascom, a top global telecommunications company, and she shares with us her story, and how ETH Zurich continues to be important.

[00:00:26] I'm Susan Kish, host of the We Are ETH Podcast, telling the stories of the alumni and friends of the ETH Zurich - the Swiss federal Institute of technology in Zurich. ETH regularly ranks amongst the top universities in the world with cutting edge research science and people, the people who were there, the people who are there and the people who will be there. These are their stories.

[00:00:56] I'm thrilled to be here with Jeannine Pilloud, who's joining me here in the studios in Zurich, and we're going to talk about what ETH meant, where it fits in her life and some of the dreams of where it's going to go. So, thank you so much for joining me this morning, Jeannine.

[00:01:12] **Jeannine Pilloud:** You're welcome, thank you!

[00:01:14] **Susan Kish:** So maybe we can start at the beginning. How did you end up at the ETH Zurich? Because from what I could read, it wasn't your first institute of higher learning that you attended? You were a transfer student?

[00:01:26] **Jeannine Pilloud:** Exactly. I was first at the university of Zurich, and I was studying language, social and economic history. And also journalism.

I did this for two years and connected with that, I also visited a journalism school that was linked to one of the large media houses in Switzerland. That was an opportunity, but it was also an opportunity for me to see what would it be to work as a journalist in day journalism, but also magazines. And I decided at that moment in time that this is not the way I want to go. I wanted to have something that is linking technology a bit more with my creativity that I have, and I found it in architecture at the ETH. That's where I went.

[00:02:15] **Susan Kish:** And so how did you know that you were creative and what caused you to say, you know, this is something that's important to me?

[00:02:22] Jeannine Pilloud: I think that was during my time at school. I never really actually liked to go to school. You know why? Because every 45 minutes you have a different subject. And for me, the thing was always when I immersed or I dove into one of these topics, I wanted to stay with it, because there was a lot of thinking about it. But then boom, it was finished and then came French, you know.

And this, I did not like it all. And what was my thing was reading many, many books and also thinking about how you could change things around you. And I wouldn't say now, I was thinking about how you can change the world, but it was important for me to always have this second world where you think about how you can make dreams come true, you know, and that was the creativity I try to establish when I was a kid. And that was by the way, also the reason why I loved swimming so much because, you know, I trained a lot when I was a kid. I trained every day and it was also kind of like a performance sport. But for me, the most important thing - and it's still today - is that when you're in the water, you have your head under the water. There is nothing that disturbs you and you do not have another influence than only yourself. And that's my way also to think about challenges, issues there might be, or also where I want to go and what I want to be.

[00:03:54] Susan Kish: So Jeannine, could you tell us a little bit about the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology? The ETH. It goes by several names, but it's not that well known outside of Switzerland. Can you give us a bit of context about why is the institution important, both in Switzerland and in a global context?

[00:04:11] Jeannine Pilloud: In Switzerland I have many network meetings with other CEOs and I am today, also a CEO of a technology company. And there it's always the saying: either you're from HSG St. Gallen or ETH. Quite many of these very successful people in Switzerland visited once the ETH. And I think the point is that we have kind of a complicated name, but also we are linked a bit less to the city than others are doing this, if you look Stanford, Harvard, and so on. If you say Harvard, you know, the university is meant with that.

And in Switzerland, it's ETH belongs to everybody and so on and Zurich is not playing so much role, but it should maybe because if you look at it from another viewpoint, I know that it's well-known with Amazon, with Google, with the IBM Research Lab, with Walt Disney and all the others that are coming here because they see that they have the most important resource. They need the people, the brilliant minds. And that's very important for me. And I think sometimes it would really help us to also make that known a bit more. It is a place where you can not only study, but where you also can find a life.

[00:05:37] Susan Kish: Well the quality of life in Zurich is rather fabulous…

[00:05:41] Jeannine Pilloud: Yeah, this is one thing, but also you can take the message and really be somewhere else. Because you could start with Google here, but I mean, it's a worldwide company and one of the good things that I learned as well, and I grew up as very, very, protected. And I always thought, maybe I'm not this kind of international person. As soon as I started working internationally, I noticed

that some of us have a culture that they learned during their education, that is very well preparation for doing cultural management, (which) means working in different work environments. And this has to do with, for example, ETH is very open into that. There are always people from different countries. There are professors from different countries. We have to adapt to different kinds of cultures during our education already. It's never this: *I'm coming from there and I have everything from there. And then I enter on all the culture.* This is something that automatically comes with our education. And that's what I think is a very important thing. And then yes, the school system gives us the obligation to learn different languages, which is also good in the end. Also, you look at it as it's a real pain when you're at school, but in the end, it's an advantage.

[00:07:07] **Susan Kish:** Very cool, and both of your children, your son and your daughter are both here at the ETH, right?

[00:07:11] **Jeannine Pilloud:** Yes. Yes.

[00:07:12] **Susan Kish:** They followed in their mom's footsteps?

[00:07:14] **Jeannine Pilloud:** Yeah, a bit less. My daughter was at the information event. She came home and said, you know, architecture, it's a bit boring. I said, okay, it's not my decision. It's yours.

[00:07:25] **Susan Kish:** I'm not going to take it personally.

[00:07:27] **Jeannine Pilloud:** Exactly. Um, she's doing environmental engineering now.

[00:07:33] **Susan Kish:** Okay!

[00:07:33] **Jeannine Pilloud:** I think that's how it's called.

[00:07:35] **Susan Kish:** Is that designing green buildings?

[00:07:38] **Jeannine Pilloud:** No, it's more about the satellite planning, traffic planning, uh, um, kind of like how cities are built and so on. Yeah, it's very interesting. I must say, this would have been something for me as well, but she likes it a lot and Etienne is doing computer science but he had to start again now because he was caught up in military (service) last year. And during this COVID time, they had to stay then longer. So he couldn't really start with the others and then he had to redo, but he loves it and hopefully they will like it also during the journey.

[00:08:13] **Susan Kish:** I'm sure. Well, so we were talking earlier and you told the story about when the decision was made in the family for you to study and then take the test to go to the Gymnasium. Can you tell that story again?

[00:08:27] **Jeannine Pilloud:** Yeah. I was 10 years old at that time where my mom said to my dad: *but maybe Jeannine is going to go to Gymnasium because she's, clever enough to do so.* And my dad looked at her and said: *but she's going to marry anyway. Why does she have to do this?* And my mom said: *no, she needs proper education.* And in the end, he said: *yeah. Okay. If you think, and then she should try.* Because there was a test you had to do to do so. That was the first time I noticed, oh, might there be a different journey for girls than for boys? Because with 10 years, you know, you never think about, and that was in the seventies, in Switzerland where it was different time actually.

[00:09:12] **Susan Kish:** So let's talk about different careers because you started as journalist. Then you studied to be an architect. Today you're the CEO of Ascom, which is neither an architecture firm nor a media conglomerate. So, can you talk through the different stages? 'Cause it seems like you had a few careers…

[00:09:31] **Jeannine Pilloud:** Yeah, that's true. But actually I had to work during my studies at ETH because I needed money to live.

[00:09:40] **Susan Kish:** Right.

[00:09:40] **Jeannine Pilloud:** You know, serving in the Dolder Grand you know?

[00:09:43] **Susan Kish:** Sure!

[00:09:44] **Jeannine Pilloud:** Yes, in the evening and you always, you always got the money immediately at the end of the evening. That was also nice. And I was working for an institution, a school that was a school of economics, but with IT and in the eighties, that was really new because there was not computer science that you could study. So all the people that entered that field, they had to have kind of a second education. And I was responsible there to draw and write the course material. So I worked there and earned money during my studies at ETH.

[00:10:21] **Susan Kish:** So during the day you were taking architecture classes at the ETH, during the evening, you were doing waitressing at the Dolder, because it was good cash, and the rest of time…?

[00:10:30] **Jeannine Pilloud:** And somehow in between, I tried to work for this company doing this course material. And for me, that was great. Because next to my studies, I had also study of computer science because all these guys that taught there, they came from IBM, from HP, and so on. They had to tell me what they want to have in their course material. And then you had to write it down. So I also had to understand and also draw the graphs and everything. You had to understand what you were doing. And when I think of this time, and it was about four or five years, we had like a second path.

[00:11:11] **Susan Kish:** Right.

[00:11:12] **Jeannine Pilloud:** I tell that (story) because when I was working as an architect, but then the company in the nineties went bankrupt where I was working because they speculated with real estate. And, at that time there was a bubble and it blew up at the end. Yes. Doing this next to my studies allowed me to apply at IBM. But in the IBM education, they looked for somebody that can help them exactly with making coming from an additional service, like you buy hardware, and then you get the service on top to creating the services people already to pay for.

[00:11:56] And that's what we did then.

[00:11:59] **Susan Kish:** Uh, so you needed to train the services people?

[00:12:02] **Jeannine Pilloud:** and also the customers. The customers had to be ready to pay for it. That was the time when IBM founded global services. Because IBM was at that time a hardware company. And whenever you bought something, you got the services on top for free. At that time, IBM decided, services cannot be for free anymore because there is even with software and everything, more implementation, system integration coming, there is education, then outsourcing came in, so on and so on. And that was at the beginning of the nineties. And what was there is that they decided then: If there is a technical education at IBM, people have to be ready to pay for it. And how do you do this? You do this with marketing means like, what was my job was being responsible for the marketing of this education for IBM.

[00:12:57] **Susan Kish:** Oh wow.

[00:12:57] **Jeannine Pilloud:** And relatively soon we noticed that you could not do e-learning or whatever. So you had a classroom. All equipped with PCs and whatever. And there were 23 of these classrooms. And during the day there was Cobol (computer language), or whatever education you could have, Basic, and so on. And people had to come there from their companies to learn how to deal with the software and the hardware, that they could do it, and lead the departments at their companies. So what I figured out - and that's maybe the creativity part - is that we said, okay, these classrooms they're occupied during the day, but in the evening, nobody's there. Let's find a way from a technical point of view that we can use all these school equipment in the evening for evening courses about PC. You know, Excel, Windows and so on and so on. So, and that was a technical thing we had to do, because you need the whole environment that you have to save and then play another one on all the PCs and then taking it away again for the next morning. So, there were some technical people need that had to figure out how that works. But they did it. And then we did something else we really started to, to ask potential customers, then what do you need? And they all were in stress because all the PC schools at that time, they were during the day. But you cannot tell to you to your boss, *listen, I have to do this extra course again, because I didn't manage to really understand exactly…*

Exactly. So what we introduced then we did this evening classes and we introduced a member card. We said you can be a member for free months and you can visit as

many courses as you want now, because we were sitting on 23 course rooms and we had students that were teaching the class a sense of also the costs were not very high.

The house was there already infrastructure, everything was there, but people they came. You know, so it was at that moment in time, it was something that was very important. And in the beginning, all the bosses from IBM, they were nervous because they thought like we never really dealt with end-users because we always have B2B and we did not deal with end users.

And we did some kind of classy things in Zurich then. We have advertisements hang up and there was: *let's spend the night together: IBM By Night*. And then there was big, big rumors. You know, they came from London everywhere. You can't do something like that. Our big customers, they're going to leave us and this and that.

And in the end it was really a success because people really understood: it's about helping everybody to take this step. That was the creativity I mentioned, you know, because creativity is something you learn as an architect. And that's also what I really have to say: that's what I learned at ETH. I did take from there that I joined ETH and in drawing, I was really bad, you know, because I did music Matura and I never did drawing.

[00:16:20] **Susan Kish:** What was your instrument?

[00:16:23] **Jeannine Pilloud:** The trumpet. Because I didn't want to sing.

[00:16:26] **Susan Kish:** I was a drummer!

[00:16:29] **Jeannine Pilloud:** Super! No but my older sister had to play the guitar and she always had to sing with it. And I was two years younger and I thought like, if I ever have to play an instrument. It needs to be something I can take in my mouth because I don't want to sing. So, so actually I like it, but not doing that much now anymore. At least I'm, I'm capable in doing it.

[00:16:55] **Susan Kish:** Architecture seems to embody systems thinking.

[00:16:58] **Jeannine Pilloud:** Yes.

[00:16:58] **Susan Kish:** Right. You did get all these things to fit together perfectly. And that feels like it's been an important part of how you've thought about, you know, the story of IBM By Night, but also must be important now!?

[00:17:09] **Jeannine Pilloud:** Yeah, it is with many different things. And, what was also important for me always was like, if you look at this and you look at your subject, try to take out whatever you need to do your own development.

[00:17:24] And there is always things you'll like.

[00:17:27] **Susan Kish:** All right.

[00:17:27] **Jeannine Pilloud:** And I mean, yes, we also had these lectures in statics and whatever. I mean, you just have to understand this, but Ii's not that I loved this really much, you know, but there were other things that were really, really, really important for me. What you take out is that they teach you: it's only about what you want to do out of it. ETH is great with that. Because first of all, everybody says it's a school and it is because the structure and the organization is very much like school. But on the other hand, they give you a lot of freedom. How you reach your goal. And that's exactly what was for me the most important part. Structure? Yes. With (age) 20 or 21, you need this kind of structure. As I am happy that my son now has at least some structure to get up in the morning and, and visit the lecture or do an exercise. But on the other hand, you also need the freedom to develop. Because you're not a machine and all the students, they're not machines, they're each individuals, they need their personal freedom to find the journey they want to do. And that was the good thing that this was possible.

[00:18:40] **Susan Kish:** The other thing that I was wondering about is it sounds like by switching from journalism, to study architecture at ETH, the other thing that it gave you was both curiosity, but also sort of the tool set to learn and then learn about something else and then learn about something else. And the confidence that you can learn that, right?

[00:19:00] **Jeannine Pilloud:** Yes.

[00:19:01] **Susan Kish:** It's not that you didn't close and you're going to have to do this for the rest of your life because that's all, you know, but it feels like it gave you some kind of intellectual resilience.

[00:19:10] **Jeannine Pilloud:** Yeah, it is that, and it is also the group you study in. And that was also one of the reasons why I felt sorry for all the students that couldn't have contact during this COVID time, because there is always in every single subject or topic one that is more talented or has an interesting idea, or you do group work together or this and that. This is what helps you to develop your journey. And that's important for me. And having this inspiration by people that come and all the professors and so on and so on. I mean, it's a gift that you can do something like that. And sometimes as a student, you do not see it like that. But in the end you have to say, that's a real gift ,and I'm really grateful and thankful also to the Swiss government that they make this happen and that it's in our system possible that whoever brings the performance can study. And that's the real difference. And that's at that moment in time, I didn't know about this, but now that I traveled the whole world for my job and I discussed with lots of colleagues and so on, I noticed that our system is really giving an education basically for free to the ones that perform. This is a good thing.

[00:20:36] **Susan Kish:** You've lived in Zurich for most of your life. What is your favorite spot? Where is it that you'd like to have a coffee?

[00:20:43] **Jeannine Pilloud:** Uh, on, my roof terrace I most almost say, because during the last two years, that was the place or the location, I pulled myself out of the whole operations and also from the screen at home office. That's my favorite place. But otherwise in Zurich, I love the city. I have to say, I know a lot of other cities in Switzerland but Zurich is my home. Yes.

[00:21:10] **Susan Kish:** Excellent. And what did you want to be when you grow up?

[00:21:15] **Jeannine Pilloud:** You know, if I could have been one that is sitting at home and reading books, I would have preferred to do that because as a kid, the library we had in the neighborhood was the most important place for me. And I biked there every week and exchanged about seven or eight books to new books. And that's basically how I learned. Because I didn't like school so much, but I liked to read and maybe the best thing was at that time that sometimes a book you wanted was already taken and you had to take another one and maybe you discovered a new world and that's sometimes I would wish that we will do this today a bit more.

[00:21:56] **Susan Kish:** Excellent. Jeannine, thank you so much. Thank you very much for your time!

[00:22:00] **Jeannine Pilloud:** Thank you.

[00:22:03] **Susan Kish:** I'm Susan Kish, host of the We Are ETH series. Please subscribe to this podcast and join us wherever you listen. I'd like to give thanks and credit to our producers at the ETH circle and the Audio Bande. Take care and stay safe.