

Unsung Stewards



ReThink
Health
A RIPPEL INITIATIVE

PODCAST

**Sterling
Cruz-Herr**
Founder, TransClue



Hosted by Katy Evans



[00:00:00] **Katy:**

In 2020 FORESIGHT, an initiative of The Rippel Foundation set out to hear from thousands of people across the country about how they envision a more sustainable and equitable future, and to begin to chart pathways toward achieving that. I'm your host, Katie Evans. And in this series of the Unsung Stewards podcast, we talk with people who are doing the hard work of imagining and building a new future. In this moment. At Rippel, we call these people stewards. Stewards are people or organizations who take responsibility for working with others to create conditions that all people need to thrive.

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Today I am so excited to welcome Sterling Cruz-Herr to the Unsung Stewards podcast. Sterling's work has included efforts to diversify newsrooms as well as promote positive images of young people in media through their organization Trans Clue they are now focused on building organization's capacities to engage in trans issues and in training and nurturing young trans leaders. Sterling, I'm so glad you're here.

[00:01:08] **Sterling:** Hey, I'm so glad to be here, Katie. Thank you.

[00:01:10] **Katy:**

So I would love to have you start just by telling us a bit about yourself and the work you're doing at Trans Clue. What is the future that you're trying to build through your work.

[00:01:20] **Sterling:**

So my pronouns are they and them. I put out there what my identities are because in all of the conversations that Rippel has convened, identity is central, and in fact, it's central to most any conversation we have these days.

[00:01:33] And so I am transgender and non-binary, and that means I don't identify as either male or female. I'm in the middle, but I don't identify as the sex I was assigned at birth. I am white. I live in upstate New York. My company Trans Clue, I started about three years ago. I became the Chief Engagement Officer of Sage, which is an organization and national organization serving LGBTQIA+ elders.

[00:02:06] And I left that work and wanted to continue in inclusion and equity work and decided to launch Trans Clue. And so I'm really on the front lines of helping people understand language that often they find difficult, but we start with training and then go into shifting culture in organizations, practices and policies.

[00:02:30] And then I also am an executive coach, and so I've been delighted to work not only with young trans leaders, but also senior executives who are navigating far more than gender identity. They're trying to figure out what it means to be culturally competent in this day and age, and recognizing that if we aren't culturally competent, we become irrelevant.

[00:02:54] **Katy:** I'm curious what you see all these different pieces of your work adding up to, you know, you've worked with young people, you've worked with queer elders. You're doing this work both with executives and also with young trans leaders. But what is the vision that you think really unites the set of work that, that you've been pursuing over the last several years?

[00:03:13] **Sterling:** I think for all of us who are interested in advancing positive change, we've gotta be bridge builders between disparate communities, and I started really understanding white privilege and white dominant culture. And so I think the core of my journey has been to continue building my own understanding of my white privilege, and then bringing in LGBTQIA issues, and certainly understanding my own journey as a trans person and thinking about how I can use my lived experience to help people understand not only why we have to create more trans inclusive workplaces, but why there are huge opportunities if we do so.

[00:03:55] **Katy:** I'd love to hear from you about the legacies you feel you have inherited. Both those that are unjust legacies and legacies you've inherited that empower the work that you do now to to build a different kind of future.

[00:04:10] **Sterling:** So I was raised in Texas and I was raised in a racist, sexist, homophobic household that would've been transphobic if we knew what that was. But what my mother made very clear was what, and I'm using air quotes here, what real men are and what ladies are. Now my mother, you know, you talk about positive legacies. She was also a, a, an incredible pioneer herself. She and another teenager at 18 rode horses from Chicago to Texas in 1949. So I had this model of a woman, and I was growing up as a young girl in rural southwest Texas.

[00:04:50] This model of this, this person who was willing to defy expectations. At the same time, there were these notions that she had been raised in that, that she embraced, that were really about, you know, deeply entrenched racism and certainly deeply entrenched homophobia and so, What I inherited and what I unfortunately lived into for many decades was a profound internalized homophobia and internalized transphobia.

[00:05:21] And while I didn't come out as trans until later in life, I certainly had tremendous shame about not being the right type of girl. And as I think for many of us who suffer with, you know, be it internalized racism, internalized homophobia, I turned that into self hatred. And so there were decades of, of potential, I think, lost.

[00:05:45] To destructive behaviors and it has been finding communities. I was in my mid forties and I was in Brooklyn, and I started seeing trans young people and it kicked up a lot of my internalized transphobia, and in fact, as a butch lesbian, which is how I identified, I wasn't part of this community, but I think we have seen this community move forward.

[00:06:11] Trans exclusionary, radical feminists who want to discriminate against trans women. And so I thought, Okay, I gotta deal with this head on. And so I started a fashion website called Dapper Q and in that begin to build relationships with gender queer people, learning how to tie a bow tie together. And so that was an opportunity for me to embrace new legacies to bring in.

[00:06:38] You know, whatever positive, I mean, I obviously have a successful life and I have a lot to share, but I also knew I had a lot I needed to heal. And so frankly, it was those young people who began sharing with me a much more expansive understanding of what is possible in terms of gender identity, in terms of racial inclusion, in terms of equity. And I committed myself to embracing that legacy. And now my work is. Building that legacy in terms of the young people who are building their potential as leaders.

[00:07:10] **Katy:** Sterling, you described yourself as a trans person, and I'm curious if you can share more about what the process of stepping into that identity looked like for you and what the experience of that was.

[00:07:22] **Sterling:** So I came out as a lesbian when I was 21. I was teaching high school English in San Antonio, Texas. And I fell in love with a teacher across the hall and I spent decades in love with women and identifying from a gender identity. I didn't know what gender identity was, didn't know if it was distinct.

[00:07:45] It didn't know in that I just knew I was a butch. lot of people think that's pejorative, but in the queer community, that's just someone who's more masculine identified. I met my wife about 20 years ago, and although we, you know, were living as lesbians, we were very clear we weren't the same gender.

- [00:08:02] That I was a different gender than she was, but didn't have words for it. And as I began to tackle, you know, this, this idea of being an elder in the community and trying to think about how to embrace gender non-conforming people, part of that was because these questions were alive in me and so when I started working at Sage and I was working with a lot of trans and gender nonconforming people, they really helped me.
- [00:08:27] Have a increasingly positive vision of what was possible. People were talking about non-binary identity. I thought that's who I am, cause I, I'm not a man. I've never been a man, but I'm not a woman either. There's just, I'm not the same gender as my wife and so I changed my name to a less gendered name and the response was really wonderful.
- [00:08:47] Felt really affirm and really great. But I told my wife, I, that's the last thing I, you know, I'm only doing that. So then, Just started thinking about it, kept thinking about it. I thought, you know, my body, like I, I really, I do think I'd feel better if I had top surgery, which is a double mastectomy. And so I was diagnosed with gender dysphoria and that is a chronic insistent, persistent mental anguish between the sex you're assigned at birth and the gender you identify with.
- [00:09:18] And so I had surgery and it felt I mean, it was, it was hard, of course, but the result was amazing. And I told my wife, That's it. That's it. I'm not doing anything else. And but then I, I couldn't be she anymore. I had to change my pronouns. And I'll say that was much more challenging than having a double mastectomy, because every day I have to decide.
- [00:09:39] If I say my pronouns to you, so if I'm buying a guitar, you know, I go on and I buy the guitar. I don't say, Hi, I'm Sterling. My pronouns are, they'd be like, What? What do I need to know your pronouns? But I take it back and then they're misgendering me and so it's really hard. If I had a better option for you, I'd give it to you.
- [00:09:54] But my pronouns are they and them because I'm not a he and I'm not a she and in the world I'm mostly he these days, but that's my pronouns. And so it was actually a year ago, I kept being called ma'am, and I just, I couldn't handle it and I decided to go on testosterone and my voice dropped, and with my voice dropping suddenly I became, sir, It's just a mind boggling experience.
- [00:10:18] It's a, a psychic weight to try and be in the world as something that, that people, you know, could violently attack you for if they knew. But I feel better than I've ever felt in my life. I feel embodied. I feel a lightness that I've never felt before and my wife is incredibly supportive. My friends have been supportive.

[00:10:39] I, you know, am supported in this work, and there's no one way of being trans. My experience is my experience. It is a white, masculine trans experience. So I'm very privileged. People who are people of color, people who are trans feminine, lot more oppression, immigrants, people in, in prison. My experience is only my experience.

[00:11:00] I, I think I could say it's truly liberating, although I'm constantly assessing. Really. Did you have to do all this? Did you have to make this big a fuss? I think I did. I think I'm really like, this is what I needed.

[00:11:11] **Katy:** Thank you so much for sharing that. So you and I met through FORESIGHT couple of years ago now, and as I mentioned in the introduction, FORESIGHT was a Rippel initiative that was designed to equitably envision a new future for health and wellbeing. And part of that work was exploring the opportunities and challenges that could be on the horizon as we look out into the future. So I'm curious what trends and opportunities you are seeing that feel particularly applicable to your work as you are looking out to the future.

[00:11:43] **Sterling:** I think many of us had a belief that progress was linear and that as we moved forward with racial equity, as we moved forward with rights for the LGBTQIA community and others, I don't think we saw this, this level of backlash coming, but from where I sit, trans rights have come to the forefront of the culture wars, and so there's a lot of money being invested in vilifying.

[00:12:10] Trans people and so we're seeing over 200 bills in statewide legislatures that are trying to limit trans rights and a lot of those focus on health access. So the idea that young people are unable to access care, culturally competent care, and that in fact their parents can be charged with child abuse.

[00:12:37] I didn't get that kind of support when I was growing up, but it was a different time. We know better. These kids are becoming punching blocks for the culture wars and so I think there's that backlash and there is in that the call for people of all stripes to say, I've gotta stand up, I've gotta educate myself, I've gotta move forward.

[00:12:58] But there's real danger. On the the trend side, the trends are not looking good for trans people. The increased visibility, a lot of people think that equates to progress, and the fact is it also equates to great danger. On the other hand, we saw what happened with George Floyd's murder, and we saw that.

[00:13:17] That people have stepped up and demanded more and I see it in organizations with leaders I work with all the time. We're trying to understand how to live our way into a new reality and so I think the opportunity in healthcare is not only to move beyond these draconian laws. But as people become more educated, as they fight back, there is an opportunity for us to say, We've gotta do better.

[00:13:41] We've gotta have more culturally competent care. We've gotta learn how to address people, how to use their pronouns, how to collect data. So I think there are opportunities as people respond to the backlash for more inclusive healthcare, mental wellness. We've just gotta press through. I think we're in the, the death throws of, of this kinda of reaction to progress. I hope that's true.

[00:14:06] **Katy:** I would love for you to share more about that, what you see as the potential of doing that work.

[00:14:12] **Sterling:** We're in the middle of a seismic generational shift when it comes to gender identity. UC Berkeley recently did a study that showed that 27% of California youth age 12 to 17 say they are viewed as either androgynous or gender nonconforming.

[00:14:31] So one out of four, and we know that 12% of millennials, identify as gender non-conforming or transgender. Now, those numbers sounded crazy to me, but the fact is that that percentage was twice of the previous generation. So workplaces, some are advanced and beginning to think about this, they're still back on their heels trying to figure out how to move forward with equity, which, you know, racial equity has to be a priority.

[00:14:57] But there's a real imperative in these organizations and what I love about young people coming into the workplace is they wanna see racial equity in a workplace. They wanna see trans inclusion. These are the expectations, and because we've got a tight job market, they can vote with their feet.

[00:15:14] **Katy:** The vision that The Rippel Foundation holds for the future is that we achieve a world where all people and places thrive without exception and I would love to have you articulate what your vision for the future is and what conversations you think we need to having to get there and what kinds of new legacies need build to move in that direction.

[00:15:35] **Sterling:** I was listening to a podcast today, and it was about how our desire to be authentic can actually be in conflict with our desire to connect.

[00:15:47] That we have this deeply rooted human instinct to connect, but in order to connect, we also often think that we have to fit in. And so what my transcestors helped me understand is that my beauty is embracing my difference. A world where all people thrive is one in which we really celebrate those differences.

[00:16:12] And the fact is, I think they can make anybody feel uncomfortable. Most of us have had that experience of, I'm not this enough, I'm not that enough, and I wish I was beyond that, but I'm not quite there. I think that it is probably finding a rootedness in my authenticity, my personal experience, you know,

the shifts that are, that are going on in my life as I understand where I fit in the world, as I understand what I wanna do as an elder, as I understand, you know, like I'm, I'm in Florida right now, you know, I feel like I'm in the south in a, in a very visible trans body, and that feels really scary.

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How do I do it? How do I see the examples of the people who are doing it and how am I that example for others? So I love that word thriving. It's a high bar and I think as trans people, we need to ask more and expect more, and I think all of us do because then we really have the ability to envision as broadly as we possibly can, and it's an exciting time to be alive.

[00:17:16]

I think I've gotta realize that as an elder, it's about preparing the next generation. As a white person, it's about elevating people of color. As a trans person, it's about getting rid of my shame and helping others to understand it really can get better because it's the young people who help me understand that.

[00:17:34] **Katy:**

Sterling Cruz-Herr is a coach, trainer, and equity consultant focused on building culturally competent organizations and nurturing young trans leaders. Sterling, thank you so much for sharing your story with us today,

[00:17:46] **Sterling:** Katie. I'm really grateful to be here with you. Thank you.

[00:17:48] **Katy:**

The Unsung Stewards podcast would not be possible without the talents of Maggie Cook, Molly Belsky, Teri Wade, Brad Girard, Rachel Gotbaum, and Amanda Macintosh. Deep gratitude to the thousands of people who shared their hopes and aspirations for the future through FORESIGHT, an initiative of The Rippel Foundation, and particular thanks to our guests. I'm your host, Katie Evans from The Rippel Foundation, and you are listening to Unsung Stewards.