

# Unsung Stewards



ReThink  
Health  
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PODCAST

**Joy Williams**

Founder of  
Hope to Thrive



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, Katy 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.

[00:00:44] Today I am so excited to welcome Joy Williams to the Unsung Stewards podcast. Joy leads hope to thrive a North Carolina based nonprofit that works to strengthen and coordinate faith networks, food chain pathways, and healthcare systems.

[00:00:58] Joy, thank you so much for being with us.

[00:01:00] **Joy:** Thank you, Katy. I'm so excited to be here as well.

[00:01:03] **Katy:** So I'd love to have you start just by telling us a bit about yourself and your background and what drew you to the work that you do through Hope to Thrive.

[00:01:12] **Joy:** I am in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I got to Winston via a Masters of Divinity degree, and even though I grew up coming to Winston-Salem, because both of my parents have family roots here, I never imagined myself to actually stay and live here.

[00:01:29] Post graduation. I found myself facing the pandemic and with a whole bunch of produce. I had started Hope to Thrive as a project within Divinity School and a local pantry had closed down during the pandemic, and I just said, Hey, let's set it up in my yard, and people came here.

[00:01:53] **Katy:** It sounds like Hope to Thrive was filling a need that opened up in your community during Covid. Can you tell us a little bit more about the genesis of that idea and what it is that you're trying to do through the organization?

[00:02:07] **Joy:** So Hope to Thrive was birthed, truly because my older sister looked at me and said, Joy, take the tears that you're crying. Our father had just passed away and let it water the seeds that he planted in all of us.

[00:02:21] He was an avid gardener. He worked with his hands. He was a woodworker. He made some of our toys growing up and he loved the community. I remember him picking myself and my friends up in our neighborhood and taking us to the Y M C A to go swimming, to go to camps. He would create camps for us to do during the summers.

[00:02:43] So this need of food was literally a food insecurity need that I had because a lot of my meals I had gotten from the university during divinity school. And it was my last semester when the pandemic hit, and so when the university shut down, so did my major food source. So when this local food pantry called me up and said, Hey, do you know anyone who needs these hundreds pounds of food?

[00:03:07] I said, yes. I called my friends that were in my network, 10 or 11 families, and that's when I said, well, let's set it up in my yard. And it was a need that so many people. I think realize the extent of how insecure all of our food resources are, and when the pandemic hit, it was strongly felt. And so I saw all types of people coming that I was surprised to see coming to pick up this produce.

[00:03:34] **Katy:** And you mentioned you started Hope to Thrive while you were working towards a Master's in Divinity, and I'm curious if there were connections for you there too.

[00:03:45] **Joy:** Absolutely. Like I said, my, my dad was a very big influencer in my life. And he had a community garden. So throughout all of my studies, I have a master's in public health and I wanted to study community gardening and low resource communities.

[00:04:01] So my thesis was around that. I also have a dance degree and had the opportunity to go to Columbia, South America on a Fulbright and work with different groups around nutrition and food and preserving culture. So food. And the production of food and how food can be used as medicine, as a cultural identity, as a practice, as healing has always been a part of my life in some way.

[00:04:27] I think professionally it became what it truly has been without me realizing it my whole life. The forefront of my focus when the pandemic hit.

[00:04:38] **Katy:** I'd love to have you share more about how you think about the role that food plays in our lives, both as a means of sustenance or nourishment, but also as a thing that connects us to people beyond ourselves.

[00:04:52] **Joy:** Sure. The way that I have thought about food is both. A negative and a positive, and I'll start with the positive first. Like as you mentioned, we need food to nourish ourselves. Traditionally, food and herbs have always been there as a way and as a resource to heal bodies, but I think in our modern perspective, food is becoming more apparent as to its benefits and the diet.

[00:05:19] Beyond like the health benefits of food, we also have those ways that we connect Everyone, I would say probably has that one childhood story of, you know, whether it was that favorite brownie recipe or that favorite soup or that cake or that something that when you think about that food, it's not just the food in an isolated consumption event. It's also the people, whether there was music or whether we were outside. Like there's a whole story around that particular food. And I think that brings us healing in a way that our traumatic experiences, Really need us to really look at, and one of the ways that we can get through those experiences is by having really strong identity markers that we can hold onto.

[00:06:07] And food is one of those things, and I think that's one of the reasons why in so many communities, When you look at diet, when we look at cancers or strokes and we say that, you know, diet, exercise, you know, not smoking, some of these big pillars can really help your health. One of the hardest things to drop is our diet because they bring so much more to us.

[00:06:28] Than just the actual experience of eating and with Hope to Thrive. I saw it as a way to get into the hearts of people by offering food. The goal was how do I get into the homes of people to address trauma offering health resources, whether it's HIV or how do we talk about abuse in the home? How do we, how do we talk about all of these really hard topics that really affect us day to day?

[00:06:52] I think one of the. Other attributes of food is that globally food is used as a weapon. So I would say that's a negative input. Whenever there's a war. Famine follows it really closely. Whenever we want to get a country hard or hit a population hard, we cut off the food supply, the water supply, and I don't think that we as a global society really elevate food to the importance that it really needs to be politically.

[00:07:23] So I think with Hope to Thrive, part of my hope and gain is to lift up the beauty of what food can do for us. So we do have a garden. We started a garden well before the pandemic hit, but even with the pandemic, one of our food sources, they couldn't get food to us one week, and so we couldn't have a pantry.

- [00:07:41] I was like, never. We have to be in control of our food source if we want to be food secure. So we started really pushing with our participants, can you grow an herb? Can you grow a tomato plant? Like, what can you do at home? We started experimenting with different types of growing, like from containers. To making planters out of newspaper to actually planting in the ground.
- [00:08:04] We're in Red Clay, so that's another story. But we also started composting because a lot of the food that we would get from the grocery stores, some of it wasn't good enough to give out, and I didn't want it to be in our trash cans and just get the same people that we want healthy through our good food sources to be sick through our environmental choices.
- [00:08:24] So I was like, Hey, we're gonna compost. My dad was a big compostor. So I remember some of the participants like, ew, like what are we doing ? And it was amazing though, because two years into it now they're calling me up and saying, Hey Joy, we need more composting supplies. Like we need more containers to put like our food in.
- [00:08:48] We have people trucking in to our designated compost site here in my yard. It's beautiful. The transformation that has happened around gardening technique. And composting through the fact of, no, this is what we're gonna do and we're gonna figure out how to do it because it's, it's the healthier choice for us to do.
- [00:09:08] **Katy:** You've made me think about food as a way, not just of connecting with your own community, but connecting across communities. Are you thinking about it in that way?
- [00:09:19] **Joy:** I have thought about it in that way. I think the diversity that I really want to explore and encourage within the food pantry, I really want it to be about relationships.
- [00:09:28] So like now I'm gonna eat this Chinese meal and I'm not just thinking about. These Chinese people that I might have seen on a movie or on TV or whatever, I'm gonna think about an individual that I've met. And so in the pantry, we have had different interns and students come through, and there was one who happened to be Chinese.
- [00:09:51] And I had explained to him that we were cooking meals from some of our produce, and if he ever wanted to cook a meal, he could. And so he decided that day at the pantry that he was going to cook some vegetables in a Chinese style. And so we got the spices that he needed in the pans that he needed. And we served mainly a black and latino low income neighborhood where there's mostly elders that come, but we also have.
- [00:10:18] Kids from the local bus stop that's nearby that may pop in. And the economic demographic is mainly low income. And so after he cook this meal, you know,

some of the pantry participants came up to me like, I don't know what this is, but it is good . But now they just didn't have Chinese food. They had Chinese food from Ja U.

[00:10:44] They had food from someone that they knew and he could talk about his experiences. There was one pantry participant who really connected with this intern and wanted to pick him up and drop him off at the university cuz he didn't have a car. The student didn't have a car at the time. So it was very meaningful for me to see because that is the type of experiences that I wanted to cultivate.

[00:11:07] We had another German student who. You know, wants to make a traditional bread that her dad made, that she had a lot when she was growing up. And we had another black woman who was very close in the neighborhood, wanted to come in to bring a special dish of hers that she had growing up, a hot water corn bread.

[00:11:27] And so there's so many experiences that we want to lift up that are. That may be identifiable to people within our pantry, but then maybe something completely different. I had one pantry member who said to me one time, Joy, I'm, I was looking up Spanish last night because I wanna learn how to communicate with, you know, some of the pantry participants.

[00:11:49] I think that to me is powerful because we're doing something more than just giving out food. We're creating opportunities for people to connect on a deeper level, and that changes our world.

[00:12:03] **Katy:** Where you've talked about this idea of food as identity, and I think you're right that we all have memories of food that are very deeply connected to, to who we're and how we think about ourselves in the world.

[00:12:17] And I'm curious if you have a memory like that, a food that was special to you growing up or that connects you to the community that you come from and, and just a story about that.

[00:12:28] **Joy:** I think I could live before I went vegan, and gluten free. Um, I think I could have lived off of mac baked macaroni and cheese, collard greens and dressing like for the rest of my life.

[00:12:47] I absolutely just would crave Christmas and Easter and Thanksgiving when my grandmother would make those items, and I could just eat all of that. So for me, it's warming. I love the taste of it. With the cornbread, there's sage, there's celery, there's onions. You take cornbread that's been baked like two days prior and it's slightly dried out, and you mix it with breadcrumbs.

[00:13:15] Then you add the sage and the broth of the Turkey or the chicken and then you bake it and it's just, it just comes out like a piece of cake. It is so good. And the

macaroni and cheese baked with three cheeses with condensed milk and salt and pepper. And yeah, it just, that to me spoke it's family time.

[00:13:35] Those three items in and of themselves just spoke Christmas and be the only things that I took back home on my carry home package, and I was happy.

[00:13:47] **Katy:** I would love for you to reflect on the legacies you feel you've inherited in your life and work, both legacies that have paved the way for the kind of transformational work that you're doing now, and also unjust legacies that have influenced the kinds of conditions you're working in.

[00:14:07] **Joy:** When I'm thinking about the past and I think about. The legacy where I am right now. Winston-Salem is a family home. It is my grandmother's sister on my paternal side. This was the home that she built. She built the church that's right across the street from it and. It was very meaningful to me to maintain the heritage.

[00:14:32] She made soap, both my grandmother and she planted gardens, had fruit trees, and so when I first moved here, there were overgrown, but there were mulberry trees. There were pear trees, there were blackberries. There was all of this fruit that had been nurtured and planted at one point that was now not producing.

[00:14:51] So when I stepped into that, it's, I'm willing to take on this legacy. Like I can identify that. I, I want to carry that on. I don't know how to, but I learned how to make soap. I have been living here and, and now I make, and I sell soap. Now I'm planting apple trees and sage and parsley, and we have blackberries.

[00:15:14] So it really is important when we think about legacy and when we think about what are we moving forward into, to also think about what are we leaving behind? And if we're leaving something behind, is that a good thing or is that something that we need to pause, regroup, and try to figure out how we pick up.

[00:15:35] To carry forward with us again. And I think the ideas of people being food insecure because they're not working hard enough or because for some reason they were born into it or they deserve, whatever stories we have adopted to explain why people need food. We don't really think of food insecurity within our community.

[00:15:57] I think that's a reason for us to pause, regroup, look at that, and say, you know what? We need to carry those people that we have left behind and we need to carry them forward with us. So I'm putting myself in that boat when truly I still go to the pantry myself as a participant.

[00:16:18] **Katy:** Joy, this conversation has been so wonderful. Thank you so much for taking the time today. Joy Williams leads hope to thrive a North Carolina based nonprofit. Thanks so much, joy.

[00:16:29] **Joy:** Thank you, Katie. It was my pleasure.

[00:16:32] The Unsung Stewards podcast would not be possible without the talents of Maggie Cook. Molly Belsky, Teri Wade, Brad Girard, Rachel Gotbaum, and Amanda McIntosh.

[00:16:45] 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, Katy Evans from The Rippel Foundation, and you are listening to Unsung Stewards.