

The Activist Files Episode 15: Brick by Brick - 50 Years after Stonewall with Dean Spade and Chinyere Ezie Podcast Transcript



Leah Todd:

Welcome to The Activist Files and we have Todd, a legal worker at the Center for Constitutional Rights and I'm joined here by Chinyere Ezie, a staff attorney as well as Dean Spade, professor of law at Seattle University. Welcome to both of you. Thanks so much for joining u s.

Chinyere Ezie:

Thank you.

New Speaker:

We're here in June this month, which of course is well known as Pride Month, and this year has been celebrated as the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall - what sometimes mentioned as a riot sometimes mentioned as an uprising and I think we're reflecting on the things that have happened, uh, since then. So if both of you could share your thoughts on what you think the most profound achievements have been in the 50 years since Stonewall f queer and LGBTI people in the US.

Chinyere Ezie:

Thanks Leah for sort of framing up this reflection on 50 years after Stonewall and sort of where we are as a queer and trans movement. And I think that in a lot of ways I feel as though we're exactly in the same place

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we were 50 years ago. Insofar as there were trans activists, trans community leaders who were at the forefront of that movement, of that uprising who were literally putting their bodies on the line to stand up and speak out against police brutality, and the criminalization of queer and trans communities in New York City. And 50 years later, I feel like it is still trans activists who are both at the vanguard and are the most vulnerable within the LGBTQ community, whose needs and whose enjoyment of rights and just even, you know, life chances really hasn't materially advanced in a lot of ways in 50 years.

Chinyere Ezie:

And so I think especially on the heels of more and more murders of trans people, including Malaysia Booker who notably had been attacked in this very public and very horrific manner just a month before and had spoken very poignantly about how she felt fortunate to be able to speak out about the violence that she experienced and not be a memorial for her. And then just one month later she's just been discovered, you know, gunned down in the middle of the street in Dallas and Malaysia being just one of several black trans women who've been murdered this year. And I just kind of being an increasingly haunting statistic and almost this grieving ritual that we do every year or parts of the community does every year to sort of lay witness to the massacre and the systemic devaluation of black and brown trans lives. I'm sort of caught with this profound sense of grief that so much work feels like it remains.

Chinyere Ezie:

However, I do think what we can celebrate is that there's been an undeniable amount of visibility that queer and trans people have sort of demanded. You know, they've demanded the right to sort of be in public space and to be seen and to be heard. And through telling our stories there have been gains in the movement for sort of formal equality. To me that is sort of a byproduct, but also what allows me to celebrate again as sort of the, the courageous acts of people just telling their stories and demanding that

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they be seen and that they'd be heard. And you know, with that there has been some formal gains, but there's still a lot that remains.

Dean Spade:

Yeah, I really appreciate your framing of that Chinyere. I think, um, for me, whenever we ask ourselves this question like has something, has stuff gotten better for like targeted or marginalized groups in the US? We have to like kind of put it in the context of the fact that one of the main things that the US and other forces do is narrate progress about targeted and vulnerable groups as a way of maintaining oppression. So it's always this really fascinating question to ask ourselves. And so for me it helps to put the things that people think of as the LGBTQ progress into context. Right? So we might be like, wow, like compared to the Stonewall era now, sodomy laws are not legitimate in the US. That's like a big law change that some people like claim as like a major one of these markers of equality.

Dean Spade:

But in that same 50 year period we had a massive, massive growth of the prison and policing systems and a massive increased militarization of those systems and more and more and more of all people, but especially queer and trans people and especially poor and people of color queer and trans people are in prison and jail generally right, for being poor, for connection to drugs for whatever. And so I think that these contexts are useful. Another one is like people claim the victory of same sex marriage as being recognized. And the hope with that would be that thing that people can access through marriage will be more accessible. Like, you know, immigration benefits are health benefits or certain kinds of like sharing property with a partner. But in reality also during the same time we've had like massive growth of the wealth divide, especially the racial and gender wealth divide, a massive increase in immigration enforcement and this huge housing crisis.

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Dean Spade:

So like nobody in the country can afford rent if they're getting paid minimum wage. And so the material conditions for actual queer and trans people may not be improving just because of these kinds of formal markers. Another example of this is like great gays, gays and lesbians can serve in the military, but at the same time we're in these like permanent wars, the defense budget is bigger than it's ever been. Um, and then the military is a good example of an institution that always claims to be making progress. Like, oh look, now we include black people, now we include women, now we, you know, and those progress narratives are part of legitimizing this, you know, deeply illegitimate institution. So to me, another example of this that I was just thinking of actually is like, maybe some of our kids go to school as I have like a gay and lesbian student group or a policy on the books that says you shouldn't discriminate against gays and lesbians.

Dean Spade:

But all the people I know who are young are like terrified of being shot in their school. So it's like, and their parents are more likely going to be having housing crisis. Then you know it's like how do we put these, suppose it kind of gains that are often decontextualized into the context of like exactly what Chinyere is saying. Like how are queer and trans people actually doing? Right? And that context requires thinking about this more. And one other thing I would say about this is like part of what happened in the ongoing, you know, vibrant, beautiful struggles of marginalized people is that we get these moments of mainstreaming where the mainstream picks up our struggle and represents us a lot and makes us visible in these limited ways. And the story is now we all feel better about this hated group.

Dean Spade:

Like now people don't hate trans people anymore. Now people don't hate gay people anymore. Or you know the story in the US that says like, you know, most people aren't racist anymore but those are really distortions, right? Because the conditions on the

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ground for most people are staying the same. I'm like, how can you have a whole country of people who are like, we're not racist anymore according to white people, but at the same time conditions for people of color, like worsening and all these material ways in terms of criminalization and immigration enforcement and economic divides. So for me, it's this question of how do we like mark that yes, there are cultural shifts happening. Like even compared to 20 years ago when I walk around the city I live in, I see more trans people who are out as trans. And that's, you know, heartening that there's some levels of shifts happening and to be grateful as Chinyere is saying for all the work and fight that that has taken and still takes to make that possible.

Dean Spade:

And then also look at the conditions of worsening material inequality that are still surrounding all those people's lives than shaping them. And, and that are causing things like the vulnerability of trans women of color to police violence and to murder because of the fact that housing is so deeply unavailable. And people become so much more vulnerable when they don't have basic economic security in their lives. So I think it's a complicated thing where it's like we live in this moment of all this kind of propaganda that says that like LGBT people are now like accepted and loved and our fight is such a, you know, inspiring fight because we've won or something. And yet, you know, we can see in our community is that there's so much ongoing suffering and harm, but the propaganda itself is a sign of how strong our fights have been at least.

Dean Spade:

So it's like, because we're in these deeply harsh, brutal times in the US generally, it makes sense that queer and trans people are also suffering severely. Like it makes sense that when there's attacks on abortion are also be, you know, widespread, you know, anti-poor policymaking and criminalization. All these things are go, go together. This is the moment we live in. And at the same time, the fact that there even is propaganda about our movement that tries to mislead is a sign of

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how strong and powerful our movements are. Um, let me just another example of this. Like, you know, I, I live in the city with the gay mayor and the mayor before it was gay and like a lot of people live in cities with gay mayors and those cities are still like building more jails, hiring more cops, like, you know, doing sweeps of homeless encampments like, you know, in, in bed with all the real estate developers so that there's no affordable housing. Like it's just, we have to kind of, uh, take these progress markers in think with, with great care.

Leah Todd:

Thank you so much for that both of you. And I really appreciate how you contextualize this work. I think this is often seen as sort of a separate issue in a separate movement. And I think it's so important we're talking about this in the context of policing, in the context of housing, in the context of immigration and criminalization. So I really appreciate that. And I think what's so important to think about too is how queer and trans people of color are at the forefront of moments working on all these issues. And I think sometimes we don't always see how that nexus really is centering people in all the work that's happening. When we talk about these issues. What suggestions would you have for shifts in how we're doing this work? Or maybe you can speak about the ways that you've tried to shift how you do this work to really bring in and, and center those narratives. Knowing that, that really this, this nexus is what's important.

Chinyere Ezie:

I'm inspired by a long line of queer and trans leaders and elders who come from communities of color and who have always both been at the margins and sort of looked to the margins as a litmus test for how our communities are doing and with an appreciation that our society is only as healthy or as only as vital as the health and well being of sort of the most, um, the most vulnerable members of our human societies. And so, you know, I think it sort of, um, making intersectionality a praxis and not being content to declare victory as a LGBTQ rights movement if gay

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men in urban centers who come from affluent backgrounds. Um, feel as though they have substantial enjoyment of sort of, you know, the rights that we should all be bestowed as, you know, just based on our, our humanity. I think it's really gaging progress based on how disabled trans women who have criminal records, like how are they doing?

Chinyere Ezie:

You know, how are people who our society has been content to throw away for a very long time, you know, and how as a movement can we really claim victory if trans women in this country, black trans women still have a life expectancy of under 35 years because we are content to deny them employment. The government announced that they plan to repeal legal regulations and protections that at least afforded trans people safe spaces in homeless shelters. The government in the same, same breath announced that they're going to repeal laws that protect people's ability to access health care on a equal basis. And so when we're literally communicating at the highest levels of sort of government that trans lives don't matter and that these communities are expendable. You know, again, I think it's just to me it's a wake up call that we, you know, it's either all of us are none of us, right? We can't leave huge segments of the community behind to fend for themselves and feel as though as a movement, you know, we've gotten rights. We've gotten, um, anything tantamount to liberation.

Dean Spade:

Yeah, I mean, I really agree with that. I think that, um, you know, during the time that I've been like doing queer and trans activist work for the last 20 years, however, what a lot of what people I've been working had been fighting is the fact that like, you know, uh, gay and lesbian rights movement that was actually quite conservative emerged and became like kind of the most visible, well funded gay and lesbian rights movement and that movement with pro police, pro military and pro marriage. And that was really different than a lot of them, you know, much more left formations that had existed. Um, and having to sit still

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exist that were, you know, um, queer and trans movements that included economic justice, fight against military imperialism, a fight against racism. That has been a lot of what the fight has been in my lifetime.

Dean Spade:

Like, you know, like, no, we don't want to serve in the military. We want to end the military. No, we don't want take crimes. Laws I think increased the power of the prosecutor and police. We want to get the police out of our communities and get our people out of prison. So there's been this, like the real fight I think both Chinyere and I are talking about, about kind of where the priorities are, what counts as progress. And so I think that fight is ongoing. I think another piece of that is that, that more, um, I would consider it rightwing formation of gay and lesbian rights, that that has been the more visible version is very focused on the idea that you win when you have something written in law about your group that says it's part of the good group. Um, and you win when you get like a mainstream representations in the media that say your group is a good group and what the last queer and trans formation says you will when people's lives are better.

Dean Spade:

Um, when you, when, as Chinyere is saying, the most vulnerable people um, are um, you know, out of danger of losing their lives. And so I think that whole piece is the work that still has to be done. Part of that is that I think a lot of work we are doing right now and a lot of people are doing to fight against what's called pink washing, which is like when politicians or governments or institutions stay there like gay friendly or good on gay or like, um, you know, wrap a rainbow flag around whatever like messed up thing they're actually doing in order to justify it. So that could be like the New York police department having rainbow cop cars or it could be like, you know, um, your, your mayor or your governor saying they're gay friendly, but meanwhile they're building these new prisons and jails are working with ICE like that.

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Dean Spade:

That's a big piece is like seeing how our movements are used as propaganda for rightwing strategies. Like that's a huge piece of work we're still doing. I think another, and also just helping people read that kind of propaganda that your politician can say they like love Muslims, or love black people or whatever and still be like, we have to read what are their actual actions and and really build power to push for outcomes we want. I think for me a really big thing, I'm really trying to encourage people to do in this really scary moment of the Trump administration and worsening [inaudible] to be part of mutual aid projects, right? Like there's a kind of pushed to just show our solidarity with each other by posting things online. But actually what really shows our solidarity is when we like are writing letters to prisoners, when we're like, you know, part of childcare collectives when we're part of packing the court for people facing criminalization when we're part of supporting immigrants facing deportation.

Dean Spade:

Like when we're directly supporting each other in the face of these brutal conditions, when we're opening up our homes to people coming out of prison, like there's so much direct mutual aid work we can be doing that actually builds our movement and builds our power and and I think it's important to kind of move away from purely representation related work. And the last thing I would say is I think that like all of our work has to tie in to the significant to actually facing collapse that is coming around climate crisis. Like the fact that our work has like issues issue siloed and we're like, oh we're over here doing gay lesbian word that's going to talk about this and best transport and not actually tying into the broad questions of survival for all people on this planet is very concerning to me. And that's the way I've seen a lot of that work in my lifetime. And to be honest, I've practiced that work in those ways often. And so for me, I'm trying to like really de-silo look at where am still disconnected from context and like what more clearly our context than the actual planet we live on in the question of

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whether or not our societies are going to collapse because of, um, you know, climate crisis.

Chinyere Ezie:

I think Dean said it exactly right. I think one thing I do want to highlight, however. And it's why you know in my role at the Center for Constitutional Rights, I devote a lot of time and energy to trans advocacy in particular is that I think there's a way that the trans community hasn't even benefited from pink washing. And I say that with irony intended, but I feel like there's actually sort of this way that, you know, for decades now, the trans community has been viewed as completely expendable by both the left and the right and a group that can be exploited for, to galvanize various causes, you know, or that in the case of the more conservative LGBT movement that threatens objectives and threatens legal strategies that are, that are best achieved or that can be easily, most easily achieved through sort of assimilation, assimilationist, uh, narratives, which is to say things like, you know, gay folks are just like you.

Chinyere Ezie:

We like to play golf. We also take our kids to the park and so forth and so on, you know, and so therefore we should have rights because, you know what, we're all the same. We're just the same as you, you know. And, and I say that because, um, I was living in Alabama right after, in the lead up to the Trump election. And what I saw, there kind of firsthand was how basically in the wake of the gay marriage decision at the Supreme Court, you know, the word basically got out, there was a coordinated effort on the part of the right to say, hey, Americans are still completely freaked out by trans people. You know, the LGBT movement has not tried to bring them into the fold meaningfully, which I think is true and this is an Achilles heel that we can exploit, right? We can exploit gender panic in this country to shore up conservative causes.

Chinyere Ezie:

And you saw this push to sort of talk about, you know, trans women as predators who are lurking in bathrooms. You saw all sorts of, you know, initiatives

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kind of wielded at basically breaking up, you know, kind of disrupting the sort of quote unquote progress of the LGBTQ movement. Um, although admittedly, again, that was probably arguably just the LGB movement, you know, in form and function. And so sitting here and kind of seeing how the government is just comfortably, confidently writing animus into the law with respect to trans communities. It's not that I find legal formalism as sort of a real strategy for liberation for our communities, but I think it's significant that trans people are really just being used as a pawn and that ultimately what we see is that our society has made very little progress when it comes to recognizing the humanity of others when we aren't relying on sort of assimilationist tropes, you know, so the idea that that trans people don't have to be just like you, but that may be we should all stop policing gender and that we should stop, um, giving people girl lessons and boy lessons and reifying gender categories and expectations and creating scripts that people have to live by.

Chinyere Ezie:

Like we haven't had that conversation. Right. We haven't had a conversation with men, you know, cisgender men that it's okay to sort of not be hypermasculine. Right. It's, it's toxic masculinity that is getting, you know, trans women across the country killed. It's the lessons that we're teaching and imparting men that men have to, you know, like women and women have to have vaginas and so forth and so on. And you know, anything about anything that, any attempt to kind of color out the lines is basically something that death is better, right? That you are more manly killing a trans woman than admitting that she's your lover. And so I wish I had more answers, but you know, those are some of the things I'm thinking about at Stonewall 50.

Dean Spade:

I think it's so interesting, you know, one of the things that's so complicated about following the propaganda of pink washing is that propaganda is really inconsistent and can be right. So it's like when you

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said that thing, that question about like, you know, to what degree is the same question happening around trans people, the thing that popped into my mind immediately was the ways that the Israeli military in Israeli government use trans pinkwashing specifically. So, right? Like they love to be like, we let trans people serve in our military. So therefore our military is a site of liberation as a way of trying to cover over the realities that the Israeli military used to engage in a genocidal, um, you know, colonial project, um, to displace Palestinians and so, and destroy and kill them. Um, and so that, you know, that includes like there's, you know, for a long time there's been this trans officer in the Israeli military who is like trotted all around the US to do speaking engagements, um, that are just about propaganda to sort of spread this message to people in the US that the Israeli military as this wonderful site of, um, of liberation for trans People.

Dean Spade:

So that's an instance where you see a really right wing force using trans people for pink washing propaganda. Not, not because they care at all about trans people. The right like pink washing is never actually about what's going to happen for the gay and lesbian or the trans people. It's always just about how does this talking point borrow feelings and ideas that these movements have built about liberation or about progressivism and [inaudible] but can that kind of sentiment be stolen by an institution that's trying to legitimize itself. In the US. I more often see politicians who actually want to be considered progressive. So who wants to differentiate themselves from Trump but are actually still, I would consider very regressive, right? Like, you know, people who are building jails who are um, you know, working with ICE or who are, so they, they might want to say, look, I'm so progressive vote for me.

Dean Spade:

I'm distinguishing myself from like the Trump camp and I, and so now I'm going to say I like trans people and now I must say I like Muslims. Like, this is the way

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this looks like in Washington state where I live with a lot of, you know, these kind of fake progressive politicians who are just doing the same terrible policy making that is harming poor people, people of color, immigrants in our state, including and especially queer and trans people who are targeted inside those systems. So that's what's interesting to me about just trying to track these false progress narratives. Is that A - remembering that they don't benefit the people who in whose names that are happening and also to see - I see trans pinkwashing stuff as kind of the cutting edge of it, right? Like there's been a longer history of people doing this with gay and lesbian stuff because gays and lesbians have been more mainstreamed in this way.

Dean Spade:

But just remembering of course, that these kinds of moments when they say they love us don't actually benefit us. It's a hard lesson that we need, um, to share with each other so badly because I think it really works on people and they're like, oh, I have to vote for the lesbian mayoral candidate or the whatever because I'm part of this community. But like, where is she on the issues that matters to people's survival, right? Like there's a way in which that kind of, um, like bate-and-switch is so powerful now and I think we're going to see it more and more around, um, around trans stuff. I mean, even just the fact that like, Trump wants to make war in Iran, so sometimes he makes noise about how Iran treats gays and lesbians, even though he does not, you know, of course has his entire administration is homophobic and transphobic like that, that ability to be completely inconsistent is actually part of how propaganda works.

Leah Todd:

I really appreciate how you both kind of contextualized where we were and how this exploitation of the community is not benefitting the community and in fact has caused so many negative repercussions. And I particularly appreciate you talking about the narratives that we're not talking about when we do all this pink washing, including toxic masculinity and what it means for cisgender men. You both are

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obviously doing so much incredible work and we've only barely touched on it. As you continue to do that work, which is obviously sparking shifts and change, what do you kind of seeing on the horizon and what do you recommitting to as to work towards these visions we have of, of what a truly vibrant and safe and loving future looks like for our communities.

Dean Spade:

To be really frank, you know, obviously my work is a range of work that's related to prison abolition and work against US military imperialism. Yeah. So when I think about the horizon of my work, um, you know, I'm thinking about the things I'm doing. Like right now, this week I'm really excited about this work we've been doing for a couple of years. This project called Queer Trans War Ban, which is a toolkit for people to do anti military recruitment and anti militarism work generally at queer and trans events in their own cities and towns and counties. We saw this real rise in these representations of trans military service being this like wonderful, proud thing in the wake of Trump's trans military ban. And what's missing from that conversation? There's of course that like the military is a terrible, horrible job and also that no one to do it. And that the US military is the largest source of violence and pollution in the world.

Dean Spade:

And so we've created this toolkit and I'm, you know, we're doing new sticker designs this year in new poster designs for that and I'm really excited about that work and that's just like on with me right now because we're doing the prep now. Um, and of course, you know, ongoing fights. I'm involved in locally and nationally to stop expansion of immigration enforcement and, you know, new new sites of prisons and policing. Um, all of those expansion sites are always something we're fighting. That is such a vital work that I really think everybody can be involved in because it's happening in every state. But I think on a longer horizon for our movements, the real question for me is about climate crisis and collapse. Um, I, I personally believe that we are moving towards

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collapse of the quote unquote normal structures of society that we are used to because we've gone so far with climate change and there's so much denial in all of our communities locally and in, you know, broader political movements about this.

Dean Spade:

It's so hard to face and people don't have good information about it. And I think there's a lot of ways in which it's downplayed. Um, and so for me, I've really been trying to let that in more and ask myself, especially because some people I know have been affected, like my friends in Puerto Rico who've been affected by Hurricane Maria who have already experienced kind of like the end of the world, like happened there, you know, and other people I know who've been, you know, people experienced Hurricane Katrina, all these moments where we already see it. And then I think a going to happen much more broadly in a very deep way that has been leading me to ask myself this really core question, which is what aspects of the work I do assume that the existing systems are going to continue and what work would I be doing or what work would I continue doing?

Dean Spade:

Or what work would I start doing if I faced, if I divest it from the belief that these existing systems are going to be the systems in place for the rest of my life. Um, and so this has really been a very profound shaping set of questions for me as an activist in the last 12 months. Um, I'm really looking at this question of what does it mean to prepare and adapt? What kinds of skills and capacities, um, do our communities need to be prepared to have more self, more ability to share, more ability to deal with conflicts in the face of the coming changes? You know, what do we want to have in place when the lights go out or the storm comes or everything gets further militarize in the face of crisis. What keeps US safer. And part of this for me is about just like really divesting from any strategies that are about like making people in power like us better say nice things about us and towards, um, strategies that

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are really about redistributing the basics of wellbeing and building the new social relations we need in moments of crisis emerges.

Dean Spade:

And so really studying like what worked between people in Puerto Rico and the face of Hurricane Maria. How did they help each other survive? What didn't work? What do people who've been through that wish they'd had in place in their apartment building or in their neighborhood or in their city? And that, those kinds of questions. For me, it's really important for us to ask them as queer and trans people because vulnerable people are often targets and experience a lot of harm during big crises or big disasters, right? Like we can look at these histories and know that like sexual violence increases during crises and all kinds of violence. And so what, how do we specifically want to be plugged into this question of preparation and an adaptation for this? You know, really significant moment that I think people who are alive today are going to be living through.

Chinyere Ezie:

I share Dean's interest in sort of mapping out what feels like sort of an increasingly dystopian present and sort of looming future and thinking through ways that as a community we can be more resilient, more resourceful and really, you know, demand our right to kind of continue to exist with, you know, our basic minimums being met, I feel within my legal work here at CCR, something I've been very focused on is crafting strategies to respond to what I have come to term as sort of the discrimination to incarceration pipeline. And um, for me I can see that as the ways that discrimination exclusion in the home and schools from the workplace has pushed, you know, generations of trans people into in particular LGBT people, you know, at large I think are also impacted by those that has pushed them into criminalized economies, survival economies that expose them to lots of policing and to experiences of incarceration that are ultimately have kind of unmitigated brutality towards them.

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Chinyere Ezie:

Because once again, we really haven't gotten to the bottom of misogyny and toxic masculinity and the ways that, um, non normativity really does get policed in society. I, you know, so many of its members. And so, um, you, that has given me kind of a, a keen interest in the looming cases concerning whether trans and other LGB individuals have protections under existing laws regulating sex discrimination. An unfavorable interpretation by the Supreme Court would mean that there is no barrier at the federal level to people being denied housing, being denied employment, being denied, again, sort of the means of survival. Admittedly in, you know, a flawed, um, kind of capitalist market economy. Nonetheless, um, having worked with people who have been incarcerated and really seeing firsthand the depravity that experience involves, if you're trans and often times denied access to healthcare, placed in housing where you're extremely vulnerable to rape and sexual assault, having um, corrections officers sort of mock you and you will aware of the vulnerability you face, but communicate things like, well, you're trans.

Chinyere Ezie:

What did you expect? Or, you know, you sure you didn't ask for it? I don't know. It's, it's just kind of, I'm looking for ways to continue disrupting those systems, at least in my lifetime, and hope that the generations to come wake up to a society that gives them better life chances, you know, and in a way that doesn't leave anyone behind, which is my concern for our first 50 years after Stonewall.

Leah Todd:

Thank you so much for all of your thoughts and reflections and really helpful framing on where we are. I've really appreciated our conversations. And thank you both, Dean and Chinyere, for being here.

Chinyere Ezie:

Thank you.

Dean Spade:

Thank you.