Sinister Myth: How Stories We Tell Perpetuate Violence

Transcript:
Episode 2:
Showing Up as Ourselves:
LGBTQ Youth: Erin Upchurch Interview

Zoe Brigley Thompson [00:00:00] Sinister Myth. How Stories We Tell Perpetuate Violence.

Brendan Walsh [00:00:04] This podcast challenges cultural mythologies about sexuality in the West because so often they encourage, perpetuate, or foster violences against women and minorities. It is supported by an Ohio State Affordable Learning Exchange Grant and is created by Zoe Brigley Thompson and Brendan Walsh.

Erin Upchurch [00:00:45] Hi I'm Erin Upchurch.

Brendan Walsh: So, could you talk maybe a bit about yourself and a bit about the work you do in your career and what made you decide to go down this road?

Erin Upchurch [00:00:58] Sure. That's a really big question. I am a social worker, a licensed independent social worker. I've been practicing just under 20 years. And you know if I were to go all the way back, through my entire life, and to my upbringing, it has been around the lines of justice and advocacy empowerment. None of those were things the words I knew growing up. But

I come from a family of service seeking fairness and equality. That's been the underpinning of my whole upbringing.

So when I went to college I actually started out wanting to be a special education teacher and my senior year I didn't like teaching, which is a little ironic considering that I do that now. But I had this really great advisor who asked me to write down words that were important to me, and I said things like "empowerment" and "bringing people together," and "working in the community" and she said, "You sound like a social worker." I took my first class and I was hooked from then on, because just learning how the profession even developed really tied it back into my own upbringing and my lens of justice and fairness and equality. Over the past… almost 20 years I've worked with youth and families. I worked with a lot of different systems. And something I think I wasn't really good at first was being strategic in thinking about how people can get their needs met, which is a skill I've learned as I've gotten older. In terms of advocacy, that's that skill set I've been able to think about strategically and say, OK here's a roadblock, but where is the small hole to get through?

So I've worked in foster care. I did case management. And I'll tell you there is one job that actually changed my whole professional life when I was working on HIV and AIDS in 2000, and it meant being able to work with consumers who actually were in these groups, consumer groups, where they directed where federal dollars went. They had a say in how we did our jobs and I thought, this is really powerful: to see an actual community together making decisions, and holding people accountable to provide specific services or do the right thing. I went to graduate school at Case Western Reserve University with a focus on social and community development, but now the concentration is called Community Practice for Social Change.

Brendan Walsh [00:03:25] That's awesome. Thank you for that. So you mentioned Kaleidoscope. You are the new executive director. Could you tell us a bit more about what this role entails and what in a broad sense you do as executive director?

Erin Upchurch [00:03:39] Sure. So first I'll briefly describe Kaleidoscope Youth Center. We are a drop-in center slash community center, and we serve LGBTQ plus youth ages 12 to 20 and we've got specific programming. We provide support. We have specific events. We do trainings in that community, and the core of that is really to provide a space of safety and belonging for the community within our walls and then to work in the community so that our youth can experience that also outside of the walls. My role as executive director is to support, guide, and lead that work - in a nutshell - and to make sure we have the resources to keep it going.

Brendan Walsh [00:04:17] And so this is going to be a big question… but what are some of the main challenges that LGBTQ youth face, and what are the ways that they are policed which make these prevalent?

Erin Upchurch [00:04:29] Sure! Some of the main challenges that LGBTQ youth face... well, there is a lot. It can start from an internal perspective, and just finding their own sense of belonging within themselves and their own self-acceptance, and then having the space to even figure out that that piece of things. A lot of our youth though do know who they are. They're very unapologetic. And then it's finding that place to be safe, to be their full selves, and to show up. And so, there is the safety piece. Whether it's emotional, mental, physical safety. We know that our youth are more likely to be survivors of physical or sexual assault.

Family acceptance or family discord can be a really big challenge. And that leads to more of our youth being homeless or having insecure housing. Then we can move into finding secure housing and not engaging in work that's going put them at higher risk. We see a lot of our youth sometimes getting involved in survival crimes. Then that moves into not being taken care of, but we know how trauma impacts us. We've got higher rates of substance use sometimes, and addiction, and not being able to have employment if kids are dropping out of high school because it's not safe. They're not going to have health insurance or perhaps have a hard time finding jobs that provide appropriate health insurance and so it's really the whole quality of life.

The top few problems would be around housing and access to basic needs, mental health and substance use support, and having access to those services. And you ask about how those youth are policed differently? I think it's really layered question. I mean to start we could look at it within our school system or educational systems, and how even these systems aren't always inclusive. When we've got conversations happening in schools and we know that representation is so important and visibility for our sense of self and belonging… if that doesn't happen when kids are growing up, already it starts to chip away at their sense of belonging in this world.

And then you talk about youth of color, kids of color, transgender or non-binary youth. These numbers and statistics actually increase within those communities. Specifically, for transgender and non-binary youth of color, communities of color, those numbers are even higher because of all those kinds of different issues, and the lack of basic needs and access to resources.

Brendan Walsh [00:06:54] You know that was great. That was a big question.

Erin Upchurch: I might come back to it because more might pop up.

Brendan Walsh [00:07:01] So kind of spinning that, there have been a number of cases of teen suicides as a result of bullying. What do you think about campaigns like It Gets Better and things like that?

Erin Upchurch: [00:07:17] I remember when the It Gets Better campaign started, and initially I was a little bothered by it. Because I thought, OK great, but what does that even mean and how are we helping people access what they need? Like the resiliency so that they can get better? But I think there are a lot of different ways to look at that campaign and its encouragement. It provides hope and there are stories that are attached to the campaign. Lots of people have shared their stories, and at a real-world level outside of identity, life typically does get better.

Adolescence is hard. I don't know many of us who'd want to go back to that time of our life. It's just hard in general, I've got two teenagers at home and so to say life gets better...? It does in a lot of ways as you have your own agency. But I think for marginalized members of marginalized communities, it's a hard and tricky thing to say, because you have to make sure they have the tools, that they're connected to their own resiliency, so that it does get better. And, yes it does, and let me support you in being able to find a better way – that's really the missing piece sometimes.

Brendan Walsh [00:08:24] So getting back to the question of trans and non-gender-conforming youth, recently greater awareness has been raised about the high levels of violence experienced by these youth. Do you think there are particular myths about sexuality in society that foster this violence? And if so, what would be a couple of the main ones?

Erin Upchurch [00:08:44] Yes, I do. I do think there are myths. You know we can call them stereotypes or myths or biases. I think a lot of it really comes down to bias, implicit bias, and prejudices and if we talk about transgender identities or non-binary identities, we have to first acknowledge that these identities really challenge us as a society to question everything we think we know about life, about ourselves, about relationships, about our faith. And a lot of folks in society are not comfortable being challenged in that way. And when we're uncomfortable we do things to try to get rid of that discomfort. It could be ignoring things, it could be trying to change people. And, unfortunately, in that act of trying to change others, it can often get violent.

I think there's been more acceptance if you will for the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities: that love is love, for marriage equality. There is general overall acceptance and with the transgender non binary community, I think that we're getting there. It's not all there and the things that I believe underpin the violence and the lack of inclusion and exclusion area round homophobia. It's a woman's issue, a feminist issue too, because it really gets around gender norms and stereotypes and how we all are supposed to fit in boxes, but if we don't, we don't.

If somebody is talking to someone whose gender they might not understand and they reflect on themselves, they don't really know what to do with that or they ask what does that mean about me? And we want to uphold this certain standard of beauty for people and all of these things that as humans we're trying to work through – all of those underpin the violence that is coming out of it and the sheer hatred for people who are different than us. It really gets to some core issues around that fear and lack of understanding.

Brendan Walsh [00:10:45] Thank you, that's very insightful.

Erin Upchurch [00:10:52] And privilege and white supremacy and you know a lot of other things.

Brendan Walsh [00:11:00] Yes! So, switching gears, in your TED talk you discuss your work with LGBTQ youth, and the things they've taught you. What are some of the most important things that you've learned through this work?

Erin Upchurch [00:11:06] So my work is with LGBTQ youth, and in my TED talk I specifically talked about working with transgender and non-binary youth and the topic was "Choosing Compassion in the Face of Diversity." And so, what have I learned?

I am trying to think how I even started doing that work specifically. It was a natural progression because I always worked with youth in general as well as work on HIV and AIDS. Working in the community, and with families, I actually was serving on the board of Trans Ohio when I first started being more intentional about that work and being able to see that trans and non-binary youth are the largest, the most under-served part of that community. What I learned from those youth… I started a support group which at the time was the first one here in Ohio for kids at ages 5 to 13. I think why that's important is because we see there are a lot of resources available now that weren't there then. I just think it's important to know in the past probably eight years how much has changed.

But what I've learned are different ways of doing things and so here's something simple: we would always talk about how kids are grouped and the binary boy/girl line-up thing. And you just sit with a bunch of six-year-olds or four-and-a-half-year-olds, and have them say, why don't we just do our eye color? Why don't we do what kind of shoes? And it seems like such a simple thing to do differently, but maybe as somebody who is cisgender, I would have never thought about that. While I can cognitively understand the fluidity of gender and I get it, to see it is a really beautiful thing, and to see kids have enough agency to do that and be unapologetic. I've learned about the resiliency in youth and the wisdom in youth, and the kids I've worked with and continue to work with all seem to have this something special within them that allows them to show up as their full selves like they're ready for the role. It's really amazing, and it's just this glow, this power that radiates out of them. And I want that for all youth. How can all youth and people access that within themselves so that it radiates out? I'm thinking how society could be so different if we had that access and so probably my biggest thing that I've learned is they have it in them. And that's been able to teach me how to also show up as my full self, because if I'm going to be with them, I've got to access that and myself as well. And a lot of internal work happens when I am doing this kind of stuff.

Brendan Walsh [00:13:45] And in that same vein, during your TED talk you mentioned the difference between compassion and empathy. Could you maybe explain that to us?

Erin Upchurch [00:13:55] Yes! The difference between compassion and pity. Because that was the title "Choosing Compassion" and prior to that time I thought of compassion as feeling sorry for somebody. Like saying, "Oh that's so sad: let me help them." And I can be very literal about words. I love words. I thought, that's pity: like looking at somebody and saying, "Oh poor thing." Throwing something at them just so I can help them is really making myself feel better, because it's uncomfortable to see people suffering, and it should be intolerable. But the compassion piece is choosing to stand with people in their suffering and their pain or their challenges. It's saying, "Oh, this is horrible, and I'm going to stand with you, because we are all in this together, and I'm going to hold enough space for you so that you can heal, and you can figure this out, and we can bring resources to you." Compassion is an active word: it's not just a feeling. It's an intentional choice to be with people and their situations and be with them as they're healing and growing and helping them connect to resiliency.

Brendan Walsh [00:15:03] Thank you. You have in the past and currently advocated very strongly for the rights of trans people. What myths about trans people are still encouraged by media, culture, and certain institutions?

Erin Upchurch [00:15:20] So a couple of weeks ago I was facilitating a training around implicit biases, and what I do is I have folks write down their biases and how those might show up in their work. And while it wasn't centered on LGBTQ communities in general overwhelmingly people were writing things about trans women in particular, like trans women are not real women, or that it's just a phase, that people are confused, that children don't even know, like saying how can they know? They're too young. And I think that feeds back to the myths of what a woman should look like, and how women should act. There is this idea that youth, that children can't know themselves, and can't be wise, and that anything that is variant from what we consider normal or typical must be wrong which I think goes back into those -isms.

And I'll go back... Thinking about kids and like their choice, we over sexualize everything. So when we talk about gender identity. We make it be about sex all the time and so if we look the bathroom issue, it's always about sex and people doing things inappropriately. And one of the kids I worked with, they live in Canton area: Tusquarawas County is actually where they're from. And I remember going to the school with this family to help advocate for bathrooms, and this kid having to go across the school. And the teacher said, "Well sometimes kids look underneath the stalls. How do I handle that?" The kid was a third grader. And my question was: "Why are kids looking under the stalls?" This isn't this the child's thing to handle and worry about. Our thinking is always around sex and purity, and we don't want to talk about genitals and we want to assign things and so it is just layered up. We see how it plays out in adult relationships too, even removing that piece from things and from the bathroom issue and the threats. And trans women using affirmed bathrooms all of a sudden is a safety issue, and for what reason, right? There is no reason behind that. And I think it's also playing on this idea of women. It's fear. Keeping people in fear, and if people are in fear, again we can go back to being uncomfortable and wanting to destroy or protect things and so I think it's layered. It's nuanced.

It is a lot of our biases and our fear-based society, and I will add the faith piece, and religion to it. I think that plays a big role and for a lot of us even if we're not practicing a specific faith as adults, a lot of folks here in the States are raised Christian predominantly, and so there's that dominant culture... That's a lot of unlearning and undoing that has to happen and so the belief system in general about roles and relationships and norms is the thing that is really holding us back.

Brendan Walsh [00:18:17] Thank you. You've been a community lecturer here at OSU, and you have also worked in the field. Is there anything you wish the academic communities working in this area would be aware of or more focused on practically?

Erin Upchurch [00:18:31] Yeah, I think as a community – and I've shared this with the deans too – I would love to work on the practice of how we share pronouns at the beginning of classes. Little things like that, because this creates inclusion, and even now at the beginning of this, I should have said that my pronouns are she and her, right? And so I'm in the work and I don't always remember to do that. so we have to practice and get better at those things, so that we're creating learning environments for people to feel not just tolerated or welcomed but affirmed and included.

And then when we have all the different readings that we have to do, making sure there is good representation across the board of folks who are LGBTQ and not just when we get to the section about LGBTQ community but there's many folks who are queer who have contributed to all the disciplines whether it be math or music or science. There's a lot of folks and so being able to have that representation is very important. And as an instructor it's also important to be mindful of how I talk about things, keeping that neutrality there, and that fluidity there and having conversations.

My work in particular in my classes like I said is around cultural diversity and inclusion, and I always tell my classes you are not going to leave this class culturally competent. I don't think that's attainable but what we can do – and this is where my passion as a social worker comes in to work with others – is be culturally relevant in the things that we're doing, to reduce harm, and to stop perpetuating oppression. As teachers and academic professionals, I think that's the work that we should be always doing: being relevant in the work that we're doing so that we can reduce harm, and the people who are going out from our class in the world also will reduce harm.

Brendan Walsh [00:20:18] Thank you, again! Something I've recently been thinking about a lot is the way in which misogyny is the underpinning of a lot of violence. In LGBT communities you see men who are more feminine being associated with weakness.

Erin Upchurch [00:20:20] Yes.

Brendan Walsh [00:20:25] And there might be this internalized homophobia in the masc4masc community. How much do you think the violence throughout the entire LGBT community can be attributed to misogyny or what other working factors do you think are at play?

Erin Upchurch [00:20:52] So as you might imagine, I have lots of thoughts about how misogyny plays a role in the violence and acceptance and inclusion. And as I alluded before, this is a woman's, a feminist issue, because I think misogyny is one of the core issues. It is the hatred of womanhood, especially empowered womanhood. And so even growing up, girls get to be tomboys, but a boy better not play with dolls and you'd better not do things that are considered effeminate because we associate femininity with weakness and being less-than. Until we can change that notion, that perspective, it's going to keep layering up like that and so those who are male identified are going to feel the need to fit into a specific box and gender expression. And that's where passing comes in for folks who are trans and non-binary, and safety, because that is a matter of life and death for a lot of people. I remember back when Caitlyn Jenner came out and was on the cover of – I forget which magazine – but what everybody said was… "She looks so good. She just looks like a beautiful woman." OK, so here we go again lifting up this norm of what women are supposed to look like. What if Caitlyn – when Caitlyn transitioned – chose to express womanhood in a different way? Would we be more or less accepting dependent on that expression?

And it is around this wanting to control women and our bodies and how we express ourselves and what we do, and the empowerment: it's that form of oppression. And even around pay, and we know that we make less money as women and all of that. I think if we can begin – well, we have begun – but if we can continue to dig into that misogyny and the way that informs our culture, we'll find it's institutionalized just like racism. It's woven throughout the work that we do as academics, in education, the workforce. It's in everything that we do. We have to undo that. That foundation has to continue cracking and breaking up so that we can begin to have different lenses as to how we're looking at women, femininity, womanhood, and gender expression in general.

You know we can't all fit in these different boxes. We shouldn't have to fit in these boxes.