

DOIN' THE WORK:

Frontline Stories
of Social Change

LGBTQ+ Latinx - Christopher Cuevas

Episode 18

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Shimon:

Welcome to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change where we bring new stories and real people working to address real issues. I am your host Shimon Cohen. Hey everyone. This is Shimon at Doin' The Work and I'm really excited to let you know about the first official promotion we've got going on. Our first podcast guest Jonathan Foiles has a book coming out called *This City Is Killing Me: Community Trauma and Toxic Stress in Urban America*. It will be released in August on Belt Publishing. Check out the link in the show notes and use the code DTW, as in Doin' The Work, to get 10% off the cost of the book. Belt is also going to kick some money back to the podcast, so this is an excellent way to get a great deal on an awesome book and contribute to the podcast.

Let me tell you about this amazing book. Jonathan, for those of you who haven't listened to our episode, one interview is a social worker at a mental health clinic in Chicago. In the book he focuses on the stories of five clients and explains how social determinants of health such as poverty, racism, homophobia and transphobia, gun violence and the public policy decisions that support these systems of oppression affect and contribute to mental health issues. It is a powerful book and what I really appreciate about the book is how Jonathan emphasizes that people are much more than their diagnosis or issues or problems. Then in order to heal individuals, families, and communities, we need a movement for radical social change.

I know podcast listeners, students, social workers, educators, activists, and folks interested in the topics we discuss on doing the work will enjoy this book. So to order a copy of the book, go to the link in the show notes and use the code DTW as in Doin' The Work. Also check out episode one with Jonathan Foiles. Now for this month's episode. In this episode I talk with Christopher Cuevas who is the executive director of QLatinx in Orlando, Florida. They talk about how QLatinx was created in the aftermath of the Pulse nightclub shooting on June 12th, 2016. Chris shares about the intense pain and healing that took place and discusses the longstanding systemic oppression faced by the LGBTQ+ Latinx community. The barriers to access culturally competent mental health services, marginalization from the white middle-class LGBTQ community and lack of protection under federal and state law.

This is a powerful story of how LGBTQ+ folks of color came together to create a powerful grassroots racial, social and gender justice organization dedicated to the advancement and empowerment of Central Florida's LGBTQ+ Latinx and they continued work they are doing. I hope you enjoy the conversation. Hey Chris, thanks so much for coming on doing the work to share your time and let us know what you're up to. Just to get things started, could you let the listeners know what you currently do?

Christopher: Yeah, of course. Thank you so much for having me. So I'm a local activist here in the Orlando area. I work for an organization called QLatinx. We are a racial, social and gender justice organization working to advance and empower LGBTQ+ communities of color. So we do that through a variety of ways from community education workshops around social and political issues to cultural celebrations that center our experiences as LGBTQ+ people of color to disaster resilience-based programs that are trauma-informed. Yeah. So the work that we do is really around the intersection of our racial justice work that's happening here in Central Florida and the work toward LGBTQ liberation.

Shimon: Yeah. It's so interesting and I'm so glad that you're on here to talk about this. I guess I'm just curious like how QLatinx came about and if you could speak to that because, I mean, I read a little bit about it and I know it's a powerful story. So I was hoping you could share about that.

Christopher: So QLatinx is founded in response to the Pulse shooting by members of the community who were deeply and directly impacted. Members of the community days after the shooting started to come together, strangers coming together in people's homes, creating circles of healing and support individuals who lost a safe space when the club was attacked, individuals who survived that night and those of us who lost friends and loved ones. We needed to come together in a very organic way because within our community, within our cultures, access to mental health services can sometimes be stigmatized and so there was a reluctance for some individuals to immediately go into traditional paths of therapy. Also, here in Central Florida, the infrastructure at the time for mental health being in that Florida was ranked 50th at the time for mental health services across the country.

Also, recognizing that in Central Florida there was a dearth of services that were linguistically accessible and who had the cultural sensitivity and awareness about Latinx identities and the needs of the Latinx community. So we started to bring together people so that they could have a system of support and become connected to one another and heal with one another in a way that was linguistically accessible and culturally relevant, where we could be our most authentic selves, free from judgment, from persecution, where we could speak our language in a way that was not shamed, in a way that was celebrated, where we can celebrate our indigenous identities and where we can laugh together and we could cry together and we could just process everything that was happening in the wake of the shooting.

Over time, these conversations that we were having, these healing circles recognized that individuals were experiencing not just a loss as a result of the Pulse shooting, but had historically been feeling isolated from the broader LGBTQ+ community. People of color within our communities were sharing that they didn't seek out certain services historically because they didn't see people like them represented in these spaces. They couldn't access services because there was no multi-lingual staff available to help them navigate things like HIV counseling services or they didn't feel like particular spaces were accessible to

them, and also recognizing that the transportation infrastructure in Central Florida created a huge hindrance for many individuals who lived in the rural parts of the Orlando region where at the time all of the LGBTQ+ services were housed in the Metro downtown area.

There were individuals who were living in the Northern part of Orlando in a more rural community and it would take someone an entire day to navigate the bus system in order to come down to the downtown area to be able to experience any kind of community within queer spaces. So growing up in that rural community, someone could absolutely feel isolated and so disconnected. So these were themes that were coming up so often in these conversations we were having. When we took this information to leaders in the community who are doing the work in response to the Pulse shooting, when we started having conversations with individuals, we didn't see action happening in the way that was needed in order to address these longstanding systemic issues. So as a community of folk who became interdependent upon each other as a circle of strangers who became chosen family, we looked at each other and we said, "Well, then I guess we have to do it."

This is a space of people who had almost no experience in any kind of organizing capacity, any professional nonprofit work. It was just people who were guided by their passion and their compassion for one another who created this organization that seeks to heal, that seeks to transform, and that seeks to shift our communities for the better.

Shimon: Wow. That is an incredible story. A you're sharing it, the words that really I kept thinking about were transformative and healing because it sounds like that's so much plus justice as well, but it really sounds like that's been so much of what this process has been like or been about for this group and your organization.

Christopher: Yeah, those are core values of the work that we do and ensuring that our communities have a seat at the proverbial table in a broader decision making sense when it comes to LGBTQ issues and also understanding that some of the factors that impeded individuals from being able to access services or access community are largely in part due to institutional and systemic racism or factors that contribute to that, like economic barriers that keep people of color economically disadvantaged. Knowing that Central Florida is a home to low wage jobs as a result of the service industry and that we have no adequate protections in nondiscrimination policies at the state level for LGBTQ folk, and knowing that largely the LGBTQ+ community that is here that works in the service industry that would be at most at risk for discrimination are black and brown, queer and trans folk, understanding that the system of immigration is one that can create huge hindrances from documented LGBTQ+ folk who may not be able to navigate certain systems, who may need linguistic access to community spaces or to social services.

So our work is around creating a path of healing so that people in our communities can feel like they can celebrate all the things that make them so

beautiful and wonderful and also create a space where either they can or others can advocate for their dignity, for their humanity and to create a path of justice for all of us.

Shimon: As you're talking about that I think about something I heard years ago, something like you can't really heal when the wound is still being inflicted, and the systemic oppression and marginalization that results from it that faced by the folks you're talking about that make up the organization and that Qlatinx is trying to help, trying to reach, that component clearly has to be a part of the healing, right? It can't just be only counseling, only trauma-informed work. The organizing and the justice aspect of it has to be part of that.

Christopher: Absolutely.

Shimon: It sounds like that's something that was also missing from traditional model. When I say traditional, I should actually say mainstream models of maybe organizing and also mainstream models of mental health treatment, mainstream being more of like a white middle class model.

Christopher: Absolutely. Not just from the quality of mental health, but I think from the particular avenue of the work that's being done in the modern LGBTQ movement, we've seen a huge shift from traditional organizing in LGBTQ spaces that say they're fighting for marriage equality while completely justified and valid is not enough because there are a multitude of factors that are directly impacting the lives of LGBTQ+ people of color that we need to address as a community, given that our movement was founded on the backs of black and Latinx trans and gender nonconforming people who created the uprising at the Stonewall Inn in the '60s and yet those types of individuals within our community are the ones who are often the most subjected to harm and who don't have adequate representation in leadership and who aren't adequately protected from social and political issues that politicize our identities.

We don't have the option of being apolitical as queer people and most particularly as queer people of color because our identities are so hyperly politicized. If we don't look, and I'm using air quotes here, traditionally queer, if we can "pass" in the world as non-queer, as people of color, we're still confronted with the fact that we either speak with an accent, look a different shade or tone that is "socially acceptable" or the norm, right? Or that we come from places that are nontraditional, and so we do have to confront a significant number of barriers just in being. So how do we shift that?

How do we make sure that when we are advocating with our community and building platforms that elevate leadership, that we're doing it from an intersectional lens that recognizes the work of, that really recognizes and celebrates the way that Kimberle Crenshaw framed the theory and concept of intersectionality that looks at the multiple social conditions that we hold and how we can navigate through the ebbs and flows of that and through the structural sort of forces that can create these hindrances for us.

Shimon: Yeah, absolutely. Earlier you were talking about how this group came together and had these conversations and then people didn't really have the organizing experience, right? Then clearly you've got the organizing experience now because one, look at the website, I mean, first of all it's a slick website. A little thing pops up and will chat with you or whatever. Then you've got all these different programs that you're doing that hit on so many issues, right? Program with Puerto Rico, stuff around know your rights, around immigration, HIV prevention, and then the community Cocina, right? So you bring in the cooking aspect, traditional cultural aspects. So I just found it all really interesting and then hearing you say this is a group of people that didn't have any organizing experience. So how did you go from there to this very robust organization doing so many things?

Christopher: We were able to do it because there were people who put their faith in the community to lead the work. Traditional models of philanthropy have always invested in things that they can quantify or people who they believe can be successful. Often, those people who they believe can be successful are individuals who have access to higher education, who have 10, 20, 30 plus years in nonprofit work, those are the people who have historically gotten funding to do community based work. It's interesting because sometimes those individuals who hold that type of privilege are a few degrees disconnected from the community.

Shimon: Yeah, totally.

Christopher: Yeah. So when you put your faith in people who are living in these communities on the daily, who are guided by their lived experiences, who know the communities like the back of their hands and thus know exactly what the needs are of the community, who can frequently come in and do a temperature check to ensure that we're on the right path and who are responsive to the social issues that are impacting our communities, then you have a recipe for success. That definitely speaks to our work because the first, in the first group of individuals who invested in ensuring that we could be successful because they saw the value of our, at that time, just a seed of an idea of how to create change were people who said, "We believe in what you believe in. We don't need to see a huge portfolio of your previous work or your success. We believe in what you believe in and we want to ensure that this can be successful. So here's an investment of some money, make something happen."

It was that amount of trust that people had for us and the circle that we created that was ensuring that we were accountable to each other, to ourselves and to our community, that really lend itself to allow us to do what we are able to do now in the areas of HIV, in the area of immigration, in our cultural education and community education programs. It's really been an honor and a huge, huge privilege to be able to be a part of this experience and to see that there are people out there who are willing to look at funding nontraditional organizations who can be as successful and if not even more in terms of impact than some more traditional models.

Shimon: Has there been backlash on the work you're doing, and if so, where's that come from?

Christopher: I think that in the beginning of our work, there was definitely some reluctance and some hesitation because we were a bunch of young folk of color, and that was not the norm, who were coming in to hold a system accountable for the inaction and for the inaccessibility of that system. Yes, in the beginning there was definitely some questioning and some hesitation from some more traditional, more mainstream folk in the funding world or in other nonprofits spaces. Because what we were doing, in particular I should say what were doing in LGBTQ spaces, was so left, like it was just coming out of left field. They hadn't seen it before. They weren't comfortable with it.

In fact, I think that when we first started doing this work, we were immediately embraced by individuals who were working in the other social justice sort of ecosystem work, the movement around economic justice, the movement for racial equity, organizations that were doing that work were the first to open up their doors and say, "Let's sit down, let's talk. We want to get to know what you're doing. We want to hear it. We want to be here to support you in what you vision for the world." Over time, the more mainstream LGBTQ movement here saw the kind of impact we were having and recognized that we were not just a sort of flash in the pan and that we were here to stay and that we were here to make a significant impact on the overall work of the LGBTQ+ community and the movement for LGBTQ equity, not just in Central Florida but across the state.

Shimon: Given that the organization was created in a response to a shooting and that it's not that long ago that there was another mass shooting here in Florida, and since the Parkland shooting there has been legislation passed, and of course there's issues with that and there's now this movement to put, to arm teachers, which without getting all into that, but those are two very different responses to a shooting that happened. So I was just wondering your thoughts about that.

Christopher: Yeah, so we believe that we need to fund education and not fund arming teachers in the classroom. I mean, I definitely believe that teachers need school supplies over guns and it is the responsibility of our elected officials in Tallahassee to hear how our communities who have been impacted by gun violence to take a stand with us publicly, not just personally as many have done, and create an infrastructural and an institutional change that addresses the growing up epidemic of gun violence. We have joined efforts in Tallahassee to lobby with survivors of violent crimes. In fact, some of our team is just coming back from Tallahassee as of this evening after having spent a few days lobbying, doing some legislative visits to talk to state representatives and to talk to state senators about ensuring there are policies and bills that can protect individuals from this growing epidemic. It's critical that our elected officials practice good moral faith and have a moral conscious in order to ensure that the most marginalized among us and the most vulnerable among us are adequately protected.

Shimon: Speaking of protections, what do you think it's going to take to get protection at the state and federal level for the LGBTQ population in terms of anti-discrimination?

Christopher: So at the state level there are several policies that are being reviewed currently and are in session to expand protections for LGBTQ individuals including a statewide non-discrimination bill for the private sector that would add gender identity and sexual orientation to protected classes. There's also an expansion of an existing hate crime law for the state of Florida that would add sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes. So it's critical that these pieces of legislation are passed and in fact we have been sending our team back and forth to Tallahassee with members of the community to advocate on behalf of these house bills and have joined coalitions of organizations across the state to show our support and solidarity and to actively uplift these pieces of legislation because it is so important that the people of Florida are protected.

At the federal level, there is a newly proposed bill that's being ... I shouldn't say newly proposed because it's been introduced a few times and has not been successful in the past, but it's being reintroduced again and it's called the Equality Act and it would ensure that gender identity and sexual orientation are protected at the federal level within the civil rights discrimination policies or non-discrimination policies and ensuring that individuals within our communities can be free from the semantics that would discriminate against us, from the systems that would discriminate against us, from the individuals who would selectively exercise certain liberties in order to criminalize who we are as people simply for living our authentic selves, for loving who we love and walking around in the world in the way that we walk around in the world, for affirming the gender that we know ourselves to be.

So it's increasingly important that we pass these sorts of protections at the state and at the federal level. In addition to these policies, it's critical that we have these conversations in our homes, in our schools and in the communities that we worship and that we share with others so that we are normalizing the conversation around gender, we're normalizing the conversation around sexual orientation and we are challenging any sentiment of homophobia or transphobia, whether over an intentional or unconscious and unintentional, so that we are creating a community that is loving and affirming and that is protected.

Shimon: Yeah, absolutely. I really appreciate the message that you're bringing to the podcast. Most of the listeners are social workers, social work students, social work educators, and what you've shared about mental health, what you've shared about systemic oppression and injustice, what you've shared about racism and homophobia, these are just really critical issues for anyone who is going to be a social worker. I mean for anyone, period, but especially for anyone who's going to be a helping professional. I just can't thank you enough for coming on here and sharing this message, because I just think it's critical. I mean, I work with students all the time and we have some of these

conversations and they need to be had more and more. So I just can't thank you enough for bringing this perspective and for doing the work in the community.

Christopher: Yeah, thank you. I appreciate this opportunity and I hope that we're able to continue to change the world together.

Shimon: Thank you for listening to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change. I hope you enjoyed the podcast. Please follow on Twitter and leave positive reviews on iTunes. If you're interested in being a guest or know someone who's doing great work, please get in touch and thank you for doing real work to make this world a better place.