

# Unsung Stewards - Brian & Evelyn Podcast

## TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] **Becky:** Welcome to Season 3 of *Unsung Stewards*, a podcast series presented by The Rippel Foundation. I'm Becky Payne, President and CEO of Ripple, which is dedicated to fostering equitable health and wellbeing. This series spotlights and celebrates individual stewards, people dedicated to working with others to create the conditions that everyone needs to thrive.

[00:00:24] At Ripple, much of the work we do is focused on guiding and inspiring stewards to expand the vital conditions for health and well-being. There are seven vital conditions representing the circumstances we all need in order to live full, healthy lives, basic needs for health and safety, humane housing.

[00:00:43] Meaningful work and wealth. A thriving natural world, reliable transportation, lifelong learning, and at the center of all of these, belonging and civic muscle. The vital conditions represent an approach to public health that goes beyond emergency response or disaster relief. When we focus on improving each of these conditions within a community, we have the power not only to prevent suffering, but to help every member of that community truly thrive.

[00:01:12] In Season 3, we're speaking with stewards of health and well-being around the country to hear about their work to expand the vital conditions in their communities. Today, I'm delighted to welcome Brian Archie and Evelyn Harris. They work together for Create a Healthier Niagara Falls Collaborative. Which aims to improve the health of its residents and engage their community in solving local problems.

[00:01:34] Brian and Evelyn are both lifelong community members of Niagara Falls, New York, and are committed to helping their city thrive.

[00:01:42] Brian and Evelyn, welcome and thank you for joining us on this podcast episode. I wanna start by asking each of you to take a minute and describe the work you do with Healthier Niagara Falls.

[00:01:58] **Brian:** So, I would say that from my, my point of view, um, it's an opportunity for community outreach times ten. And what I mean by that is trying to make resources and ourselves available to residents, um, to identify the specific needs, um, and challenges within, uh, the Niagara Falls community, organizing with residents to build capacity to make the best impact possible as it pertains to creating pathways to healthy food access.

[00:02:40] Uplifting the opportunity for physical activity, whether that's walking or biking or other, uh, workout opportunities to address ability, mobility issues for individuals and creating a connection, um, across these different pockets of our city.

[00:03:02] Um, we are a population of about 48,000 or so, give or take, which, which numbers you're looking at, and, we are kind of separated into different quadrants, and as folks identify themselves with these separate quadrants of the city, it is also the thing that separates us from identifying, um, the needs and challenges of each other.

[00:03:26] So we really work to make that connection, um, across, across this space. Um, so that we can work in a, in a more collective and unified manner.

[00:03:37] **Evelyn:** I think that in the stage that I'm in life wise and the age that I am now, there has been a lot of changes in Niagara Falls, um, from being a really healthy, vibrant city that had jobs to a city that doesn't have jobs. Um, I'm hoping that by us being here, by us connecting people together, that we can, um, have a level playing field where people can get out and really say, you know, this is my city. I want to reclaim it. I want to do great things here. I want to start a business here.

[00:04:21] I want my family to be here. I don't want it to be these little segments, you know, like this section over here and this section over here, but you know, like all of us together.

[00:04:35] **Becky:** So you've both referenced your community, Niagara Falls. I think it's safe to say most people are familiar with the tourist attraction that is in Niagara Falls, but may or may not know the community, the heart, the way you do.

[00:04:52] Um, so let's, let's take a minute before we go too much farther and have you describe the city as you know it. What, what Niagara Falls do you want our listeners to have in their hearts and in their minds as they listen to the rest of this conversation?

[00:05:13] **Brian:** So, I've always lived in the North End section of the city that has the majority of the black and brown population in it, some poor, poor white folks. And, but it was still a beautiful place, right? So I lived in Unity Park. And we were directly attached to Main Street, which was, uh, as, as Evelyn was speaking, alive and vibrant. And... a direct artery that connected to then the Pine Avenue district, which again, full of commerce, open shops, allowed people to buy goods and services and connect with community members that they had not, you know, seen throughout the week because of, you know, work obligations and kids and things of that nature. And at that time, and I'm talking seventies and eighties, we were a manufacturing town, right? So there were plant jobs, a plenty everywhere. And I would say somewhere into the nineties, that activity began to cease.

[00:06:16] And so as jobs left, and people began to migrate, there was a systematic disinvestment in the city. And I will say specifically, um, for me, that started in the North End of Niagara Falls. And you saw that immediately because Main Street, uh, went down. Um, business owners began to close and move and, uh, the grocery store that was there, like, was gone.

[00:06:45] And it was like, wait, whoa, what, what's happening? We'll identify that the economic prosperity was, was taking a hit, but no one really took a look at the impact it was having on the individuals. And so when you hear about Niagara Falls, to your point, the destination is what is actually marketed—the water, right? And the behind the curtain three minutes away up the street are the people which are in receivership of none of the resources that actually flow into that destination.

[00:07:21] And so you have, uh, in my humble opinion right now, decades, of disinvestment in people that are now in a space of learned hopelessness. Uh, you know, and respond in, in that way, right? So we are, I'm going to use a quote from my friend. She says that people are focused on their focus, meaning like if what's in front of me is I'm working this minimum wage job and I'm trying to take care of my kids and pay the rent and get groceries, I really can't even activate myself as a community member because that's not what's in front of me right now.

[00:08:02] I am not saying that things have not taken a slight upturn, because they have, but as it took decades for the decay to happen, it is also going to take us some time to be reinvigorated and for people to see the light again. It is hard to sit here and experience this when there is such prosperity happening fifteen minutes down the road in Buffalo, New York.

[00:08:32] We seem to always be forgotten, um, when it comes to, uh, investment, um, of that kind.

[00:08:41] **Evelyn:** I, of course, I've lived through everything that Brian has, you know, I remember Main Street, uh, you know, like, uh, Niagara Street, Pine Avenue, all of them were hustling and bustling, and, you know, um, the plants all over the place, you know, in the city, outside of our city.

[00:09:01] And then all of a sudden it just all just started to go downhill. But now, and when I talk to people and when they come to me and we're having this discussion, I think about. The young people that are here and the ones that want to stay here and want to make something better here. And I believe and I see in my eyes that that Main Street can come back, that Pine Avenue can come back, that Niagara Street can come back.

[00:09:32] We have a community now that we not only have African Americans, you know, whites, but we have people from India, you know, other parts of the world that have come here and making their lives here. So I think that that melting pot coming together and working together and seeing that we have such a beautiful place.

[00:09:58] We have like four different, absolutely, beautiful parks. I mean, when I say. parks, I'm talking about one of our parks as big as it's Central Park on one end. I'm not talking I'm not talking about Whirlpool State Park, and I'm not talking about Davis State Park right down the street from us, not even what six blocks away from us. I mean, this absolutely gorgeous park. And then when I say to people, well, have you been to Hyde Park lately? Have you been down to Whirlpool lately?

[00:10:28] They look at me like, you know, I'm crazy and see that's where I get into my, my, my talking to them and saying, listen, take, you know, go on a excursion with your, your boyfriend or your, your kids, uh, pack a lunch, go to one of these parks, enjoy it.

[00:10:48] And I, I think that that's what we have to do to reconnect people with the city. When you start reconnecting people with the city, reconnecting families with the cities, people coming together and working together, then that's, what's going to make the city better.

[00:11:04] **Becky:** I want to pull on a couple of things that both of you mentioned. One is you both describe a time when Niagara Falls had all of those things in place that we talk about as those vital conditions for well-being.

[00:11:19] Um, and it doesn't matter if you refer to them that way or not. You described transportation, arteries, you described jobs, like meaningful work that afforded wealth building that can be passed down to generations. You described what that gives you in terms of ability to have free time and then connect with community members in downtime, in park spaces, and the presence of grocery stores and markets and the ability to get the things and provide for your family within proximity in ways that don't require long extensive travel or access.

[00:12:01] How important is it to remember that legacy in the work that you do and Evelyn, in particular, you know, your, your love for Niagara Falls is so contagious. Can you talk a little bit about that history? Not just the history of who you are, but how you grew up and experienced it and what that means for you now in your vision of the future of what is still possible for Niagara Falls.

[00:12:35] **Evelyn:** Well , I grew up in, around the same area that Brian grew up in. We had a wonderful neighborhood of people that worked, people that owned businesses. Like, we had this absolutely incredible restaurant right across the street from me called Hills and, um, you know, I mean, it's like every Saturday night, man.

[00:12:57] I mean, it's like, I could sit out there on the porch and watch everybody, you know cross the street and the business is booming, you know, people stopping and, you know, you got the guys that work at Chevy because Chevy is like right in Buffalo, but a lot of people worked over there and then you had a plant that was in Lockport.

[00:13:16] So, I mean, it's like, it's like, as a young girl, I'm like, you know, yeah, you know, this is all right, you know, ain't nothing like this, you know, I'm liking this here, you know what I mean, I'm really getting into it. Uh, and then, you know. Um, again, things start to change, but you know, I still love Niagara Falls because I was a very adventurous, uh, child.

[00:13:38] And then, like I said, as that started to go, of course things started to, to change, but all of that, all that gave me was so much love and so much, uh, caring and so many good things here that I don't think that we have lost them totally. They just have kind of disintegrated into the earth, but what is the earth for?

[00:14:06] It's to regrow things. To bring it back up again. So, uh, when I talk to the younger people that I engage with, one of the things that I'm always talking to them about is it doesn't have to be this way. I mean, it's like I talked to Brian and anyone that I can get an ear when it comes to trade school. If nothing else, I would love it if we could start a trade school here because everyone was not meant to go to college.

[00:14:35] And I think that when you have a trade school, you're teaching those kids how to become, um, like we have a lot of people still 80s and 70 year old men. who still have skills that they could pass on to those kids, you know, something that you'll never get out of a textbook. So to me, that will build our city back up.

[00:15:01] Then we'll have another generation that will be able to pass that same type of information on to another generation. You know, I mean, it's like if we had that, that would be just like one of the greatest things ever to happen to the city, if we could do that and start like right now. Here are these kids in elementary school, you know, and let's start right here.

[00:15:27] And even the ones that are in high school. Grab hold to them, even the ones that are out there on the streets. Grab hold to them and say, hey, you know, come on in. This is what we teaching in the day, this is what we, do you want to learn this, you know, and just the fact that we still got older men, older women in this city, that could pass things on to us. Let's gather that up. Let's get that together and let's all sit down and pass this knowledge on. Don't let it die with those people. You know, and that's, that's, that's the part that I just hate every time I hear about someone who's had a skill in something that I know we will never be able to, to find someone that has that knowledge.

[00:16:09] You know what I'm saying? So this, this, this is to me, One of the ways to start our city back up and get our city growing.

[00:16:20] **Becky:** I want, I want to invite the two of you to tell a story, um, because Evelyn, I think you have a particular superpower in some of what you just said about spotting talent and calling people into a calling to give back. So I would love if you could share the story. of how the two of you met, um, how you experienced each other.

[00:16:45] Go from when you met to where we are today.

[00:16:51] **Evelyn:** I work in the emergency room here and I was already part of Create a Healthier Niagara Falls Collaborative, but it wasn't that at the time. So we um, was going out door to door and, you know, asking people, um, you know, like what they want. And, you know, those kind of questions like that. And, you know, it always came back to something kind of negative.

[00:17:20] So, um, we decided, okay, instead of what do you want and how do you want it? And what can we do? It was matter with twist, let's do it back around and kind of put it on the person. Let's hear what they have to say. Let's hear what they're going to want to do or can do or are willing to do. So, um, when I saw Brian, he was working in admitting and, you know, I told him, I said, you know, I was asking him a few questions and we were just talking back and forth and everything.

[00:17:57] And, uh, I'm gonna let Brian take this over from that, the question that I asked you. What did I ask you?

[00:18:04] **Brian:** So what I remember, what I recall, is, is, is this, is this, this person, um, kind of intruding on my walk around the emergency room at about one or two o'clock in the morning and really just asking me if I could do anything for my community, what would that be?

[00:18:20] And I know that that was an immediate challenge and call to leadership that allowed me really to question my space, in, in the, in the city, in my community, I was taken aback definitely and wondering in my, like, why would you ask me such a thing? It took me a moment to identify the fact that I did have the power to do something, that I had the capability to have an impact and make change in, in the community,

[00:18:53] right? And so if we go back to when I talked about that, that learned helplessness, like it was just like, I'm going to focus on what I'm doing. And I'm not a part of this thing, this thing that's happening by they, them and those, right. Because we hear about that all the time. And, um, it's like this unstoppable force that, you know, you, you can't, you can't see it, you can't touch it,

[00:19:16] but there were people making decisions about things that would directly affect. My life and the people in my, in my community. I would say that the majority of them were way detached from any of that experience. It is not to say that they couldn't lend some sort of suggestion, but when you start to make decisions for people, it means that you're not, you're not even taking into account the whole person and the experiences that they're currently having.

[00:19:42] And then I understood why I was there, right? To be that voice for the voiceless. And so my job since that day, has been to speak with and try to activate others to meet people right where



they are and help, help them to find their leadership opportunity, right? That may be through storytelling. It may be over a meal, right? Listening to someone give a workshop or motivational speak or just at a regular community meeting to hear what, we don't have problems, we have challenges, and challenges can be overcome.

[00:20:20] Just hearing those challenges, a lot of times, sparks, um, some sort of interest or, or deep-seated anger that we have, which motivates us enough to move. That's what that question did for me. And um, I haven't turned back, right? Because now, if, if I were to shut off my ears and go sit back and, you know, just sit at the computer and, and, and focus on just a job, um, I am complicit now, uh, not restoration, but the destruction and complacency of, of my city. And that's, and we weren't put here for that. Being of service is, I think it's, it's the ultimate call to leadership.

[00:21:03] **Becky:** I want to ask you both to go a little bit deeper on this idea of engagement because I know Healthier Niagara Falls deeply prioritizes engaging residents to be change agents in your city. We just heard a story, Evelyn, of you bringing one person in, but I know that that is just emblematic of that deeper commitment to engaging with many residents. So can you say a little bit more about why that is so crucial to the work of Healthier Niagara Falls?

[00:21:36] **Brian:** If I think about the system that we live in, I will unfortunately say out loud that we still have a racist society that, that we live in. And the systems that are in place were built based upon that premise, with a top down, do as I say, heterosexual, male, white patriarchal. And so we're we've all been subject to that.

[00:21:58] More specifically, those that have been marginalized and live on the fringe. And so when we talk about capacity building, I think that it is important to give individuals that we have shared value with a hand up to have the same opportunities to challenge power and to build within their own spaces.

[00:22:21] Right? And work for the things that will benefit us to allow us to live happy and full lives. You know, I often say that I believe deep down somewhere we have the same set of values, right? We want a living wage job to be able to take care of our families, which whatever way that that is structured, we would like to live in an environment with clean air with uh expansive green space, clean water to drink.

[00:22:52] Right? We would like to have a safe and sanitary home and or be able to if we choose to purchase a house, right, to bring that value back to a community that's been disinvested in. There are still structures and systems in place that stop us from doing so. And it stays that way unless we have opportunity to meet others that are, that are like us, um, along with allies to really help build and organize, to start to challenge the system that we live in.

[00:23:25] There was once this prosperous East Falls. Uh, Niagara Street Corridor, where there was black home ownership and businesses until, until the war was about over, um, folks coming, returning from war needed some place to go. And the idea was to move them, right? Well, we can, we can seclude all of the individuals of color to one space in the city, which is the North End, which still stands true to this day, and allow others to reinvest and create that generational wealth pattern that still thrives through to today. So the work, uh, for me is really about building and organizing individuals to understand what their calls to leadership actually are. We all have a position to play and actually to get active and move forward in our space.

[00:24:17] And I'm not talking just, you know, we don't It's not about protesting and, and, picketing and all about that. But like, we see the challenge, we come together with some strategies, and we try to find the resources to make that happen. And coming together like that to our government officials, whether it be local, State or federal is all the better for us to get some attention on what needs to be done to help really spark that investment.

[00:24:45] So that's why community engagement is a core, a core principle. It starts, it starts with the people.

[00:24:52] **Becky:** It's so important. I think so often, I just want to underscore so often. People will hear a clip that says, taking back power, you know, organizing and the ears kind of turn off and they stop there and they hear a fight or they hear, you know, a zero sum game where something's going to be taken from me.

[00:25:15] And, I think it's really important that our listeners hear that whole arc of the story of what you're asking for and why you do this, which is the importance of the voice and hearing the solutions that are truly needed to the problems that are actually happening and that it is about reclaiming power to return to a level of prosperity and health and community connection and cohesion where you were thriving and are attaining a level of self sufficiency and community connection and feeding back generational prosperity and building future community leaders, taking care of yourselves.

[00:26:04] You're not asking for the handout. You're asking for the space to be the beautiful, vibrant community that you're capable of.

[00:26:13] **Brian:** It's about, um, equity, right? Equity, as you said, does not mean you have to give me or us or a group of people, your resources. It is about making the opportunity available at the same level for everyone. And then and then letting them decide because some may not want to own the home or move to the green space or just they may not. But having the opportunity to do so and allowing the individual to decide, it changes the game and the perception for everyone. I believe, I have said since I've started to This work with others that I am only as healthy and resourced as my neighbor.

[00:26:58] So if I have someone next to me in my direct circle that is sick, underfed, unemployed, or without, so am I. Because they are still in the community and can't contribute to the space to bring it back to the, to the flourishing level that we know, uh, that we know it to be.

[00:27:19] **Becky:** So let's bridge to think about the future.

[00:27:21] I'll invite you both to take us home by thinking about what's next as you think about the future, what concerns you, and more importantly, what excites you and makes you hopeful.

[00:27:34] **Brian:** I know that there are many people are agitated enough at this point to do something and not sure exactly what that is.

[00:27:42] They're in the space of not wanting the same politics. They do not want the same practices, and aren't sure who exactly to trust to do that. So for me, the future says, if I am to, um, begin to help the decision making process, I need to up my own game. So I'm running for Niagara

Falls City Council. To get in a space and place where I can connect other residents to local government so that we can really make ourselves a part of the process.

[00:28:14] in a meaningful way. I think it starts with that. We have a real disdain for politics in general. I think that's just the natural response to it, but it's what we make it and we don't actually have to leave it as this ugly system as it's, as it's become. It doesn't matter how we are registered or how we affiliate.

[00:28:32] Again, we're all together. We have to work together. We have to understand that there will be some compromises along the way to ensure that we can get to that place. But we can't do nothing anymore. Like, that's no longer, um, the option.

[00:28:49] That also means engaging those that are making those decisions in a different way. Letting them know that we are no longer asleep at the wheel. We have something to say and there's something we have put you there to do. It's time for you to do it. Or we vote you out.

[00:29:05] **Evelyn:** Brian was talking about one of the things that we've always, um, said is, you know, it shouldn't be, uh, from the top down. It should always be from the bottom up.

[00:29:16] For me is starting from the bottom up, meaning starting with. It's two generations that concern me the most because I feel that they're neglected more than anyone and that's our children and our elderly people—our children, because they are our lifeline and they're the ones that can go into the future, either with some powerful, uh, loving and incredible thoughts and feelings.

[00:29:50] And we can give that to them. We can help them in so many different ways in weaving those older people in with those children, because a lot of those older people have the time, and they also have the patience and the knowledge. And because those older people have that time, and when you have those younger ones and those older ones coming together like that, it becomes this thing that you can't break, this bond.

[00:30:20] And they're, they're, they're, they're gonna always be there to encourage each other, because not only will kids encourage those older people, but vice versa. You know, and it also gives them things to do. Okay? The older people are not somewhere just dying, basically, and withering away with their knowledge and taking all that with them.

[00:30:42] And the younger ones are going up and getting nurturing and love and, and, and also every once in a while, like now maybe you shouldn't have done it that way. Let me tell you the way you should do it. Or this is the way I think maybe it would be better for you to do it, that direction that they need. So for our community, for me to be stronger, I think that that is something we must invest in.

[00:31:10] So that would be for me, the direction that I would want us to go in, because I think that if you did that, can you just imagine in just ten short years, what could happen, you know, in the direction our city could go in, you know, I mean, it would be just something that was, it would be just incredible, you know, we would have people from all over the world coming here, not just to see the falls, but to see how Niagara Falls turned around and how we did it.



[00:31:44] **Becky:** What I find so beautiful about everything you both have shared is all of the pathways forward and the return to prosperity begin with building that sense of belonging, that someone cares, that they see you, that they're invested in you, and they're going to give an outlet for your talents and from there you build in whatever direction the solutions need to take you, but you both keep anchoring back into that connection to belonging and feeling a sense of place and that you're valued in that place.

[00:32:21] And I just think that that is, um, it's beautiful. It's consistent with what we've observed in other places. And it's, we can't say it enough. It's so important. So thank you for lifting that up.

[00:32:33] I kind of feel compelled to end us with asking Brian to one more time remind us of that question that got you into this beautiful mess.

[00:32:44] Because I think it's a, I think it's a question we all need to hear.

[00:32:48] **Brian:** It was, um, if you could do anything for your community. What would that be?

[00:32:53] **Becky:** Yeah. Thank you for that question, Evelyn. And Brian, thank you for answering it.

[00:32:59] Thank you for listening to this episode of Unsung Stewards. I want to thank today's guests for joining us and for all the work they do to improve the lives of the communities they serve.

[00:33:10] I'd also like to thank the team that makes this podcast possible, including Molly Belsky, Teri Wade, Brad Girard, Amanda McIntosh, and Laila Hussain. I'm your host, Becky Payne, President and CEO of The Rippel Foundation. To learn more about our guests and their work, please refer to the links and information on our website at [www.rippel.org](http://www.rippel.org), R I P P E L dot org. We hold deep gratitude for those who've been willing to share their stories with us.