

Unsung Stewards Podcast – Chris Casillas

TRANSCRIPT – Episode 4 | Season 3

[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 Rippel, which is dedicated to fostering equitable health and well-being. This series spotlights and celebrates individual stewards, people dedicated to working with others to create the conditions that everyone needs to thrive. At Rippel, 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:

[00:00:39] basic needs for health and safety, humane housing, 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. 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 joined by organizer and activist Chris Casillas.

[00:01:26] Chris is the founder and executive director of Regenerating Sonora, a collaborative in his hometown of Superior, Arizona, which works to improve the health and well-being of the community and the environment of the rural but vibrant part of the southwest that he calls home. Welcome, Chris.

[00:01:44] **Chris:** Thank you. Happy to be here.

[00:01:45] **Becky:** And we're thrilled to have you.

[00:01:47] So I want to start by going back to your story. In getting to know you, I know your roots and your family background are really important to the work that you do. So could you tell us a little bit of that part of your story, how your past contributes to where you are today, and how do you think about your lasting legacy looking to the future?

[00:02:10] **Chris:** Yeah. Thank you. Sure.

[00:02:11] So I'm talking to you right now from Superior, Arizona, small rural mountain town about an hour east of Phoenix, we're a population of 3,000. Growing up here, I didn't, I was, I was a bit oblivious to the aftermath of the mine shutting down, that's like a big part of our story here, is that there was a copper mine in my, uh, great-great grandparents and great grandparents. They immigrated from Mexico to come here to work in the copper mines, and, um, those shut down in the early eighties. And as a result, uh, about 80 percent of the working male population just didn't have a job, and it caused a lot of ruptures in the town. And, uh, I grew up with Main Street being all boarded up, and I didn't really think about it that way.

[00:02:58] It's just I was, you know, having fun with my friends and my family and enjoying life and enjoying the, the beauty that we have around us. To me, helping our community was something that

our family just did. I was really initiated into being a a community worker by my grandparents, especially, and seeing it modeled by all my family. And so at a very young age, I remember helping out our community with, uh, some different food drives and different community initiatives that we had that I just got roped into, and I loved it. I really had a lot of fun with that, and it got into my bones and stuck with me and ended up moving away from Superior like many families in order to have, uh, more stability and more opportunities. And grew up in well, I I guess I'll say that started my career in tech, uh, when I was 19 years old, so very young age, and did that for about 12 years or so.

[00:03:49] At some point, I had this, this question that just sort of slapped me in the face that said, what if you could be more helpful? And I couldn't shake that kind of a question. So I ended up quitting my job. I decided that I was going to ask the question, why do we have all of this ecological destruction, why do we have all this societal dysfunction? You talk about legacy and how that relates to to my legacy, this work that I'm doing now.

[00:04:13] Well, my girlfriend at the time, now wife, we were talking about the idea of of raising a family. And I started looking at the world and thinking, well, what role am I playing to make this world a better place. And if I do have a family, what happens when my little kids look me in the eyes and say, what are you doing about all this? Big part of, uh, what I'm doing now. So in a way, I'm part of a, of a long line of family members.

[00:04:37] Like, my, uh, my son will be six generations of Superior here, so it's a long line of of people who've been active in our community doing this kind of work, and, and so I feel like I'm, you know, the, at the tip of the spear as it were in, in this. And I don't think too far beyond just being able to, um, be in, in right relationship with, with life now. Um, I know that I'll be dead longer than I'll be alive. So if I could be helpful when I'm dead, then that's ideal. And some of the work that we're doing now is is meant to put myself and other people that are doing this work in a position to be helpful.

[00:05:13] **Becky:** It's such an important aspect of what we refer to as stewardship: skills that we help others to see in themselves who are acting as stewards. This idea of thinking about future generations and doing things in service of the greater good beyond just your own personal gain, and your story is definitely a living example to that. You've given us a little bit of a taste about where you are in Superior, but I want to ask you to describe Superior a little bit more, describe where you live, and help draw the connection to why place-based work is so important in the work that you do.

[00:05:54] **Chris:** It can be really easy to use some old paradigm thinking and apply it to doing good in the world. And some of those old paradigms are things like, I have this great idea.

[00:06:07] Let me put it here, or, um, I have this great idea. We need it to spread everywhere. And in a lot of ways, that can be recapitulating the colonial mindset and some of the dysfunctional patterns that have gotten us to where we're at today. And so why place-based work? Because if we're truly grounding our work in in the place, then we're looking at the essence of the place that we're at.

[00:06:35] So here in Superior, the,, the question would be, like, who is this place, and how does this place want to be? How does how does here work? And these become the grounding questions that we can ask to approach our work in a different kind of way. So with some humility, you know, even though a lot of us have, have long family histories here, we still want to say, well, let's just have a beginner's mind here as much as we can.

[00:06:58] Ask these fundamental questions about our place to get a better understanding of, uh, how we can be custodians or stewards to this place in a way that is helping Superior, helping Copper Corridor, wherever the place is for you, be more of, of how it's meant to be. So, you know, we'd have to start by saying, how did this place come about? You know, we go back almost, uh, well, 500 or so million years ago and start to see how the the geology of this place was formed, how that informed the hydrology, uh, how the Queen Creek and the Gila interact with each other, how the Gila River, um, and the, and the Queen Creek being here has resulted in, um, various settlements that have occurred. We've had the the Hohokam, the O'odham, the Pima, the Salado, the Apache. We've had so many different people who have, may call this place home at one time or another, and we start to understand how they worked with this place.

[00:07:50] And we start to see how it was always like, trading post. There was a place where people came to meet and interact in trade. Uh, we find obsidian deposits from Superior found all throughout Arizona ranging back from the pre-classic time. So you can see this place being a kind of a, almost like a node or a hub of activity and change. And so that's, uh, just an example of something that is a pattern that we see in many different places that we can apply when we're thinking about how this place works and how we want to do our work to be an adornment of this place versus an embellishment on this place.

[00:08:26] **Becky:** It's amazing. It's almost as if you're honoring that there's a personality to the place, and that you're really curious about understanding that and honoring the influence of all of those past people who have called this their home. I want to talk a little bit more about Regenerating Sonora. If you could share a little bit of the story of how you came up with the concept. And then in doing that, you know, what, what does regeneration mean to you in the context of your community's well-being?

[00:08:59] **Chris:** So Regenerating Sonora, our mission is, uh, that we're nurturing local potential for a resilient and thriving future. And we think about that concept of regeneration. It's good to ask, well, what are, what is it that we're regenerating? And for us, It's regenerating the, the essence or the spirit of the place. And so that goes back to what we were talking about before, just like you mentioned, this place having its own personality, and, and we want to bring that more and have those gifts come to bear in in various ways.

[00:09:29] Other ways that you can look at regeneration I mean, some people like, if I was talking to, like, a six-year-old and someone asked me, I might say, oh, it's, it's, uh, trying to make things better than you found it. And that's like a maybe like an overly simplistic idea. For someone who's more technical, I might say something like, uh, it's, uh, doing the work of tending to the vitality, viability, and evolutionary capabilities. And that could be of a place of an able to say an entity, and that's another way to look at what we're doing when we're talking about, uh, regenerative work. And how that, uh, starts to look like in Superior is, we see that this characteristic of Superior has been one of, like, creating pool, like, people would meet up in Superior from various places before it was even called Superior, and they would do that trade like I mentioned before.

[00:10:17] And one thing that we can see really clearly is that we're uniquely positioned amongst our neighbors to be a kind of gateway or an access point, uh, that connects and interfaces with the, what we call the valley. So we'll say, like, the Phoenix metro area. It's a whole whole different demographic set, uh, different context there, but there's some common causes amongst, uh, organizations and people and resources that want to move into rural places like ours. And so what we find in just seeing how, uh, this place has worked in the past and what opportunities we have now is that we have this opportunity to connect with folks in the valley in the Phoenix metro area, allow them to see what we're

doing here in Superior, then introduce them to these other communities that are, you know, may, maybe a little bit more out of reach for them in various ways, but that are doing really great and amazing work. So there's other, uh, community groups in my own hometown here.

[00:11:10] We have Rebuild Superior, which is a group that is doing something called the Superior Enterprise Center to do some workforce development, and it's skilling people up for the jobs of the future, um, as, as a for instance, the food bank, of course, that we have here. But then also in other neighboring towns, we have Miami Arts Commission who is, uh, doing a lot of creative work and, and meaningful things. We have Love Where You Live out of Globe and Set Free out of Kearny. These are groups that for one reason or another, I guess you could say because they're further away, they are, they don't always get the kind of exposure that we're able to get. So one thing that we're able to do is pull those resources and attention in and say, hey,

[00:11:49] look at all these other great things that these other communities are doing. And so that's, uh, part of this initiative to help our region, what we call the Copper Corridor, which is a string of about 12 communities, population a little over 20,000 in total. These are all small rural towns with a similar story. We want to have the Copper Corridor be self sufficient. And it's interesting when you think about self-sufficiency of a region because it sort of implies that there's self-sufficiency at the scale of the, of the community or of the town and the neighborhood and that there's cooperation amongst the the various communities to work together. So, so the region as a whole can become more self-sufficient, and so that works towards that resiliency piece.

[00:12:29] **Becky:** I love the way you are so thoughtful about multiple generations, multiple perspectives, and the patience to know who else is also working. And, again, another thing we often point to as an effective approach to doing transformative work - work that will endure for many generations, not just like a project cycle, is this notion of weaving vested interests. And that begins with, as you said, being curious, being open, and honoring the work and the gifts and the assets of others already in place, but who share a, a common vision of what the future should look like. So I think you've just painted a really beautiful picture, an example of that. We've talked a lot about honoring multiple people, peoples and generations that were in your place before, but there's also, I know, a very particular emphasis and valuing of those who will come after.

[00:13:30] You talked about future generations in the abstract and your own children, but I also want to talk about those who are growing up right now and how you think about bringing in youth voices to your work. So could you talk a little bit about your approach to that and how you think about bringing youth in to this work of civic life and in their community?

[00:13:54] **Chris:** Yes. And this, is I could probably spend all the rest of our time just on this subject because of how much, uh, energy and excitement and potential there is around all all of this here. So point of direction, we say that we're doing this work not to our community, not for our community, but with our community.

[00:14:16] And that's certainly the case when we think about how we're working in a multigenerational way. And so we have seven-year-olds to seventy-seven-year-olds who are involved in what we're all doing together. But there is definitely more of a, of a special emphasis on our youth because they are our future. And we're, when we talk about regenerating and we talk about, uh, evolutionary capabilities, well, we need to ensure that anything that we have learned that's worth sharing is, is passed on and transferred in a way that, uh, our young people can pick it up and keep going with it.

So it's just fascinating to see how effective our young people can be when you give them resources, some encouragement and a little bit of modeling and demonstration because it's, it's really our, our high school and just out of high school Students who are, uh, I'd say, like, the driving force for what we're doing.

[00:15:06] So if you go to our community center, you'll see that, who's the, the team that is setting up everything for the workshop that's gonna happen on self-sufficiency? Well, you're going to see a, a twenty-two-year-old, u, going around making sure that everything is set for people and that, uh, we can have a good, a good workshop and learning experience. We have a youth tech club, and they're working on all kinds of interesting projects. They're working on a wearable computer. They're working on, uh, a voice assistant for our community center so we can control everything without having to use a third party, but our own, uh, programmed voice assistant as some for instances.

[00:15:42] But if you were to sit down and, and watch how they run a meeting. It is phenomenal. And then how they're able to have the strong bias towards action. It's just so exciting. And our work that we, when we began, we said, okay,

[00:15:54] we're going to start with the community center. We're going to bring people together, do some community gatherings. COVID hits, and that changed everything. So for us, it went from, this is a community gathering space where we're all going to get together to pivoting to it being a food distribution place for picking up the gap that was left by the schools being shut. Because here in Superior, you know, we have half the, uh, average household income, we have 1.5 times the the state average poverty level.

[00:16:21] So there's certainly a need with a Title I school. Everyone has free lunches. Well, COVID hits, school shuts down, no free lunches. So we filled in that gap. We started providing meals.

[00:16:31] So for about two years, we did that, and It was a little over 10,000 meals that we were able to distribute, which is a lot for our small little town. But if you were to just be a fly on the wall and observe, It's like, who are the ones packing the bags? Well, it's a mix, but there's way more young people there packing the bags. Who are the ones, um, doing the cleanup afterwards? It's the young people who are really the driving force like I mentioned before.

[00:16:54] So we have, uh, young people who are doing this work for their, for their peers, and not just for their peers, but even for the, uh, for the elders here in town. So, uh, that's how we got started. And as we were doing that food distribution, we started to to see more clearly that we needed a more sustainable answer to threats like this and to hazards that might come up and getting food shipped in from Saint Mary's Food Bank, while we were very grateful that they did that, It's just really not what, uh, we would call a resilient type of a system. So that started our natural capital initiative. We were able to get a couple lots thanks to Arizona Community Foundation and, uh, and a, and a local donor here in town, we were able to, uh, get two lots set for community gardening, and we now have a, a whole initiative around growing food locally to relocalize our food system.

[00:17:44] So, you know, there, there's more I could say, but, uh, you can see how things just evolved from, from one thing to the next and, uh, knowing how to do this in a way that isn't, uh, try isn't disconnected from reality and, and is working with the true emergent potential that is around us. It's a bit of a dance, and it takes, uh, someone who can be comfortable with some chaos and also comfortable with spreadsheets and, uh, bean counting. So it's, it's having, having to do it all.

[00:18:15] **Becky:** Yeah. And it's such a beautiful example of the relationship piece of it that you weren't trying to build all of this connective tissue among people when the crisis hit, you had banked some capital in those relationships prior to and built up trust that was able to seamlessly, as seamless as it could be during the pandemic, but pretty quickly able to pivot, and you all were taking care of yourselves.

[00:18:40] And then the learning from that, which a lot of people have posed the question, how do we, you know, not repeat the lessons and, and learn and, and design a different system going forward so that we are less susceptible, and your, your story of moving into saying, you know, we need a more sustainable local food system, one in that you have designed in a way that honors your history and past generations and the legacy of your place, but also really does build some of that resilience in a way that is culturally appropriate and meaningful for your community is exactly what we know can happen when done with intention and done with voice and agency, and you're a living example of that along with all of the the partners that you have there.

[00:19:25] **Chris:** You talked earlier about honoring our past, and there's another saying that, uh, we throw around which says context is queen. And part of that context is, is honoring our past, but also working with the shadow of the past too because it's not all rosy. Right? Like, for the growing that we're doing, we're doing it right by, uh, a big huge tailings pile from the mine, and we're doing it with ground that hasn't been remediated, that has unsafe levels of arsenic and lead in the ground from the tailings leaching.

[00:19:58] So we have to keep the, the whole picture in mind. And that doesn't mean you don't grow there. That doesn't mean you just eat, uh, foods that uptake a bunch of heavy metals, it means we just have to work with our situation, um, and then just adapt to it in the right kind of way that's going to take these things into consideration. If we didn't take those things into consideration, we might be going down a path that ultimately wouldn't be helping anybody if we're growing food that's unsafe to eat. So you have to just keep both sides in mind.

[00:20:26] There's the, the, the, the, the shiny bright light, and then there's also the shadow too. And both are important to recognize and to, to bring into our design considerations.

[00:20:37] **Becky:** So important. And I imagine there's some opening up of old wounds and some healing and some reckoning with lasting legacies that are those constant reminders that you're pointing out.

[00:20:51] **Chris:** Yeah.

[00:20:51] And a bit of of history repeating itself potentially. We, we have a a Rio Tinto, a multinational mine that is trying to open up a block caving operation right by like you say, right in Oak Flat, which is Apache sacred grounds, and we could be in a similar boom and bust type of situation again depending on how it affects our water and the other economic repercussions after the mines close. So these are all things that we have to hold in mind, while there's the things outside of our own context that are, that push themselves in, like, uh, housing prices and gentrification being a pattern that we just see everywhere, the story of people who are from here, uh, not being able to continue to live here is, uh, something that a lot of people have had to face in their various communities, and so we've been, um, actively looking at how we Ensure that we don't run into similar problems. And if we're not careful, as we know, when we're working in complex systems, uh, unintended

consequences is inevitable. We will there will be unintended consequences that we couldn't predict or see.

[00:21:55] Some that we might be able to a little bit more, like if we're increasing the value of our place, that could mean that property values go up and it's harder for people to live here, and so we have to hold that in mind too. And that, uh, starts to point towards some efforts that we're beginning now around looking at community land trust as a way to, uh, to go, uh, against the grain a bit. And then, um, also some efforts of doing what we're calling resource hacking, which is seeing all the available programs that we qualify for, but that we're just not taking advantage of because of the various barriers that are associated with getting access to that support. So we're looking at creative ways to lower those barriers and make it, make it easier for residents here to take advantage of social support systems that our tax dollars are paying for or that other nonprofit organizations are offering, but, uh, for one reason or another, those resources aren't yet making it here.

[00:22:46] **Becky:** It's a really good segue to something I wanna bring up, which is, lots of people would like to be able to do the kind of work you're doing in their communities.

[00:22:55] I wonder if you can reflect on what you think might be keeping them and what you would want them to know about why and how you work in the way that you do and what they might be able to take away from your story.

[00:23:09] **Chris:** It's really about the relationships. And, uh, another saying, culture and connection before vision and strategy. So for folks who are interested in doing work in their own neighborhoods, how do they get started? Well, it might not sound like, it's a little indirect, but at least to some,

[00:23:26] starting off by having, uh, conversations around a fire, starting by getting together with folks who you have common interests and values and, and a desire to do something and are comfortable sitting in the ambiguity for a little while to just build the relationships amongst you and those folks that you might want to do work with. And if we're taking this, this more place-based approach, it's possible to go on a on a collective learning journey with some of those folks after some time that you've built those relationships to say, Let's get to learn more about our place. What, what can we learn about the the precontact history of this place? What can, what can we start to discern from, um, the the living systems that are present here, starting from the geology working all the way to human systems. So those are things that can be done in the process of starting to see what's going to emerge.

[00:24:15] And after doing some of that work and, and maybe even during, it is doing the just do it actions. You know, you don't want to go into, uh, analysis paralysis by trying to formulate some kind of precisely planned project. It's uh, really hard to do that in the beginning and for it to actually work because we have to get feedback from our environment. So it's good to do some, some just do it actions, some safe to fail experiments, holding in mind that, uh, sometimes we have the novelty effect where things will sometimes work right away just because they're new, uh, but that doesn't mean that it's necessarily going to last. So if you hold that in mind and think about this as an ongoing process versus a one-time project that you're doing, um, that's going to put you in a position to start to learn as you go, and, uh, you'll be surprised at who shows up and what opportunities start to emerge that you just couldn't guess.

[00:25:08] **Becky:** I love it. It reminds me of another saying to add to yours, which is moving at the speed of trust. Yes. Yes. And I think these days, I would actually even modify that to say moving at the speed of love and really just stepping back and not holding more up as a standard than just starting off with how you treat each other and get to know each other and then move into the work. Let me invite you to answer one final question, and that is, I would love to hear what your wildest dreams are for the future. And in that, I hope to understand a little bit about what gives you hope that you can get there.

[00:25:46] **Chris:** I sometimes say that the the theory of change that I'm holding is a developmental party or a party that can, that can change the world.

[00:25:54] I think this would be less about the the biggest party. Maybe it'd be, like, the longest party because, uh, a big believer in in ongoing processes versus, like, one-time events for the most part. And, I can picture some really big party where in the middle is, like, where the, the dancing and the raging is the hardest. Maybe there's a fire there. And then as you go out further from the center, there's less raging and dancing happening and more productive things taking place that's almost being fueled by the party itself.

[00:26:28] And part of where this vision started to come to me was when I took upon the challenge to say, how can the ends and the means be the same. And it's a challenging question because, uh, so often my own thinking is like, okay, we're going to do this to get to that, But how could the this be the that? You know? How can the how can the means and the ends be the same?

[00:26:50] And so what are the ends that I'm looking for is, uh, people to be partying with a purpose, for us to be filled with joy while we're also gardening and growing, doing it in a way that we're making the the land around us more thriving versus extracting from it. In a way, that's part of what we're doing here in Superior. And I think what gives me hope is I can totally see it the happening is that here in Superior and maybe in the Copper Corridor too, we're kind of like a living laboratory. We're doing a lot of, uh, things that people tell us is cutting edge and different, and it's our hope that we can start to document these as methods and procedures and pathways that are accessible for other communities to understand and apply in their own ways. I'd love to see communities trying new things that they're learning from other people to make the world a better place for themselves and for their neighbors, and I totally see it possible.

[00:27:45] I have this vision of of our young people being totally equipped and fired up to address the challenges that they're faced with. It is very easy to get into being a bit of a doomer with how, how challenging we, we see the future ahead of us. But I see these young people being trained up and having a wealth of experience by the time they get out of high school and have a a vision for themselves and the role they want to play in, uh, in addressing the challenges of our times. And I get so hopeful when I see how capable, excited and full of love and joy our young people are who are doing this work with us.

[00:28:26] **Becky:** I love it. You're singing my song.

[00:28:28] I often respond when asked what gives me hope that it is our youth and this generation. So thank you for that.

[00:28:36] **Chris:** Yeah. Thank you. This was a great conversation.

[00:28:38] Thank you very much.

[00:28:40] **Becky:** Thank you for listening to this episode of *Unsung Stewards*. I want to thank Chris for joining us and for all the work he does to improve the lives of the community he serves. 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 Paine, President and CEO of the Rippel Foundation.

[00:29:04] To learn more about our guests and their work, please refer to the links and information on our website at www.rippel.org, rippeidotorg. We all hold deep gratitude for those who are willing to share their stories with us.