

Rippel – Unsung Stewards Podcast Transcript

Season 4 | Episode 1 | Kellie Easton

Building a thriving community in Winston-Salem

[00:00:00] Welcome to Season 4 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 committed to working with others to create the conditions that everyone needs to thrive.

[00:00:24] At Rippel, we pursue a future where everyone thrives with no exceptions. Rippel and our partners have dedicated ourselves to building that future, which starts with building the will among others to join a growing movement to thrive together. This season on Unsung Stewards, we're talking to some of our strongest colleagues from within that movement.

[00:00:43] They are advancing equity and thriving in their communities and bringing others into this work. Today, I'm speaking with Kellie Easton, President and CEO of Action4Equity, an organization working to transform the education system in Kellie's hometown of Winston Salem, North Carolina. Kellie's approach is rooted in racial justice and is an example of strong shared stewardship.

[00:01:06] Join us as I talk with Kellie about Action4Equity's whole school, whole community, whole child approach, and how to truly transform a system so that everyone can thrive. Kellie, it is such an honor and joy to be back in your company and to be able to share a bit more of your story and Action4Equity's story.

[00:01:28] So thank you for being with us.

[00:01:31] Thank you for having me.

[00:01:34] So I want to start with asking you to share a little bit about who you are, what brought you to this work, and anything you would like to share about your journey.

[00:01:45] Yes, thank you. I am proud daughter of some just wonderful parents. I would say that my village is deeply rooted in the Winston Salem community.

[00:01:56] But then in my senior year of where I was supposed to graduate from high school here in Winston Salem, my family moved to Baltimore, Maryland. So I went to school there and really became more involved in community related work. I would say that

it's a big part of my upbringing. was to contribute to the advancement of Black people. And so upon graduating, I got involved in a lot of initiatives.

[00:02:24] Black Girls Vote was just one specific initiative that really led me to delve deeper into policy work and to really understand the way that government operated. And then I, you know, hit a crisis situation. I found myself actually facing a divorce with two small children from just being in a emotionally destructive arrangement.

[00:02:49] And so I packed my bags, my two children, and moved back home. And then I became involved. I knew I had to get work, so I went out and began networking and was introduced to some people that connected me to a guy who was running for office. And then I got involved in some entrepreneurship ecosystem building. And so in those two efforts, I began to reconnect with the community here in Winston Salem.

[00:03:18] When I first moved back to Winston Salem from the DMV area, I was really excited because I had, I lived just a few months with, with one family member on one side of town and the development was very encouraging because I was like, okay, things are happening here. And then I went back. to the downtown area.

[00:03:39] When I left Winston Salem, there was nothing downtown. And so coming back, there's like a downtown area with shops and restaurants. And then all this energy and synergy around entrepreneurship. And there was a lot of development. So I, you know, began to say like, okay, you know what, it's not too bad here.

[00:03:56] And then I went back, I began to reconnect to my community, my village. And it was like, it was frozen in time. There was all this development taking place all around Forsyth County, and then right there in the center in Winston Salem, there was nothing. It looked exactly the way it looked when I left. And then that was very discouraging.

[00:04:20] And we lost a campaign that I was working on. Being a part of that campaign, I learned so much about what was happening and the gentrification and the, like, the lack of investment in the community and the increase of violence. One of the issues that really, I would say, solidified my understanding of what was happening was with the elementary school, Ashley Elementary.

[00:04:46] There were some folks that were volunteering. One of our elders were volunteering in Ashley school. And he was saying how there was very bad air quality there and how the teachers were going to the school district, fighting for them to come and do something. And so this is one of the issues that I cannot disconnect from.

[00:05:04] There was just a type of apathy that was just so wrenching to some degree because people just felt like that their voice did not matter. So we began to go out to the community, build more awareness, like knocking on doors, sharing what was happening. And we said, we're going to stage a protest at the school board meeting and then, and put forth these demands.

[00:05:27] And at the same time, we're going to file a federal complaint with the Office of Civil Rights. In that process, people began to realize that we can do more and really move towards systemic change. We put forth a policy agenda and to this very day, we're still fighting to realize all of these systems are interconnected and going back to the issues of health, we really need to prioritize health, focusing on not only what happens in a school, but understanding that there, there are resources in the community and then what also happens in a home, that all three of those matters.

[00:06:03] It's an amazing story. And you took us through both your origin story, but also the origins of the platform that Action4Equity holds right now. So let me go back to your return to Winston Salem and that initial joy, it sounds like you felt, when you were reacquainted with a community that seemed to have abundance.

[00:06:27] And then to be reintroduced to your home base, the community that you grew up in, where you still knew people who were still there and your description of it sort of being stuck in time. I think that describes, sadly, so many communities. So I wonder if you could share a little bit more.

[00:06:50] I would say I did feel encouraged because the built community, and especially in the areas that I was in, it's always thriving. So I was encouraged by the fact that, okay, you know what, like there's some connectivity here. I remember just seeing the reality in terms of where I am, feeling as though there's a lot of resources here, but then there's truly a disconnect, you know, all within like a five-mile distance. So then from there, just having conversations with different people in my community, they had no idea of what was happening with all, with the multimillion dollar investment

[00:07:27] in the downtown area, you know, around biotech, entrepreneurship, like they had no clue what was happening. And so I would have conversations with different stakeholders and they're like, well, everybody's welcome. You know, like we won't turn anyone away. You know, people can come downtown, like these restaurants, it's for everyone, but there is an invisible line.

[00:07:51] And even just the socialization of how do people know, like this too belongs to them when they don't see themselves in it, there isn't any outreach to really invite people in, in a culturally affirming way. So it just feels like, okay, well that's for them. Like what's for us is on this side of the line. And so that issue around access being a major part of how we create equity is really, I would say that's probably the number one takeaway from that experience that, yes, it could be five minutes away and still there's this barrier in them and creating this sense of, well, you don't really belong here.

[00:08:36] And even though people may not say it, like we don't see "for colored only" signs, however, that the sentiment still resides.

[00:08:45] I think it's worth spending a minute on what you just said, because you hear that often. "We aren't excluding anyone and all are welcome." And yet the systems say so much about the undercurrent, the subtext of what welcome and belonging really means.

[00:09:02] And I think it's really important for those who may be listening, who have a seat at the table, in allocating resources to understand the unspoken cues that are built up over generations in a community. We should give voice to the fact that you described that community was thriving.

[00:09:21] The community where there's economic development, where there's been gentrification, people there are thriving. And what's happening in the community where you grew up that hasn't had that economic investment, how could they not see what's happening five minutes away? Because they're head down struggling to survive.

[00:09:38] Yes, it's so real. I really shifted my attention more so on creating the structures and the assets to break down those barriers. So you have well-intentioned folks coming together to address a community issue. And so the first thing that they say is that, well, you know, we need to get the voice of those with the lived experience.

[00:10:02] Whenever we're in a room and we have to say that, then we already know that the room is not the right room, because if you have to go out and get, then that means that you were not considering them as you began to shape the container to have the conversation in the first place. That gives the opportunity to reinforce the fact that having the right people at the table matters.

[00:10:25] And then as decisions are being made, then before you finalize that decision, then, what type of community feedback loop that you have where there is this whole other separate space that is fully dedicated to, you know, the perspectives and the lived experiences and all the nuances that come with that of the people that your solution is supposed to solve and run that decision by them.

[00:10:49] Because when we do that, then we begin to produce interventions that's going to be more culturally responsive. Now we're creating something that will draw the people that it's meant for. So now they will come out.

[00:11:03] I want to ask you specifically about the role and the approach and the strategy of focusing on youth and focusing on transforming the education system.

[00:11:15] You explained to us that this was a strategic decision to focus in that way. It was born out of recognized need, but also the decision to transform a system and build capacity in youth. So talk to me a little bit about the long arc strategy of getting in there and improving the education system and investing and cultivating the skills and capacities of youth in Winston Salem to also take up

[00:11:48] the charge and participate in transforming those systems. Talk a little bit about why, how that contributes, I'm going to use our terminology, how that contributes to thriving and how you see that trajectory in the long arc of the future of your community.

[00:12:05] Yes, we are very excited about the work we're doing around thriving in our community. So we have actually adopted that language as well. Listen, this is generational work. The type of collective impact work that was done in the past, there's still a place for it, but we're going to build upon it. We need to learn, take the good from that and utilize to help propel us towards true collective impact.

[00:12:33] And the collective has to include the folks who are impacted and this whole school, whole community, whole child gives us a framework to do that. As people say, you guys focus on education and it's, again, all the systems are interconnected. We don't want children to just thrive while they're in the four walls of a school.

[00:12:52] We want them to thrive in your communities. We want them to thrive in their homes. A child leaves their home, go through their community to get to their school. What is that bridge? The community, what does that look like? It's really the wholeness of the community being a place that will create an environment for children to succeed.

[00:13:13] Having reliable transportation, it's a matter of making sure that they have access to foods that they need. It's making sure that, that there are opportunities for work for them. It's all of that, and then when they go to their home, that they're going to, that there's humane housing. Winston Salem has one of the lowest economic mobility rates in the nation.

[00:13:37] If a child is born in poverty in Winston Salem, chances are they're going to die in poverty in Winston Salem. And so, how do we change those conditions to ensure that when a child is born in Winston Salem, that they are going to have the ability to thrive, that everything that they need, that it's in their community and then it's in their home, that they have humane housing, like I said,

[00:14:00] make sure that their parents have access to meaningful work and opportunities where they can get a job that's going to pay a thriving wage, that they're going to have transportation to and from work, and that there is an opportunity for them to give voice to the conditions in their community. And so we knew that this is going to be, it's going to require generations.

[00:14:20] So how do we create the structures in our generation? This is the way that we do education. This is the way that we address housing and we don't consider them as two completely different entities, but we understand that they connect and that, that it matters for a child to have a safe living environment in order for them to succeed in school.

[00:14:45] It was important to continue to center youth and to make sure that we start there so then those children can begin. They will become adults and be able to break the

cycle because there was a better pathway for them. And so that was, that's the reason why we focused on youth. It's important for youth to understand that, for them to understand the systems, and for them to begin to contribute and to co-develop with adults.

[00:15:13] So as a community, then we are constantly learning and evolving and working towards liberation is what we say here.

[00:15:22] I wonder how you think about building the space and capacity for members of your community to participate in that and contribute in that in ways that meet them where they are and don't extract more time and more effort than is needed, but build off of their assets and their wisdom.

[00:15:43] Yes, that's a great question. Thank you. As we shifted from Action for Ashley, which was the campaign to build a new school, and we put forth a policy agenda, we also launched Action4Equity. And as we started delving into the policy work and to conducting research with very limited capacity--we were all volunteers at the time--what we realized is that town poverty was a real thing. People weren't able to show up and to do all the reading and the writing and going down to the school board in a way that we were. And so that required us to develop the infrastructure that one, we can leverage with other grassroots initiatives.

[00:16:30] We leverage our infrastructure. You bring the people. We will together go after the resources and we will equip, then let's figure out what policy recommendations do we need? What were the barriers that we experienced? So then we can surface that up and come up with recommendations. And so that is a way, it's like really rethinking how we do our work.

[00:16:53] It requires a lot of intentionality. It requires sharing power. It requires sharing resources. And so, it definitely requires a way of understanding how to collaborate, how to backbone, how to convene, and how do we utilize the strengths of folks in the community, as well as the strengths of institutions. We're going to have to develop those types of structures in order to create something new, but when we do, we see that it's mutually beneficial for all parties, and then we're able to build a community we all can be proud of.

[00:17:27] It's beautiful. So I want to just draw a little bit of a through line to current context in our country. I don't care what side of lines you, you live on, you, it's hard to watch the headlines right now and not recognize that we're in a time where democracy is weakened and under threat. So based on where you sit, and thinking about educational and racial justice space in particular, I wonder what your thoughts are, and you may have shared some of this already, but I'm going to invite you to go back to it and draw a bright line between addressing our current state of affairs and how we rebuild our systems in this country to reach a truly multiracial, equitable, and durable democracy.

[00:18:12] Yes. I would say that the, the number one thing is we have to do it together. One, not one organization or leader will have the ability to create a new system. In many

ways, I believe it's important for us to prioritize working ourselves out of, dare I say, the nonprofit industrial complex and really move towards nation building.

[00:18:38] And when we are nation building, we're just developing all new tools. We need new tools to even build a new structures. And so when I say the new tools, then that is like that shared language, these shared best practices. And how do we do it together? The more we're able to collaborate and align at the local level and produce something that requires the strength of all of our capacities and not just one, then we are beginning to build a more sustainable, inclusive foundation.

[00:19:09] You got to be a part of the critical mass that's moving towards justice. And so that's the same thing with systems. At the mezzo level, it's important for organizations to really understand what they're really good at, what can you do very well, and then how do you bring that to the collaborative? And so it's really finding where you are in the systems change work because it's happening and what frameworks already exist. We were elated to learn about the thriving model and the seven vital conditions because it gave us a framework and we are connecting with other communities and organizations that are doing this work and as we continue to align

[00:19:54] what will emerge will be a new way of being and a new system and the ability to illuminate that for all. I've even saying it, there's a sense of joy. It provides a greater sense of purpose. And I feel that at least in our community, we are constantly being pulled forward by that.

[00:20:13] Yeah, that's wonderful. One of the questions I was going to ask you is to share for our listeners that as we do talk about this broader movement to thrive together, which we see signs of and signals of, it's tangible, we can measure it, we can see the bright spots that are taking hold across the country, Winston Salem, Action4Equity being good examples of that,

[00:20:36] do you see yourself as part of that bigger movement? And if so, how? And even more importantly, I wonder what advice you have for us and for our listeners about what it would take, what your advice to us is to bring others off the sidelines into that movement, people who might be looking for a way to contribute or looking for something to improve their communities.

[00:21:00] What do you think it takes to bring others in to the work that we're trying to do?

[00:21:05] So, I definitely see myself as part of the movement, and I would even say like one who's throwing fuel to the fire of the movement. And I think in order to be involved, I communicate with people along various parts of what I say, like their equity journey.

[00:21:28] I actually believe that equity is a marker, like liberation is our ultimate goal. But I would say there are some people that really haven't started, maybe they're curious. And so for that person, then I would say, to be in a part of community is understanding that you

have to be a part. Like you have to, you're one person, but the community is made up of many others, and there's diversity there.

[00:21:56] And all Perspectives matter. However, what unifies us is the shared understanding and a shared vision of what it is that we seek to accomplish. And once you understand that, then once this is the shared vision, now you can go back to your unique perspective and then identify, what do I bring to the table?

[00:22:16] And I like to say that it's important to build a table that's big enough and long enough for everyone to have a seat. And we all may not sit there at the same time and that's okay, but it's, let's set the table and have people who are going to maintain that table and make sure that everyone is able to contribute.

[00:22:34] And so that was one. And then I would say for those who are already doing the work and especially if they feel that the world is moving a lot quicker than what they are able to do or even wanting to do. Maybe there are some people who are comfortable with the status quo. However, they know that there is change happening.

[00:22:54] Then it is important to realize that, what are the benefits of disrupting the status quo? Yeah, change is hard. However, what all are we losing at the cost of not changing? And how does that impact you personally? How does that impact your children personally just for maintaining it? And so there are benefits for change, and we can all identify where we had to come out of our comfort zones to do something

[00:23:19] and in the end, we realized that it was for the better, that there were improvements that we couldn't even think of. I think it's just important to understand just where you are, where a person is, but just being a part of the movement, it just means you have to move from where you are into where their energy is, and you'll be able to connect, but you just have to understand that it's not just your perspective. There are multiple perspectives.

[00:23:45] One of the things I love about the way you just set that whole framework up is that it sets the table for something that I think people can relate to that it is not about what are you going to get out of this, but you said, what is it that you get to bring to it?

[00:24:04] And also, I think it's important to recognize that we've heard a lot in the headlines about an epidemic of social isolation and the impact to us as individuals and as communities of not having social networks and connections. And so it's also an invitation to start to break out of that and build some entree into connecting with people.

[00:24:28] It is an invitation to craft collective abundance that is built on the assets and the strengths that each person can bring to the table to achieving that. I want to close with acknowledging that while there is no shortage of problems to tackle and lots that one could perceive as standing in our way, when I get to talk to wonderful, inspirational people like you, it always leaves me feeling hopeful.

[00:24:56] And I think it helps our listeners be filled with hope. I'm curious, what is giving you hope in this moment?

[00:25:03] I think the people who I'm working with, because it's like, literally, I am grateful because I am blessed where yes, I can literally, in one part of my day, I could begin my day in a community, working with those who are mentoring and advocating, and then by the end of my day, I could have, you know, I've met with one of our friends in government or another leader.

[00:25:31] We have leaders working in our hospital networks. We have leaders in early childhood and even a few in the business community. So it's just, it feels good to see how hopeful, how everyone feels like this is a moment. There's something different happening and they are all wanting to go all in, they're wanting to make this happen. So despite what's happening in terms of the Supreme Court and this upcoming election, there are people working and we're doing it together. And we need each other. I think that we all sense that. And because for the first time in our community, we're able to bring those in grassroots or those on the ground at that micro level.

[00:26:20] Because we took the time to create the structures and the containers to do this, that we're able to bring both sides together to multisolve, to be able to do this work and to come up with the best ideas and understand that, you know what, we have nothing to lose and how everyone is just, let's just focus on what's in front of us now and we're gonna lean into the dream.

[00:26:46] That's what I call it. So we know we've got to focus on urgent services, but then at the same time, how do we, with great intention, focus on building the dream? And we're receiving short wins, and so those short wins that we've done together, and the people doing it, that gives me a lot of hope.

[00:27:05] It's wonderful. I think the thing that I love to highlight in what you've described is that you give equal attention to what it is you're trying to build, the different version of the future that you're trying to attain, as you do to the systems that need to be disrupted. And it really does take both.

[00:27:29] Thank you so much for sharing your story, Kellie. More importantly, your wisdom for helping to lift up what's happening right there in Winston Salem, with Action4Equity and the many partners and stakeholders who are doing this work with you. It's such a bright spot and I'm so glad we got to tell the story.

[00:27:45] Yes, thank you for inviting me. This is great.

[00:27:48] Thank you for listening to this episode of *Unsung Stewards*. I want to thank today's guests for joining us and for all their work to improve the communities they serve. I'd also like to thank the team that makes this podcast possible, including Molly Belsky, Brad Girard, Laila Hussain, Amanda McIntosh, and Teri Wade.

[00:28:07] 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. That's R I P P E L dot org. We all hold deep gratitude for those who've been willing to share their stories with us.