

Rippel — Unsung Stewards Podcast Transcript

Season 4 | Episode 2 | Tonia Wellons

Stewarding Systems Change: From Global to Local

[00:00:00] **Becky Payne:** Welcome to season four 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.

[00:00:22] 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.

[00:00:42] They are advancing equity and thriving in their communities and bringing others into this work.

[00:00:50] Today, I'm talking to Tonya Wellons, President and CEO of the Greater Washington Community Foundation in Washington, D.C. Tonya is committed to closing the racial wealth gap in her region and under her leadership, the community foundation has prioritized economic justice in the Greater Washington area, piloting guaranteed income and child savings account programs.

[00:01:11] Tonya has been a movement builder throughout her career, and as a fellow foundation leader, I was especially excited to chat with her about how she's working to align the internal culture of the Greater Washington Community Foundation with its external mission. Join us as we talk about Tonya's work and how she's positioning her organization as a leader in the movement to thrive together.

[00:01:32] Tonya, thank you for being here. You've been engaged in movement building and social justice work for a long time. So I wondered if you could share a bit more about your story and your path into this field.

[00:01:46] **Tonia Wellons:** Thank you so much for inviting me to have this conversation with you. I should start by saying I feel like I've been involved in, in justice-related work and democracy work my entire life.

[00:01:58] I come from a very activist and engaged family. A lot of participation in electoral politics. My mom has been working as a voter registrar or poll volunteer for as long as I can remember. It's interesting because my family, um, from

Southampton County, Virginia, were some of the first black voters in our county from the early days of voting.

[00:02:25] Active participation in that way has always been front and center in my life. I grew up in a civil rights church. I went to an HBCU that had a strong, again, sort of social justice sort of story. I went to North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, where it's home of the Greensboro Four, uh, what we call them the A& T Four,

[00:02:47] who participated in the sit-ins and, and at the Woolworth counters in Greensboro that kind of started student movements around the country. And it's interesting because I knew for sure I was going to go to school and become a lawyer, a civil rights lawyer. And during the course of my studies, I had a professor who says, Tony, there are lots of great lawyers out there,

[00:03:07] lots of really activist civil rights, black civil rights lawyers. I think you'd be a great diplomat. We need more African Americans in international development and affairs. And it really piqued my interest. And again, A& T was an amazing place that helped to cultivate this notion of being a global citizen.

[00:03:27] So I participated in Model United Nations, was selected to, to go on an internship as a democracy and governance intern. That took me to Colombo, Sri Lanka at the height of the war there in the 1990s. My role there was to really look at human rights abuses, to look at the impact on the minority, the ethnic minority in that country, and to look at the relationship between the nonprofit sector, the burgeoning nonprofit sector and government in Sri Lanka.

[00:04:02] And so that was my entree into all the things, social justice, human rights, democracy, and the relationship between government systems and power and the third sector. It was really, it got, it set me up for a framework that I've really been able to operate in for the last 25, 30 plus years.

[00:04:28] **Becky Payne:** It's an amazing story.

[00:04:29] You've had an incredible impact globally. And even before joining the foundation, I know you've always taken to heart the need to give back locally. And I wonder if you could share a little bit more about what inspired you in that moment to move from that international diplomatic work. It's a shift to move into philanthropy.

[00:04:51] So I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about that moment that caused you to pivot to the greater Washington region.

[00:04:58] Sure.

[00:04:59] **Tonia Wellons:** Since I completed graduate school many years ago, the Washington, D.C. area has been home for me. I worked for the World Bank for a spell, for USAID. I served at the, at the Peace Corps under the Obama administration.

[00:05:14] And so much of my energy and emphasis was really outwardly looking, but my home base was the greater Washington region. And I knew that I wanted to, at some point, focus more locally. I think that international development and local community development are basically two sides of the same coin. And while I spent most of my time on the other side, I knew at some point that I wanted to focus more, more locally.

[00:05:39] So here's what happened. One, I, my, my kids were in middle school and high school. And it was pretty difficult as a parent to keep up with them being on the other side of the pond most of the time. And I just thought the timing was right for me to shift my focus to where my kids go to school, where I pay taxes, where my, I'm an active member of my local church in my local community.

[00:06:08] And to really begin to stitch together some of the things that I've been working on in far flung places around the world right here in my backyard. Again, I always knew I was going to come back to this point, but I have to say that the age of my kids and the timing of what was happening in our local economy, our local democracy was also a pivot point for me in making the decision to shift from international to a hyper-local focus.

[00:06:36] **Becky Payne:** It's a common theme, I think, for folks who work in social justice at these larger scales, national or international, anything outside of your backyard. People don't always realize that you devote as much time and effort to practicing what you preach and walking the walk in your own backyard, and sometimes that's harder, but it's such an aligned opportunity to be able to do that.

[00:07:00] It's also not lost on me that you have long been making this connection between economic justice and democracy and broader well-being. You've done a lot of work in your tenure leading the foundation to bring those connections into clearer focus. So I wonder if you could enlighten our audience a little bit about those connections and why it's so important for the communities you're serving now.

[00:07:28] **Tonia Wellons:** Yeah. Thank you. I'll talk about when I entered the community foundation, it was, um, really on the heels of some really important work that had been done almost 40 years at the time, a little over 40 years at the time.

[00:07:44] Um, but especially during the period, um, when Terry Freeman was the president and CEO, um, the community foundation had led some of the most impactful grant investments, of course, but also conversation around some of the

most important topics of our time, whether it was talking about issues of race in the early 2000s, before it was comfortable or even a little more comfortable to do that,

[00:08:10] or talking about access and opportunity, using data as a roadmap to help us be more strategic about our investments. I'd really inherited a place that had a reputation and experience for the work. I came in the, at the middle of 2016 into early 2017. And there was a new, a newly elected president.

[00:08:35] There was a lot of focus on what is, what to make of our new, of our democracy or our changing or shaping democracy. What it meant to figure out how to invite back in people who were being targeted for marginalization. And how do we really stand against this notion of anti-othering? That's 2017. Yeah.

[00:08:57] Fast forward a bit, Becky, to 2019 when the federal government shut down, and D.C. workers, greater Washington region workers were perhaps more impacted than any place in the entire country. And then fast forward again to 2020 and a global health pandemic. And so there were so many things that happened in the span of three years that made a conversation with my board, with our membership,

[00:09:25] around a North star that has this focus squarely on increasing economic mobility and addressing the racial wealth gap. It was actually, there were so many things that led us to the point of having a real reflective conversation about what the role of a community foundation like ours, in the community, that is as diverse and energetic as ours could really mean.

[00:09:50] What's the most catalytic way that we can evolve our work such that we are investing in people who are at the sharpest intersections of both challenge and opportunity? And in places that really deserve our investment and attention. And so again, I think the timing for us was right, and the readiness was just more available to a broader range of people, given all the things that led us up to that particular point in time.

[00:10:23] **Becky Payne:** Yeah. And you have written. and spoken about the value of focusing on root causes rather than band-aid approaches, which is language we often use as well. I want to invite you to talk a little bit about the Health Equity Fund there in D.C. because you were really instrumental in making sure that the broader community was using those funds for projects that I think, in your words, would disrupt more traditional approaches to social change. I want to understand, I'm so curious about hearing what it took to gain a commitment to those upstream approaches versus those more traditional, invisible, urgent services.

[00:11:05] **Tonia Wellons:** Yeah, I'd say it took everything, Becky.

[00:11:08] But again, the timing was right. The Health Equity Fund is a, it's a \$95 million fund that we manage at the request of CareFirst and D.C. Government, Office of the Mayor. And so, in developing the strategy for that fund, we spent a lot of time looking at the health outcomes for the district. We looked at the percentage of causes that were related to medical access.

[00:11:40] And then the other sort of 80 percent of the environmental causes of some of the disparate outcomes that were impacting low income people, especially people of color specifically in, in the nation's capital. And so as we were thinking about how are we going to organize a strategy that allows us to, to address the social determinants of health, rather than direct health access, not rather than, but in addition to, but placing the emphasis, Becky,

[00:12:12] on the social determinants. It just required sharing the data and making it plain and available to both our board of trustees and to the Health Equity Fund committee members who, again, who are experts in their own right. And it wasn't a hard sell. What it took was a decision that, that we would go down this route.

[00:12:34] And we have not, we're still in just year two, 2.5. So we still have two and a half years to go. But we made some decisions about investing in the existing infrastructure. These nonprofits that were doing social determinant work for 20 plus years, many of them, but doing it on shoestring budgets. Like how do we undergird the sector in a way that gives them both the runway and the bandwidth to implement existing work, but also to think freely about what they would do if they had some additional resources to bring to bear.

[00:13:09] We, Strategy 2 was around investing in the policy infrastructure, right? And we know that that the gains from good policy, good governance will outpace and outstrip grant investments ten to one. So we spent time in the early years identifying organizations that were pushing an advocacy agenda, a systems change agenda, and networking them one to another.

[00:13:37] So part of the requirement, because policy work does not happen in a vacuum, right? And our health equity director likes to say, there should be health in all policy. So how do we get people who are working on budget advocacy in the same room with people who are working on housing advocacy and those who are working on employment.

[00:14:00] It's, you invest in them deeply, and then you encourage them or support them to get together and work on things in tandem, that we level set, Becky, with our stakeholders, that policy change doesn't happen in one year or two year cycles, but we're going to be looking down the road for how these policy investments are going to be able to take shape and make adjustments well into the future.

[00:14:24] Then the third level of investment was really around innovation. How do we invest in those cutting edge practices? Position people who are working every single day, but they really don't have enough time and space to think about their own economic future to make plans for the future. Making big bets on, again, the tried and true, investing in the policy, advocacy space, and then really leaning in on innovation and new ways of solving for old problems.

[00:14:55] **Becky Payne:** Thank you for laying that out because I think you broke down some, I think, historic barriers and misconceptions that initiatives that are trying to do systems change are trying to boil the ocean or they can't justify a return on investment that is near term enough. You've been demonstrating and you just clearly laid out a roadmap for anybody wanting to try this in their own region that there is a way to do it.

[00:15:21] And I love that you all have not centered yourselves as the locus of action, but you're centering yourselves as what I would call catalysts and intermediaries and connectors. And those are such important roles and such an important approach and philosophy. So I want to honor that in what you described and appreciate that it started with a decision to act differently.

[00:15:44] Yeah. And you really took that mantle on and have worked that approach. And it's not easy, but it's not impossible, and I hope that inspires others.

[00:15:55] **Tonia Wellons:** Thank you. And we have some great partners. CareFirst has been an amazing partner. The Office of the Mayor has been fantastic to work with. And then the volunteers who spend hours pouring over the, the many applications in my team, of course, that we receive for groups, organizations who want to, to be a part of this important work.

[00:16:17] It has just been an amazing demonstration of important teamwork and partnership.

[00:16:23] **Becky Payne:** As we talk about seeing signs of a broader movement for thriving together, which includes people like yourself who work with each other and within your communities toward that collective well-being as defined locally. And we talk about it requiring transforming current systems.

[00:16:39] So I want to just invite you to describe for us where you see yourself and your foundation in that broader movement.

[00:16:48] **Tonia Wellons:** Yes, we think we have an obligation, and at this point I'm talking about we, my Board of Trustees, we, my, my team, to make sure that we are positioning community first and the community foundation to make it stronger than where we found it.

[00:17:06] And that requires examining and re-examining both our practices, our approaches and our strategy such that we are making the most impact that is, that's possible. It can be, I'd say, Becky, sometimes a little exhausting when you're halfway down a path and then you're saying maybe we ought to step back and think about a thing.

[00:17:29] But the, I think the, the motivation is to not just do a thing because we've always done it, but to really do something that matters now for the community based on what they need right now. And if that means that the community foundation needs to make some shifts and adjustments, then we have to act accordingly.

[00:17:49] That for us is what, what stewardship and what keepers of, of public trust is really all about. How are we acting in the best, not just the best interest, but in, in partnership, in relationship with the people that we are serving and with our partners who are in it with us. Our community foundation cannot exist without the generosity of individual donors who care enough to link up with us

[00:18:18] to make an impact in this community. And so we don't take these relationships for granted in any way. And so in much the same way that they trust us, they're also expecting that we're building these lasting relationships and that our work is informed by people who are closest to, to the challenges that we are trying to respond to, to solve for, and to proactively get in front of.

[00:18:44] **Becky Payne:** It's amazing. Our respective foundations share some big aims in common. You've lifted up a few of them. I know you take an approach of bridging differences and fostering hope, for example. How do you think we bring others off the sidelines into that movement? Are there any examples you want to share in tackling coalition building as you described?

[00:19:08] **Tonia Wellons:** Yeah, I think it is extending an invitation. I think a lot of it I've seen over the years an expectation that people will always raise their hand and volunteer or sign themselves up, which is one way that certain personality types move. But the other way is to extend the invitation. Like it's really to invite people to be a part of both of the conversation, to be a part of the decision making, to incentivize it at times.

[00:19:38] We spend a lot of time, in philanthropy especially, talking about how do we learn more from lived experience. And I'm really proud to say that the sector has moved from just getting folk to tell them about their problems to inviting them to the table and paying for the expertise that informs our work.

[00:19:58] Lived experience is a value that we should respect by paying consulting fees for. So again, it's extending, it's offering the invitation for those who will readily volunteer, but also creating a wider table and soliciting participation and then paying for people's experience. I think. And adding some energy and excitement too.

[00:20:21] I think that people want to be a part of something. People want to be involved. I think the pathway for involvement is not always super clear. And so to the extent that we can create opportunities, direct people, make the connection is an important one for our community foundation to play in this region.

[00:20:45] **Becky Payne:** It's such an important role that you just described. I want to invite you to go a little bit deeper. Most of our listeners may be familiar with a community foundation, but all community foundations don't necessarily operate in the same way. Connect that to what you also just described in terms of honoring the wisdom, the innovation, yes, the labor, but really the expertise that comes from what gets described as lived experience and bring those two ideas together and describe the special and important role of the community foundation in bridging those perspectives.

[00:21:24] **Tonia Wellons:** Yeah, I think we sit in the middle of, of sort of public life in the region or in any city or county or state where there's a community foundation, where you have people who live on different sides of town who would never ever really come in contact with each other were there not for a bridge builder like a community foundation.

[00:21:44] I often say, and, I say that we sit in the middle of the racial wealth gap in our region. Also, that's another place where we sit, where many of our clients and partners are ultra wealthy and care about this community. And I have other clients and partners who are not so wealthy and care about this community.

[00:22:03] I think the most important thing that binds is the care for community, the interest in doing something transformative such that everyone has the opportunity to thrive. And I think that's, that to me is the most beautiful part of the work and it rides against this notion that in terms of what our region offers is only available for a few.

[00:22:27] We see the opportunity for it to be even more available to everyone who lives here. And we're in active pursuit of making that happen.

[00:22:39] **Becky Payne:** It goes against the division that we are fed in our streams and live feeds. But the reality that you just gave voice to is we share more in common.

[00:22:49] Absolutely. And we value the same things for our future when we have opportunity to talk to each other.

[00:22:57] **Tonia Wellons:** Absolutely. So powerful. Yeah. Thank you. It's interesting. There's a new study on cash transfer work that's being circulated. And when I tell you all of my donors are sending it to me, all of my, our partners are sharing it because we're looking for these sort of the evidence about what works.

[00:23:16] And what I often say is, what works for us is also what works for other people. If you're questioning whether or not cash works, then we should just ask ourselves, Does cash work for me? Would a savings account for my children work for me? Would access to great employment and great healthcare and great benefits,

[00:23:43] is it helping me and my family? Of course, Becky. And so while we can do a million studies on certain things to tease out nuance, I think we are also experts in our own right. And we think about the things that helped us to move from one station in life to the other, and all of the supports that we might've had around

[00:24:05] ourselves and our families to make, help us make it, to help us to move to thriving is the same things that we want for people in community. These are the same kinds of conditions that we need to strive for. These are the vital conditions that we need to strive for everyone to have access to, to a good life, to being, to healthy outcomes in our communities.

[00:24:29] **Becky Payne:** Beautifully said. Our foundations also share another attribute in common, and that is you under your leadership, and since I joined the foundation, we've both been taking steps to align our internal operations and culture and your business with your mission. So I wonder if you could share a little bit more about how you've brought your teams and board along with why this is so important.

[00:24:55] in accomplishing your mission, that alignment of internal practice and culture with outward mission and what that does for you with your impact.

[00:25:03] **Tonia Wellons:** It is, I'd say it's probably even more important than our externally facing work is the internal alignment. It's the alignment around vision, around values,

[00:25:16] around mission that really help to drive, propel, filter everything else. One of the, we talk about our work in three core pillars. First is to lead in the community with an emphasis on increasing economic mobility, addressing the racial wealth gap. The second one is really to align our vision, align our business with our vision.

[00:25:43] And then of course, the third one is to really create and tell powerful stories about people in community that we are working in partnership with such that we expand our impact and value. But this alignment with aligning our business with our vision has us focused on everything. From the values that we are looking for when we recruit team members and board members, it's how we invest our assets.

[00:26:10] And so it's critically important that alignment is from top to bottom in everything that we do.

[00:26:16] **Becky Payne:** Thank you for sharing that. If you had one piece of advice for somebody new stepping into a role such as yours, who wants to try to take on

that internal piece, but is looking around, not finding resources or tools, where would you suggest they start?

[00:26:34] **Tonia Wellons:** I think the place to start is with reflection. It really is, it's not a matter of being able to copy and paste what someone else has done, but really doing an assessment of where your organization is presently, and then think about where you want to go. Rome wasn't built in a day, it can become, it can feel a bit overwhelming and sometimes daunting to think about all of the kinds of shifts you might want to make over time.

[00:27:05] You might, you may want to make generally, all the shifts you may want to make generally, but if you think about them in a time horizon, I think it's far, it's much more doable. Our strategy, our strategic plan, which was launched in 2021, is a 10-year plan. And Becky, I am so delighted that my board went along with me on, on moving toward a 10-year strategy.

[00:27:28] It's hard to do all the things you want to accomplish in three to five years. And of course, we'll do a midterm assessment in a couple of years, make adjustments where we must, where we need to, because a lot can happen in 10 years. But it also takes time to make the kind of reforms and adjustments, both internally and externally, and to do them well, and to do them in ways that will stick well beyond our individual leadership tenure or any cycle of a board or cycles of staff.

[00:28:02] **Becky Payne:** And it's fair to say that you feel like that has an impact then on the outside world, that the community feels the changes that you're making internally. It's an investment worthwhile.

[00:28:14] **Tonia Wellons:** Absolutely. Absolutely. It's one of the things that I get a lot of feedback on externally, which makes me really incredibly proud.

[00:28:23] **Becky Payne:** So let me come to the final question and just invite you to share a little bit. about hope. There are so many problems to tackle and lots standing in our way, but when you think about the future, it's pretty clear that you are able to maintain hope and promise. So I'm wondering where that comes from for you when you think about the future, what's giving you hope?

[00:28:47] **Tonia Wellons:** Oh, wow. I always lean to my faith traditions, which are rooted in faith and hope, hope for the future. If I go to, from a historical perspective, we just celebrated my family reunion, Becky, we were, my family is eight generations in this country, up from chattel slavery. And then I just think about people who I work in partnership with and on behalf of, and hope is really the substance of those things that we are, that we're expecting. It's centered. It's, it really is about dreaming of a world and working toward that world. Despite all the things that might be happening

against us, that might be contrary sometimes to the direction we'd like to see them, it's the evidence of shift and change and beauty and relationships and shift.

[00:29:41] That keeps you super excited about our ability to change the world and to leave it in much better place than we found it.

[00:29:49] **Becky Payne:** I am so grateful to leaders like you who recognize and honor the resilience and the profound expertise and capacity in your community and do so much to bring that out. Thank you for sharing your story and the story of the Greater Washington Foundation.

[00:30:06] **Tonia Wellons:** Thank you for the opportunity, Becky. I really appreciate it.

[00:30:10] **Becky Payne:** Thank you for listening to this episode of Unsung Stewards. I want to thank today's guest 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.

[00:30:29] If you liked this episode and want to hear others, you can rate and review this podcast, or follow us on your favorite podcast app so you never miss an episode. 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

[00:30:46] at www.rippel.org. That's www.rippel.org. We all hold deep gratitude for those who have been willing to share their stories with us.