

## Rippel—Unsung Stewards Podcast

### Transcript Season 5 | Episode 2| Yvonne Pacheco with guest host Dr. Ruth Thomas-Squance

#### Stewardship Begins with Listening in South Texas

[00:00:00] **Ruth:** Welcome to Unsung Stewards, a podcast series presented by The Rippel Foundation. My name is Dr. Ruth Thomas-Squance, and I'm delighted to be guest-hosting for this episode of Unsung Stewards. In this season, we've been talking to stewards who are part of the growing movement to thrive together.

[00:00:20] I am Co-Executive Director of the Build Healthy Places Network, a national organization working at the intersection of community development, public health, and health care to advance health equity and collective well-being through multi-sector approaches that center community-led and -owned solutions. My work is one of the many reasons I was so excited to speak with our guest today, Yvonne Pacheco.

[00:00:48] Yvonne is a community connector at Methodist Healthcare Ministries, an organization that is working to advance health equity across the state of Texas. Yvonne's work involves building relationships in communities around South Texas to understand what residents need to thrive and support them in efforts to expand the vital conditions for health and well-being. I sat down with Yvonne to learn how she views stewardship and talk about what it means to bring people into a collective movement to thrive together.

[00:01:24] It was a wonderful conversation that was full of hope and lessons for anyone looking to support well-being in their community.

[00:01:33] Hi, Yvonne, and welcome to the podcast. I'm delighted to have you join us to share more about what thriving together looks like in your work. I know that you are a lifelong resident of Southern Texas, and you've shared how your work and your stewardship is deeply rooted in the place that you live. So I think I'd love to start there with that and having you ground us in place and share a bit more about the city of Laredo.

[00:02:00] What do you love about where you live, Yvonne?

[00:02:02] **Yvonne:** Hello Ruth. It's great to be here with you. I am a resident of Laredo, Texas. Just in case y'all are not familiar with Texas or South Texas, Laredo, Texas is a border town in South Texas with a deep connection to its

Latinos. That really shows in the way we live, the way we speak, the way we connect with each other. We're a very tight-knit, family-oriented community. Our family ties run deep here. A lot of us have relatives just across the border in Nuevo Laredo.

[00:02:51] And we oftentimes go visit. It's this mixture of identities, but it becomes one. And that relationship and our relatives and that connection to Nuevo Laredo shapes really who we are. Our identity is this blend of living in the U.S., right, being American, but also staying true to our Mexican heritage.

[00:03:14] We go from English to Spanish in one sentence. We're very unique in that way, and I grew up to be very specific in the south side of Laredo, which is an area of Laredo where there's a lot of folks that are still experiencing a lot of challenges. And, regardless of all those challenges, there's still this strong sense of community.

[00:03:37] My parents actually still live there—in the same place where I grew up. There's a lot of pride; there's a lot of resilience. And to go a little bit further, just to give you a little bit of background, my dad immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico—from Monterey, Mexico. And my mom is part of a migrant farm-working family.

[00:03:58] She grew up—spent most of her childhood traveling to Wisconsin with her family to work the fields. *En la pisca*, which is the way, you know, I remember her talking about it in the fields, harvesting cucumber. Both of them come from very close families where family is in the forefront.

[00:04:19] It's stronger than anything. My parents taught me the importance of working hard—not just my parents, but my grandparents—of speaking up for what's right and to always push forward even when things feel impossible; even when you don't have the system in your favor—you have a bunch of odds against you.

[00:04:39] They really taught me about work ethic, about speaking up, following your dreams and working hard. And that's something that I carry with me. Those are values that have shaped who I am, how I see life, and how I connect with others—especially when being out in community, in rural communities, in neighborhoods that have a lot of beauty in them, but a lot of challenges as well.

[00:05:03] **Ruth:** Well, that's a really beautiful description, Yvonne. I really love how you've captured that fluidity of the cultures—that really unique sense of identity.

[00:05:15] And there's a really strong sense of time, I think, and that being integral to what you've described, that history and that connection to that. And that leads me to my next question:

[00:05:29] Many stewards have expressed that connection with place and time—and how honoring legacies of the past—is a central part of the what as well as the why of their work. So could you share a little more of your own personal journey? You've mentioned some of that that led you to the important work that you are doing today.

[00:05:50] **Yvonne:** Yes, Ruth. When I think about that, I think about the different stories that have been shared with me, by my parents, by my grandparents, my own story, right? Their struggles, the barriers they faced, and, more importantly, their courage and resilience. That stands out. I think that influenced who I am.

[00:06:13] It is because of them I feel called to do this work that I do. I try to do my best to support and accompany those who, like my family, are pushing forward, even when the odds are stacked against them. And that is why I believe and know that when you truly want to create change, it's not just about the data, it's not just about spreadsheets and reports.

[00:06:36] It's about the stories. The stories, the land, the history behind those communities. Understanding why people are living a certain way, why they're making the decisions that they're making, and why sometimes they don't have choices.

[00:06:53] They feel like they don't have a choice, or they feel like the opportunities are limited. It is so important that we understand and we speak to what's important, and we can't do that without listening to those stories, listening to the history, listening to the way of life in those communities. Until we have that deep understanding—that human connection—we're not gonna be able to support them in a meaningful way—a way that means a lot to them.

[00:07:24] Because they're really the ones holding those solutions. They're really the ones knowing what works, what's not working. That is so important. And I think knowing that my family, my grandparents, have shared to me their

stories, their struggles, it keeps me grounded. It keeps me knowing that when I'm out there, it is so important to listen, to listen, and to listen.

[00:07:48] **Ruth:** Thank you so much for sharing that, Yvonne. Absolutely. I love what you were just saying that it's not just about data. That strong connection that we can't do this work without listening to the stories. And I love what you said that lead us to solutions, that importance of the stories, that really connects us back to what you were saying about land, history, people, and that important work, that understanding values of a community.

[00:08:18] **Yvonne:** I do wanna say that when I first started doing this work, going out there, going out to community sometimes, I go to a small town of a thousand in population. Others are 4,000, 12,000.

[00:08:31] Laredo is about 230,000 in population, right? So I go from rural to a little bit more urban, and all these communities, they're different. But one of the things that they all have that is very similar is that when you build that connection, that relationship, you get to learn more about the beauty of their community, those assets, those things that bring people together.

[00:08:59] We make assumptions of what we think thriving looks like for a community that we're not part of. We need to allow those in those communities to dream that up, to think about it. What does it mean to them if they haven't thought about it? Let's talk about it. Let's take a moment and really dream it up.

[00:09:17] **Ruth:** I love that. The opportunity to dream, and what a great learning opportunity for us, as we sort of change that to think about it not just as a nice to have, but a great learning opportunity for us to discover solutions. Thank you. So, you know, you've talked about Community Connector and the work you do. Could you tell us a little more about what being a community connector at Methodist Healthcare Ministries looks like?

[00:09:44] **Yvonne:** Methodist Healthcare Ministries, we are focused on advancing health equity in South Texas. Our corporate office is in San Antonio, Texas, and we serve in 74 counties. That's a huge stretch for an organization that's located in San Antonio with its corporate office. And we have regional folks that work. You know, we have Wesley Nurses, we have counselors, community health workers. But we also realize that, to do the work that we wanna do in a meaningful way, we have to be more present, more engaged.

[00:10:19] We know we hold a lot of resources. We hold a lot of power as an organization, but we also know that the real expertise lives in the communities

themselves. Our biggest goal is to support the people in the community who are already doing the work.

[00:10:35] We wanna learn more about what it is that they're doing; wanna know more about the community. And that means creating space for honest conversations to take place. And that's what we do as Community Connectors. We go into those communities, not trying to bring answers, but bringing support. We're listening.

[00:10:51] We're creating that space for them to imagine, plan out, talk about what thriving means to them, what it looks like to them, and try to connect them back to the different resources and opportunities that we might have at Methodist Healthcare Ministries. We wanna make sure that they understand that we're here, we're one, we're part of your community. We're trying to be present, we're trying to learn from you. And if you need that support, we are here to support and help advance our mission. Our goal of advancing health equity, so that's really the role of the Connector, is building relationships, building trust—which, if we know anything about relationships, Ruth, is that that takes time.

[00:11:36] That takes a lot of time. And more than time, I would also say, it takes openness. To go in there with an open mind and know that these communities are gonna be different, gonna be different to your reality, are gonna be different to maybe what you were expecting to see or maybe what you weren't expecting to see, you're gonna see it there.

[00:11:56] **Ruth:** I really hear from the work you're describing around it being in communities, very on the ground, it's very real. And the communities are of all kinds, you're serving 74 counties. And of course there's gonna be different characteristics and naturally different needs that really speaks to that, what I'm hearing, very intentional effort to acknowledge that in your work. So, in order to get to that nuance—those differences, as you've described—it's very relationship based and I'd love you to share a little more about how you approach that process of building trust, with the different communities. And how does that really help you engage in a way that works that is relevant to each different place?

[00:12:40] Not just engaging in a transactional basis, but making it meaningful. Can you share a little bit about your process or the approaches you have found successful in building that trust?

[00:12:52] **Yvonne:** We are trying to move away, and we acknowledge that moving away from a transactional relationship is very important. We wanna

make it more relational. For me, building trust and communities starts with the mindset, how you approach that community.

[00:13:07] It's a mindset of *unidad*. Which—that means, humility, curiosity. You need to be curious. You—you need to go in there with that mindset that, you know what, I'm here to listen and to ask questions if I'm allowed, right? They invite me in. Let me ask some questions: I questions on their history, you know, their values.

[00:13:34] What is it like to live there in that community that's so important? What's their lived experience? What do you do for fun? What brings you joy? What brings you all together? That shapes how people show up and what they need. It's gonna give you an idea, a sense of who they are, what's important to them.

[00:13:53] It takes time to know a person, but I do wanna say that it even takes more time to know a community. These are people shaped by generations of stories, of struggles, of resilience, and relationships. If you're going to a community of 4,000 population, you best believe you're gonna go to the library—the only small local library they have. And I will share, Ruth, there's so many times that I've gone into that library, and I ask them, “You know what, I'm trying to get connected with somebody from the school district.

[00:14:24] Who would you recommend I speak to there?” And they're like, “Oh, you can go speak to my cousin. She works there.” It's a small, tiny community. Relationships and families run deep, and it's important to show up in that space with that enthusiasm and care—compassion—because it'll be mind-blowing to see how many Gonzalezes are in there, how many Rodrigezes are related.

[00:14:50] So that's so important. So important that you treat everybody with respect when you go in there, because there's gonna be relationships and families tied to one another. I can think of numerous times where I've showed up to a community and they tell me, “Are you guys gonna stick around or are you just gonna leave?” So, showing up consistently is so important. You need to be genuine, and you need to be consistent.

[00:15:14] You're walking alongside them. You value their insights; you're acknowledging and honoring their stories and support the work in a way that actually makes sense to their community, to their reality. That's when trust really begins to happen.

[00:15:31] **Ruth:** I think it's very impactful how you began with mindset—that whole description and process—acknowledging how it takes time. But that you started with this work from a sort of a self-awareness perspective that one brings to that, And you've also brought in honoring what's important to people—it really connects us back to that listening and connecting to the stories that we discussed earlier. Well, you need to be able to hear what—what do they honor? What do they value in order to make that connection? I think that's very powerful. And another piece of this connection work, you're making an important contribution to the movement of this thriving together.

[00:16:19] And part of this movement-building is bringing in others into that movement. And I think of it as an extension of what you're talking about: building trust; connecting with folks in communities. How does that feed into your movement making of bringing others because we know we can't do this work alone?

[00:16:42] **Yvonne:** When I think of that question is when I think about stewardship, right?

[00:16:47] I think that we sometimes forge—or we don't acknowledge enough—that work is happening in those communities. Whether it's having big impact, or sometimes in very small ways, but it's happening and they're the real stewards.

[00:17:03] And we need to really be more in tune that there's trust in those communities. When you're speaking to some of those people, other people trust them because they're from their community. That's when people collectively come and become one. I can share with you that I walked into a community, Laredo, it's a community. It's Zapata, Texas. It's and it's a small little community. And I remember walking into it, it's probably my first or second time going in there, and I met a lady.

[00:17:40] There's always gonna be somebody that's gonna know everybody. This lady, she holds power. She holds influence in her community. People know her, people trust her, and that's important. So I know that if I have a good relationship with her, she invites me into the community, I will be welcomed in that community. I will be trusted. So, every relationship, every encounter matters. It doesn't matter who it is. I've gone to that same community, gone to the—it's a small-owned business. It's a bakery. Have coffee, stop there.

[00:18:20] So you see how in those small communities, every relationship matters. Your strongest connections—strongest relationships that you'll have



when you're doing that work—will be from those people that are trusted there. And that's how people will continue to follow and continue to show up. They do it because they trust, in this case, Ms. Patty. They trust Patty, so they will trust me. And holding space in a respectful way is important—because you don't wanna tarnish or damage Patty's reputation and influence and judgment, right?

[00:19:01] Because that, that will reflect. So it's so important to—to approach those communities with care and those relationships, with care.

[00:19:08] **Ruth:** That's such an impactful statement. Every encounter matters. I really appreciate that. And understanding it's not all about titles, it's about connections, relationships. One question I have, the vital conditions we know are a group of different foundational aspects that communities need to support thriving.

[00:19:31] We know that they can look different in each community. So, what does leaning into the vital conditions look like in a community? What is different about this approach from health and well-being initiatives of the past? What are we sort of really talking about here?

[00:19:48] **Yvonne:** When I visit all these different communities—rural communities—conversations often start with urgent needs. Things like food, access to mental health services, access to health care. A lot of times people in these rural areas are in survival mode, right? Trying to make ends meet. So naturally the conversation starts there, but I see my role as supporting people connect those urgent needs to something bigger.

[00:20:20] That's when the vital conditions come in. The vital conditions that are supporting that long-term health and well-being. They don't know 'em by vital conditions, right? They don't know 'em by that framework—that word. Oftentimes, people haven't had the chance to really think about the bigger picture, and how the vital conditions that are necessary for people to thrive—for places to thrive—how they're connected and how they should be there, right?

[00:20:49] That's where I see my part. That's where I see my role: helping people connect their everyday struggles to the systems behind them, and then gently encouraging them to think about what could be different. A lot of times I do ask if politics and those power dynamics in your community didn't stand in the way, how would your community look different? What would you have that you don't have right now? What would you expand on that maybe you already have a bit of but you want more of? That's where a lot of the conversations begin to happen.



[00:21:27] That includes them being able to dream of green spaces, safe streets with proper infrastructure, stable, affordable, humane housing, things that we need to thrive—things that they need. Things that we all need. It's about acknowledging the urgency while also inviting people to dream, to believe that change is possible.

[00:21:50] That's really my approach when I'm out in community, when I start talking about vital conditions. We can't dismiss the fact that there's urgent needs also that need to be addressed. So, I try to allow them that opportunity to talk about that, but also to engage in dreaming up, thinking about the bigger picture, and what could look different.

[00:22:15] **Ruth:** Yeah, I really appreciate that thought of creating space to step outside of the everyday, you know, to creatively think about alternatives in community together, um, to think about what could be possible for your own community.

[00:22:32] And, and that's a special place to be when people trust you to share their dreams.

[00:22:39] **Yvonne:** I will add that—when I do ask that question—that's when you really get to see the beauty of every community and the differences and similarities they have.

[00:22:50] Because when they start, they take a moment to realize that, you know what, let's talk about this. I can dream this up. It's just nice to hear from them. Not to hear from anybody else what we think that community should be, but actually coming from them, directly.

[00:23:10] **Ruth:** Absolutely. So lastly, as we think about creating a future where all people can thrive, we've talked a little about what brings a community joy—that question you ask, what brings you joy? What gives you hope in this, Yvonne? That we are moving towards that kind of future that creates opportunities for all people to thrive?

[00:23:36] **Yvonne:** Two things come to mind. One is I find hope in the work I get to do at Methodist Healthcare Ministries working alongside passionate, passionate team and with so many committed partners, a lot of our partners are anchored in those communities, right? They're there. Reminds me that change is possible. We're learning together—sometimes stumbling, sometimes failing forward—but always trying to get better at understanding the root causes of health inequities and how we can work more closely with community.

[00:24:13] And that gives me hope. But I will say that what also comes to mind and what gives me the most hope is the people in the community. Their love for where they come from, that fight, that willingness to fight, to ensure that fair and just opportunities are there for everyone. Even when systems weren't built for them, even when they're in a situation where they're trying to survive, they still continue to show up. They still continue to push forward. They care deeply about building something better—care deeply about one another, about the community, about their community. Being out there, listening to those stories, to their stories, seeing their determination, reminds me of why this work matters.

[00:25:06] So to me, it's just makes sense for us to take that moment and listen to what they have to say because it's a lot. That brings me hope.

[00:25:16] **Ruth:** It's a beautiful way to end. It's been a real pleasure speaking with you today. Yvonne. Thank you for joining me and thank you for joining the podcast.

[00:25:26] **Yvonne:** Thank you. Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure.

[00:25:29] **Becky:** Thank you to Dr. Ruth Thomas-Squance for hosting this episode of Unsung Stewards. I want to thank Yvonne, for joining us and for her work to improve the community she serves. I'd also like to thank the team that makes this podcast possible. Molly Belsky, Laila Hussain, Mark Navarro, and Amanda McIntosh.

[00:25:47] 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 visit our website at [www.rippel.org](http://www.rippel.org); [www.R-I-P-P-E-L.O-R-G](http://www.R-I-P-P-E-L.O-R-G). We all hold deep gratitude for those who have been willing to share their stories with us.