Episode 3: Supporting Trans Lives Through Care and Community in Iowa

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HOST: Hello everyone. I'm Dashae Engler, and this is a dignified life podcast. Our last guest is Max Mowitz. Mowitz is with one Iowa, Iowa transmutal aid fund, and is a trans doula in Iowa. I've never heard of a trans doula before, but basically it's a non medical companion who provides advocacy work for trans people. Mowitz explains it much better in the episode, though,

I wanted to highlight a state that is in a contingent transitional growth period, because this formerly moderately blue swing state has become more and more conservative over the past few years.

Iowa, civil rights effectively removed gender identity on July 1 of this year, this means transgender and non-binary people no longer have specific state protection from discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations and education. Mullitz is doing tons of work to protect trans Iowans and their rights. This ties into my question from the first episode. Is it the progressiveness of the state that is moving us forward or the people that are pushing us forward? Let's get into his story.

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GUEST: So one Iowa is one of the statewide LGBTQ advocacy organizations in the state of Iowa. You talked a little bit about the progressive history of Iowa, as well as, of course, Illinois. And we were actually founded as a marriage equality back in 2005 and so at that time, we were fighting for marriage equality and same sex marriage in the state of Iowa, until we got it in April of 2009 so I really think a lot about our history, because while we're not a marriage equality organization any longer, we have been doing work now for about 20 years in the state of Iowa, and so it's given us kind of a long look at what the work can look like.

But in terms of what we're doing in our day to day, we do a lot of healthcare access work, which is, of course, very relevant to your work and your experience and what you're looking at. We also support gender affirming healthcare providers as well as individuals that are looking to try to access gender affirming care. But we also have an LGBTQ Leadership Institute. We do a lot of LGBTQ inclusive workplace work as well, and we have the biggest LGBTQ affirming resource guide in the state of Iowa. So that's health care providers, mental health providers, and resources for folks that are trying to get support in the state.

So I think again, all of these things intersect with what you've shared. And then one Iowa action is our 501, c4 that fights the anti LGBTQ legislation at our state capitol, which has definitely put us on the map as a red state in the past couple of years as well. And of course, that connects

with the issues that we're seeing with health care in the Midwest in general, and the way that our neighboring states, like Illinois are impacted by our legislation as well.

But of course, outside of my role at one Iowa, I'm also a board member for the Iowa transmutal aid fund, so we provide people with free money for gender affirming care, and that includes traveling out of state to a place like Illinois for care. And I'm a gender and transition doula, so I often help folks try to access care outside of the state in that way as well.

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HOST: Yeah, you have a lot of like, experience with this. The like, what I find very interesting too, is like, the trans do look you talk a little bit more about that and like, how people are able to find you, like, how that is a form of gender affirming care as well. Like, yeah, absolutely.

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GUEST: Well, for those that are listening that don't know what a doula is, most often people are aware of birth and postpartum doulas. So typically, a doula is a person that supports someone through like pregnancy, childbirth and then postpartum. But there are actually doulas for many different types of transitions, including adoption and other things that folks might experience even there's like death doulas as well.

So when I first learned about doulas in a past role, I thought, Oh, well, a doula is a person that supports someone navigating a system through transition. Trans people need doulas too. And now this is a I had not met another person that did this work in Iowa until very, very recently, and it's something that I'm starting to see in other parts of the country as well.

But the way that I practice and do the work is that I take the knowledge and information that I have access to through my job, and also through the work that I do in my personal life, and I try to make that information available to trans folks. So an example would be that if somebody reaches out to me and they are trying to access top surgery, for example, I can talk them through the best surgeons in Iowa. I talk them through ways to call their insurance to make sure it's covered, ask the right questions I have, like scripts for insurance.

So it's a lot of more, like logistical support and how to access the care. But getting access to gender affirming care is really challenging and confusing, and so my role as a doula is to really break down the parts that feel overwhelming and help folks feel more empowered to access the care that they need. And notably, I do that work for free, so I don't charge doula clients

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HOST: Because you said you work with the trans mutual aid fund as well, so you're able to receive money in order to help people get these gender affirming cares. Can you talk about the importance of like, why that's important, especially in a state that doesn't necessarily give a lot of government funding?

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GUEST: Yeah, absolutely. Well, I think this is actually even shifted in the past couple of months. But when I worked with folks to found the Iowa transmutal aid fund in 2021 there was a decent amount of demand for this kind of support. And so essentially the way that we function now, after many years of kind of curating, or, I guess, like creating really good systems so that we can support folks, is that we give out about $10,000 a month in aid to folks, and we don't have any paid staff or a working board, so there's not really, like, any like, basically, when We get mutual aid funding from individuals in the community, that money goes straight back out to support trans folks.

And so this is particular importance, because right now, what we're seeing in Iowa is that after a budget change at the end of this legislative session, the Iowa legislature cut Medicaid funding for gender affirming care for trans Iowans. And so this is very important, because now trans Iowans that are covered under Medicaid can't access any kind of gender affirming care in the state of Iowa.

So we've actually seen this summer, a huge increase in the need for mutual aid funding from the fund. So I think that's why mutual aid is so cool, is that we kind of exist outside of the typical nonprofit structure, and we're able to provide people with that basic day to day support, and because we do this every single month, often, we are more reliable than insurance to have folks access the care that they need.

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HOST: I also wonder, when it comes to, like, doing these things for people, and then, like, there's no government funding in it, there's a barrier, because we don't want to make it seem as if being trans is a an illness.

But then there still should be opportunity for trans people to be able to get that gender affirming care?

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GUEST: Yeah, I think that's fair, especially the way that the conversation around gender affirming care has been made more political in recent years. I think that a lot of folks now kind of conflate being trans with mental illness as a result.

But to your point, gender affirming care is like a lot of health care that's not necessarily mental health care in nature, in that in the same way that we would want to make sure that a migraine

sufferer has access to migraine medications so they can live their best, happiest, healthiest life, and that's not a mental illness. Same thing with trans folks trying to access gender affirming care.

It's not necessarily that the care itself is like the thing keeping us from being mentally ill, or you know that being trans is the mental illness, but rather that gender affirming care is a way for us to live our best, happiest, healthiest life and not just survive.

AD

Do you identify as a feminist? If not, that's okay. My name is Caroline Siebels-Lindquist, Senior culture editor for Urban Plains magazine and my podcast, Bad Midwest Feminist is out now. On the podcast, we're exploring what it means to be a feminist in the central Midwest and whether or not feminism is on the right track. Listen now to me and my guests, a politician, a professor and an abortion advocate, decipher what separates Midwest feminism from every other region.

Visit urban-plains.com to read the story.

AD

09:42

HOST: You so the name of this podcast is called a dignified life. What do you hear when I say a dignified life?

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GUEST: Well, I really like the name of the podcast. I mean, I think that's such a cool name. Because I think especially with the work that you're doing, you're really calling into question what it can look like to lead a dignified life in this moment, and from my perspective. And so for me, when I hear that, what I hear is a persons like empowerment and agency, and I think that's really important.

And the thing that comes up for me in this current moment in life is because we're seeing the ways that our state and federal government are trying to disempower LGBTQ individuals, but more importantly, disempower and take away the agency and autonomy of marginalized people in general.

And so I think that the focus on dignity and a dignified life is so cool because it feels like, in many ways, the people that are in positions of power are trying to strip many marginalized folks of their dignity. And so I love that this is kind of the focus and approach that you're taking, because we don't necessarily talk about the ways that we're losing access to that, like autonomy and dignity, but also the ways that trans people very much preserve their own dignity.

Regardless of what's happening at the state and federal level, and that can be everything from still accessing the gender affirming care that you need, all the way to choosing to stay out or

choosing to come out as trans even when it's unsafe, all the way to deciding to do things to Take care of yourself even when the world around you tells you don't. You don't deserve that. So to me, that's a dignified life in this season of life.

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HOST: That's beautiful, makes a lot of sense. So another question that I wanted to ask was is, like when it comes to the trans community, is there something that like people that aren't familiar or don't know too much about it can do to give gender affirming care, because gender affirming care doesn't, it doesn't have to necessarily be medical. It can just be, it can be interpersonal. So I think yes, I would some tips and pointers.

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GUEST: Yeah. Well, it really speaks to the way that you're approaching this work, that you asked that question, right? Because you're, I love this question. It's it's so good because you're right. I think that, especially in my Doula work, but also in my work with the mutual aid fund, also at one Iowa at the end of the day, I'm like, I am interacting with a lot of trans folks and helping them to try to survive our current moment. And so I mentioned all of that to say that what I have seen, and the thing that I try to focus in on, is what is within someone's control and what is going to make an impact within that control, right?

So if you can't access gender affirming care because you're a young person under 18, what is the thing that you can do that's going to make you feel confident? So when I'm talking someone through that that's everything from I'm going to get gender affirming clothing, I'm going to get a gender affirming haircut, which is also something that the transmutal aid fund provides aid for. It's not just like hormones and surgery, it's also laser and electrolysis, gender affirming haircuts, gender affirming wigs and clothing. All that stuff is covered, because even if you can't access testosterone, can you get to a binder? Can we get you some better clothing that makes makes you feel good. Sometimes, if a person's not out to anyone, I might talk to them about, like, building a gender affirming playlist that really makes them feel like themselves, when nobody in their life knows that they're trans yet.

Or, like, is there a piece of jewelry that can be hidden that makes them feel like themselves? Is there stuff that they can read about online, or books that they can check out that can help them connect with their identity, even if they can't present at all? So I think that's why I love your question, because I think that those things are the most important right now, when people are losing access left and right to the care that they desperately need, and there's, of course, lots of trans people that don't ever use gender affirming care and have these other ways of affirming themselves. So yeah, I would say, when I'm talking to someone, what I'm usually going to try to figure out is, like, what's going to make them feel the most like themselves within their kind of sphere of control?

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HOST: Yeah, I think, as the podcast says, a dignified life, everyone deserves it, and there's just with Lily's story, she was just so vulnerable and honest, and it towards the end, there was a lot of hope. What hope can you,bringing?

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GUEST: Yeah, I I'll say this, I think the best part of my job is also the worst part of my job. And by that, I mean that because I see all of the bad stuff up close and personal, right? I'm in the subcommittees. I'm in the hearings. I'm seeing this legislation being passed, even though it's unpopular. I am talking to trans folks and their families every day, and they are scared and afraid, and a lot of what I do is very heavy. And also, in addition to that, I'm seeing people say, This isn't my Iowa, this isn't what I believe in, and this isn't okay, and diving in for the first time ever. And so the thing that gives me hope is that moments like this, as scary as they are, are catalyzing for a lot of people. And I think that I have seen so many people step up and share their resources and knowledge and their courage, more so than I've ever seen in the history of my activism of now, over 15 years. And so to see people show up and say, This isn't what I believe in, that is the most hopeful thing, because we need more folks that are going to show up.

And we need people that can connect with their own qualities too. You know, sometimes I'll talk to people that are like, well, you know, I'm an accountant. What really can I help with? And then I say, like, oh, actually, we need accounting support for this organization. We need your, you know, knowledge of excel in this organization, like there's something that everyone can tap into that's supportive. And so I see more people than ever stepping up and being empowered in that work too. And I think that that's also really special.

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HOST: Yeah, is there anything else that you want our viewers, our listeners, to know?

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GUEST: Um, um, yeah. I mean, I think the only thing, and I kind of mentioned this, but I think it's especially relevant with the work that brave space does, is that, like I've talked about a little bit with mutual aid, I do think that mutual aid is such a cool part of what it can mean to have a dignified life, because so often for trans folks, but for anyone who needs support to access it, whether it be through large nonprofits or charities or the government, they have to jump through all of these hoops.

And even to access gender affirming care, you have to jump through a bunch of hoops to show that you're really trans and you really need this care and things like that. And so I think mutual aid is so powerful because it cuts all of that out. And it is neighbors helping neighbors. It's solidarity, it's not charity. And I think that that's so important, because when a person applies for aid from the mutual aid fund, they're not asked to go through a bunch of interviews or questions,

and they are just they receive that funding with relatively low barriers, which we're very proud of. And I have so many conversations with people that get funding from us for the first time, and they're just shocked that they weren't, you know, put through a bunch of hoops to access what they really need, and that's because we trust each other. That's what mutual aid is about.

And so I think that mutual aid is a really important ingredient in dignity in this current moment, because it cuts through all the bureaucracy and all of these different barriers and says like, who are you as a human, and how can I support you as another human. So I think I just wanted to mention that as well, especially because that's so much of the work that brave space does as well.

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HOST: Yeah, well, thank you, Max. We really appreciate you being on the podcast, and then yes, can you let us know how we can support your organizations?

19:01

GUEST: Yeah, Absolutely. Well, if you are interested in being connected with what's happening in Iowa, I actually recommend folks sign up for action alerts at one Iowa action.org action alerts are when we send out information on what's happening at the Capitol. So if you maybe don't live in Iowa or curious about the work that's happening there, we're able to keep people updated.

And if you find yourself feeling a little overwhelmed by reading through legislation and trying to understand what it all means, our Director of Policy and Advocacy is really good at breaking it down in those emails as well.

And of course, you know, donations to one Iowa, for example, go to keeping up our resource guide and connecting with healthcare providers that can help bridge these gaps. And then, when it comes to the Iowa transmutal aid fund, of course, we have a website, which is Iowa transmutalaidfund.org, But you can also just donate to the Iowa transmutal aid fund, and that money goes straight back out to trans Iowans as well,

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HOST: If you made it to my last podcast. Extra special, thank you. You're a real one. I hope you learned something new. I know I did. I learned that agency, self preservation and community makes the difference. I truly think it's the people that, if we work together, show up when it's hard, we can make a change and help everyone live a dignified life, because it's the standard. Let's keep all in mind, stay learning and love each other. I'm Dashae Engler, signing off for the last time, and this is Urban Plains.