

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 0:03

Hello and welcome to the second episode of Toward a More Just Future, a podcast from Rutgers School of Social Work. My name is Marla Blunt-Carter, and I'm an assistant professor of professional practice at Rutgers School of Social Work. Today, I will be speaking with Sarah McBride, an activist and elected official, who is a member of Delaware's General Assembly. Sarah is the first transgender state senator in the country, making her the highest ranking transgender official in United States history. For this, and for many other reasons, Sarah is no doubt a changemaker.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 0:53

Hi, Sarah, thank you for joining us today.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 0:56

Hello. It's so wonderful to be with you.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 0:59

Oh, my goodness, so can you briefly share with the listeners your journey to get to where you are as a Delaware State Senator?

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 1:11

Sure. Well, my name is Sarah McBride. I am the brand new, or relatively brand new at this point, State Senator for Delaware's first State Senate District, which includes parts of our biggest city, Wilmington, all the way up to the Pennsylvania state line and the community of Claymont, where Joe Biden spent several years growing up. And I was born and raised in this district, my story, my journey really starts here in this community.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 1:39

Right.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 1:40

I was incredibly lucky. I was raised in a loving family, a supportive family, a progressive family, and I had a world of possibilities before me, because of that luck and that privilege. But buried deep inside of me was a struggle with my gender identity, a struggle with who I am, and a struggle with how I fit into this world. And from a really early age I was dealing with that I was thinking about that, and the tension between who I was and what everyone thought I was between who I wanted to be and what seemed possible.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 2:25

And so I kept my gender identity buried deep inside, and I really found an escape, in reading. And in particular, and reading history. But more than an escape, I found hope and reading those history books, because I saw as much as I was struggling with how I fit into this world. I saw in those history books that the story of every chapter was the story of advocates, activists, citizens, and a small group of courageous elected officials who would band together to deepen our sense of equality and justice for more and more people who for too often had been pushed to the margins and into the shadows.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 3:06

And so I found hope in those history books. And I saw in reading those stories, that politics was the place where you could make the most amount of change, for the most number of people, in the most number of ways possible. And I thought perhaps, if I could make a change in my community, if I could build a world where more people could live fully and freely, whether there's someone like me or someone else, that perhaps that would be a fulfilling life, even if I couldn't live an authentic life. But as I grew up, I saw that the only way to live a fulfilling life is to live at your core and authentic life.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 3:41

And I got involved in politics, and I got involved in advocacy and community service. And I saw that as fulfilling as those things were professionally, they didn't heal that pain in my own life. And so I came out started doing advocacy here. And in that advocacy, I saw our state at its best. But I also saw how we fall short for far too many people. And I wanted to serve this state in a way that would help us to live up to our values. For more and more Delawareans, to ensure that we left less and less people behind and to eventually build a state that is truly a state of neighbors in both values, but in action as well.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 4:24

And so when the opportunity came up to run for office, having worked in advocacy, having seen so much change here in Delaware, and then eventually as the National Press Secretary of the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest LGBTQ civil rights organization, I saw what I saw in those history books that change is possible.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 4:43

Right

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 4:43

When politics remains a place where you can do big things and make a real difference in people's lives. And so I decided to run and ran for about a year and a half and fortunately, the voters decided to entrust me with the responsibility of representing them.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 4:57

Resoundingly. You had 90% of the vote. But you just explained so much about your journey. But let's go a little deeper because you didn't just come out, it wasn't as easy as just- oh, and then I just came out and then I came back to Delaware. That was a difficult process for you. You were the student body president at American University, if I'm not mistaken. And, here it is in an op-ed in the newspaper, and you're telling everyone welcome Sarah McBride. How was that? How did you find the courage to finally reveal to the world, the individual that you have always been? Knowing that you had a reputation of being a political operative? And dealing with the fears that maybe you would be closing a door because of people's inability to accept who you really were? How did you do that? Explain that journey of finding the confidence and the courage to be Sarah McBride?

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 6:15

Well, it was 21 years in the making. I think one of the challenges we have in conversations around gender identity that differ from conversations around sexual orientation is difficult for people who aren't trans to understand what it feels like to be trans and in the closet. And for me, the closest thing that I could

compare that experience to was a constant feeling of homesickness. And that homesickness like I said, it plagued me, all of my life, it plagued me every single waking hour of every single day.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 6:50

You know, they always say that it's hard to be what you can't see. And growing up, there weren't examples that I could see of out trans people who are happy, healthy, doing what they love, finding love, and in a community they necessarily love. The examples were not present in the media, the examples weren't present in the news, the examples weren't present in my own community, physically, here, in Wilmington. And so the idea that I could be out and not just be involved in politics in some way, but be out and find fulfilment and happiness and love, it seemed so impossible that it was almost incomprehensible.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 7:31

Right.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 7:32

But at a certain point, I found that as painful as it may be, to come out, it would pale in comparison to the pain of remaining in the closet.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 7:52

Absolutely.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 7:53

And in many ways, I'll be honest, before I came out, I had to give up. I had to give up on a future. I had to grieve.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 8:05

Right.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 8:06

And go through it in many ways, my process to coming out was in many ways, it's a process of grief.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 8:12

Yeah, and acceptance.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 8:13

And right, in the final stage of that grief is acceptance. I had to grieve, a future I hoped for, that I feared would not be possible and only when I could get through that stage, the stages of grief and come to a place of acceptance, of potentially a future of discrimination, and a lack of opportunity and, you know, a void of love. You know, despite all the privileges, I still have, fearing that that would be the reality once I could come to a moment of acceptance, a place of acceptance, of that grief for what I hoped would come in my life, I was then able to accept myself. And frankly, I mean, what a tragic thing.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 8:58

Yes.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 8:58

That anyone has to

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 9:01

Go through that process

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 9:02

And give up on their dreams and their hopes, for whatever reason, in order to live authentically. But I did and so when I came out, I was scared. But in many ways, I was expecting the worst. Every single step every single person I came out to every single reaction I received. While the fears were understandable, they proved unfounded. And I came out to my family, close friends and then on the final day of my term as student body president at American I came out to my campus and my community back here in Delaware as trans. But the responses for me as powerful and positive as they were also only highlighted how lucky I was.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 9:56

Right.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 9:57

Because those experiences remain the norm for far too many trans people, for far too many people across our country, across our world, of varying identities and backgrounds.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 10:11

Well, Sarah, I was gonna say, so did that give you even more of a passion to be a stronger trans advocate and activist? Because of your experience of coming out and being one that was positive, but knowing the history of so many others that do not have a similar experience? Is that one of the things that led to you working on the equality Delaware program, or initiative, the laws that that were just not fair.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 10:56

It is. The recognition of how lucky I was in coming out, it led me to work on the ultimately successful effort to pass a non-discrimination law here in Delaware, protecting trans people from discrimination and ultimately led me to work in national advocacy, helping to helping to draft and formulate the Equality Act, which is our movement's top legislative federal priority.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 11:27

Could you explain that to the listeners? What exactly is the Equality Act?

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 11:31

So, the Equality Act is a comprehensive LGBTQ equal rights bill that would finally add LGBTQ people clearly, undeniably, and explicitly to our federal civil rights laws in employment and housing and public spaces and education and health care, basically making it clear that LGBTQ people cannot be discriminated against throughout daily life. Because right now, we have a recent Supreme Court decision that does interpret existing laws to protect us, but that's subject to being overturned by future supreme courts. And it remains open to Antiochus LGBTQ politicians and judges seeking to deny that. And so this

would send a very clear message make it undeniably, permanently clear that LGBTQ people are protected from discrimination, no matter where they live, and no matter what area of life they're participating in.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 12:27

And so, I got involved in that advocacy, and then ultimately decided to run, because of a different experience that taught that showed me the exact same lesson. And that experience was serving as a caregiver to my husband, Andy during his battle with cancer, which ultimately chose life. And in both of those experiences, there were obviously a lot of lessons I learned. But one of the top lessons I took away from those experiences, were as hard as they were, for as much of life as I have jam packed in the last 10 years of my own life, for as difficult as they were, they were still relatively easy compared to the experiences of so many other people. And I barely made it through both of those experiences.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 13:13

And I know that without any layer, any one of the layers of support, of privilege, of luck, of opportunity that I've been afforded, if any one of those single layers had been removed, I don't know that I would have been able to make it through. And so many people don't have those same support, those same opportunities, those same privileges. And so I'm motivated to make sure that, you know, everyone's gonna face hardship in their life. It's the moral question before us is, what do we do to support them through that hardship?

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 13:46

We can't eliminate loss, we can't eliminate tragedy, we can't eliminate hardship, what we can do is we can provide better support, we can make life a little bit easier for people. And my goal is to try to make life just a little bit easier so that people can get through that hardship like I was able to get through that hardship.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 14:01

And so now here, you are in a position as an elected official, to create policy, to shape policy, to do that, and that's really exciting. And so, as the first transgender, no, the highest transgender elected official in the country, okay, that is huge. And is that a lot of pressure? Is that- do you feel a sense of responsibility that you didn't feel prior to being in this position now? The highest in the land. Right. So everyone is looking to you, and you are 30 years old?

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 14:51

Yeah.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 14:52

That's a lot of pressure. You know, and that is certainly why you are definitely a change maker. But what does it mean to you? Being the first, a lot of responsibility, that's a lot of pressure.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 15:06

It is. It is. And, you know, I certainly feel that it's, it doesn't matter if I'm the first if I'm also the last.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 15:16

Right

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 15:16

And I do view my job, part of my job as not just leaving a Sarah-sized hole in the wall, but to take this moment to try to bring down all of the walls and barriers that stand in people's way to fully and equally participating in our society, including in our democracy.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 15:38

Right

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 15:39

And, you know, I I though also know that as much as I have a responsibility to the LGBTQ community, the only way I can fulfill any of the responsibilities I have, in whatever symbolic or sort of trailblazing role I have, the only way to fulfill those responsibilities is to do the best job I can in the job that I'm in for the constituents of this district. And so, on a day to day basis, that's really what I'm thinking about. That's what I'm focused on. It's not, you know, how do I, I'm not thinking about the title or the fact that I'm a first I'm thinking about doing the best job for all of my constituents, including my trans constituents, and knowing that if I do that, I will do justice, for the broader communities that I also have a responsibility to.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 16:35

Yeah, you're focused on the work.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 16:37

Exactly

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 16:38

On the work, and there's a lot of work to be done. And so here we go, you are now a part of the most diverse, and definitely the youngest group of legislators ever to be in Dover. How's that working out for you? What committees are you on? Are you working with individuals that are like minded? Or is it difficult? What is the work like in Dover?

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 17:10

Well, it's been one, it's an incredible privilege, I really, I have a perhaps a romantic view of public office. In that I believe that every elected position is a position of public trust. And in that role, you have a moral responsibility to do as much good as you can, for however long the voters will have you in there. It's not any other position, it's not any other role, it is a unique privilege and a unique responsibility. And if you don't spend every single day, for as many hours as you can, trying to fulfill that responsibility to the people who elected you to future generations, recognizing that you, all of us, are part of a story in the history books. If you don't do everything you can to fulfill, to write that story and to fulfill those obligations, then, I think you should look for other work.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 18:20

Yes, I agree.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 18:21

And so, I have a really sort of deep, I'm not I'm under no illusions as to the flaws of our government and to the flaws of politics and electoral policymaking and all of that. But I have a deep reverence for these

positions. And so, I bring that with me and I know, so many of my colleagues share that that reference. And I think the historic diversity we have the youth we have that coupled with the returning members really makes us uniquely positioned to meet the times and the scale of the challenges we face. Because at the end of the day, diversity and government isn't a luxury. It's a necessity to a healthy and long-lasting democracy, because you can't craft effective solutions to the challenges that we face if you don't have the full diversity of that community at the table.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 19:21

That's true in technology, in business and in politics. And so, you know, I'm really optimistic, and I'm loving working with my colleagues. There are certainly disagreements that colleagues have, especially when we're talking about colleagues across the aisle. But I think one of the things that I have always tried to perform is a recognition and live by I should say, but performing my duties in my work, is a recognition that you can be bold and bring people together all at the same time.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 19:57

Absolutely. So the 2020 election had a very high youth turnout. I met you when you were 16, 17 years old, involved in politics. But what do you attribute the high turnout in the 2020 Election to? What happened? How do we get everybody excited? Especially the youth- how did that happen? I personally think, in large part, having candidates like you, but what are your thoughts on that?

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 20:36

It's a great question. I think there are a number of things that contributed to that. One, it was to your point, the historic diversity in candidates we saw people want to vote for people that that see them that that hear them that understand their experience, and their pain, and their hopes.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 20:56

I think two, ironically enough, the pandemic for states to make voting more accessible. And we see that one mode when voting becomes more accessible, more people participate.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 21:10

Absolutely

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 21:12

So, I think those are two of the contributing points. Three, of course, Donald Trump's shadow loomed large. And the harm and the frustration and the fear people had around his election in 2016, in his presidency, I do think was a motivating factor for a lot of people.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 21:34

So how do we keep the engagement? How do we secure just that level of civic involvement for future elections?

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 21:51

You know, I think this is always this is a perennial challenge we have, right, it we see time and time, again, that people turn out oftentimes out of anger and an opposition. But then once their candidates get

elected, turnout decreases. And I think that that's for two reasons. One, there are people who end up saying, okay, we've elected the right people, our job is done.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 22:19
Right.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 22:19

And, you know, they're there, it's summed up in that sign "if Hillary had won, I'd be at brunch right now", right? But you saw some of these protests. And that is, you know, an unfortunate perspective that some people do have. And I think we have to do is we have to recognize one that the Donald Trump and Donald Trump-like elected officials are a symptom of a larger problem. And that problem did not disappear. In November. It didn't disappear in January, it didn't disappear on January 20, there is still work to do. And the only way to prevent people like Donald Trump from getting elected again, the only way to address the underlying problems, whether those problems are racism, sexism, misogyny, whether those problems are our sort of the institutions and the health of the institutions we have, whether it's trust, whatever those contributing factors are. And I think it's a combination of varying combination of all of those things. We have to stay involved to address those issues. Otherwise, we will see people like Donald Trump get elected to the presidency again.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 23:35

The second is, though, something that I think is on us as elected officials, which is that when we get elected. And if we don't fulfill that sacred trust, if we don't meet the promises that we've made with action, people will say, it's not worth it. People will say the system has led me down once again, and it is beyond repair. It is beyond my contributions. And I am going to now self-select out of advocacy, activism and our politics. And so, we have responsibilities elected officials to deliver.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 24:11
Right

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 24:11

In order to keep people engaged in order to demonstrate that there's a reason for advocacy.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 24:17

Right. And so, they the voter wants to see results. They want to see that their choice for representation is acting in a way that is beneficial to them. So, speaking of someone that is working very hard to fulfill the voters, requests for good representation. I want to talk a little bit about your connection to the President of the United States. Being from Delaware and knowing the family well and having him write the foreword to your book that was released in 20...

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 25:09
...18

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 25:10

Correct. Let's go back to 2016. And your speech at the Democratic National Convention. I know that President Biden referenced that, as well as your relationship to his son, Beau Biden, in his foreword in

your book, what role has the Biden family played in Sarah McBride's success? And how important was it to have him write the foreword to your book?

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 25:59

It was an incredible honor. I think back to you know, my 12 year-old 13 year-old self, if I had told me at a young age that Joe Biden, I mean, this is when he was still U.S. Senator, if I had told me that Joe Biden, U.S. Senator Joe Biden, would write the foreword to my book, I wouldn't have believed it. But I think what was so powerful about that was it was essentially the longest trans-specific public statement ever made by a national elected official. And now to have the person who wrote that serve as the President of the United States.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 26:46

I mean, beyond what that means to me personally, I see every single day people talking about in the trans community how powerful it is to know that the President of the United States wrote the foreword to a trans woman's book, about his personal relationship with her. Just how incredibly, both comforting it is, to know that someone in that position sees us in that kind of way. I mean, literally just sees us

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 27:14

Yes

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 27:14

But also, to know that commitment, and to, to see that he doesn't just see us, but recognizes the importance of our lives and our cause. I see that every single day, the Biden's have been an incredibly important part of my own life. As you mentioned, I worked for Beau Biden, President Biden's late son, during his campaigns for attorney general in 2006, when he was first elected, and then on staff in 2010, when he was reelected. And Beau, was the real deal.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 27:47

Yeah

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 27:48

I was, uh, you know, Beau was decent and kind and humble behind closed doors as he was out in public. And I mean, it is noteworthy when an elected official period, is that real.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 28:04

Yes

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 28:04

It is particularly notable when an elected official who was brought up in the spotlight, that Beau was brought up in, you know, in a family that, you know, everyone in the state knew them right. For him to be so real and kind and compassionate and down to earth. It's really a testament to who he is. I'm also friends with Ashley, she's the same way.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 28:33

There's a there's a there's a just inherent goodness, in members of that family. And I always whenever I hear vice president Harris talk about President Biden and how she first sort of saw President Biden got to know President Biden through the eyes of Beau, that's very much mirrors my own experience. And a lot of times that, you know, the mythology behind our national figures is just that a mythology. It's not real, but the story of Joe and Beau is, is real, right? It is so authentic. It is that the love between them is a love between a father and a son that I don't know, that I've ever seen at that sort of that depth and that profound level of connection.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 29:16

Yes. I was gonna say authentic is a great word to describe your book, and how you know how honest in real in in beautiful, almost poetic. How you write and tell your story and share the most intimate parts of your life. What inspired you to write and to be so vulnerable? What inspired you to make this wonderful book that really shows authentic leadership?

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 29:57

What I think for me I've always felt that if I'm going to tell a story, I should tell an authentic story. And that includes moments of vulnerability. I think it's our vulnerability that shows our humanity.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 30:14

Yes

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 30:15

That elicits people's empathy. And we shouldn't require people to bear all in order to be treated with dignity that's an impossible standard. But in recognizing that our vulnerability is in many ways, beautiful and powerful, that it's in some cases, and in some cases, in many ways, our superpower. I think, you know, for me, it's guided my advocacy, it's guided my work. And I think there were a couple reasons why I wrote the book one, I wanted it to be a primer for folks about some of the issues and about trans rights as a cause. But in writing it, you know, it was after the 2016 election, I was pretty dispirited. My hope was that it would also do what it did for me for the reader, which is that it would help restore a little bit of hope that would remind people that change remains possible. And then it's oftentimes in our biggest challenges, that we take our largest steps forward.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 31:20

That's wonderful. And it kind of leads me to one of my, my second to the last question. Do you feel hopeful about the progress that we've made in the fight for equality and social justice as a whole? Do you feel hopeful?

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 31:41

I do. You know, I think the challenge that we have, for those of us who fight for progress is to never be pacified by our progress, but to never lose track of how far we've come. I think there's a disturbing trend, in our fight to- it comes from a good place- in our effort to see everyone's pain, and our effort to articulate very clearly all of the very real problems that we have as a society and challenges that we face and prejudices that remain and exist. I think, though, there's a disturbing trend, to ignore, to scoff at and to mock, the very real progress that we have actually made.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 32:35

Exactly

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 32:36

And I frankly, think it's inherently unprogressive to do that. And I'll say that, and I believe that's true for two reasons. One is, I think it's progressive, to honor the work of the advocates and activists who've come before us. And too often, what our contemporary dialogue suggests is that those advocates work their sacrifice in many cases, they're giving up their lives in pursuit of justice didn't result in anything, that it was all in vain. And I think we do a disservice to them and their efforts and their legacy by minimizing the outcome and impact of their work.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 33:21

That's one reason the second reason why I think it's inherently progressive, to recognize the progress we've made, is because hope is a necessary ingredient for continued progress. If you lose hope, if you look at history and see no progress in that story, you will lose the hope that progress remains possible, and therefore the energy necessary to continue the fight. And so, I think it is a self-defeating proposition to pretend like we haven't gotten anywhere now. It's never enough. We have to keep going. We have to always be clear eyed about the ongoing challenges, we can never forget the fact that we have demonstrated that change is possible that we have made that change, and therefore we can do it again.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 34:05

Wow, Sarah. I wanted to ask another question. But I'd rather end on that note, because you know, you do honor those that have come before you and you inspire those that work alongside you, and motivate us to work even harder because of your example. You are a change maker. And it is an honor to speak with you, to know you, to work with you and thank you so much for talking with us today. You're the best.

Sarah McBride, Delaware State Senator 34:39

The honor is all mine. Thank you for having me.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 34:42

Aw, you're very, very welcome.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Rutgers School of Social Work 34:49

Today, State Senator Sarah McBride shared her thoughts and experience on leading with authenticity, resolve and hope. Her activism and work fighting for social justice speaks to the values of social workers and that's why she is in the spotlight.