

THIRD WAVE FUND

English Transcript

Mic Check! Podcast

Episode 03: The Value of Leadership Transitions

Guest: Rye Young, Executive Director of Third Wave

Guest Host: Pidgeon

Total Run Time: 43:49

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Tara Tabassi (00:00):

Can you say Mic Check?

Various Speakers (00:00):

Mic Check, Mic Check, Mic Check, Mic Check, Mic Check. You're listening to Mic Check, a podcast featuring conversations with young women, intersex, queer, and trans folks of color about what it's really like on the front lines and back lines of the fight for gender justice and how listeners can best support grassroots movements.

Musical interlude featuring Nina Simone (00:22):

Honest duty, as well as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times.

Tara Tabassi (00:27):

For over 20 years, Third Wave has funded youth-led activism and organizing across the United States, and its supported emerging organizations that lack access to philanthropy. We believe that young women, intersex, queer, and trans youth of color are vital to all movements for justice.

Musical interlude featuring Nina Simone (00:42):

I think that is true of our painters, sculptors, poets, musicians.

Tara Tabassi (00:49):

Third Wave Fund exists because the precise communities who experience the bulk of oppression still exist in the margins of philanthropy.

Musical interlude featuring Nina Simone (01:00):

That to me is my duty.

Pidgeon (01:05):

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[inaudible 00:01:05]. Third Wave.

Monica Trinidad (01:05):

[laughs] Oh my god.

Rye Young (01:08):

Were you being an orca in the ocean, being like Third Wave?

Pidgeon (01:13):

I was saying Third Wave.

Rye Young (01:15):

As an orca? or this is not a developed idea?

Pidgeon (01:19):

And that's a perfect segue...

Monica Trinidad (01:22):

into how amazing Rye is and how much we're going to miss Rye.

Rye Young (01:25):

As a very professional boss, let me tell you.

Monica Trinidad (01:40):

So this conversation with Rye is going to be really important. It's for the archives and it's going to be on the value of leadership transitions. I think that with Rye on their way out, I think that it's important to have a conversation that I think a lot of people don't have, especially in the philanthropy field, nonprofit world about how important it is for us to have leadership transitions for our sustainability, for growth, for our longevity, especially when we're trying to emphasize the importance of young people of color leading, right?

Monica Trinidad (02:14):

I'm so sad you're going to be leaving, Rye, and I'm so excited for this conversation and I want to also say that we have a guest host today, which you already heard talking. Our guest host today, since Tara is out of town right now. We miss you Tara. Our guest host today is the former youth

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leadership coordinator and communications and operations manager at Inter/Act, which is a former Mobilize Power Fund grantee. Let's give it up for-

Rye Young (02:39):

And badass organizer and activist.

Monica Trinidad (02:41):

And badass intersex activist organizer, Pidgeon.

Pidgeon (02:49):

Thank you for the proper New York welcome. My name's Pidgeon. Hey, thank you for having me and I'm excited to interview you, Rye. This is going to be something that I can learn from and I'm just really, really happy to be here. So Rye, what was it like moving from intern to executive director at the Third Wave Fund, and I was wondering, did you feel mentally prepared for that leap?

Monica Trinidad (03:13):

That's also a really big question. So yeah, let's start with the first [inaudible 00:03:19].

Rye Young (03:18):

Let me just say-

Monica Trinidad (03:18):

Go ahead.

Rye Young (03:19):

Okay. The first thought that came into my mind was that it didn't feel like I went from intern to director because it wasn't that linear and there were so many steps in between, and so one of the things that was the bigger transition was actually going from intern to staff and realizing being a staff person who's salaried at a nonprofit is something that takes a lot of learning how to do, and when you're an intern and you're surrounded by people who you feel are so superior to you, literally are, they just know so much more than you. When you're an intern and you're in that space and you're like, I really don't know my craft. I know some things, but I do not know how to do them. So it was a lot of just coming in and just feeling like I just feel so unworthy to just be here in the space with you.

Rye Young (04:12):

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And I wasn't thinking about my work and my labor and paying me for what I do as much as I was thinking about, I can't even believe this organization exists. I never thought that I would be able to be in a space like this. I thought I'd be pushing papers and doing assistant work after school with almost no relevant skills aside from short order cook. So I was just grateful, and then it becomes different when you're an employee and you're like, wait a minute, this is a J-O-B. I have to figure out how to work in a place. It's such a different vibe. So it's just a very different, it's a big shift in orientation and thinking about yourself. It's a weird shift to go from feeling like you don't know anything and you need to talk to everyone to people looking at you to answer questions.

Rye Young (05:05):

Yeah. So I was an intern and then I was a part-time staff person and then I was line cooking while I was a part-time staff person. I, along the way, knew that there were so many ways that I was getting experiences and access to things that young people did not get. So for example, I was getting professional development money that I could spend on whatever I wanted before I was even on staff. I was being asked by supervisors, what is it that you want to be? What is it that we can create for you that is going to make you able to do the social change work that you want to do, and then how do we provide that for you and what are the experiences that we can give to you by nature of just being here that's going to launch that, and it wasn't even about doing it at Third Wave forever. It was about thinking about me as a change maker and someone to be invested in.

Rye Young (05:51):

And I think that's really uncommon to get that kind of attitude, that kind of spirit of what leadership development means. It's not just about getting investment to always stay in the organization and bring those skills in and further the work that way. That's something I really wanted to pass on and the way that I try to do management. It's like, well, what are skills that feel really meaningful for you in your life that you want to keep bringing into the world? Sometimes you'll do that at Third Wave and then ideally at some point, you won't because you'll be doing something else that's great, making space for other folks to come in.

Pidgeon (06:21):

There is an importance to thinking of the future and when. I don't think people think of the future a lot, so I'm glad you said that.

Rye Young (06:30):

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Yeah. So I think becoming an ED was a little bit challenging because it's not like other jobs in the sense that it has so much loaded meaning. When I say I'm a program officer, not everybody goes like, I know immediately what that is and I already have assumptions of what your life is like. With a director job, it just feels like a big deal. It feels really scary and in a lot of ways, it is a big deal and it is really scary, but it's also, there's a lot that was really fantastic about doing this. I got to create the work culture that I thought was actually good and we just see a lot of examples of work culture where it's like, what not to do. This is killing staff, and I got a chance to be like, what is going to lift staff up, then freedom, flexibility?

Pidgeon (07:22):

So Elon Musk right now just said to the New York Times, he has to take Ambien to go to sleep and if he doesn't, then he doesn't sleep. Would you say the word culture at Third Wave is a little different than the word culture at Tesla?

Rye Young (07:34):

Monica, what do you think? I don't think that executive directors should always be defining the work culture because we have the image that we think it is. We're not always the best to know, even understand what it's like to work at an organization because we know what it's like for us to be the boss of that organization. It's really different.

Monica Trinidad (07:55):

Did you second guess or did you really have to think hard about making that decision to become executive director because I know I was like, Pidgeon, would you ever be executive director? You were like, no, and then you were like, Monica, would you ever be executive director, and I was like, no.

Monica Trinidad (08:08):

Instantly.

Monica Trinidad (08:08):

Instantly. So what was that thought process like?

Rye Young (08:12):

So I came in at a time when we were facing closure and in fact, we had closed down our operation. We were a C3 nonprofit foundation called Third Wave Foundation and we went through financial hard times that just built over the years and reached a tipping point where we couldn't sustain our model anymore, and it was hard and we had staff get lost and I actually took

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a break from the work for about a year, a little bit more than a year. I started a catering company and I was consulting with a few groups around strategic planning and fundraising, and I got brought on as a consultant to help sunset the work and in that process, I got access to this transition process that was being held by an interim director where the task was figure out what to do with our assets.

Rye Young (09:05):

Because even though we're not getting any grant funding anymore and we're not getting individual contributions, we had assets. We knew that we had strengths and we knew that we had things to pass on and that was knowledge, it was a little chunk of money, not huge, and a database full of people who are just some of the dopest people around, and expertise and in terms of how to run a social justice program specifically for people who've been left out of philanthropy, which is a very important skill set that we wanted to make sure lived on in the world. So we did a request for proposals and every single scenario that we imagined was one in which we would no longer be operational as an organization except for one that we got that came from a fiscal sponsor called Proteus Fund, which is where we're housed now.

Rye Young (09:56):

Which was the only one that gave us an option to rebuild as an independent organization that was nestled in a support system of an institution that was strong and gave us what we needed to imagine the work continuing, if only in an experimental way at first, and so we needed somebody to come in who essentially had nothing to lose, who knew the work really well, and could just come in and just start and just start trying. The spirit of the work was strong and in many ways, we were I think ahead of our time and not benefiting from it. I was seeing, at the time I became director, all these organizations benefiting from their trans inclusion, their intersectional lens, all these things we were doing 10, 15 years before and losing money because of.

Rye Young (10:43):

And I just thought our spirit is alive and well. We have really good reasons to keep this work going. We're really the right people to do it too, and so I just thought, it's not our time to go and so I just had this vision for how we could do it and it was scrappy and it was about grassroots giving and it wasn't about chasing money, and that really came from our grantee partners, interviews with them where when I asked grantees, what do you want to see from Third Wave if we do relaunch or what's important to you if we find a new home, and they were like, well, we honestly don't care if you're giving away \$5 to each group as long as there's a voice of truth in

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philanthropy that can bridge what we're saying about y'all into real professional spaces where people can hear it, and that's what we're missing right now.

Rye Young (11:33):

We see a lot of funders talking about social justice, but it's not in the way that we do and they're not passing along those messages that we need to see to feel like there's someone we trust there. In terms of was I nervous or not sure if I should do it, absolutely. I tried to get people to co-direct with me who threw it back in my face and were like, you're just scared, but you have nothing to be afraid of and I think it was a little bit true. I had nothing to lose. I had only done professionally things at Third Wave and things in the food industry and I was very happy to stay in the food industry. That was my passion is cooking. So it's like I had this opportunity to bring something to life if it could and bring it back to its proper place where it needed to be. It either doesn't work and you tried and good on you and go off into the food service, or it works and it's a miracle and something exists that's beautiful and needed to be there.

Monica Trinidad (12:32):

So it sounds like you had a little bit pressure, but you also just had a lot of people that had faith in you and because you had been with Third Wave for so long already and you really had that vision and you had the support, both of those things combined, the vision and support I think are essential to being in a leadership position. So in this time, did you have any mentorship as an ED? Were there words of wisdom that you carried with you in your work?

Rye Young (13:01):

I'm somebody who likes to go deep with my friends, really wear my heart on my sleeve. I'm an open book and I ask for advice and take in advice all the time without even realizing that's what's happening because it's just kind of how I am, and so along the way when I was talking about this with folks, without even knowing it, I was going to people who had been involved for a really long time and they were my support system, and I think about Angela Moreno who was on one of the founding boards of Third Wave. She was just like, dude, I believe in you so much, and she was just the kind of advice being like, you don't need my advice in this moment. I actually think you have a clearer vision for this than you realize, and just people being able to point that out gave me a little bit more confidence in myself.

Rye Young (13:55):

And people I went to to co-direct who were just like, no, I think you have this. I don't think that's what you need right now. Just that kind of conversation was really helpful. I didn't have a coach or I didn't have any money for myself to think about support systems that were formal, so it was

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all very informal. Our budget the first year was 80,000, nothing else. So it was really build this ship as we sail it, so to speak, and so yeah, I never really had that early on. I think later, I was able to use our funds for different kinds of coaches and through Rockwood, I actually, Rockwood is a leadership development program, and so one of the things they do is they set you up with this accountability buddy.

Rye Young (14:43):

You go through all this process and you come up with all these big ideas about yourself and your leadership and everything you want to do different in this little incubated week long study and 99.9% of the stuff, you just stop doing because you're back into your groove where you don't take the time to do that. So they set you up with a buddy, you're supposed to meet with them for, I don't know, six weeks or something, and we've met now for over two years on Fridays and just get breakfast together and I think you need that person who's in a similar place as you to be confiding in part so you're not confiding in everyone because when you're a director, you can't just be going around and being like, this is hard and this is hard and this is hard.

Rye Young (15:29):

You have to be honest in how you're really doing because your friend life and your community life, you can't stop being real, but you also don't need to air out your shit and it actually affects people. You need people you can be honest with and be like, I don't know how to handle this donor. I don't know, but you can't be talking on the street about this donor. So you have to figure out boundaries. You have to figure out that the things you say have an effect in a bigger way than when I was on staff in different capacities, and the board is fabulous, our donors are fabulous. Nothing's ever bad. I just want to state that for the record, but sometimes things are confusing. You're like, I need to talk, I need to call a friend.

Pidgeon (16:13):

You said it was 2003 when you guys did the sunset and the transition?

Rye Young (16:17):

Yeah, I came on officially in 2014. So it's been like, I'm wrapping up my-

Pidgeon (16:21):

2014, you said?

Rye Young (16:22):

Wrapping up my fifth year. So I started as an intern in 2008.

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Pidgeon (16:26):

Yeah. Can you lay this out in terms of years and what you were, and now-

Rye Young (16:29):

Check out this timeline.

Pidgeon (16:30):

Thank you.

Rye Young (16:30):

Okay. 2008, I was an intern and then I came on in staff in 2009.

Pidgeon (16:36):

And what was Third Wave called when you were an intern?

Rye Young (16:38):

Third Wave Foundation.

Pidgeon (16:39):

Okay. Got it.

Rye Young (16:39):

Yeah. So we were a brick and mortar foundation with a building and a place and our own C3 and all that jazz. So 2009, I was a staff person working part-time and line cooking, trying to raise money for top surgery, doing that dance, and then I came on. I got the call, I believe I got the call that I got hired full time when I was recovering from top surgery, which was a very, it was a beautiful thing, and then-

Pidgeon (17:08):

Was it weird to work at a fund and also be trying to fund your own top surgery? Were you ever like, can you guys just fund me?

Rye Young (17:14):

No, that wasn't that weird. It was a little bit cool actually to be a trans person running an abortion fund. That's what I was doing when I was an intern, and so there was something really beautiful about being the person giving money away to get people's bodily autonomy met, and at the time,

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I was running it and then I was supervising another trans person who was running it and so we were the only fully trans-run abortion fund in the US and it felt really radical because I was like, the image is always that trans people are asking for services and resources and support to get their basic needs met, and it was really powerful to say we're also the people that raise money and give it away through this deep gender justice love and in a reproductive health setting, which is really important to claim.

Rye Young (18:04):

So that was very meaningful for me. When you're thinking it at three dimensionally about the work and you're trying to hold everything and have this idea of what it means to be successful and be working toward that every day, you have to find the stop point within yourself and you have to create boundaries, which is hard to do I think for many people, and so what was really important for me early on was since I knew that we had nowhere to go but up, which can be freeing, but it can also be really like, so let's go all the way up. It was actually when we were starting to make progress and I was just like, oh, this is going to become a job for not just me. This is going to be a thing. That became really clear towards the end of my first year.

Rye Young (18:54):

And what I started developing was thinking about what does it look like to be sustainable in an organization where it's not dependent on your own ability to set boundaries, but where the work culture and the policies of the organization already anticipates our inability to set boundaries and actually does a little bit of that for us and does expectation management where it's not all about here, manage all this workload and then figure out, incumbent upon yourself to figure out how to survive. So we have to be looking out and recognizing that's a pattern, that's not healthy, that's not good, that's not actually good for the organization or for anyone involved. So that's where I was like, what are the things people are doing, and saw that Rockwood was doing a four day work week. Some state governments had implemented a four day work week. There was so much literature on what it was and also the labor movement was never fighting for five days. It was a three day work week.

Pidgeon (19:50):

And again, you were saying that you guys were ahead of your time and this is another thing because now I hear a lot of people talking about, well, not a lot of people, but I see it more in the mainstream. Is a four day work week better and you guys were, I just remembered you guys do that already.

Rye Young (20:02):

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Yeah, we do that. We've been doing it for four years now or so, and it was interesting because I thought that it was going to be a struggle, honestly.

Pidgeon (20:12):

10 People just applied to Third Wave right now.

Rye Young (20:15):

It's also important that it's not five days of work within four days, which is I don't think positive. It's 32 hour, four day work week so it's still a normal day. It's not stretching to 10. It's still eight hours a week for three days, four days.

Monica Trinidad (20:31):

So I want to shift a little bit to how do you actually lead in a way of knowing you're going to leave in five to 10 years, and was that your mindset when you actually became ED? Did you know were like, I'm only going to do this for X amount of years or...

Rye Young (20:46):

Yeah. I mean, I think about when... I'm a cook so I think in terms of cooking metaphors all the time, so when people are like, how long does this thing take to cook, I'm like, till it's done. I don't think in terms of time in some ways. I'm thinking about process and development and the developmental stages things need to go through, and so for me, I was like, there are some things I know. I want to leave before I'm burnt out. I don't want to be fried to a crisp and holding on for dear life and then jumping off for dear life because I need to survive. That's not good for me, the work, or the incoming people. So I was like, I need to have reserve energy in order to leave correctly. Speaking of reserves, I was like, we need reserves in our bank account. We've been through too much chaos fiscally as an organization.

Rye Young (21:39):

So we built up those reserves to the level I thought it needed to be at to feel good, and then I was like, and then we need a fundraising development culture that's about sustained gifts so that when you come in, it's not like, oh shit, everything left with Rye. Everybody gave one year gifts because he asked them to, they gave. He asked them to, they gave, and then that relationship of giving is all tied up and being asked by one human to give. So I was like, I need a culture where the board is asking, many people are fundraising for us, it's not just one person, and then the kinds of asks we make are consistently about giving monthly and giving annually for three year pledges. That's what we ask for.

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Rye Young (22:18):

So my outro campaign fundraiser is not the Rye Young fund for whatever, whatever. It's a sustainable leadership campaign asking people to give three year pledges and monthly gifts because I want the message to be like, it's not about who's the director, it's about the work, and so when you believe in the work, you give in these sustained ways or you just don't pay mind to the director as much as you do to what are you doing, who are your staff, what is the feeling there? You ask different kinds of questions. So there are organizations that have always been white led and are trying to be like, how do we get people of color up in this place? We know those, they're everywhere. It's like 90% of nonprofits or foundations or whatever and whiteness is in their dna. It's like in their coding.

Rye Young (23:07):

They don't even see it, it's so deeply in their blood, and so for me though, I had a different institution I was leading and it has a different legacy of strong leadership of women of color, and so there were times at Third Wave where I've only had supervisors who were women of color except for an exception of four months with a white woman and everybody else were women of color, and that's not common for white people in the nonprofit field. So it was just a different situation. We've, I think always had majority women of color boards and so for me, the way that transition happens, there's a lot of thought that has to go into me being white, passing off the position to most likely people of color, but it's not the same as when that's never been true and an organization has to think about this is going to be the first director of color, what do we do, or where they're only thinking about inclusion and leadership shift from the top position and no other places.

Monica Trinidad (24:15):

Do you see a relationship between our hiring practices or this transition to our grant making models?

Rye Young (24:22):

Oh, hell yeah. So definitely, and that was a big part of how we set up our grant making and why we even have these reserves in the first place. I don't believe institutions should exist just to exist. I think that the stability that they create needs to translate into stability that we're providing to our community, and so creating a reserve fund was always in service to never closing, never being in dire straits when we don't need to be, but the way that translates into taking an important risk in the field has been, and not hoarding money just to have it, has been making six year grants and so we make six year grants through this program called the Grow Power Fund and these are to groups that have not had a chance really to be invested in long term, but they're

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doing long term work and they're building a vision towards really important systemic change and they're doing work that in many ways, I think is bigger than where they're infrastructure's at.

Pidgeon (25:22):

Is six year grants possible only because you have reserves?

Rye Young (25:25):

Yeah, exactly. So we make these longer grants because we have money in the bank to support it. We have these organizations that are figuring out so many important things in the field and doing intersectional gender justice work across all these different movements, and we want to be their long-term partner in philanthropy that helps them break through glass ceilings. I sometimes have this metaphor in my head of, there's a lot of gatekeeping in philanthropy. We want to be the lock picker that's on your side, trying to figure out what are the gates you want to get into. We might be on the inside of them, we might be in the side of them, or we might have the strategy in how to pick that lock, and so how do we be your accomplice in doing that over a long period of time because it doesn't happen overnight and a lot can happen in six years.

Rye Young (26:19):

It's important that we don't be a foundation that just kind of moves with the wind, but recognizes that this is generations of struggle, but also, you might have an ED transition. You might have a huge turn up in your board or things might go down that are hard for most foundations to stomach, and we see that as part of the work. In our own story, some funders didn't abandon us when we relaunched, those very few and big shout out to Overbrook Foundation who had our back and Elton John AIDS Foundation that came through in the first year. That was huge, but we need to see that as part of developing a field and not a sign of forever failure, and I think that how are new leaders supposed to learn how to do this work if the second there's even the remotest indication of challenge, funders flee.

Rye Young (27:11):

With nonprofits, there's all this stuff about nonprofit industrial complex, which I think is all real, but I call it the philanthropic industrial complex because at its root, that's I think what it is, and when we say nonprofit industrial complex, we flatten out all nonprofits, but a lot of nonprofits exist as organizations that have never taken a dollar from philanthropy or if they do, they're really selective about which ones and they're very protective of their work, and so we want organizations who are coming up in this movement work to not feel like, if I don't take this one grant with all these strings, that there's nothing else for us. That doesn't give you options, that doesn't give you political choice.

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Rye Young (27:53):

So we want to say this nonprofit could be a tool for community empowerment or it can be a weapon, and there's lots of choices along the way and there's so many nonprofits where people come in and they feel spat out, demoralized, degraded, and jaded about the work. We all have seen that before and so we want the groups that we fund in the Grow Power Fund to give spirit back and have the nonprofit be a thing that isn't traumatizing, that gives choice to folks and is another form of empowerment and not disempowerment, and so along the way, they get general operating funds, they get money for a coach to help them be their advocate. Sometimes I think of it as a grant doula, somebody who's in your corner being like, this is super weird and it would be weirder if you knew what to do right now.

Rye Young (28:47):

So let's just be in your corner and help you navigate that, or you could get a grant for six years and end up in the same place at the end of six years. You could be transformed by doing little things differently along the way, and so a lot of the groups we're funding, they want to be more accountable to their base, they want to be more funded by their base, and they want to build that out over time and at the end of our grant, the sixth year of the grant is of grassroots fundraising match to reflect that we don't want to set groups up to fall off a cliff when our funding ends, but we want them to leap into a lot of sources of funding and not just be dependent on one. So in that space too, giving six year grants, we're also saying, this isn't about your ED.

Rye Young (29:38):

This isn't about one leader that we see potential in, which is a lot of grant making is a director building a relationship with a program officer and then that program officer is like, I think you're special. I think you've got something, let's keep talking, and it gets negotiated that way and I've done it myself, and there's this way that it's about, well, who do you immediately trust as a program officer? Do they look like you? Do they sound like you. Do they have the same kind of educational background? What is creating that sense of, I want to meet and have coffee. I want to have a follow-up meeting. I think a lot of it's this bias and a lot of it's about thoughts that if you say these certain things this certain way, you must be doing the work that way or you must be doing solid work, and so I believe as a funder, we need to be looking at not one person, but the whole.

Pidgeon (30:27):

It sounds like you're being aware, not critical, of the traps of individualism and not wanting to, and you know we can fall into that so easily, but you guys have made a conscious decision to not just try to fund, what's it called, charismatic leaders because like you said, when there's king

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making happening, there's dethroning as well and you want to support more a group, a movement, the work, not the individual because that way, the work can hopefully continue.

Rye Young (31:00):

Yeah. I mean, I feel that. I think I get asked a lot now that I'm leaving, people want to know-

Rye Young (31:04):

Yeah, it's kind of like-

Rye Young (31:05):

What's your legacy?

Pidgeon (31:07):

I think we want to know that too.

Rye Young (31:11):

Legacy, and I'm just like, I think my legacy is putting into question why do we think in terms of legacy? That is one of the more capitalist, white supremacist, wealthy person idea of change is one, just even the idea that ideas are original. I'm doing this work and I'm very clear that a lot of it came from my predecessor. A lot of my predecessor, Mia Herndon's ideas, were about her own experience, but also deeply rooted in Black feminist theory and a lot of-

Pidgeon (31:44):

Who's this person?

Rye Young (31:45):

This was the previous director of Third Wave, Mia Herndon, who I believe also was an intern to director. It's unusual, but not for Third Wave.

Pidgeon (31:54):

Started at the bottom, now we're here.

Rye Young (31:57):

Yeah. So I think that I want to be careful about legacy because I think it's so easy to co-op things and I think that there are things I want to recognize about what's happened. I think that I want to be clear that success can't be separated from how we feel. That was really important to me as a

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leader and so when I think about legacy, I'm like, okay, there's an opportunity to define certain things that you don't want to change when you leave that you feel like are important, but I don't think of that as legacy, but-

Pidgeon (32:31):

Can you say what you mean by success can't be separated from what you feel?

Rye Young (32:36):

Well, so for example, when I'm thinking about when I become director and I think about what does success look like, if I feel like I've been completely sucked of all my health and energy and vitality from doing the work, but the work itself appears successful to other people, that's not success, and I think that we need to bring our bodies and our minds into the idea of success and start to frame it that way. If you're hiring and firing and losing staff all the time, but the work looks great, a lot of times, funders don't notice that people leave and have trauma in organizations, but the budget's good and the director's been there and it's stable looking, that's not success and I think that was important to me that we've had a hundred percent staff retention in my time here. We have five staff now and everybody has been on board and-

Pidgeon (33:36):

That speaks volumes, yeah.

Rye Young (33:38):

And so that just matters a lot to me, successes that people from the past feel excited and bought in and oh yeah, those conversations we were having 10 years ago, I see it in the work right now and I see that it's pushed forward or the good parts of those conversations have lived on.

Pidgeon (33:57):

It sounds like you just don't throw people away.

Rye Young (33:59):

Yes.

Pidgeon (34:00):

You know how that call out culture wants to throw people away or someone messes up once or twice, people want to throw them away, and then there's this other model, restorative or transformative justice, that's like, no, let's sit down and work with you, and it sounds like that six year model, which comes from the board, which comes from the staff, which comes from the

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whole ethos of Third Wave is about not throwing people or groups away. It's about committing to them almost like when you love somebody. It's committing to them in that way and seeing them through even their "mess ups," and I think people sense that about Third Wave and I know don't want to talk about your legacy, but I feel like you set up your legacy is great and it is good, and I want you to talk about that and moving forward, you should be able to talk about that.

Monica Trinidad (34:48):

I also think legacy has a bad rap. I think the way we've historically thought about legacy, yeah, it's a little weird, but I think that Mariame, our friend, Mariame Kaba has a really good quote that's in my signature for my email and the quote is, it's "Write yourself into history not because you're vain, but because you're important. Your work is important and you're building off the work of your ancestors and someone will be building off of yours."

Monica Trinidad (35:10):

And I like that because if we're not writing our own histories, then someone else is going to write it for us or it's not going to be told. It's going to be invisibleized and so I think it is... So yeah, I just think not legacy, but legacy, and so I guess with that, are there other things that you can think of that are helpful tips or advice to people to shifting that narrative, especially in the philanthropy field? How do we just switch that idea of this is crisis, we're about to explode, I don't know? How do we shift that to, no, this is a sustainable thing for our movements?

Rye Young (35:44):

That's a great question. I mean, I think that a lot of times, there's crisis in not leaving that we don't identify-

Monica Trinidad (35:50):

Right, exactly.

Rye Young (35:51):

Because there's no moment where we can look to and rally around, shit, that person's never leaving. Shit, that person's been toxic for a while and they are situated. There is an imprint of them in that chair and it's not leaving anytime soon. There is a crisis in that lack of change, which doesn't get identified a lot. When I wanted to tell funders that I was leaving or tell people who are deeply invested in Third Wave's work that I was leaving, yet the typical response is, oh no, and it's a fear based response of who's going to replace you? Who's going to fill your shoes?

Rye Young (36:40):

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And I think that there's a lot of, it seems like it's one of those things where it seems like a compliment, but it's actually speaking to systemic problems of why aren't more people set up to lead and getting access to skills. So yes, it is true when people were like, oh no, what's going to happen? I was like, I hear your fear as this systemic problem in the field and I hear that also, it's a problem with funders not investing in places that have a really strong track record of developing young leaders and likes.

Pidgeon (37:13):

Thank you so much, Rye, for sitting with us today and doing this amazing interview. We've been asking all the questions, but we wanted to know if you had any final thoughts or words or things that you wanted to share.

Rye Young (37:28):

There's a feeling that I had when we put out the job announcement where I felt like, damn, the people that need to be in this job are going to be the same people who tell themselves that they shouldn't do it. There's this overlap of imposter syndrome with the very people we need to lead and they've internalized, a lot of folks have just internalized this message that it's not for you, it's going to be too fucked up, and I think that's real and I think it's one of these challenges that haven't been fully addressed. So the people philanthropy needs especially are going to be those folks who are going to be like, well, they don't want me. I don't know if I can do this.

Rye Young (38:15):

I think that there's other things that felt true for us around, and this is big picture when we talk about we want work led by people most impacted by oppression, but don't want to talk about what that impact actually looks like and how it affects the work. We're talking about trauma and we're talking about trauma doesn't have a place in most professional settings and we don't know how to talk about that, and I mean that in a very basic way, when we see signs of trauma in interviews and people back off and they're like, too much, that person's too much. There's all these ways we see this and so I think particularly when nonprofit leadership has stayed 80% white for the last 15 years despite all the rhetoric and all the conversation and attention around this issue of buy-in for leadership, things haven't changed on a large scale.

Rye Young (39:12):

And I think we have to get good at answering these questions and figuring out as funders, as people, how do we relate to trauma? What does it trigger in us? Why are we afraid of seeing signs of just different ways of being in the world? That really scares people and there's such a narrow path that's allowed for in the professional context that we're in, especially once money's

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involved. There's a little bit like, oh no, you're too much. I don't trust you with money. Your trauma's too real. Will you know how to handle a hundred thousand dollars? That's really so much of what's operating at the level which we don't talk about. With our sex worker giving circle, that was a really big part of a little bit of, if I have a legacy in philanthropy, it's like, given that early on, we had nothing to lose.

Rye Young (40:02):

I was like, yeah, we need to be the funder that's willing to throw our weight behind things that groups lose funding for. You lose fans from, you find out who is a secret turf in your donor pool and then they pull their money like what happened the other day. So I think that those are the things where I'm like, if we don't upset some folks, we're not doing our job. If we keep all of philanthropy happy, we are failing at something because it is not our job to make people comfortable. It's our job to point out flaws in the system that don't get named because people are too afraid, have too much at stake to name them or naming them in their communities, but it doesn't have a way of reaching where it needs to reach, and so I think that's been really an important part of what we do.

Rye Young (40:52):

And then the last thing I'll say is that I really want folks to recognize that so much of the work is being held by so many people right now. So Monica is doing... I used to do social media, website, grant making, fundraising, everything when I was the only staff person and some people still think of me that way, but I really want to point out that we are five people strong, and so there's just this sense of everybody's kind of in it together and so the idea of plucking me out and being like, Rye this, Rye this, this is so amazing. You're leaving, blah, blah, blah, blah. It's like, okay, I accept and I would like to direct your attention to our amazing staff, to the folks who are going to be coming in to the legacy of leadership that's been extremely keen on transitioning out themselves and making space for other people to come through.

Monica Trinidad (41:50):

And you also said something in your announcement letter that we have online on our website, and you said, "I believe Third Wave Fund works best when young people most impacted by our issues can lead and change the work because the philanthropic sector that will get us free is the one that doesn't exist yet," and I really like, that was my favorite line because I think it tells us that we can't... Yes, we are doing amazing things right now, but we can't stop here. We can't just settle right here, and it allows open space to the staff and to the future leaders at Third Wave Fund.

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mai doan and Joy Messinger (42:29):

Hey Joy, what's the Mobilize Power fund? That's a great question, Mai. The Mobilize Power Fund is a monthly rapid response fund for direct action, community mobilizing, and healing justice. We launched this fund in 2015 so that powerful movements can respond to and heal from immediate threats and opportunities with flexible and responsive funding opportunities. Whoa, that's so cool. Who can apply? The Mobilize Power Fund supports groups led by and for young women of color and queer and trans young people of color organizing in their communities around gender justice. Groups don't even need a 501 (c)(3) status or a fiscal sponsor and can even apply over the phone or using a selfie video. That sounds amazing. How do folks get more info? That's easy. Just visit our website at thirdwavefund.org and find more information under grants by clicking the Mobilize Power Fund tab. You can also reach out to us at programs@thirdwavefund.org.