

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Jesse Pierce and Samy Nemir Olivares

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Brooklyn Democratic Party District Leaders Jesse Pierce and Samy Nemir Olivares, where I ask them: How can local politics be more gender inclusive? Welcome to "Getting Curious," this is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited to welcome, we have a very unique episode today because we have not one, but we have two guests and I'm just going to welcome them straight away. We have Jesse Pierce and Samy Nemir Olivares. How are both of you doing today?

JESSE PIERCE [00:00:38] I'm, I'm doing great. Thank you so much, Jonathan.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:00:40] I'm doing awesome.

JVN [00:00:41] Oh, my gosh. Well, I'm so excited that you're both here. And I'm also really excited because you are both Brooklyn State Committee members, a.k.a. District Leaders. advocating for gender equity in the Brooklyn Democratic Party. But before we get into your specific stories, because they're very, very cool. Very incredible. Can't wait to hear about it. I feel, like, kind of a naughty Democrat because I literally, independent of hearing your two stories, just kind of understood what a Democratic Committee was, like, literally two weeks ago. First time I heard about it. I thought I was well versed in politics, I was like, "Yes, State Legislature. I speak three languages of State Legislature," but I never knew what Democratic Committees are. So can you both tell us, a little bit about what a Democratic Committee member does?

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:01:33] So Democratic County Committees are supposed to be organizing structures of voters who organize their own communities. So it start at the very local level. There is four seats for every block. Those are County Committee members. In Brooklyn, we have two male, two female. They run for office. They get very few signatures and they get there to represent their block. Those are County Committees.

JVN [00:01:59] Question! What if like eight people run on those two blocks?

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:02:03] Then they have to go to a ballot and people have to vote, and actually people, there are people, more than four people run, then the voters of that block vote for, for them and then the top winners win. And that's why we will advocate that the top winners, instead of, like, the female and male. And this gender binary rule actually disenfranchise some women because there are only two out of the four separated

for women. So there are blocks in which four women want to run, then only two can win and the two male seats get empty. Actually, New Jersey already last year, two women and nonbinary people sue New Jersey and they got a very victorious decision where the gender binary rule was repealed because the women, more than two women wanted to run in those seats.

So after the County Committee members for every big Assembly District are the male District Leader and the Female District Leader. And there is only 42 male District Leaders in Bushwick, in Brooklyn, sorry. And then it is the chair of the Brooklyn Democratic Party. So this is supposed to be, and then the state, the state Democratic Party, there's another chair and then the National Democratic Committee, which will be the DNC.

So this Brooklyn Democratic Party should be the one organizing, and what is all these people are supposed to be are kind of like a campaign, like a political campaign, let's say that presidential one, in times that are not a presidential campaign. Correct? So after we pass the presidential campaign, these are the people who for the next four years should be organizing people to register to vote, who should be finding candidates to run for office, should be educating people how to fill out their ballots, absentee ballots and doing that ground work. And that's why the Democratic Party fails, because this structure, it is broken and it's not filled, and it is not energized and taking its full potential. If we keep that organizing structure during the four years, then we can actually easily win in the elections. So this is what grassroots people and progressive, we want to make sure that all of these seats are filled and with people and we're energizing and making people to run to fully bring the voices of the, of the people on the ground.

JESSE PIERCE [00:04:16] And I think that, I think that it's normal for the organization to be a little bit different, depending on the, on the state, and then it roll, and of course, very locally. And that rolls up nationally. But I'll say that the, the Brooklyn Democratic Party does encompass all of Brooklyn and there are lots of different parts of Brooklyn. So, so my part of Brooklyn is Brooklyn Heights, Downtown Brooklyn, Carroll Gardens, Gowanus area, and, but there are parts of Brooklyn that are a little bit more, more red or more purple, depending on how you want to think about it, like Bay Ridge and Southern Brooklyn, which is a little bit more representative, I think, of potentially the more rural areas in the United States. People tend to be a little bit more conservative in their views, have more issues with, with phrases like "Defund the police" and, and things like that. So we, I think that Brooklyn is actually a pretty unique space where we have very, very blue spaces, but we also have communities that are a little bit more reflective, I think, of what you see outside of major urban areas too.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:05:30] It happens that the Constitution of New York said, if you are going to have a party that has a gender rule, then it has to qualify for equal representation of the sexes. And this came from advocacy of Eleanor Roosevelt since 1930s. So Brooklyn is one of the only ones who chose to have a gender parity rule. So for the past century, we have only men and women who fill this 5,000 seats, four County Committee members who represent the blocks. So me and Jesse, there's also two District Leaders for every community.

And I am the male District Leader, which I will, I do, do hate the word in there. And it was, one of the things that motivated me to run because it was, I feel discriminatory and exclusionary that all these 5,000 seats have male and female, excluding a lot of our community. So that's the structure in Brooklyn. And these are supposed to be that grass for people that are organizing there in their blocks, their neighbors, and engage them and spread the word of registering to vote, organizing, supporting candidates. So that's the structure that we have here in Brooklyn, which if it's functional, if it's well led, it could be very thriving because Brooklyn is the largest, one of the two top largest Democratic County Committees in the entire country.

JVN [00:06:55] So Brooklyn has one of the two largest in the country?

JESSE PIERCE [00:06:59] Yes, Brooklyn and Los Angeles, I believe are the two.

JVN [00:07:02] Wow. Yes. So essentially, it's how can local governments be more gender inclusive? And so what I hear you saying is in the New York State Constitution, if they chose to make a gender difference in who the representatives were, then there had to be equal representation. But it completely left out nonbinary and gender nonconforming people is what the impact was of this, and that was passed back when, is that, like, an Eleanor Roosevelt era thing? That's what you're saying?

JESSE PIERCE [00:07:34] Yes. League of Women Voters and Eleanor Roosevelt, so, like, the 1930s.

JVN [00:07:40] Which sounds fierce, you know, like when you think about like, we love Eleanor Roosevelt, we, I'm pretty sure, like, the phrase a "League of Women Voters," it sounds amazing.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:07:51] I went to the New School to study human rights just because Eleanor Roosevelt went there. So now advocating to repeal actually that law that she pushed for, which was female participation and inclusion. But the important thing here is that, yeah, Eleanor Roosevelt advocacy to include women is so admirable. It is so

important. And we need to keep increasing female participation. But what we should be advocating for was gender advocacy and equity and that now we understand that that is beyond women. Right? It's all that is impacted by patriarchy and a male-dominated politics and society, which are effeminated bodies, LGBTQ queer people, transgender, gender nonconforming, and anyone who does not feed on the gender binary.

So I think one of the things that local governments can do to make it more gender affirming and respect people's identities that are beyond the gender binary is first to understand that there are more people living outside of the gender binary and for that, hear the Alok Vaid-Menon podcast on this, here, but I think it's eradicating that language, right? Starting with the language, making sure that there is a gender inclusive language that signal that, that you understand the complexities of gender identities and expression, but also removing these barriers of gender like Brooklyn that has only male and female that completely push out people. So.

JVN [00:09:17] So you're both minding your business. You're living in Brooklyn. We're living in New York. And then when did you get into this?

JESSE PIERCE [00:09:25] So I'll say that I guess, just to speak a little bit about my background, I came through politics in like, in very local politics in the summer of 2016. But my day job is in, in technology. So I work at a local tech firm in Manhattan.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:09:43] I was a journalist. I studied communications and I was on TV until the 2016 election when the racist, xenophobic, misogynistic Trump campaign. And I was, like, this is not the way that we should be covering the election and also all these attacks on Hillary that are completely unfounded. And he was then giving a red, green light, right light, green light to Trump and his misogyny. I was-, and racism. So I get very fed up and I say, "I need to live this." So I joined the Hillary Clinton campaign to be a Spanish translator. I didn't know much about politics. I just switched there. And after we lost the presidential election, sadly, I was, like, there's a huge thing happening on the ground, on the, at the community level that we don't know.

The DNC, the Democratic Party literally fucked up. They didn't engage young people, they didn't engage people of color. They didn't change the grassroots progressive eye. And I was, like, there is something at the grassroots level. So I joined the Center for Popular Democracy, very grassroots community organizing. And then I learned through political L.G.-, there are in New York, we have thank God, LGBTQ Political Clubs. So it's a group of LGBTQ people who are literally hearing and pushing elected officials to adopt LGBTQ-inclusive politics. So through there, I heard that the Democratic Party in Brooklyn, and in New York, had something called County Committee. And I need to name Genesis Aquino

because she's a Black, Dominican, Spanish-speaking migrant, queer, that was one of the first one of progressive mind to run for District Leaders, and she only won for 100 votes.

So then I had this idea of, wow, there's this whole world of very local engagement and those seats are empty. To have an idea of the 5,000 seats in Brooklyn, half of them are empty. So there's a huge lack of opportunity there. So I get more involved in the LGBTQ Political Clubs. And one day I saw that my District Leader did not represent our values, that they, the title, it was male District Leader. I was the only gender binary. When I am gender nonconforming myself, and some days I wear dresses and high heels. And some days the last thing that I want to describe myself as is a male. And I thought that was an opportunity, I was like, "Where do I sign up for this? I think we need to make sure that our party, the Democratic Party, is, particularly, reflects those values and reflects New York City."

Brooklyn is one of the most queer spaces. My district is Williamsburg and Bushwick, where all of the artists live and queer people. One of the most LGBTQ diverse in the entire country. And that is not reflective of that. And I thought that the gender parity rule was a challenge that we need to reform to ensure that it is more inclusive. And I decided to run last December for District Leader and it was a leap of faith to make sure that through my campaign, our campaign, I could let people know that gender nonconforming, nonbinary people exist and TGNC folks and that we don't, we don't only deserve a seat at the table, we deserve a voice, a vote. And also we can also lead some of those tables, you know?

So, but right now, we're not advocating for a seat at the table. We're asking to get the front door open because TGNC folks cannot even run for those offices. So I took too-, to finish, I ran for County Committee, which is the tiny seat on my block, and I did not put gender and I, it was disqualified. So it is actually excluding people. And that's what we are advocating for right now, is to repeal that gender binary rule so we can allow anyone, regardless of their gender, to run and represent their, their communities and really serve because of their contributions, not of their gender.

JVN [00:12:32] Yes, and then, so where are we in that fight about repealing that rule?

JESSE PIERCE [00:13:41] Yes, so I think when, one group to mention within all of this is there were six plaintiffs, one of whom was Samy, as Samy mentioned, petitioning to be on County Committee and petitioning in, in New York means gathering signatures so that you can be, run for elected office, essentially. So, and these County Committee seats, there are so many of them and they're so small that for the most part, it's just an act of going out, asking your neighbor for a signature and getting the right number of signatures. And then you are an elected County Committee member representing your neighborhood.

And the, the thing to, because of the way that the, the County Committee seats are organized is the forms that you, you actually are showing, like, "My name is Jesse Pierce. I'm running for County Committee." Your address is on there. And also a gender designation, so male or female, indicating whether you're running for the male or female seats. So what Samy and other plaintiffs, and I say plaintiffs, because they ended up suing the Board of Elections and the Brooklyn Democratic Party, is they filed their County Committee petitions with their signatures without a gender marker, and the Board of Elections threw them out because they didn't have them. And so that's when the lawsuit was filed because they said that they were being discriminated against based on, based on their gender.

And so the, what was ruled by the judge and Samy can correct me if I misrepresent this, but, is that the Brooklyn Democratic Party needed to to sort out these these gender designations and figure out a way to, to stop the exclusionary practice of just male and female genders and keeping people from participating. And so where we're at now is there were, so Samy and I were first elected as District Leaders of this, this past summer and us two, in addition to-.

JVN [00:15:50] Congratulations!

JESSE PIERCE [00:15:51] Yes, thank you.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:15:51] Thank you.

JESSE PIERCE [00:15:53] So we were elected to represent our our communities, our, our Democratic communities, and in addition to Samy and myself, we also have Julio Peña, who's another queer District Leader, newly elected, and then also the president, Jared Arader of Lambda Independent Democrats, which is a queer Political Club, the queer Political Club in Brooklyn. And others are members, are now members of a task force that was created by Rodneyse Bichotte, who's the Brooklyn Democratic Party chair or party boss, and she created the task force in order to investigate the gender issue and basically provide a recommendation on what the parties should do going forward from a rules perspective, in order to allow TGNC and nonbinary people to participate.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:16:47] And I want to quickly add that in that task force, the task force did not have basically very little nonbinary representation, so it was 14 people without nonbinary, barely no nonbinary queer representation. So we had to fight to understand that this panel had to have nonbinary and TGNC, but unfortunately, after our

advocacy, also Jason Walker, who is a nonbinary, also Black activist, was added as well, transgender, Black, transgender women, T.S. Candii.

JVN [00:17:21] And when, has that task force issued their, what their recommendations are yet? Or are we still, are they still researching?

JESSE PIERCE [00:17:28] So we're, we're in a stage right now where we're actually accepting public comments.

JVN [00:17:34] Ooh.

JESSE PIERCE [00:17:35] So tonight and tomorrow, there are two public forums where people are submitting written testimony and also requesting to, to speak to the task force in order to, to state like what, what their preference would be when it comes to the, to the gender rule. And so that's very exciting because it's been a lot of meetings kind of behind-the-scenes. And so now we're actually soliciting public feedback.

JVN [00:17:59] So I just want to quickly try to understand, too, just to make it clear. So the Brooklyn Democratic, the Brooklyn Democratic Party and the County Committee, it's basically if you want to join the committee, what I hear you saying is you have to gather signatures and then you have to sign your name and then like sign, like, you know, if you want to be, like, male or female. And then if you do that and then get enough signatures, then you automatically are on the Committee because there's, like, two spots. But a lot of those are not filled, like in both, like, because Samy, you are, you represent, like, Williamsburg and that other-, oh my gosh, I can't keep 'em. Why does Brooklyn have so many names? No offense. But there's always like 17 bajillion names.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:18:41] Williamsburg and Bushwick. This is where all the gay bars, LGBTQ bars in Brooklyn are in my district. So.

JVN [00:18:46] Yes, I don't want to check my complaining-ness, for someone who's from like a cornfield, it's like so hard to remember, like all the baby, likem they're not baby neighborhoods. They're very adult neighborhoods. It's just, like, very hard for me to keep them, you know, all organized. But anyway. So because I think, I think I'm still reeling from the fact that there are Democratic Committees, not in a bad way. I just mean reeling in the sense that it's like what I'm trying to act like I understand a haircut, but I don't. And then I'm, like, running into the back room to, like, go check, like, you know, look at, like, bobs, on YouTube. So I could be like, wait, how do I do this again? We're going to take a really quick break and then we're going to be right back with more "Getting Curious" after this.

Welcome back to "Getting Curious," this is Jonathan Van Ness. We have Jesse Pierce, and we have Samy Nemir Olivares. OK, so now wait. We were just saying right before the break about how County Committees are made up. So once they get elected, is there four, is it four-year terms or two-year terms?

JESSE PIERCE [00:19:45] So it's, it's two-year terms, same as District Leaders. So Samy and I were elected for two years. And I think the, the grassroots and local organizing and voter education and really just wanting to, to get the turnout of the vote, what Samy was speaking to is, is critical to having a very vibrant, active, and dynamic base of Democratic voters. I think the interesting thing also, too, to point out about New York City and specifically Brooklyn is that all of our elected officials are, are Democrats. And so it creates a situation where in order for-, because the purpose of the public when it comes to elected officials is that we want to hold them accountable to make sure that they are voting the way that we want them to, that they are, they are leading in, in expression of our values and what we say is important.

And so one thing that the County-, and County Committee as a rule, because there are so many people in so many spots, each individual does not hold a lot of power. But it's really about power building and building a base. And so if you get a large group of County Committee members that are aligned, you can have really strong influence on how the, the local Brooklyn Democratic Party operates. And that's the purpose of, of the grassroots organizing and making sure you're getting active members involved. And just as an example, one of the things that County Committee can do is that if, if somebody leaves office before their term ends and again, because everybody in, in Brooklyn and New York City is a Democrat, the County Committee is responsible for picking the Democratic Party nominee for the special election to fill that vacant seat.

And, and since New York, unfortunately, has such a strong incumbent culture, you're one, you're basically picking the person who will win that election because, again, everyone is a Democrat. But you're also likely picking the person who will hold that seat for a significant period of time and elected officials hold, hold power. And so that that's, that's really what we're talking about when we're talking about making sure we want to get active representation and then going back to getting TGNC and nonbinary people open seats to this is we're talking about trying to build electoral power and include those people who have been excluded, by the way, that the Brooklyn Democratic Party is organizing itself.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:22:17] And that's not the only power of District Leaders. I want to say that one of the attentions that why District Leaders are becoming so attention is because in Brooklyn, for example, one of the powers that Jesse and I have, this is an unpaid voluntary position, but District Leaders choose the judges in Brooklyn, Brooklyn

Supreme Court, surrogate court. So when we're talking about racial justice and reforming the criminal justice reform and who gets to abolish the school-to-prison pipeline and all this mass incarceration, it has to, you know, District Leaders have, are a gateway. So District Leaders beyond the rules of the Democratic Party have this, like, alternative power of choosing a District Leader or recommending them. And that's something that we as a progressive District Leaders want to completely reform.

So the role of a District Leader and County Committee members are beyond actually what it is to like local office or the Brooklyn Democratic Party. It is a lot of, it has an impact on people's lives, and that's why it's so important to them. And I want to also add that to complicate, in addition to the Brooklyn Democratic Party, there's also the state Democratic party, and I want to highlight that Emilia Decaudin was the first transgender State Committee member. And a lot of this work also was inspired by Emilia Decaudin presented a gender rule change that, that is also very similar to that, at the state level, there are some gender diversity, that there's more space for be, beyond male and female. And there is a bill in the State Legislature in New York to make this change.

JVN [00:23:56] So one other thing that I hear us saying is because everyone here we're talking about, these elections are determined at midterms and primaries. Right? Because they wouldn't happen like-, correct?

JESSE PIERCE [00:23:09] Yes, that's right. Because they're a Democratic Party position. So it happens in the primary.

JVN [00:23:15] So, and I know that we don't necessarily know how every state does it here, but I wonder if that's a part of why this, the system doesn't work, because if local Democrats in other places don't see that as a reason to turn out and a reason to vote, then there's really no eyes on who is getting elected to these County Committees and State Committees who are so responsible for grassroots turnout. And I think one thing that I hear effective politicians, especially progressive ones like AOC say, is that, like, you have to be on the ground. You have to be, like, chatting to people and having really strong grassroots local engagement, and I think that in a lot of rural communities, especially when it comes to the Democratic Party, like they've just been so forgotten.

JESSE PIERCE [00:25:57] I think it's a really important point that you're bringing up, Jonathan, because there's a, there's a complacency that at least exists in, in New York City politics, because the assumption is that we're a blue state and so that you don't need to pay attention and that the people who benefit from that are the people who hold power and don't want people paying attention and don't want people asking questions and don't want people to participate. And so one of the, one of the exciting things about, you know,

Samy and me and others who are newly elected District Leaders, at least at the very local level, is just, is just getting more excitement about these local races because the, a regular voter has so much more sway over these local races and you, and your, like, donating dollars goes so much farther to these local races and that you basically have much more influence as an everyday voter on very local races, regardless of whether you live in Brooklyn or elsewhere.

And so the idea is just to bring awareness to these positions that can be forgotten and show people that you have real power just by understanding what's going on and, and either running for these positions because there hasn't been a challenger in X number of years and just bringing, bringing that awareness so that the people know that they exist and that, that they can hold, again hold their elected officials accountable.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:26:27] Yeah, a lot of, I want to say a lot of people focus when we have, like, a Republican in another state race, but to add to what Jesse said, not all Democrats come, you know, are created equal. And I think that we need to hold them accountable. And the only way is to bring that transparency, but also attention to these races. And, for example, when we're in a pandemic, you know, and after many years, some Democrats are conservative or very moderate, do not get a challenge or don't have that grassroots accountability. They became, you know, take positions that do not represent the democratic values. Right? We are in a pandemic and we need to cancel, do rent relief, we need universal health care in New York. We need to defund the police, to fund schools and, and many of the social services.

And none of those things are happening because the Democratic leaders do not feel incentivized because they don't, we don't have that kind of structure and pressure built enough to, or they don't listen, because then they know that because they're Democrats, they will continue winning. And what a lot of races like ours and many other challenges, Democratic challengers to recent local races like Democratic Socialists of America, Working Families Party, or independent progressive candidates have been doing is to challenge those leaders and say no, the fact that you're a Democrat doesn't mean that you could stay there and take very moderate stance. We need to make sure that we're representing the values, right? So I think that's the, the point that we're trying to, to make.

JVN [00:27:03] Which is a really good point. And I also, while we're on that point, because I do want to speak more to why having binary elected official positions are so limiting in the first place. I do think that a lot of people listening to that would be, like, you know, we're not big fans of the binary on this podcast, generally speaking, especially if you have to fill it out to like fucking run for something. Which is bullshit.

So I want to, so we do want to talk, but another thing that is just making me think about is another reason why it's so important is that like we had protesters in Manhattan and in Brooklyn getting like, experiencing police abuses, being detained, like, I just feel like there's very much things happening in very blue places that we would think are very progressive that are actually, you know, very much aligned with, like, a moderate sort of, you know, moderate stuff that we don't really, and, like, one thing that I wrote down when you're explaining that, because I mean I think you guys got elected in June because obviously we were having so many protests here, there was so many abuses by the police that just like people just getting, kind of taken off the streets, there is a lot of violence.

So I just want people to know it's like, well, why should I care about these committees? Well, there's, aside from everything else that you've said, what are other ways, what are the hopes for your future about what, the more that awareness gets risen about what committees do and what this type of hyper local politics can do for other communities because other progressive communities need work too, and obviously other rural ones do, so what are other ways that you think that these committees could sway power?

JESSE PIERCE [00:29:40] Yes, so, I mean, I think, I think it comes down to, to relationship building. You know, people want to be respected. People want to feel like they're being heard. And so, and I, we saw clearly with the, with the protests after the murder of George Floyd, especially in New York, people, people weren't being heard. And so they took to the streets in order to raise attention to the issues of the, of the over-bloated NYPD budget and, and from there, you know, defund the police. And then really tangible actions came out of that, like, like, cutting the NYPD's budget within City Council. And there were a ton of, of local advocacy groups that were, that were doing that organizing and bringing that issue to the forefront. I think if, if we're tying it specifically, for example, to the Brooklyn Democratic Party or any kind of local party organization, there was no, there was no statement from the Brooklyn Democratic Party when it, when it came to the Black Lives Matter protests. There, there's no, right now, there's no published platform from the Brooklyn Democratic Party.

And so if we go back to "everybody in this town is a Democrat," we need to, in order, we need our elected officials to, to prioritize issues that affect our daily lives, as Samy mentioned, talking about the coronavirus epidemic, rent relief, both residential and commercial. We're seeing tons of small businesses closed because they just, they can't stay open because, that, people can't visit them. There's, there's no revenue. And the Brooklyn Democratic Party as an organization is effectively vacating the, the conversation and not, and not putting pressure on the, on the people who are in office to, to provide relief to every day Brooklynites. So that's just, I think, an example of politics, not, not doing what they can for, for grassroots or everyday people. And it's, and it's about building those

relationships on the ground. So creating the structures within your community to, to then understand, like, what tools you have to organize and how you can use your voice and then use the, use your toolbox to, to put pressure on people who make those decisions.

JVN [00:32:03] Yeah, I think ultimately that's what it feels like we're missing is like that, that, that ability to communicate across the spectrum of party lines that exist within the Democratic Party. I mean, obviously you two know, you're elected officials that are District Leaders, but like, y'all wake up. Like maybe this is why we're not really chatting that well amongst ourselves, because we're not electing the people, and even in the fight, as Elizabeth Warren would say, about who has these chats about people on the ground. 'Cause the grassroots communication is just so important, otherwise it gets lost. And we're seeing what that lost in translation looks like.

I kind of felt like the National Convention this year was such a good example of, like we're eating ice cream and talking about dogs, but really there's, like, a lot of like much more important stuff that we're not talking about here, and it felt generally disconnected from so many of the worries that, like, my Democrat, like, progressive-minded people were really worried about in the general election, whether it was, like, State Legislatures or whether it was about police budgets or whether, whether it was about really focusing on racial equality. It's like we were still tiptoeing around, you know, trying to make more moderates feel comfortable, like, listening to the John Kasichs of the world, instead of really leaning into what our base is. So that idea of like, I heard someone explain it, like, Democrats run away from their base, whereas, like Republicans tend to run towards it.

JESSE PIERCE [00:33:34] Yeah.

JVN [00:33:34] And so how does that relate to the, your opinions on the state of the Democratic Party's future in general?

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:33:44] Well, politics are local, and if we want to, a thriving, progressive, transformational national Democratic Party or presidential candidates that reflect our values, we need to start at the most local level at that block because it is from those structures of power, of opportunity and engagement and local organizing that leaders grow. And for a long time, the Democratic Party have put there a lot of people that are just using that as a pipeline for power instead of organizing and bringing up the voices of the community. So I think we should be as a vision where all of these little County Committees are filled with people, with regular voters that want to really engage, that want to participate, that want to bring the concerns and the vision that they have for the Democratic Party.

It should not be top-down from a presidential campaign or the DNC telling us that the entire country, what should be their policies. But it should be a bottom-up strategy where we're listening to the neighbors, to County Committee members as to what are they hearing in their communities, what are their needs and that, and I think we could move forward. And I think that's the vision that us as progressive District Leaders are, are pushing through in Brooklyn is that we are here to listen and to push that vision and bring the values of our community, not to decide for them. Right? So I think we, I, I encourage everyone across the country to look at, you know, what are the local, like, structure of powers are doing. And it is not only County Committee. Right? There's also school boards, community boards. Right? There is also this spaces of leadership in which you can accept so much power locally and from there affect some change more, more citywide.

JESSE PIERCE [00:35:35] I just want to add really quickly that I think it takes a real investment by our, our Democratic Party, both locally and nationally in order to create these structures. It takes time to build these relationships. Running for office is, is pro-, it's so hard. Like, I, I have an amazing, supportive partner. I don't have children. I have a job that was very supportive in, in essentially running for an unpaid position like this is, is both expensive and extraordinarily time consuming. I also had an amazing team of people that were helping me every step of the way. But these should be barrier-, these are barrier, true barriers to, to politics that, the, if the party is serious about creating a leadership pipeline and building support from the ground level, we should be understanding all of these things that are structurally prohibitive for, for creating, like, a really dynamic space for, for our politics and then coming up with real solutions in order to, to lift people up, because that's, that's the way that we'll create real change and really help people understand, like, our point of view and bring people in in order to create that change from, from a policy level in addition to a people level.

JVN [00:36:50] One thing I learned from Wendy Davis when I interviewed her about some of the things I asked her about was her time as a state senator in Texas. And she was saying how that is also an unpaid position, in the state of Texas, like, there's no salary for, like, a state senator or congressperson and why that is so, in addition to all the reasons why you just said about it's really cost prohibitive to run and do that full time if, like, but it also really opens you up to, like to just if you're, if there's no payment, it can open you up to corruption. If, like, someone can come through the back door and be like, "Hey, if you-, " because, I mean, at least that's what she was kind of saying, it would actually bring a little bit more transparency if we could pay people for the work that they're doing, because it is, and it also is so limiting to folks who can't afford to run if they don't have a job.

JESSE PIERCE [00:37:44] Yeah, if you're a single parent, if you work strange hours, it's just, it's, it's, yeah, it doesn't allow for class diversity for, it just really promotes people with

different levels of privilege. And you end up getting a lot of the same people representing you because they're able to, to overcome the, the unpaid positions and, and the, and the lack of support.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:38:10] And this fight, and this advocacy of us to ensure that the peoples of all genders are included or have an ability to run for a very local office is very intersectional because we understand that the intersection with a lot of people of color. Right? And that comes from very, Brooklyn is one of the most diverse boroughs in the entire country. Right? So it is not only about gender, it's about race and class. And I think that these unpaid seats that are County Committee members require some time and require some level of access of information. So what we're trying to do is remove all barriers, barriers that are preventing people to actually engage or even know about it. So we believe that not only by removing the gender category, but also, making sure that we proactively, as the Democratic Party, evaluating what are other barriers that people have to engage in these meetings, whether they have to be in person. They're, they're limiting people with disabilities. Whether they are only in English, they're limiting people from many multiple languages, especially in a very immigrant place like Brooklyn.

And whether this, you know, have lack of access to child care, where people that work two jobs cannot attend these meetings, and I think that there's so much that we could do. And that's one of the, the works. And I think the most immediate and discriminatory rule is the gender binary. But I think we can do so much better to include everyone under that tent that is the Democratic Party. And I, to answer your question is like, there's so much that you could do, because there is the two theories of change on when it comes to be an insider or an outsider. Right? And we can protest and we can, like, really criticize the Democratic Party and we could criticize our elected officials to some extent and exert some power from pressure from the outside. But also, we need people in the inside. W

e need progressive District Leaders. We need progressive Congress members like AOC, right? To be inside effecting that change, to putting out, raising their voices. So by people engaging and joining their County Committee, that's what they will be doing, bringing that protest, bringing that complaining and those ideas and helping reform and push your party to that vision that we want to, to achieve. And that's why we need more people to engage rather than become apathetic and, and exclude it. But we understand, particularly for transgender, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary people, the real work and hard work, that emotional labor that that has to be.

So that's what I want to also encourage Jesse Pierce, not encourage, I want to admire and recognize the work of those gender nonconforming and nonbinary people who sue their party and that are advocating taking these fight because it's very emotionally intense and

people should not be going through this to participate, to represent their blood. Correct? So what we're trying here to do is like put all the effort, to lead the way and open the gates for others at some point in the future can just run and say, I want to run for Count Committee. And no one second guess or ask, "What's your gender? Can you tell your neighbors what's your gender or what's your race?" Right? And just participate. And I think that it is incredibly admirable and the courage of all these plaintiffs and, and advocates that are putting this word right now so everyone can, can run regardless of, of those barriers.

JVN [00:41:29] Well, I think we should really talk about that, too, because I think I was so trying to get everyone to understand, like, what a committee is that we didn't even get to talk about that. As you're, you know, wanting to get involved in this fight and leading up to this initial barrier, and I think we touched on it. But I do just want to more clearly put it out there is that the very first thing that you have to do is mark male or female. And I know for every single thing I do as a gender nonconforming person, like, every time I'm forced to do that, whether it's signing up for something or filling out a new form, it's like, it's like, like it's always an emotionally taxing thing. It's always an irritating thing. And so I think when you're talking about doing something like that for public office, it's even more irritating because it's like, just feels like it's something we shouldn't have to be discriminated against at that, we shouldn't ever, but especially in an elected position. So essentially you did, we, how? So, I think, so you, so yes, I guess I just want echo what you're saying is the courage and of conviction and strength that it takes, and the emotional labor that it takes to sue your local party for that inclusion, I just want to say as a nonbinary person, thank you so much for having that courage and for having that strength and for making that stand, because it's such an important one.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:42:44] Yeah, I want people to understand the emotional impact that it has, that, that this discrimination and, yes, the society at large have all these binary rules and division, but that's what we should actually the Democratic Party, especially New York, lead the way that to, to pass a rule, to really signal to the rest of the country how we need to be moving forward when it comes to gender equity that includes and ensure that everyone can participate regardless of their gender. So when you have to run for a seat like in the Brooklyn Democratic Party, that is only male and female seats, you have two options. Whether you feel excluded, discriminated, and withdraw yourself completely and say the Brooklyn Democratic Party or the Democratic Party is not a place for me, or you are forced to lie and you have to choose between male or female, two identities that you do not belong to and really lie and forced to be excluded, you know, exposing the entire borough county with a gender that is not yours. Right? And I think that that's not only emotionally draining, but it is inhumane. Right? And I think that that's what we're advocating to repeal it. And no one should go through that. And so I am very

encouraged for all this, you know, people who are standing up and say, no. I mean, my, I have nothing to do, my gender doesn't have nothing to do with, with my contribution and engaging to run for office.

JVN [00:44:17] After the public comment section when can New York and Brooklyn expect a final ruling on this? Or a more ultimate decision?

JESSE PIERCE [00:44:31] I think, I think we don't know the exact timeline quite yet, but I think that it's, I don't imagine there would be that many meetings afterwards, but it's, I would say it's within weeks is probably a fair guess. So the way that it'll work now is that the task force makes a proposal, a recommendation to the Brooklyn Democratic Party's executive committee, and that's the District Leaders. So Samy mentioned, there are 42 District Leaders that sit on top of the County Committee. And the executive committee make, in this case would pass, like, a rules change, ideally based on the proposal of the gender task force.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:45:16] Well, I want, before we leave, to briefly ask you or talk about the elephant in the room when we're discussing inclusion or transgender and gender nonconforming people, which is the quota, the gender quota for women, which was there to begin with, right? 50 percent women. So a lot of the, of the hesitancy and pressure has come from people who believe that repealing that 50 percent gender quota for women will be impactful, right? Especially from, you know, the, when, when it comes from the thought of trans, trans exclusionary feminists. Right? So our argument is we are also feminist, but we're all, radical intersectional feminism.

What we, the question that we need to ask ourselves is, is it worth it? To have a gender binary rule that, that provides 50 percent of the seats for women, but it's actually excluding and keeping out and discriminating against one of the most marginalized and underrepresented communities, which are all those beyond the gender binary, gender nonconforming, nonbinary and transgender people. So it is, it was a proactive rule, but at the same time it's excluding others. So how do we make sure that we are include-, we're making sure that women are taking into consideration, are represented, but at the same time, we're bringing up other identities, and making gender equity? All genders should matter so, and representation matters so, we don't only share the value of female participation, but also all of the other genders. And I think that that's what we're getting support from in the task force. And we hope that the broken Democratic Party ends up voting for that.

JVN [00:47:03] So what are your hopes for both of your districts and, and what are they prioritizing, heading into this new year?

JESSE PIERCE [00:47:14] So we have a big round of, of city, city wide and City Council races happening in 2021. So the, the, the mayor is, there's a mayoral election. A lot of these positions are term limited. And so it's creating a lot of candidates and engagement within these, these city and some borough-wide positions. So that's very exciting. It's, is wanting to make sure that there are, there's a lot of voter participation there. Also for these city elections, it's the first time that we'll be using something called rank choice voting.

JVN [00:47:56] Ooh.

JESSE PIERCE [00:47:56] Which is, yeah, really exciting. And so, but as it'll be the first time, there'll be a lot of voter education that needs to be done to help people understand they don't just select one candidate. You select multiple candidates based on your, your ranked favorites. And so that's creating a lot, of a lot of energy and conversation in, in our local politics, because most of these races have upwards of, like, five and sometimes 10 and even more candidates. So.

JVN [00:48:28] So it's, just a quick question on that. If there is, because I first saw this amazing graphic about rank choice voting for the Maine Senate race, then I was, like, oh, my gosh, that's how it works? Fun. So if there's like five candidates or like 10, do you have to rank like all of them? Or will it say, like, in the directions, like rank your top four? Or like rank your top three? Or do you have to do all of them? Or is it different every time?

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:48:50] You have up to five, there's ten. You can rank choice five, but you can do one. You can do two, three, how much you can up to five.

JVN [00:49:00] And that doesn't invalidate it. So I guess the bottom line is, like, read the directions. Don't be like my stepdad, RIP, who I loved so much and he was amazing. But honey, he could not be bothered with a direction. And then, like, whenever, like, we would assemble something, it, like, broke. So just be sure to, like, read the directions. It's so important to read the directions, especially when talking about voting.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:49:18] Well, one of, one of other things the early research has found that it increases participation of, of women and people of color and those from underrepresented communities. And we're particularly excited from 2021 because the New York City Council for the next ten years will have 40 new seats out of 50. Right? So we're going to lose all of the LGBTQ council members in New York City, which for the past 10 years have been one of the pioneering bodies of LGBTQ politics in the country. So we're going to lose all of the five currently openly LGBTQ members. So if no LGBTQ candidate

wins for city council next year, we could be seeing a New York City without LGBTQ queer representation for the next eight to, eight years. So we're hopeful that the rank choice voting really helps women, people of color and LGBTQ candidates to come up and really represent their communities.

JVN [00:50:14] New York, no! You better look at these races.

JESSE PIERCE [00:50:19] That's actually one of the reasons why it's so important at, again, at these local levels that we do what we can to support and create a leadership pipeline for TGNC and nonbinary and other queer communities. In order for people to get the experience and, and get these skills. And I'm actually going to take a little bit of a moment to share a personal detail about my run, because Samy mentioned the District Leader positions are, are male and female. And I ran for the female seat in my district. And it was actually, a lot of through the course of my race, too, of being kind of boxed into the female and woman category that I came to realize for myself that, that, that's not quite, that's not right for me and that I fall somewhere on the spectrum. And so I identify as, as nonbinary.

And it was, you know, through the experience of running my campaign and also having these conversations with people and, and kind of broadening and a lot of it too, I think for people who maybe are more exposed to LGBTQ issues on the sexuality side, you know, separating out gender and sexuality from an identity and experience perspective. And that's, I think the potential power that we have within these very local levels is to really diversify who's participating and giving people the tools to represent their community and share their lived experiences, and that's why it's, it's so critical in spaces like this, to be like as accessible as possible and, and create as many opportunities as we can so we can have these really amazing, fierce candidates from a diverse set of perspectives.

JVN [00:52:02] Thank you so much for sharing that, Jesse. That was major. That was incredible. And I just think the important-, as Alok says, and I think this is one of, it's like a shocking sentence, but I think that it's, it's, well, it's yeah. Basically, every bit of violence that we deal with at the root, like, comes from this idea of the binary and the fact that we have been in so many different ways conformed into one of these two camps when in reality the u-, the uniqueness and the humanity that we all have could never possibly be arranged into those two things. And so I think to have that in elections cannot be, and I really thank you so much for sharing that, your story with us and Samy for you sharing your story with us. But I think it's really, it's just such a vulnerable place to put yourself out publicly, and I've never run for office, but I think to do it at all, it's such a vulnerable thing. I mean, you're putting yourself out in front of your peers and asking, asking for something. And I think to bring in gender expression and create and fighting for your right to run in

the first place, I just again want to say thank you to both of you because we need more of you. And I just thank both of you so much for your work.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:53:24] I just want to appreciate and send love to Jesse for sharing that. And like, I think it's just accentuates why this fight is so important. Right? Gender is very personal. It fluctuates, it fluctuates. It's fluid, right? And some day, gender fluid people, gender nonconforming people, you know, feel differently and identify differently and the fact that Jesse themselves went through this process while running for office, it should be very personal, but it also creates some trauma and some pressure that should not be there. So for people like Jesse, for people like you, Jonathan Van Ness, across the country is that we're fighting for this to eliminate those rules because they force an external pressure that we already have living our lives. So when you're trying to help the party, it should not be there. And my message to the progressive world is that, movement is that we should not be fighting only for economic justice or racial justice in a silo. It should be truly intersectional and that should bring up gender justice for, we need to bring gender justice to the conversation and not dismiss it as identity politics. Right? Our identities matter and, like, the way that we identify. And there are gender issues that are beyond some of the other progressive, quote unquote, "fights." And they have this, these stories and these identities needs to be taken into consideration.

JVN [00:54:47] Yes, and what can people do that are listening to this that want to be, I mean, I think we've already talked about this, but sometimes, you know, you just got to ask it one more time. But what can listeners do that want to become more engaged and, and enact more change in their local Democratic Party? Where do they start?

JESSE PIERCE [00:55:11] Yeah, so I think it's, I think the, the best thing, because these, so these organizations and structures do vary depending on where you live and what's been set up. So I think it does need a little bit of research and legwork to understand how those structures are set up. And you can also reach out to your elected officials as well, if they're, if, if they're representatives within that party, they, they surely know where the Democratic Party is and who are the people that are doing the, the local organizing. I think, I think also, if you are interested in a particular issue, just researching advocacy groups that are, that are doing that grassroots local work and just start showing up to spaces, I mean, I think COVID's clearly been a wreck to our society in so many ways, but there is a little bit of a level of accessibility when it comes to these virtual meetings and, and, and parents, and other people just being able to, to show up.

And so I think at least like my experience in trying to insert myself and figure out what's going on, it's, it's doing a little bit of a legwork and then just showing up and seeing what, what fits for you. I think that, you know, one of the great pieces of advice is just like try

things out and take what works for you and leave what doesn't. And I think that there are just so many ways to get involved. And, and like I said before, that these, these local races and local organizations are just desperate for people to be paying more attention and to contribute in small ways. So your efforts can just go so far and you have such a broad influence by just a little bit of participation. So I can't, I can't advocate enough for people to, to try to do the research and just, and just get involved in, in, in local, local party organizing or local advocacy organizing.

SAMY NEMIR OLIVARES [00:56:12] Visibility matters, representation matters, right? So no one else has the views that I have as a Puerto Rican, queer, raised by a single mother, unemployed, right? Living in Brooklyn right now, so each of us have a unique perspective to bring. And I think we could bring that to many other spaces. Usually you say, "Run for office or donate," but there's so much that you can do. I always try to bring out the best of people. So if you do hair, then do hair. Please reach out to Jesse Pierce and say, "Jesse, can I make a makeover for you?" Right? So if you do finances, reach out to your local elected officials and say, "Can I help you with the finances?"

Because you have to try, like in talking about bliss and joy, like I really think that you could provide from wherever you are. There is also school boards. There is community boards. They're like local, like, churches, community-based organizations. They all have leadership positions, advisory boards. And I think being queer and living our true selves, I show up to the community boards, the school boards in dresses and high heels. No one say anything. They just respect me for who I am. Right? And that creates tectonic shift of mind and thinking because we're living our, our truth. Right?

And, like, now, it's not something that, oh, those people down there are like LGBTQ people. No. It's me, I'm here. Right? And I think that that create a mind shift. And I want like, for example, if you don't have an LGBTQ Political Club, you can start one. Like Marti Cummings will be, running for City Council, will be the first nonbinary elected official in the entire New York state next year. Marti Cummings founded LGBTQ Political Club in Hell's Kitchen, in Manhattan, a few years ago. So that's something that people could do. Call your, all your gay friends and LGBTQ friends and say, "Let's do a group and let's see what our elected officials are doing for LGBTQ policy." So there's so much that you could do to really affect change at the very local level, where you're going to change truly hearts, but also minds, and affect policy change.

JVN [00:59:18] Yes, Marti Cummings. Yes, Jesse Pierce. Yes, Samy Olivares. You are killing it. Everyone is just, really I love both of you so much. I'm so grateful for your time. You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Brooklyn Democratic Party District Leaders Jesse Pierce and Samy Nemir Olivares.

You'll find links to their work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on.

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