

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Queer Youth Assemble

JVN [00:00:05] Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited for today's special episode, honey. We are giving you so much energy and so much queer joy, and I'm so excited that everyone is here. Today we have the honor of getting to speak with three young LGBTQIA+ activists from Queer Youth Assemble, a queer, youth-led nonprofit serving queer youth under 25 in the U.S. First of all, I am like, just in awe of y'all. I thought that it was weird and confusing when I was growing up—honey. So I just—hats off to you. I'm so proud of all three of you. Thank you for being who you are. And thanks for coming on Getting Curious. Faith, I'm going to throw over to you to introduce yourself. Tell us a little bit about yourself, please.

FAITH CARDILLO [00:00:51] Sure! So my name is Faith Cardillo. I use she / they pronouns. I am a political activist and advocate based out of New Jersey, and I'm the Head of Onboarding with Queer Youth Assemble.

JVN [00:01:02] Okay, title! And tell us, Alia, tell us all about you.

ALIA CUSOLITO [00:01:06] Yeah. So I'm Alia Cusolito. My pronouns are they / them. I'm 17. I'm a junior in high school in Massachusetts, and I am the co-president of Queer Youth Assemble.

JVN [00:01:16] Oh, my God. I love all these titles. And Esmée, please give it to us.

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:01:21] My name is Esmée Silverman. I use they / she pronouns. I am a chaotic entity based out of Portland, Oregon. I'm a college student at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, and I am 21. I am the co-founder of Queer Youth Assemble.

JVN [00:01:35] Oh, my gosh, I love so much. So y'all are giving us coastal brilliance. We have West Coast. We have East Coast. Also, I know this is a podcast, so you can't see our guests but everyone is giving us strong POV hair, honey. We've got a gorgeous side part. We've got a gorgeous short cut. We've got this half slick-up back, like, Ariana Grande vibe, honey. We got like three strong looks here. I'm so excited. The kids are okay, as they say. So, well, I hope that's what we're going to find out. But it's, it's March 31st. It is International Transgender Day of Visibility and Queer Youth Assemble is organizing one of the largest queer and trans youth marches in history with events across all 50 states and Washington, DC. Okay, that just, like, gave me chills on my triceps, y'all. I am so inspired I can't stand it. So I think Esmée, you said, co-founder. 'Cause I love a title, if you've ever listened to the podcast, honey, like, a PhD, a doctor, like, I love a good title. So is that giving me, like, are you—you're giving me upper echelon honey, you're giving me co-founder. That's, like, that's, like, *the* title, no?

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:02:43] Yes, I co-created Queer Youth Assemble in August of 2021 after a successful launch of one of our first events Let Trans Athletes Play, which was centered around building community, playing sports, and overall just having fun.

JVN [00:02:57] Ah, love! That's one thing that it's like—well, no, ah, I'm letting the youth shine. I'm not making this about me. Shut up, Jonathan. Keep going. Alia, tell us about your gorgeous title.

ALIA CUSOLITO [00:03:11] Yeah, of course. So I'm co-president. My title has kind of shifted over the course of the organization because we've evolved and grown, so it's probably gonna change again soon. But basically, I just have been coordinating the organization as a whole. I'm kind of, I call myself the organized one, and Esmée is the, like, inspiring and leader one. We love to collaborate and have those different strengths. So that's sort of my role, but it definitely, it has changed over time as we've, you know, grown and been able to reach more people around the country.

JVN [00:03:41] Ah, you better grow and evolve! Faith, tell us what you do because you're, like, giving me on boarding, like, vibes, right?

FAITH CARDILLO [00:03:48] So I'm the newer one of the three of us. But within my role with Queer Youth Assemble, I'm in charge of all the new volunteers, making sure they're adjusting to the organization. Right, putting them in touch with the projects that they're interested in and things like that.

JVN [00:04:03] I just think this is so cool because all of the skills that you're using and building now to further LGBTQ liberation and queer liberation are all skills that you're going to continue to use in your lives, in your careers as you grow and evolve. And I just love that you're learning them now and just, yes! So, okay, let's hear about Trans Day Of Visibility mobilization. What do you have planned across the country. Esmée, oh, actually, I think you guys already pre-planned who's going to answer what? So whoever is answering that question, give it to me.

FAITH CARDILLO [00:04:31] So on Trans Day of Visibility, we are currently at over 90 marches happening across the country with over 47 states. And we are growing each and every day. We also have a list of demands for individuals, students, teachers, organizers across the country, where if you're in a hostile area and you can't make it to a march, you're able to still show your solidarity and sign on to our list of demands and stay as anonymous as you would like. So we have different options for different ways people can get involved. We have marches, rallies, school walkouts, anything you can really think of.

JVN [00:05:08] Follow up question. What happens on a school walkout? Like, if you just, like, fucking—like, sorry, if you just, like, walk out, like, what happens? Like, protest, it's your First Amendment rights? Or do, like, the teachers get mad or, like, what's up? What happens?

FAITH CARDILLO [00:05:21] So I've organized a bunch of different walkouts, especially recently, and pretty much I put up an Instagram post, like, "Hey, we're walking out in 20 minutes. Everyone leave through this exit," and we're, like, Okay, cool, let's go. I already told our principals if they get mad, we already told them, it's not our fault."

JVN [00:05:39] Great. That's good that y'all are able to do that and to exercise your right to make their voices heard in that way. I love that. So what are some of the stand out events, like the DC March?

ALIA CUSOLITO [00:05:49] Yeah. So in DC, we are directly coordinating that one. Across the rest of the country, then, we're reaching out to different organizations and individuals. And then now we're also receiving thousands of emails to coordinate marches there. But the one in DC, then, we're directly organizing it. And so we're starting right next to Union Station at Columbus Park Circle on the 31st at 3 p.m. And then we're marching from there to the Capitol. So we'll be at the Reflecting Pool, which is called Union Square. And there's an area there, a grassy area, where we're going to have speeches from some incredible activists from around the country. We're even helping with some transportation costs to fly people in from different areas. So it's really exciting. We actually just got the permit back from the Capitol today. So we have both of the permits that we need, and all of those things are secured. It's been a lot of those kinds of organizing, which is kind of wild to say that I've been doing that as a 17-year-old. Like, it's a little weird. They're probably confused why a high schooler's e-mailing them, trying to get permits. But it's really exciting and I love that we're doing that.

JVN [00:06:43] Ah! Thank you for taking that initiative. I am obsessed. Okay, so what's been the initial response to these activations?

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:06:51] It's about time someone's organizing this. This is incredible. This is amazing. We've been wanting to do this for the past two years. And now that we have hundreds of thousands of people willing to get involved, willing to organize this—warms my heart.

JVN [00:07:07] I love your group's vision for a world where all queer youth are given safety, autonomy, joy and the ability to reach their fullest potentials. What does the world look and feel like to you all?

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:07:20] A world of radical empathy. When we speak about radical empathy, a lot of the times people think of that means, like, literally being willing to hug every single person in the room. But I completely understand that that's not always plausible. I think radical empathy is just simply being able to understand why somebody has certain beliefs. And this is especially meaningful for queer and trans youth who oftentimes go through life not knowing what other people think about them, or in some cases having outwardly negative reactions or responses directed towards them. I envision a world where all queer youth are

given safety, autonomy, joy, and the ability to reach their fullest potentials because that is the baseline. That should be the baseline. We should not just be stopping at rights. We should not just be stopping at a baseline of safety. We should not just be stopping at autonomy and joy. We should be going up the hierarchy of needs until we reach the top, which is the ability to reach your fullest potential, the ability to self-actualize.

JVN [00:08:33] Hmm. And sometimes I feel like people get, or at least I'll speak for myself. Sometimes I feel like "self-actualize." And then I'm, like, "What does that mean again?" Well, you tell us, Esmée, what self-actualization means to you.

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:08:50] I see self actualizing as the ability to do what you want to do in life. And obviously the hard definition we have is as long as you're not hurting anybody else—

JVN [00:09:03] Of course.

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:09:04] Or yourself to a certain extent. But I see it as being able to start up a pizza business, or being able to create art for a living, or being able to make movies and TV shows that feature queer and trans youth characters or being able to go outside after getting top surgery for the first time, shirtless, holding the hand of your partner with your two dogs on a leash just walking across the sunny street.

JVN [00:09:33] Ah! Awww that's so cute, I love that. Okay, I love that. I'm obsessed. Okay Faith and Alia, do you want to. What does it look like for you two?

FAITH CARDILLO [00:09:41] I don't think I could have said it any better than Esmée just did! Like—

JVN [00:09:46] Ah! It was really, like, a mic drop moment about that, too. Do you agree, Alia?

ALIA CUSOLITO [00:09:49] I love how she was speaking about, you know, we need to go past the basic rights because I feel like we've had to spend so much time just fighting for the right to just exist because so many people have a problem with that. For some reason, just of us just wanting to exist and live and, you know, get health care and things like that. But we also want to look past that and see how people can actually have joy and be celebrated and have caring relationships and be fully supported in all areas of their lives.

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:10:22] And that to me looks like having conversations. It looks like being open to discussing things. It looks like open discussions happening between people who identify as LGBTQIA+ and people who don't identify as LGBTQIA+. It's the openness, it's empathy, it's love, it's having discussions, it's having conversations. That is what I see as a world where queer and trans youth are self-actualized. It's a world where conversations can take place openly and freely.

FAITH CARDILLO [00:10:52] And adding on to what Esmée just said, it's a way for everyone to also be comfortable in having those uncomfortable discussions. Because not everyone is going to understand how you identify. And they're not—most likely not going to. But making sure that these uncomfortable conversations can be held in safe ways where we're all able to learn from each other and understand each other better and actually be able to express our true selves without being afraid of the repercussions that come along with it.

JVN [00:11:25] So the vision, again, it's a world where all queer youth are given safety, autonomy, joy, and the ability to reach their fullest potentials. How does that vision compare to the world that we're living in today as the three of you see it? And who's ever taking that question?

FAITH CARDILLO [00:11:40] This world that we're envisioning is definitely something that we want to bring to light with this national march. We have a ton of progress that we have been making over the years, especially since the Stonewall riots, the March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, the security of Obergefell v Hodges in the Supreme Court. Like, all these are landmark events that have made sure that we are able to get closer to this world that we all envision. But we are far from this truly happening in our everyday lives, which is why we're hosting this march, which is why this is so important, because we are at over 400 anti-LGBTQ laws across the country, and it is only the third month of this year.

JVN [00:12:27] It's really alarming when I think about doing Getting Curious on Netflix last year, and I remember that 2022 was, like, the most anti-LGBTQ bills on the books at that time and it was, like, a couple dozen. And now it's, like, so many times higher than that in just one short year later. You guys are involved with, you know, students all across the country. So I would imagine they're hearing a lot of really distressing stories from other youth in places that are having, like, intense things happening in their state legislatures. How are the three of you experiencing this moment and how are people that you are hearing from in other places experiencing this moment?

ALIA CUSOLITO [00:13:08] Yeah, it's definitely it's, it's very heavy. It's a lot to kind of carry around every day, especially when so many people don't even know what's going on, if it doesn't affect them or they don't feel it's relevant to them, they don't even know. So we're going to school every day and maybe dealing with these kinds of heavy things, like seeing another news article that is an attack on your community and your classmates have no idea what's happening or teachers don't even mention it. It's a really kind of complex thing to deal with. Which I think isn't really talked about very often is even if you're not directly being affected by having that health care taken away, there are also kind of those mental effects on folks. We've actually had a mother from Kansas who reached out to us. She'd never organized a protest before, but she wanted to organize one in her area because she had lost her son in the past year to suicide because of fear of this legislation. So even, even when legislation hasn't passed yet, or even if it has, there is that fear that comes with it. And there's just the heaviness that can really weigh on people. And it has absolutely already caused peoples'

deaths. And that's a really awful thing to think about, but it is something that we need to recognize and acknowledge so that people can be aware of how serious this is, that we need to, you know, work towards achieving that safety for all queer youth, because that's not something that anyone should have to deal with.

And no mothers should be losing their children that they already have. And on, you know, on a little bit of a less heavy note. But we've, we've had students email us just saying that they're afraid to go to school because of the harassment they face or things like that. And they're asking us for help on what can they do. And so we give them tips on how they can advocate for themselves. But that's, again, not something they should have to do. You know, we've all had a lot of experience with different kinds of advocacy and getting involved in this. And it's things that we're really passionate about. But there are some people who just would rather not do that and would rather spend their time, you know, making art or spending time with their friends or playing sports or doing other normal kid things instead of having to fight for their rights every single day. So that's a really, really difficult thing to deal with. But on the other side of that is that it's really been amazing to see the response from our community as a whole. I feel like so many people who have never even been involved in advocacy before are now wanting to because they see how important it is and how they can have an impact.

Even though I'm in Massachusetts, we've dealt with folks in my school districts trying to remove books from our school library, and it has really created a division within our community in a way that people don't expect to see in states such as Massachusetts. And I'm really, really fortunate for my school district and for the state that I live in, that those books were not removed from our library, but it did create a really hostile climate for all of the queer people in our area and people of color. And it's been, it's been a difficult thing to deal with. But as I mentioned, the other side of that, there have been a lot of folks that I had never met before now, including some older, lovely queer people in my area who have just kind of appeared and showed up at our school committee meetings in support of us, just come out to say, "What can I do? What do you need from me? How can I help support you?" So that kind of support is really beautiful to see. And I think, you know, there's kind of that dual situation of the heaviness and the things that we're dealing with, but also our community. I feel like throughout the course of this community, we have always shown up when it is the hardest. We're always there for one another and when it's great we're there to support and celebrate one another. So I think that's kind of how I'm experiencing this moment.

JVN [00:16:31] Beautiful. Not to be scare-scared. But you know what I was thinking about the other day? I'm going off script, but, like, when I was your all's age, I used to think, like, "Oh my gosh. When I get a little bit older, it's not going to be like this. It's going to be, like, better." And in some ways, like, it has—like, we did have marriage equality. There has been progress, but there are setbacks within that upward trajectory. This came up for me when you were talking about kids talking about being afraid to go to school because they were in a hostile environment. And I had a very bully-ish, hostile, like, rural-esque, like, sticking out like a sore thumb, like, the only queer kid. Like, I mean, it felt like I was only one. There was a few other

ones, but, you know, like, you know, five, like, out of, like, you know, thousands. But I realized that a lot of the kids that were mean to me then are the same people that are like they grew up to be Marjorie Taylor Greene, like, she's only like three years older than me. Like Lauren Boebert's, like, my age. A lot of the people that were bullies in high school grow up and then they seek positions of power. And I think what's really beautiful about you all choosing to do this work now is that when you do make people aware of these issues, when they are younger, when you can get into hearts and minds before they are so hardened from the propaganda and like the meanness of, you know, people that just don't understand that is really beautiful and your doing the work that you're doing, like, will, hopefully create a world that is better for younger queer people because you're getting in this fight so much earlier. So I just think that's, like, really beautiful and you're probably preventing, like, the next Marjorie Taylor Greene from forming in the multiverse. And that's really beautiful. Esmée, you are raising your hand so beautifully and so cutely. What are you thinking?

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:18:24] I want to bounce off that point in regards to the amount, the sheer amount of anger and suffering and yelling in this world right now. I've always thought about yelling through the quote, "When we yell, we are trying to communicate our suffering to other people." And I think that with the rise of social media and the access that people have to it. It creates a world where there is just so many more echoes. It creates a world where suffering is echoing louder than ever before. And it is so deafening at times, it creates this reverbing effect that overwhelms us. It makes us feel like that nothing can be done when you're surrounded by yelling people. We actually times do want to shut down or we want to yell back, when—sometimes, and especially in this situation—the best thing to do is to have conversations, is to talk. It's to not raise your voice, but lower it. It's to talk in a calm, clear and concise way that gets your point across and calms people down. And that is really what I'm hoping that we can do as this generation to prevent people like Marjorie Taylor Greene who are suffering, to prevent people even on our side, who are yelling and suffering, who are not capable of love and empathy yet. We are going to always be that calming voice in the crowd, in the sea of anger.

JVN [00:20:24] Okay, Soothe app, like, spokesperson. Can we get you, like, I am signing up for the campaign? Like, are you like, I think you have to be, like, 35 to run for president or something Like, T-minus not that much longer. Like, we are so ready for it. Like Esmée, come on. I feel like listening to you talk, I want to—this is, like, going more towards a yell, but I didn't mean to. But if you all ever watch, like, Venus or Serena play tennis, like, "Come on!" Like, it's giving me like that. Like, I just feel like you just, like, aced it. And, like, you hit the winner. And I was, like, "Come on!" That's so good. Wow. Okay, I'm going back to focusing. So how does it feel different heading into this year's Trans Day Of Visibility, compared to last year's?

ALIA CUSOLITO [00:21:10] I think it's unfortunately a similar feeling because we actually last year were organizing a similar but smaller event, a national walkout. That was obviously much smaller. We had about 10,000 students across at least 20 states who participated. So it's really

incredible. I was actually speaking at the state house in Massachusetts last year on March 31st. And this year I'll be at the Capitol in D.C., which is kind of wild. I did not expect that to happen. But I think it's a similar feeling because we're dealing with a lot of the same issues and they have continued and they've grown. But on the other side, we have also grown and we have been able to organize and coordinate so many people around the country who are really feeling hurt, but knowing that they need to stand up because that's the only thing we can do.

JVN [00:21:58] Last year we spoke with Dekila Chungyalpa about climate action, and she noted that our, quote, "tendency to say that what gives us hope is young people often furthers the burden that they are carrying." So this idea that, like, young people will save us, and then that's like, you know, it's a little bit of pressure. Does that idea resonate at all with you?

ALIA CUSOLITO [00:22:17] It resonates with me a lot. I've actually spoken about this with people in my life, even people in my family who have said, "You and your generation are going to fix everything!" And my response is, "Well, you're still here. Why don't you fix it now!" We're kids. As incredible at organizing as we can be. That's not something that we should have the responsibility to do. It's something that I'm really passionate about. And I love to do this. So I absolutely would, even if it wasn't as necessary. But adults are the ones who have power and they put us in the situation where they are the politicians who are creating these laws. They are the teachers, they are parents, grandparents, family members, you know, neighbors. They are the ones who create this culture that we're living in. And then they turn to us and expect us to fix it for them. It's a little weird to expect us to fix a problem you created. We're doing our best, but, you know, it's complicated. And that kind of pressure makes it feel like they've given up already. They've said, "Well, you know, the kids are here now. I guess there's nothing else for me to do." But a lot of the people who say that are still in, like, their fifties, you have many years left to live. You have so many things left to do. Please join us. Yes, we absolutely appreciate that you see what we're doing and that you value that. But why have you given up already? Where is your hope? We want to bring hope to you. And where is your motivation to help us rather than just hand over all that responsibility? It's a lot of responsibility.

JVN [00:23:38] Hmm.

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:23:38] It reminds me of this The Simpsons episode where this lawyer in a courtroom is trying to bring evidence against the mayor for corruption and essentially asks, "Did you rig the election?" And he says, "No, I did not." And then he turns over to the kids and says, "Kids, help!"

JVN [00:23:57] So what do you think is unique about your generation?

FAITH CARDILLO [00:24:07] I think the thing that's unique about our generation is that we aren't afraid to raise our voices for what we believe in, starting at a young age. Like throughout history, like, we've seen voter turnout among youth voters being consistently low, where as soon as our generation is getting old enough to vote, you're starting to see a spike in those numbers. And it's only going to continue to rise as we get older and as we hit the point of being 18, which: this is the first time I'm going to be able to vote and it's for state elections and I'm very excited about that. But I think our generation, we're sort of sick and tired of waiting for everyone else to fix things where we're just, like, "Alright, if you're not going to do it, we're just going to do it ourselves." The three of us are some of the oldest people who are helping organize this march, like, within Queer Youth Assemble, where it's like all of us were having, like, middle schoolers being, like, the main group of people helping us, which is really cool to see where it's like our whole generation, regardless of how old we are, are coming together, just to prove our existence.

JVN [00:25:09] Is that part of what motivates you to keep going, even when you feel that kind of, like, burden of being that generation that people think is going to, like, fix everything? Is it, like, looking at those younger people and being, like, "Ah!"

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:25:22] It's looking at the younger people and saying, "You are incredible, you're amazing." And I think it really motivates me personally is the fact that I have had so many queer and trans youth in my life or have committed suicide. I lost two people who I wasn't necessarily very close to, but were still parts of my life. During my junior and senior year of high school. One is too many. I will not rest until the suicide rate for queer and trans youth is down to zero. This is a burden I will carry for the rest of my life because this community gave me my life back. When I was in my freshman year of high school, I was on the verge of death. I had so many things going against me at that time that I woke up every day wondering, "When will it get better? I don't want to live anymore." And the second I walked into my school's GSA, the second I walked into a GSA regional meeting in Massachusetts, the second I met queer and trans people just like me was when it got better. They gave me my life back and I want to do the same to the queer and trans youth who are in a similar position I was. I look at middle schoolers in high schools across the country who are suffering. I look at middle schoolers and high schoolers across the country who are finding joy. And I say to them the exact same thing: "Regardless of how low you are, regardless of how high you are, I am always going to be here with you."

JVN [00:27:00] Hmm. Wow. So what resources and support systems have been helpful to you all?

ALIA CUSOLITO [00:27:06] Yeah. So actually Esmée just mentioned the Massachusetts regional GSA meetings, and we are the only state which has a Massachusetts commission on LGBTQ youth. We've had that commission for 30 years, a long time for no other states to have gotten one. But we are absolutely advocating for other states to do that. So shout out to that. But part of that is that we have a Safe Schools program as well, which runs the Massachusetts

GSA Leadership Council. So I'm one of the students on that council, Esmée was before me, and was a little bit of, like, a mentorship figure to me when I joined. And it's a really, really incredible thing. We bring together, you know, GSA clubs from around the state. We have meetings, we'll talk about different topics like intersectionality or how do you bring inclusive curriculum into your school, how to make sure that everyone's healthy, things like that. So we have different topics for each meeting and we bring students together from around the state to talk about what they've been doing in their own schools, talk about how we can support one another and see what we all need.

And it's just such a welcoming space and a really safe space. I went to my first meeting when I was in seventh grade and I have never felt that sense of community before then. It was, it was incredible. I can't even explain that kind of, like, level of safety that you feel in those kinds of spaces, but that is really necessary and I hope that other states will get those sorts of things soon because it is really, really important for youth to feel supported and connected to one another in that way. I also just think that, you know, in terms of support systems, that can also just be friends. I found a really great group of friends of just random people that I've sort of found in different places and then been, like, "You all should be friends with each other because you're all friends with me. So you probably like each other, too." And then it works and it's amazing. And we have so much fun together and we support one another and we're always there for each other. And, you know, those kinds of informal support systems are sometimes all that we have when the formal systems are not there for us, they aren't made for us, they aren't built for us. So we support one another. And I think that's something that's really incredible and really unique to kind of marginalized communities in general.

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:29:16] And Alia, all I want to say to that is, as much as I was a mentor to you, you were a mentor to me. Even being in eighth grade, even being a freshman, you taught me so much more than any teacher, any elder, any older person ever could. And that goes for every single queer and trans youth I've met. That is the fact that the younger generation is teaching the older generation, and it is all about listening and having those conversations.

JVN [00:29:49] Thank you for saying that, both of you so sweetly making everyone cry on the pod, we're obsessed. So have particular books or music or activities been particularly affirming? And before you guys answer this, and only, like, the millennials will think—the, like, older queers will think this is hilarious. My music that was really affirming and that, like, well other than, like, Christina Aguilera, like, "Fighter," and, like, "Stripped" was, like, Sade, like, "Lovers Rock." Like, like, all of the older gays will know—like, when, like, in 2000, in 2001, like we just listened to Sade and, like, cried ourselves to sleep. Like, that's just like, what it sounds like what I did. So please help. I hope that your answer is going to be so much more cheerful than that, and I think that it is going to be so. I'm excited: have particular both music our activities and affirming?

FAITH CARDILLO [00:30:43] So me as the music and book nerd will gladly be able to speak on this! So my library was giving out books one day, like, during June last year, and I picked up this book. Even though it was a kid's book, I still wanted to get it just because of just the sweet messaging. And it's called *Small Town Pride*, and it's very much so the scenario that you described earlier, where it was a gay teenager going to high school and is the first person to ever come out in his town. And it's, like, how his parents, like, got this huge pride flag and like, this whole thing was just him rallying all of his friends together to put on their first Pride event in the town. And so it's very similar to what we we're doing now. And, like, as I was getting involved in Queer Youth Assemble is when I finally read that book and I was like, "Wow, that's phenomenal timing." When it comes to other books, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid is one of the first books that I've read with queer representation, which is still one of my favorite books I've ever read to this day. And then series wise, with, like, a consistent representation throughout a series of books, *The Wayward Children* series by Seanan McGuire. There's different identities across the community represented in that. Music wise—

JVN [00:32:08] I'm taking notes.

FAITH CARDILLO [00:32:09] Halsey was the first queer artist I ever listened to. I remember, like, my sister was listening to their music being, like, "I feel like you may like Halsey." And I was like, okay, let me listen. And then I was, like, "Oh, wait, I am. I am not straight. I like this music a little too much." [LAUGHTER] As I got older, that was, like, when I was 13. So then within the last couple of years, I've discovered more artists like *Girl in Red* and *Fletcher*, who have helped me just become more self-confident within my own identity and all of its complexities and stuff like that.

JVN [00:32:41] Anyone else?

ALIA CUSOLITO [00:32:43] I would love to shout out the books *Pet* and *Bitter*, both by Akwaeke Emezi. Because I love their writing so much. It is gorgeous writing, first of all. Second of all *Pet* is focusing on a Black trans girl. But that is not even the focus of the book. It's just, I think, an important thing to mention with the current political climate and the books that are not being allowed to be in schools. This one is beautiful. It's sort of about finding the good in people, but also recognizing that not everyone is good or that not everyone is fully good and the complexities within people. It's a dystopian world, but it really feels reflective of our own world. And the character is helping to make sure their friends are safe and things like that. And then *Bitter* is, like, it comes before that. So it's the mother of the main character of the other book, and she is fighting the revolution that came before basically where *Pet* takes place. So she's an artist and she's afraid to get involved in direct actions and protests and things like that because of the police brutality that they're facing. And she's worried about getting involved in that. And then she discovers that she can get involved by doing her art. And I don't want to give away spoilers for the book. It's complicated, more complicated than that. But it's a really beautiful way of showing how there are different ways to get involved in a

movement and everyone has things to contribute. And it's also just like I said, really beautiful writing and I love the story.

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:34:05] Three answers. Number one, my Chemical Romance. Number two, Pink Floyd. And number three, I write queer and trans youth movie scripts that I am hoping to get published one day so that queer and trans youth can be affirmed by them.

JVN [00:35:19] Ummmm.... yes, yes, yes. And also, like, your having, like, such a old soul, like, trapped in a young person's body, just like Pink Floyd. And My Chemical—okay! My mind is still a little bit stuck, trapped, rather, in 2005. So don't worry about me. "I'm 16. Like, what do you mean? Like, I'm also in Queer Youth Assemble. I will be there. I'm running for new chair of whatever." Everything's fine. This isn't about me. We're obsessed with you. Okay, so we've spoken with parents of LGBTQIA+ youth on this show, like Gabrielle Union. I'd love to hear your advice on parenting an LGBTQIA-plus child.

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:35:59] They can try. That does not just involve trying based on your own ideas of how you can help, but rather trying to listen and understand what your kid or kids need based on what they say. I am a big fan of parents listening to their kids rather than just assuming what they need is what they think they need.

JVN [00:36:25] And what you're saying Esmée is, like, you're listening to what your kids need, right? Which is, like, complex and multi-layered. What so many trolls fail to realize is that if you know and love a trans person or have ever known a trans person, they were at one point a child, and most of them knew exactly who they were from a very early age. Not all, but some. Alia, I see your beautiful hand up. You are so patient. Tell me everything that you're thinking.

ALIA CUSOLITO [00:35:59] Yeah. I just wanted to say, like, I completely agree with what you were saying. I think it's really important that people recognize that when someone is discovering that they're trans, it's not a sudden moment or even if it is, that's not something that's then going to turn into, you know, medical treatments or something. People are spreading sort of rhetoric around the country about—well, misinformation about—healthcare.

JVN [00:36:22] I literally wrote down disinformation in my notes earlier. How does that disinformation aggravate you all? How do you encounter that disinformation, like, in school and on social? And I find myself explaining a lot that gender-affirming care can be therapy. It can be letting your kid dress in the clothes that they want. It can be letting them play sport. It does not have to be surgical. It does not have to be medical intervention. And even if it is, it's not five-year-olds. It's, like, much older kids that are like 16. Like, if it is surgical intervention, it is much older people, which I just think there's a lot of disinformation. It's, like, how do you guys encounter that?

ALIA CUSOLITO [00:37:58] That's absolutely, completely real. And something that I've noticed recently, which has actually come up in my own school district, is that sometimes people do

know what the truth is and they choose to ignore it very purposefully. At our recent meetings, at our school committee meetings, we've had people stand up and purposefully say that they, quote, "don't care about the research," and "don't care about people's credentials or years of, you know, getting a master's degree on certain subjects or things like that." They openly said that they do not care about the research, which means that they know that the research exists and they know that it supports our position and they're actively choosing to ignore it. They said it's because of their own morals, but that does not make sense when the science goes completely against what they are saying. So I think we need to find a way to address, you know, what is the actual root cause of what so many people are saying around the country, because some of them are truly, you know, misinformed. They don't know what the actual reality is. And once they learn, they quickly change their minds. There are a lot of people who are really open to learning and they learn what the real data is and what doctors around the country support.

And they say, "Oh, absolutely, thank you for the information. I have now changed my opinion." But there are far too many people who hear that data and they are actually aware of what the correct information is and, you know, the fact that all the major medical associations are in support of gender affirming care and things like that. And they say, "Mmmm, you know, that doesn't support my position, so I'm just going to ignore that and I'm actually going to tell you that I'm ignoring it because somehow I don't think that takes away from my position." So somehow identifying where their hurt is coming from and where their hatred towards us is coming from, because it's not from a scientific standpoint at all. They may claim that biology backs them up, but it never does, and they very rarely present any real science to back themselves up. So it's all coming from a more personal place, coming from maybe just a deep sense of a lack of compassion maybe. And that kind of, you know, connects to another idea, which I just want to kind of bring up, which is I think it's really, really important that people try to focus on compassion over comprehension. Shout out, took that idea from ALOK, who I know that you know and is amazing. And it's just really important that people have compassion for one another and recognize that everyone deserves to have rights and to be allowed to exist as themselves as long as they're safe. And so they can be happy.

Even if you don't understand someone's identity. I know lots of people, even in my own family, don't completely understand what it means for me to be non-binary, but they are still supportive of me and they still celebrate my accomplishments and they tell me that they're proud of me and they do their best to use my pronouns and they might not entirely know what it means, but they know that I'm a human who they're related to, who they care about very much. And so even if someone doesn't know someone personally, they should recognize that we are all human and we all deserve compassion. Even if you don't fully intellectualize every single thing, you can still understand that someone deserves to live. So that kind of baseline compassion could lead to so many better things in the world of these policies not being passed or just different kinds of things that we deal with, we wouldn't have to deal with them if people just had compassion rather than focusing so much on the fact that they don't get it

or that they don't, you know, that we're too confusing because really, at the end of the day, we're not that confusing. But if we are, at least settle on that we deserve to live.

JVN [00:40:34] But as ALOK also says, like, if these fuckers can understand, like, what offsides in soccer is and, like, understand like how fucking football works and stuff and like a Mazda this and like a truck that and like, you know, this supercar race or whatever. Like, all that shit's way more fucking complicated than our gender identity. Okay. I cheered for fucking soccer for ten goddamn years, and I still don't know what offsides means. Okay, so...

FAITH CARDILLO [00:41:58] It takes the same amount of energy to love someone as it does to hate them. So even when it comes to misinformation, instead of taking the energy they would take to respond to each and every one of those comments and read each and every one of those, just translate that energy into doing something positive. Reaching out to your friends, making sure that they're okay, or just like, "Hey, like we haven't talked a while, Let's go get coffee," just to check on mental health, things like that, or just taking some self care to just focus on you. Because at the end of the day, not everyone is going to love you. Most people will not agree with what you have to say, but as long as you love yourself in the process, that's really all that matters.

JVN [00:41:39] Faith! Am I gonna cry?! I'm never responding to a troll again. I'm going to text my friends, fuck these fuckers, they are on their own journey and they need to get their own information because I am too busy and too gorgeous and frankly do not have enough bandwidth in my rapidly fraying mental health robe to respond to these people. I need to go hang out with my friends. Faith, you just, like, gave me the best advice ever! Ew! Are you going to be like the new Iyanla Vanzant? Oh, my God. Do you guys even know who she is? No, Iyanla, Fix My Life. Really iconic. She was, like, Oprah's bestie and she was on, like, the Oprah Winfrey Network. It might not be fierce enough for y'all because you need like I feel like young people now are, like—don't like as the type of like early it's unscripted that was a little bit more bombastic and hyperbolic and like, reductive even though really wasn't reductive, but it was hard to talk about what she was talking about, like a 40-minute-show because it was like complex, like systemic. So I think I'm ready to get into our last beat, which is: how can people under 25 get involved in Queer Youth Assemble? So by the way, I do have a lot of, like, listeners that are in that age, but then also older. So if you have, like, a young queer relative or kid or, like, a younger person that you think would really benefit from this episode or its contents, we will be adding any social to follow our three amazing guests today on this episode description. If they are more, you know, TT or Instagram or whatever, or if you want to send them this link because these people are really blowing my mind. I'm so inspired by y'all. Anyway, how can people under 25 get involved in Queer Youth Assemble and how can they join you for Trans Day Of Visibility?

FAITH CARDILLO [00:43:33] One of the main ways that people under 25 can get involved is through volunteering with Queer Youth Assemble. We have different projects and events that we are going to be hosting—with instances like our newspaper, with our zines, protests that

we will be holding and other things of that nature. And so then I'll pass it off to Alia for how you can get involved on the 31st.

ALIA CUSOLITO [00:43:55] Yes. So the good news is that there are a lot of ways to get involved. So we have a lot of information on our website, which is the best way to go: QueerYouthAssemble.org. We also answer emails, but we're very busy, so it takes a second sometimes. But the number one way people have been getting involved so far is organizing actions. But of course by the time you go over here, it'll be far too late to do that. So we recommend checking out the map on our website. We as of now, probably more by the time you're hearing this, we'll have over 100 marches across the nation, and that includes the one in D.C., but also many other marches, whether they're in capital, you know, going to the capitals of states or if they're just in small towns. I'm pretty sure one in Alaska is going to a Costco because that's what they had there. So, you know, march coming to an area near you. So check out what events are happening near you, whether that's a march or a rally. If there's no events happening near you, school walkouts can also be organized pretty spontaneously. So you might want to be aware of what the safety precautions you need to take are. If you're in a very hostile area, then, of course we don't want you to put yourself in any sort of danger.

But there are many ways to just quickly, you know, send an email to administration and basically say, we're doing this. You're not asking for permission, you're just informing them and then get the word out to all your fellow students to say, we're walking out at this time. Here's what we're doing, here's why we're doing it, and motivate them to leave class, even if it's only for 20 minutes. That can be really impactful in your local community to get visibility to these issues and get people talking about it and see how they can make changes in your own school to make sure that everyone is safe. So that's one way is organizing those types of actions. But also, you know, there's quick things people can do. So we have a list of demands, which is fairly extensive but doesn't include everything we would want it to do. We wanted to make sure that it was still readable and not an entire novel because there are so many things that we need in the world, but we have a list of demands which can be found also on our website and folks can sign on to that. So it can be anonymous or it can be on behalf of an organization if people want to sign on that way. And we're going to share, you know, which organizations have been in support. But individuals, we're just really trying to get those numbers across the nation to show that we have thousands of people who are involved in this fight. So that is one way.

And then also, of course, we have donations. We've been getting a really incredible amount of donations from people around the country. It's been really amazing to see. We're really, really grateful for this. And it's made it so it's possible for us to have ASL interpreters in D.C. and made it so we're able to help with transportation costs for the incredible advocates around the country who might not necessarily be able to afford plane tickets or hotels right now. But we want to still have them be speaking because that should never be a barrier to having people's voices be heard. So we've helped with those kinds of costs, and we've only been able to do that because of donations. And we hope to have many, many more events like this in the

future. Events promoting just plain old queer joy. Even if it's not a protest, we still do it. We've had lots of events around sports and skating, you know, just everything from dances to just little hangouts. So we really want to promote this kinds of things around the country so that queer youth aren't only forced to be involved in advocacy because that can be really tiring and we need to just celebrate one another and be in community for one another. So donations also go to funding those sorts of things. So yeah, there are lots of lots of ways to get involved and we really, really recommend that folks also share their words and their art and poetry and music online. And if you tag us, we'll share it for you because we want to get it out, spread across the world. Those kinds of ways can also be, you know, a little bit less stressful. Maybe if you're more interested in art, then that is also an incredible way to get involved and get your voice heard and have people seeing what this means to you and seeing the impact on your life.

JVN [00:47:46] Come on, Queer Youth Assemble! Esmée, give it to us!

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:47:50] Donate to QueerYouthAssemble.org, QueerYouthAssemble.org, QueerYouthAssemble.org.

JVN [00:47:57] Yes. And in fact, I once was told that you had to say something four times for people. Pay attention. So donate to QueerYouthAssemble.org, honey. Okay. I love that. And if you're just, like, ready to, like, flip your table or like, stop your car right now, like, do a fuckin' school walk out in the middle of the street. But it's, like, "Wait, no, don't do that. That's not how it works. And you're like, 40, so don't do that. Just stay in your car and, like, just share this when you get home, when you're not driving, like, stay safe." But if you want to get involved in future things, because, like, maybe, you know, TDOV this year was a little bit too, like, there's going to be other activations, there's other demonstrations. There's also queer joy-filled things. So you can donate to queer youth assembled or you can follow your socials to stay on top of whatever is coming up. And whatever future activations and organizing efforts are happening. What's one thing that everyone can do to join in now?

ALIA CUSOLITO [00:48:47] So one thing people can do is any of the things I just listed, but also just go tell someone you love them. Because I think so often we're focused on, you know, these big things we can do, but it's really everyday things, too. I think we've all lost people who are close to us. And one of the big regrets that people always have is not going to be that you love them more often. So it sounds kind of cheesy, but it really, really is an important thing to, to think about and to share with people around you, because we know that we feel it. But sometimes people are afraid to express their feelings in that way or to share how much someone means to them. Having that love for your friends and for your family and making sure that everyone is doing good and that you were there for one another in the big ways, like these protests, but also in the everyday ways, like just showing up for each other. So if everyone can make sure to show that love for each other, I think that will make the world a much happier place.

JVN [00:49:42] That reminds me of like, in Miss Congeniality when they were, like, “What do you like? What do you want?” And they're, like, “World peace.” And then Sandra Bullock is, like, “Harsher punishment for, like, parole violators and, like,” like, mine was going to be like, if you would have asked me, it would have been like, “Separate church and state is one thing that you can do right here and today to help queer people. It's the separation of church and state. And,” and then I was, like, wait, no, it's just so much just I think that there's so much to do. Yours was so much better. You like not to put that burden back on. Young people know you're just so much better. Yes, but we are fighting disinformation and like the over influence of Christian nationalism at the same time, we are doing so much! You all are just blowing my minds, I love you. So what's next for queer youth? Assemble and for each of you more? The latter. Cause I think we kind of know what's happening. We know where to follow. But, like, what's the tea? Are we, like, Esmée over there in college. Like, are you okay? Are you, like, in your dorm room? How's it? No, you're not. What's going on?

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:50:43] I'm a sophomore.

JVN [00:50:44] Sophomore! You're, like, is it, is it, like, is it like the finals or that midterms? And it's so hard. Is it like so much studying, like going, God, are you going to go to the rec? Like, is that like, is that what happens? Like my, like, what do we do when we're in college, like, sophomore, what do we do?

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:51:00] Yeah, after this march, I really plan on focusing on Queer Youth Assemble number one, but also getting my movie scripts turned into actual movies that queer and trans youth can watch coming up.

JVN [00:51:12] Okay, so, Esmée, you are nailing it, you're slaying it, you are writing scripts. You are literally, like, our generation—you're gonna be your generation's—like, well, there isn't really to be you're to be the first one here. You make the first Oscar winning ass like filmmaking, like fucking amazing verse and like, was, like, from our gorgeous, like, gender diverse community. It's not your fault.

ESMEE SILVERMAN [00:51:34] I am curating the future of queer and trans youth film.

JVN [00:51:37] [CLAPPING] Got it. Faith, what are you doing? What industry are you toppling taking over, what are you doing? What's happening?

FAITH CARDILLO [00:51:44] So I'm going into college next year and playing Division One soccer, which I'm very excited about.

JVN [00:51:32] You're playing what soccer?! D-who?

FAITH CARDILLO [00:51:53] It's Division One. It's, it's a whole thing—

JVN [00:51:57] I know what D1 is! You made a D1 soccer team?! Oh, you better. You fucking absolutely. Get out of here. You. Those soccer. First of all, soccer players are so gorgeous. Like, but like, all of them are just so gorgeous. And y'all run like nobody's business, pump fake in and scoring goals and stuff. Or defending or whatever. No, I know D1 when I am can I. I went to U of A, I know all about a D1 moment. So you better, Faith! Okay, obsessed! Can I just say and I'm sure Esmée can attest to this: college work was much harder than I anticipated. Also because I accidentally kind of skated through high school, like, academically, like, I didn't have to work that hard because it's like not it's kind of well, except for math. But the other stuff can kind of easily, like, kind of fake it. You can't fake it in college and you really have to, like, go to class and stuff and like, pay attention. And then, Alia, what are you doing? What's next? What are you doing? Tell us everything we're, what's, what's next for you?

ALIA CUSOLITO [00:53:03] Yes. So I have been really busy recently because, as I said, I am a junior in high school, which everybody knows is busy. But also now we're coordinating a national march, which was a little bit wild. But my current focus outside of the march is a research project. I'm doing at school which I'm really, really excited about, which is why I'm mentioning that and not a future thing. It's an AP research class, and we spend the whole school year basically writing a 5000-word paper and then doing a 20-minute presentation on our topic. And we conduct our own research to add on to the existing body of research. And I'm focusing on the ballroom community. So not to be confused with ballroom dancing, but the ballroom community. Incredible. there are many resources and just the support system within the community is really incredible and pretty unique. So that's what I'm focusing on, is how the ballroom community has saved lives. So I was able to interview 14 people from around the country and I also attended four different events relating to ballroom, three balls and then one conference. And these were some really incredible people I actually got in contact with, like founders of the longest running ball in the country. And folks who were on the show, legendary and just other really, really incredible people who are leaders in this community. And so I was able to speak to them and get their kind of perspectives on the topic. And it's been really amazing what I've been able to do with this. I think it's a really important topic and I'm hoping to actually get the research published. That's not a kind of central part of the class. Not everybody publishes their research. It just gets sent to College Board. We all know College Board is a little bit annoying, but I'm hoping to actually, like, officially publish my research and get it out there into the existing research in the world. So I don't know if research is something that'll continue in, but I definitely really love doing it. So it's a possibility. But other than that, advocacy with things like Queer Youth Assemble is really my focus in life. That's what I'm really passionate about.

JVN [00:54:52] Thank you so much for letting us know that. And also Faith, because I did completely get really excited on D1 soccer. And then I looked shit my pants and freaked out. Will you please tell us what, activism-wise you're working on and what's next for you?

FAITH CARDILLO [00:55:04] Sure. So activism wise, I work with a couple of different organizations and the gun violence prevention movement. So I'm going to start shifting gears

into focusing on how gun violence disproportionately impacts the LGBTQ community, doing more research and activism in that area, and then also continuing with voting rights and making sure that voting is accessible for everyone.

JVN [00:55:30] Okay, this is kind of like an unconventional ending for a Getting Curious podcast for me, but I'm going to do it anyway because there is just no other way that I could end this than doing what I'm about to do right now. [CHEERING AND CLAPPING] Queer Youth Assemble! You're number one! We love you so much! I've never had so much fun in my life! I love you guys! Not to burden you guys with your future but I love you so much in your daily that I can't wait for your march! You're slaying!

You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend and please show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me and Erica Getto, with production support from Julie Carrillo, Chris McClure, and Erin McKeon.