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R.47. Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present, and Future of Feminism

Interview R-0896

Rye Young

July 6, 2015

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ABSTRACT – Rye Young

Interviewee: Rye Young
Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman
Interview Date: July 6, 2015
Location: Brooklyn, New York
Length: Approximately 122 minutes

Rye Young is the Executive Director of the Third Wave Fund. In this interview, he discusses his childhood growing up in Westchester, New York. He describes his relationships with his grandparents, and his parents, and reflects on his own “fringe” identity in the highly class-conscious and academically competitive Scarsdale high school he attended. Rye recounts his experience at Bard college, where he was frustrated by the LGTQ community’s lack of political activism, and where feminism was not an active movement. He reflects on the major impact of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, on his views of American foreign policy, and how differently he viewed the attacks from all his peers. He describes his early days at the Third Wave Foundation, where he started as an intern giving out grants to people who needed abortions, and how he eventually became the executive director. Rye discusses his transition from female to male, and his efforts to change the conversation around trans issues in the feminist movement. The interview is notable also for Rye’s in-depth reflections on the practice of philanthropy, and how he was trying to make it easier for grassroots organizations to get grants. This interview was conducted as part of Rachel F. Seidman’s research for her book *Speaking of Feminism: Today’s Activists on the Past, Present and Future of the U.S. Women’s Movement*.

FIELD NOTES – Rye Young

(compiled July 6, 2015)

Interviewee: Rye Young
Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman
Interview Date: July 6, 2015
Location: Brooklyn, New York

THE INTERVIEWEE. Rye Young is the Executive Director of the Third Wave Fund

THE INTERVIEWER. Rachel F. Seidman is an historian and associate director of the Southern Oral History Program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. After trying to hold the interview in the backyard garden of Young's basement apartment in Brooklyn, which he shared with his partner and another roommate, we moved indoors because the wind and other noise was too disruptive. There was, nevertheless, some street noise that came in through the open window. We had met years before when I had been overseeing some student intern projects at the Third Wave Foundation, and Rye was friendly and warm. He was relieved that the interview would focus more on his professional life, rather than on his personal life. We sat on the couch in his living room.

NOTE ON RECORDING. Recorded on a digital zoom recorder.

TRANSCRIPT—Rye Young

Interviewee: Rye Young

Interviewer: Rachel Seidman

Interview date: July 6th, 2015

Location: Brooklyn, New York

Length: 1 audio file, 121:59

START OF RECORDING

RACHEL SEIDMAN: This is Rachel Seidman and I'm here with Rye Young in Brooklyn, New York. We are undertaking an interview for a book project called *Speaking up, Speaking out, Talking Back: An Oral History of Feminism in the Digital Age*. Rye, I'm going to start out just asking you just a little bit of background about your family and what you know about your grandparents and then talk a little bit about your parents and your family of origin. So just situate us in terms of your family. Where does your family come from? What do your parents do?

RYE YOUNG: I wish I knew [laughs] more about family. But I'll start with my dad's side because I probably know the least about my dad's family. I know that they come from Scotland, probably by way of England. I know that my dad grew up in Ohio in a small rural town called Waite Hill, I believe, W-A-I-T-E H-I-L-L. Which is outside of Cleveland.

RS: Oh my gosh I have a family there.

RY: Oh really? In that same place?

RS: Mhmm.

RY: Oh wow. I remember the name of the town because it's painted on a mug that my grandma made. It's one of the few things we had of hers. I know she was very crafty and made clothes for my sister and things like that. So, my dad's dad, I believe, worked as a managerial type guy in a factory. I believe my grandma worked in the house and had a lot of children to take care of. My dad is one of five kids. He's kind of in the middle and--. What else do I know about them? I know that they died fairly young. I believe that my grandma died when I was a baby and my grandpa I never met. I think he died in his sixties and she passed away of breast cancer and he had leukemia. And then my dad's siblings are kind of all over the map. One of them works for Scientology and I never see her. Her name's Jane. I believe she does kind of celebrity wing stuff in Scientology. She gets into it with my mom and that's all I know about it. They have religious feuds. I have an uncle in Norway, and an uncle who has potentially disappeared in San Francisco who's probably on the autistic spectrum somewhere. My dad says they didn't diagnose that back then but he's pretty sure. He had a run-in with the Moonies and had all his money taken by a woman and might have left him homeless. We don't know where he is. And then I have an uncle in Florida and another uncle in Ohio. That's my dad's side.

My mom's side is harder to gather, but I'll try to get my thoughts straight. So they come from Minsk and Poland. I want to say my great-grandma comes from Minsk and my grandpa's side of things comes from Poland. My grandpa was a jewelry maker, both grandparents are Jewish. My dad's side is some kind of Christian but very low-level Christian. I don't know, it wasn't an important part of their life very much. My grandparents were both Jewish and I'm fairly sure fled varying types of waves of anti-

Semitism and ended up--. When did they move? I believe my grandparents were both first generation immigrants. My grandpa fought in WWII and Italy is where he was placed. They were kind of grumpy, miserable people. [Laughs] My grandparents got a divorce around – right after their fiftieth anniversary.

They moved to Far Rockaway in a high-rise building, so that's where my mom grew up. And she used to tell me that she would play hooky from school and go float in the Atlantic for a long time. She hated her family a lot. She has a brother and they don't talk. He's in New Jersey somewhere with his wife and two kids but I haven't talked to them in probably ten years. My sister's gone rogue and sort of found my uncle and they've been talking, but my mom doesn't know because it's a complicated family. It's a very complicated situation. My mom cuts a lot of people out of her life and is a difficult person.

Yeah, my grandparents. They lived in Florida the whole time I knew them. My mom would send me by myself to go visit them when I was five years old. I would fly on a plane, be taken to the gate, land in Florida, be greeted by my grandparents and spend time with them, but never with the whole family because my mom didn't talk to them. Because, again, she's a volatile person. I just remember being really independent and as a little kid meeting my grandparents and had a totally separate relationship with them than the rest of my family which was interesting. Yeah, I don't know a lot about my family because we have a kind of tradition of not talking about—I think because I was always just there by myself and my grandparents would just like feed me and hang out and play cards and stuff. But we never talked about serious things.

RS: Was there a supportive relationship with you, your grandparents? Did you enjoy those trips?

RY: Yeah, I definitely looked forward to them. I remember having a lot of fun. I look really happy in the pictures. I think they just spoiled me basically and so it wasn't a complex relationship. They'd buy me a lot of ice cream and desserts and my favorite thing was this matzah and cheese. The most disgusting thing you could put in your body but it's really just a foot of matzah with three inches of different kinds of cheese and butter and egg. Oh my god. So that was the extent of our relationship. It was fun. We never got into any complicated sort of things. They both died when I was a senior in high school, within about a month of each other but that was after they were divorced and living on opposite sides of Florida. I think it's really fascinating, that I tell people they died within a month they think "oh they must have loved each other so much." They hated each other. They might have been codependent but they hated each other. The whole time I knew them they didn't sleep in the same room. My grandma slept on a La-Z-Boy chair. Maybe it was the same room but she was on a La-Z-Boy chair and he was on a bed. I doubt they had any kind of intimacy or anything. So those are my grandparents.

RS: What did your parents do for a living?

RY: My parents. My dad is a real estate developer in Westchester, so he buys lands and builds mansion type things. And my mom started a company challenging real estate property assessments if they're disproportionate to the value of your house. A mouthful, but it's basically--. We were going to go bankrupt when I was a baby because my dad had a house on the market that wasn't selling and they had to pay taxes on our

house and that property. I think it was the first house he had built, so he didn't have money saved up from doing this. We were going to go bankrupt so my mom--. Instead of filing her taxes, she petitioned the county to lower our assessment. She went into the system before the internet, figured out what the rate was that would determine the assessed value of the house. She figured it was way over market, and sued the county court basically to change it. And then she got a much lower rate and it saved us from going bankrupt. Then she took that model and made it into a business. So she's kind of rolling in it and is really kickass at it. She's such a unique person. She figured out the one area of law where you don't need to be a practicing lawyer or a licensed lawyer to be able to practice it. So she's doing quite well and her income supplements my dad's work so they kind of work together in a business sense.

RS: And you have one sister?

RY: Two sisters, yeah.

RS: Other siblings?

RY: One's in Florida, the other's in Queens, New York.

RS: Are they older or younger?

RY: They're both older, yeah.

RS: So, and you grew up in Westchester?

RY: Yeah, I grew up in Scarsdale until I was seventeen, and then we moved to Bedford Hills.

RS: Can you describe Scarsdale for me?

RY: Oh my God. I don't know what I can say about Scarsdale that hasn't already been said. It really is sort of the image that is out there in books and popular culture.

Scarsdale's kind of a joke of a place that's incredibly rich, incredibly college focused. Really, really well funded public schools; very homogenous environment in terms of race and class. There weren't even private schools in Scarsdale because the public school was so good. People would sacrifice a lot to send their kids to Scarsdale High School. To me, it was socially disturbing and I hated it.

I was very much a fringe-y kid. From the time - since probably forever. I was probably a different kind of kid since forever. I was the kid in middle school with blue hair and drumsticks in my tube socks and I was in a band in middle school. Always ran with a pretty queer or punk or goth crowd. Always just kind of, like, different.

Scarsdale's about conspicuous consumption, doing well in school for the purposes of getting into a good school, not for the love of any kind of subject. It's a little bit liberal in the elitist liberal sense. People were mostly Democrat leaning because that's what wealthy people in the Northeast do, but not because there's a particular leaning towards social justice or values of human rights or decency. One thing I learned about Scarsdale is that it's--. I thought growing up, I was so sure it was ninety percent Jewish because of the way people talk about it and because the culture there feels like a very Jewish place. You go to tons of Bar and Bat Mitzvahs and everyone I knew went to Hebrew School and it was a big part of life, but it's only ten percent.

RS: Really?

RY: Yeah, I was looking at the census and there's as many Asian American and A.P.I. people living in Scarsdale as there are Jewish people. It's interesting to me that the cultural narrative around Scarsdale is that it's a Jewish place.

RS: Do you think that's a change? A recent change?

RY: No, no. I was just looking through the data when I was there, those numbers have stayed the same. My partner's from Newton, and we always joke that it's the Scarsdale of Boston. My partner, her parents always said, "We're Christian, we're a minority here" as a joke, I guess. But we looked it up and it's the same statistics, it was about ten percent Jewish. So I think that's an interesting thing. I always equated Scarsdale with Judaism and as a result I equated Judaism with like a vapid, not sharing the same values as me, very concerned with wealth and exclusivity--because Scarsdale's such an exclusive place. I worked at the Haagen Daz in my town, and the manager of the Haagen Daz was a black man from Kenya and he said that almost no time was he able to go from the train station to the Haagen Daz a block away without being questioned by cops. Why was he there, what was he doing there? That's what Scarsdale is like; it's like a comfy cushy place for some and an incredibly exclusive, hostile environment for others.

RS: So, you said you were a fringe-y kid. Were there adults, even your parents, or others who are particularly important to you or kind of supportive in your fringiness? Or did you feel at odds?

RY: Well, my parents are both pretty different. They weren't part of the hegemonic Scarsdale culture. They were very much on the outside even though I was always at odds with them and thought that they were hypocritical. All the things that you might think about your parents, I thought about mine. But they didn't represent Scarsdale to me. They were kind of on the outside in many ways. For example, there was one time where I got called to the principal's office and my mom had to pick me up and take me home because I was doing something I wasn't supposed to do. I don't remember what at

this point. But I remember my mom coming up to the high school. She drove a Chrysler LeBaron up to the front door. [She's] a pretty heavy woman, and she was wearing spandex black pants and patent leather Birkenstocks and a shirt that was hand cut up with cleavage out to here and it said on the shirt "designated drinker" with a jug full of beer. She had like frizzy hair and a sloppy ponytail and big red glasses. I don't know, I just remember looking at her and being like, "You don't belong here. You're so different than every other mom in this town." I just remember realizing that I think that's when I should've been embarrassed by her but I wasn't, and it was one of the first times I felt some kind of camaraderie with her. She was very different and I think found some comfort in that. Not to say that we got along, but they were supportive of me being a queer child. I made friends with my friends' parents, so I had a lot of sort of parental community that way which I think was really good for me. And then one consistent friend from elementary school through high school who was definitely a bad kid, like everyone would say "ooh, stay away," but she was definitely my best friend growing up.

[Background noise]

RS: Why do you think people called her a bad kid?

RY: She probably was in many ways. There was a very public time when she ran away and escaped to the city with some random guy when she was fifteen or fourteen for a few days. She was very depressed and goth and did a lot of drugs and chain smoked outside the school and hung out with much older guys. But we were best friends and we always had a lot of fun and laughed a lot and had a kind of wholesome friendship which I think is kind of funny. We were in a band in middle school together and she was always

the first kid to do things. Fearless and troublemaking. But she was definitely my best friend. Karen Phillips.

RS: So, were you planning to go to college? Did you think of yourself--.

RY: Yeah, though my parents never said, "You need to go to college." In fact they were kind of like, "You could go to college or we could take the same money and you can do anything you want, really. You can make your own choices in life." They're the only parents I know of where were like, "College is stupid, you don't need to go." Or they didn't say it was stupid; it's not a requirement to do well in this world.

RS: Had they gone?

RY: My dad did a couple years of college at Kent State University and my mom went to Brooklyn College. And she'll always say, follow up, "before open enrollment." She wants you to know she's very smart. She went to college but she majored in Philosophy. She wanted to be an actress and she kind of did her own thing. My dad dropped out to college to pursue playwriting in New York. So between the two of them they weren't really career path minded. They sort of had this idea that you do what you feel called to do and, you know, you work to be happy and financially responsible but beyond that they didn't really put expectations on us, which I thought was pretty different. When I started working at Third Wave they were like, "Why would you work for someone else? Why would you have a boss? Why are you in an office? That's so weird."

RS: I don't have that form in front of me. Did you go to college?

RY: Yeah, I went to Bard.

RS: Oh, ok. And so what were your expectations going in to Bard? What did you imagine for yourself?

RY: I'm not--. I don't imagine things so much. I'm a little bit more--. Yeah, I actually don't spend time picturing what something's going to be like. I don't have a very active imagination but I just was excited to be in a place where the norm is to be a little bit different and having a critical mindset being sort of normal. That felt exciting to me. At that point I was pretty leftward leaning, not to the extent where I am now, but I was getting there. For a while I was kind of Republican in my stance on things, not in a fully formed way, but my parents were Republican voting and their libertarianism sort of sunk into my brain. It was really the Iraq War that I think tipped the scales for me and made me see the light. [Laughter]

RS: Why, how did that happen?

RY: It was really through a bookish sort of way. What happened was that I went to an alternative school within my high school and they believe in sort of encouraging you to explore a field of interest. We were encouraged to do a senior project and mine was about—this is so random—it was about “can outside governments create democracy for another country.” I was just exploring that as a question because to me that was a big question mark, but it was the whole premise of the Iraq War. The premise of the ongoing intervention was this idea that there's a democratic project happening, or a project to democratize another country. I did a study on the history of attempts to bring democracy to other places. I thought, “If this works, it's something that the Bush administration knows. If it doesn't work, it's something that they know and something that they're keeping from people because it's serving other interests. So I wanted to just kind of prove

it a little bit. What was happening, and what were the true intentions of going in there, because to me it all felt like a lot of sort of speculation and I didn't really understand what was happening. I did a lot of research on waves of democracies and basically found that it never works. It literally never works and I had this epiphany that as long as people think that's why, that's good enough, and then once the government's toppled, there's a power vacuum and we're going to fill it and create it however we want it. That was when I just realized, whoa. Our government doesn't live by any code or moral compass that I thought it did. I had a real break up with the government.

RS: How old were you when 9/11 happened?

RY: Fifteen.

RS: Do you remember that experience having an impact on the way you looked at the world?

RY: Definitely, it really did actually. I remember it was one of the first major international political things that put me at odds with my parents. I remember I was out at some kind of alternative school bonding trip. We have a retreat to start the year off every year, and I remember it happened towards the end of the trip. We were out in the woods somewhere outside New York, or upstate New York, and we were told that we were going to leave early and go back home because the Twin Towers had been hit, and first of all, I was like "why are we going towards the city if there's a terrorist apocalypse happening?" I didn't know what was going on. But a lot of people--. Maybe I was sixteen. But a lot of people had parents who worked there and were really terrified and I think that people just wanted to go home. I remember thinking immediately that the people doing this, what are the chances that they're all crazy evil people? I'm

remembering thinking early on I think our job was to understand the forces that led to this and not respond out of anger because our response – I think this was a really restorative justice idea of like oh, the media is quick to depict a whole region as bad and take this and just sort of cast a blanket, sort of blame on a lot of people. And I thought, well, if sometimes resistance is ok, could this be one of those times? And yeah, I remember thinking that and saying it out loud and people being like, “What the hell? What are you even talking about?” But I still feel that way.

RS: Still feel which way?

RY: I still feel that not every attack on America is inherently unjustified. I don't think we're so exceptional that we can take ourselves out of this idea that some people might resist our abuse of power. Because if we can understand it outside of ourselves, why can't we apply it to ourselves and be more self-aware? Yeah. I think that immediately put me at odds with the response that this is absolutely unjustified. And it's civilians of course, and there are people that are connected to people that I know and it's a tragedy, but that doesn't minimize the fact that there's some rationale to it and that when you don't look at it, you make choices that are not – don't add up to a solution.

RS: Ok, so you went to Bard.

RY: Mhmm.

RS: And you? What did you study there?

RY: Arabic Language, culture, and literature.

RS: Was that connected you think?

RY: It was really connected. It was connected to 9/11 for sure, to the Iraq War more specifically, and to this kind of feeling I had that we're so arrogant in the way that

we talk about cultures we know nothing about. And it's so easy to draw major conclusions about regions where I had never received any studying about the area. I studied Mesopotamia and that was it. There was no modern sort of, "this is the Arab world, or this is the cultural context or contributions" or anything positive or neutral or negative. There was just no conversation of a serious nature about the area, so I felt sort of drawn into "what else is there besides what the media is saying?" I felt so disconnected from reality. Yeah so I studied Arabic, but I mostly did language courses and I did a lot of critical theory and I made a few courses up because I just wanted to study what I wanted to study and there wasn't a lot of, I don't know. I don't know what I wanted to do. I think I just wanted to learn as much as I could about why things are the way they are.

RS: And were there particular mentors or people there that you engaged with who shaped your thinking?

RY: Yeah, there's a few. I would say Joel Kovel is an academic, a writer and an activist who was at Bard for a very long time. I think he was laid off or fired the year after I left.

RS: How do you spell Kovel?

RY: K-O-V-E-L. He wrote a book called White Racism in the seventies, which I think was the first book about--. He's like a neuroscience psychology person and he wrote a book specifically about the psychology of white racism and I think he's the first kind of writer to do that and so he was sort of out there early on. He wrote a book called-- I can't remember, but it was it about Zionism and Zionism as a detrimental force and it got him into a lot of conflict with the school and a lot of people feel like that's why he's

not there anymore. Anyways, so Joel Kovel. Youssef Yacoubi--. He's not there anymore either. I believe he was fired the year after I left. Pretty much half my advisors were fired for various reasons. You could read into that how you want. He was an Arabic professor and a literature professor and we would spend many, many, many hours talking about politics and critical theory and literature. He was such a great guy to talk to. And he also helped advise a Palestine solidarity coalition that I helped found. Kristin Scheible is a Religious Studies professor and a pretty badass feminist and I just sort of love her. I took classes with her that just didn't make any sense to take.

RS: Like what?

RY: Like World Religions of the Hudson Valley. It was a seminar and I just wanted to hang out with her more or less. I didn't really care about that per se. I'm just one of those people who's like, you can study anything and sort of find the meaning that you're looking for. So in that course I just sort of absorbed a lot but it didn't make sense for my major. I just thought she was great. I really liked her and there's one other person I'm trying to think of. Oh well. It'll come to me.

RS: Until you got to her, Professor Scheible, it's hard to kind of see Third Wave coming in your future.

RY: Oh, I know.

RS: Can you trace for me how, from graduation to Third Wave, was there another period in between?

RY: No.

RS: You went straight there.

RY: Yeah, I've never taken a gender studies course in my whole life, which is funny because I feel so tapped into that right now. Oh, I just remembered who the other person was Ewuare Osayande.

RS: You should spell that for me.

RY: I can't spell it for you.

RS: Oh, okay. [Laughs]

RS: I just know it because he did a bunch of workshops. He wasn't faculty. He was invited--Ewuare. How do I spell it? I can dig up his information, but he's a racial justice trainer based in Philly, I believe.

RS: Do you think Sawendi is S-a-w-e-n-d-i?

RY: It's Osayande. It's an O as a first letter. But he's a racial justice trainer I believe at a place called Power. Political education curriculum training organizing space so he was brought to Bard probably three different times when I was there for weekend-long intensive racial justice trainings. That was very influential for me, to have the luxury to be in three different deep, long, and sort of regular racial justice trainings. And to be a part of the follow up steps. There was a students of color group that was started and then there was a group for white students to try to work together to try to bring about change on campus as a white ally. That work really affected me I think. I was sort of tangentially involved in labor organizing on campus; there was a student labor dialogue where they were working toward a living wage campaign for faculty. Not faculty, people that worked in building and grounds and through Chartwells, the school cafeteria and everything. So I did that work.

I never did LGBT work on campus because--. I would once and while drop in and do a little guest thing. A training or a workshop on gender or something. But I always found it to be so apolitical and sort of removed from critical inquiry and about throwing parties and distributing condoms.

RS: Did you identify--.

RY: I identified as --. What did I identify as? I don't know if I identified as queer or genderqueer or dyke or something--. It was waves of all of those things at different times. I wasn't trans identified in college but I was definitely visibly queer and hung out with a queer crowd. And so often the students would be like, "why aren't you in the group?" And I was like, "why aren't you in solidarity with any of the activism on campus?" It seemed like a social space, you know? I wanted a political space, so I did activism outside of there. I don't know that there was a gender or feminist activist contingent. I know there was the rape crisis center that functioned in that way a little bit in terms of where a lot of feminists went and did work. But, yeah, it wasn't particularly strong at Bard.

RS: And you didn't participate with them or connect with them?

RY: Yeah, I did in a way but it might have even closed by the time I was a student. It wasn't very active. I never got the sense when I was at Bard that feminism was alive and happening and was a thing. I knew it to be an affiliation or a way I was being impacted and growing through and thinking about my own body and my own life and sex was very affected by feminism. I probably identified as a feminist in a way but it didn't seem to me to be a movement that was present or active. Yeah. Then I went straight to Third Wave as an intern right after Bard. I had a summer and then I started in September.

RS: How did you find Third Wave?

RY: Idealist.org. [Laughs] I had never heard of it. I didn't know what it was. I just saw it and was at the end of my rope. I had applied to a million things. Had no applicable skills for most things that I wanted. I wanted a job in the nonprofit field. I didn't want to do work internationally. I felt like I didn't want to use my Arabic skills to be a part of an international NGO. [Background bus noise] Didn't feel like it fit what I wanted.

RS: Or the CIA. [Laughter]

RY: Yeah or the CIA, right. Oh my god. [Laughter] When I found Third Wave's work it just appealed to me as a way to continue doing racial justice work within a gender focused space and that was more appealing than anything I could have imagined for myself. I was surprised to find something like that, because everything seemed so not deep, not radical, not sort of challenging, just sort of you could be a case handler here for some agency or you could be a legal assistant at some kind of progressive law firm. It just didn't seem like there was any place that was creative and multi-issue and deep in their approach and thinking. I found Third Wave and started as an abortion fund intern.

RS: Tell me about that first period as an intern.

RY: It was really trial-by-fire. I got there. The intern that had been running the fund was there for the first five minutes I was there and she was like "here's a notebook where you write things down, people are going to call you starting now, so answer the phone and give money away for abortions and then call the clinic and tell them how much money you're giving. Tell Tara and she'll write a check." It was really like okay. Day one, and I'm giving away money. I think there was an orientation booklet that I sat in a conference room reading for a little bit and then I just started answering phone calls

from people directly calling who needed money for abortions. I had a budget amount. She was like, "keep it within this number and you're good." There was a lack of structure and systems and oversight in a way. I had meetings with somebody who was my direct manager but it was very like "What are your ideas? You have them? Go do them. You know how to make this better, more streamlined. You want to collect data? Do it." It was very, like, if you see a way to fix this or make it better you would just do it.

RS: How did it feel to be talking to people who needed abortions?

RY: It was interesting. There were definitely really hard moments because people would be telling you their lives, their life situations. And some of it was really hard. I think it was really--. There was not a lot of time to feel because it was so busy and it was a moving train. People would call constantly. There was way more people that needed funding than we could ever possibly fund and so I felt a little bit like I had way too much power to decide who gets what and why can't this person get funding and that person can? It felt overwhelming to make decision like that that affected people's lives so severely. But it also felt really rewarding to be able to say to someone that the \$3,000 procedures that you need covered, we're going to pay for half of it and the clinic will discount the rest.

Being able to negotiate for someone's needs to be met felt good, but then it also felt really angry making because it shouldn't come to that and it shouldn't be--. It should be covered. I just felt so strongly that we're doing this job that shouldn't be--. We shouldn't be in this position. It should be the government doing this work. I think it's important to continue to meet people's needs where they're urgent and maintain a real strong commitment to funding groups who are challenging the government to really

include abortion as a healthcare need in the law. So I think that was exciting for me to know that in addition to the abortion fund we also had a sort of root cause analysis to the way we did our grant making to institutions and really only funding institutions that were geared toward looking at the structures and the policies that create the problems that were, are manifesting in these phone calls. I think that felt pretty powerful to be doing resource distribution through a hotline and knowing that we had a long-term vision that was about structural change.

RS: So you felt like the foundation itself had that vision or did you bring that vision?

RY: I think the foundation had that. And we had that in our own way of doing work and we had it in the way that we understood the work of our grantees. Many of who were doing direct service, but they were also doing long-term community organizing. I think that was built into the Reproductive Health and Justice Initiative grant program that was running when I was there. That program is not around anymore but it's still a part of how we understand the kinds of work that we want to fund.

RS: So, give me a little bit of history of Third Wave until now. I know it was founded by Rebecca Walker and had this very conscious--. The choice of the Third Wave of its name was very conscious.

RY: It's such a complex history.

RS: You don't have to give a blow-by-blow, but it has shifted and changed over the years.

RY: Oh, so many times. We've never been one place for any period of time. Do you know what I mean? You can break our history down into certain sections if you

needed to but that wouldn't really paint a full picture. So you've been saying Rebecca Walker founded it. That's not necessarily true, because it depends on what *it* is. Because Rebecca Walker started the Third Wave Direct Action and that was really trying to be a collective. It started in [19]92 with freedom summer rides that went predominantly through the South and registered thousands of young women to be voters. That was very much geared toward the election that was happening in a sense that young women and girls were not exercising their power enough in political life. Waking up and becoming more conscious to political issues that affected them. I think she had a vision that there was going to be a grassroots movement that was massive and sort of using these voting drives to build a membership base for a Third Wave movement that would bring to a head an agenda, a Third Wave feminist agenda. At that point in '92 there was the freedom rides but there was really a year of time off to figure out – do we continue doing these drives? There was a lot of back and forth.

I was just interviewed by someone who was saying, “when did Third Wave start using social media?” and I'm like “in '92!” Because there was a lot of back and forth that would happen. We had this I Spy Sexism campaign in the '90s. There were these cards that got sent out to colleges and different social centers and young people would take them and document where they found something sexist, be it somewhat small or large scale, and just write it down on the card or send in a photograph with the card. They would say where they saw it go down, what they cared most about, did they identify as a feminist? All these different questions that were getting into their life and how they experienced sexism in the world. And then there would be a feedback loop. That information would be taken back into Third Wave and they would learn this is what

young women think feminism is today and this is how they want to approach feminism right now. I thought that was really interesting and I think that's social media. Having a two-way conversation.

RS: Were those cards saved? Are those part of the archives?

RY: Yeah, they're in the archives. It expanded to I Spy Homophobia and I Spy Transphobia. So you can see over time the vision, the Third Wave model, really expanding out.

Then the Third Wave fund was established in parallel to-- No, it was the Third Wave Direct Action. And the Third Wave Fund was within that. So that was in [19]94 I want to say. And then there's an announcement of it in the archives. There's this new fund and you can fund Third Wave Fund. Which is funny because that's our name now and in many ways harkening back to where we were before. So it was kind of intentional to do it that way.

It was in [19]96 I want to say, that the Third Wave Foundation merged the direct action and the fund. And then there was this sort of sense that the voter drives weren't necessarily going to happen anymore and we were best positioned to fill a gap in philanthropy and support local groups to do that work for themselves. There were chapters between [19]92 and [19]96 that closed at the point. There were a handful of chapters where people had set up a Third Wave in blank. There's a little bit of documentation in the archives. There's not a ton. I think they were very informal. It was basically people saying, "I love what you're doing, can I develop a membership office here or in this college?" This was very informal. That was in '96 to '97 is when the foundation was really solidified. They had been housed at Funding Exchange for a while

and then they got their own C3 at that point and became independent. Then they had at that point an organizing and advocacy fund, a reproductive rights fund, and scholarships was a big one.

The other program they did was called Reaching Out Across Movements and that was a van tour; it was kind of like Road Rules. If you think of the [19]90s and [19]90s television. They were kind of doing that with an activist community who wanted to understand how movement building was happening regionally. A lot of different activists from around the country would apply and they went on a Southeast tour, a Northwest tour and a Southwest tour of really seeing the early formations of reproductive justice organizations and environmental justice groups where gender and environment were coming together. Indigenous rights groups. So a lot of different groups that hadn't typically been pointed to as feminist or women's organizations. I think that had a profound effect on everyone that went on the trip. And I think built a sense of this is a movement. This isn't just random stuff happening. Across the country there's momentum and it's momentous and marks a different way of things happening.

At that point there was a lot of youth-led organizations just starting. It's not like that right now, but we'll get into that. Yeah so, those program areas were like that for a long time. It was in 2000 that the conversation around trans inclusivity started. At that time it was called gender justice conversation or gender justice question. I believe we had maybe one trans person on the board who was trans identified at that point in time and it was in 2001 that the scholarships fund renamed itself to be specifically for people who were female or trans identified.

RS: These were scholarships for college?

RY: Mhmm. College or graduate school. I believe that was it. I don't think it was outside of school. That was the first thing that happened. I believe it was in 2003 that the mission statement changed to include trans people. When I was coming up in the organization, there wasn't a ton of funding going to trans work. It might have reached some trans communities through focus around sex work, but it wasn't an explicit priority in the way that--. It didn't appear to be explicitly prioritized in the way that the grant money was going out. I think in part because it was so focused on reproductive justice and there weren't a lot of trans groups really situating themselves as repro justice organization.

RS: What year did you arrive?

RY: 2008. The fall of 2008.

RS: So after you were the intern, you got hired?

RY: I was a part-time Program Associate.

RS: Ok.

RY: I was in culinary school at the time. Yeah, it's weird. I was in culinary school in between being an intern and being hired as a part-time Program Associate. I went to school and then I took on a line-cooking job at the same time that I was working at Third Wave. I worked seven days a week for eight months, billed up enough money to get top surgery, went and got the surgery done and I think it was while I was gone or immediately after. Or immediately before. It was sometime around then that I found out that I would come on as full-time. And then I was able to quit my line-cooking job and do Third Wave full-time.

RS: As Program Associate?

RY: As Program Associate. And then I went--. Was it program? Oh god, am I going to eat my words now? Hold on. It might've been Program Assistant. Yeah, it was Program Assistant. Then I got a promotion to Program Associate probably the next year or year and a half. And then there was in 2011, 2010? There was a major round of layoffs and in that round of layoffs my direct supervisor who was the Program Director was laid off due to budget cuts. That's when I became the Program Officer.

RS: Let's back up a little bit. You arrived in 2008? Which is pretty much right in the middle of the financial crash.

RY: Yea.

RS: But these layoffs don't happen for a couple of years? Did you see the crash effecting Third Wave?

RY: A lot, yeah. Because this is what happened. Right before the crash we got our two biggest gifts ever. It was in that first year that I got there. We got a million dollar grant from the Ford Foundation and then we got a million dollar gift from an individual donor through the Women Moving Millions campaign. Those were the first million dollar gifts we had ever gotten and they came at same time, more or less. They were spread out for a number of years. The Ford Foundation grant I believe was a three-year grant split up three hundred or so per year. The individual donation was a two-year gift. What happened was we were very protected from that. And we made a calculation that funds would recover after the crash; the crash would be short. Things would bounce back and that foundation giving would follow, would pick up where it left off. So places where we had made progress, once funds got regenerated, we would be right back where we were. We would get renewed from Ford, everything would be fine.

That was the calculus and we saw a lot of foundations who were hit really hard from the recession scale back their giving. So we thought this is a great time, since we have all this money, to ramp it up. So we increased our giving by quite a bit. Our biggest docket was \$475,000 and we gave that out a year after I got there and made a very intentional commitment to giving. While we were having good times, making sure that the groups around us didn't close their doors. That's why, for example, we funded Queers for Economic Justice. Because in that time, we felt like they're not youth-led, they're not a feminist identified organization, but they're so critical to the landscape. They're one of the few intersectional, queer, economics-driven places and they're a political home for so much of the work that overlaps with ours. So we funded them because we knew that they were hurting. That was the kind of stuff that we did in that time. We gave a lot of money out that expanded our focus a little bit. We funded Women With a Vision even though they weren't youth led at all.

RS: What do they do?

RY: They're based in New Orleans and they organize people – women of color who are affected by HIV, the sex trade, and incarceration. They're often the only resource that's out there for incarcerated women in New Orleans. They help assist you when you get out of prison. They have a campaign that we funded called No Justice, which they did with the ACLU to challenge the sodomy laws that made it so people who were picked up for doing sex work would have a sex offender stamp on their ID. You know, that kind of work. It meant that we could take on issues where we know it's core to who we are to fund that work, just the youth focus wasn't there. I think given what we knew at the time, I think it was a good call.

What didn't happen quite the way that we calculated was two things. The amount of fundraising; we weren't able to figure out how to match those contributions with new donors. We weren't effective at bringing in more individual donors. At one point or another we knew that both of those grants were not going to be renewed. So we had this big cliff that we were going to fall off financially and just weren't effective about bringing in a new funding source.

RS: Were they not going to be renewed because of the financial crash? Or because the donors didn't like what you were doing with the money? Why would they not be renewed, would you think, looking back?

RY: It's hard to say because each million dollar gift had its very different reasons I think. One of them had to do with how much money we were giving away versus how big our budget was. Our donors, foundation and individual donors, all wanting to see a better ratio of grant making to operating expenses and that had always been a challenge of ours.

RS: Because which was too high?

RY: The operating was too high, so people wanted to see more of a grant making impact given our budget size. In part one of the difficulties was that the way we did internal leadership development was never really considered a program. It wasn't something people funded us for. It was just considered a nice by-product of doing the work, but we really spent a lot of time and energy developing leaders who can effectively run foundations and leaders who are excluded, specifically excluded from philanthropy. I think that is huge and it's so much a part of where Third Wave's meaning --. The meaning that it has for so many people comes from that work that we did. The pretty

amazing internships. The way that when I was a part-time Program Assistant, I had a professional development fund. Those are the types of things that were so unique and put our values into motion. And there are a lot of people who are leaders in philanthropy now for whom Third Wave was their entry point. I think they bring different perspectives. I think they bring culture that's different. They're racially diverse people who made it through Third Wave.

RS: Where have they ended up now?

RY: My former supervisor Alex DelValle is the Program Director at Groundswell fund. Jee Kim was on our board many moons ago and is now I believe a Program Director if not Program Officer at the Ford Foundation. There's Monique Mehta, a philanthropic advisor now in the Bay area. There's just a lot of people. Wilma Montañez is at Jessie Smith Noyes and she's been a part of Third Wave for a really long time. Rini Banerjee, who's now the president of Foundation for a Just Society. Her first philanthropy thing was being on Third Wave's board. It's been an important part of how we do our work. But that's no donor's main impetus for giving us a major gift was to develop new leadership within philanthropy. As part of a commitment to our "by and for philosophy." That was something that we did and we valued.

It was expensive to train everybody to do everything for the first time, including the board. Many people joined the board who had never been on a board, and had never fundraised before. Which is powerful, but also it takes a lot of work. So then we didn't quite bring in the donor base that we needed to replace that money, or even close to replace the money. We also didn't anticipate how differently the money would be given when it did replenish. What happened was a lot of social justice organizations were not –

who had been funded before the recession – were not funded when money came back. It had this conservative tightening that happened that was really political in nature and not financial.

RS: What do you mean?

RY: Well, in the sense that when money came back, it became clear that it would be harder to get money for social justice work, intersectional work, and small organizations. So there was less of a commitment to that work. I think what happened was I don't think those groups were getting funded for the right reasons to begin with. I don't think these bigger institutions had a deep commitment to funding a lot of social justice work that got on their dockets. I think it was because a lot of program officers had done a lot of work to try to get these groups on. Behind the scenes work, getting the proposals up to the level they needed to be, crafting their dockets in such a way that it would fit strategically and maybe fly under the radar, whatever. And then I think when the recession hit there was a level of scrutinizing of the approach that led to such a narrowing in and focusing and sort of re-strategizing and a lot of groups did strategic planning. A lot of foundations did new theories of change and at the end of the day, we just saw who--. The words stayed social justice but the funding really shifted away from small groups, away from radical work, away from community organizing. There's a great report that Sara Gould did with the Council on Foundations that analyzed the shrinking dollars for social justice work. I think that's kind of the period we're in, where a lot of funders are talking about social justice but it's not clear what they mean. Particularly when it's very challenging in the way they're structure to fund small organizations.

RS: So where's the money going or towards?

RY: It's going more toward policy work, advocacy work, bigger organizations, litigation. There's very little funding of the things that, for me, have always been proven to build grassroots power, which is community organizing and political education and direct service. That trinity is so critical and I think it's telling to me that it's some of the last things to get funding when it's one been one of the only effective power building tools that we have. And so I always am wondering why is that so? One of the other things that's happened is that regranteeing organizations are public foundations that take grant money and give it out, and smaller grants became a dirty word during the recession and it became very, very hard to make the case for that funding. Even if all the program officers and program directors really get it. There's no other way, truly, to support emerging work than to fund intermediaries. That there's sort of a movement-building role that we play that goes beyond just a grant. Even if practitioners of philanthropy got it, boards and presidents and everybody wanted to cut out the middleman quote unquote.

RS: So someone at the Ford Foundation would now say "Why should we give money to another foundation?"

RY: We're doing social justice funding.

RS: as opposed to just--.

RY: We're close to the ground. We're --. All these different ideas they have about themselves, which don't really check out lead up to this conclusion that "we don't need you, you're not necessary. Yes, we will only fund a group whose budget is \$600,000 or more, but we're fine with that. And where we're not reaching what we want, rather than funding a new institution we're just going to create our own collaborative fund." Collaborative funds have somewhat replaced, in the eyes of big foundations, the need for

funding intermediaries, at least domestically. Internationally there's more of a willingness to entertain the idea that intermediaries are necessary for regional funding because the geography's so big and the cultural differences across nations is so wide that the philosophy of intermediaries is easier to accept. But domestically there's this kind of idea that we'll just start our own fund and we'll house it at Arabella or Tides or one of these fiscal managing companies. The return on our investment will be higher. We won't have to pay for your rent and we won't have to pay for your staff and we'll just make checks to who we want to make checks to and it's very removed from any kind of movement involvement from an activist leadership.

It's still really lacking any attention to how groups get to some kind of scale. How do you support a movement that can be led by people who are poor, if the only way you can get grant money is by having a half a million-dollar organization? Who has never had grant money before. You have to have access to something. Which most people who we want leading this movement are never going to get there unless there's some ladder you can climb, you know? I think Third Wave's always been that first, second, third rung of that ladder for so many groups who say "I'm not ever going to have a doctorate in social change. I'm doing it though. I should get funded because my community needs this change to happen." I think that's been the most frustrating thing. I've been in meetings where I've been told, "Why would we fund Third Wave when we could just fund your groups directly?" and I've said "Are you going to fund our groups directly?" and they say "No"! [Laughter]

So there's a logic gap and I think it's about, at the end of the day, our work not fitting what they really want to fund without wanting to say we don't want to fund that

work because it's not popular to say. I think there's a real neoliberal way that our ideas and our philosophies have been taken and expunged. They've really wiped out the meaning behind a lot of the words and the way that funding would look differently if you truly believed in those things and not just took it as words and said we do social justice, we fund intersectionality. We fund grassroots. And all those things are gutted of their meaning because when you look behind the door they're funding the same institutions. They're funding very large institutions led by people who are not the people impacted by that work. I think that's part of the challenge that you can have an institution like Ford come up with a huge communications campaign that says they fund inequality, but they won't fund groups led by low-income people. That right now is one of the biggest issues. How to really be authentically doing social justice philanthropy with all of its contradictions? How do you do that well?

For a while in the '90s and in different periods of time there was this idea that big foundations should endow and fund intermediaries. Third Wave came around right at the end of that and very quickly it flipped into "we want nothing to do with you." It's starting to change a little bit, but I still think it's a heavy lift.

RS: Two things in my head. I want to get back to the question or the issue of social media, but now that you are Third Wave Fund as opposed to Third Wave Foundation, what does that difference look like beyond the name change?

RY: Well a lot of things have changed since we took a year off last year.

RS: Ok.

RY: We announced that we're becoming the Third Wave Fund. We're pausing all programmatic activities, and redeveloping our donor base. But in addition to that we set

up at a fiscal sponsor institution, so we're now Third Wave Fund housed at Proteus Fund. They do all of our back office, so we spent a good amount of last year setting up a new model, a new business model for ourselves, which would dramatically cut down operating expenses. We would have to do less maintenance of an institution and that's part of why we didn't call ourselves a foundation. Because we weren't an institution in the same way that many foundations are, with structure and a board of directors and a fiscal space. The idea of fund just indicates that we're really a tool more than a place.

RS: So really that place where you went and interned really doesn't exist anymore?

RY: It doesn't. In many ways Third Wave Foundation closed. The mission continues through this new entity and I do see Third Wave Foundation's history. We're a part of that Third Wave Direct Action lineage going through lots of different iterations of which Third Wave Foundation is one. Third Wave Fund is another. The freedom rides were another. That's part of being a movement space. It changes and it grows but it's still based on the initial philosophy that started the movement. So we're housed differently. We don't have an office. I have Skype meetings with interns and fellows. We have Proteus in Massachusetts and I'm in Brooklyn. We have a board in New York; we're going to have an activist advisory panel around the country. It's very kind of flexible and different. The grant making programs are new and launching right now as we speak.

We had just been funding reproductive health and justice towards the end of our funding we branched out to gender justice and had three different funds: repro justice, empowered leaders, which was a leadership development fund, and freedom from violence. A lot of them overlapped. It was how do we take our reproductive justice and

health initiative model and make it broader to include more multi-issue organizing and intersectional work and we created those three buckets, but we basically were like we want to fund all this work, how do we organize it in a way that makes sense to other people so it wasn't like we believe this is the one, two, three ways you do things. So now we've scrapped that and we're really just kind of moving with setting up two movement-building funds. So we're not trying to create sub-issue categories or put work into boxes because it just doesn't work. It really doesn't. That's the beauty of our grantees, is that they're multiple things. I think that's always been the beauty of Third Wave feminism, is that it's not one thing. It's a multi-issue agenda. It's a multicultural agenda and intergenerational agenda. We're funding in two ways. Two funds. One's called Mobilize Power and the other's called Seed Power.

RS: Cede, like C-E-D-E?

RY: Yeah seed, like C-E-E-D.

RS: S-E-E-D or C-E-D-E. Like give over power or help mobilize?

RY: Oh like S-E-E-D. Seed and mobilize. So they're really about field growing approach and really elevating that our strength and our beauty is being multi-issue and intersectional, so we're not trying to have issue-focused dockets in a traditional way that an institution might have. This is our gender and women's portfolio; this is our environment and politics. This is way more about highlighting that intersectional work.

Mobilize Power is a direct action rapid response fund for urgent community organizing needs. It's very flexible and open to non-501c3s, individuals, collectives, and pretty much any way that the work might pop off. And it's really geared to be flexible such that if all abortion clinics in Mississippi is going to close or the one's that left, we

could fund direct action around that. If a trans woman of color is murdered on the street and there's a need to urgently respond, we would fund that. If black girls are organizing around state violence and the murder of black people in America, we're funding that. So I think it's putting our intersectional priorities into practice in a way that's responding to urgent needs. It kind of reminds me of the abortion hotline. It's like okay, this isn't necessarily that long-term work but this is where it's needed right now and we're going to be there for that.

RS: How does the actual process work, structure make that – do people still have to write a proposal?

RY: That's so funny. So we just created a new process that's really meant to be something that, if you're in a crisis, if you're a young person that's never done that, if you're not versed in philanthropy, that you have multiple ways that you can apply for funding. Everybody needs to give a few line items of a budget, and if they are a 501c3 then we need their tax letter for Proteus' audit reasons, but beyond that the proposal itself --it can be two paragraphs, it can be a list of bullet points. We have some prompts. It can be a half hour interview with us on the phone. If you're like, "I have thirty minutes window between A and B," you can talk to us on the phone and we'll ask you the questions that we have. It could be a selfie video that you and your members, whoever's applying, can respond to the questions in a video. So I think the idea's just why would philanthropy make it hard to fund or create a space that evaluates work for things that have nothing to do with how well you are equipped to respond to a political issue? Writing a long proposal is a very different skill set than organizing a rally.

They're at cross-purposes often, and so we decided to throw that out completely and drill into the only few things that we need to know and go from there. That's the proposal process. The reporting process is going to be a highly optional thing in which it's really a learning and feedback session to find out what happened. One, we want to know how we can continue to support you, what happened with the funding so we can continue to learn, and if they have bad feedback for us to solicit feedback.

RS: It sounds amazing and like the way I would hope philanthropy would be responding to these needs. I can also imagine, just like you were saying, Third Wave did this incredible nurturing of new leadership for philanthropy but people didn't really recognize that, so you never got—people weren't funding that. How will you make sure that people understand the theory behind what you're doing and you are actually trying to sort of change philanthropy so they want to invest in that versus them just saying, "Oh, this is scary. They're not doing it the normal way."

RY: I think in some ways, having Proteus, we've been able to pick and choose where we want to highlight that new leadership and invest in that process. So for us, Proteus Fund handles all the back office and so they do our audits and our financial management and donor acknowledgements and a lot of the hard grunt work that went into building Third Wave. I think in our old model we had people doing that all for the first time, we did it all in house, so that means that work is happening for very cheap and where we're not the ones responsible for training people to do it. And frankly, it's not that important that the person doing our bookkeeping is only doing our bookkeeping. It would be great, but it's not crucial. I think we've been able to restructure such that our board of advisors is not a governing board and so the pressure for them to be as interested

in management in finance as before has kind of been alleviated and they can really bring their attention and their vision to programming and the places where there's a more direct political need for decision makers coming from those who are impacted by the work. So our board, our program staff, and me can kind of embody that value, but we don't need it from--to run our institution.

RS: But do you need--where will your money come from now?

RY: Last year we raised funding from four hundred and fifty individual donors, eighty of whom are giving monthly now. Some major donors who are giving \$1,000 and up through a major giving campaign. We launched that campaign asking people to either give monthly or give for three-year commitments. I think the hope being, we're presenting ourselves as always in transition. This is Third Wave. It's what's beautiful about us, so we're not going to sell you on us being standby that you can always count on. We always change and that's good. And we need long-term support. We've been trying to message around that. I think because there's so many other ways you can give your money right now that is removed from new leadership, there's this niche that Third Wave can have, which is you can make a fund at Tides or you can have a fund that's empowering, that people are doing the work to make these decisions. I think it appeals to people who really care about community building to see that that's happening at Third Wave. I think that's appealing now that our operating expenses are so much lower. We are able to do this in a way that's efficient as well with your money.

It also helps to say to people that they're kind of getting the best of both worlds. You're getting activist leadership, leadership development happening, and you're getting informed decision making with movement leaders making movement decisions. That's a

positive, powerful thing. And you're getting the security of Proteus Fund who manages ten million dollars in grants a year with highly trained oversight in terms of people who care about how their big dollars get invested. So we have individual donors that are a very cross-class body of people. Some people give two dollars a month. Some people are giving one hundred and fifty dollars a month. So it's a big range. Somebody's giving \$25,000 a year. It's a lot of different things. We have two different bands that are popular that are funding us, which is great. So one of them is doing it through a fund that they created.

RS: Can you say what bands?

RY: One is Hurray for the Riff Raff. They're kind of like a folky, artsy band in New Orleans and they started a fund called the Body Electric Fund that benefits Trayvon Martin Foundation and Third Wave. That started last year and they're really focused around gender based violence and racial justice issues, particularly where they come together. Then a band called Ms. Mr., which is M-S M-R. They are based in New York and they just launched a big tour. Every ticket they sell will give a dollar to Third Wave. We'll definitely make a buck from that. They're playing at Terminal Five and some big venues. It's a European and American tour.

It's good to have multiple ways we're getting funding and foundations did come back. When I started we had no foundations funding us, we had no major donors on the table. We had one monthly donor and I think she had forgotten she was giving to us. So now to have eighty monthly donors after one year, four hundred and fifty giving, most of them are new, and thirty five major donors. At the end of the year, we'll have six foundations that are giving to us. From a range of different issue areas. We have an HIV

funder, LGBT, repro, human rights. So to just have that range feels so much better than when we had a bigger budget but it was so dependent on a couple of big funders in the repro arena.

RS: I want to go back – are you doing O.K?

RY: Yeah, I'm fine.

RS: Okay. You've been there long enough to--. You talked about how even from 1992, Third Wave has been using social media. But you've been there long enough to have really seen the role of social media the way we usually understand it this sort of internet based, it has really changed, and is much more visible in activist work. Can you talk about how that has played out at Third Wave if you've seen it be important at all? Or the people you fund?

RY: I remember when I was an intern, at one of our staff meetings we had another intern give a presentation on "this is Twitter." I was like, "Wow, we're really entering the modern age." I was going through a server and found the old presentation. I was like, oh my God, this is--. We were kind of an early adopter of Twitter I think in terms of organizations using it. I think part of it is just that a lot of our base is on Twitter. A lot of young folks, a lot of women of color and trans folks are on Twitter. It's one of the primary places to engage in social media and also to share news about what's going on. Movement news. So I think we also thought it was important because it's where movement level conversations are happening. It's where a sort of different conversation about who has power and who doesn't in our movements. And I think there was also a lot of conversation about--. Well, I think Twitter was a medium by which other people, other expertise were able to be highlighted that wasn't based on who could get a placement in

Salon or the Guardian or one of these places that would publish feminist work. So we loved it. Our grantees were on Twitter before we were, so I think it started in [20]08 and to this day we have way more Twitter followers than anyone would ever expect because we were on it so early and I think we're so multi-issue that it's actually a benefit for being on Twitter.

When you're single issue it's great because the way you can communicate about your work, you have a great elevator pitch. You're sort of like, "This is what we are." It's simple and it's finite. And you can just say, "Our mission is very clear and direct." For us, we're between worlds of philanthropy and movements. We do capacity building and we do things for which we only have wonky words to describe what they are. We don't do work that's connected to many things that people think about on an every day basis. And it's very multi-issue. So it's a nightmare to have one communications method around. However, on Twitter we latch into so many conversations and I think that's where you find growth in social media platforms is when you can plug into dynamic conversations and contribute something and share something. And it's one of those places where being who we are is really a benefit in terms of communications. Otherwise it's a nightmare. I think Twitter's been a big thing for us. Facebook has been helpful in terms of doing events, staying connected to some folks who have been through the organization and are maybe like in their thirties or so. It's not quite as interactive and useful as something like Twitter, I don't think.

RS: So on Twitter--. I just want you to talk more about what it actually--. I see how it can connect you to many different people. What sort of specifically are roles it

plays? Is it getting the word out about the people you're funding, or how do you actually use it?

RY: Um.

RS: Does it help you raise money? Does it help you--?

RY: It helps with everything because it's kind of like asking, well how is being connected to a body of people helpful? Well, we're an institution that's funded by lots of people that should reflect a lot of different people and should benefit a lot of people. If you think of it that way, the more connected we are, the more plugged in we are, the better we do our job in terms of elevating work we're funding, in terms of learning what's out there that we otherwise wouldn't have known about, being informed as to what the issues are in a way that is bringing value to people's investments. So the more informed we are, the more we can be like, "Hey, funders, this is what's going on. Maybe we should be focusing over here a little bit." And I think that's really valuable when you know how disconnected most of philanthropy is from current work.

There's not a lot of young people in philanthropy. There's also not a lot of people who have an activist background and if they do, they're often not still plugged in around their activist work. It's disconnected in a lot of ways so just to be there and to say lots of young people are having conversation about this. Maybe we can have a panel on it or invite those activists to this funding session. So we do things like that. We use it to understand issues better. We use it to promote organizations. We do use it to fundraise and one of the things that we've done recently is with this rapid response fund, Mobilize Power, one of the features we're building up is having crowd funding platforms to support moving bigger grants to the field. We'll put up a grant but we'll ask people to

crowd fund to match that grant. So the idea is if the work around Black Lives Matter, Say Her Name campaigns, are taking off on the internet, there's a whirlwind of interest in that work and inspiration that is coming out of that organizing but the organizers of the campaign aren't--. They're doing the work, they're not necessarily fundraising, and they're not building those platforms out to fundraise from. Part of what we're trying to contribute with rapid response fund is to take some of that momentum and drive it into donor activism. Having this engaged, online network of people whose interests are evolving around specific real time campaigns versus gender justice philanthropy and theory. This is something happening now. We're talking about it right now.

We want to plug into that whirlwind and sort of add a donor activist dimension to it and make sure people know that their five dollar gift plus a retweet is going to have an effect of strengthening organizing through grassroots philanthropy. That's one of the ways we're using it and towards that effort we've developed a communications network of communications social media leaders who are committing to playing an active role in the campaigns that we roll out. So we identified people who are sort of the most tapped into the things we do. People who favorite our things or retweet our things the most or share our posts on Facebook and we've made direct interactions with them and have said, "You're awesome. People care what you have to say; we care what you have to say. Can we work out an arrangement where we can send you updates on our campaign work with specific asks around communications pushes and sample tweets and different ways you can support this growing movement?" So that's been really effective and so far almost everyone has agreed to do that and so as we launch this new fund, we have this ready and willing group of people who are going to help our campaigns take off and hopefully go

viral if that's possible. So that's new, I think. Integrating a somewhat sophisticated and pre-planned approach to tying grassroots philanthropy to urgent campaign work and political activism that really has a strong online fuel. I don't want to say it's happening online because it's happening in real life, but it's getting fueled by online media. That's what we're trying to do and we're trying to apply that to the way our money moves.

RS: My last question I think for you --.

RY: Yay, I'm tired.

RS: I can tell. Your voice is tired.

RY: I'm enjoying the conversation though.

RS: Good. You had mentioned earlier that you saw a difference in the amount or the prevalence of youth-led organizations or activism. Can you tell me more about the difference you're seeing and where you think that comes from?

RY: Well, I think there's a lot of youth activism happening. Maybe more right now than like four or five years ago. I don't think there's as much of it happening under a youth umbrella. I think there's a lot of young leadership that's taken for granted and just talked about as movement leadership. And I think there's not a lot of funders who are thinking about why is most of our movement leadership under thirty and why isn't that part of our strategy to fund work from people who are under thirty? I think it's one of the inherent ways that political organizing happens. Largely on the backs of youth of color and young women, I think are often holding down movement work and not getting a lot of funding or credit for it.

I don't think that "youthiness" is as important a rallying cry as other things like racial justice, queer work, gender work. Like people are naming their work differently

and youth led or youth organizing is less of a--it's just been less of a distinguishing label for work even though a lot of it is youth organizing. And I think there's been a lot more push for intergenerational models. I think there's been a certain amount of sense that youth-led organizations are sometimes a set up to fail. Not because they inherently don't work, but because the funding environment and the C3 structure aren't conducive to leadership transition, are so expensive to run and there's been a collapse of a lot of the structures themselves and a reflection that the model doesn't work and that intergenerational leadership has been really key for a lot of youth organizations. Yeah, and I think there is less politicization around being a young person right now. I don't think that will last but I think it's true.

RS: Do you agree that intergenerational organizing is an important model or do you see it as a loss of the focus on youth-led?

RY: [Pauses] Hmm. I think it's important. I think most of the successful youth organizations that I know of that are truly youth led receive a lot of intergenerational support. I think there's an important distinction between youth-only attitude where only young people can be involved in a meeting or whatever versus we want the leadership and the staff and the board to be youth and we want to involve and engage and receive support from people who are older or have graduated from our leadership pipeline. I think that the organizations are doing some of the greatest work are evolving to sort of say that it's not like you hit twenty two or whatever the cap is and all of the sudden you're not a part of this work anymore. If you want to help and you're sixty, you should be able to or there should be a structured way to receive that support. Then there's just a really brass tack-- To truly be led by young people who do not have access to wealth, it

is very hard to fundraise, particularly because a lot of people develop a professional network when they get older and so--or gain exposure to people with resources or more access to funding. There's just a real pragmatic sense of why it's important and then there's a political importance to it. We funded a good amount of work that was not youth-led. I was mentioning a bunch of it and part of what we came to understand is that it's a little bit --. There's really important reasons to think about youth empowerment and shifting toward trusting young people and considering them very sufficient to make the decisions that they need to make for themselves. I think that's great. I think we tried to expand to say part of why we focus on young people is because we want to have--we want to focus our resources on where people haven't been trusted leaders to determine their own lives and their own destinies.

And so part of what we funded were people who were doing sex work or organizing that weren't really young, but were really not considered natural born leaders. People who are considered not competent to lead organizations or even have a say in their own lives. I think that's where the crux of why we fund youth can lead into funding non-youth work. I think that was a really important shift for us. We funded Justice Now to work on ending coerced sterilization in California. They're really led by a board of people who are serving life sentences in women's prisons in California and many of whom are not young because they're in prison, as opposed to juvie. That felt critical though to our understanding of what our movement needs and Third Wave wants to model a better movement for justice. If we care about justice we will consider leadership very strongly, and that might take us in different directions. One of the ways that this is going to show up in our current work is the Mobilize Power Fund is going to be open to

supporting all work done by trans women of color dealing with emergency issues. It's not going to focus on youth because that would be a somewhat arbitrary kind of distinction. We're trying to be very clear of when we say youth, why do we care about it? If we follow that logic, what else might we want to fund. It comes down to this question of leadership and who's been on the margins of our movement for bad reasons. Or unjust reasons, and how can we model something better than that?

RS: Well, are there questions I should've asked that I didn't ask?

RY: I love that question.

RS: Something you wanted to talk about?

RY: Well, I think I would just say that the ongoing sort of conundrum or the sort of never-ending challenge--. We've cracked the nut of our model in important ways. We're reaching sustainability for ourselves in the sense that we've got reserves, things are going well in that sense and we've fundraised well but we have this fundamental concern for what happens to groups once they've kind of reached a medium ground. I think our nonprofit field mimics our economy. A vast majority of them have no budget, are staffless, are essentially poor institutions that have no resources truly but they're community efforts. The vast majority of grassroots groups are that. They're informal, maybe a part time staff member. Maybe not. That kind of thing. And then there's this precarious middle class that's ever more precarious. And I think we don't have a solution for that.

I think it speaks to the inadequacies of, or the real lack of commitment to building long-term social justice infrastructure in this country. Because groups might come to us with a \$50,000 budget after many years to develop really hard fought \$200,000 budget

and have to maintain twenty grants to have a \$30,000 budget. There's no solution to that problem. That is something that is in our court that we can handle on our own. We can exist as a fund now, we can exist in a sustainable way, but we can't crack that nut and that's the big question for us is how to support groups that can really last and withstand a big funder leaving, which most of them can't. So a lot of groups that we find to be beloved organizations, grounded so deeply in our values and our vision, most of them close. If not while they're a grantee of ours, soon thereafter. And it's often after a big jolt up that a group will close their doors.

I think we are interesting in convening conversations around that, that sort of engage some medium-sized funders and funders where we really want the same things for our movements but we come at it from different angles, to think about what our responsibility is for groups that they might have between a two hundred and a \$600,000 budget but they feel terrified like they always might close. Or if they rub a funder the wrong way then they're gone or if they have a leadership transition and people don't like that leader that everything they worked for would go away. I think that's where a lot of groups find themselves. And they're considered successful. If that's our measurement of success in terms of the nonprofit model that we support, how do we create something different or fund differently to not create that constant crisis mode?

RS: Are you going to convene conversations around that?

RY: We want to. Right now we don't have the capacity to. We're hiring a Program Officer in the fall and hopefully that will free up some time on my end to start to organize something around that. Yeah, it's something that I don't think any sector of funders has ever really dealt with it. I don't know that it's specifically our issue to solve,

but I think we have a role to play in encouraging the conversation and doing some early convening of allied funders. I think it's a profound question and a challenge to some bigger foundations to change and to really fund long term and to stop their self-serving rebranding that brings groups on and kicks them off. You know, it's a cycle of boom and bust and to think really clearly about infrastructure and long term investment and even endowing organizations or setting up--. Urban Justice Center is a hub that houses projects and they're more than a fiscal sponsor. They're a cost-sharing mechanism, and even funding that model to exist in every city would be huge. I mean social justice activism would pop off if there were a way to house a project for five years, ten years, whatever. If you have money for staff, great. If you don't, great. But there's a space for activism to have an infrastructure that you can tap like a well and then leave. Right now there's nothing like that in most places. I think that's the next level conversation to for funders to think about.

RS: It's kind of like those co-working places for freelancers who need a--.

RY: Exactly, and when there's a viable model for a group to come into money that's sustainable to spin off, great. If not, there's a place for you. There's a place where you have choices as to what model is going to further your mission and allow you to have the leadership that you need versus burning out the people who built something that eventually is likely to close. I think that's where the lessons are pointing to from our own budget crisis to the amount of groups we've seen close their doors to the shifts of philanthropy that we've been able to witness over these years since [19]92. Part of what's helped us fundraise is that we've been able to point to those challenges and say, you know, we sit in a crux of issues that are no one's priority for very long. Youth, people of

color, low-income communities. Every issue that we focus. Trans people, queer youth. Everything we focus on is very susceptible to flavor of the week kind of funding and it's not sustainable. And so just to say we need funding because we are a permanent home for that work that always cares about that work. And it's bad for our movement to not have any one funder truly have the back of those communities. That's been a big part of how we've grown but it doesn't solve the problem. [Laughter] In many ways.

RS: I'm curious about the name. I've seen in a few places people start to kind of say maybe this is the fourth wave or these various conversations happening. Does the Third Wave --. Do you identify yourself as part of the Third Wave? Not just in the organization but does that terminology have meaning for you as a person and a member of feminist movement? And do you see it still being something people gravitate toward?

RY: I really, I see it as where we're grounded politically. It's where we come from politically. I'm not trying to have a discourse about feminism generally because I'm trying to steer journalists and media people towards action and the way that people are talking about it is structural issues that are affecting their lives. And I'm quick to say they're all feminism, right. But the amount of time we spend laboring over what is and what isn't feminist or who is or isn't a woman--. I really would love to focus on where there's movement-building happening. Where young girls and trans folks are working together to transform our economy or our prison system. I think that is Third Wave feminism but to sit around and talk about it is not Third Wave feminism. We're way more focused on the issues and the action that's happening and the way of labeling I think it is not so critical right now.

I do think it's important that gender be explicitly talked about because it's so easily wiped off the map of funding priorities to organizations that might think about economics but they're not thinking about gender or whatnot or vice versa. We challenge a lot of groups who are only thinking about gender to say, "Hey, race and class and everything else," is not your issue. I think that's been a lot of what we focus on, is naming a gender justice frame. What does that look like? Our approach is really called gender justice and we have our own definition of that that we've been promoting and using a lot. And Third Wave feminism is not what we lead with, in part because it's not an effective way to lead any conversation is to give a history lesson or talk about the genesis of ideas and movements. It's to say what is the agenda now, what do people care about? In many ways we're naming a feminist agenda and that's politically important work but we don't talk about it like that. There's so much that we're trying to avoid. Some of the only ways to talk about feminist work is to have an inner battle about feminism in the media and it's so sad to me because it's often interested in feminism to look at it as a point of conflict and always being in a battle with itself and isn't that funny and sort of sad. I would challenge some of the current rhetoric makers and narrative makers to say how much are we playing in to that and why aren't we trying to build solidarity across issues of structural oppression and why are we still having conversations with ourselves about feminism in an exclusive kind of way.

That's one of the things I talk about as being a trans person running this foundation. I'm not interested in having that conversation. I'm interested in having a different conversation about how we work together, how our issues connect, how they're the same thing often, and really be explicit about misogyny at the end of the day. I think

that somehow that gets lost in a lot of, “are trans people women? Are trans people feminists? Can they be in this space or that space?” The reality of misogyny is absent from most of that conversation and we try to bring it back and keep that at the heart of what we do. For us, it’s more important than the label Third Wave feminist. But I did keep the name in part because I think that legacy is important. I think we’re really standing on those shoulders of people who invented intersectional ways of doing work. I think feminists of color invented intersectionalism and I think it’s important as it goes off into the world that the legacy really stays there. And I think our brand was strong. I think people though really positive thoughts about Third Wave but it was a little bit nostalgic thoughts and I wanted to keep the name and the name recognition but rebrand it and brush the dust off and say this is relevant now. Point people to specific action that’s happening that young people are leading and to say this is Third Wave in action right now. It looks like Black Lives Matter. It looks like Free Cece MacDonald. That’s what we hope to do now.

RS: That’s great.

RY: Yeah.

RS: All right. Thank you.

END OF RECORDING.

Transcriber: Emerson Rhudy

Date Transcribed: September 6, 2015
