Minnesota Unraveled

Episode 210 - We Live On: *Telling Queer History* and the Transformation of Silence

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> **Harry Waters Jr.:**
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> I learned for survival is you don't talk about that. You can talk about who you are, but you don't talk about that queer part of your life.

Chantel Rodríguez: For years many members of the LGBTQIA+ community stayed silent about their identities and stories due to safety concerns. Harry Waters Jr., whose voice you just heard, was one of them. But things changed for Harry and many like him in 2013 with the opening of *Telling Queer History*.

Founded by RJ Lawrence, the non-profit organization aimed to connect LGBTQIA+ people living in Minnesota across generations and identities through oral storytelling, with the goal of fostering compassion, empathy, belonging, and healing. *Telling Queer History* held 72 events over 10 years that drew around 3,000 people. The organization closed in June 2025 and is still in the process of preserving its history and stories about love, resistance, and identity. How did *Telling Queer History* create a space that inspired people like Harry to open up and share their stories? Why does intergenerational storytelling matter to LGBTQIA+ history?

To answer these questions, I spoke with four individuals from across generations, who played important roles in *Telling Queer History.*

> **RJ Lawrence:**
> My name is Rebecca Lawrence. I also go by RJ and I use they/them pronouns. I'm the founder and former executive director of Telling queer history.
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> **Jayce Wepplo:**
> So, hi, I'm Jayce Wepplo. I use they/them pronouns, and I am currently 23. I've been doing stuff around the queer nonprofit scene in Minnesota since I was 15. So I've been here in around for a minute. Currently I am working at a library, which I'm very excited about. This is coming out a lot later, so I'm an Aquarius for any queers listening. It's very important.
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> **José Maria Herrera Tamayo:**
> I'm Jose Maria Herrera Tamayo. My pronouns are they/them. And in Spanish I usually actually use El. I'm currently an associate librarian, public libraries. So it's been, gosh, maybe almost 10 years that I've been in the Twin Cities now.

And most of that time I've spent working with telling queer history in one way, shape or another.

Harry Waters Jr.:

hi, my name is Harry Waters Jr. He him, his Black Lives Matter, Zurdo, elderberry, queen Nancy. And this should be shorter and it's not. I use all of that now because during George Floyd, I added Black Lives Matter as a part of my name. I wanted to say it every day. And Zurdo is my superhero. He's a left-handed leftist. Yes. And elderberry is what we need at a certain age of this, keep us healthy. And of course a friend of mine gave me a blunt and that was named Queen Nancy. And so I've had that to my name and my friends of course say that it's too long and it should just be shorter and I want to go. And it's not because why the hell not. We can create our own identities. I'm retired from Macalester` College as about two and a half years ago.

Chantel Rodríguez: Welcome to Minnesota Unraveled, I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez.

I spoke first with RJ about the origins of *Telling Queer History*, which grew out of a campaign urging people to vote against the Minnesota Marriage Amendment in 2012 that would have banned same-sex marriage.

RJ Lawrence:
instead of trying to argue for rights with people who didn't believe we deserve them, they used storytelling and one-on-one conversations to change the folks in the middle to our side and to just say, even if you don't agree fully yet, at least let's not put this in the constitution.

And so we used one Minnesotan on a phone with one other Minnesotan, and we were instructed to talk about what love and marriage meant to us and listen to what love and marriage meant to them and find common ground.

Chantel Rodríguez: The amendment was defeated and in 2013 Governor Mark Dayton signed a bill writing marriage equality into state law.

RJ Lawrence:
when that was all done, it was like, now what do we do with our time, our skills, our energy? And I went to, OutFront hosted this, I think they called it Equity Summit, and it happened to be on my birthday that year, and I went to it and my step uncle told his story of watching his community die during the AIDS epidemic when it first hit Minnesota in the early nineties and late eighties. And I felt the urgency of creating this thing that's been boiling up inside me. I am fourth and seventh generation Minnesotan. I deeply love this place and belong here in the sense that I want to belong here. So I do.

And I knew that there were queer people growing up, but it was kind of not said as out loud. I knew that they existed before me, but where do I find them? When I started this, there was only one book in the library that was about Minnesota queer history. It was all coastal. I knew that wasn't true. And so now there's a couple books and a couple specific stories like *Precious and Adored*. I'm still reading that one. So yeah, but there wasn't that 13 years ago. And so I wanted to start bringing in people I knew as leaders, organizers, people who had used what they had to survive and struggle through to thrive and to build community and care. And so that's where we started was just a small circle and there was people from their seventies to their teens. It's just building, local personal connections that can change people's lives.

Chantel Rodríguez: *Telling Queer History's* events were held largely in South Minneapolis, and oftentimes they were hosted in partnership with other organizations.

RJ Lawrence:
We worked with Clare Housing on HIV and AIDS and that event, we had our first queer history timelines, specifically around AIDS and HIV. My person who worked with us, Megan created that and that became a whole nother project we can get into. We did mental health with Reclaim, we had Hmong queer stories that were curated by Ka. We worked with the Tretter collection for years and they're in LGBTQ archive at the University of Minnesota. We had a tradition in February that was about love and that was really fun and became something people looked forward to, me in particular. We made Valentine's to your first queer crush or the first person who ever saw you as who you are or to your younger self.

And then we also created two walking tours of queer history walk and roll. So one was downtown St. Paul and the other was in Powderhorn Park, which used to be called Dyke Heights.

Chantel Rodríguez: From day one, RJ worked hard to create a welcoming environment for everyone to participate.

RJ Lawrence:
In the beginning it was really important just to have a safe space to share. That was a big part of it. Just wanting people to be able to be vulnerable. There's often crying. I often was the person starting the crying. It was a public vulnerability and so we intentionally didn't take photos or videos so that people could show up who maybe weren't out in the rest of their lives and things like that. And then it became important to create some kind of recording of the storyteller. And we really tried to focus the recording just on the storytellers and the TQH team.

Chantel Rodríguez: One of the ways RJ created a safe space was through radical hospitality, going above and beyond to remove as many barriers to participation as possible. This included things like providing sign-language interpretation, substance-free spaces, and more.

> **RJ Lawrence:**
> We often provided free childcare and that was such a gift to have the children in the room with us only using spaces that were ADA-compliant and finding ways to make the bathrooms gender neutral or at least creating space where we could use the bathroom of our choice. We provided food and we tried our best to make it a healthy array that would suit different diets and avoid things that are high allergens.
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> We did things that made people uncomfortable not playing music, that's supporting neurodivergence. So creating spaces where there's less sensory input. We held most of the events in a circle, that made some people uncomfortable, but that also sometimes you need to get into your zone of discomfort so you can be vulnerable and show up. And it was important to look at each other to take away the hierarchy as much as we could. We're not here to download information, we're here to participate together.
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> **Chantel Rodríguez:**
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> you mentioned storytelling being so important to a lot of the early work, and obviously history is in the title of telling queer history. So can you make that connection for me about how history fits into these gatherings and storytelling for you all?
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> **RJ Lawrence:**
> Sometimes we were, well, often we are mistakenly called telling queer stories, which very much makes sense. But the history part is that if we don't tell our stories, we won't have history. And that motivation of we didn't have local stories, weren't recorded here, and we have an incredible queer organizing community and have for generations. And so again, it's like, yeah, you tell your story so that we have history, living history is part of history.

Chantel Rodríguez: The care RJ put into curating an accessible and friendly environment drew in my other three guests, each from a different generation. They shared with me their first time either meeting RJ or at a *Telling Queer History (or TQH)* event.

José Maria was in journalism when they connected with RJ almost 10 years ago, but now they work as an associate librarian.

José Maria Herrera Tamayo:
storytelling and telling queer stories through at the time being a reporter was really important to me. And so I did a lot of that here and there through internships and then jobs. But Telling Queer History was really kind of my first dive into really local Minnesota history, which was super helpful when I was just getting started and I knew very little. So really, it's been a really unique experience for me and I think it kind of developed my love for history and archiving.

Chantel Rodríguez:

So I'm curious for you, do you remember your first Telling Queer History event? What was it and what was that like?

José Maria Herrera Tamayo:
Yes. so we traditionally did in February event that always talked about or incorporated art in some way. That was just kind of our tradition. And it was talking about zines in particular, which is something I've kind of always did growing up and I hadn't really been in, I didn't know a lot of the zine spaces at the time, especially having been newer to the Twin Cities. And so it was like a perfect, wonderful introduction to just what has been going on and local zine makers talking about their work.

Chantel Rodríguez: A zine is an abbreviation of magazine or fanzine. It is a handmade, self-published work made of original or existing text and images—think of a small booklet featuring handwriting, cut-and-paste collage, and drawings. Zines cover diverse topics, and are often reproduced cheaply on a photocopier for a specific readership.

José Maria Herrera Tamayo:
And when I was much younger and still living in Florida, I remember writing a literal letter to some zine distro-to-order zine, and then they would, you include five bucks in cash with it and they send you back a huge packet of zines. And that was really one of the only access points I had growing up. And so I loved it and I didn't know how powerful that was at the time for me. But thinking back, those were some of the first introductions I had to queer literature period. Not that there wasn't queer literature at the local library or somewhere else, but it wasn't easy to access.

So this was the first time I was reading queer experiences and they were all firsthand queer experiences. And that's one of the special things I think about zines. I read stuff that I really wouldn't be able to read anywhere else, especially at the time And I still remember a series of zines that had come in, and so I was in high school at the time and I have searched, I have tried finding these zines and I think they're kind of lost to the world. I cannot find them at least

digitally or who they might be from, and I don't have them anymore. But it was a series that was firsthand experiences by a black trans man hiking the Appalachian Trail.

And I had really no concept of what being trans was when I acquired these zines , when they were sent to me or anything. And I was just so enthralled by them. I was like, I can't wait to read the next one.

Chantel Rodríguez: While José Maria found their way to *Telling Queer History* as a transplant from Florida, Jayce grew up in Minnesota and has been involved in the state's largest LGBTQIA+ advocacy organization, OutFront Minnesota. They also found support in their community and the Quatrefoil Library, a community center in Minneapolis that makes LGBTQIA+ materials accessible for education and inspiration.

Jayce Wepplo:
So I was raised by a lot of gay men, two of which one of them worked at Quatrefoil Library and they were like, Hey, Cliff Jones is coming to this thing for the book that he just put out. And I was like, cool, I will come. So I was 15 and everyone else was at the youngest, I think 35. But I just got really engulfed and enraptured from there

Chantel Rodríguez:

So do you remember when you first learned about Telling Queer History or were you there sort of at the beginning of its founding? Okay.

Jayce Wepplo:
No, I was not there at the beginning of this founding. I think I was eight when RJ founded it, but I like to joke that we have enemies to friends trope because the way I found out about Telling Queer History was at these Youth summit and Q Quest, which is put on by MNSOC a type of events that happen around the Twin Cities in fall and spring for high schoolers and middle schoolers, depending on which one you go to, RJ would be tabling and I would be kind of tabling slash also doing workshops. RJ was also doing workshops. We both were doing queer history workshops. We were not doing the same queer history workshops. We still don't do the same queer history workshops and we do 'em in the same room.

And as a 15, 16-year-old, I was just like, I'm the one that does the queer history ones though. Enemies. Enemies immediately. Not actually though. If you come to mine, you will get just an info dump of queer history, but I was raised on *Gilmore Girls*, so I talk fast and run on caffeine and so it only takes me about an hour and a half depending on how many tangents I decide to go down or not. And RJ is going to tell you a story and these are very different experiences. I love mine, mine's great.

Mine's great for just a mass amount of information. RJs is really great for the community building aspect of things though. So we have merged ours now where I just info dump at the top and then we're like, okay, how do you make this applicable to knowing your neighbors and doing work now and stuff.

Chantel Rodríguez:

What are the challenges in doing this history that you faced in working with *Telling Queer History* or other organizations?

Jayce Wepplo:
Yeah, I mean the biggest challenge is always something didn't get recorded or it got recorded and that recording got set on fire normally or some other equivalency of gotten rid of. And so even finding that information can be a challenge depending on what you're looking for. For instance, I'm trans-masculine, I'm a trans guy. I also identify as a butch dyke. I am just doing all the acronym at the same time. I'm Living life. It's great. But I didn't have any trans dudes in my history presentation for a while because they just aren't as easy to come across as one trans women in history versus trans men are easy to come across, but in general it's a lot of cis white gay men and cis white gay lesbians that you can very easily find for a reason. And so I had to sit back and be like, I'm going to find trans men to put in here.

Chantel Rodríguez: Unlike José Maria and Jayce, Harry Waters Jr., has been involved with *Telling Queer History* from the beginning. Harry grew up in Denver and pursued a career in theatre, which eventually brought him to Minnesota. His life journey, including his experiences with the HIV/AIDS crisis in Los Angeles and New York, led him to have a different experience at his first TQH event.

Harry Waters Jr.:

it was in this place called Madam of the Arts upstairs on the second floor, and we're sitting around on Little Arc, and I don't really know any of these other queer folks at all who are also seniors. It's like we've lived a different life than a lot of the youngsters. But having and listening to each other's stories was kind of phenomenal to actually have a place where that was happening other than with being around friends of mine, none of whom are here in the Twin Cities, to talk about our lives and what we went through and how basically we are the survivors of a scourge, but still going forward, but also being creatives. Being creatives has another kind of resonance for us because a lot of our work then gets connected to our survival from time. Actually, I'm proud to say I will be 73 this year, so I'm very happy that I'm able to get this far. Of course, it's not 73 yet, it's just today. Who knows?

So going back to that event where we were talking for the first time, there is something that that I learned for survival is you don't talk about that. You can talk about who you are, but you don't talk about that queer part of your life.

You just have to be present as a persona. You're present as a professor, you're present as an actor, you're present as a family member, but you very seldom talk about your queer history because the history that we have of that is if you talk about it, you're going to lose a job. You're going to get violated. Something horrible is going to happen, so you just don't do it. So to talk about it sometimes is unnerving, just personally inside. So when I'm sitting there, in that first meeting that we had, I was sort of in awe of how everyone else was So at ease telling their stories like, oh, you can just do that. Oh, fascinating. Not something that I had experienced before

So having a Telling Queer History event where those other parts were, what people were looking for was still like, I don't know. Should I do this? Is somebody going to use it against me? The other thing you learn is that sometimes secrets that you reveal come back and haunt you in different ways. So Telling Queer History has allowed me to have some relief about talking about who I am in a public way, in a public way.

Chantel Rodríguez: Community members across many generations shared countless stories at TQH events, but the ones my guests repeatedly brought up were those told by older generations like Harry about the HIV/AIDS crisis. Starting in the late 1970s, the epidemic did not yet have a name; no one knew how or why people were dying; and the federal government was reluctant to acknowledge the public health crisis.

The condition eventually became known as AIDS, “acquired immune deficiency syndrome,” which is caused by HIV, the “human immunodeficiency virus.” HIV is spread through sexual contact, shared needle usage, fluid contact, or passed from mother to child during childbirth.

Harry first experienced the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Manhattan in 1978.

Harry Waters Jr.:

I just moved from Brooklyn into Manhattan on the hundred 10th street, and me and my lover at the time had what you would now call an open relationship. But I mean, it's like it wasn't an open, it was just what we were doing. It's how we were living. So yes, there was a sexual revolution and we were at the barricades, yes, celebrating, and then there would be this thing happened where there would be someone that you slept with and a month later they were dead. And that was blowing all of our minds, and especially if

you were black and gay in New York City and in theater, you did not have the resources that the rich white gays had.

So that taking care of each other became what we had to do. There was a period of time that one of my friends, he just won a lottery and he had this great apartment, his baby grand piano, and he came down with positive HIV condition, and there were people that were afraid to go visit him. Actually, I was in California at the time and I said, I'm flying in and we're going to go see Nathan. It was hard because there was no nurse there helping to take care of him. There was the volunteers of friends who could come by, and the fact that it was actually one of his best friends, who was my former lover, was afraid to go. I said, this is your friend. We are going. And it was hard.

Chantel Rodríguez: HIV attacks the body's immune system, eventually reducing an affected person's ability to fight off otherwise common illnesses like pneumonia. The final and most severe stage of an HIV infection is AIDS, which makes victims vulnerable to otherwise non-fatal diseases and causes suffering and pain at end-of-life. HIV has an incubation period of up to 10 years, meaning people might infect others without knowing or not show symptoms for years. This uncertainty caused widespread fear among LGBTQIA+ people as well as fearmongering, mis- and disinformation, and discrimination against them.

Harry Waters Jr.:

no one knew what to do, and there were also no resources for us to take advantage of. So that learning, like to say, there was a great lesbian support system that happened that you have to acknowledge as well during that period of time. And how do you keep your joy? How do you keep your optimism? How do you keep your hope going during that time was the key thing because there was always daily, someone else's positive, someone's calmed down or someone or someone's disappeared. If someone wasn't heard from in three or four days, you didn't know if you panicked going, have you been to their apartment? Are they even there?

So there was a lot of heartbreak that was happening during this time, and we're in a business where we're having to create characters and roles and relationships that have to be vital and alive, and then there's this mourning and grieving that's just a baseline of how you're living. And I think that's one of the things that we spent a lot of time trying to, I don't want to say deescalate or just incorporate into how you're living because there's some that cannot let go of it and still and some who are pretending it never happened.

Chantel Rodríguez: While the initial outbreaks affected mostly large coastal cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York, it spread within a few years to other metropolitan areas like the Twin Cities. In 1982, Bruce Brockway, a St. Paul native, gay

activist, and publisher of a gay-focused newspaper, became the first documented case in Minnesota. The HIV/AIDS epidemic killed more than 448,000 Americans from 1981 to 1999.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, by the late 1980's complications from AIDS were the leading cause of death for men aged 25-44. We do not have any reliable numbers that indicate how many Minnesotans died in the epidemic, which has only added to the difficulty of fully capturing this history. *Telling Queer History* provided a safe space to share those stories.

Harry Waters Jr.:

So I would say one of the gifts of Telling Queer History is, because we brought it out in our stories so that the younger generation or even our peers will know that there is a history that got us to this point. None of you all didn't just show up a fully formed flower. There is a history that's a big part of why you get to be as free as you feel. Even though you may not feel as free as you want, you're certainly a lot freer than we were, or freer than we felt publicly especially.

It's still living in us. I do have friends that are long-term survivors with HIV who are still living and have vital lives. Because now they have PrEP and you can have PEP. And so there's all these inhibitors that are there that did not exist 40, 55 years ago. So there's a different experience that my colleagues who are younger have towards HIV and AIDS.

Chantel Rodríguez: For José Maria, stories like Harry's were some of the most impactful.

José Maria Herrera Tamayo:
Through Telling Queers History's stories, and especially through the stories of my neighbor who's still in my building, actually, I learned a lot about mostly a lot of the gay men who lived in the neighborhood who were living with HIV and AIDS and their networks that they had with one another, and organizations today that exist, the Aliveness Project and how integral they were to people staying alive or at least being taken care of when they weren't in the best of health with food delivery and stuff, and how common that was in our neighborhood.

And I think the story of my neighbor in particular was she is a healthcare worker and has been for many years, but she directly took care of people who were dying of AIDS in our building and how powerful that was. And that gave me a really big appreciation for how the community has taken care of each other long term.

And I think thinking about those stories of what it really took to take care of each other and the community, and I think that sits with me a lot, and I try to

remember that a lot today when as we're making choices for our day-to-day lives of, alright, what do we have the capacity to do?

Do we have the capacity to do more? We have a basis of what that looks like, and we have that in queer history. We have that in our neighborhoods and our own buildings, and we can keep doing that by remembering what people before us have been doing, but this in a different way and shape is not new and we don't have to entirely recreate the wheel either. And it feels good to know that that is the legacy that we have just around us, that people have always been doing this kind of care work and the way that they did it then we can keep doing it right now.

Chantel Rodríguez: TQH events offered more than oral storytelling. They had singers, writers, puppeteers, painters, drag performance, circles of care, digital art, and more. Several of my guests facilitated collaborative storytelling through three giant paper timelines that were rolled out at various events. The timelines contained important events in Minnesota, national, and international history. Participants were invited to add their own history to the timelines.

José Maria Herrera Tamayo:
So especially in the Minnesota history one, you'll come across just little blips that are sometimes anonymous. Sometimes they're just initials of just being like me and so-and-so kissed on this date, and it's kind of in between this big rally that happened or the creation of a big organization or something. And then it's just someone being like, oh, we got married this day or we broke up this day or cute little points in time like that. And I loved that about the timeline project was that we got to include what people had shared with us that was really personal and important to them at the time.

And so just we wanted people to really get a sense of just how much rich history was out there that sometimes is only living in people's heads.

Chantel Rodríguez: José Maria worked with Jayce and others to turn the paper timelines into digital ones that would be available on the TQH website.

José Maria Herrera Tamayo:
we spent months just meeting as a little group, which was really fun because the whole point of telling queer history was intergenerational storytelling. And then suddenly we had three of us all in different generations just every month meeting up and making sure what's the next thing we're trying to do? What are we missing? We spent maybe six-ish months putting together big highlighted points of telling queer history and other queer history events. And it was just a big digital humanities project of like, okay, what are the links? What are the photos? What are we trying to get people to read? How do people explore this?

Chantel Rodríguez: Jayce explained why it was so important to have the timelines be worked on collaboratively.

> **Jayce Wepplo:**
> So the one really most obvious piece of that to me is everyone has a bias that's going to come through when they do and teach history. Teaching history is a political act that you are doing. Also learning history is a political act you are doing. So having multiple perspectives and multiple people add what is important history to them is going to always look and sound different.
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> So it's like that added perspective of what's important to people. There's also things that are, it's like queer history and other marginalized histories are not often recorded and are easily forgotten and easily swept over. If more people are telling more of the story, it is harder to do that. So there's that aspect and then there's also giving people agency of being part of the project, either indirectly or directly to whatever degree they are aware that they're doing it. I also really liked that being able to add your personal history because it's another entry barrier just taken away. It's like, oh, you don't know your history right now, your community history, your personal history, you've been living it the entire time.

Chantel Rodríguez: Collaborative storytelling, as well as storytelling at events, was complicated by language. Certain terms like queer, gay, and trans were understood differently, or not used at all, by certain generations. I asked Jayce to provide some general definitions to better understand why generations prefer certain terms.

> **Jayce Wepplo:**
> So queer was originally a slur. It was used as a slur and a lot of older gaypeople will not like this term because of its connotations around being a slur. It was used interchangeably with the F slur and other derogatory words for queer people. Currently queer is used as an all encompassing, it's a lot easier to say than LGBTQIA2S+I think I got them allYeah, currently it's easier to say than that. I don't have a strong preference between a long acronym, short acronym or the word queer, depending on who I'm talking to. I like the word queer for myself for a couple of reasons.
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> One, I am just a punk kid running around in mosh pits trying to get people to use Libby, the library app for audio books and I, there's Queer Core, which is the queer sub genre of the punk scene that came out alongside Riot Girl. So I like the word queer for those reasons. Also, I like other slurs. I like the word dyke over the word lesbian, just I like the power behind it. I feel more at home in those words, the word trans is shortened of transgender. Transgender also kind of has all encompassing terms in some ways. Some people have non binary, which is just, think of a third option. The easiest thing is think of a third

option that isn't boy, girl, whatever for these things and non-binary type identities that fall under that, some people don't put that under there. It is still a conversation happening within the community.

Trans is going from whatever gender you started as to the opposite gender or to something else that is not the current gender you started as is the way I would identify it. Other people, like more specific terms that are more direct. Trans masculine is for people who primarily started as girls, women Afab, which is a female assigned at birth,ake your pick of whatever woman adjacent terminology you want to use, transitioning towards a masculine identity. But that is not necessarily being a binary trans man. I like the term trans-masculine because I have a lot of strong ties and connections to both the butch community just within my own personal way that I identify myself and way I feell show up in my community. And because I am trans, I've been trans about as long as I've been queer, both out literally and just in general.

Chantel Rodríguez: At TQH events, Harry and others in his generation did not immediately embrace the use of the term queer.

Harry Waters Jr.:

n the 21st century when it became queer, that was part of the conversation that my peers have also had is that we don't use that word. It's not that we don't use it because we don't like it. It's just like it's not something that's familiar. It doesn't resonate with us the same way. I am gay. I just say that. Or I'm bisexual, depending on the day. I don't know. I used to say I'm ambisexual, whatever that means. I don't want to define it. It's like it's people love 'em.

But hearing myself say I'm queer was interesting in telling queer history because it did travel. When I first started, it was definitely, I'm gay. But then as the years went by, I would say a good five years ago, it just became, okay, queer is fine. It wasn't like it was a bad thing. I think there's something about identifiers that we use to box us. And being a person that doesn't want to be boxed, nd I think that most queer people don't really want to be boxed at all, which is why there's so much language we're going to do non-binary, going to do gender fluid. So there's something about how we've held onto our own identity of using gay as opposed to queer, but going through the histories of Telling Queer History was hearing those other voices and how they were then identifying and where they came to their reality, their existence, how they wanted to move and walk in the world.

Chantel Rodríguez: Jayce is fluid in the language they use, especially when talking to anyone from Harry's generation.

Jayce Wepplo:

The language I choose to use depending on who I'm talking to, I will switch my language. If I am talking to an older generation, I probably won't use the word queer to talk about us. It is a reclaimed slur and one that's just gaining notable popularity over the last several years. I will probably still use dyke and some other slurs though that seem to have less of an effect. But I'll use gay versus queer. If I'm talking to an older generation, if I'm talking to a younger generation, I'm going to have to edit out some of the more adult quote unquote details and also I am constantly thinking about perspectives

Chantel Rodríguez: Despite the issues of terminology, my guests have found the cross-generational experience to be invaluable for a number of reasons. For Jayce, there is power in hearing someone tell their own story.

Jayce Wepplo:
Yeah, so I am always the baby in every room I'm in, just in general. Even in my friend group, I'm two years younger than everyone

And so being able to talk to people of an older generation, even if it's like I'm Gen Z, so talking to millennials, which I believe RJ is a millennial and I think most of the people working on this are millennials

That's a big part of being able to talk about history with people from firsthand perspectives, which is I've been geared towards the entire time I got really into the Making Queer podcast for that reason that Eric Marcus puts on because it's like, oh, these are people's actual voices. It's not people talking about people who are not with us anymore. It is just you telling your story directly.

Chantel Rodríguez: José Maria is grateful to be growing and moving forward together as a community.

José Maria Herrera Tamayo:
I think I am most hopeful to keep some of that intergenerational love alive because it's so incredible to learn from. And I've learned so much working with younger folks than me now that I'm in my thirties, someone called the thirties elders, which they have been in the community before. And I'm like, I don't feel like that. But I learned from folks in their twenties and teens all the time. And so I am really hopeful that all of us, regardless of age, just keep learning from one another and keep sharing the things that we have learned and being honest about what we've learned, because otherwise, younger generations aren't going to get the message.

Harry Waters Jr.:

So the youngsters, two of which I've spoken to on my way here to this podcast, taping are giving me hope. One of it is because, well, they like the fact that I am the elder that's available.

It is like I'm not dismissing them. I'm actually inviting them. I have an event that I created a couple of years ago called Harry's Hangout, and it's for black, gay, queer, trans men, and we meet every other month. And it was a really coming together because I didn't know anyone other than because I was at school all the time, so I knew everybody at the college, but where were my black gay friends in Minneapolis? I have some in New York, I have some in LA, but there was no community that I was a member of here. I mean, I knew people. And so in that time, I have a whole new set of friends now, and 90% of them are much younger than me, but it's allowed me to experience their stories and also the ways that they are surviving, especially young trans men of just how how they're treated, but then also the choices that they're making to stay in certain jobs or certain kinds of relationships. So I've had to learn from that. And I think that that's something that all us older people might just want to take just one of those, not even a whole page, just take a few lines out of that book

And go, wow, there's something that you can learn from this younger generation. We wanted to teach our older generation when we were young, so now it is a different world than where you come from, but how we welcome the spirits and the stories, the frustrations, the arrogance, the woe is me. The everything

Chantel Rodríguez: In its final years, *Telling Queer History* received a grant to create an exhibit that was years in the making. It was called "We Live On: Stories of Radical Connection."

RJ Lawrence:
Originally it was conceived as the beginning of franchising out telling queer history to other cities. So the goal was to build the relationships where we knew there were already queer communities in these other cities, build those relationships and give them the tools and skills and kind of format that we had created so they could run their own telling queer history and then hopefully make it maybe hybrid. So there was more rural urban connections.

So there were panels that were double-sided. That created a space so you could be surrounded by the queer history. And there was tables and objects that you could touch, read.

Chantel Rodríguez: The exhibit featured hundreds of LGBTQIA+ voices, and spotlighted several underrepresented stories, including intersex and two-spirit people, sex workers, and incarcerated queer and trans people. Participants could also visit the ancestor altar, memorializing those who had passed on. Another part of the exhibit shared the history of TQH itself. The exhibit traveled to the cities of Red Wing, Moorhead, Duluth, Grand Rapids, and Minneapolis.

RJ Lawrence:
A piece of history to name in here with the Red Wing exhibit, we did not record anything. We did do a volunteer if you want to be in a group photo at the end, hat was only photo we took. And part of that was because,, I had to look at his face on my altar. Sam Nordquist was from Red Wing and was found dead and tortured the week that we did our exhibit opening. The fact that he felt he needed to leave his community to find somebody to find love, and then that love was used to torture him is disgusting and the worst of humanity. And so the community needed and requested that it could just be a space where they could gather and be together. And 109 people turned out to that one.

Chantel Rodríguez: The Red Wing exhibit took place in February 2025, and in June of that year *Telling Queer History* held an "end-of-life celebration" at a gathering space and cafe called Queermunity in Minneapolis. I spoke with RJ about the decision to sunset the organization.

RJ Lawrence:
That's still a little raw. And there's some things that I won't include in the story, but I'll say for me, the primary motivation was burnout. I have been running for 12 years, and I've been doing this alongside being a photographer and working as a nanny or a deli cook or whatever odd job I had to get. I didn't get paid. The storytellers got paid before I did for the first five years. And I was using every part of myself, every resource I could get my hands on to continue the space. And I was pretty tired. We had grown. We became a nonprofit in 2020, January, 2020. On the first day of that year, I fractured my kneecap ice skating. And so I filed the 501(c)3 paperwork from bed not knowing what the year, what was coming for us.

And we were growing consistently. We doubled our income year over year, those last five years. I'm really proud of that. And every time I got enough to hire somebody else, I did.

And we were hoping to get to the point where I could take a sabbatical or really, I was hoping to do succession. I was doing succession planning, but financially we weren't able to weather a leadership change. And so I came to my board and I was like, I really need to be done. This is causing damage to my relationships in my personal life at this point, and it's causing damage to my financial life.

But they personally weren't able to support a leadership change. And then financially that wasn't in the cards either. So we decided to sunset, and this was shortly after we lost several organizations the last few years in the queer community. And so we did a long sunset. We stayed open for a year after announcing our close, which was confusing to some people who didn't read

the whole letter. But it was intentionally long and slow because A, we had this grant that they allowed us to continue to use, even though we had the intentional close afterwards. And B, we wanted to give the community time to properly grieve and to give ourselves time to do the archiving.

Chantel Rodríguez: With the sunset of *Telling Queer History*, RJ has been working to process all of its recordings and materials. They began this work in 2017 when José Maria was hired as a paid intern.

José Maria Herrera Tamayo:
So I was RJs first ever hire of which since, they've had many other hires, but I got to be the first, which was exciting. And that's just how we kind of got to know each other. We just worked a little bit with each other every week, kind of chipping away at some of the recordings that they had from events and organizing and pitching in at the actual events in person. And that's kind of how I really got to know the organization. And that was only for, it was no more than a year.I mean I loved it so much that I kind of stayed on as a volunteer and kind was on the board sometimes and volunteering other times and still kind of volunteering to wrap up our work currently as we try to get the last 12 or so years of the organization formally archived.

I mean, archiving sounds so formal, but essentially what we were doing was cutting down audio, editing our audio for the first time. All of it was raw from events and you could hear all sorts of stuff in the background

The recordings themselves are very long. They're very long in-person events, which makes them wonderful. But especially this past year as we've wrapped stuff up and so many different people have actually contributed to, especially creating transcripts of the events, listening through the events, editing the events, organizing the events, and sometimes we were still like, oh man, there's that one event that got away that we might not have a recording from and it might just be lost on someone's device, who knows where five moves ago.

Chantel Rodríguez: In the process of organizing and transcribing all of TQH's records, RJ secured an archival home for the materials at the Gerber/Hart Library and Archives in Chicago. RJ had hoped to donate the records to an archive in Minnesota, but they ran into several obstacles.

RJ Lawrence:
Over the years, and specifically in the last year, we actually got, all of our recordings have been transcribed, keywords, abstracts, all those kinds of lovely things that archivists get excited about. And we had them printed and out on display in this four-inch binder at the exhibit. So that's going to be available somehow to community. I'll say my original plan was the binder is going to live

at at Quatrefoil Library and Quatrefoil is one of the oldest LGBTQ libraries in the country.

We had this long-term relationship with the Tretter collection and

Chantel Rodríguez:

At the University of Minnesota

RJ Lawrence:
At the University of Minnesota, the Tretter collection there. We tried to get ahold of him for six months to do research to access the archives and were not responded to. And so when I said, we're sunsetting and we're trying to get, we're planning to put our things in their archive, he said, we don't have capacity, which was heartbreaking after years of cultivating a relationship and saying that's where our archives were going. They were just rejected flat out. We also were in conversation with the Minnesota Historical Society. I love, love you all been great supporters in the last couple of years. It took about 10 years for you guys to pay attention to us. So hey, we're here.

But ultimately, we decided not to archive there because the Finders Aid is very out of date. And big organizations take years to make any updates, especially in technology. And the deed of gift specifically says, you can destroy any of the archives you want to. So once I handed over, I have no control over that, and that did not feel okay to me. So we looked around and Gerber/Hart was a good fit for us. They're an independent organization. They have their own library as well as the archives. It's still in the Midwest. Their finding aid is up to date. And so folks will be able to listen to stories, read transcripts, see photos, all that kind of stuff. Eventually, once they're in Gerber/Hart's hands.

Chantel Rodríguez: *Telling Queer History's* website includes additional materials, but unfortunately it was taken down in early 2026 due to ongoing safety concerns.

RJ Lawrence:
I will say our website is not available right now with the threat on queer and trans people and all black and brown people in our state right now. People are being killed and disappeared. It's frightening times. And so we are currently in stealth mode to make sure that our people are safe and that our stories are preserved for future generations.

Chantel Rodríguez: Harry is especially excited about TQH's records being preserved.

Harry Waters Jr.:

this is, I think, an opportunity of the fact that being archived, because they're trying to erase us currently in so many ways.

So there's something about us in particular, and these stories is they're going to disappear if we don't tell them. And we didn't think about that when we were living our lives. We were just living and surviving. We almost have to tell these stories because they won't exist anymore. And because we've got enough technology that we can do it in different platforms in different ways has got to secure that they don't disappear. And my body will get older, and I won't remember as many stories. I have more weeks behind me than I do in front. But still, there's other people that may, like you say, you never know who's going to benefit from the story that you told and where you told it.

Chantel Rodríguez: I asked my guests to reflect on what *Telling Queer History* has meant to them.

RJ Lawrence:
I don't know who I am without Telling Queer History. I haven't really thought about this question because I'm still in it, and I really look forward to reflecting on this next year. It has meant that I found that my role in this community was being a connector. I see the connections and I build the connections, and people are constantly coming to me, do you know this resource? Do you have something for this? And how do I help this person? And I feel really grateful to be a trusted connector. It has taught me about disability justice, about all kinds of different identities. I've been very grateful to be able to hold people's stories.

José Maria Herrera Tamayo:
for the whole time I've lived in Minnesota, I've been a part of Telling Queer History in one way, shape or another. And I think that's for me the perfect metaphor of how queer history is just part of our lives and how it's just constantly ongoing. And I love that there's been this organization and this group of people who I could always come back to, they're people I can rely on, that I can be honest and communicate with and who I can help support, and

they support me as well. And so I think having that connection with the organization and the group has been really powerful, not just on a, okay, we're getting X, Y, and Z done, but on a personal level.

I think that it's helped me be more intentional around, am I staying connected with people? Am I not isolating myself? How am I navigating conflict with people? Me and the neighbor upstairs, we've lived [unintelligible] with each other that we have beef at this point, totally normal other beef with each other, and yet I still really love and appreciate her. And when you're in community long enough, it's all kind of muddy and complicated. And I think Telling Queer History has reminded me of that. Being community is not all perfect in rainbows and butterflies. There's conflict and it's a normal, and this is how we get through it. And so that has been really important ~~to me~~.

Harry Waters Jr.:

One of the powers of Telling Queer History is that allowed also those of us who were older to come into the importance of our stories. It's not that our story was the only one, and mine's the one that must be told. It's like, no, this is just my story, and it's the relevance that it has to you. I don't know how it's going to come, but at least you're witnessing. And I think that's like James Baldwin would say, that's what we should be doing. We should be witnessing each other.

So I think there's something about how you use your own history as a way for other people to reflect on their own stories. It does not have to be, I need to tell the textbook tome story, but the personal stories that people share are the ones that actually have a different kind of effect because they vibrate for something. Because I want to give people permission to have the power of their own story, which means I have to listen more instead of doing what I'm doing for the last hour of running my mouth.

And so we must, must, must keep telling these stories. It's not just our stories, it's the youth stories. I need to hear those youth stories because they need to hear their youth stories. They may just struggle alone, but if they're hearing somewhere that, oh my God, there is someone just like me who's actually 25 as well, they're going to go, oh, that can make a difference.

There's someone that's in a rural community like I am that's having the same experience. Oh, I'm really not alone. I think that's the thing about Telling Queer History is knowing that you're not doing this by yourself.

Chantel Rodríguez: After successfully running *Telling Queer History*, RJ remains hopeful for the future of LGBTQIA+ history and community in Minnesota.

RJ Lawrence:
My hope is that we continue to tell each other our stories, that we continue to archive it and share it. We don't have history if we don't do that. And I hope for our greater community continue to learn the things that I learned through doing this work. How to make accessible both financially, physically, emotionally, spiritually, ~~make our events~~, build more care into each event that we do. I hope I see that more, and I hope I see, and I have seen a lot more collaboration. When I first started Telling Queer History, I would send out our events to people and ask them to share it, and no one would, or very few people would in the beginning, but by the end, people were sending me events. That was a big part of what I did in our newsletters in the beginning, was sharing each other's resources. Me sharing your event doesn't take away from my event, and in fact, builds more trust. It builds more connections. It builds an audience that has a shared value. And I think that I want to see more of that.

I want to see more of our history include queerness.

And I also want to invite straight people, straight cisgendered people. This is your history too. It's really important that you learn it, that you hear it from our mouths and tell the stories and find ways you can relate to it. This is, it's your job to safeguard us. And that was an important invitation to events was like, yes, straight people, you're supposed to be here. You're supposed to hear this. You're supposed to be the volunteers, the ones standing at the door guarding us. All of those things just don't take up space. And your story is important, but not in this space. But come and be and listen. It's really important that we listen. We have two ears for a reason.

Chantel Rodríguez: For so long, silence was a form of safety for the LGBTQIA+ community. Between 2013 and 2025, *Telling Queer History* cultivated a welcoming space that invited people from across generations and different identities to transform silence into language and action. They shared and documented stories of life, joy, love, resistance, and identity that have long been missing from the broader narratives of LGBTQIA+ and Minnesota histories.

Telling Queer History's journey to secure a home for their records shows that archives, like sources, are neither neutral nor natural. They are created through a human process that involves individuals producing the source and an institution deciding whether or not to collect it and make it accessible.

Telling Queer History leaves behind not only its stories and records at the Gerber/Hart Library and Archives in Chicago, but also countless lessons on how to create a safe space, how to organize intergenerational communities through storytelling, and how to cultivate community care.

My guests RJ, Harry, Jayce, and José Maria, hope others will pick up the torch and build on their work. The stories they shared with me are an important reminder of the power of storytelling in the act of making history.

If you want to be part of history, then you need to tell your own story.