

Building Community in BC with Sonia Furstenau

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Crystal: Hello Sonia. Thank you for coming today. I am at work at the hospital, so if it is noisy in the background, I apologize. I can't shut down the hospital. Here we go! Sonia, we had talked last week about you coming on to talk about what has been going on in BC and the calls you have been making over the last few weeks about the pandemic data and need for evidence- and science-based practice within public health. To start, could you tell us a bit about who you are and why January (2022) your message was loud and clear about needing this in public health? It has been really great to see. But I'm wondering what you are seeing and what got you invested in this?

Sonia: First of all, thank you for inviting me and it is nice to meet you both.

Mel: Nice to meet you.

Sonia: It's nice to have an opportunity for the conversation. I was thinking about it... Crystal you started with saying what got you here? And I think this is an important part of answering the short-term question... it really connects to the longer story of what got me into politics. I'm a teacher. I moved up to Shawnigan Lake in September of 2011 thinking we would come up here for one year. And spend a year in Shawnigan Lake and then go back to Victoria. Our kids were 4 and 5 years old, our youngest ones, and we just thought that will just be a little journey.

While we were living here two things happened. One is we fell in love with Shawnigan and Cowichan generally, and the people and the community up here. And for the first time, weren't living in a really urban area and discovered the joys of smaller community living. And two, the province began a process to grant a permit for 500 million tonnes of contaminated soil to be put at the head waters of the drinking water shed in Shawnigan Lake. And at the time I remember saying to my husband, no government would ever do that. No governments willfully put the government at risk. It's not what governments do. And then they issued the draft permit in April of 2013 and then they issued the permit in August of 2013. And that was a real turning point for my life.

One, we were still in Shawnigan, we were staying. But two, it was really clear that I couldn't stand by and let this happen in my community. I became very committed to the community building that went into standing up against that permit. And four years later, very very long story short, that permit got revoked. And the reason that connects to today is that what we relentlessly focused on, and I would say this – I got elected as the local area director in 2014 and would speak in front of big crowds, 500 people in the community – I would say, we have to root everything we are doing in honesty, kindness, compassion, integrity. Because how we do this is how we shape the future and it really mattered that we didn't root our efforts in anger, in hatred, but that we focused on the truth, on evidence. And we knew that in the end that is a very powerful force. Telling the truth is a very powerful thing to do. And we got to the place where that permit got revoked but in the course of it... I came to recognize we were a symptom of a problem in decision making.

In BC, particularly around natural resource and extract decision making, land use decision making, the government had handed over an enormous amount of agency by bringing in professional reliance. So, companies and businesses hired their own professionals to oversee and then gave government advice. And government built into the legislation that they had to take that advice. They had no agency of their own. And what we discovered in Shawnigan was that the engineers had a secret profit-sharing deal with the landfill owners. And we thought again, what kind of government would think that is okay? But that was fine under the legislation.

So, I really came into my role as an MLA in a determination to address that flaw in decision making. We do have a piece of legislation now called The Professional Governance Act, which provides oversight of professional reliance. There is still a lot of work to do on this, but the problem has been clearly identified and recognized and steps are starting to be taken. But, that brings us to the present day. And I see this very much as a continuum in that it is becoming more and more difficult to understand what informs decisions when it comes to a public health emergency. It's becoming more and more difficult to make sense of how and why decisions are being made, how the success of policies is being measured, and what the outcomes are meant to be. And I think that this is... since December of 2020, we have been consistently saying to government a couple of things. One, be transparent with data, be transparent with what is informing your decisions. Be transparent about how this virus is impacting different communities differently. We were calling for disaggregated data on how racialized communities are being affected. I think socioeconomically we need to look at this, very much so.

Crystal: The social determinants of health that should be a core aspect of public health. In my opinion, anyway.

Sonia: Absolutely. It should be a core aspect of government decision making at large. Are we achieving those outcomes? Are we improving the health and well-being with our policy and decision making? We should have well-being budgets. We should have genuine progress indicators. The social determinants of health should be the driving forces of public policy. And what we have seen is over the course of now 14 months, 15 months since the election, is a steady decrease in transparency. And an increase in a kind of... real difficulty of understanding what is informing decisions. And this is a long answer to your first question.

Crystal: No, that's great.

Sonia: From my point of view, when you say our voices have gotten louder... I would say our voices have been there but what we have been really emphasizing is, in the last month or so, we have to start from the reality of this being an airborne virus. The transmission of this virus is airborne. And if that becomes the prime mover of policy decision making, then we start to understand and be able to make sense of policies. The best technology that we have, the least expensive solution, that this government should, and I wish would, be leaning into... is every household should have a supply of n95s. And that supply should be replenished regularly. It should be, as it is right now – I was just talking with my constituency office team, we are scrambling to get our hands on n95s, to keep our staff and team safe.

Crystal: Well, and the commercialization of the n95s has just solidified and taken off since Omicron. We've been buying n95s off Vitacore or Canada Strong Masks. For me, I'm not in a great financial position. So, there are times I am literally deciding to spend that money on the mask to try to be as safe as possible at the hospital as I can be, at the cost of other things. For my family. To work at a hospital.

Sonia: Crystal. It is mind boggling, right? The cost of making sure that everybody has this most effective tool against an airborne, compared to the cost of hospitals being overwhelmed, the cost of the burnout and exhaustion that we are seeing in the healthcare system, the cost to the economy when people are sick, the loss of time people can be at work. To me this is one of the most difficult to understand policies. That we are at the opposite end of the spectrum. We are not providing these masks as we should, as a public health tool. It would be a logical response to an airborne virus the whole pandemic. In BC, we have policies in place that prevent people from wearing these masks in the most high-risk environments.

Crystal: Including cancer patients that have been on this podcast. They were told not to wear their n95 in Fraser Health. They are being told they need to wear the 3-ply surgical masks with gaping holes in it, because it comes back to everything you said, Sonia... they refuse to recognize it is airborne. And that has been BC-specific. Alberta is in that too, and Western Canada. But BC has driven that movement against masks, from the start. From the start.

Mel: And they have doubled down on it. To the point they are preventing people from protecting themselves.

Crystal: Correct. I mean, even if you want to be a terrible policy maker and not supply them... the fact they are actually preventing people at risk from being more safe is mind boggling. Is genuinely mind boggling. And it reminds me of the comment you said, Sonia. That your initial reaction was it can't be possible that the government enacts policies that would harm a section of their people. And I think all three of us on this call that happens every day now. There are policies being made, especially right now, with a certain segment of the population in mind. They will be able to access the best of things and there is not a lot of concern about all those that are essentially holding this response up. That have made the last three years of their life in a real way, on the ground, and still hear this many months in that they are not worthy of a mask. Right? Like our healthcare workers that have sat with our family members that died alone and held those iPads for us, that continue to hold it for us... that we won't give them a mask. That is cruel. It is cruel, the word I usually use for it.

Sonia: And again, if you look at it from a policy point of view, it is indefensible. We have heard from both the health minister and the public health officer a variety of responses to this, right. But ultimately, it is indefensible. And this comes back to the transparency piece. And again, I will continue to call for this. If you want to make policies like this and not show to the public what is informing your policy making... show us what kind of research, you are relying on to make these policies. Tell us where are the peer-reviewed papers that are suggesting that n95s are not a very effective tool in this pandemic.

Crystal: As a researcher and as a scientist, I have struggled so much with the response of BC in particular because of the misuse of science-based language and data. And it's actually - As an academic that has worked in doing research for the last 10 years, at least now – it is truly horrifying what they are doing in terms of the understanding. And what's it going to do in the faith and trust of public health at the end of this. It is a basic thing in public health that we should understand our risk. Let alone when they are saying we are at a “self-management phase” where we have to identify our own risk and move on with life. And we don't even have any valid data to which to draw our risk from. So really that means, if you are lower risk you are going to go about and do your things now. And if you are not, well, you got to sort it out. That's the role of public health I thought, was to ensure it was an equitable, healthy, safe society.

Sonia: I mean, in its essence, public health is meant to be about reducing inequality. It is recognizing that education and tools in the hands of the public is a very effective force for improving health outcomes and reducing inequality. But we aren't going to achieve that if our public health approach isn't rooted in accurate and effective, up to date information, and then the tools. And, of course, we have all been talking about those tools. In light of this notion that we are in a self-management phase of a global pandemic ... which in itself is a jarring...

Crystal: Shocking statements from public, right? If we had thought this was going to happen 5 years ago, we would look at this and be like what do you mean they abandoned these things?

Sonia: What are the tools? N95 masks, number one. Good education, data, information, understanding. How do I self-manage if I don't know basic information about where things are at with this pandemic. Number three, rapid tests.

Crystal: Talk to me about rapid tests in BC. What has your experience been watching the rapid tests? I have many thoughts.

Sonia: My friends' husband went to England just before Christmas to see his mother, hadn't seen her in several years. All the precautions and fortunately stayed healthy the whole time. But came home with an armful of rapid tests because they are handed out there, just constantly. There is no lack of access to this tool. In provinces across this country, there hasn't been the problem with access. But here, again, if you don't have the means to pay for it – and they are not inexpensive and seem to be getting more expensive – then there is no effective way to access these tests. There is a lot to think about, but I tend to be very focused on what are the solutions? Where can we go from here? For example, they are being provided to schools right now, I understand. But then the criteria for who can have one are again, mysterious, and not entirely clear. But what we could be doing, for example, is saying okay the schools are an access point for these tests. If anybody with a family member that is experiencing symptoms, here is a package of tests. Now you have the capacity as a family to understand whether or not your family members are covid positive, to make decisions about what you do to protect your family members and your wider community. You are able to test until you are no longer showing positivity. Which is the responsible thing.

Crystal: Then you can isolate the appropriate amount of time.

Sonia: Not some magic, poof it's over. This is evidence-informed decision making. It gives us this power if we are on our own. If we are self-managing in this, please, we need the tool to make informed and responsible decisions for our families and our greater community. That is a collective response that recognizes that I'm not separate from the other people in my community. My decisions and choices effect other people and in some cases, could have dire effects on other people. If I make the choice to engage in my community while I am carrying this virus or shedding this virus and infect somebody else, I don't know where that ends and if that ends in a loss or long-term illness of another person. Maybe I come out fine. But I should not be doing a calculation in a pandemic that is wholly focused on me as an individual. This is a really important aspect of this. If we lose that sense that we are deeply connected to the people around us, and are communities are inter-connected, we lose the collective effort against this virus.

Crystal: It is worrisome and seems sort of clear that this particular government is not worried about those outcomes necessarily. Which is concerning, because their focus has very much been individual choice, individual responsibility. That's something they have very much pushed throughout their pandemic response. And I agree with you in the fact that this a global pandemic. We can't get away from being interconnected. And from a psychological perspective, reinforcing that in-group/out-group has been the worst decision BC has made. And it is in large part why there is so much division and so many issues in BC right now. There has been no community care. No community bridging. And that's what I hear you working on, is actually trying to understand what is going on in the communities. And that is very much what Mel and I try to do. I don't really care what the policy makers think to be honest. I care about the people that are being impacted by the policies because a lot of time those people that make the policies have no access to the ground, don't talk to people on the ground, just talk to senior management, and that has been the approach many times. That is not solving these issues. We can ignore that. But the fact is that all of the choices that they have made in the last three years are going to effect BC for decades to come. Including in the healthcare system and public trust in public health. What happens to these agencies that made really problematic and anti-science statements? Those are all things BC will be dealing with for some time to come.

Mel: I'm very concerned about the state of education in BC.

Crystal: I saw a study the other day, and I don't know if you saw it, and Sonia, you mention you are a historian and that makes me happy. The fact is people aren't even conceptualizing history right now and that is why we are where we are. That study looked at North America, United States and Canada, and saw that 1/3 of the students did not believe in the Holocaust. And even after the education they provided, 23% still believed it was exaggerated. We are failing. We are failing.

Sonia: I did. I saw that headline and was immediately, like you Crystal, quite concerned. And Mel, I agree. As a teacher, no matter what grade I was teaching – I taught middle and high school – during Holocaust Remembrance Day, I would invite speakers into my class. I would ensure we oriented the unit around the Holocaust. This is absolutely essential knowledge for people to have. And I think we were talking about this too. I studied history. I fret that history is not, or civics – this notion of what is our responsibility as a citizen, what do we owe to the society that provides

us with all these benefits of being a citizen – we have a real loss of understanding of electoral systems, jurisdictions. And that is replicated in times you see massive majorities for this party in whatever election. And I remember after the 2013 election. The provincial one, 40% of the vote, 60% turned out to vote... 24% of people handed a majority of seats to one party in the legislature. And that party now has four years to not answer to anybody. They cannot be held to account. There are no mechanisms other than the next election to hold that party to account. The election we had in 2020, we had the lowest voter turnout ever. It was just over 50%. It was high 40s that voted NDP. It was again about 25% of the population, and 57/87 seats in the legislature are NDP. That makes it very, very difficult to achieve not just accountability, but collaboration in the legislature. They don't care. They don't need to talk to anybody. For a year now, both of the opposition parties have been saying actually it is better to work across party lines, as we had to during the minority government. But that is a thing of the distant past at this point.

Crystal: Yeah, I have been watching a little bit of Horgan sometimes and his appearances. He is so... not holding decorum when I see him in those places, the way he speaks to people and addresses them. The NDP to me right – and I'm speaking in my opinion – there is no empathy. There is literally no empathy. And the reason that boggles my mind and there is so much dissonance in BC about what to do is because that is literally supposed to be the party that is for the vulnerable groups. That is what people have typically associated with the NDP. And there are a lot of people that are sort of where you were at Sonia, before all this stuff happened and you joined in. They genuinely don't believe that the government would be lying about something as significant as the pandemic or misusing data or misrepresenting things, however you want to state it. They can't fathom those choices would be made. And Mel and I have been doing this, just trying to visualize and make sense of what they are doing so people can understand what is going on. Because no community can be empowered without transparent and open information. That's the basis of it all, just like you come back to.

Sonia: Yeah. I use that word a lot, how do we empower people? And not just in a pandemic. How do we empower people widely? In a democracy what you benefit from are educated, empowered people who are contributing to the fabric and strengthening of your social society. I have come back to this over and over again and I won't stop. The most important thing in this pandemic for the government to do was to maintain trust. Because you are asking people to operate in a collective way in the benefit of each other. You are asking people to forego or to make sacrifices, to make choices that are about the greater good. And we could see in 2020 that we were all ready to just give everything we had. We were going to take care of each other. We were going to bang the pots for the healthcare workers. We were going to say that we were in this together. And then 2021...

Crystal: And then the election hit, to be honest. As soon as they got majority Horgan's demeanour changed. I said it back then. Even his presentation in public. He had this air of gentleness to him and trying to be very caring and empathetic. And it really significantly changed when the year turned over and he had majority. It's like he went... he felt too good to answer people's questions. Too good to provide reasons for why we are operating in this way. And when we are in a place when we do not have access to hospitals effectively, when we don't

have access to ambulances effectively, when we have multiple natural disasters happening where nobody shows up to help the people, we are in some real trouble. We are in some real trouble because there is no community sense anymore. Once that happened, it's like their focus on community left. It became about... well, how can we get this group of the most people back to normal? And that is sort of how we are going to run with it. And they literally just put blinders on for all the issues we bring up. Whether it is long covid. Whether it is before delta hit there was an 11x rate of morbidity and mortality among racialized communities in BC. And we knew that going in, but they deny and don't address those things when it is brought up. Or you watch the pressers, and they literally refuse to answer the question. They just sidestep them all together. We have no way of getting accurate information in BC right now. And that's terrifying. And my grandma died in December 2020 in long-term care, and we could not get information. We still can't get information. No one will answer our questions from the government. Yet they stand up there and say they are taking care of things. Not my things. It's not my people that they are taking care of anymore.

Sonia: And I'm sorry for your loss, Crystal. That...it really hits home that this has been a time of enormous loss. On so many levels. But that for thousands of families, it has meant the loss of a loved one. And that is an enormous space that you can't fill, that space just stays with you. And so, I think it is really important to acknowledge and recognize that loss.

Crystal: The government too... that's been something that has stuck out to me with Horgan and the NDP. It has been so cold to those that have lost family members. It has been so cold to hear their statements and to hear them now refer to those deaths as if they were the cost of doing business. And we are moving on. And to fail to recognize the extent to which our communities have come to harm, whether it is the loss of family members that were in long-term care, or the loss of those two children. The impact of these deaths will be generational, and I say that having lost my father at 12. These people will not go a day in their life without this impacting them from hereon out. And the failure of the government to even recognize that or say that people are going to need support or to understand what is going to happen moving forward... it is just this lack of ability to long-term plan, or understand the situation, or accept it? I don't know. It's hard.

Sonia: I've thought a lot, and talked a lot, lately about the burden of leadership in overlapping crises. You touched on... it hasn't just been covid. We have had several climate change related crises...

Crystal: And the overdose crisis that has been continuing on for years. That they have done nothing about.

Sonia: A drug supply that is so toxic it is killing 6 people a day on average in this province. The burden of leadership in these overlapping crises is very real and very significant. And I think that you touched on empathy. How do we on the one hand have empathy for people who are in these leadership roles, bearing the weight of that... and at the same time, have an expectation that they be transparent and accountable. And empathetic in return. But also, aware, and able to recognize the limitations that any individual is going to have at a time like this. Or even any collection of individuals. Or any organization. I made a lot of comments at my year-end interviews I don't

want to hear the word unprecedented again, I want to hear the word anticipated. I want to hear a proactive footing. I will fully acknowledge this has been a relentless collection of unprecedented phenomena and crises hitting us.

Crystal: But none of them were necessarily unexpected.

Sonia: No, no. And we have been warned about pandemics for a long time. And we have seen the zoonotic diseases come more rapidly. And we know that we are creating conditions that engender these outcomes. The dangers of how we raise industrial animals in farming. The dangers of habitat destruction and the way in which we encroach on to animals that can be carriers of diseases that become transferable between humans and animals. That's zoonotic. And that's real risk. HIV/AIDS. SARS. Ebola. H1N1. We have seen an increasing rate, or decreasing time, between the emergence between these diseases. We know researchers are telling us this is not our last rodeo. So, what are we doing to prepare for the next wave of covid? What are we doing to prepare for the next pandemic?

Crystal: How do we even know the lessons we are going to learn if we are not collecting the data?

Sonia: Exactly. What are we doing to reduce the changes of that next pandemic? So, there's that. When I come to that burden of leadership... this is where we have made the call, reinforcing the call of the Protect Our Province BC people, for an independent science table. We have the covid modelling group which in a way has acted as a de facto independent science table, but I want to add to the expertise we need on that table. I think that it should be beyond just covid. I think we need an independent science table to provide that guidance and advice and that lens to government decision making in light of the significant burden of governing in overlapping crises. So, scientists, in addition a psychologist, a sociologist, a historian. We need the perspectives of a wider range of informed people to be able to navigate what is an extremely complex situation. As opposed to operating from, and I reflect on this a lot, trying to make it contained into a narrative. And I think that this is one of the most disorienting problems we have in BC. Which is this feeling that things don't fit into the story we are being told. And rather than acknowledging this narrative of droplets or this narrative of transmission doesn't happen in schools...

Crystal: Or hospitals, apparently.

Sonia: We know that doesn't really make sense given the evidence that is out there, whatever limited data, and looking at other jurisdictions that are being much more transparent and much more mindful and effective at collecting and sharing data. We know that we are not somehow in a very separate category from the rest of the world. The pandemic is happening everywhere.

Crystal: And the angering thing about that narrative specifically is that when it works for them BC has its own pandemic. But when it doesn't work for them, they are doing what everybody else is. And there is no sense or structure to their methods. I do big assessments right now, like 100-page assessments, and you have to be able to follow those things. You have to outline where the evidence came from, you have to support the things that you are saying. And there has been no expectation of that, of these individuals. Or there has been and they haven't been meeting it or

been unwilling to meet it. And gosh, it is so hard even to try and put a fence around what you need when everybody else is seeing and hearing things that they don't really know how to make sense. Or they don't know that it is wrong. A lot of people it takes time for them to understand the ways that they are changing the data, or how the data differs from other peoples, or what they are doing behind the scenes. It has taken two years of following and I still have to lay things out for people so that they understand the way changes have happened. Because a lot of people that hear the pressers or the tagline of the news. A lot of people came out of that presser going, oh the 700 people hospitalized, 60% do not really have covid. That's not what the presser said. The presser had a minute selection of data from a month, where they specifically did mass surveillance in hospitals, which they have now taken away... of that group, for that specific week period, where they did mass surveillance, sure. But now it is being applied to the hospital numbers this week and it will be applied to the hospital numbers tomorrow. Even though they represent very different things. What they did in the last two months served to obfuscate even more what is going on.

Sonia: When I have made the case – and when we go back into the legislature next week, I will continue to make this case – that why earning trust through transparency and accountability is so essential is because we are all first and foremost living through this very stressful experience together. And what we don't need is the additional stress of questioning how much am I actually learning or what is this that I am being told? Why doesn't this match with what I'm hearing elsewhere?

Mel: How do I keep my family safe?

Sonia: How do I keep my family safe? Why can't I have access to the tools that I can increasingly recognize would help with that?

Crystal: And failing to recognize the influence that they have is truly, truly irresponsible. For people such as Dr. Henry to go up and state as she did yesterday that people in the same hospital room aren't getting covid from each other. That's not okay. That is a clear mistruth. And our public health official, the representation of our entire public health, was allowed to go up there and say that yesterday. And nothing has come out of it. We are in a bad place. That is a bad place to be in.

Sonia: And that's the accountability piece. We should have the expectation that the information is verifiably accurate and sound and backed up by data and evidence. Like that should be a basic given in how we operate in a functioning and healthy democratic society.

Crystal: And you see the example, there are not covid notifications but there are lice notifications. In what world did we make that decision and how were people not involved in that on a larger scale? And even these decisions about we are going to live with it. Well, 54% of people don't want restrictions so we are going to go on with it... we are back in a place where if the majority of the population wants to kill a minority, we are going back to that? Cause that seems a problem historically.

Sonia: And I guess that comes back to the big principles. What do we want to be trying to achieve collectively in our governance, in our policy making, and decision making? And again, I am so, as we all are I think, it is unnerving to see what is unfolding across Canada. Around the world in a lot of ways.

Crystal: The uncertainty is peak.

Sonia: The uncertainty. The misinformation. Obviously very concerted efforts right now to... the convoy in Ottawa is basically saying we can operate outside of the law.

Crystal: And they are being allowed to, right, in some ways. We are in this impossible place right now where we are being held hostage.

Sonia: And the historian in me looks at this and says this is worrying. And we need that trust in our institutions and our government and our political systems to be restored. And we need the humility and the ability for people to say we've made mistakes, or we've learned more since then. Whatever that takes. Or we need help. Yes, it is time to be more collaborative. Yes, it is time to bring in new, fresh voices. Two years, people are exhausted. Just acknowledge the humanness that of course we are going to get to places where nobody is perfect in their decision making, in their assessment of things. That's when you hand the baton. That's when you say I'm operating from a place of service first and foremost. And want to ensure that I am doing the best I can.

Crystal: You have identified really nicely there, and it works into empathy there, is the humility. You don't really have empathy when you don't have humility at some level, because you are not seeing outside of yourself. And that is sort of what we are seeing now, there is an exceptional rise in this as long as its good for me we are good. Which will not allow a functioning society, as history has shown us. It just will not last for long if we are all out for ourselves.

Sonia: We are deeply interconnected and dependent on each other.

Crystal: The entire globe at this point, which you would think they would be recognizing. In this global pandemic that we cannot get away from the fact we are all connected. And as we watch climate change escalate, we all watch it together. And until we all act together, we won't get very far.

Sonia: I used to say in Shawnigan when we were in the midst of what felt like an endless effort and battle that we were in, we articulated a future that we wanted. And we would say, the future of Shawnigan Lake includes clean safe drinking water and a connected community. And we would hold that sense of where we wanted to get to, to drive us through some really tough stretches. We are talking about dump trucks arriving full of materials that you definitely want in your drinking water shed, and people standing on roads at 5:30 am in January trying to stop these trucks from coming into our watershed. It was a long, hard effort. But I think about that right now. And I think what we need in people in places of leadership is to tell me the future we are going to try to get to together? Tell me where we are going to go.

If you'll humour me, I have a thing. I drew this a year ago. We talk about policy a lot in political parties. We talk about this policy and that policy. And I think those are really important. But the policies are a vehicle to get us somewhere. Where are we trying to get to? So, we had this big policy discussion in late December 2020 after the election. And I was like oh okay, I have been a political leader for six weeks.

Crystal: You handled it so well.

Sonia: Humour. And having teenage children relentlessly mock me.

Crystal: It keeps the humility, right?

Sonia: It's very important. So, I was trying to... how do I take all these pieces of policy and turn them into somewhere I see as a future. I'm going to show you. I keep this somewhere I can see it. It is the BC I would like us to have. There are four pillars. Everyone's needs are met, and everyone can meet their full potential. We protect the natural systems that we depend on for our health and well-being. Our neighbours and communities are vibrant, safe, connected, and resilient. Our government, political systems, and institutions are trustworthy. So, this was early January 2021. And then inside of that are the policy pieces. ECE for all. Thriving public education. Lifelong learning. Equity. Declaration/rights of Indigenous peoples act. Anti-racism. Forestry reform. Food security. Social/mental health supports. Housing for all. It goes on. Clean energy and economic transition. But to me, then we look at those policies and we ask ourselves the question, are we moving towards these four outcomes that we have articulated as where we want to get to. And I think that what I want very much from anybody in a political leadership role is tell us where you think we are going to go together? What does it look like when we are there? What does it feel like? What is the experience for people? I think that our politics have become so much about I'm going to take aim at my opponent and bring them down and that is how I get to wear I want to be. The question is why did you want to be there? What is your driving vision?

Crystal: And who do you want to be when you get there? What I see in your beautiful graphic, which is a BC I also dream of for my family there, those things should be the basics. That what is hard about this. Those are the basics. And if you don't have the values that are fighting for those things constantly... like a value to me is equity, truly for people. Whether that means that I have to sacrifice some of my own privilege, I am 100% willing to do that for equity. But people that don't have a strong understanding of their own values, or where they want to go, or what they want the world to look like... and what you are saying, Sonia... they are going to have such a hard time to make sense of everything going on. To make the policies to get there if you don't even know where there is. If you don't understand what it means to be a community. If you aren't trying to build a community, then these are all just floating things. They are one piece of a policy that is going to come and go and not be rooted in much. And I like that you have that image of what it all comes down to. Because I think that sort of framework is lacking in – and I try to stay out of the party stuff, because I am genuinely party-less – in the other parties right now. At least not in their leadership being willing to say that explicitly and that is mind boggling.

Those things that are on your paper about what we want for BC? That should be the basis of every platform.

Mel: And honestly, the thing on your paper with four pillars, that's showing us how to move the goalpost to thriving for everyone. Instead of just surviving.

Crystal: Instead of reacting we are preventing.

Mel: Yes, so shifting those goalposts to thriving. So, people aren't missing out on their basic needs and people are able to have the fundamentals to thrive in this society.

Sonia: We also have to ask ourselves, what are we collectively losing when so many people are in survival mode? When people are just trying to have their basic needs – shelter, food, basic education.

Crystal: And the research will say that financial distress, especially in low-income situation where you are talking about necessities, that's one of the higher-level stresses you can have.

Mel: And there is evidence of brain trauma and poor brain development in children that are trying to survive in poverty. They just did a huge study in the US. They are giving money to the mothers, and they are measuring the babies brain function. And they found the brain function are so much better when mom gets money because it relieves the stress of poverty.

Crystal: And we've seen studies that also provide a basic income. These people are surviving with that income. They are surviving. And people get to questions about what they are doing with their money, nobody is asking you what you are doing with your money. So, I don't usually entertain that question. But people shouldn't have to fight to live. To me, my viewpoint, and my basis in this is that all life is valuable, and we should be fighting for all life in the ways that we can. And we have moved away from that, at least within this pandemic response specifically. But this is just a continuation of all of the ways that the intentionally ignored communities have been treated all along. It's just been magnified to all of us now. But these are the ways and the things that they were already dealing with.

Sonia: And I think that is why it is really important to locate the kind of political response in the bigger political picture. Which is, again, what is the purpose of government? What has that served? When we talk about people not being able to be out of survival mode and the study that you mentioned Mel, the effect on brain development... the way that I look at this is what are we collectively losing? Who are the artists and the entrepreneurs and the inventors and the scientists and the writers, the teachers, the people that if they can be able to thrive would then be providing us with a richness in our world, in our communities, in our societies, that we are being deprived of?

Mel: That's you looking at it as a teacher though. Teachers see it like that. The potential.

Sonia: You know this in your classroom, right? I took an excellent course when I was in the education program. I was building a prosocial classroom and I was like what the heck does that mean? The instructor was amazing because she drew on her decades of teaching experience and her stories as a teacher and a mom were just fantastic. And basically, she said that the important

thing that you do in your classroom is you create a community. From there, you can achieve all the other things. So, in a way this reflection is similar. We will get to the curriculum. We will get to the algebra. We will get to the history lessons. We will get to the English lessons. But first we create a place where you are safe to learn, where your needs are being met, where you are respected and seen for who you are... and also you see yourself as part of this community and this classroom. And so, you are both a contributor to the bigger picture and you benefit from that sense of community. Once I approached teaching like that, it is an incredible thing because that initial work into the community building in the classroom meant that we could then basically perform miracles as a group.

My favorite story was a grade 8 class. I came in about a week and a half into the year and they had already attached, already bonded, with the previous teacher. So, they were like who do you think you are? I was a fairly new teacher at the time, and I thought, okay. I tried to carry on with his approach and thought this was definitely not going to work. I stopped and we just got to know each other. And by the time we got to May of that year... we are hitting it out of the park with Algebra, we had a medieval fair and invited the whole school, and we had accomplished really fantastic things. A group of students come and say we want to go to Playland, and I was like well I'm a little busy. If you want to do that you need to organize everything. And by the way, you need to fundraise so that everybody can come. So, this is not about who can afford to go. You fundraise so that everyone is coming. They did it. In the space of about 10 days, they raised a couple thousand dollars. They used various approaches, chocolate sales and bake sales and all sorts of things.

They not only raised enough money so that everyone in the class could afford to go to Playland... it was a \$20 cost for everybody, and everybody got to go even if they couldn't afford. And there was enough money leftover to give to two of the organizations that had come in to talk to us about work they were doing. One was in India. they build preschools in Mumbai. And the second was a water project in Kenya. And so, the kids said, well, we raised more money than we need... we don't need this money, so we are going to give this money to the organizations so that they can go to other kids that need this money elsewhere. To me this was an example of empowering, of locating yourself within a wider community – not just the classroom, but the global community – and recognizing you have this capacity as an individual, when you work collectively, to make really amazing things happen. And I feel like I was so blessed to have been a teacher before I came into this realm. One, I can handle question period because I have been a substitute teacher in grade 8.

Crystal: You dealt with teenagers; this is the least of your concerns.

Sonia: But two, I know what we could do, if we oriented ourselves differently. I've seen it. I've lived it, over and over again, with these incredible kids. Who might think they are never going to pass a history 11 class, but they do?

Crystal: I've shared this with Mel, and I've shared it on Twitter before. But I honestly... it is so hard for me the way that schools are being used in this pandemic and in other ways to marry a mental health narrative because I truly treasure school and teachers. And I was a teen parent, and

I went back to the Kelowna Young Parents' Program after I had my son when I was 16. One of the primary reasons I am here, about to get my Ph.D. and be a licensed psychologist, is my social studies 11 and history 12 teacher, Mr. Lindsay Gibson. He truly was one of the first people in my life that showed my unconditional positive regard. That saw me as a person, saw the potential in what I could and helped me see that potential. And changed the trajectory of my life. Truly. I was planning to go be a chef before that. And I now have three degrees later and I'm going to do very different things in the world and I'm going to have a lot more reach than I would have. And that is because of one of those experiences and community building. I lacked a community, and many of the kids that come from disadvantaged places will lack a community. They have never experienced that. And to be coming into a situation where you genuinely build that and see the possibility of connection and what connection can do for the world? It does amazing things, Sonia. It truly does. And your story and my story are just tiny versions of that.

Sonia: But I think this is... everybody has a story about a teacher. At some point in their educational career that was that teacher. Mr. McNam for me. And it comes back to, Mel, you talked about being worried about our education system. I think about that adage that a starving mother can't feed her children. If our teachers are in a place of such high levels of stress, what does that leave for them to give to their students? And I'm not just talking about the pandemic. When you have 35 kids in your class... when you don't have the resources...when you don't have access to the photocopy machine because you've used up your allotment...

Crystal: My sister routinely buys things for her classroom.

Sonia: I don't know a teacher than doesn't, right? But the difference between that and a teacher going into a classroom feeling supported and resourced and not having to worry about a bunch of things they shouldn't have to worry about... but being able to give that undivided focus to the well-being and the learning of their students... that's what we should be striving for.

Crystal: And those are the schools that would be improving everyone's mental health. That is what makes me frustrated. We could have that. The ability to get there is there. So, it is just pushing for that, and continuing to take the framework that you have of community. Of continuing to build the community. Because without community we won't get there, and I think there are lots of us out there. It is getting the words in the right way. And getting it in the right format. And reaching the right people. And I think we will all continue to do that as the pandemic and the future goes on. Because the pandemic at some point we won't be as focused on it, and there are still a lot of other problems that need dealing with. Climate change being one of the foremost. That we are dealing with a short-term loss without dealing with the loss of it all. Which seems semi-pointless at times if we are not actually going to target climate change. We have to do something, right now.

Sonia: And acknowledge where we are at. The grief. The loss. The pain. The sorrow. I think right now. I have been trying to articulate this, but it is not just we are grieving what is happening right now, or what we have lost. We are also grieving about a future that we have to accept a whole bunch of things about that future, that 20 years ago we have a different view of the future. It looked different. And now here we are. And one of the things we have been saying

a lot in our little team is you can't build a hopeful vision for the future unless you start with an honest truth about where you are at now.

Crystal: And we cannot rush back to a normal that was breaking so many people. That didn't value so many people. The pandemic didn't cause any of these issues. It simply magnified the existing ignored communities that were in those population to an nth amount of degree. Where it is their lives now that are on the line. Let's not rush back to that normal and let's make a different one that is full of community and full of people that actually care for each other. So, that when these things happen, we are ready. It's not a scramble, it's not division. We know what is expected of our community and we are going to get there. It gives us that hope.

Sonia: People ask me how do you stay in politics, especially right now?

Crystal: Sonia, I applaud you for what you are doing. Politics is so hard, because as you are, I am about honesty and transparency. And from what I can tell, it's not what the majority of people are trying to do right now. And it's hard. I am glad that you are there, and I am glad that we have people with similar viewpoints that are in those positions. Because that is what we need. We need people to take the action now, to step into those things and actually make the change. We need to go from honesty and transparency to action once we have it.

Sonia: It's honesty, transparency. It's action. And it's that purpose – where are we trying to get to? And I think what we cannot do is be passive in times like this. But we also, and I struggle with this all the time, I am just as human as everybody else, not giving in to being angry or fearful all the time. I want to push myself to orient my work and my efforts into this place of where can we get to? I've got books on my desk. My desk is very messy, I'm glad you can't see it. But this is a beautiful book – All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis. All woman contributors, a lot of women of colour. This is an absolutely stunning and beautiful and hopeful book. But next to that – so there's the hopeful vision for the future and here is the honest truth about where are – Slick Water: Fracking and One Insider's Stand Against the World's Most Powerful Industry. And I think that it is that combination. It is that cold hard look at, we are seeing a corporatization and privatization of healthcare. We are seeing corporate profits driving all sorts of the opposites of social determinants of health. I read an article the other day about the housing crisis. And as long as housing is a profit-making business venture, humans are not going to be able to compete with this. There is no way that you can go up against a hedge fund.

Crystal: In Kelowna when I moved, my tattoo artist sold her house right before I left and she got \$300k over asking price, no stipulation. Four offers from different companies. Not a single person or a family that was putting an offer. And they are just going to wipe it out and put other stuff up there. She had 8 offers all together, none of them were families.

Mel: My brother tried to buy a house and he was outbid by 35 other people, by \$570k. \$570k over asking price. No normal Canadian can complete with that.

Crystal: And the amount of inflation we've seen with house prices versus the amount of wage increase... I mean... basic math there. It is unsustainable. And it will come to an end. It's just

when and how much damage it is going to cause. And unfortunately, we know it is not going to cause the most damage to the highest of people who decided these things.

Sonia: And I think all of this, to wraparound the conversation of the pandemic response... when we come back to social determinants of health, like genuine progress indicators, we can start to see and evaluate and properly measure where are these policies taking us. And if they are taking us in the wrong direction? Okay. Let's shift and move in the other direction. But we can only have that roadmap if we are agreeing on some fundamentals about the destination that we are going to.

Crystal: And that to me means democracy. That we are a well-informed population. That is apart of what is happening. Not that we are a population that is yelling misinformation that was provided by officials that didn't care that much. That is democracy to know and feel like we are understanding and making choices in this. And I hope that we move towards that. And I suspect that you'll be apart of that, Sonia. You are an honest voice out there right now and I appreciate it. I very much appreciate you taking the time to talk to us today on the podcast to just get information out and educate people. Because that is that basic starting point, is honest information to people.

Sonia: I'm really touched that you invited me and really grateful for this conversation. I think we need more and more of these kinds of conversations, and I applaud you for creating this space. For having these important discussions.

Mel: I just wish more people could have a chance to chat with you and experience the real leadership. We need more voices like yours to be amplified out there. Because that is not the message the general public is hearing.

Crystal: It is hard though because the amplification or what is being amplified are not necessary the honesty.

Sonia: And it is one of the things... Margaret MacMillan was on CBC on Sunday morning, talking as a historian about the way that wars typically bring a population together. Because you have a common external enemy, and you have to rely on each other and it really creates a sense of unity... she was specifically and ironically talking about Britain during World War II. The funny part of the story was the Keep Calm and Carry On motto. The government printed up millions of those posters at the time, but they weren't actually distributed. It was a post-war phenomenon that messaging. But that pandemic, historically, have ultimately undermined connection and unity because they push us to isolation and keep us apart from each other. And Melody when you say I wish people could hear that... a typical year for me, last year, would have been travelling around to communities and meeting with people in person. Having big gatherings, having the opportunity to have back and forth... but that is very difficult to do. Hi, come to another Zoom meeting at end your day of Zoom meetings is hardly an appealing choice for a lot of people right now. But I recognize that is... we need to be able to have these conversations more widely and be able to have conversations about politics that aren't immediately about putting your fists up and staking out your territory and making sure you shout the most loudly. But actually, hearing and listening and looking for where is our common

ground? Where can we start that we agree on? Maybe we have differences in how we get there but if we can agree on healthy communities, healthy people, health natural systems, and a trustworthy government, I think then we can start to make strides.

Crystal: And then the policies just click right in. Once you know what the purpose is, the policies will follow. Absolutely.

Sonia: Thank you both very much.

Crystal: Thank you for your time.

