

Sera Fernando



Sera Fernando (She/Her) is a Filipino queer transgender woman living in San Jose. She is a manager for the Santa Clara Office of LGBTQ affairs and is involved with the smaller queer/trans community of San Jose. She's also an activist, educator, and cosplayer.

Transcript: Filmed in San Jose on 4/21/23

0:00

Alex

Okay, So just the first thing I ask everyone was, what's your name and what do you do for a living?

Sera:

Yeah. So my name is Sarah Fernando. I use she/her pronouns. And what I do for a living is that I work as a manager for the Santa Clara Office of LGBTQ Affairs, which is part of the Division of Equity and Social Justice here at the County of Santa Clara.

00:24

Alex:

Can you tell us more about what you do? And also how do you specifically help trans people with your job?

Sera:

Yeah, so what I do specifically, our office is really built on research programs and policy. So in terms like the simplest way I could describe it is that we use your taxpayer dollars to be able to create programing initiatives and policies that help uplift and improve the lives of LGBTQ people that live in the South Bay. So through data driven research and through our office's recommendations, and especially through the lived experience and community voice, we go out of our way to reach out to LGBTQ community members, see what they, what kind of programs or what kind of initiatives they look through or are looking for that best support them. We also give a platform for LGBTQ folks to be able to express their stories and give us recommendations on what the county needs to do better to support LGBTQ lives.

01:36

In terms of my role specifically as a manager, I'm really overseeing the day to day operations of the Office of LGBTQ Affairs. We also work collaboratively with a lot of agencies and departments within the county of Santa Clara. So we provide technical consultation on anything that's LGBTQ. We make recommendations based on, you know, data that we've gathered through research and through data that we've heard from our community. We also represent, like the national landscape in terms of what's going on. So, you know, this year is 2023, and what we've seen is an increase of anti LGBTQ legislation, specifically anti-trans legislation that greatly affects the community. And what we try to do is make sure that what programs and policies and research anything that we do ensures that LGBTQ folks are included in the process.

2:36

Alex

Okay. And so can you talk about like because a lot of people don't know about the anti-trans legislation especially. Yeah. Can you talk about how that will impact, especially younger trans people, not just in California but along the country?

Sera:

Yeah, I mean, in California, I think what a lot of people believe is that California is in this kind of bubble, right. Where LGBTQ folks of all varying gender identities and sexual orientations are fully accepted. From experience and lived experience that it's really not. And it really depends on which area of California that you live in. Even here in the Bay Area, specifically in the South Bay, we still see instances of lack of acceptance for LGBTQ folks, especially LGBTQ youth. We see lack of inclusion for LGBTQ folks from monolingual communities. And we also see kind of like folks going to where they find their community. So even here in the South Bay, we've still seen instances where people will migrate to, you know, San Francisco or Oakland to find community. In terms of anti-trans legislation that's out there. Um, we're seeing it this year is like over 500 pieces of anti-LGBT legislation with the majority being anti-trans.

4:02

Some things that you've probably heard is like the don't say gay and don't say trans bill in Florida. The multiple trans bans for trans athletes to compete in women's sports or girls athletics. We're also seeing a lot of anti-trans legislation against youth getting access to gender

affirming care. We're even seeing instances where adults just recently, um, also are getting banned from gender affirming care and the reason why I'm doing this is like when you look at this anti-trans and anti LGBTQ legislation, it deeply affects LGBTQ youth in particular just because from the data that we've seen and that we've research being able to access gender affirming care allows youth to actually do better in school, and academics, uh, have overall positive health outcomes, especially mental health outcomes. So for us, based on the data we've seen, the research we've done, it's very important for kids to be able to have access to what they need and be able to define what it means to be authentic in their own way of expressing their authenticity.

5:29

So what we try to do is make sure that we uplift those barriers, take out those barriers, those challenges that kids might face. And educate. It seems like a lot of people are pointing towards education, educating not only for, you know, institutions, but schools, especially making sure teachers are educated in the LGBTQ cultural competency. And I think our biggest challenge right now is educating parents and going through a humanistic approach and making sure that they understand that what their child is going through and exploration of gender identity, it's a good thing.

6:12

And being able to give them the tools to be able to succeed. What we're trying to do here is really make sure that they have access to those tools, their resources, both the parents and the kids and anyone that is within those kind of settings.

6:28

Alex

Yeah. And obviously the bay is really different from the rest of the country. I wanted to know if you've ever lived outside of the bay and how your personal experiences are different. Like, um, how the trans community in the Bay Area is different than other places.

Sera:

Yeah. I mean, I think the one thing that again, I go back to like the South Bay versus the Greater Bay Area and in terms of being trans, I myself identify as a queer transgender Filipino woman. Right. And in terms of where we live in the Bay Area, it's the South Bay. But one time someone that was a prominent leader here in the Bay Area, a trans leader, said that, oh, that the trans community here is not really kind of like involved in like, you know, politics or rallies or protesting or anything like that or advocacy because they're affluent.

7:25

And I'm just like, what are you talking about? Like, it might be you that, you know, as a leader of a trans community might think it's affluent, But in terms of my community, from what I've seen, there's a great disparity in terms of folks of trans identity being able to equitably access the things that they need to be able to have meaningful lives, right.

7:47

Be it, you know, work, health care, stable housing, food. Like all these things, we need to survive. Right? So what I've seen here specifically in this area is that intersectionality from what I've seen in like Oakland communities and areas in San Francisco, I feel that there's a little bit more diversity in those areas, whereas because of the lack of maybe community spaces, maybe it's the lack of a trans wellness center.

08:23

We do have a gender health center here locally, right? But we only have one LGBTQ center. And when you think about, you know, San Francisco that has multiple LGBTQ centers, right, or even open that has a lot of spaces for queer and trans folks to be able to congregate here in South Bay. One of the biggest challenges is that we really have a lack of spaces.

8:46

So what our office tries to do is kind of like see what the community's looking for. And based on some of that research, that lack of areas for folks to be able to socialize, especially the trans community, shows that it's a challenge for us to be able to get together. And when you look at Nationwide, it's really important to, one, have a space for LGBTQ people, but also ensure that that space is affirming of trans people.

9:16

And there's a lot of spaces out there. I'm thinking like specific, like bars, like quote unquote, like gay bars or spaces that might be historically LGBTQ, making sure that they're inclusive of the trans community. A lot of folks don't find community. They might find community and other places. And that's why I feel that, you know, this this revolution that you're seeing with trans equity and people fighting for trans rights, it's really it's really, really kind of like our ability to connect through social media, through technology. Discord servers, Twitter, Instagram, what have you to be able to create this kind of community.

9:58

Alex:

So would you say like trans people are left out of the larger LGBT community usually?

Sera:

I mean, it really depends. And I think it's for me, I feel it's okay for each of the letters of the LGBTQ community to be able to celebrate authentically how they see fit. Right. But at the same time, when we talk about, like all of LGBTQ celebrations or spaces that are intentionally meant to embrace the entire LGBTQ community, if the goal is to really celebrate, like, for example, pride, right? If our goal is truly meant to, like, celebrate the spectrum of LGBTQ lives, then what I am looking for is are the people that is within this space accepting of all LGBTQ identities.

10:52

And I really think about how like one thing I love how you ask that question, because one of the things I'm thinking about is that people don't believe that racism exists in the LGBTQ community.

It's just like racism exists in a lot of spaces that people think that might be affirming of everybody. And even caring like anti-trans rhetoric and LGBTQ space. This is something that I've seen and I've witnessed and I've also been affected by in my own life. Um, one of the reasons why I constantly look for communities to be able to find people that embrace me for who I am and in terms of my advocacy, I feel that it's my duty to be able to call that out if it's not.

11:38

Because sometimes people just don't understand what equity looks like or some people don't, They don't mean to unintentionally offend anyone, especially if they're building an LGBTQ space. But if trans people don't feel like they belong in a certain space, that's something that's, something to take seriously because it's not the fault of a transgender person that a space isn't inclusive. It's the fault of organizations that it's not making it inclusive enough. So we really have to think about if we're really making these spaces like, you know, how like the new the progress flag also includes the pink and the white and the blue. It's just like if you're showing that flag, if that's what you're representing, then trans lives better be included in the space because they should be held accountable for that kind of inclusion. And there's so many tools and resources to be able to make that equitable, you know.

12:40

Alex:

Like the Progress flag also has the black and brown stripes. That was supposed to include people of color. How do you think the experience of trans people of color is different than white trans people?

Sera:

Yeah, I mean, in terms of statistics, we know that within our community and black trans women, their lifespan is around age 35, which is alarming, right, when you look at the data. Black trans women face instances of violence or harassment, even losing their lives. You look at HRC's yearly report. I think it was um, 2021. Where we've seen around 56 trans people. Majority of being black, trans women, black and brown, trans women being murdered just for who they are. And some of them are instances where it might not be a direct instance of they got murdered due to their gender identity.

13:50

But a lot of people don't understand is that like when it comes to being trans, being put in a situation like, say, for example, you know, homelessness, food insecurity, maybe it's like survival crimes, survival sex, or it's being put in a situation where it's difficult to even be acknowledged for who you are. Um, it causes trans folks, especially trans folks of color, to experience greater challenges, greater instances of marginalization and stigma for who they are. Me, In terms of personal experience being someone of Filipino descent, how I kick it, how I was raised is different from someone that's like a white trans woman. Um, I grew up Catholic. I grew up in a very strict and religious background. I was taught to assimilate to American culture because my parents were first immigration, first generation immigrants.

14:53

So it's taking those things to account in terms of our life experiences. So what our role here and my role is, even as an advocate, is to be able to make sure that when it comes to representing the transgender community, those voices are heard, making sure that we uplift those voices to make sure that they have access to the things that they need to survive. Because I just want to dispel this, this kind of like notion that, you know, like trans people here, especially in the south bay, they are affluent because they're not.

15:29

Alex:

Yeah. And then I want to talk about having pride in your identity. Euphoria. Because like we always talk about the struggle of being trans, But I want to know why is being prideful so important to trans people?

Sera:

Yeah, I think that's a great question. A lot of people talk about gender dysphoria and they fail to acknowledge what gender euphoria is, and it's that feeling of really just being able to be kind of like set free. When I came out as trans, it was rough. I lost a lot of friends. I lost a lot of family members in terms of being in communication, thank God, like work couldn't discriminate against me. But it's that sense of like being able to finally acknowledge who I am and present myself in the way I've always seen myself. That's that sense of euphoria Is this like I am taking ownership of who I am and existing despite what society says, despite the fact that a lot of people want to see trans people erased, I think there's a lot of power and acknowledgment in terms of being able to own who you are, embracing who you are.

16:51

It's something that's so bold that I look at a lot of folks that, you know, are against the trans community and against LGBTQ folks. And in terms of, you know, what they're unable to acknowledge is that for me, as I as I come out as trans, as I acknowledge, my my place on this earth and acknowledge my being and live it freely, um, this is me addressing the trauma that I've always felt right, addressing kind of like the the hurt and the angst, the kind of like the the ickiness that I've always lived with.

17:35

Right? This is me taking ownership of my own life without fear, right? Like me being just like, No, I'm going to do this. I'm going to live who I am, that this is me, and I'm going to do it very boldly. And this is what I see that's so beautiful. In the transgender community. The hashtag trans is beautiful. I totally love that hashtag being able to see people live boldly in their authenticity. I feel that people that are against the community have yet to address the harms or the traumas that they've felt growing up. Um, they might have been brought up to be kind of like live within the binary of being traditionally masculine, traditionally feminine.

18:22

Like there's, there's this way of being that we're taught to wear. It's just like, you know what, there's in terms of just living for who you are and expressing who you are, you should be allowed to do that. And for trans folks, it's breaking that. Like mold, I think it is a very brave act. And I think that's that sense of euphoria that folks face where others of maybe cisgender heterosexual experience, they might not be able to experience, you know, because they haven't healed from the traumas or the harms that they experienced very early on.

19:00

Alex:

Do you think cis people should also explore their own gender?

Sera:

And I think cisgender people in terms of exploring their own gender, I think that they should explore their own authenticity. And when I say authenticity, it's not like, oh, be bold out there and just showcase who you are and tell the world. Tell the world. Like authenticity to me really means just like being just who you are and accepting for who you are and being able to adapt and heal from kind of like your own lived experience.

19:32

You know, there's a lot of people that don't just think about, they don't think about addressing kind of like the things that they've gone through from childhood to adulthood. Um, some of the things that they might, that may have harmed them. Then for cisgender people, I think it should be okay to be how they want to express.

20:03

And I think that it's totally okay, in terms of exploring gender expression, right? It doesn't have to be like masculine and doesn't have to be feminine. It could be anywhere within that or even outside that expression, gender, it's all within the spectrum. It's not, it shouldn't be within the binary. And if like, you know, someone of cisgender experience wants to dress feminine but still uses, you know, like, say like, you know, they identify as a man but wants to express a little bit more feminine but still uses him pronouns that's totally okay.

20:45

It doesn't have to be so rigid in this binary. And that's what we're trying to educate people. Just accept people for who they are, respect people for who they are. And I think we could just be we'll be more along, you know, on the ways of like compassion and empathy and acceptance if we're able to do that. But I mean, legislation is so rigid that they want to erase that and they're like, no, this is how we want you to be. And I think at the end of the day, it's really just using trans people just as a platform to gain more power, which is not good.

21:24

Alex:

Yeah, because like, um, yeah, I mean, like the binary affects everyone. Not just trans people, whether they realize it or not. And then now, since we're talking about cis people, I want to know

you probably have to go, like, we all have to go through, like, dealing with cis people. Like, what do you want cis people to do for the trans community that maybe you haven't seen yet, like cis allies.

21:57

Sera:

Yeah. I mean, I think Ally is, is a very powerful word. And, in terms of like an ally, there's so many ways one can define ally. I don't know if you ever heard before, but allyship is or ally is a verb or allyship is a journey. It's kind of like where you want to be, but to get there, it's, it's kind of like a destination. And like this idea of equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging needs a destination. But to achieve true equity, it's a long way to get there. And in terms of white folks have this experience in terms of what they could do to be stronger allies is just to listen with empathy, right? To understand where you're coming from. And also kind of like acknowledge their own, kind of like, well, I'm telling you, kind of like where I'm coming from.

22:53

I'm telling you a little bit about my story and how my upbringing and were in terms of kind of like how that shaped me. I'm choosing to, you know, live life the way I do. And I'm addressing kind of like all the things that have held me back for so long. I challenge cisgender people to be able to if there's anything that's holding them back, what is that that's not being addressed.

23:17

What harms or what traumas or what things are they experiencing that might like, you know, that might be suppressing them, or more so even like making them choose non-acceptance to choose to be anti LGBTQ. They choose to be anti-trans, right? To really not allow people to be who they are. My challenge to them is really just like, What is it about you that prohibits you from understanding that trans people are just meant to exist?

23:57

That's all we're asking for. We're not saying that we're going to take over the world, even though I feel that we are. But in terms of just being able to have a space, trans people deserve this space so much as just as much as cisgender people do. So being able to acknowledge that they too might have something that deep inside them that they have not addressed.

24:20

Maybe it's being brought up in a certain way that is just like, you know, like I'm a man. I have to stay a man. This is how I was born. This is what religion taught me. This is how I was taught to be. I could be no other way. You could be other ways. You could accept you for who you are. And I feel that when people see that, when they see trans people living freely, they see that as a threat because they've been so rigid within their conformity that they have no other way of being, right. Um, but I'm here to let them know. It's just like you could be how you want to be. It's totally fine.

25:04

Alex:

Um, yeah. So, um, and then do you have any advice for, for like, young trans people trying to find a community, especially in the Bay Area?

Sera:

Yeah. I mean, there's so many ways to get involved, and I always say, like, find your tribe and it's, it's not kind of like a be all end all right in terms of finding community, there's just so many different platforms and ways to be able to communicate with folks. Um, I remember in my coming out experience there was only like a meetup at a site called Meet Up. And in terms of like the folks that I met from there, it wasn't really like the group that I thought they would be right. This was back in 2013, so it's not even like that far out, long ago. But in terms of finding people that are of experience and finding communities, it gets difficult at first, but with the available technology as well as the willingness for people to embrace who they are.

26:10

And like a lot more, space is opening up. There's a community for everybody, I feel, and it does take some work. It's not just going to be, it's just not going to fall in your lap. And it's just like, Oh, community. I went to Pride and I found my community. It takes a lot of work to be able to find folks. So I think one piece of advice I have is it's okay to be uncomfortable, especially in kind of like situations where like social settings where you might not know anyone, especially in like trans or queer or LGBTQ spaces or even if it's a trans space, like, say, it's a trans, the invisibility event, or some kind of a queer prom or celebration.

27:01

Even I get anxious meeting people for the first time, but that discomfort is nowhere as uncomfortable as going out as trans for the first time. Um, going to the bathroom that affirms her gender identity for the first time. Coming out to your parents for the first time, coming out to colleagues and friends for the first time. That stuff is done.

27:27

Like you've really been through the hard stuff you might as well just say hi to other people and, and, and there's so many ways to be you in the spaces that you want to be in. I myself am fond of the anime and the manga, the geek community. How I kick it is much more different from how other people kick it. But I'm always out there just seeing where community might exist. So being able to be okay with discomfort, um, and just being bold and just going to spaces where you want to try out. It's okay to experiment because, I feel that if you really came out as trans, the hard stuff is already out of the way. It's now time to meet your community.

28:19

Alex:

Is the anime community kind of with the queer community?

Sera:

You know what? I think that's going to be a topic for another time. But I mean, in terms of just being able to explore gender identity, I just love how the anime community, especially if you go to these conventions, you'll see people exploring gender identity.

28:39

Um, sometimes it could be seen as, sometimes folks might take it as an opportunity to use it as parody, like, you know, like maids, like muscular cisgender men like, dressed up as maids. It could be seen as a farce, but at the same time, I think it's an okay space for people to be able to explore gender identity. And I saw that very early on and that's why I gravitated towards it during my gender journey. But again, everyone's journey is very different. And in terms of what I see, it's I gravitated towards I gravitate towards that community because that's where I found that identity very early on.

29:23

Alex:

So like when you do this parody of kind of like, like try it on before you actually kind of think about it more?

Sera:

I think in terms of parody, when I think about parodies, yeah, I think parody, I'm talking about my cisgender straight colleagues that try it on as parody. But I mean there are a lot of people that try you know, dressing up for the first time in costume as a way to just yeah. Attempt it. So for trans people or folks that are exploring their gender I don't see it as parody, more so I think it's kind of like a brave attempt to be able to really explore who they are in that space.

30:04

And that's why I like when you see people as cosplay, I think it's I think it's really cool to see people just just cosplaying and seeing those intricate costumes at first, but also just seeing people just be there, the character that they adore so much, right? That's cool. Both cisgender and transgender alike and non-binary.

30:28

Alex:

Okay, then I'm curious to know what's the best part of transitioning for you?

Sera:

I think the best part is being able to work in a role where I could actually change trans lives, right? To affect trans lives in a positive way. I think the cool part about transitioning is that like when I transitioned, I felt I found my calling. If you heard me talk before, as we always talk, I like when I came out, I thought personally that I was going to be the most famous transgender Filipino woman in the world.

31:05

Like, honestly, that's what I thought. And then six months later, after I came out, I found on a clip of a TED Talk that Geena Rocero, who I idolized so much, also of transgender experience, supermodel from the Philippines, comes out on a TED Talk stage and proclaims her transgender identity. And I was just like, okay, I'll have to settle for second.

31:31

And then I find that there's more trans Filipino women out there. So like, okay, also I'll settle for third or fourth. But no, I mean, in terms of just like my sense of euphoria as you brought up is when I came out as trans, I felt that my calling was really. When I came out as trans, I felt that my calling was to really just be out there, share my story and try my best to impact trans lives and leave this world better than, you know, when I was in it, you know, So whether it's, you know, embracing trans stories, uplifting trans communities, I do what I can to make sure that people are represented across all intersectional identities.

32:24

Alex

Okay. And then the last question I would ask you is, well, is there anything we didn't talk about that you want everyone to know about what it's like to be trans in the Bay Area?

Sera:

That's a good question. I think in terms of being trans in the Bay Area, I think a lot of people treat being trans or being LGBTQ here. I think that there's a sense of like a lot of people believe that there's this transgender wave that's coming through, right? There's this queer wave of like, everyone's turning transgender, everyone's exploring their gender identity. Yeah. When you really think about it, there's yes, people are explaining their gender identity because we have so many resources, we have so many stories, we have so many outlets to be able to explore gender identity, not just schools.

33:21

Right? But beyond that, we have access to so much information to be able to to be able to kind of like think about or discover who we are. When you really talk with people, they probably don't know one single transgender or non-binary person. That to me where you think because trans people are politicized right now, right where we are being used as political platforms to be for or against trans rights and everything like that, a lot of people don't know about trans folks.

34:04

So this is where I implore transgender people to be able to be bold enough to share their story, be visibly out, and be okay with who they are. When I say authenticity, that means that if a trans person chooses not to disclose who they are, if they don't identify being trans, or rather just being like a woman or a man or someone, a non-binary experience, that's totally valid.

34:30

I get that. But- or not but. But, and I also want to acknowledge that in terms of being who you are and like our community, a lot of people just don't know trans people, even though we are in

the media much more than ever before. So I think that what we believe trans people are, the myths or the, uh, what do I call it?

35:09

Yeah, the myths demystifying what trans people are. But actually knowing someone of trans experience, I feel that that's important. So I asked if people are really like LGBTQ allies, trans allies, you know, queer allies to be able to really be exposed to actual trans people and for trans people to really, you know, exist and not hide who they are and be okay with that.

35:41

Right. Because what we're trying to do is really just make sure that all the spaces, all the environments are as safe and accepting of trans and non-binary people. We're doing it to make sure that everyone feels included. That's the mission of not only not only our office, but our county, right. To make sure that spaces are inclusive of everyone because we want to make sure that they get the available resources to live healthy and meaningful lives.