



Episode 14: Caring to Lead with Jennifer Esteen, RN

Transcript *(lightly edited for readability)*

Roxy Manning 00:14

Hi, I'm Roxy Manning.

Sarah Peyton 00:16

And I'm Sarah Peyton. We're the hosts of the Fierce Compassion podcast. In this episode of Fierce Compassion, we are honored to welcome Jennifer Esteen, a dedicated nurse, mom and community activist whose journey from New Orleans to the East Bay of California has shaped her into a formidable advocate for working families, and for everyone in her community, and a candidate for the Alameda County Board of Supervisors in California.

Roxy Manning 00:49

We dive into Jennifer's remarkable transition from nurse to political candidate, explore the roots of her caregiving ethos, and learn how her inspiring journey has informed her views on critical issues, like the unequal rates of life expectancy, inequities in access to health care, and the war in Gaza.

Sarah Peyton 01:09

Jennifer brings a unique perspective on advocating for safe healthy communities that serve everyone regardless of income, and her vision for a more compassionate government.

Roxy Manning 01:21

Join us as we uncovered the depth of Jennifer's commitment to service and the powerful lessons she's learned on her journey to becoming a voice for change.

Roxy Manning 01:41

Welcome to Fierce Compassion, the podcast that explores the power of compassion in creating an antiracist society. I'm Roxy Manning.

Sarah Peyton 01:49

And I'm Sarah Payton. We are delighted to be joined today by Jennifer Esteen, nurse, mom, community activist and candidate for the Alameda County Board of Supervisors in California.

Roxy Manning 02:04

Welcome, Jennifer.

Jennifer Esteen 02:06

Thank you so much for having me today. I'm really excited to have this conversation.

Roxy Manning 02:10

Well, I was so delighted that you said yes, since I've been supporting your campaign. And I am delighted to do anything that I can to help you get elected. So let's jump in. There's a question that we ask every guest, which is how do you define self compassion? And what's the role that it's played in your work and your life?

Jennifer Esteen 02:32

Yeah, this is, I think, more challenging of a question than it seems on the surface. Because having compassion for oneself, especially in this day and age, really feels at times hard to get to. I think in my life, I've had time when I was a single parent, and times when I have really wanted more out of myself. And I think there's a drive that we have as people to try to do and be and perform. But there's this drive as we have, as people in a capitalist world that is somewhat different. And the speed and the demands and the expectations are often unrealistic. And yet we have to try, because that's what our survival is based on. And so I think the two don't always sync up. And finding compassion for myself in those moments when work is more demanding, or I respond to the demands of work more than I respond to the demands of my home life, I think those are the places where I feel it's very difficult to have compassion for myself. And you know, I think sometimes compassion can just be kindness with oneself and gentleness. And I can typically be more gentle with others than with myself. But I really liked this question because it's, I feel like it gives me permission to try again, to be kinder and gentler with myself.

Roxy Manning 04:11

And I'm appreciating you linking this to the idea that some of the challenges we have with self compassion is some of the messages that we're getting from that capitalist world that you named. You know, that we need to do more, be more. And sometimes we end up sacrificing our family, our loved ones. So knowing how to be gentle so we could change those patterns is so important.

Sarah Peyton 04:35

And I imagine that part of what you have to juggle is an intense sense of mission, along with a great care and tenderness and love for your family. So that's quite something to hold on to. And I wonder kind of, how did this all start for you? What's the origin of, of this passion that you have and if you want to say anything about your parents and your upbringing in New Orleans, we'd really love to hear.

Jennifer Esteen 05:06

Thank you for that. I love that you use the word mission. It's not a word that I use often. But I think that's exactly what I feel. I feel like I'm on a mission. And I'm like a train that's, you know, chugging along, and I've got to get to the destination, and the destination is some kind of betterment of our world. And it feels like a lofty goal. And I'm, like, you know, what kind of ego must I have to think I can have an impact on the world? But we all have an impact on the world, right? Yeah. So I think it started, you know, I come from a family of caregivers and providers. You know, I've got a family of teachers and principals, and my mom was a public health nurse, and my dad was a teacher. And growing up in New Orleans, we definitely had a lot of, I think it was instilled in us to give. And I didn't think I would become a nurse. I, as a young person, I thought I would actually become a psychiatrist. And an undergraduate, you know, like, pre med is not easy. And you have to really have a different kind of dedication. And I was a young college student, I started college at 16. And I was an okay enough student. But when I graduated, I was pregnant with my son, my first son, and I didn't see a pathway then for medical school. But I found my way to nursing because I lost everything.

Jennifer Esteen 06:40

I went into foreclosure and bankruptcy in 2007, when the real estate market crashed, and it was that moment. You know, that was a hard - talk about compassion for myself! Like, it did not exist, then. I felt very responsible for the fate of myself and my kids. I was a divorced parent, single parent, and had no help from my ex. And it was very difficult to have these small kids and to be facing financial ruin. And that drove me to nursing because my mom had been a nurse. And seeing her stability - like really talk about the capitalist drive - her stability was the thing that let me know nursing would be okay. And you know, in that moment, when I had lost everything, I was worried. And as I went through this process of the nursing education, which I was in an accelerated program, it was only one year. But it was then that I knew I would be a psych nurse.

Jennifer Esteen 07:39

When we had a rotation in the psychiatric emergency room, some people went into clinics, some people went into inpatient settings, but I went to a psychiatric emergency room at a county hospital, in Contra Costa County. And I felt drawn to the people who were coming in and out. I

was, it was like being magnetically pulled towards folks. And it's interesting because it's like nursing. And in many mental health professions, you're taught as a student, to literally stay an arm's length, or a leg's length away so that you don't get assaulted by people. And I breached that from the very beginning. Because it felt important for me. My patients were often tired. You know, they were exhausted from whatever was happening. Lack of sleep, because they were unhoused. Lack of sleep because they had been stimulated by substances. Lack of sleep because they had been manic or psychotic. And everybody was exhausted, plus, we're giving them sedating medication. So I would typically connect with the client when they were laying in the bed. And my natural inclination was to sit on the bed. And that meant I was within arm's reach. But it also meant that I was within, I thought heart's reach because I wanted to connect with them. I wanted to be at their eye level. I wanted to be able to be close enough that I could hold their privacy in a crowded room filled with cots that other people were sitting on, so that we can have a conversation in a normal tone of voice where you know, they could have some respect. And I was chastised as a nursing student that I was too close. And I was like, Well, what am I supposed to do? You know, like, what is this space? Am I just supposed to violate everyone's privacy? Am I supposed to stand over these people? Like, it didn't make sense to me. And I think that that was probably the first kind of beacon that was telling me, this was about care. This was about compassion. This is about making contact. And the message that was sent to me was, don't do that. And those are really conflicting things to feel and experience.

Roxy Manning 09:56

I am a psychologist and so I'm listening. So I totally get the ways that our training can often tell us to maintain professional distance, right. And what I'm hearing is how much you were able to connect to the humanity of the person in front of you. And I can imagine just thinking, if I were lying in that bed, and scared, and terrified and exhausted, what would actually give me a sense that somebody cared? That my experience mattered to someone? And this is what I'm hearing you talk about - that being willing to hold compassion and to fully lean into the humanity of the person, not see them as a patient, but as another fellow human being, was so important to you. So I'm really celebrating this.

Jennifer Esteen 10:39

Yeah, yeah, thank you. Lean in wasn't a phrase that we used when I became a nurse 14 years ago, but it's the phrase we use now. And that's physically what I was doing, leaning in, you know like trying my best to reach into their life and their experience in the short time that we had contact. I think it informed so much of who I am and what leads me in the service now in a different way.

Roxy Manning 11:05

And one of the things I'm really also resonating with hearing your story is that you chose nursing, you know, in part, because this is what your mum did. And also there was the financial need. But that you still, even as you chose it, you found a path towards service, and towards service that's grounded in care. So I'm getting such a strong sense of how much caring for other people is part of who you are, and how you want to move through the world. And so I'm curious, like, you're still doing nursing now. Right? So what's that path that led you from nursing to also adding, while being a parent, being an activist, being a union leader? And now being a political candidate? Like tell us a little bit about that transition and what motivated you?

Jennifer Esteen 11:47

Yeah, yeah, that was actually, I never imagined going from bedside care to where I am today. But working in the psychiatric emergency room put me in touch with folks who have severe mental illness. And those were the majority of my clients. Also, you know, being in the Bay Area, specifically, I work in San Francisco. I trained in Contra Costa County but then when I got a job, I started working in San Francisco, at San Francisco General Hospital in the psychiatric emergency room. And it was there that I worked for the first five years of my career. And those interactions just happened day in and day out. And what's unique about San Francisco - but maybe it's not that unique when we think about America and urban centers. San Francisco was like 25% Black, many years ago. And now it's between 3 and 4% Black, but the population of people who are coming into the psychiatric emergency room is 46% Black. So talking about an overrepresentation of the population. And I was the only full time staff nurse who was Black, working in this place where almost half of the people coming in are Black. And I think that I started to, you know, because of the way that I approached the clients, they connected with me. You know, it was all about restoring dignity, restoring humanity, just being a person. And it was important work. It felt like it was my heart's work. But it was incredibly stressful. You know, everybody's brought in wearing handcuffs just about. And you know, like to seek care, but have to basically be in the back of a police car, almost as if you're getting arrested. And the path and the journey of seeking care - like that is a tough entry. And it was hard for me to take people that are handcuffed every single day. So I shifted my work into the community, still with folks who have severe, severe mental illness, into the work I do now, which is in the transitions division, helping people move through different levels of care. And some of our clients with severe mental illness have permanent housing, in what's called board and care homes. And the thing that catapulted me from bedside to advocacy on a wider scale publicly, is that there was a policy decision made to close the beds that my clients were residing in, the permanent beds. And they were going to change, because there is an issue of people being unhoused in San Francisco. It's a huge issue in all of California and all of America. In order to address it, they were going to open a homeless shelter in place of my clients' permanent housing, and they were just going to change the license. But what I couldn't understand is why we

couldn't have both of these resources. Let's keep the permanent housing and open the homeless shelter. But it was not the plan. The plan was just to do this thing really quickly under the cover of darkness. No one was going to know. And the reason I found out was because my clients had a trusting relationship with me. And you know, I would see them in the hallway, we would say hello. Sometimes I would sit in the courtyard and have lunch, they would sit in the courtyard, and we would have conversations. And they came to me and showed me an eviction notice. And every single person who lived in the facility had received an eviction notice. The staff was worried. The clients were worried. And what what really struck me as odd is that the people I worked with, did not know this eviction was occurring. And that is our job. We know every facility that's opening, and every facility that's closing. So when this started to happen, I was like, well, we need information, we need to understand this. But it was hard to get answers. So we went to the body that I thought was going to give us the answers. We went to the Health Commission of San Francisco. And that was kind of where the organizing began, or I don't know, developed, because we shut their meeting down. We would not let them do business as usual while people were going to be displaced and unhoused. And we did that two months in a row. And it got real when the second meeting happened on a Tuesday night at 5pm. At 8am the next morning, I went to work, and my computer was missing from my desk. And I was so worried because I had been - they told me I was going to be investigated. They said I was breaching patient confidentiality. We had patients, clients, residents that were coming to protest with us. They came to the Health Commission to speak on their behalf. It was like national news: it was all over the TV, the New York Times covered it. It was huge. Because you know, San Francisco, you, you shut the meeting down, you shut the meeting down where they're doing the government's business, and it becomes a big deal. And you do it two months in a row, it's a really big deal. And that was the moment when my activism was like, fully on. And I came home that night and talked to my wife. And you know, we were worried that I was gonna lose my job. And we had a really hard discussion about, you know, if you're doing this thing that you think is right, but your job is on the line, you got some choices to make. And it was then that I was like, you know, I'm a nurse. No matter what, I can get a job. But my clients are the people who are ignored, who are stepped over in the street, who are put in handcuffs. And I have to speak. And luckily, I didn't lose my job. And by the time the next month came, the County Board of Supervisors passed three pieces of legislation and prevented my clients from losing their housing. And they protected it, they funded it, they made sure we stayed fully occupied and fully staffed. And it was a huge victory. And that taught me so many lessons. You know, that speaking up is okay, that organizing works, that public information matters. And that when you have a righteous cause, and you put everything on the line, it's a huge risk. But, you know, at the end the end, it's worth it. It was worth it to me.

Sarah Peyton 18:20

So Jennifer, not only have you been a psych nurse, and a care nurse for folks transitioning, and a political candidate, you're also an active union member.

Jennifer Esteen 18:35

That's right. That's right. It was the journey through saving my clients homes that led me to become a leader. You know, when we won the fight, when my clients did not get displaced and the legislation was passed. I'm lucky to be a member of SEIU 1021 and they joined the fight. And also they recognized something was happening. And they said to me, Jennifer, you are the best organizer we've got in this union. And they invited me to become the vice president of organizing, and I was appointed into the role. But I also really didn't know what that meant. I had never. You know, I feel like organizing is a thing we talk about a lot. After 2020, there's so many people who are organizers, who are you know, organizing marches and organizing this and I didn't know what organizing was. I was just a nurse and a mom. I went home and I went to work and back and forth again. And I talked to the organizing director and asked her to treat me like a trainee. You know, we had this one classification of workers. They were called a OITs, organizers in training. And I said I am an OIT. I might be your vice president. And maybe I've got some like instincts But I'm an OIT. And I was very grateful to get an organizing education and learn about a lot of great organizers from the farmworkers' movement. Learn about techniques that people have used. You know, organizing, they say organizing conversations are 80-20, the 80-20 rule. There's all these 80-20 rules, but the 80-20 rule in organizing is you listen 80% and you speak 20%. Because ultimately, what matters is what the people are talking about. And I think it serves me well, on the campaign trail, because when I'm knocking on doors and talking to voters, I want to know, what is it that you care about? What are the issues that matter to you. And I think that that will serve me well, as an elected official. Because, you know, I can walk in with a million ideas, but my ideas might be irrelevant. They may not be what the community actually needs and wants. So listening is how I really feel we can get the most progress. And I think if we were better listeners as a society, things would be somewhat different.

Roxy Manning 21:12

Jennifer, it's really clear how you saw the importance of becoming an activist and how important it was in being able to impact the life of the people that you were serving, the clients you were serving. But how did that transition into now becoming a political candidate?

Jennifer Esteen 21:30

Yeah, serving the people is ultimately the answer. And, you know, after, after all that happened with my clients, and after the legislation was passed to ensure that they did not lose their housing, I began to connect the dots on what organizing is, what raising public awareness is, what it means

to move policy from people power and public awareness. And right after that COVID happened. And COVID was this really defining moment? You know, I'm sure everybody listening remembers, we had no idea what was happening. And our world was completely disrupted, and people were dying. And where I live, we had a huge impact. I live in an area that's unincorporated, which means that we don't have direct representation. We don't have a city council. We don't have a mayor. We're not actually a city. And, you know, the town I live in is called Ashland, California. And neighboring community next door to us is Cherryland. And Ashland and Cherryland are the poorest parts of Alameda County. Our average income is about \$19,000 a year. On average, we're below the poverty line. And we're more than 50% renters. When COVID happened, we were dying faster and getting sicker more often than other people in Alameda County. There were several communities that this was happening to - the impacts were greater in Ashland, Cherryland, deep East Oakland, and Fruitvale. And the thing that makes our communities susceptible, and that is similar about our communities is that we're browner, we're blacker, we're poorer, and we have less access to representation. And that sparked in me, a desire to go to where policy, health policy specifically, is made and where health budgets are passed. And that's on the state level in the state legislature.

Jennifer Esteen 23:35

You know, I had just come off this victory where we got legislation passed on the county level. And we did it through organizing. And I said, I'm going to take what I learned, and bring it to the state and let's see if we can win this. And I decided in July to launch a campaign for State Assembly - grassroots effort, super people powered. And by December, there was an incumbent who had been in the seat for 10 years. And I think our people power was intimidating to him. He decided not to run again. And in that moment, I was like, Whoa, did we just win?! But then the seat, you know, then it became an open seat. At first when I was challenging an incumbent, you know, I'm like the lone person out there who's crazy enough to take on an incumbent. And then everybody jumped in when the incumbent no longer existed. So it became political pretty quickly. And it became expensive. And the independent expenditure money poured in. It became the fourth most expensive race in California that year. And I lost by 1%, which was devastating because it felt like it was such a close race. And we were against all odds. I mean, people literally said to me, Jennifer, you were the most improved candidate. Or they said stuff like we want to support you, but we won't because XYZ reasons but the code was the establishment. The establishment is what we want to hold on to, and feel afraid of, and intimidated by, and are beholden to. And the establishment spent all that money. And you know it, it really broke my heart in so many ways. And I was devastated. I spent about six months crying and trying to figure out like how I am going to show my face in public again. It was a really hard loss.

Roxy Manning 25:42

That was a moment for self compassion.

Jennifer Esteen 25:46

Yes, it was. Yes, it was.

Sarah Peyton 25:52

And but here I am from the outside going, jeez, what a triumph! I mean, there you were, probably outspent 10 to one, losing by only 1%. Wow. And I want to acknowledge the heartbreak that it was for you. Are there other challenges and triumphs that you've experienced along this, this inspiring journey from unemployed single mother who's facing foreclosure to nurse and now political candidate and union leader? What other challenges and triumphs have you experienced?

Jennifer Esteen 26:32

Yeah, so many, I mean, I think the, the challenges and the triumphs are probably too many to name, too many to count. But you're right, you know, to have gone from I mean, when I was divorced, even though I was married to a man, and, um, you know, completely like homo, you know, like, that was a devastating moment in my life. And, for many years, I didn't date, I didn't talk to other people. It was just, you know, we got divorced, my son was two months old. And I had a baby attached to my chest, he breastfed for 16 months. So like, that whole period, I would take my kids to the playground, and I would see families. I would see dads with their kids and that would just mess me up.

Jennifer Esteen 27:19

So being able to, like, recover from that loss, to finding myself in nursing school. And before, I was like all in on being a psych nurse. I had this fantasy of going into the ICU, and becoming a nurse anesthetist, because you have to go into the ICU first, in order to become a nurse anesthetist. And there was this moment where I wasn't supposed to necessarily see the evaluation form. But I saw it. I could read upside down and it said, Jennifer's not ready. And it was reminiscent of the stories my mom told. And you know, my mom was in the nursing school in the 60s. She integrated, she was in the second integrated class of Grady Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. And she was told the same thing, that she wasn't ready. And she was a 19 year old, you know, nursing student and I was a 28 year old parent, like on my second career, and the same exact message. So like to overcome that and become a successful nurse anyway, even though I wasn't ready, quote, unquote. And to move on through that, and to, you know, to have all these moments of challenge, you know. I was always the youngest parent, wherever I went. It took me a while to come out, you know, and face my own sensibilities about who I am. And, you know, just be okay with myself and you know, kind of mature as an individual. I feel like the challenges and the room for growth and the opportunities are constant. And even now, you know, yeah, having to stop myself from being so

devastated and crying in a corner. You know, I see a therapist twice a week. I believe in mental health care for everyone and I believe in it for myself also. And it's, it's like challenge after challenge after challenge. But that's what life is. I feel like so much of life is the journey that we're on. You know, I thought it was a straight path. Middle school, high school, college, you know, white picket fence, 2.6 children and a dog. Like, sorry, that's a fairy tale. What life really is, is a series of challenges that we have to figure out how to overcome. And I think that's also the challenge of public service. You know, like, what are we dealing with in the world that we have no control over? And how do we make adaptations so that we can continue to provide for the community that we're sworn to serve. And I feel like that was the challenge of COVID. You know, people had to figure out a lot of things really quickly. And I think that raised the bar for what we, as taxpayers should expect from elected officials. That yeah, you can get stuff done quickly. And you can be effective. And you can marshal resources. And you can do it in a way that protects people. And I think that's what drives me, you know, that's what drove me to run. That's what encouraged me not to give up, as everybody was saying, Come on, Jen. You're gonna have to try again. You're gonna have to stop crying, shake it off or keep crying. Who cares? I think my wife was really clear. She was like, If you cry, it's okay. You cry, the blast campaign. It's okay, cry. But get out there. Because, you know, she would say you're driven. You gotta go, and you gotta run, and you have to do it. And let's see what happens.

Roxy Manning 31:01

You know, there's a huge triumph, like when we're talking about triumphs, when you talk about the kind of coded language, you're not ready, which somehow black woman get a lot right. There is this triumph over how many people said, actually, you are ready. You're ready to step into service, you know. The union coming to you and saying, we want you to become an organizer. People saying, we want you to run again. It's really a testament to you stepping outside of the boxes that society has put you in. And so even as I say that, I'm going to ask you a question that might seem to be putting you into a box again, right? So, you know, you've already identified in this call. You said, you're a black woman, you're a queer woman, you're a parent, you've been a single mom, you've been somebody who's had a house foreclosed on. So you've had a lot of these identities that have been marginalized. And I was really curious, you know, like, how many black queer woman or black queer folks are there in public office. And so I looked it up and the Hill said, there are only 57, nationwide, right. 57 In our entire country. And I can imagine that you've had some challenges that are specific as a political candidate because of your identity. So I'm curious to know, like, how do you see your identity as relevant? Your identity as a Black LGBTQ, LGBTQ+ person, as relevant to the candidacy you're running?

Jennifer Esteen 32:28

Yeah, yeah, I think this is, this is a great question. You know, it's. I think, being a, I often lead with values. I try to start with, my values are that I want people to be housed. I want justice. I want health care for all. You know, I want to make sure that we have all the right things that move our society forward. And my values are informed by who I am and by my upbringing. And by the fact that I did have to overcome, you know, being on food stamps when I was in nursing school. I did have to overcome losing everything and facing eviction you know, after I was a homeowner to going back to being a renter, and then the people we were renting from sold their condo and being evicted. Like that's a big deal. I was on childcare assistance when my kids were little. And you know, food stamps as a nursing student means that I understand what it's like to go through the application process. To sit in the Social Services Office to, to have to, you know, continue to provide my income statements in order to get renewals. And that drives me to want to break down barriers.

Jennifer Esteen 33:43

But there's this other piece of my identity that I haven't even named because I don't typically lead with identity, but you know, I am black. I am a woman. I am masculine presenting. I am a nurse and a mom. And I'm also Jewish. And I think that that combination gives me a very unique perspective on the world and on life. And, you know, international affairs, which I'm not running for federal office, that would have an influence on international affairs directly. But because I am a queer black woman, we don't have that many. You know, like, the first gay person elected in the entire country happened 50 years ago in San Francisco. Harvey Milk was the first gay out elected official. I'd like to say out because you never know who's gay, but not talking about it. And it still happens today. So, you know, what I represent would be the first openly gay black county supervisor in all of California, in all of progressive California 50 years after Harvey Milk. And I think that my my history as a person who was, you know, destitute, you know, was on the brink of being unhoused, was on food stamps and childcare assistance, that means I'm not connected to wealth. I'm not independently wealthy, so I can't self fund my campaign. I still work full time every day, plus all the other roles that I serve. It means that I am, you know, gonna have a different perspective than the current person in the seat - a 24 year incumbent, who I think is at this point very far removed from the experience of the person sitting in the Social Services Office, you know, and has never had that experience himself. So, like, we come from different places, and it informs so much. And being a black Jew. There was a study done by the Jewish Federation to reveal what the population of Jews is in this country. And if you are under 35, 30% of Jews are Jews of color. That means you know that the future of American Jewry looks more like me, than the stereotypical white European descent, Jewish person. So you know, I also am representative of the future. And I think that this means a lot when what is happening internationally is impacting the community so heavily - the Jewish community, the non Jewish community. There's a whole lot of hate moving

through the world right now. And, you know, I think I sit at an interesting intersection or an interesting crossroad because of my identity.

Sarah Peyton 36:38

You shared that the Israel-Hamas war, and the calls for a ceasefire is a theme that has come up in your campaign, that that you've been asked about and you've written a little bit about this. Tell us about your position and how you came to it.

Jennifer Esteen 36:54

Yeah, yeah. Thank you for that question. I think the what's happening in Gaza is horrendous. And it's devastating. And I think that the only way we can get to, to any kind of resolution is to have a ceasefire. Like just stop dropping bombs, stop blowing up hospitals, and stop destroying schools and stop killing children. Like it has to stop, as a baseline. You know, I think that all the hostages need to be returned, and we have to get to negotiations. And you know, what happens after that? I honestly don't know, and cannot dictate. But it's important for me as a black woman, as a black Jewish woman, especially, to speak up because so many Jewish elected officials have not spoken up, or have spoken up and said, the job is not done, which is a frightening thing to hear. You know, it wasn't that many years ago in Charlottesville, that people were walking with swastikas and they were saying Jews will not replace us. And I think that what's really frightening it's that sentiment that I think now there is, I don't know, this attachment to the fear, attachment to the trauma, attachment to the loss that has occurred and it's causing more loss, and more death and more destruction. And we have to get to a place of healing. Like it is such an unfortunately, divisive moment. And I think that as a community, we have to be able to say, enough is enough. Let's get to peace. Let's get to healing.

Roxy Manning 38:47

Yeah, I think you're talking a little bit about making a statement on something that has been so polarized. Like you mentioned, so many people have been terrified about making a statement for something that I'm getting for you and for me, and for so many people is clear. It's like a ceasefire is necessary. People are dying, children are dying, infrastructures are being devastated. But people are not willing to say that. And so much of the rhetoric has become this kind of polarized, if you take one chance, you're bad. And we're going to just demonize each other. And that seems so typical of what the political discourse has been in our country, that it has become very much this, us versus them instead of what you mentioned earlier, which was about being values driven. So I'm actually curious, like, what is your take on negative rhetoric and how have you been navigating, talking about all of the different issues that are dividing our community, but in a way that isn't contributing to the sense of division?

Jennifer Esteen 39:51

Right, right. Yeah, I'm not into negative negative rhetoric. I learned a while back that if I can maintain a positive outlook, a positive languaging, that it is best. And it's not easy because you can get sucked into negativity really quickly. But it doesn't serve us well. And I don't think that our divided community is really. You know, people talk about antisemitism, and people talk about Islamophobia. All of that is steeped in this unfortunate hate. And the unfortunate rhetoric that is divisive, that really stokes it all has to be squashed. Like, we cannot come from that place, if we want to have any kind of ability to get through these difficult times, because we're gonna get through this difficult times together. And, you know, there's all these old adages. One of them that has always stuck is divide and conquer. And I think that what we're experiencing is that we are being divided and driven against one another. And it is simply not helpful. We have got to be able to come together and make peace. And it has to happen here locally. I think we have to have.

Jennifer Esteen 41:10

You know, I went to a interfaith vigil a few weeks ago, that was really sweet. And, you know, people were able to just come together and talk. And then I have received some negative feedback because I issued a ceasefire statement. And, you know, people said to me, I didn't vote for you in this thing last week because of your ceasefire statement. And it felt really unfortunate that that was the case. And the person said to me, I think that your ceasefire statement was political. And, you know, I feel like, if I was really being political, that I would have waited to make my ceasefire statement until I got their vote. And if I was really being political, maybe I wouldn't have made a ceasefire statement at all. I just would have stayed silent. Because silence is this cocoon of safety. I wouldn't have to go out on a limb. But, you know, I tried to seek wise counsel. I talked with religious leaders. I talked with friends and family and other advisors. And there is no way that my heart could continue to break and ache for what's happening in Gaza. And while I had, just like when I was, you know, speaking up for my clients and saying, I will put it all on the line. I will take this risk, even if it causes my livelihood to come into question, I will stand up for what I believe is right. And I think we need that kind of leadership, in order for our world to be better, because with bravery, with clarity, that people get to make a choice. Yeah, you don't have to vote for me. But you know, where I stand, which I think is far more honorable than someone who you know, is talking out of both sides of their mouth, or is always kind of afraid to speak. No, you know that. I can't live that way.

Roxy Manning 43:10

Well theres, there are two thoughts that come into mind, as I'm hearing me speak. And so first, I just gotta say, kudos, kudos, kudos. This is exactly part of why I am excited to support you. I supported your first campaign. I'm supporting the current one. And it's that we need people who are willing to speak up and to take some of the positions that are hard and to name them. And

one of the things that I'm reflecting on, as I hear you now, is the difference between having divisive negative rhetoric, and still being able to speak about the difficult things, right. Still being able to say, what's happening is not okay, or this is who's being impacted. These are the groups who are suffering. And I think it's such an important distinction to be able to make, that you could name harm, without saying that somebody's evil or bad, without saying somebody doesn't deserve to be served. So I first I'd love to hear your thoughts about that. And as you talk about that, I also imagine there are people out there who are looking at you going, Are you representing just one group of people? Are you representing only black people or only Jewish people? Or are you truly representing everyone in the community? So I'd love to hear your thoughts about both of these issues?

Jennifer Esteen 44:20

Yeah, yeah. I think it's a good point. To be able to name harm does not mean that you are doing harm or recreating harm. But you know, sometimes it does bring stuff up. And you know, I think that one of the tenets that I remember as a child learning, and really every year we celebrate, and remember the horrors you know. Every year as people read the Torah in the synagogue, you go from one end to the next, and then you unwind the Torah scroll and roll it back up, and you start all over again. And that's about telling the stories again and again so that we never forget. And I think it's the same way for these horrible things that have happened. Those who do not remember their history are doomed to repeat it. We have got to be able to talk about these hard things. And we have to make sure that we make different choices going forward. And I think as a society, we have to make different choices, so that we can get to better outcomes. And that is what I think my work is, as a nurse. I think that is what my work will be an attempt to accomplish as an elected official, is to get to some different outcomes. Because we've been working with a system that was designed based on redlining, a system that was designed based on the war on drugs, a system that was designed based on segregation. You know, systems that were designed based on so many things that kept our communities apart, and that have led to different outcomes, disparities, and different life expectancies, for example. We have got to make some changes. And that is a part of why I'm running. You know, we've had in this particular seat, this district, we've had the same representation for 24 years. And I often say that if we are satisfied, then we don't need any change. But I'm running because I am not satisfied. I don't like what I see, I don't think our public health system is giving people the service they deserve. I don't think our mental health system is giving the community the treatment that is needed. I don't think our criminal legal system is spending our tax dollars in the best way possible to really make us safe, and I want it to change. And the only way we're going to get change is if someone like me steps up to offer it. Because you know, the same person is going to do the same thing. We have to make some change.

Sarah Peyton 46:57

Yeah, as you speaking, I'm brought back to a concept that Roxy brought to me that I just had been totally changed by which is Martin Luther King's concept of Beloved Community, and how much it is the opposite of the divisiveness that we've been talking about. How does this concept of Beloved Community influence your work and your approach to politics and community building?

Jennifer Esteen 47:23

Yeah, I think this lovely concept, you know. I had to do a little research to make sure that I didn't butcher it. But, you know, it seems as though, when Dr. King talked about Beloved Community, what he was talking about is recognizing where we've come from. That there has been this legacy, this history of colonial oppression, and of slavery, and of kind of an overuse of natural resources to the detriment of our world. And understanding that that is where we come from, and moving forward in a way that allows people to still come together and to shift away from those kinds of extractive ways of being that lead to, you know, blood diamonds, or lithium mines being worked by children who are five, six, and seven, with no protective gear. You know, all these things that we know are happening in the world so that we can have the technology that we benefit from. People may be listening to these devices, you know, this podcast on an iPhone. You know, like, how often do we think about how this iPhone came to be or our electric cars and where the battery source came from? We may not think about it often, but it exists. And we can use these technologies we can come together as community and heal. We can we can have a better world that is no longer drifting down the colonialist, kind of extractive way of being. We can have peace. You know, I think the Beloved Community was something he said before he talked about having a dream, but I think the two are one and the same. It's about having a community of neighbors who previously didn't talk to one another, or who previously didn't believe that they could be neighbors. Even though you know, you crossed the tracks, you got Joe on the one side of the track and you got John on the other side of the track. Let's come together. So I don't, I feel like I'm not being very articulate in this moment about the Beloved Community. But I think it's really just about all of us being together in space, with acceptance and with some graciousness for each other.

Roxy Manning 49:50

And I think this goes back to what I've been hearing you speak about, right, that anything that impacts some of us, some portion of our communities, impacts the rest of it. That we're interconnected. And so anything that we do in service is going to benefit everyone. And we need to be able to hold all of these relationships as we think about the strategies and the policies that we put into place.

Jennifer Esteen 50:15

Absolutely, yeah, absolutely. You know, I've been serving on the Alameda Health System Board for three years. And our health system governs our four county hospitals. We have a \$1.4 billion operating budget separate from the county budget. And our level one trauma center serves everyone. You know, if you're in an accident, and you need to be treated with a medical emergency, you want to be in our emergency room. But if you are seeking preventative care and you want to see a primary provider, and you have private insurance, and you might go seek care elsewhere. And the people who have less options, because they have less income or less status in the community, the only option they have is our public health system and our level one trauma center. So how do we make sure that those services being offered serve everyone. You know, we deserve top level care for every member of our community, regardless of their income level, or their immigration status, or their race, or their gender. And it's going to take some work for our health system, our public health system to actually live up to the promise. And I hope to use my professional expertise to make it so.

Sarah Peyton 51:33

I love that you have this experience in the public health, not just as a nurse, but looking at policies. It's such a wonderful preparation for public office, elected office. It seems like it just dovetails so beautifully. I'm also sitting over here going, how does Jennifer do it? All these things?

Jennifer Esteen 52:03

Yeah, yeah, I've been busy. I've been busy. You know, sometimes I say, I work in San Francisco, because that's where my full time work is as a nurse, but my extracurricular activities are here at home. And you know, in the unincorporated community, we have an advisory council, which I've been serving on for four years. And you know, I'm a council member here. And then the Alameda Health System Board, I've been on that board for three years serving on nearly every committee. Even the first year, I started as the Chair of the Finance Committee. And, and when I became the Chair of the Finance Committee, I was like, guys, I don't have a financial background. But it was really the best gift that could have been given to me, because I got to sit next to the CFO on a regular basis, going through the budget, understanding with a depth that you know. How many people can say that they got to manage a billion dollar budget? Not very many. So, you know, I think that it gives me the perfect preparation for what it is to be an administrator on the county level, where, you know, our county budget is \$4 billion annually. So you know, it's really been the right kind of service to get me prepared for this seat that I'm trying to win.

Roxy Manning 53:20

Well, I know we can keep talking to you for hours, but we need to come to a close. But I actually want, because your story of being in service and moving from, in some ways, feeling powerless, to

actually having an impact on the community has been amazing. So I'm wondering, what advice would you give to folks who are coming up who are also feeling either disenchanting or disenfranchised in our current political climate?

Jennifer Esteen 53:46

Oh, advice? Oh, once a time, I was told never give unsolicited advice. So since you asked, I would say, I think that the thing that has served me really well, is perseverance. And making it through against all odds. That even when I was told indirectly, that I wasn't ready, or even when I was struggling financially, or even when it was time for me to try to make a move and I felt discouraged because I lost. I didn't give up. I couldn't give up. And my community wouldn't let me. My family wouldn't let me. You know, when when the fire in my heart felt like it was dimming a little. It was able to be reignited because of the need of our community and because of the belief that people had in me. And my advice would be to stay surrounded by people who love you and care about you and see you and don't give up.

Sarah Peyton 54:54

This is wonderful, solicited advice. And now as we're coming to a close, you have an opportunity to ask our listeners to take an action. Is there anything that you'd love for people to do?

Jennifer Esteen 55:08

Absolutely, yes. Please take action. My campaign is in need of all sorts of resources and people. And you can find us on my website, which is JenniferEsteen.com. There's going to be a link where you found this podcast. You can also find me on social media at [esteen4CA](https://www.instagram.com/esteen4CA). I'm at all social medias on that handle. And you know, if you want to reach me, you can email me directly at info@JenniferEsteen.com. And I would love to engage with anyone who's tuned in and who has questions, regardless of the outcome of this race and when you might hear this podcast. Feel free to reach out. I would love to be in touch.

Sarah Peyton 55:58

Thank you so much.

Roxy Manning 56:00

Well, Jennifer, it's been a delight. I am so, so, so thrilled that you're in my county and I get to vote for you, and that you agreed to do this podcast with us. Thank you so much for being with us.

Jennifer Esteen 56:12

Thank you for having me, both of you. I really appreciate it. It's been a great conversation.

Roxy Manning 56:18

And then for our dear listeners, we want to remind you to support our work by going to our website antiracistconversations.com. And there you can purchase our books, *How to Have Antiracist Conversations* and *The Antiracist Heart*. And learn more about our exciting guests that we have booked for season two in our upcoming classes. See you next time.