

The Shared Mic: Conversations for the Ages

Episode 7 - Kinia Romanowska and Liz O'Neill

Eric Storey: Welcome to The Shared Mic. I'm Eric.

Eric Storey: And I'm Salima. Today on The Shared Mic we have Kinia and Liz.

Eric Storey: Liz O'Neill is the executive director of Boys & Girls Clubs Big Brothers Big Sisters Edmonton & Area.

Salima Suleman: And Kinia is the founder of Pros & Babes, an organization that empowers working parents. The topic we gave them today was balancing careers and family.

Liz O'Neill: My son is 32 years old. So it was a long time ago that I went on maternity leave. And ironically, I was having a conversation today with a couple of staff who have found themselves in a situation where they've gone on mat leave in a day later had their baby and none of that was planned. That's just the way it all worked out. And we were having a conversation about how you transition to what and what are those things mean ... so how do you plan for any of that? These are important conversations and ironically, I can actually remember my mom many, many, many years ago, I'm from a family of 10 children. And I can remember her having these conversations with people on the block. And one of the words that got used was this word that you and I were talking about earlier. And that's balance. And I always resented the word. Because for me, it always suggested that there was something wrong if you didn't figure out how to do something that maybe is 50/50. And I think that Jerry and Braden and I, what we figured out was how to create a life for us that worked. And so what I mean by that is Braden's an only child, but he grew up believing he had tons of brothers and sisters, because of where I work, because Braden would be included in everything and he would come to the events and he would be part of being one of the kids in the group. I can remember he was a swimmer and we'd be at the Kinsmen Pool. And I would actually bring boxes of newsletters for other moms and dads who were there watching their kids swim and I would get them to volunteer for our agency, because that meant I could be there, and they could help me be there. And so that's what I mean when I say we found ways to make our lives work for the three of us so that our careers were able to move and grow as we wanted them. But our family was always number one.

Kinia Romanowska: Right. Was there even something like maternity leave when ... ?

Liz O'Neill: You know, I was trying to remember today when I was driving here, did we get six weeks or did we get three months. So that will say to you, I'm part of the generation that worked hard for moms in today's generation to get the year and so maternity leave was something very, very different. But I also had the privilege of working for an organization that they too saw home and work as something that was critical ... that you actually felt good about

when you came at night. We were the hangout house on the block. And if any of my neighbors were hearing this, they would absolutely say, yes, that was the hangout house. And most of the moms were stay at home moms, because we lived in an environment that actually had to have some tight timing around it because of our lives. We were actually the best place to have a hangout home because, you know, snack was always at snack time. Homework was always at homework time, trampoline was always at trampoline time. But that rigor never got in the way of happiness, never got in the way of happiness.

Kinia Romanowska: It puts things in perspective, because we get longer maternity leaves right now: 12 or even 18 months, but that comes with other challenges. For example, career breaks and the compounding interest of the wage gap. Recently, there's a study that came out that said that out of university pretty much across all fields across all subjects, women get around \$5,000 less than men for the same starting position per year. And this week at some of the groups that I run, we had a financial advisor who specializes in wealth building for women, came to tell us that not only there's that, but then girls from a young age are told to save and budget and boys are encouraged to take risk and invest. So already women, there's an investment gap, because from a young age, we're socialized differently. Then there's the compounding effect of taking breaks for having children and then becoming caregivers for the elderly. And then we live five years longer on average than men. So the compounding effect of all of that was about a million dollars, right?

Liz O'Neill: Over a lifetime.

Kinia Romanowska: Over a lifetime and she gave us ideas you know, she gave story examples of women being in happy marriages but then ending up in divorces and forfeiting a lot of wealth or security. And when I prepare materials for my groups, I was preparing a topic called 'Being a working mom in Canada in the 21st century.' And I was determined to find a silver lining. But the statistics everywhere don't lie when it comes to money, you know, the average wage gap is around 12%. And with every child, it increases, and we are also seen as less hireable, less suitable for promotions, less interested for hire, we're offered less money as working moms. And that's just the reality. So even with that, I tell the moms 'Okay, you know this information now, what are you going to do about it right?' Are we going to protest and say it's not fair? Or are you going to do something about it, which is why I bring experts in finance and negotiation. We're going to have a workshop on how to negotiate better and not to let emotions and fear hold us back from actually engaging in it, so that we can kind of tackle this motherhood penalty but in a way, I hope that is tasteful and that is proactive and empowering and not simply complaining. Because when you tell me that when you were having children, you didn't even get a maternity, right? We have the opportunity to stay longer with our babies. But it still begs the question for me, does that warrant the very big wage gap that comes after that? I like to encourage women to think that they come back with more skills when they become moms, we know we become multitaskers and focused and we don't put up with as much gossip or we just want to get the work done really well. So I encourage moms to brand

themselves as that, it adds to their toolkit and it doesn't make them worse workers so they can start tackling that that wage gap. It's a different challenge then in your generation. But it is a challenge nonetheless, that we do face.

Liz O'Neill: Well the way we experience it may look different today. We have about 125 staff in our organization, probably 100 are female and probably we have eight to 10 women on maternity leave on any given year. And so we have lots of experience with the conversations that families end up having and the worries that young women end up having. But I can tell you that the conversations, while the context of 2020 may look different, conversations are really similar to the ones that we had. Challenges are really similar to the ones that we had. In fact, there might even be more possibilities today, because we were on that front end of having to be the translators and interpreters, from our parents generation. And our parents generation was very much about simply wanting the best they could have for my generation. And so I grew up with parents who worked very, very hard, from a family of 10 children, five brothers and four sisters and a dad who had to work several jobs in order to make ends meet. And a mom who worked at home in order to make extra income, baked for other people, did laundry for other people, and did ironing for other people. And so again, I got to experience what it looked like for my parents family. And it's interesting to think about, while we may have more information today about the issues, the issues remain pretty constant. And again, how we experience them, how we live them. And it's wonderful that you've got the ability to provide that kind of support to moms so that they can think about, while they're on maternity leave what it is that they're experiencing. We could get to make decisions and we get to make choices. And as hard as some of those would be, just knowing that you can talk those things through and knowing that there are other moms, because often I think we're isolated in these feelings and in these worries and in what do I do next?

Kinia Romanowska: There's an ebb and flow, sometimes you give more to your family, sometimes you give more to your work. There's the whole question of mom guilt. I bring that up in the groups too. And I haven't experienced it much. But recently, I've been so focused on developing this project of mine. And I've been getting a lot of help for my children. And sometimes, I don't spend that much time with them. And one of my son's is five months and the other one is two and a half. But what I found is that by outsourcing some help at home with the kind of the tasks, the chores, now we have time with my husband in the evening to actually spend two hours with our sons and their focus and we're not worried about the laundry or the food or the cleaning. And we're really focused on where we can give the best contributions to our communities. You know, we decide to budget ... we're not going to go on some fancy vacation for one week, we're going to invest some of our resources to help on a day to day basis so that we can enjoy those daily moments together, but still, there is some mom guilt around that though. I would say that it's a very exhilarating and exciting time of our lives. Would I say there is balance? Absolutely not. But I feel like I'm a better mom when I'm doing something that I love for my community and for other moms. And my project was born out of becoming a mom. So they kind of percolate and they feed each other and they cross pollinate.

And yes, I prefer integration to balance. What are some of your core values Liz that you try to live and walk every day?

Liz O'Neill: Well, I have a number one: treat everyone the way you want to be treated yourself. Boy, when you reflect on that, that stops you from blaming others, that makes you take responsibility for, it also helps me be a really good citizen. But I absolutely live every day that I only want to treat people the way I want to be treated myself. There are things that I will do, and there are lines I won't cross, and I know where those lines are in terms of and I think that my son has grown up absolutely. You know the word balance, as I said before, I didn't like but sometimes my husband and I say, boy, he's so balanced because my husband's way of working and where he works is very different from being in the not-for-profit sector. And so he's a lawyer. And so there's a lot more boundaries around when offices close, what time courtrooms open and close ... those kinds of things that really don't exist in the non-profit world. Our clients live 24 hours a day, within a 24-hour day environment. Our volunteers live in kind of 18 hour a day environments. And so there's lots of tug in terms of making sure that staff and volunteers and clients have access to us in the organization. And so often Jerry and I will say Braden has such balance because he finds time for himself. He's a family doctor in Toronto, and so young, beginning of a career, too many hours, not enough hours in the day, but he always finds when to walk, and when he needs time for himself. And so if we gave him anything, I pray to God that we gave him that. But I will tell you that the one thing I grew up with when our son was born and to this day, is that no matter what he did in life, I just wanted him to be a good citizen. And I think that that goes back to ... treat others the way you want to be treated yourself. And I will tell you that he's many wonderful things, but he's an amazing citizen. And so all these years later, because I worried all those years back then, right, in terms of is this the right approach? Is this the right boundary? Should we do that? Should we say that all the things that moms and dads worry about? And now I look at him today, and I see a wonderful human being, none of us can ask for more than that. That's the best.

Kinia Romanowska: There are so many hooks in the things you say that I just want to jump on and explore. One of them being citizens and civics, both my husband and I are passionate about politics and playing a role in the community. And I'm going to make a sideline of a little bit of a joke. We were doing icebreakers and we're trying to let people guess who's going to, kind of like the shoe game at a wedding, right? So my husband jokes that I often want to debate the state of liberalism before coffee. So that was the question, who's most likely to start talking about politics. We always have lots of ideas. He's a teacher and so of course, you know, sometimes some of the only time we have together is before we have coffee, before the day starts. I have my own personal conflicts about being a working mom and what it means for society. For example, we know that since women have entered the working world on mass, they've kind of stepped away from more civic duties, more community building, unpaid work, volunteer work, that plays a strong role in kind of the social tissue, the social fabric. You know, one day I'll be reading one article that kind of confirms some ideas I have and then I think my gosh, is it a good idea to be a working mom? But whether you're at home working from home

and whether you're for the children or for the community or you're working for salary, you're still working right? I don't want to get into the mommy wars debate. But civics and our latest debate was, you know about whether money's being pulled from the public sector or being stayed there. And then we're thinking the buffer, that community service, that's sense of civics, that's the kind of balancing power between the corporate and private world and then the public and government world, right. We don't want either one to take up too much space. And in our times, Liz, it's hard like our smartphones have taken over. I usually try to create a certain boundary, but with the type of work I'm doing right now and the things that surface, I'm glued to my phone nonstop. And do I really have a choice, like, we could have a philosophical debate about it. But ultimately, if I want to succeed in this competitive world, it's very hard to disconnect from this gadget. And it makes me think about like, when are we going to stop and think, you know, have the time to think, be parents and be involved in our communities and have those Sunday picnics when we were just a community and people who didn't have gadgets and weren't cyborgs? So I think I went on a gazillion different tangents right now from one concept to the next. But you probably see a thread in terms of what I say.

Liz O'Neill: I do. About a year ago, I decided to change my voicemail and my out of office notice on my email to you know, this is so and so, if your call is urgent my cell number is, you can text me and I will connect back within one hour. I started that in January of 2019. Because what I wanted to actually do was take the load off the staff at the office, and I'll tell you the outcome. In 13 months, one person used my urgent, and that taught me something. And that was I made it all urgent. Nobody else did. I started to realize I don't have to respond in six hours. I don't have to, because everyone knows how to get me if there's an urgency, but I had put myself in that position. And so I think that just as you're helping moms right now do some thinking about who they are and what's important to them and what kind of professional development and whatnot they could be doing on maternity leave. Somebody needs to help us kind of reframe our own centers, because we're doing so much of this to ourselves. And it's not a requirement of others and we don't have any lessons, teachings about how to undo it. I was really lucky somebody told me they tried this and it worked for them. I can honestly say I thought for about six months. Oh, what a stupid idea. Well, no turned out to be a brilliant idea and taught me a really important lesson. But I think most people who get up every day want to have the best for their families. And I think that the people in our networks want us to have the best. And again, I think that so much of this is about the fact that we worry alone. We don't talk about the things that because we either don't want to burden or we don't know how to say it, or we don't want to be misjudged because of saying it, or we're too damn busy to say it. But I really do think that's the reframing we have to do. Because I think that will help us put some of the cell phones and the need to be on the internet and on email, perhaps we can find some balance. But I do think we're going to have to learn our way because this has for the last 20 years just taken over our lives.

Kinia Romanowska: When you're saying learn our way ... so I'm growing into my role every day, probably every day of my life I'm growing into who I'm becoming. I picked up an article when I

was in college, and it's haunts me to this day in a positive way: life learned itself into existence. Yeah, we don't we don't have full pathways as to how to use our gadgets in the most mindful way. It's a learning lesson every day. Sometimes I put it aside more, sometimes I have it more in my life. When I studied communications over 10 years ago, we were talking about cyborgs and I thought that was just the strangest concept, you know, that technology will become extensions of ourselves and I thought that was just grotesque but it is today, people have chips and implants and our cell phones track our every move and we can get so much good from technology but we also have to be reflective. One of the topics we explored is social media and children and how our children will have a digital footprint from the day they are born. And so one New York Times article asked, well, will that matter when they're applying for college? Like, will recruiters look at their history, you know, how far back did they have tantrums or behaviors and social media can be so helpful that say, if you're struggling with a mood disorder, it's a great way to access a community of people who feel the same and who will encourage you. But it can also be a black hole where you start oversharing things that will have consequences one day.

Liz O'Neill: Well, and again, if you go back, if you think about years of videotaping, and VCR's .. but I think about when you're saying what you're saying, the thousands and millions of VCR tapes that exist in the world. I mean, I can tell you that my sister in law and brother in law, have 30 Christmases at our house on videotape, and then came, you know, the new equipment and sometimes when I find these tapes in our basement, I go, what do I do with these and I'm sure that as a parents, we're going to be asking ourselves when we're packing up our kids and they're moving on. Though I will tell you, my son moved out, you know, eight years ago and I have not packed his room. As I say, no, no, that's Braden's room when he comes over at Christmas and Easter to his birthday, etc. I think that there is always, whatever the technology is of the day. But this, there's no question that the technology of today has taken over a much bigger part of our lives than any technology of the past. But luckily, there are really smart people out there that are having those conversations, and hopefully, they'll sort through some of those answers. But I think just what you're doing is fantastic in terms of providing a place and a space for people to have these kinds of conversations. And when I think about you know, all those years ago when Braden was young, and I've always said mother he was the best thing that ever happened to me. If our moms can walk away with that, after all the heavy lifting, then something will have gone really well in their lives. But I just want to watch say one other thing. About 1992-1993, a group of women in the community here in Edmonton, we started to talk to some of the corporate leaders of the day about things like childcare centers within businesses so that moms and dads could go have lunch with their kids or could go for their coffee break time with their kids. And I don't think we spent enough time really helping them understand that because I think there's more of an appetite today to be able to provide family solutions for the workplace than there's ever been before. But I don't really see anybody kind of harnessing it. And so recently, when the government of Canada came out with needing to create another 150,000 childcare spaces in Canada, I think that was the number, I thought to myself, I think we now have a bit of a recipe about what a childcare center looks like, that I think really needs to

be rethought. And is this the opportunity for moms and dads in the workplace to be talking with the workplace, about how collectively, we might be able to do something that really helps moms and dads really feel valued by their employer, and really helps the employer understand what it takes to have a wholesome employee in your organization.

Kinia Romanowska: It's interesting, the whole childcare conversation, because I'm getting the sense that we actually as Canada have not agreed as to what this looks like. It varies from province to province, the costs are completely different, whether you're here or in Quebec or in B.C., and I was pretty shocked to realize that we have not made that decision collectively. I remember growing up being told you can do whatever you want to do choose whatever career path you want to but the reality is that women in certain fields, STEM for example, it's very hard for them to pursue those careers and have families. The dropout rates are huge. So we haven't even solved the childcare equation. And we know that reliable childcare is so important if you want to be a working mom, right? How can we tell young girls today still, you can do whatever you want. But we are not paving the way for you to have those solutions and to be able to make it happen and to be able to thrive as a mother and a family. This is probably the concept that leaves me a bit of a bitter taste in my mouth when we're young and we're so passionate, and we think we can take over the world. It wasn't true that we could do whatever we want and be our whole selves. Of course, it's better today than it was and other times, but I think we still have a lot of work to do in that regard and giving women a bigger picture. Young women a bigger picture of what they will be facing like when they chose a career that is very demanding on them physically, and in some regards, forces women to delay having kids and then maybe not even being able to have them at all because they were so focused on their career. We don't talk about that enough.

Liza O'Neill: You know, it's interesting. There are groups of women, and not millions. But there are groups of women in our community, who again have found a way. I know a group of six female family doctors, who have all made the decision to live in the same neighborhood. Who have all made the decision to share childcare as a responsibility across the neighbors and who've all chosen to work part six and they are having and I think this maybe is, what we have to do as citizens in our community, is learn from those other good examples. So that when we start to talk about things like so what could childcare be? You can see their six family doc's who figured out a different way to have childcare and integration across their families using your term. And again, not everybody's going to be able to do that, but I bet you we have in our community lots of really good examples of what works and what doesn't work. And so over these next number of years, I think this is a real opportunity for us to start to better define what those lines and what those boundaries are. What are the things that, because we have so much knowledge and research now, you know, we actually have evidence on things. Right. And I think that if we could take a little more time about so what is the evidence actually tell us? And then how can we live the evidence? Sometimes I say to my colleagues, look, I know nobody wants to hear the word more taxes that when people say to me, but you know, Liz, Norway, Sweden, you know, Denmark, they've got it all figured out. And I go, yeah, and they pay 20%

more taxes. Well I don't want to pay more taxes. But again, I think if we can take that evidence and understand what does it really need to look like and now how do we pay for it? But I would love to bring together women who have found solutions that none of us would even think about. And they were privileged to be able to do that. But I think that we can replicate some of those things, even if you don't have the privilege.

Salima Suleman: I loved listening to that episode because it was two empowered women just learning from each other. I thought it was a really beautiful episode. My big takeaway from this one was that it actually linked back to our special episode from the Twin Brooks Community League where we had people talking about technology and technology came up in this episode too. And it's one of the things I love about this podcast is that we don't know where these conversations are going to go. And somehow they always connect to each other, and it's finding those little threads and that shared experience that seems to come through on these episodes. In this episode, we heard two mothers talking about technology, and Kinia talking about using technology and leveraging technology to advance her career. And Liz using technology to set up boundaries. So using that, hey, if it's an urgent matter, please contact me on my cell phone and using her cell phone as kind of a filter for her to prioritize what was important and what wasn't. And I think that was really interesting in the juxtaposition of us just recording all of these conversations about technology. And bringing us back to that idea of creative solutions, and that we need to be creatively thinking about how to navigate the complexity of everything we do, including being parents.

Eric Storey: So applying critical thinking to technology, that creative solutions is critical thinking, not just here, it's been presented to me, but how can I use it? How can I change it?

Salima Suleman: And how do I leverage it? To meet my goals and my needs.

Eric Storey: And so that it benefits my time, it doesn't waste my time or consume my time. For me another issue was, sort of strange talk about it because it was two professional women talking about their careers. But I kept thinking back about the fatherhood role in these, the partnerships in these relationships, and how much that expected role has changed over the last 40 years. And listening to how Liz negotiated that with her husband, and how Kinia is negotiating that with her husband as well, how much they are changing. And a lot of times, we talk about the work that needs to be done, I got to get this done at home, I got to get that done at work and so on. But we don't talk about the emotional work that needs to be done. So the physical work gets done. And I think that gave me a chance to reflect on how much emotional work goes into being a professional, being a parent, being a partner.

Salima Suleman: We'd love to hear from you now. Leave us a comment. Tell us what you think. Tell us what you're thinking about.



Eric Storey: The Shared Mic is a project of Age Friendly Edmonton which is a joint venture between the City of Edmonton and the Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council.

Salima Suleman: We'd also like to let you know that if you are a senior or you love a senior, if you're looking for more information or want to be connected with outreach providers, the line 211 here in Edmonton will connect you up.

Eric Storey: So please subscribe. Give us five stars if you're feeling generous. Give us five stars. Tell your friends to listen to us on Apple, Google, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts.

Salima Suleman: We will be releasing the last episode of season one in two weeks.

Eric Storey: We hope you join us. Thanks for listening