

Saskia Epstein:

Welcome to PNC C-Speak: The Language of Executives. I'm Saskia Epstein, Senior Vice President of Client and Community Relations at PNC Bank in New England, alongside my co-host, Carolyn Jones, Market President and publisher of the Boston Business Journal.

Carolyn Jones:

Thanks, Saskia. It's great to be with you on PNC C-Speak. Each podcast features local executives talking about relevant and timely business topics. This knowledge sharing platform showcases leaders with forward-thinking approaches, that disrupt the status quo and cause us to think differently. Our guest today is Jean Dolin, a social impact entrepreneur who most recently curated the groundbreaking portraits of pride.

Saskia Epstein:

Jean, welcome. It's so great to have you. We are so excited to learn more about you and your journey, how you lead your life and in your work. Your story already has a lot of fascinating chapters. Share a little bit with our listeners about yourself and what led you to this point in your career.

Jean Dolin:

Thank you, Saskia, good morning and good morning to you Carolyn. I'm so excited to be on this podcast having listened to so many episodes of people that I have a lot of regard for and people that I admire. I'm honored to be here.

I think my journey really starts where I'm from, in Haiti. I grew up in a family of six children as the only boy back in Haiti, and growing up I wanted to be a news anchor. Telling the morning news with a little bit of a good story, and that is because I grew up watching a lot of TV. So film, art, movies, particularly storytelling really intrigued me as a kid. I remember being 6, 7, even until I was 12, I would be in front of a mirror using a hairbrush as my mic and telling people the news. I would make up stories because that's the news.

But even at the age of 15, I even got the chance to be part of a youth led talk show on Channel 38 that was on television, and so I spent about two years there, about three times a week, and we would get behind the camera and talk about pop culture. A lot of American culture, anything that was happening in American music fascinated us, so we would talk about all of those things. But when I moved here to the United States, things shifted for two reasons. So when I moved to the United States at the age of 17, things shifted for two reason.

One, not having anyone to guide me through that process of getting into college or understand what it would take to be a news anchor in the US and then also having to find all the resources for myself, getting myself into college and looking for different resources. So I really became the savvy person in how to find resources, and in that process, I really became a community advocate because I started to find out how things work, how people get resources, how people are getting scholarships. I remember working for the American Red Cross in 2015 and my role there was enrolling students in some of the lifesaving courses that the Red Cross offers and people would come with all type of scholarship, all type of resources and institutions paying for them and I was curious about those processes. And in conversation I have with people, I said, "I want to learn more how things happen, those processes." And people say, "Maybe you should try an internship." I ended up interning for Senator Warren in summer 2016, and that led me to working as a fellow on the Clinton King campaign from that fall until election time.

Then I worked with different nonprofits, learning a little bit about public health, doubled a little bit into policymaking. I even ended up managing a campaign in the South Shore, helping elect the first woman of color as an at large counselor in Randolph Mass. But in 2020, the world shifted and we all shifted along with the world due to COVID, and I went back to myself and asked myself, "What is it that you wanted to do at first? You need to go back to that first love," and to me that was storytelling.

So in 2021, I did a documentary focusing on the journey of four Black women, how they came out to their families and how that impacts the work that they do today. And I loved that and I wanted to do more and I wanted to tell more stories to tell more L-G-B-T-Q stories and a photography exhibit makes sense. I ended up stumble upon John Hewitt's photography and he was so striking. I said, "Okay, those are the pieces. You need a great photographer. You need to find people with great stories. You need to find community leaders and community champions and put a series of photography together that could tell a story of L-G-B-T-Q in Boston," and so that's how I launched Portraits of Pride in 2022.

Saskia Epstein:

John, before we hear more about Portraits of Pride, and I'm excited to talk about that. Tell us the name of your film and talk a little bit about that, the work and your interest leading you to be at the intersection of social impact and media storytelling and politics where you got your start. So talk a little bit about that and how you are harnessing that, both in your own career choices and the things that you're involved in and also to drive social impact.

Jean Dolin:

Yeah, so I will say I didn't come out as a gay man, as gay, because I didn't realize I... until I moved to the US. There are only one or two people that I knew in Haiti that people said they were gay, but they never came out themselves. And although it was the truth, we all knew it, but that's not something they never took ownership, or they ever stood in affirmation. So I think when I moved here, I came out to my parents, my sisters, they welcomed, they had tons of question, but it still wasn't talked about. I've always had question, how do other people come out to their parents? That is a question I always had. What is the experience of fellow gay people?

So the idea for the documentary came after I gave a keynote speech at Social Capital in 2018 and people were telling me, "Oh, you should do a TED Talk," and you should do this, you should do that. And I kept thinking, "Okay, which part of my identity or which part of my lived experience should I bring to that TED talk? Is it being an immigrant? Is it being a gay man? Is it being a Black person in America?" So it was too many things to unpack. I figured let's get more people to talk about these experiences because you can't speak on all of them at once.

So storytelling, there is this word fairytale, T-A-L-E-S, and the rainbow is associated with the LGBTQ movement. It came together Rainbow Tales, so it's just storytelling of LGBTQ people, and I reach out to a few leaders in the city of Boston who had come out as gay men and I said, "I'm working on this project, would love to know your story, how you came out, and then the work that you do it now, how that impacted you."

Carolyn Jones:

That's amazing, and the variety of the work that you've done in the spaces you've worked, I'm sure, inform everything you do now. Let's go back to Portraits of Pride a bit. Maybe just share a little more about the story of how that came about and maybe some of the highlights and some of the challenges

that you experienced in launching it, whether that be getting the people, getting the funding, et cetera. So share a little more in depth about that.

Jean Dolin:

Thank you for that. So Portraits of Pride stems from my desire to tell more stories of LGBTQ people, and I know I wanted to tell it on a big scale so that it could strike the viewer, it could strike the audience that people couldn't miss it. I know I'd done a documentary and I knew that... You can't do a documentary with more people because you can't capture an audience with that many people. It would've to be a series and you don't really have the resources for that, so a photography exhibit made sense.

I love museum, I'm always going to museums, and so I had somewhat of a insight into exhibit and how you can put it together having seen hundreds of them. So I emailed John Hewitt and he responded. He was traveling to photograph the Olympics as he had for the past 10 Olympics, and so when he came back, we studied the photography process.

What I love the most about the project is one person will give me a suggestion of someone to feature and then that person will give me another suggestion, so it really became this community process and connecting me with different leaders, connecting me with unsung heroes, because the exhibit, the first one in 2022 featured 19 LGBTQ leaders, some of them we know, some of them nobody knew before. Even amongst themselves, they had not met each other. So I love that community process, those conversations, meeting everyone, people I may have seen, I may have read about, or people that I didn't know at all, but nonetheless have done incredible work.

Some of the challenges were really the schedule. As you know, people in Boston are busy because there's a lot of work to do, and so getting them to commit an hour or two for the photo shoot, in some cases seven hours was not easy, but they showed up, they got the call, they responded, we made it happen. I think that was the first challenge is really working with people's schedule, and in the second part, figuring out the logistics. Portraits of Pride is this exhibit that sits in a public park. The first one was in Boston Common, the second one working with the mayor's office was on City Hall.

I really didn't know the process in getting those permits would be that complex. You have to go to the parks department and get it permitted and then you have to go in front of the Boston Art Commission and getting it permitted. Insurance and all of those administrative forms, I didn't know any about them, but I'm glad I do now because the second one was a piece of cake. I learned all those lessons in the first one.

Another unique challenge I think exists for beginners in this space, in this space of public art, is fiscal sponsorship. I didn't know that I would need fiscal sponsorship in order to raise money for the project. And when I did, I tried to reach out to many organization and I got those, we don't really do that, we don't do fiscal sponsorship, if we do, it's for long-term project, not just for a one-off. Until I was able to find NPI, nonprofit incubated and they support one off projects like these. They support our projects, and so they were able to extend fiscal sponsorship to Portraits of Pride and that's how we made it happen. Because without that, we would not have been able to obtain the insurance, get 501C3 status for taxes purposes, and raise the money that needed to be raised for the projects.

Saskia Epstein:

That's so interesting. Just taking a step back and recognizing that, in addition to creating an incredible art installation, which was a story unto itself, as you described, you are also building an organization and the infrastructure to support it. I've had the pleasure of seeing the exhibit and have heard you talk quite a bit about it. Was very proud that PNC was one of the supporters that helped launch this.

For our listeners who might not be familiar, can you bring it to life a little bit more? What is the exhibit saying as a story, and what visually are the components that drew you to photography and the subjects that were chosen?

Jean Dolin:

So Portraits of Pride is a large scale public art photography exhibit, where we photograph LGBTQ leaders and LGBTQ advocates all across Massachusetts. We then print those photographs 8 feet tall and attach them to a 10 feet tall frame in a public space, so that is, itself, the exhibit. So within that, we use imagery, we use photography to tell a story. A story that is diverse both in age and race, languages, background and lived experiences. The first exhibit, we had Alia who is a non-binary, queer advocate person and they are only 17 years old. And I met them on the steps of the State House because they were giving a speech on Trans Visibility Day.

Then we have people like Paul, Paul Glass, who is 80 years old. So the vast lived experience that exists between someone who is 17 today and someone who is 80, who was present during Stonewall in 1969 in New York is huge. And it's a beautiful coming together to see the progress the movement has made over the last 50 something years, and so much more work remains to be done.

If you love imagery, you love Portraits of Pride. If you love photography, you love Portraits of Pride. If you love people, you love Portraits of Pride because it is a gift to anyone who recognized the humanity in each other because that's where we center it.

To give you a quick story, when we do the photo shoots, we ask the people to choose their own location. We don't bring them into a studio because I've learned that brings up their anxiety, so people have chosen their churches for their photo shoot, because they really connected to church, their favorite part. Places where they meditate, their workplace because they say, "I work all the time", and people have chosen their homes.

So each photo is very different. Each setting is very different, and as a result, even if you looking at this Body of Work series of photographs, they all very different. I do visits myself when they are exhibited out there, and I meet people who are choosing their favorite, what they love about it, what they don't love about it. They looking up those leaders trying to connect with them, they visit the website, read their stories, and people are inspired, they are informed and they are moved by the exhibit. And that's something I'm very grateful for, that the subject said, "Yes, allow me to tell these stories and that we're using imagery,£ and extremely grateful for my photographer, John Hewitt, who made it all possible.

Carolyn Jones:

Yeah, it's really an amazing, amazing exhibit. And just seeing it in a public place like Boston Common where I had seen, it's really impactful and the courage that even just the subjects took. So Jean, tell us what's next for you and your work? What are you working on now?

Jean Dolin:

Oh yes. So what I'm working on now is a response to my experience in trying to get that fiscal sponsorship back in 2022. I am working with a small but very dedicated board to launch an LGBTQ museum in Boston, so that is the next. I'm actively working on it. We are actively working on it, having meetings. We are very grateful to the legal team at Latham & Watkins who have taken us on and guiding us through the process.

I think it was very difficult to make Portraits of Pride happen, because there isn't, and there's not, an organization in Boston that is dedicated to LGBTQ Arts or LGBTQ artists, although we have tons of art

organization and art institutions in Boston, but none of them focus on LGBTQ, which I think is a missed opportunity there, because Boston, as of 2018, had the third-largest LGBTQ population, and according to Time Magazine, this is well researched and documented, Boston is amongst the top 10 cities where LGBTQ people live and reside and have children and thrive.

So we are working on launching the Boston LGBTQ Museum of Art History and Culture, and our mission is to collect, to research, to conserve and to exhibit arts that speak to the LGBTQ community and to create a home for LGBTQ artists where they can thrive and show their work and really be in community and be in fellowship with each other. That is what's next for me.

Saskia Epstein:

This is so exciting, both for the museum and the institution that you're building, but also I think you just turned Carolyn and me into journalists because we're breaking this story here.

Jean Dolin:

Yes.

Saskia Epstein:

This is really terrific. For people who are interested in learning more about Portraits of Pride, you mentioned the website has an opportunity to glimpse that work and perhaps see into the future, share the website and does the museum have a name yet?

Jean Dolin:

Yes. So the website of Portraits of Pride is portraitsofprideboston.org. That is the website, and the museum is the Boston LGBTQ Museum of Art History and Culture. That is the name. We are working with the team to have a launch between next month and February, which is when you're going to see much more of it on the public side of press releases, some of our programming, and our first exhibit is going to be next year. I'm excited about that. So you are indeed breaking the story and I am actually honored to be breaking it with you, because Saskia has been committed as both a community leader and working for PNC in this work, and Carolyn Jones as well. We've talked, we've connected about what it takes for the city to advance, for a city for all and not the city of just a few, so excited to be breaking the news with you too.

Saskia Epstein:

Well congratulations. And we're really excited for what lies ahead. Looking back and I think now we understand why, to something a recent honor and recognition by Forbes Magazine that named you 30 under 30, for likely, what lies ahead, but also what you have already done early in your career, talk to us a little bit about what you attribute your early success to and your drive.

Jean Dolin:

I associate my success to three things, my community, and that means my family. It means the mentors that I've had along the way, Dr. Brian Buckley and the scholarships that I've gotten through our college and this community in Boston. I think it is a community that really pulls love and resources into people.

I love to say that, when I moved to the US in 2012, I moved with about three English sentences and a suitcase. And to have seen this growth from when I first landed at Logan to where I am now, it is only a

testament to what the city is, who are the people that live in it, and then how they welcome people and pour love into them. So my community, and then I have a deep sense of curiosity in how things work.

If I see something happen and I'm going to inquire, "How did you get from point A to point B?" I'm very curious about life, I'm curious about people's stories. I love to know where you're from, where are you now and where are you going? And the third thing I think I would say I associate my success to is service. I really do believe in serving people, and I know that might land wrong for some people, but bear with me, in serving my community and living a life of service.

I say this, I think it's in every field. If you work in financing, if you work in wealth management, yes your goal is profit and making sure clients are happy. But I think the essence of service for you is to make sure your client and your families have the best financial life that they can. If you work in retail, yes, you're just selling clothes and making sure people are buying and shopping and empty the shelves, but your service is to make sure every piece of clothes a person walk out of, they feel confident wearing. So that has been the essence and element that drives me throughout those past 10 years, whether I'm staffing a campaign, whether it's an internship, whether I'm putting an exhibit together or even launching a museum, it is about service.

How can I use my skills? How can I use my connections? How can I use my knowledge? And quite frankly, my desire, to serve people. If there was an LGBTQ Museum, I think my process for Portraits of Pride would've been easier. There isn't. And so I'm trying to put myself in a position in launching this institution that can serve LGBTQ artists and creatives like me.

Carolyn Jones:

It's amazing, and I love your piece about community. So Jean, you have been through so much and you have achieved so much in your life. As you think about sharing some of that knowledge, what's the best advice that you've been given, that really was influential in this path that you've taken?

Jean Dolin:

The best advice, I've been given so many advice on so many level, Carolyn, I have to tell you. I think, very recently, I'm getting approached by so many incredible leaders who are telling me, "You need to learn business. You need to learn how to set boundaries. You need to learn how to be intentional about your time. You need to learn how to build a team." There have been so many lessons. I think I would stuck with my dad, who taught me the value of hard work. I think my mom is there. She always taught me to stay focused and my sisters, always take opportunities when it comes to you. You have to take opportunities of everything that comes to you, whether educational or otherwise.

But there've been many advice. I don't know if I can pinpoint to one. And I think there are people who may have not other advice to me, but I think the way they lead, the way they work and the work that you do, I've been learning a lot from them. Elise Cherry, for example, after featuring her in Portraits of Pride, we've been able to talk and I've learned a lot from her as a community leader, and as someone who has seen the movement from Stonewall to today. Even Michael Bobbitt, who leads Mass Cultural Council and I've been learning a lot from him because he is an artist. He writes theater pieces, he's a playwright. He's also worked in this very administrative sign of the arts and funding the arts, so I'm learning a lot from lots of incredible leaders.

Saskia Epstein:

That's great. Jean, what's your outlook on this unique moment in our country? Living in a progressive state, while nationally, LGBTQ rights are under attack? What are you worried about? What are you optimistic about and how is that driving your work?

Jean Dolin:

The way I guess I could answer this question, I am really worried about the attacks. I think we can talk about the history of the country and go through the rabbit hole. We know that the folks that don't want liberation for everyone are very bold, but I think, I'm still stuck on January 6th. I think there is a new embolden element of hatred in this country that I thought was done, for one reason or another. I'm really worried about the attacks, physical attacks that can take place on certain groups.

As a gay man myself, I have friends in the trans community and as a Black person and as an immigrant, right, all of those intersectionalities that are part of my lived experience and my identity, it worries me. I'm worried that people are getting killed for who they are. People are getting killed for speaking up. I am worried about this cultural war that we are in, because it really feels like it's me against them or them against me, when I think at the very core of it, we all want to be seen, we all want to be heard and we all want to get to a place of understanding. So I'm hoping we can get there somehow, even if it's at the community level, and then maybe we can be a model for what the national conversation can look like.

But I will say, I'm very optimistic about this new generation, and I'm saying this as only 29 years old. There is another generation after me and they are leading fiercely. They are leading with strength and they are leading without much of a choice, but liberation. I think there have been movements in the past where each community focus on their own, whether that's Black, whether that's LGBTQ, and even within the LGBTQ, trans women have had to lead their own movement and they've also have had to lead the broader LGBTQ movement.

But I think this new generation that is coming up understand we shouldn't be looking for individual privileges or group privileges. We should be fighting for the collective liberation of all of us. So that gives me great strength, that gives me great sense of hope and I really just want to use again, what I have, whether it's skills or knowledge or lived experiences to set the ground for them, so when it's time for them to speak up, when it's time for them to be amplified, I can provide that platform and that resources.

Saskia Epstein:

Well, that's a wonderful exclamation point to emphasize your optimism and thank you for that gift. Jean, we'd like to close with some rapid fire questions. Here we go. Favorite spot in the city?

Jean Dolin:

My favorite spot in the city. Oh my god, there are so many. Can I choose more than one? Okay.

Saskia Epstein:

You can set your own rules, of course.

Jean Dolin:

You know that I love breaking those. So I think I would start with, I don't know if that's a blog, Estella. It is that new restaurant, they about to celebrate their first year anniversary according to social media.

And they have this mix of Italian, American cuisine, and soul cuisine. I love going there. If anyone wants to meet me, you might just catch me at Estella having dinner. I love that space.

I also love the Gardner Museum. I love that it has this contemporary galley where you can experience artists of today, and then when you go to the palace, you can just experience the life of Isabella. I love that museum. I go there all the time. At this point, even the securities know me. That's how much I go there, so I think those are the two that resonates for me. I love the Seaport because it's so innovative. There's always a lot happening in the Seaport. The shopping experience there is great. I have a deep sense of connection with Dorchester because when I moved to the US that's where I lived first, so I think those four.

Saskia Epstein:

Perfect. You've talked a little bit about a few leaders, but for our listeners, who is a leader or organization to watch that you haven't yet mentioned?

Jean Dolin:

I think people should be on the lookout for The Davis System. They are somewhat of a newly launched organization by Anthony Davis and Aaron. They are partners, married, beautiful young Black couple who have taken the lead in launching an organization that is at the intersection of civic engagement and also campaign and movement building. They led the youth day work and partnership with the NAACP doing the convention. They've done tons of stuff with other candidates that are running for office. So I think they are building something that is innovative, that is very creative. As much as I love Boston, as much as Boston loves to pour resources into people, it is also not a easy city to navigate. Boston can be a tough cookie to break, and so I think I've been enjoying seeing Aaron and Anthony really breaking through and making magic happen all across the community.

Saskia Epstein:

Right, what makes you laugh, Jean?

Jean Dolin:

A good meme on Twitter and it doesn't even need to have any words, just an- [inaudible 00:28:34].

Saskia Epstein:

On the artist formally known as Twitter.

Jean Dolin:

Yeah, just a face can just make me laugh hysterically. Yeah.

Saskia Epstein:

And finally, what is your wish for Boston?

Jean Dolin:

My wish for Boston is that it can become a city for all and not just the few. Having been there for a little bit over a decade, if you really launch yourself in community, if you really launch yourself in social impact, it takes really about a year or two to know everyone. At that point you realize there's just a few

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of us and we all know people who could be doing amazing work if they get the support that I may have gotten, that Aaron and Anthony are probably getting. And even when we can even unpack that, looking at this new section of Boston, the Seaport, how this neighborhood was just parking lot 5, 7 years ago, to what it is now, and realizing only a few people are getting access to that wealth, to that space. So whatever else happened in Boston, whether in the development sides, community funding, politics, how can we make sure it's for everyone, not just for a few? So that's my wish.

Saskia Epstein:

That's a great call to action to end on. And that wraps up another episode. Thank you so much for joining us.

Jean Dolin:

Oh, thank you so much. This was really a pleasure. I feel like we could talk for days.

Saskia Epstein:

I'm Saskia Epstein.

Carolyn Jones:

And I'm Carolyn Jones. And this is PNC C-Speak: The Language of Executives. Our guest today was Jean Dolin.

Saskia Epstein:

You can find C-Speak at bizjournals.com/boston or on any of your favorite podcast platforms. Until next time.