

Audio Title: The Book Stoop Rebekah Bruesehoff - Through a Teen Activist's Lens - Trans Advocacy, Radical Empathy, and Inclusivity

Audio Duration: 0:28:42

Number of Speakers: 2

Transcript

Rebekah Borucki: Hello, friend! I heard you were looking for our spot. I got you.

So, you're going to go past the corner bodega and down the block from the fresh cuts barbershop, and there you'll find a brick row house at the intersection of Literature Place and Social Justice Blvd. That's the stoop.

Amanda, Amanda Lytle, she will be there to welcome you to the conversation. *The Book Stoop*, that's the name of the spot. We got the hottest takes on book culture, nerd culture, current events, with best-selling authors, change-makers, and risk-takers, the best kinds of folks.

Oh, me? I'm Rebekah Borucki, President of Row House Publishing, and this is our podcast. I am so glad you're here.

Now, I'm going to let you get to Amanda.

Amanda Lytle: Thanks, Bex. Hey friend, let me be the second to welcome you to our spot, *The Book Stoop*. I feel incredibly honored to be the host of this podcast and I'm so grateful to have you here. Today on *The Book Stoop*, I'm speaking with Rebekah Bruesehoff.

Rebekah is a passionate, outspoken, and heart-driven teen with her heart set on change and the greater good. Between the numerous projects that she's a part of, which we will hear about today and the vision she has, Rebekah is changing the world one conversation at a time. In our chat today, Rebekah shares the coolest gift idea for the holidays as well as how impactful it has been for her and others to have a reverse mentorship role working with large companies in order to educate the workforce for upcoming generations of employees.

Rebekah shares the importance of language and finding the right words to describe who we are and how special playing sports can be when it comes to just being yourself. We talk about representation in the media and safety in faith communities.

This conversation is honestly one you do not want to miss. We start our chats on *The Book Stoop* with a rather fitting question. So, what are you reading these days? And Rebekah started telling me about this super cool idea that she has got for the holiday season.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: I bought books for my friends which, you know, it's pretty standard. But I'm annotating them. So, I'm reading the book and I'm annotating the books before I actually give them the books, so that they have like my sort of opinion on what I'm reading. But we also

like get to have fun with it because we make jokes in the book, and we get to laugh while reading it.

That has been really different to do because like I haven't done that much annotating in the past and I'm really obsessed with that at the moment. As for like what I'm actually reading, other than that, I'm reading *The Poet X* which is so cool. I mean I found – it's written in like poems which is super cool, and I think outside of that, I haven't really liked reading poems.

I do them in school and I'm like, "Oh, not another poem." But I read this, and I was like, "Wow!" Like that's a super cool way to like put a story into it and like use it to make – I don't know, and it was really inspiring.

Amanda Lytle: Back to annotating books for friends for a moment because I've never heard of that and what I think is so beautiful is that it becomes a shared experience.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah, definitely.

Amanda Lytle: What has the feedback been from people that receive a book that you've read?

Rebekah Bruesehoff: I think – I get texts while they're reading it or something and they're like, "Why did you write this? Like this is weird." But like it makes it so fun and to be able to like just say like this is one of the presents that I'm giving you or like this is like your gift. It's really personalized because you can buy something like a book, and it wouldn't be like something really personal. But I like this sort of different connection level that you're getting from the whole book.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. I'm totally taking that idea. So, thank you.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: You know, my entire friend group, we're doing it for each other. We're like, you know, swapping books and like that's our stuff.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: But yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, Rebekah, this is cool! Speaking of cool, I really want to open the floor for you to tell me all about the back story and what GenderCool is. Like tell me all about the GenderCool Project.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah, definitely. So, I think in a short little blurb, the GenderCool Project is a national storytelling campaign that focuses on replacing misinformed opinions with real-life interaction with trans kids. We work to focus on who trans kids are like me and not what we are. But like there's this really cool level where we don't talk about the nitty-gritty details of being trans. We talk about who we are, what we love to do. Like how we're athletes and that sort of

stuff and it gives a really nice connection to people and it also – I think it inspires and changes more hearts and minds in a way that we wouldn't have otherwise.

But there – it's like a youth-led movement. So, the youth that are a part of it are called “the champions”. We have such a great community of champions right now. Like we're all so – we're intertwined. We have like group chats and that stuff and like we play around. It's not all serious and like work stuff. We have like a great group of friends because of it.

Amanda Lytle: I want to come back to something really cool that you just said about the who and not the what because this has even been something that I've explored in different workshops and one in particular that kept coming back to being like you just wrote your name down. You're not a collection of letters. You just wrote your job title down. You're not a job title. You know, keep digging. What doesn't matter. It is who and ultimately it comes back to I am me and what makes you who you are. But it's coming back to the who. I think this is really, really me. How did it start?

Rebekah Bruesehoff: I don't actually know like the nitty-gritty details there. A trans girl, her name is *Chassey* [0:05:55] [*Phonetic*], her mom Jen, she like had the whole idea for this and she like wanted to make a bunch, a group of friends for like *Chassey* to like be with and then also like to make change because it's what we need to do in the world right now.

From that, it has kind of sprung everywhere. I think now we're doing a lot of work with like places in the workforce and that sort of stuff and Fortune 500 companies, which has been really interesting because I think otherwise, they're not sort of an audience that I would reach or talk to because that's not what I've done. I've like led workshops. I haven't done panels with these sort of people. But being able to do that has brought a different light to my advocacy than I had before because I am realizing that I am going into the workforce.

You know, and this is like something that directly affects me and it's really important for me to be passionate about and talk about it because it is like a crucial part of my life.

Amanda Lytle: I have a couple of questions that are coming to mind as you continue speaking which is so great. But before I ask you my next one, I want you to tell me what transgender or the word “trans” means to you.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah. I feel like – so for me, being trans gender is – it's just like a term that fits. Like when you put on your favorite pair of jeans per se. It's something that fits so right, they make you feel more you and for me, I was born – the world thought I was a boy. But I knew I was a girl. Like that was it from that and it was finding words like “transgender” that I was able to express myself and like that's really what inspires me about the whole like words and terminology because when we find the right words for who we are and we are able to connect that word to like an internal, integral part of ourselves, we're able to stand up and speak out about our own identities in a way that we wouldn't have been able to before. But it also gives us this sense of empowerment when we're able to be like, “Yes, that's me. That is who I am,” and it – I think it made me really happy.

Amanda Lytle: I can't stop smiling. Like my cheeks hurt because it's incredible to think that just navigating life and finding a word, a term, a title can help you feel like I'm less alone. I can be more me. I feel empowered and now I can actually step into my truth. What a beautiful thing.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: And words like "transgender" are really good things. I think it was never about telling my identity to myself because I knew that was who I was. It was about finding this word that I could tell the world. Like this is who I am, and it made it easier for them to understand in a way. I think – you know, yeah, it was just like something that I could use to educate other people as well, which I did a lot through books and that sort of things because it was like a tangible thing to do.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, I have so many questions now because you're saying like books and audience and athletes and community and connection.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: This is fantastic. So, I kind of want to come back to what you were talking about audience, the fact that all of these experiences are now putting you into spaces where your audience is shifting, right? And as you are getting ready to enter the workforce yourself, you're in a very cool spot right now working with a global tech company, helping educate them for the next generation coming into the workforce and I would love to know all about this.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah. So, a really cool part of what GenderCool has like started to do, it's a fairly new program I guess. It's called a "reverse mentorship". So, we partner with companies and like one of the champions goes out and we do like this – I think it's a 12-week mentorship. Like we learn from them because obviously we're seeing like what the ins and outs of their jobs are.

But they also learn from us. They learn how to make their teams, their company just more inclusive and accepting and diverse I think, which has been really cool. I'm working with VMWare which is a STEM company tech that is behind most of the like tech that we use, which has been really cool to learn about because I think before that, I hadn't been thinking about or learning about what was behind the apps and the websites that I use daily. It's really important to like learn and think about that sort of stuff.

But I think they've also heard things from me that are really important. I will just give you a small example. Like I've taught them about the importance of pronouns and like just introducing yourself with your pronouns is so amazing because it allows trans people to be seen and they know you're a safe person. When you make that a habit or a part of your company I think, you're making a more safe community and you're doing the work that needs to happen in the world in a sort of small way. I think it's just with words.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, there's safety and compassion in words.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, this is great. OK. You also mentioned books and writing and the fact that you have been writing and you're an author. So, I have a two-part question. But first I just want you to tell me about your writing journey.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah. OK. So, I feel like my writing journey has kind of been a little bit of everywhere. I've always loved to put my ideas on a paper, make my voice heard in a way. That may have not been about advocacy-related things. Maybe it was just making a word in my head that I wanted to put on paper and show to the rest of the world.

But I've published some things with the Philadelphia Inquirer op-eds, opinion pieces and I've also – recently I've written, co-authored a kid's book about being inclusive, as a trio of books for GenderCool. But to be able to – to put this book in my hand that because I've always wanted to be an author, I've always wanted to write things. It was such an amazing moment for me. I was like shoot, I wrote this. It's in my hands. This is like an actual thing that I wrote, and the people are going to be reading it all over and I was kind of freaking out at the moment.

I was like, "What is happening? How am I supposed to do this?" But it was amazing, and I think it has inspired me to think about what else I'm going to write. Where is this going to lead me I think is really cool because when people ask me what I want to be when I grow up, I always say an author and I've only really realized the true meaning of this in writing the book because I do find so much joy in writing and to be able to express my opinions in writing form is much different than speaking to companies, doing workshops. It's such a nicely crafted way but also to like, you know, let your creativity run wild. There are so many possibilities.

Rebekah Borucki: Hey friend. We are coming straight back to *The Book Stoop* after a quick break.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, to sink inwards and to really use that, the moment of inspiration, which leads me into another question. I have so many. So, inspiration, where and when do you feel the most inspired?

Rebekah Bruesehoff: That's a really good question actually. I feel the most inspired when I'm with people like me, whether that's communities of transgender kids who are just being themselves and thriving or this is like a thing that I learned through the Marvel Hero Project but communities of other advocates because when I talk to my friends and I'm like, "Oh, I had this call later," they're like, "What? We don't have that."

But to be able to connect with people on like a different level of being able to show that, you know, I am doing work in the world, and I do have like this sort of abnormal life but it's still important to me and I don't want to stop it because it's not typical. But yeah, to be able to be supported and affirmed in my own community is amazing and it does inspire me.

Amanda Lytle: OK. Now I want to come back to the community when it comes to athletics and being an athlete. So, tell me about that and even about *Play It Out*.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah. So, I've been playing field hockey for five years now. Yeah, I think so. Our season just ended but I've been playing since fourth grade. I think I started playing field hockey because a bunch of the other sports had already started. Like soccer, they've been playing since they were like three or two. But field hockey started in fourth grade. There was a clinic. You got to put a stick in your hand for the first time and it was a really easy thing for me to jump in with the rest of my community.

I think – I hadn't really found a sport that I loved. But when I found field hockey, I was growing and learning with my peers and I also – field hockey people are the nicest people you've ever like met. They are amazing aspects of your school community but they're also great friends. But off of that, *Play It Out* is a campaign run by GenderCool. But it like – it's to showcase transgender kids in sports and just so that they do this for fun.

Like it's just something that they do. But we really focus on what kids get out of sports. You know, like the community. But what else do you learn? To fall down and get back up. You learn to not be the best on a team. You're learning so many things that you bring to the rest of your life and that has been really cool to I think dive deeper in my own imagination but also to be able to talk about because I've heard so many different aspects and in doing this with some of my champion friends, we've bounced ideas off of each other and we've made a different, you know, idea what being an athlete is than we would have had before because when you really think about it, there's a whole difference between being an athlete and playing sports.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. Can you speak to that?

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah. So, playing sports is – I think it has a fun connotation to it. I think it's just something that you love to do. You're having fun. You're playing. You're getting a community out of it and playing sports doesn't mean that you're less of a team player. It doesn't mean that you're less of like, you know, part of your sport. But being an athlete means taking what you learned from playing your sport, from being part of that community and that team and bringing it to the rest of your life, bringing it to your school life, bringing it to whatever else you want to join in school.

That sort of stuff and, you know, being an athlete means putting time and effort into this that because it – you know it is something that you love and it's just something that you strive to get better at as well. When I talk about it, I say that I am somewhere in the middle. I think I am an athlete, but I also do play sports in a way, which I mean obviously is in the definition of athlete. But you really do have kind of this both-and mindset of it.

Amanda Lytle: That was really well-shared. Thank you for that.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: OK. Now I want to jump into Mighty Rebekah and Marvel.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah. So, Marvel Hero Project is a docuseries on Disney Plus that showcases 20 kids doing amazing things in their communities. What's really important about this to realize is that they're doing different things. None of them is the same. None of them are advocating for something that's exactly the same. They all have really different backgrounds and different purposes and what this does is it like shines a light on kids doing amazing things and it empowers the next generation of kids while also showing adults that kids do have a voice.

Just because they're younger doesn't mean that they are less impactful or don't have as big of ideas, if not bigger. But I was showcased in one of the episodes as the Mighty Rebekah and what happened in each of the episodes is at the end, the advocate, the kid is made into a Marvel superhero.

They get their own comic. They get a jacket and you also like kind of get admitted into this community that is the rest of Marvel Hero Project. That was really cool and what I got out of that in regard to my advocacy purpose and journey was a new realization for representation in media. Like for kids to see themselves, a trans kid in huge companies like Marvel, it was amazing because they were able to know they're not alone and to be able to know you're not alone is one of the most important things that anyone can feel in general.

Amanda Lytle: That is so true, and I've always said this too even growing up is just like if you don't see it, how do you know that you can beat it?

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah. And when you're not seen, when you don't feel yourself being represented in your places in the media, then you think you're like – you think you're weird. You think you're out of the ordinary. But you realize you're not. There are people just like you and they are out there for you to talk to and they're doing the work that needs to be done.

Amanda Lytle: Big time.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: You have so many projects which are just incredible. And you know what I love so much? I'm just starting to connect to this is they are all from the heart space and they are all projected outwards to and for the greater good.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Was that something that has just always been to your core, that you've always been heart-forward?

Rebekah Bruesehoff: I think so. As I've done more of this work, I think back obviously. I'm not that old but I think back to when I was a kid. Maybe say like five or six. I've always loved learning about problems in the world and wanting to make the change. I've always had that sort

of spark in me to make a difference and make my voice heard, which is – I think it’s amazing for me to be able to have that and to have had access to like places to do that.

But when I transitioned, it gave me another like area. I was like – I realized that people like me aren’t always supported in their communities, and I was like, “Why? That doesn’t make sense. Could we like change this?” And I knew that that was the work that I had to do. This was what I needed to do and since it directly affected me, I was the best voice for this, I don’t know, issue because there aren’t that many kids advocating.

I mean now there are more. But when I started, there weren’t as many kids making their voice heard because they didn’t know it could happen, which is why I do this work so that kids know that they should be empowered in their communities.

Amanda Lytle: Yes. Actually, that is such a great segue into Faith, Hope and Love because I recognize too that when you are being your most authentic self, safety is so important. Compassion is so important. But back to the safety thing is that perhaps there are communities that aren’t as welcoming for people to come out and be their most authentic self and to explore gender identity. So, can you speak to what Faith, Hope and Love is and about this project as well?

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah. So, my dad – some context. My dad is a Lutheran pastor. So, faith has always been a big part of my life. I think when I transitioned educating, the church was a different journey for us because, you know, it was a bunch of people, and they all had a different way of taking in this information and learning about it and also learning how to empower kids like me.

But Faith, Hope and Love was started by my mother, and we do a lot of work about faith and for faith because we know that faith communities are doing some of the most damage to the LGBTQ community. You know, speaking out against LGBTQ youth, being themselves in church and we know that that’s not true. They use the words of like the bible against transgender and non-binary kids, which we know is not OK and that like it’s false.

We need to speak out against that so that we can sort of change this narrative because there aren’t that many of them. They are just the loudest. There are more supporters than there are these haters I guess. But when we are also loud, it’s able to balance that sort of thing because right now even talking to some of my peers, they’re like, “Oh, church. That must be like not safe.” But like no, it’s a place where you can be yourself and it’s such a great community once you get to be a part of it and you know that you are accepted. Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: I love that it’s also a conversation that is being had way more often than it ever has been now and again tomorrow it will be even more, you know, common to be having these conversations and hopefully continues to grow and move that way.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah, and that has been really interesting too. Kind of look at as I’ve gone through this sort of journey in advocating because to see these conversations pop up and to

see more people speaking out has been – I think it’s the other thing that has inspired me. It gives me hope for the future. It gives me hope for how we can change and the world that we want to live in.

Amanda Lytle: I love this conversation. OK. A lot of this work, you are using so much of your heart and so much of your energy and in order to show up as everything you are, you have to rest. You have to look after yourself. So, what does self-care, rest and reset look like for you?

Rebekah Bruesehoff: It looks like a lot of things. I think – I find a bunch of things to do. But specifically in this sort of stress, I find places where I can just hang out with my friends. I can take life away from being an advocate, a public figure at that point. So, I could just be a teenager because I am one and I go to school and like it’s such a different life. But I think I also – I love to get out in the woods. It’s such a place where I can think my own thoughts and kind of recenter myself.

Along with meditation, I love doing that sort of stuff, internalizing sort of stuff, and also reading. I think it gives me time to go into a different mindset, going to a different world at some point and it’s also something I’m really passionate about.

So, it’s not hard for me to do. It’s just something that I love to sit on my bed. I love to read. I just like have fun while doing it. So, it’s not counterproductive at that point.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. OK. I am super interested in knowing what moving forward, what is something that would just – I guess maybe where is an area that you’re looking to expand into, whether projects within your community, as a person.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yeah, definitely. I’m looking forward to doing more work in the workforce. I think to be able to learn about that and in doing the mentorship, I’ve learned so much and I’ve also realized that school doesn’t teach you all the things that you need to do a job, to work in general. You know, to lead a group of people. So, to learn more about that, but I think as things get more in person on that stuff, I want to focus on having fun. I think making space for me to just have joy and laugh. Obviously I can’t stop laughing. It just is something I do. But to be able to like, you know, make space for that is going to be really important for me.

Amanda Lytle: Rebekah, I have absolutely adored this conversation. Thank you so much for your time. I have one thing to ask you. Very last one. A shoutout. If you could give a shoutout to an account, a person, organization, a disruptor, an activist, or a change agent, who would you like to give a shoutout for?

Rebekah Bruesehoff: A hundred percent. Oh, there are so many. Honestly, I think outside of this advocacy world and doing the work. During the summer I go to a camp. It’s called Stomping Ground. Stomping Ground is a really great place. It’s an empowering and safe community I would say for all people including LGBTQ plus people because they’re actively awesome. They’re doing the work that needs to be done and they’re showing their support. They’re making their voice heard in a different way than other places have.

But it's also just a place where I can go for two weeks per se and just be myself, be around the people that I love, hang out with people I've seen before or maybe even make new friends. But it's kind of a break, I think. I usually go after pride month which is a really busy month for me.

So, like that's a really good break for me. But they also do this whole thing with radical empathy, which is a really great topic and thing to think about because being empathetic is so important and integral in our life and they do the work to teach kids what that is and how we can be empathetic and like one of the ways they do this is how they solve problems in camp. They do a circle thing. So first of all, you would talk to the person that you're directly like in conflict with but then you would move out. You would move to a counselor and the person. You would move to a staff person and the person. You would go to the director and the person.

So, you're getting this different way, but they ask how you can see yourselves in their shoes. So, you're actually going to be solving the problem and it's not just going to be like, oh, we're talking about our feelings and then like what you've learned goes away. No. It's this actively important thing that they're doing, which is really cool and interesting and unique.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, totally is. The radical empathy, like that in itself is just the most beautiful thing to say and to feel. Radical acceptance, radical compassion. Like just radical, radical all the things. I love this.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: And they also – it's like kids make the rules. Kids run the place. There's so much space for creativity and for kids to just be themselves and however they express that is totally supported.

Amanda Lytle: Which is so beautiful.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Uh-huh.

Amanda Lytle: Rebekah, thank you so much for being a guest on *The Book Stoop*. This has been so beautiful.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Yes, thank you! This is so fun.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. You will have to come back, and I can't wait to hear about how all of these projects continue evolving. So definitely stay in touch.

Rebekah Bruesehoff: Definitely. Thank you.

Amanda Lytle: Thank you so much for being with us. We hope you loved the conversation, and we will be back again soon. Please be sure to follow us on your podcast app and leave a rating where you're able to do so. Writing a written review helps reach more listeners too. Check out all of the show notes for the links and share *The Book Stoop* with your friends. Talk soon.

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