

Courage My Friends Podcast Series X – Episode 8
Diana Chan McNally: Bringing Community Work to Toronto’s City Council

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ANNOUNCER: You’re listening to *Needs No Introduction*.

Needs No Introduction is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

RESH: With the upcoming October 26th municipal election, what are the top-most issues for Torontonians? What does the ongoing provincial overreach of the Ford government mean for local democracy? In her run to become city councillor for Toronto’s Parkdale-High Park, how does Diana Chan McNally envision a city of strength, joy and solidarity? And how will she bring community work to city council?

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: Welcome back to this podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute at George Brown College.

In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

TOMMY (Actor): Courage my friends, 'tis not too late to build a better world

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the Courage My Friends Podcast.

RESH: Welcome to Episode Eight, *Toronto Candidate Diana Chan McNally: Bringing Community Work to City Council*

I’m your host Resh Budhu.

Episode eight spotlights community worker, homelessness advocate, and candidate for Toronto City Council, Diana Chan McNally. We discuss her run to become City Councillor for Toronto’s Parkdale-High Park, top-of-mind issues for the Ward and city, provincial encroachment on municipal government and her vision of bringing community work to municipal politics.

Diana, welcome. Thanks for joining us, and congratulations on the official launch of your run to become City Councillor for Toronto's Parkdale-High Park in the October 26th municipal elections.

DIANA: Yes. Thank you. This is for me, just terrifying, but also just a joy to be doing.

So thank you, and thank you for having me on the show.

RESH: Well, before we get into all of that and into city politics, tell us about yourself.

DIANA: Gosh, I have the most bizarre timeline in history. I feel like every time as part of a campaign I'll post something about something I did, someone says, "How have you done so much in your life?"

And so, you know, if I'm trying to give a little bit of my history, it makes zero sense at all. And you know a little bit about this.

RESH: A little bit, yeah.

DIANA: So, grew up in Etobicoke, North Etobicoke in Ford country, if you can believe that. So I've had to deal with these guys my entire life. I remember them as a kid. And I hope to live part of my life one day without any of the Fords, but that's yet to be seen.

Fairly normal upbringing, but at the same time, when I was a teenager later on, I ended up homeless for a period of time, which has influenced a lot of how I think about the work that I currently do, which is with homeless people.

DIANA: In the interim in between those things, I was a teacher and also a DJ. I still am a DJ. So I actually studied art history, and have a Master's of Museum Studies, which the only time I ever really applied this was as a community worker, if you can believe that.

So, I like those things. I still am not sad that I studied them. I still think about them all the time, but at the same time-

RESH: Well-rounded. It's a well-rounded education.

DIANA: Sure. Worked in film. Someone was laughing. They were like, "When were you a union president?" I was, as well as a steward. So I have this really odd history of just jumping all over the place.

Worked in comics for a while. Was an illustrator, so a lot of my background is actually in the arts.

But when I was a teacher, and I was teaching at Centennial College and what is now TMU, I could not do that job at a certain point anymore. Or I saw rather that it was really exploitative of students, and I found that instead of actually kind of performing the job that I was hired to do, I was a coordinator and an instructor at the time, I was a case manager.

'Cause a lot of my students were coming from places like Venezuela - and this is before the current conflict - Ukraine, right before the war. And it was pretty obvious that people were coming for safety, not for education first, but were unable to actually gain refugee status.

So a lot of it was working with older students who had more knowledge than I did about the subject. Trying to find them employment. Supporting them to find housing that they could afford. And I realized that I actually really like doing that. It's important work. So I ended up going to college, much to the chagrin of my mother.

Shout out to the Asian moms who will tell you that you should get the PhD, and I did not. I went to college, and it's definitely the best decision I ever made.

Ended up wanting to work with youth in the arts, and then ended up working in homelessness because really, if we raise the platform for those who have the least, we raise it for everybody.

So that was kind of the onus behind it. But as someone with experience of homelessness myself, I was always afraid to do that because I didn't want my own experiences to colour how I worked with people. But it just makes all of the sense. So I can speak about it from very different angles, and have been doing it ever since.

And for some reason now I'm just like a very visible advocate, which is not what I had planned. I really thought I would be bad at that aspect of it, 'cause I'm quite academic in my background and thought, "Oh, there's no way I could do this. I'll be terrible at it." And now it's literally all I do. So that's kind of my history in a nutshell.

RESH: Well, we first met, years ago in the Community Worker Program at Toronto's George Brown then College, now Polytechnic.

DIANA: Yes.

RESH: So you're a graduate, you taught in that program as well, so you're a former faculty. And you just spoke at the 50th anniversary celebration last month of the Community Worker Program.

And, you know, in the spirit of celebrating, Community Worker, can you share some of the program's significance for you?

DIANA: It is absolutely the best education I've ever had.

And as I said, you know, I went to UofT twice. I started a second Master's, which I never finished, in education.

I also went to McGill, Concordia. These are, you know, universities of note, many of them.

So I found something that helped me to kind of unlearn. And that's what I really wanted out of the program. I think, you know, a lot of people go because they're looking for work, and that's absolutely valid. For me, it wasn't that at all.

I wanted to restructure how I think about things, because what I saw was injustice in supporting my students who couldn't find employment, who were refugees or should have been refugees. I wanted to know how to, again, kind of navigate these systems better and unlearn a lot of what I had already internalized about what the system is and how it's supposed to function.

So it really was more of a personal growth kind of education for me, and I think subsequently I've met lots of graduates over the years where they're not necessarily even working in their fields, but what you learn is so applicable to everything.

If you're in any kind of human services work or anything that has to do with systems-level work, and frankly, almost everything does. It does, 'cause everything is political. You can find a way to apply the education that you had in the Community Worker Program to that work. So it was massively important for me to be a better person. And I think that's what I'm most proud of coming out of the program, was being able to unlearn and relearn how to think about structural injustice.

So massively important, and I would recommend it to anybody, no matter what you wanna do in your life. I think it's such an important education for me, and I think for other people as well in just being better-

Yeah ...

being a better person.

RESH: And it's a pretty broad field. And, and community work-

DIANA: Yeah

RESH: Is very core, obviously. to who you are. As a community worker, you're the founder and coordinator of the Ontario Coalition for the Rights of Homeless People. You've worked with anti-poverty and rights organizations, Maytree and The Shift. You have sat on the Housing Rights Advisory Committee for the City of Toronto. You've been an unapologetic advocate for housing security and the rights of homeless populations. Really at all levels of government you're quite a familiar presence, right? You've developed quite a following there for your activism. What are some of your most significant wins?

DIANA: Well, I'm happy to say that there have been some, and honestly, very, very hard-fought. I think.. Well, the first win that I ever really had was actually going against Mayor John Tory at the time, who was notorious in his positioning on encampments and homelessness. Uh, was not an easy person to work with by any stretch of the imagination. And frankly, there were times when in the media, we would have these, not conversations with each other directly, but through the hosts where we would lambast each other back and forth. So I was not his favorite person for lots of different reasons. And I wasn't welcome into City Hall at that time.

But I worked in drop-in centers for years since I graduated from the program. The only job I've had in community work is as a drop-in worker, and I love it. I will defend drop-in centers forever because they kind of are the intersection of all of the issues and a space where people, no matter what they're going through, if they're unhoused or precariously housed, they can go and access resources.

We kind of catch everybody. So they're so vitally important, but they're also dramatically underfunded compared to every other service. Even shelters are so much better funded. At the time, we had 59 drop-in centers and \$7 million to fund all of them. Some received no funding at all.

So considering we were the most used homelessness service in the city by far, that kind of funding is extremely limited. So we're kind of very good at cobbling things together from nothing. I've gotten very good at that, and actually that's been really important as an activist as well. How do you cobble together a campaign when you have \$0? I've done it many times.

But in the context of the drop-ins, women and femmes who were on their period, who were menstruating, who were suffering the indignity of just being covered in their own blood. This is a regular thing that we'd see in the drop-in centers. Folks were experiencing incontinence and not able to do anything about it.

These are just basic health and dignity issues for people.

So I kind of cobbled together a little team of people. A couple of them were my former students, and during the budget period, we deputed on needing to address this issue. And so I had gone to all the drop-in centers and asked them for what they needed in a budget to actually supply menstrual products, incontinence products for free for everyone who required them.

So, I had this very, very detailed budget, like line by line for 59 drop-in centers and submitted that as part of my deputation.

And at the time, Mayor Tory was kind of edging toward his Strong Mayor phase, right before he left office in a scandal, where there was \$8 million that councilors got to allocate. That's it. He controlled the rest of the budget, and he gave everyone else \$8 million to go into what they saw fit, which is, this is nothing. This is nothing. Our budget is billions of dollars. The police alone are over a billion dollars, and you have \$8 million for everything else? It was ludicrous.

But we were one of the things that actually got funded. The ask was pretty small. It was under \$200,000.

What I've learned as an advocate - and this is what a lot of people get wrong - is how you advocate for things isn't just using statistics. It's good to use data, obviously, because it's correct, and we want what we're talking about to be evidence-based.

A lot of people kind of default to the moral demands. "This is wrong. This is undignified. This is unethical."

Politicians aren't generally moved by that. You have to build leverage. And so in the case of what I was advocating for, the leverage was making him look good.

Usually I'm trying to make it just, you know, they can't say no to something 'cause it'll damage their reputation so much. In this case, it would help his reputation. I'm fine with that, if it gets us the resources that we need. So we actually won that, and that was the first time I ever won anything.

And subsequently in every budget, I've won something in the City of Toronto.

I think the biggest, biggest win was probably funding for refugees.

In 2023 we saw outside of 129 Peter Street in downtown Toronto, there were hundreds of refugees, almost exclusively from Africa, places like Uganda and Kenya, because there are laws now that criminalize people who are queer. So people were coming not just as Africans, people who often didn't have resources, but also as people who are queer.

So there were these intersections that were very clearly stigmatized and people were being discriminated against in multiple ways, and they were just out on the sidewalk.

At the time, you know, Mayor Tory had kinda moved on. Jennifer McKelvie stepped in and was Interim Mayor before Olivia was actually elected. And the federal government just constantly were sniping at each other, being like, "It's your responsibility. It's your responsibility." It's a federal responsibility. It's refugees.

RESH: Yeah.

DIANA: And that's very clear. But the City of Toronto had also cut off all resources to people, so they didn't have water, bathroom access. What I was seeing, again, just people covered in blood, trench foot, like this is World War I.

And they were telling me things like, it, it was the summertime, but for them it's very cold. They're not clothed adequately. They're told they can't cover their faces 'cause it's security risks, so they're lying on the sidewalk while rain is pelting directly on their face. They're getting very sick. They don't have food.

You know, I saw this and myself and my colleague Lorraine Lam, who's probably also the other visible homelessness advocate, decided we were gonna raise money for water. And at the time, I think we were like, "We want \$3,000?" I don't know. We just came up with some random number. We thought that sounds adequate based on what we know of distributing water. But we didn't know how many people we would be supporting because people are coming every single day. And it ended up

turning into \$81,000 in my bank account. Oh. That's like, I'm terrified now. I'm gonna get audited so badly.

But most of that we donated to Black-serving and Black-led organizations who were working with refugees. So the African Center for Refugees which serves queer African refugees specifically. We gave them I think \$13,500. Another \$13,500 for the Rwandan Healing Center, which was directly across the street, coordinating a lot of the efforts to support people. And Dominion Church, which was sheltering people in North York, gave \$20,000 to them and bought a whole bunch of supplies that they needed to take care of people.

The rest of the money went toward frontline aid. We would just take lists of what people needed, and we would just buy them. We got lots of gift cards so people could purchase whatever they needed themselves. But if they needed like boots, we would go get them for them.

So we did a lot of that kind of aid, but at the same time, we're lobbying the federal government to do something. And we were locked in this war where they were calling us liars, saying, you know, "This is not a problem. There's no refugees in the shelter system. What are you talking about?"

So I was fighting Adam Vaughan, a former Liberal MP, quite a bit, and he was calling me, like, a liar, didn't know what I was talking about. James Maloney, other MPs were kind of suggesting that this is all just fake news kind of thing.

But the leverage I had in this case was I'm a frontline worker. I was there directly. And I was constantly speaking on what I was seeing. And other people who were actually experiencing it, I was connecting them with the CBC. They would be talking about it.

So our leverage was the reality of what was actually going on there. But it took nine months to get the federal government to actually give money to support these people.

\$143 million, though. \$143 million we won, and that is still continuing. There's still aid being delivered. And I think that, to me, is by far the most significant win that we've been able to achieve so far. But good God, it should not have taken all of that.

RESH: It should not have taken so long, but that is a huge win, and I do remember that time when we were seeing people out on Charles Street.

And there was a very different approach also between different groups of refugees who were coming in at that time. Yeah. So you talked a little bit about this already, but, there was a price to be paid because, again, you refused to toe the line.

DIANA: Yeah. You know, and this isn't just true for me, but my friend Lorraine, we're both very visible, very active, you know telling the truth about what's going on. And

both of us really struggle to find employment. That is the consequence of speaking truth to power.

I'm okay with it, because for me, I probably could be making more money, but I'm more concerned about doing good work. That's what I wanna be doing.

I need to pay my rent, and sometimes that is a struggle.

I did not make money the entire time I was advocating for refugees, except I would DJ here and there, and that was the only money I was making.

When you are visible as an advocate, a lot of the nonprofit sector are afraid of you. They like what you're doing. Slide into the DMs and say, you know, "This is great work that you're doing, and thank you for that". Like, I appreciate that.

But they're terrified that if you're associated with their organization, they'll lose funding. And this is a holdover from Stephen Harper years, where literally part of what was changed, but it's changed back subsequently, is that if you spent more than 10% of your budget on, you know, advocacy... what does that mean even? Like, define the activities associated with that. You could face an audit and potentially be defunded.

So I think since that time, there's been a real cooling from certainly my sector and other sectors. I've seen this as well. And actually speaking about what's going on and how underfunded they are and how they can't support the populations that they are mandated to serve.

I always kind of gently say, "Is your funding enough to do what you need?"

At this point, for many, it's so little that I don't think it's worth defending at this point because it's not even supporting your populations. That's your job. That's what we're trying to do, is make sure whoever we're there to serve get the support that they need.

And if it's just not doing that because the funding is also for some program that people don't even access, it's not relevant to them, then I have to question, you know, what are we doing? But I am seeing it start to shift, which is great.

So, you know, there's less fear around someone like me, which is, which is nice. And so Maytree in particular... I think I posted on LinkedIn something absolutely I should not have posted, just being like, "I wish someone would just pay me, you know, to do my wild special projects." And then they're like, "What if we did?"

RESH: Oh.

DIANA: And I was like, "What?" That, that was... I was just frustrated. But, you know, they support me to actually do a lot of advocacy, and so I've campaigned against Doug Ford. I've been supported to do that.

I'm a fellow, so it's arm's length to Maytree, but they recognize that what I'm talking about is advancing people's fundamental human right especially around the right to housing. So they support me to do that work, which is honestly just amazing.

I wish there were more, more funders like that who take those kinds of risks and understand, like, on-the-ground activism and advocacy is vitally important to moving the needle.

RESH: Yeah. Say it louder for those in the back. That's a need right across so many sectors, especially with the federal austerity that's coming down the line as well.

So you have deputed many times at City Council. Now you're running for sort of the other side of the table. You're campaigning to become the next City Councilor for Toronto's Ward 4, Parkdale-High Park. What motivated your decision to run for City Council?

DIANA: That's always a good question these days.

When we kind of found out that Gord was going to be retiring, so Gord Perks is the current councilor. He's been there for two decades now. I work with Gord on the Housing Rights Advisory Committee, and-

RESH: Very progressive. Very

DIANA: progressive. Very

RESH: progressive. Yeah.

DIANA: And has had a very specific and important role on council, I think, for the duration of his tenure there.

So he's very much the guy who knows all of council procedure, which is vitally important, knows how to use that, and also is very ethical. He does not swing back and forth on things. He has a very clear ethical framework from which he makes his decisions and puts forward policy. And I think I'm quite similar in that regard.

That there is a clear kind of ethical voice that I have and for me it's a human rights lens. All decision-making, the way that I think about everything is always through the framework of human rights.

People think it's very pie in the sky, but it's actually an important guiding framework for how you yourself, kind of go toward issues and advocate, and how you support

people. So, you know, for me, it's been vitally important in how I think and then how I act.

But people very much misunderstand human rights and what they are. Even kind of don't understand the difference between constitutional rights in the US and Canada, and you're like, "Oh my goodness. Okay. Well, that's a problem."

But all to say that I think I can also bring that kind of strong progressive ethical voice into the council chamber from the perspective of somebody who is a renter, who is not high income, who takes public transit, who has been working with people. Not working to support only, but working with them, alongside them, to bring their issues to the forefront politically.

And so I think I'm primed to do that kind of work as a politician. And I know it's a huge change. I cannot be an advocate anymore in the same way. I'm very fundamentally aware of that, but I've also been a liaison in many ways between folks on the ground and political actors now for a long time. So I have good relationships, even with people who I don't agree with. Most of the time, I can still find ways to work with them, and this is the thing about being a community worker, you should be able to work with everybody.

RESH: Yes.

DIANA: That's the idea. So I've been very good at liaising between people in power, people on the ground, and bringing forward issues with solutions that can actually be implemented. So I think it's an extension of that kind of work.

I see it as natural. I think other people think like, "Wow, we did not see that coming at all." And it's like, that's fair. I wouldn't run for any other role. That's the thing.

Council is very specific. I'm like, "I like this job." I like the kind of freedom and chaos of City Hall. But you would not see me as an MPP or an MP or mayor or anything like that.

I just wouldn't want to. I think they're all quite distinct, and I don't think the political farming system, I don't actually agree with that. I think some people are better for certain roles. , You know, trustee is very specific, and you often see trustees jump ship to another role. It's different. It's very different. So I like council specifically.

RESH: Well, say more about that. The power and the draw of municipal politics specifically. Because for, so many of us, this is really our first point of contact with government.

DIANA: It is probably the hardest of all the jobs. The most involved day to day, and it's also the most tangible. Because it's the real-life everyday things in your community, in your municipality, your city, your ward, that the Councilor actually

attends to. You are generally the first point of contact because I think in terms of levels of government, it's also the most transparent.

It's the most accessible. It's not accessible by any stretch of the imagination, but it's more accessible. Which also is to say that the work on the ground, that's casework. I've been a caseworker for so long and I find that actually quite appealing. I quite like doing that work. So even if it's around stuff like tree-trimming, it's like, "Okay, well, here's a small, tangible thing that we can do for you, very everyday that will improve your life, like in a very small way, but real way," right?

Mm-hmm. So I like how tangible it is.

And this is part of why I'm running too, I also very much do not appreciate the provincial encroachment on municipalities. I have a history of fighting Ford. I have won resources from Ford, including \$54 million for rents for people on the streets. Managed to win that from his government And I am ready to just let it rip against this guy because his constant encroachment on our autonomy municipally, not just here, across the entire province. Strong Mayor powers. He's appointing regional councils instead of having them elected. The trustees, cutting them and then putting them under supervision.

All of this is about taking away local democracy. It makes me so angry that I want to fight back as well and defend the city against what he's doing.

RESH: The pressure on our municipal government, of course, was doubled in 2018 when the Ford government cut down city council by almost half, from 47 to now 25 seats, right? How would you actually stand up to, or perhaps even work with other levels of government, not just the PCs, but the federal government. Yeah. But start with the province.

DIANA: Yeah, I think that the fact that we've cut council in half effectively has actually made the job of Councilor impossible. You have 110,000 constituents. The worst democratic representation in the world municipally is the City of Toronto.

RESH: Really?

DIANA: Yes.

RESH: Wow.

DIANA: Yes. So, you know, you think about it, and you have to start making choices because it's not possible to represent all those people and all those interests across a pretty wide geography a lot of the time, and Parkdale-High Park is large. It's quite large, and actually has a lot of economic disparity as well.

You do have to make choices, I think, about how you're gonna prioritize what's needed. Of course I don't decide that now, that comes up issue by issue and what

we hear from constituents. But I do think it's impossible to actually enact strong local governance, because of that slashing.

So that's not going to change, unfortunately. So it will be about thinking how to prioritize issues, where we wanna allocate our time, what are the most pressing things in the ward, and what are the most pressing things that are coming out of this government, the provincial government.

Right now, Billy Bishop, the airport expansion is top of mind for everybody.

And you know, it's so funny 'cause again, Etobicoke North, that's where I grew up. It's not where Doug Ford lives, but it is his riding. He lives in Etobicoke Centre, what a surprise. Not too far south, but he does not actually live in the riding, and he doesn't live anywhere near the airport

The airport is loud, man! It's really loud! It's an airport. What the heck?

And you think about our waterfront and overtaking Toronto Islands. He was talking about potentially building an artificial island just off the shore, essentially, of Parkdale-High Park. All of these things will have profound environmental impacts, social impacts, and economic impacts as well, because we're essentially taking away the waterfront not for, you know, the recreation enjoyment that it currently provides, the tourism, et cetera, but rather just for expanding jets.

And in this case, we see that the MPs are staying mum about it. I have a sense that they're probably working with the province and think this is a good idea. And I cannot figure out why except that they just wanna walk down to the airport and go to Ottawa. I have no idea. I don't know why you would support this. There's no viable business case at all.

Again, the environmental impacts, because we're talking about enacting Bill-5. And actually the federal government has very similar legislation. Last year we saw Bill-5 passed. Right now, Doug Ford has enacted it over Ontario Place. Also talking about it in terms of the Billy Bishop expansion.

RESH: Say a bit more for those who don't know Bill-5.

DIANA: Yes. So Bill 5 basically creates lawless bubble zones, like boundary areas where there are no applicable laws, which doesn't even make sense because even if you're trying to build something, there are building standards you need to adhere to at a, like a base level.

So how do you have this lawless zone? What standards do you follow if there are no applicable laws? So this impacts environmental assessments. We're throwing that out at all levels of government anyway. Especially federally and provincially, it's just, "What environment? Climate change isn't real," essentially.

We're disposing of this entirely, putting species at risk. It's devastating as Canada. Our wildlife is so important, our environment. But I guess it's seen as getting in the way of economic growth or something ridiculous like this.

So environmental laws do not apply. Labour laws don't apply.

And even when governments say, "Oh, don't worry about that," well, you just enacted a zone with no laws. Of course I'm gonna worry about this. There could be horrible labour infractions happening. So it's nuts that they can just kind of say, "Hmm, we're gonna take land away from the municipality, and we're gonna just create these pieces of infrastructure that have no business case, that seem completely unviable, and we're gonna just, like, suspend all laws in creating them."

So Bill-5 is a big one for me. Because this is just egregious that this has even been enacted at all. How can you create space with no law? I imagine there will be legal challenges.

A lot of the legislation that we're seeing coming out of the province, there are substantial legal challenges being mounted. I've been involved in some of them.

There's currently an injunction and a Charter challenge around removing bike lanes. This is a big one in the city of Toronto, where we don't even have control over our own roads, which is very clearly a municipal issue.

In my ward, Parkside Drive, is a big one because we've seen a number of deaths there. There was a speeding camera that was cut down, I think five or six times, and I believe is kind of the onus behind Doug Ford saying, "We don't need speed cameras." You can just put a whatever, speed bump there. It's like, no, because emergency vehicles... you can't do that. That's not viable. And in fact, bike lanes often serve emergency vehicles as well to circumvent traffic, right?

These are all different pieces that the provincial government has been kind of wresting away from the municipality's control and there will be more.

DIANA: There's zoning changes as well. They've enacted zoning laws around transit hubs, so TTC stations, some of the new GO stations, Ontario Line, where developers can build pretty much whatever they want and have zero affordable housing targets. That's been suspended.

He's trying to argue that, "if we have affordable housing targets, that means developers won't build anything." It's like, no, we just force them to do that.

RESH: And this is, the leading economic anxiety-

DIANA: Yeah

RESH: that is facing Torontonians. Housing insecurity, unaffordability. It just basically the rising cost of living. Yeah. We're looking at these as crises. They are, but perhaps not for the reasons that we think. So how do you understand the housing and affordability crises, and what municipal approaches are you championing in your campaign?

DIANA: Yeah. I think, you know, people often argue it's strictly a supply problem. It's not strictly a supply problem. We're talking about what kind of housing is being built and for whom.

You know, the condo market is in bust mode right now to the point where we have the federal and provincial governments offering this bailout, this HST rebate.

They are also going to pay for development charges that municipalities levy for new developments. And there's a lot of different thoughts about whether this is good or bad. I support the charges, because it's a municipal revenue tool. And if you just take that away, which Doug Ford is suggesting, he's gonna pay for the development charges, but then force municipalities to also reduce them, which means less money for municipalities, right?

So I take strong issue with that. Economically for municipalities, that's gonna take away a lot of money that they need to run basic services.

And what we also see is that the province has downloaded a substantial amount of services, often through negligence, onto municipalities. Our homelessness budget skyrockets all the time.

The City of Toronto is back in the business of public housing. They're building affordable and public housing. These are not technically their purviews. And we pay for this through property taxes, yes, other taxes as well, but primarily through property taxes.

It's so fascinating to me because there's always this argument that, "Oh, municipalities, the property taxes are too high. They're just taking all our money. We don't see anything." Yeah, you know why that is? It's because the province is not funding the programs that you already pay them taxes for. So you actually end up paying taxes twice for programs that are worse, delivered by the municipality who doesn't have as many resources as the province.

So, that's the kind of situation that we're in right now, and Ford loves it because everyone gets mad at the mayors. They get mad at the councils. And not mad at him when they should be, right?

It's interesting to me, especially on housing, how there's so much emotion and ire, toward homeless people in this moment. And I'm a real target for this right now. I've had, like, Canada Proud, you know, come out to my campaign launch. I talk about

homelessness. I talk about the right to housing. And it is a very sticky subject with a lot of people.

I think there's this idea that, "Oh, why should we give people free housing?"

One, that's not what the right to housing means. And two, you get healthcare. What is the fundamental difference? Housing is healthcare. I thought we learned that from the pandemic. Evidently, we did not. There is so much just vitriol against the idea of people not earning the home by paying the maximum amount, whether that's through rent or mortgages.

We talk about housing as well. I feel like the actor we never talk about in the room are the investors and the banks-

RESH: Yeah.

DIANA: and their role in financializing housing as well, so.

It is really impossible at this moment to, I think, enact the kind of housing scheme we need to build truly affordable housing for people who need it.

The housing that's generally being built, it's not accessible for the people who need it the most, people that we call in-core housing need. So it seems to me that we're just gonna continue along this path until, I don't know when it gets too bad that someone's gonna actually rethink

RESH: However, there is room for movement. You do have a vision for what this should be. Because we do know that affordable housing is really needed. Wait lists are now at least ten years. So as a city councilor, how would you be acting on this issue?

DIANA: I mean, I, I support the public builder model. I think we should be doing more of this, but I also know that it's a very, very small scale for the number of people who are in core housing need and who are on the social housing wait lists.

There's a program that I quite like, called the Multi-Unit Residential Acquisition Program, MURA, which is actually something that Gord Perks has been a major champion of that I would like to see continue. Those investments should continue, and I would hope expand. And what it allows is for nonprofits, land trusts, to work in partnership with the city to purchase buildings. Mostly at this point it's been residential, and keep the rents affordable in perpetuity for people.

So it's a way of just kind of very quickly enacting deeply affordable housing for people.

It's a small-scale program as it stands. There's been about a \$100 million that's been allocated over the last two years, which is great. That actually is a huge jump from before. I think it was \$10 million or something fairly modest.

So it's good that we have these investments, but I would like to see substantially more of this.

And I also just have a sense like it's not just residential structures that we need to protect, it's also commercial structures. You know, community assets, community benefits. What kind of spaces, third spaces do we also need to protect and preserve for our communities that also keep them affordable because people can access services, resources, whatever?

And that doesn't seem to be totally a part of the conversation in this moment, so I'm interested in exploring further what we can do.

RESH: And third spaces are really, again, those spaces where people can come together, where you can have the building of, you know, community capital, social capital, correct?

DIANA: Yes, exactly. Exactly. You know, I grew up in the city of Toronto. I feel like accessing third spaces is so much more limited than it used to be.

I think about when I was a teenager, and I would go to the corner of Queen and Bathurst, where I later worked in a drop-in center, and we would go to the Big Bop, and I would play in crappy bands and see my friends' crappy bands, and that was just, like, a fun thing to do that cost zero dollars.

I actually have no idea how they sustained that business model, but they did. And it was just, it was great to have stuff like that. And it's so interesting because now, you know, there's a lot of policing of kids' behaviors, a lot of fear if they go out and do things. I was, like, coming downtown and just hanging out and going to shows. I started doing that when I was 11.

Not suggesting that's what everyone needs to do. But if we have spaces that are accessible and safe and fun for people, that would be wonderful. Instead of just telling them, "You need to not be on your phone," and then not give them anything else to do. Do you know what I mean?

RESH: Oh, I do know what you mean.

But again, you know- But again, you know, talking about bopping and whatnot, I mean, the arts, right? You're an artist.

DIANA: Yeah.

RESH: This is also a focus of your campaign. So talk about the role of the arts in your vision of Toronto.

DIANA: I mean, there is an economic angle here, and that's the thing that, you know, everyone's just like, "Oh, starving artist, go get a real job."

This is the kind of stereotype that underpins the arts and creative workers altogether. And we're talking about almost \$13 billion that's contributed to the economy in the city of Toronto alone just from the arts. That is not insubstantial. That is fairly substantial. So even the economic argument, I think people are just not aware of what it contributes.

I feel like in the city of Toronto, there's so much focus on survival. Literally, that's been my job for years, is trying to support people to survive. You know, being so grossly under-resourced and abandoned and stigmatized in this city. But even at that level, in the drop-ins, we have art groups, we have music-making, there's a lot of fun and recreation and creativity that happens in those spaces.

DIANA: And I find in a lot of spaces where there are people who are very poor, there's a lot of art-making. It doesn't have to be expensive. It really doesn't. It doesn't have to be fine art, but it contributes a lot to people's wellness, their wellbeing, and their sense of cohesion with their community and their sense of self as well.

RESH: Quality of life. I mean, it's really about quality of life, right?

DIANA: It is 100% about quality of life. So it really can't just be about survival. We also have to talk about that aspect of joy and creativity that I think is actually essential in people's lives. Which, you know, again, doesn't mean you're necessarily a fine artist, but we all do something creative that gives us a sense of joy. I wanna foster that. How can we make it easier, more affordable for people to do this just independently as their own in their own homes, their own practices, but also spaces. Third spaces, again.

Music-making spaces are a big one for me. I think about practice spaces. There's, like, none left. If you're a drummer, you got nowhere to play. You have nowhere to play. I have issues with this 'cause it does impact the culture of our city ultimately when we don't actually have places to practice the medium that we love.

So I wanna look at how can we foster these kinds of studios/practice spaces as well.

RESH: Lovely. Now, I wanna get back into the riding itself. Gord Perks describes Parkdale-High Park as a, "laboratory of creative resistance." So, you know- ... speaking of creativity and activism, what does Parkdale-High Park mean to you?

DIANA: It is the first place... I, I did a student placement when I was part of the Community Worker Program and I landed in Parkdale. A really interesting placement, which Robin Buyers, former professor, kinda helped set up, and it wasn't

actually with one agency, it was with three. So I was with the Parkdale Activity Recreation Center, drop-in center. They have supportive housing. There's a lot of interesting and really fun recreation programs. They have their own stage where people just play music, and some of them are world-class musicians. We're talking about, you know, Zephy used to play with Bob Marley. There's real talent there, right? There's PARC. There's Greenest City, which does a lot of initiatives in gardening, greening the city of Toronto, especially in Parkdale. They were in partnership with PARC on a program called Co-op Cred. And the third partner was the West End Food Co-op, which no longer exists.

So it was really about a placement with a program. And it was how can we build food access programs that are not charity-based? Which is cool because we know food bank usage is just at... it never goes down. It never will go down. It's just gonna keep going up.

RESH: Yeah, higher now than it was during COVID as well.

DIANA: Absolutely. Absolutely. And you see it. You know, I was working in meal programs. You would see like Uber drivers, all kinds of folks coming for the meal, not just folks on the street or very low-income people. All kinds of people now.

But the program was, okay, so folks are on Ontario Disability Support Program. We know that if they earn a lot of money, they will get clawback. They could participate in this program where they would earn community credit by participating in gardening initiatives. They would make food at the West End Co-op, and that would be sold. And this community credit could be applied at the Sorauren Farmer's Market. It could be applied elsewhere where they could just buy what they wanted or needed, without it being again, like a food bank, stand in the line, come in. You know, even when you have the shopping model and you can just choose what you want, it's still food bank, and there's still stigma attached to being in the line.

In this case, you could just shop like everyone else, but you would have the community credit to use instead. So that's a program I worked on, and the first task they gave me was write a grant, write a business grant, and I was like, "Oh, wow, okay. You know what? I don't know how to do? That." But I ended up winning. This is as a student. I ended up winning second place with a business grant, and I was like, "Cool, I guess I know how to write these now." And the West End Food Co-op got \$50,000 to start up a bakery. The bakery never actually materialized, unfortunately, but the idea was that people would learn how to bake bread, and then they would earn community credit to spend in the neighborhood.

So, that was the first program I worked on, and it just really showed me you can be really wily, and just do really interesting creative things.

I'm not a very good artist. I'm not. Like, I, I can draw, but I'm not great. Like, whatever. It's okay. But I'm, I'm an abstract thinker, so I feel like my creativity comes out in how I, like, enact these wily schemes and ideas that I implement in the world. So for me, that's my creativity that I love.

But just doing that and meeting everybody and seeing the kinds of interesting things that we could do, and again, I would agree with Gord Perks, is a laboratory. And that's, I think, the perfect example of that happening.

So I have this real attachment to the neighborhood.

You know, it's funny. Everyone's like, "what neighborhood do you live in?" It's like, I'll be honest with you, I've never had a choice. I move where I can afford to live.

But I'm glad during the pandemic, ... Well, I wasn't glad to be evicted, but I was right at the beginning of the pandemic. And I had two apartments to choose from in the city of Toronto, and I ended up in Parkdale.

And I've been here since, yeah March 2020, and I love it. This feels like home. I know so many of the guys here. Even when I was working at Dundas and Sherbourne, housed people in my neighborhood. They love it here now. So it is kind of a special place because of the kind of solidarity that people have, the support that they have for each other. Where you literally have people say, "Supportive housing, why are there not more units?" And you're like, "Where am I? I love this." So for me, I'm so happy to be here, and I would love to represent exactly all of these things that I've been talking about.

RESH: Well, you're currently one of six candidates who are running for that seat. So why should residents of Parkdale-High Park vote for you? What will you bring to Toronto City Council?

DIANA: Well, I'm not a professional candidate, I'll tell you that much. This is something, again, that's very new to me, but at the same time, I have a track record.

I have a track record as just a guy doing stuff in my apartment on my laptop and winning resources from every level of government. If you want somebody who has that ability to liaise, again, with all of these different levels and win the resources that are needed in the neighborhood, I have that. I can bring that, and I think that's vitally important that I do have that history and track record.

Again, if you are progressive-minded, if you are concerned, not just about, you know, some of the stuff that I'm concerned about, like homelessness, but even just ensuring that community centers are in states of good repair. That the pools are heated, because apparently there's one where the heat has been off for quite a long time.

This is stuff that I care about. Ensuring that community assets are accessible and safe and decent for everybody. So that's really, I think, the focus that I wanna bring, is making sure that those shared resources are absolutely accessible for everybody.

But I also very strongly feel we should be for everybody. This is not a place where anyone should be pushed out. And I'm very, very, very, adamant. This is, I think, the

key to a healthy neighborhood as well, healthy communities, is that we make sure everyone who wants to be here can be here because they absolutely belong. So ensuring, again equity, that people aren't pushed out is top of mind for me because we're seeing it more and more unfortunately across the Ward, actually.

So for me, if it's something you care about. I have again, a track record of fighting for equity. Like, here I am. Vote for me.

RESH: Okay. And t-talk a bit about those who are endorsing you and the support that you're getting.

DIANA: It's wild. It's wild. You know, I, I'm Left, i'm very Left. But I also kind of weave through these different communities as a community worker, and so a lot of the people that I've met in my journeys, and I've worked with all kinds of people, written letters, and there's been, like, 200 organizations that sign up, and now I have relationships with all of these workers, frontline workers, EDs, people using services.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised, but there's been a lot of support from communities that I was like, "Holy. I didn't realize you were still kind of following what I did."

I had someone show up from the Museum Studies Program that I graduated from, who now is working in Toronto museums, and he's like, " We really need to bolster the Toronto museums."

I was like Yeah. "Wow! Why are you here? Like, it's so nice!" So it's nice to see, like, all these people that in some way have still been kind of following along or, whose lives I guess I impacted in some way, and seeing them come out to support. Every kind of person, I've seen along the way. I've been floored by it.

I think we have well over 100 volunteers now. We're canvassing at least twice a week at this point. I'm going to community meetings, meeting everybody. We've raised over one-third of our total budget, and it's not even June.

DIANA: So apparently I'm like, "It's 2026, who's got money?" Wow. I was not expecting that.

But it's been a phenomenal response.

A lot of support from folks in the NDP. Some folks who are Liberals. Folks who are Greens are supporting as well. So that's kind of what I wanna build too, is just something that is a broader coalition, broader tent. I know people say that a lot, but I also have a history of being able to do that effectively, and I wanna make sure our campaign, again, just like how I feel about Parkdale-High Park, anyone who wants to be there, they belong.

So I wanna foster that sense of you're not excluded from this. Let's build something together. And after the campaign, let's see how we can continue that work. The community worker, right?

RESH: Working across lines.

I mean, again, city council. You have councilors of many different political stripes. You have the elections coming up on the 26th of October.

That whole body could change. Right now, you have 15 candidates for the position of Mayor. So could you speak a bit about your ability to work across different political lines within a city council setting?

DIANA: Yeah, yeah. I've worked substantially with the NDP, and for a period of time, I actually worked for the NDP at the Ontario Legislature for Bhutla Karpoche, who was the MPP in Parkdale-High Park previously. Alexa Gilmore, who I've worked with quite a bit, just front line, is now the current MPP. So have a really good relationship and connection there.

But for instance, Doug Ford, put forward Bill-6, last year. And so Bill-6 was very much an anti-homelessness bill. Essentially, if you're living in an encampment, and they suspect you might have or use drugs, they don't even need proof, so when they're conflating homelessness and drug use as the same thing when it's clearly not. They can arrest you. They can charge you. Put you in jail for up to six months. Fine you \$10,000. Or both.

Municipalities are asking for resources, funding to actually support people on the streets. And I've talked to municipalities across the province, not just GTA. You know, I can talk to Grey Highlands, which is a fairly small rural municipality. The town of Goderich. And they're telling me that they have encampments everywhere. Burlington, which is one of the richest municipalities, Oakville, they have encampments. Everybody has encampments. I have not talked to a single municipality that does not in Ontario.

They want money to support people. And what we got instead was this bill that says, "Uh, we're not gonna actually give municipalities any resources or funding, we're just gonna enact this law that criminalizes homelessness."

I'm me, so I'm very angry about this. And we hosted a rally. We had a number of different actions that were associated with the campaign, but we hosted a rally just prior to Bill-6 being passed. And I wanted to make sure everybody was involved. This is not a partisan issue.

I can't make this an NDP issue, which I think some people were a little bit sour about, but it's like, no, we need to show that this is broadly unpopular as much as possible, not just one party says this is wrong. So during the last provincial election, I built a letter-writing campaign and there's hundreds, thousands of emails that are going

directly into Bonnie Crombie's email address. Thousands that are going into Mike Schreiner's email.

These are the leaders of... well, former leader of the Ontario Liberal Party, and then the current leader of the Ontario Greens.

Flooding them, and it actually ended up in the debates, where they were saying, "This is wrong. If you're using the notwithstanding clause to take away homeless people's rights, if you're criminalizing homeless people, this is wrong."

And both of them, all of them, including Marit Stiles, said this during the debates. And so as part of the rally, I invited representatives from all three parties to speak. To, again, show this is not just about one party versus another. I need all of you. And if you're not okay with that, then you can't speak.

So, so we had a number of representatives from all three parties, and I was very happy to work with all of them.

What I tend to do is once we work together, I extend, you know, like I'm always open to working with you. If we're on the same page about things, I'm ready. And that's the same approach that I use with councilors as well.

There are councilors who have very different politics than me that I've worked with. Lily Cheng she always asks my advice all of the time. Paul Ainslie I've worked with quite a bit. There's a lot of different councilors, again, who aren't just part of necessarily the more progressive wing that I've been able to work with and push stuff forward. Matlow I've worked with. So I will use that same approach.

It's not about the party lines or anything like that. It's what's the outcome? What do we want? And who can we bring in to this to make sure that we actually win that outcome?

I will work with anyone who will work with me to achieve those better outcomes. That should be the focus.

RESH: Yeah, it should be. Because we do need effective city government and governance. Now, municipal elections, again, are taking place on October 26th.

Voter apathy is an ongoing issue at all levels of politics in Canada. Why do you think this is?

DIANA: Oh, I have a lot of thoughts about this. It's been a long time since it felt, and I mean this very generally, it felt like politicians were there to serve their constituents. It feels like they're serving themselves a lot of the time, and there's a lot of cynicism.

I hear it from my own friends, where some of them aren't voting, and I know they're not voting. And I'm not yelling at them about it because for them it feels like it doesn't matter because we don't actually get the change that I would like to see in my community because no one listens to what I'm saying. I see a lot of that.

There's a lot of disenfranchisement. That's very true on the Left. There's a recent study or poll that said about 25% of Canadians considered themselves part of the disenfranchised Left. People who did not align necessarily with any political party or felt like they weren't fully aligned, who also were looking for alternatives.

That's a substantial portion of people that feel like they're not being represented, and I know a lot of these people

My hope, because I have been working with these folks for so long, 'cause we have strong relationships, I hope that even though I'd be moving to a very different role, that they know that they can, again, talk to me about things.

And if they have issues they wanna bring, I'll work with them to make sure that these come to the forefront. That's really what I wanna do, is ensure that nobody's voice gets kind of sidelined in this. Especially I have that human rights lens that I'm applying to how I'm working with people and what the issues should be. I will champion these issues with you, and we'll bring forward what we can and see what we can actually win at the council level. Absolutely.

So that I think is a big part of the apathy.

There's also just people have no idea, like, you know, it's hard to keep up with politics. There's a lot going on in people's lives. There's a lot of survival going on. And so a lot of folks feel like they're not on top of things, aren't always aware even sometimes that there is an election happening. Even I think in the last provincial election, I saw very few signs ultimately.

And that was true everywhere. It wasn't just in my ward or riding or across Toronto, it was just everywhere. There just wasn't a lot of signage. So I think there's also just, yeah, the day-to-day grind and survival that people are experiencing where they're not going to vote as a result of that, right?

RESH: And also, I mean, we're seeing the really rising fascism. Yeah. It's, you know, I mean, we're, right above the center of it, right? What's happening in the United States, the growing corporate power that seems to be buying up more and more political power as well.

DIANA: Yeah.

RESH: So people are feeling, disillusioned and hopeless in these times. So what would be your message to voters about October 26th election, but also beyond that

in terms of reigniting interest and involvement in municipal politics, but really every level of politics?

DIANA: You know, I think that's what I want our campaign to build.

I have the hardest time being like, "Vote for me. Ser- serve me and my..." Like, I'm not that kind of person. I actually generally don't like being the person in power because I like to be fighting the bully, which I'll still be doing because again, we have Ford, who is constantly encroaching on us.

What I want from the campaign is to build community. That's actually the most important thing. And again, it feels very extractive a lot of the time when you're a candidate. And I'll see other candidates and I have. I know lots of people running for lots of different offices at all levels of government. And sometimes you just see this very kind of extractive behavior where they show up for the photo op. You know, they're trying to ask people like, "Are you gonna vote for me?" And wrangle something out of them.

I'm like fundamentally like, I cannot do that. If I'm going to an event, I'm not just showing up for photos. Sometimes I think my team is like, "You need to take a photo." So I'm learning how to do that.

But I'm gonna stay for like two hours, four hours. I'm gonna hang out and I'm gonna actually talk to people and not make it this weird extractive thing. And maybe that's inefficient, but this is what I've always done as a community worker. This is why people are showing up from 20 years ago and being like, "Hey, I'm so happy you're running. I'd love to support you."

It's relationship building.

So the campaign, not just me, I want the campaign to prioritize that. Because whether or not I win, what can we build that's lasting, that can go beyond the campaign? What kind of, you know, resources, what kind of coalition-building can happen in the space now as a part of the campaign?

Can it be the catalyst for something else?

When we have our campaign office, what can we do with that space? What kind of mutual aid can we have embedded as part of the campaign? Not to extract, but rather also to give back and share and work with all different communities to connect them with each other.

That's community work. This is the campaign. This is how I wanna build it so that it is something beautiful and sustainable and that has legs beyond October. So this is my hope.

RESH: It's essentially bringing community work to city council.

DIANA: That is the idea. I don't know when or if we've had a community development worker in that space, but it's the idea, and I think this is also how I want to work as a councillor.

RESH: In terms of your final message that you would like to leave with listeners of this podcast, what would that be? And also what is your overall vision for Toronto?

DIANA: Well, I will say that even though I'm running as a candidate, electoral politics is not the beginning and end of how we get involved in our communities. It is one small piece actually of how we build community and build change.

And so I would hope, you know, again, as part of the campaign, we can invite people to participate in real democracy with each other. And I know like showing up to City Hall to deputize-- there's a lot of reasons why people can't do that. But what can we do in our communities and with the time and the capacity that we have to, again, support each other to get what we need essentially?

We don't have to rely on, we shouldn't rely on politicians to do that for us.

I've worked a lot in mutual aid, and I hope that people can understand, and will actively work together to realize the change that they need. This is how I've always done it. I go and vote, sure, but I'm also every other day of the year thinking about what can we do? And who could we be working with to support whatever issues that we need to address in our community.

So that's kind of also my vision for Toronto, where we have these really healthy communities that are well connected. I think part of you know, coming out, especially the early pandemic, is people started to fear each other. There's a lot of mistrust right now in the room, and we need to build that back.

So my vision for Toronto is building back that trust where, again, people are connected to each other, they're friends, they're neighbors, they support each other, and we have less of this division and cynicism and power-hoarding and fighting.

If nothing else, I wanna bring kind of a positivity into City Hall that shows that this is possible instead of, again trying to make everyone afraid of their neighbors and think that everyone's out to get them. It's exhausting, right? So let's build joy together.

RESH: Lovely. And how can people support your run for Toronto City Council?

DIANA: If you're in the ward, I mean, you can vote, I guess. That's part of it. But we have a website. It's www.dianachanmcnally.ca. It's my name. Sign up to volunteer.

I'm not just talking about canvassing and phone calls and that kind of stuff. We're looking at, again, how can we build out of our volunteer base that kind of community, that I envision for the campaign and for Toronto as a whole. So that's a great way to get involved.

If you have money, you can donate, but I'm also like, again, I think my people don't have a lot of money. That's okay. I think it's more valuable that we actually, again can connect with each other. I wanna build relationships with you. So get involved that way, and I look forward to meeting you.

RESH: So Diana Chan McNally is running for City Councilor of Toronto's Ward 4, Parkdale-High Park, in the upcoming municipal elections taking place on October 26th. A link to her campaign will be posted in the show notes to this episode.

Diana, thanks so much. It's a pleasure, as always speaking to you. And wishing you great success in your run.

DIANA: Thank you, Resh. Appreciate it.

RESH: That was Diana Chan McNally, community worker and candidate for Toronto's Ward 4 Parkdale-High Park council seat, in the upcoming October 26th municipal election. The link to Diana's campaign website will be posted in the show notes to this episode

And this is The Courage My Friends podcast.

I'm your host, Resh Budhu. Thanks for listening.

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