Jes Rau: For me, it's about being seen, and for a lot of us, I think it's about being seen and valued for who we are and how we show up in the world. And so, when we refuse to use a person's pronouns that they have said that they would like to use, it can feel really invalidating and really painful. Like you, you are not willing to see me. You're not, I am not worthy of your respect and love and attention.

Sam Fuqua: That's Jes Rau, and this is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. On this episode, we talk with Jes Rau about pronouns, why they matter, and how we can respond to some of the common conflicts and apprehensions around using non-binary pronouns. Jes Rau is the Manager of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Training at Well Power, a large mental health service provider in Denver. They are also a member of the production team here at Well, That Went Sideways!

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program joined as always by Alexis Miles. Hi Alexis.

Alexis Miles: Hi Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we're really excited to have as our guest for this edition of Well, That Went Sideways! another member of the Sideways team, Jes Rau. Hi Jes.

Jes Rau: Hey Sam. Hi Alexis.

Sam Fuqua: Really great to, uh, to have you on the program. To start with, Jes, can you tell our listeners your thought process as to why you have chosen to use the pronouns you use, and what that was like for you coming to that decision?

Jes Rau: Sure. So, um, it was a journey. Pronouns are often, uh, a journey for folks to, um, explore and see what fits and what feels right to them. Um, and for me, growing up throughout the 80s and 90s and into the 2000s, there weren't many choices. There, there were a few choices for gendered pronouns. And for non-gendered pronouns, there really just weren't many, especially not ones that felt like they fit. Um, some that kind of became popular in the 70s but weren't widely used and, um, didn't feel right for me. And then, I heard through, um, attending some conferences and participating in some workshops that there were some folks who were identifying, um, using they/them, and that felt good. That felt really like it fit. And, and I guess I should say too, um, it felt like it fit compared to what the other options are. So, there may be something that we invent later on that will feel better, but compared to what the other options were, he/him, she/her, um, some of the other pronouns, they/them just felt the best when I kind of tried it on.

Sam Fuqua: And remind us, what is a pronoun?

Jes Rau: Yeah. So pronouns are, are actually just, they're a part of speech that we use. Um, they're the short little words, um, that we use, um, throughout all of our language. But in this case, we're talking about personal pronouns. So, a pronoun that we're using to, a word we're using to refer to a person, um, when they are not there or when we're not using their name. So, when you think about, like saying, "He went to the store." "They went to the store." "She went to the store." Um, those are pronouns. And so, uh, we use 'em all the time. Everybody has pronouns. "I", the, the word "I" is a pronoun. Um, you're referring to yourself without using your name. Um, and so, "we" as a pronoun. The collective of all of us without using

our names. And so, just keeping in mind, um, we all use them. We all have them. It's just a part of speech. And we actually use, uh, non-gendered or non-binary. We use "they/them" as a singular pronoun all the time. So imagine you're, you're at a restaurant, and it's raining outside, and you look over at the table next to you, the people have left and you realize that someone has left their umbrella. That's what you would say, "They left their umbrella." That's, it's a common thing for us to use, uh, they/them, when we don't know the gender of a person, um, to use they/them as a singular pronoun. And so, um, it's something we actually always do and we have the skills to do and we've always done. Uh, it just feels heightened right now because folks are, are feeling nervous or threatened by the idea of using them more often or more commonly. But yeah, pronouns are just, just the words we use when we're not using a person's name.

Sam Fuqua: And maybe we should back up and talk a little bit about gender and what that even means. How do you define gender, Jes?

Jes Rau: Yeah. So when I think about gender and when I train folks on gender, um, I think about it as a social construct. Basically, something that we've created as a society, um, that categorizes people. And that's what we do, right? Our brains need to categorize things so that we can have efficient thought processes. And so, throughout many different iterations of, um, exploring what does gender mean? What does sex mean? Um, how do they, how are they related to one another? Um, what a lot of us think and what feels right to me is that gender and sex are two separate things. Gender is the way you feel internally and want to express yourself outwardly. Um, and sex is the biological. And so, those two things don't have to align. They don't have to be, uh, connected for folks. So, when I think about gender, yeah, I think about it as, uh, a bigger social construct that we have created to help categorize people.

Sam Fuqua: Well, and the, the whole pronoun question, or in some cases, pronoun debate, has really, I think, made a lot of us think more deeply about gender.

Jes Rau: Yeah, I think so. And I think it's, it's become very, very divisive and, um, very challenging for folks because we're asking, when we're asking folks to consider gender in a different way than maybe they had before, and then also to do the action of using pronouns that they're not used to or that may have been different than what they expected, then people are, um, defensive. It makes people really nervous, makes people really, uh, feel like, hey, you're changing something that feels comfortable to me and I don't like that. And so, so yeah. It's, it's very broad conversation right now being had everywhere from workplaces to governments to schools to faith-based institutions to families, but also a really challenging conversation to have.

Alexis Miles: Jes, one of the things I've noticed is that some people have not thought enough about the language to even understand that pronouns are gendered. So, I, I'd just like to read a, a little something. I believe this is from the Anti-Defamation League, and just get your response to it. It says, "From an early age, many were taught that pronouns should follow specific rules along the gender binary. She/her/hers for girls and women, and he/him/his for boys and men. However, as our society has progressed in understanding gender identity, our language must also be updated. It should be accurate and convey understanding and respect for all people, especially those who are transgender, gender nonconforming, and non-binary." Would, do you agree with that analysis?

Jes Rau: Oh yeah, that's, that's beautiful and perfect and said, said really well. Um, I think we, like I was just saying a little bit, we get stuck in what's comfortable, um, and, and, the reality is, is that things are always changing. Language is always changing. Like think back, um, to the language that you've introduced into your vocabulary, right? There was not email. Email was not a word any of us knew, and then all of a sudden

it was. It is a thing that we all know about and we all use, we all understand. And so language evolves. Think about slang terms, like things like saying cool or rad or awesome. Like those things change over time. Our language changes and, and evolves over time. And so, this is another example of that. And then, also our understanding has gotten so much deeper, um, and so much richer in terms of people's experiences. And I think because of social media, more people were able to share their stories and find each other. And so, therefore, that amplified some of the, uh, experiences that folks were having outside of what they're talking about, that gender binary.

Alexis Miles: The thing about the language evolving reminds me of some of the language that we use and maybe even have begun to take for granted now, like cisgendered, transgendered, non-binary, intersex, gender fluid. Could you take a moment and just give a, a brief explanation for some of the more common terms used to describe the lived experience of some people, with gender?

Jes Rau: Sure. Yeah, happy to. Um, and I think there's, there's a big misunderstanding of what cisgender means. Um, and there are folks who are taking pretty strong offense to being referred to as cisgender. So, um, cis and trans are just two terms. They're Latin terms. Cis means basically like in alignment with. I'm aligned. And trans means I'm not aligned. And so, when we talk about people who are born, um, and they're assigned male or a female at birth, um, let's say someone's assigned male at birth and then they grow up and they're like, yes, I feel like I am, uh, male. That feels like that describes me. I'm a man. And my biology is the same. Then you're cisgender. Your, your gender identity aligns with your sex that was assigned at birth. For trans folks, that's not the case. We are born and then as we grow and learn and develop, our gender identity may not be aligned with the sex that we were assigned at birth. And so that's all it means is aligned and, and, uh, not aligned essentially, in the simplest, uh, terms. So those ones, that's how I would describe those.

A couple of other non-binary is a, um, a type of gender. So, you have male, female, man or woman, right? And then, non-binary are folks who don't feel like they fit on that, uh, two-part spectrum. So we have, sometimes we think about sex and gender as there's men on one side, women on the other side. Um, that mean, either you are one or the other. It's like an off and on switch, right? You're either on or off, one or the other. Um, and that's what binary is. You have two choices and that's it. With folks who are non-binary, we don't feel like we fit in those two choices neatly or nicely. And so, again, because there's not a good word for describing who we are yet, like we haven't, um, created those terms together yet, we kind of described based on who we're not. We are not binary. We don't fit in that box. Um, and so that's what non-binary is. Gender nonconforming or gender fluid, um, those types of terms, that just means people within the various identities have, have different experiences of gender. So gender fluid, um, are folks who kind of go in and out of different gender feelings and experiences. So, um, they may feel at some point in time, a little bit more like male or masculine or man fits, and then they might shift more into non-binary and that feel like that fits. So, it kind of, um, depends on the day, the situation, the time. Um, it's much more fluid, it flows, right? And so, um, there are a lot of different terms, many, many, many that folks are experimenting with, trying on, um, exploring to find what fits best for them.

Sam Fuqua: Well, let's take a couple of, uh, examples of where we can come into conflict with pronouns. And as we mentioned in our introduction, you are the lead for diversity, equity, and inclusion work at a large mental health nonprofit. Let me start with maybe the, the less confrontational situation, which is whether it's a friend, a family member or work colleague were supportive of the pronoun conversation and using the correct pronouns with, uh, someone we work with or someone we care about in our friendships or family, but we're nervous about making a mistake. And so I'll just go with my own self, right? Jes, so when we met 2020 and you told me, uh, prefer they/them, but she/her is okay, part of me was like, okay,

shoo, uh, I, because I don't wanna screw up. And part of that is a motivation to not hurt the feelings of my friend or coworker. But also kind of lazy on my part, as I thought about it. Like, come on Sam, you could like pay attention to this and get this right. So, when you have someone who's say, like me, who's supportive and trying but does make a mistake and use the wrong pronoun, how should we approach that?

Jes Rau: It's a great example. Definitely a great example. And I'm gonna note one thing before we, before I dive into, um, what, what folks can do, is that pretty often, um, it's pretty common that folks will say, um, I'm okay with two different pronouns. One that's more binary, and then they/them or another, non-binary and non-gendered pronoun. And sometimes we do that because we're truly okay with it. We really are okay. We, either one is fine with us. Um, sometimes we do that because we don't want to be a burden on others. So, we don't want to force others or make others uncomfortable. Um, we don't want to have the conversations constantly about gender or the reminders. And so, it lightens the mental load for us to say, oh, it's okay to use she/her or they/them. Um, another reason that we might say that is because, um, we're still trying things on. We're seeing does they/them fit? Does she/her fit? Does he/him fit? And so, people evolve over time and sometimes can become more comfortable with one pronoun versus the, the, what we call mixed pronouns that may, they may have been using at a different time.

And I think that's definitely been a journey for me. The way it fits for me is that with folks who I'm very close to and very familiar with, I don't have a strong reaction when folks use mixed pronouns. I don't really feel, um, very strongly about it. And so, it's okay with me for people like Sam, you and I, Alexis, um, our Sideways Pod team, my family, my close friends. Externally, in a work setting or with people I'm unfamiliar with, with people I don't know very well, I would strongly prefer not to use, um, she/her pronouns, and I only use they/them for a couple of reasons. One is, I feel like you all see me, my, the Sideways Pod team, Sam, Alexis, you all, you see me and you know me, um, and so I don't have to question what's going on for folks. With external people who I'm not as familiar with, um, I don't know if they're seeing me fully as who I am. And so I think for me, and that's just my experience, everybody has very different experiences. And another thing that I used to say is, uh, when I started to kind of push a little bit, I would say I use she/her for your comfort and they/them for my comfort.

So you can pick. Do you need to prioritize your comfort? And, and no judgment if that's what you need to do. Um, or would you like to prioritize mine? So if in those settings, sometimes people would make choices based on where they were and how they felt in terms of pronouns. Um, that is definitely not common experience of, of a lot of folks. A lot of folks really feel strongly, um, that when they share, uh, specific pronouns that you need to use those pronouns. If you make a mistake, because mistakes will happen, in a situation where folks are, are close to you or friends, or if you just know it's not malicious in intent, um, the best thing for you all to do if, if you mix up on pronouns is just to, um, correct yourself and move on. So say you're talking about me, you're talking to me, and you say, uh, she, and you want to use the they/them pronouns, you say, they, she, I mean they, and then you move on. Um, you don't have to make a big production. Usually people don't want, uh, that, that type of attention. And then later on, you could reach out maybe by a text message or, uh, pull the person aside and say, "Oh, I'm, I'm sorry, I mixed up those pronouns. I'm really working on it." Um, but usually if you just quickly correct yourself and move on, that's, that's a great response and feels, um, really validating and supportive.

Sam Fuqua: Thanks for all that. So quick correction there. What about in a workplace where someone does misuse a pronoun, does not correct, how do you call someone in to a conversation about that versus calling them out and saying, "Hey, you're using the wrong pronouns," in a kind of a calling out way?

Jes Rau: It obviously all depends on the situation, but, um, kind of similar is if I notice, um, someone is using incorrect pronouns for me in a meeting, um, then I may just shoot a quick, we use like a lot of instant messaging, right, whether it's Slack or Teams or Hangouts or whatever it is, um, just a quick message, "Hey, just a reminder, I use they/them pronouns," and typically people are like, "Oh yeah," and they, they shift or they, they work to shift. Another option is sometimes, depending on how I'm feeling that day, if I, if I feel like I have enough energy, um, to do it, I might, uh, just pause and, and just say that in front of the group. But in a really like, kind of, uh, supportive way of, again, just, "Hey, just a reminder, I use they/them pronouns," and then again, not making a big deal of it, just move on. And then for others, so, uh, for me it's really tricky if people speak on my behalf or, um, come in into my defense, I would prefer not, that folks don't do that. And so, I often will ask people if they jump in and say, "Jes uses they/them pronouns," um, I'll send that message and say, "Oh, please don't, uh, speak on my behalf. It really, you could open up a can of worms that I'll, I don't wanna deal with in that day or with that person. And I, thank you, I appreciate you, but, but I'd rather not deal with that or manage that." But I would say typically, like a, a short private conversation, a quick reminder note, um, for those who maybe just made a mistake or just forgot what pronouns or don't know because we haven't met before, um, don't know what pronouns folks use is a, a great way to call people in and, um, let them know.

Sam Fuqua: And finally, do you encounter in your, in your workplace or in, uh, talking with other folks, any, uh, cases where people are outright resistant to the idea of, uh, shifting their own thinking about pronouns and, uh, they may just be a hard case, you know, old dog, new tricks, or they may just be, uh, actively resisting. And how does one deal with that? I mean, I guess at, at a certain point we have federal laws against harassment in the workplace, and this could come into that area. But I wasn't so much talking about that necessarily, as just dealing with someone who is really, uh, resistant to this.

Jes Rau: Yes, unfortunately, it's a, it's a fairly common experience. Um, and it can come in in several forms, right? It can be a person who just kind of scoffs and, and laughs when you share, uh, that you use pronouns other than what they expected to use for you or wanted to use for you. It can be outright. So, in a training setting, um, it has definitely been the case that people have said, "I don't use pronouns. I won't use pronouns," which we can talk about. Uh, we can talk about that if you'd like to. But, um, what they're really saying is, I, I will use the pronouns that I would like to use and, and, um, any others, I'm not going to be respectful of that. Um, and then there are folks who purposefully and who regularly, um, misuse or use improper pronouns for folks, and that happens on a regular basis too. So, no matter how many times you remind them, um, they're still using the incorrect pronoun and it's because they don't agree with having non-binary pronouns in particular, or using a pronoun that they don't think aligns with a person's gender expression, um, that they're making assumptions about. I, and so in those situations, I do, uh, tend to, and do suggest that folks get a little bit more firm if it, if they're in a place, I'll always, prioritizing their safety just to say that's, it's really disrespectful on, or opening a question with a, an open-ended question, "I'm wondering why you don't want to respect my pronouns or respect this person's pronouns. I wonder, um, can you share with me a little bit about what's going on for you?" And sometimes that leads to a really good conversation. Sometimes it doesn't. But it, but it can be a tool asking those open-ended questions.

In a workplace setting, what my hope would be is that the workplace would say something like, "You are not required to share your own pronouns, um, if you don't want to. That's not a requirement for anyone. But it is a requirement to respect other people's pronouns and to put that effort and energy in." And then, like you said, Sam, it can get into, uh, disciplinary action or things like that if someone refuses to. And then in the rest of the world, it, it honestly comes down to picking and choosing your battles. Like, is this a person I care about enough, um, that I need to engage in this conversation with them, to ask them, um, to use the pronouns that I use? Uh, or is this a person who I'm, I just don't have a deep relationship, or I don't

care about, or they're trying to escalate a conflict, in which case, I might just choose to leave or walk away from that situation because it's not really gonna go anywhere.

Alexis Miles: What's the impact of a person's refusal to use the pronouns that a person wants to be used for them?

Jes Rau: Yeah, that's a really great and important question. The impact can be really profound, uh, because like I said, for me it's about being seen. And for a lot of us, I think it's about being seen and valued for who we are and how we show up in the world. And so, when we refuse to use a person's pronouns that they have said that they would like to use, it can feel really invalidating and really painful. Um, like you, you are not willing to see me. You're not, I am not worthy of your, uh, respect and love and attention. I've heard some people even say, I was working with some youth and someone said, that they're, they have a, a family member who is very adamant in making sure that they gender the, their family's dogs correctly. He, the, this dog's a boy. This dog's a girl. Um, but not them, not them as the, the niece or nephew and how that feels, um, that they've made, value their pets over a family member who's, um, wanting the same thing. And so it's, it can be really devaluing. In the mental health world, it has been researched and shown that respecting a person's identity, including their pronouns and esp, even just something as small as pronouns, um, can dramatically reduce the risk of suicide within the community of transgender people. And so, um, the impact can go from, from a, a small feeling of invalidation all the way through to preventing suicide and preventing people from, uh, making really terrible choices to cope with, with the world that we live in. So it, it may feel small, but it's pretty significant to the folks who are, are trying to navigate the world.

Alexis Miles: Thank you for that because some of the conversations I hear, uh, imply that, oh, this is a trivial thing. It's just people experimenting. Trying things on. They're gonna change their minds in the future. So, it's trivialized a lot in the media by people who are against the, the use of using the pro, pronouns that people want used for themselves.

Jes Rau: Mm-hmm. Yep.

Alexis Miles: So I, I, I do have another question because sometimes I hear people say, what is your preferred pronoun as opposed to, which pronouns do you use? Can you say something about preferred pronouns?

Jes Rau: Mm-hmm. Yeah. So, um, preferred pronouns was the, a way that we talked about this, probably maybe even 15 or so, 10, 15 years ago. Um, the term preferred pronouns was, was appropriate. But again, as language evolves, as identities evolve, as people evolve, um, the community has asked and, and wants to remove "preferred" before "pronouns" because, um, preferences are easier to disregard. Preferences are easier to, um, dismiss. And so, instead of saying, "I prefer that you call me they/them," folks are just saying, "No, my pronouns are... These are my pronouns..." Um, so you can say a person's personal pronouns. You can say a person's, um, pronouns, but preferred, um, was, was kind of diminishing and people were just like, oh, if you just prefer it, I don't, I'm not going to, to honor it because it's just a preference. And so, that's the shift that's happened, uh, with that language over the last few years.

Sam Fuqua: Jes, I know you've done a lot of work with youth throughout your career. This, uh, discussion of pronouns, does it differ and if so, how?

Jes Rau: Yeah. Uh, in large part it does differ. I think there's still pockets of places depending on where you are and what the, um, value systems and belief systems of the communities that you're within are. Um, but in, in general, with the youth that I have worked with, there is a dramatic shift. Um, even from, uh, again, like ten years ago or so, there's been a, a pretty dramatic shift where it's not really, uh, as much of a big deal as a youth, as you might think it would be with youth. Youth are just like, kind of, yeah. Yep. That person uses they/them pronouns or, um, this young person is transgender and they just kind of roll with it, um, and support each other. It's, it's pretty, I, I wouldn't say it's perfect by any means. There's still a lot of challenges that trans youth face. Um, a lot of ridicule, a lot of bullying. But there's definitely a broader or greater acceptance. And just walking through schools or walking through youth programs, hearing young people say, oh, I use they, they/them pronouns, or I use he/him pronouns when maybe the expression, their gender expression might not indicate that for folks. It's common and it's, um, mind boggling because in my time in high school, middle school, that was absolutely not the case. Um, that was, uh, a recipe for, um, bringing a lot of really negative attention your way. And so, um, I do think it shifted. I do think youth are more used to it and are more willing to, uh, see that people's lived experiences are just different and we don't have to be, um, in the one or, one of two boxes, uh, in the way that we've always set things up.

Sam Fuqua: Well, that's really good to hear. It's another example of where young people lead the way, sounds like.

Jes Rau: Mm-hmm. Yes.

Alexis Miles: And Jes, in addition to how young people are, are able to have a more expansive view of, of gender, what are some other things that give you hope in this area?

Jes Rau: Yeah, it's, uh, it, on the age spectrum, I would say that it's, um, elders too. There are a lot of elders who are, are leading the way. Um, I was watching a, a short video clip of, um, compiled, uh, group of people who are 40 and older who use non-binary or non-gendered pronouns of various types, and they, uh, were sharing when they started using those pronouns. So again, some folks in the 60s and the 50s, some folks more recently, but they're still within that kind of age group of 40 and older, and they were doing that to help inspire and support youth who've, and, and for those people who say it's just a phase or who just say that it's just an experiment. This is just a thing kids are doing. Um, and I'm in that age group. I'm within that 40 and older group, and you, have used, uh, non-gendered pronouns for a very long time, um, since I became aware of them existing. And so, uh, I think that gives me hope that there are elders who are also paving the way and being supportive. And then folks outside of the community who are willing to do the same thing no matter what the, the age demographic that they are.

Um, I think the, the number of media options and where we're seeing non-binary characters or transgender characters and TV shows and cartoons and, um, other media is really giving me hope because representation really matters. Being able to see yourself as a part of this world really matters to a lot of people. So that, that brings me hope. And then, just the conversations I've been able to have, even with people who are so adamantly against the use of non-gendered pronouns, most of the time, those folks, with a conversation are at least willing to put their guard down a little bit, um, in my experience. I know that's not, not everybody's experience. But at least willing to say, oh, I didn't understand that a pronoun is just a part of speech and all of us use pronouns. Everyone uses pronouns. And I, I didn't get that. I thought it was just a thing that those people were doing. Um, so those con, conversations that disarm, um, and peop, where people can come together have been really inspiring.

Alexis Miles: And Jes, for people who want to know more about pronouns, the importance of pronouns, the fact that we all use pronouns all the time, for people want some more resources, what would you recommend?

Jes Rau: Yeah, so I think two resources that can be really helpful. One is a website called Trans Student Educational Resources, or TESR. So it's uh, transstudent.org, and it's a group of educators, um, students, who come together and collect, um, different resources for folks to be able to explore these ideas more. And so, they have great resources on understanding gender, gender expression, pronouns, um, various other parts of identity. And then another is, um, local to Colorado, but they have lots of, uh, resources as well, and it's an organization called Envision You. And so, um, it's all one word, envisionyou.org, and they are a great organization with lots of resources on their site as well.

Sam Fuqua: Jes, it's been great to talk to you. It's great working with you and, and I really appreciate that we're able to have this conversation as well.

Jes Rau: Same. And I love the, the Sideways Pod team is so supportive. Um, and so thank you all as well for the opportunity to share.

Alexis Miles: Absolutely. It's a very, very important topic. Thanks, Jes.

Sam Fuqua: Jes Rau is the Manager of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Training at Well Power, a mental health service provider in Denver. And they're also a member of the production team here at Well, That Went Sideways!

Thanks for listening to Well, That Went Sideways! We produce new episodes twice a month. You can find them wherever you get your podcasts, and on our website, sidewayspod.org. We also have information on our guests and links to more conflict resolution resources at the website. That's sidewayspod.org. Our production team is Mary Zinn, Jes Rau, Norma Johnson, Alexis Miles, Alia Thobani, and me, Sam Fuqua. Our theme music is by Mike Stewart. We produce these programs in Colorado on the traditional lands of the Arapahoe, Cheyenne, and Ute Nations. To learn more about the importance of land acknowledgement, visit our website, sidewayspod.org. And this podcast is a partnership with The Conflict Center, a Denver-based nonprofit that provides practical skills and training for addressing everyday conflicts. Find out more at conflictcenter.org.