

Ilya: [00:00:03](#) Tiffany: Hi, welcome to the One Love Fits All online conference benefiting Embody Love Movement. I'm Dr Tiffany Denny. I'm the executive director of Embody Love Movement. And my conversation today is with Ilya Parker. Ilya owns Decolonizing Fitness, which is a business he created blending his experience as a physical therapist assistant, personal trainer, certified medical exercise specialist with his work in social justice. Um, Ilya is a social justice advocate, educator, organizer whose work really centers racial, gender and healing justice. And Decolonizing Fitness not only offers services, personal training, medical exercise services for individuals, but also offers educational opportunities for professionals and organizations hoping to create more gender affirming, size inclusive spaces. Ilya and I had a really great conversation. We covered a lot of ground and um, we talked a lot about what makes affirming spaces, what is toxic fitness culture and some of the lived experiences Ilya has had as a trans, non-binary person. So please enjoy this conversation. There's not a video, you're just going to see our little thumbnail pictures, but it is absolutely worth the listen. I hope you get a lot out of it. I know I did.

Pura Fe Sings: [00:01:44](#) Pura Fe Sings: True freedom involves the understanding of our true human spirit within. It dispels the lie of inadequacy and helplessness who are we? Powerful beyond measure. Who are we? Power of the creator....

Tiffany: [00:02:08](#) Tiffany: Ilya welcome. I'm so glad you're here.

Ilya: [00:02:11](#) Ilya: Thank you. Thank you Tiffany for having me.

Tiffany: [00:02:14](#) Tiffany: Of course. I am so thrilled that we actually got to do this interview because I know for a little while it was touch and go with our schedules. So this is making me really happy that we're getting to talk.

Ilya: [00:02:28](#) Ilya: Yes, the stars aligned

Tiffany: [00:02:29](#) Tiffany: The stars aligned. I know. I'm especially excited to talk to you, I know, because I'm a physical therapist and you're a physical therapist assistant plus all of the other amazing experiences and certifications and things that you have. So I'm really excited to talk to you about kind of a few different topics, but initially I'd love our audience to get to know a little more about you. So I'm curious, um, how your own personal relationship with your body has changed over time.

Ilya: [00:03:07](#) Ilya: Wow. Thank you. That's a really good question. Uh, initially I started out as a fairly, um, large child, a chunky child. And, you know, it's cute when you're younger and your family, you know, loves to pinch your cheeks and feed you all the time and you know, and then as you develop, especially those of us who were assigned female at birth, then you begin to feel the rigid confines of societal pressure to look a certain way. So I was really struggling with my body image in particular in preteen years because I was also beginning to go down the exploration of what sexuality and gender identity meant for me. So I had, um, the, you know, the pressure of living in a larger body, and to note, you know, larger body for me was like a size 18 to 20 in ladies' clothing.

Ilya: [00:04:07](#) And I understand that it's a, it's, it's definitely a much deeper issue when it comes to people who are bigger than that size. But my experience, I'm living in a larger body and feeling that pressure in conjunction with, you know, the pressure that I felt from looking a certain way and not looking feminine enough, whatever that means. So I really struggled with that throughout my preteen years, all the way up into, into my younger adult years. And then I literally just got to a point in my late twenties where I said, you know what? I'm just gonna be free. And that's when I started my gender transition. And once I started transitioning, at that time I was choosing to identify as a man. A lot of the societal pressure was alleviated because I was someone moving in a masculine body and my weight, my larger body was somewhat, um, justifiable because I was a guy and I could take up more space. So, so those were the things that really, those are the things that really stick out for me as I tried to, you know, explore what living in my body felt like.

Tiffany: [00:05:15](#) Tiffany: Wow. That is a kind of a juxtaposition I hadn't thought of. There's the element, the challenging element of moving through the world as a gender nonconforming, like as a transgendered person. But then also it's so fascinating to hear you talk about some of the relief of the societal pressure of your body size after going through the transition.

Ilya: [00:05:44](#) Ilya: Yeah, yeah. I absolutely have to name that privilege. I've struggled with naming privilege for me as a, as a person who carries a lot of marginalized identities, you know, as a, as a black, as a person assigned female at birth, as a non-binary person, as a queer person living in the rural South. You know, it's been a real struggle, but I do notice it's just a lot easier to move in this world being viewed, especially when I'm being viewed as a cisgender man. Um, it's, it's a little different when I'm being viewed as, um, even a gay man, which I'm read a lot,

um, in society or even being viewed as a trans masculine person. But when I'm in spaces where I'm particularly viewed as a man, it's, it's just a, it's a relief. You know, the, the only, the only thing that affects it now is the racial component.

Ilya: [00:06:41](#) Um, a lot of times when I looked, when I identify more along the spectrum of what a woman would embody, uh, it was thing, it was ways that I could move. Now if I step onto an elevator with let's say, a white woman, it's just a very different visceral reaction she has to me. Because she sees a black man, she sees a man in general. And that's what I had to realize. You know, what that fear embodies, um, for people who see that staring them in their face because that's what I felt. You know, that's what I still feel when I'm next to some men, you know, so I had to really do my healing work with not really trying to personalize it so much, but also understand that's what the systems of patriarchy and, and race, you know, play especially in westernized cultures.

Ilya: [00:07:31](#) That's just, you know, that's where we are.

Tiffany: [00:07:34](#) Tiffany: Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. Because you also have that experience of feeling that fear as well.

Ilya: [00:07:41](#) Ilya: Yes, I really do. And it's difficult because, you know, like I said, I'm read as a man and oftentimes when I have, you know, big, gigantic, huge men looming over me, I still feel very fearful. Um, you know, I've had experiences being in spaces, especially in communal spaces like locker rooms, bathrooms, and you know, now I'm in a place where I have facial hair. So it's very difficult for me as a trans person to utilize a locker room, a woman's locker room. And we don't have a lot of options in the South where we have like gender neutral options. So default, I have to go to a men's locker room and I just don't feel comfortable in a men's locker room.

Ilya: [00:08:27](#) You know, I've had, I've had men, you know, look at me, I've had men say things to me, you know, I haven't had any gender affirming surgery, so I can't walk around with my shirt off without my chest being visible to a man and I, I'm fearful, you know, my safety is at stake. But it's hard to explain that when you see me and most people are like, but you're a guy and you have this freedom in the world to move as a guy. And that's why I tell people it's very complex when you're assigned female at birth and you have a masculine presentation that's only in aesthetic, you know what I mean? It's an aesthetic and the minute somebody pulls that aesthetic away, you're just as vulnerable as any other assigned female at birth person. Yes,

you carry a particular privilege and you need to note that it is your job to as best you can to, you know, deconstruct toxic masculinity. But we also have to name that these layers are real. And it's a very, it's a very, um, genuine safety concern that a lot of us have and we just don't often have those types of conversations.

Tiffany: [00:09:39](#) Tiffany: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, in just listening, you know, I think that's, that's not even a conversation that I hear. At least not the nuances of that being had when we're talking about, you know, there are all these States, including mine, I think including yours, I think North Carolina has one too, where people are talking about these bathroom bills and, and all of that. You know, we're not even having this conversation of, um, of what it's really like for people to actually try and figure out which bathroom is the appropriate one because what we really need is, um, gender neutral bathrooms so that people don't have to

Tiffany: [00:10:25](#) go through that as much.

Ilya: [00:10:26](#) Ilya: Right. Yeah. When we really began to unpack how gendered this society is, and it doesn't need to be, you know, even when you have grade school classes and you have oftentimes teachers separating the classes by gender, it's pointless. You know, it's really pointless even the way we have classes separated by age. And then as we move in society, a lot of young folks, um, we have like these intergenerational separations because a lot of young folks don't know how to coexist peacefully with elderly folks and vice versa, you know? But again, it starts with the way we rear each other, the way we rear our kids in a society. Like, I mean, we've created these systems.

Tiffany: [00:11:15](#) Tiffany: Yeah, we have. And so what was that like as you were starting to explore gender and sexuality growing up? What was that like when there was that moment? I mean, I can't imagine how many times, I'm just thinking back to how many different places and spaces within just the school experience, not even all the other places, camps and all of those things, right? Like what was that experience like?

Ilya: [00:11:44](#) Ilya: Oh man. Growing up in, in the, in the Bible belt South is difficult because you always feel like you're always for the way you really want to be liberated in your body and you always feel like you're doing something wrong. You know, I've often been told as a child that I was going to burn in hell and this was my family members. You know, that, that I was living in sin. And

there was always this push for me to, to go to church to, you know, get these sins lifted from my soul and to do my work and to get connected with God when really I always tell folks, I think those of us who exist beyond the gender binary, I think we're the closest spirituality spiritual wise, um, that you can get with humans on this planet because we move outside of the restriction of any type of identity.

Ilya:

[00:12:40](#)

You know, we're, we're more linked to spirit. And when you study historically the connections with deities, you'll often see that a lot of deities had both masculine and feminine components. And once you see the infusion of the church and the state, you see where it's this push to create these separate categories of man and woman. And also to tie in with, um, the lesbian and gay push to tie in the sexual deviance. You know, and that's why it's been a lot of over the years in the mental health communities, it's been a lot of categories for us. And like the DSM-IV and DSM-V manuals of like these sexual disorders when it's really just a person trying to live their truth and oftentimes it doesn't even have anything to do with the act of sex, you know, and, on a side note, I'm going to do a book review of Melissa Fabelo if folks aren't familiar, she wrote an amazing book about eating disorders in conjunction with sexuality and she does an amazing job at unpacking sexuality. And again, I didn't even know the extent of the layers that sexuality is based in, and so it's not just like you're, you know, the sex that you're assigned and it's not just like the sex that you have, it's so much more complex than that. So that's what I've been exploring. That's what I've been exploring a lot lately. Sorry, I'm rambling.

Tiffany:

[00:14:18](#)

Tiffany: No, that's so interesting. I'm really, I'm glad you said that. We'll include that book because I think that that is a really complex conversation and I, and I just think that so many of, you know, people like those of us that identify as, you know, cisgender, heterosexual, like society is made for us and therefore we've never even had to consider these different things or think about them. And so I think there's just a lot of a lack of awareness out there. And um, and going back to some of that, talking about how we start getting the categorization, um, in the DSM-IV and DSM-V, I mean that that perpetuates out amongst the medical community just in general. That's one thing that I'm, I'm interested to talk about because you have experience with the medical model, kind of both as a PTA, as somebody who works with medical exercise, like somebody who works in the medical community, but also I guess I'm assuming just as a human being that you've utilized healthcare at some point, so from, from both of those angles.

- Tiffany: [00:15:43](#) I'm really curious as to what your experience has been because, you know, I, um, just even coming at it from, as a physical therapist, I'm looking at, you know, our intake forms and like in every, every system I've ever worked in, the intake forms are very much like sex: male, female. Sometimes it says other, but there's no questioning about, uh, gender pronouns about anything like that. And that, to me, that would make a huge difference for a lot of people in their treatment.
- Ilya: [00:16:16](#) Ilya: Yes. And even when you do have those intake forms, um, because uh, Let me go back a little bit. The thing that really bothers me with
- Ilya: [00:16:28](#) westernized medicine is the way we categorize different body systems. And what I noticed in particular when I started working in acute care, you know, it used to be where you had like your primary care physician that would follow you to the hospital if you got sick and they knew your whole history and you were like a human to them. And so in acute care now you have the hospitalists and then you have, you know, then you have like the, all these other different specialties and they break every body part up, every system up, and then they kind of like have this one particular way that they want to treat the client, the patient, excuse me. And then they never really come together. And there's always like this tug of war. And then as a physical therapist it's like we just want you to come in and get these people up and out of the hospital because most of my experience is literally been in acute care.
- Ilya: [00:17:27](#) And so that in and of itself was difficult for me because then when you added the layer of race into that and how oftentimes I would notice that my patients would be, my, my black patients would be in severe pain and then you would have like all of the doctors, no matter the specialty would be like, Oh, they're just trying to get extra pain meds. Just get these people up. It was an assumption that they were a lot stronger than they were, that they can endure more. And so I even noticed the added layer when it came to trans folks, it was like, look, especially like trans women who might've had, who might've had facial hair or who didn't possess the characteristics of what passing entails, and it was just like, look, get this man up and outta here. I don't care what the paperworks says,
- Ilya: [00:18:15](#) I'm treating them for this particular condition. That's all that matters. Get them up, get them moving, get them gone. And that that's been really disturbing for me because you have so many doctors moving in and out of the rooms with these patients who spend very little time with them and then they

don't, the patient never feels empowered to say, Hey, but this is what I'm feeling. This is what I'm going through. And this is an automatic disconnect with our bodies because we have this doctor who almost playing God, especially when you have surgeons, cause we know surgeons got a lot of God complexes, you know, who are like they're playing God and then they come in and they tell you and you're looking at them like they know more about your body than you do. So yeah. I know I went a little bit further beyond the, you know, the intake forms, but I think it's so many layers with, yeah, with how, with how patients are treated in the healthcare system. And honestly, that's why I kind of wanted to tie in my medical exercise work with that because there's also a lot of patients, a lot of people who just can't even afford healthcare, let alone be able to receive the adequate health care that they need.

Tiffany:

[00:19:33](#)

Tiffany: And that's a whole other layer to the care that people are getting, right? Like the, even the hospitals where if you can't afford health insurance for instance, those hospitals are quite overcrowded. And so you're already going to have a disconnect between the patient and the providers. But then you add these extra layers of, um, of like implicit bias that go on in there. And you know, I think about that too, and, um, patients coming into any sort of medical facility are putting a lot of trust in these providers, right? Like these people hold a lot of power over access to really vital medications and, um, relief from pain or relief from suffering. And so I think about that too, even in, if we're talking about people who are coming in, like I would imagine that the second someone misgenders you who's in that position of power, like how much trust gets broken there. And I, you know, I mean, just even that, like that one simple act of, of not even being able to correctly, appropriately gender somebody creates more disconnection. Um, in really a, a field where, where need to be connecting with people on the most human level.

Ilya:

[00:21:15](#)

Ilya: Yes, you do. And, and you're, and you're at your most vulnerable when you're in the hospital. Even even the way you're clothed in the hospital, you know, you're very exposed with the gown and with people, you know, being in and out of your room. You know, and studies often show like, um, being in a hospital setting for an extended period of time, you literally have more sleep deprivation than someone in like a prison. Um, because you get, you get no sleep. Yeah. You get no sleep, don't get any sleep. You don't get any free hours. Right. Because I often say like even when I'm coming in early morning and treating patients, I'm like, Hey, the hospital's not to get sleep it's

to get well. And I try to make a joke of it, but I know how, I know how hard it is and how rough it is.

Ilya: [00:22:03](#) So when you have a doctor that comes in your room and they're doing rounds at three, four in the morning and they're calling you Mr, you know, and they're, and they're commenting, cause I've had patients where they're literally commenting on their face stubble because they haven't been able to access a razor because you know, oftentimes, you know, we can't utilize razors if they're on blood thinners and stuff in the hospital and they don't have access to family members that can bring in electric shavers and all of this different stuff. So then you have this trans person who's already dealing with the medical condition that they're in for. And more than likely they can't afford it. So the doctors aren't going to do any and everything that they need to do. They're not going to run a whole bunch of tests cause you broke, they're just not, they're going to do the basic minimal that they can do to get you out of that bed.

Ilya: [00:22:55](#) And it's so, so difficult. Um, a little story really quick. I was actually working at a hospital and during that time my grandmother was in that same hospital. She was very, very sick. She was close to dying at this point and my blood pressure was sky high. So my, my supervisor was like, Hey, you need to go down to the ER. That's how high my blood pressure was. And as soon as I got down to the downstairs to the ER, they literally put me in a wheelchair and rolled me over to triage. And so I was in the little triage waiting area and I knew, you know, most of the docs that were coming in and out on who the nurses and stuff and they still were misgendering me, and I worked there and they know me, they know me on a more personalized level, but they saw that, um, you know, my medical records noted female and they were literally just reading off of my chart and that's, that's all that mattered.

Tiffany: [00:23:57](#) Tiffany: Wow. So they know you and they're still not actually treating you like the human being that you are

Ilya: [00:24:02](#) once you've transitioned to that place of patient.

Ilya: [00:24:06](#) Ilya: Yeah, and I actually worked on the diversity and inclusion team that we had for the hospital cause it was a major, major, like level one trauma hospital. And, and I worked, um, uh, on that team for about two years, really with frontline staff was my primary goal to educate as many of the staff as we could. And they still mis-gender me as a patient. As an employee, as a coworker, as a friend. You know,

Tiffany: [00:24:40](#) Tiffany: That's, um, I want to say that's shocking. I actually feel like, I feel like I'm not shocked and it's shocking all the same time. Um, okay. I want to ask about some of that diversity inclusion training, but I'm, I'm curious about, you made me think of, when you were saying, you know, on the paperwork, you mark female and um, and so is that a case where you know, you, you have to mark female and then there's, there's no actual way to indicate on the paperwork

Tiffany: [00:25:24](#) what gender pronouns you use or is that all they look at?

Ilya: [00:25:29](#) Ilya: Yeah, I think for those of us who don't, because it's a, it's a whole paper trail that you have to create. Um, the onus is on you as a trans person to get your, if you can, in that state, to get your identification changed, to get your birth certificate changed, to try to get, you know, to get some type of passport or some documentation that will allow for, you know, your gender identity to be recognized in a particular way. And that's also costly and that's very difficult. Especially like I always say for those of us in the rural South, and I've been doing this activism work for a long time and I still can't afford, um, a lot of those things and I just don't have the time, you know, to do all that.

Ilya: [00:26:13](#) It's really time consuming. So what happens is, you know, in these, in these institutions, you're female because that's what your birth certificate says. That's what's linked to your social security card. And so, you know, if I'm filling out an intake form that doesn't have the option, I usually write it in, but that's not recognized, you know, they're like, whatever, you know, they get the answer from the computer and they don't put that in the computer, they're not going to. Even if I asked them. And again, the onus shouldn't be on me. You know, if I'm, if I'm a patron in your establishment, if a consumer or a customer, you know, you should be doing all that you can do as a business to make sure every single one of your customers, every single one of your patients in the doctor's office feels welcome. And so if, you know, especially if you're doing the work of the type of clientele you serve, the populations you serve, and you see that you may have, you know, a small percentage that are, you know, transgender, nonconforming, then you need to do the educating.

Ilya: [00:27:09](#) You need to educate yourself and see how you can, you know, adjust your paperwork, adjust your intake process. Like these things aren't difficult, you know, and it, and that was the type of work that, that I was doing on the, um, diversity and inclusion board. But that was very, the reason why I stepped down from

that board was, you know, I'm a community activist. I've been doing activism work for at least 15 plus years now. And they were literally reaching out to cisgender heterosexual people to, to facilitate a lot of these educational trainings. And I just thought it was a slap in the face, um, that, you know, they wouldn't ask me. They wanted me to be tokenized and exploited on their board, um, to diversify their board, but then they didn't want to utilize me and my experiences, you know, as a patient, as someone who has had this happened to them, you know, directly, you know what I mean? So, yeah.

- Tiffany: [00:28:08](#) Tiffany: So you were, you were on the board, but you weren't actually then brought in to do the trainings to speak on behalf of the organization? Ugh.
- Ilya: [00:28:20](#) Ilya: Nope. And then I would show up to the, to the meetings, cause we have a monthly, you know, hour long meeting and we sit in a big office around the oval table and you know, I could share there. And oftentimes I was met with a lot of pushback because my ideas were too radical. And they'd often say, well, we'll contact, that's a great idea. Let's contact so-and-so to get that started. And I'd be like, well, Hey, you know, maybe I could be on the planning committee, maybe, you know, I could sit in and maybe talk to that person and educate them. And then maybe they could be the one that presents it. No, no, we're good. And then I just said, you know, well the hell with it. Yeah. I'll stick to grassroots organizing. That's where I see the most change.
- Tiffany: [00:29:07](#) Tiffany: Okay. Which is too bad because it seems like that's a lot of time and energy spent, um, for, for not a lot of change to actually happen. And I see, you know, I'm thinking about in the physical therapy world, I just recently learned about, um, about an organization. It's called, uh, it's called PT Proud. And like their purpose is to, is to educate physical therapists,
- Tiffany: [00:29:44](#) um, about
- Tiffany: [00:29:46](#) issues and like things that we can do as a profession to create more inclusion in our profession for, um, LGBTQIA+
- Tiffany: [00:29:59](#) patients and also, um, colleagues and things like that. And, but even that is like a separate group that's having to come in and, and I, and I've heard them on podcasts and I've, I've seen them some places, but I would really love to see a lot more action based on their, on the recommendations that are coming in.

Tiffany: [00:30:35](#) I assume that lots of organizations have, have these boards and committees and like groups, but I wonder how much of that is getting implemented and how much of it is a publicity.

Ilya: [00:30:47](#) Ilya: That's true. That's true. I do love that that's in existence. Um, cause I will say, yeah, I'll have to check them out because I will say, you know, I worked in a very massive rehab department. I think we had over 150 PTs, OTs and speech therapists. And my, the director actually recommended me and she put in a good word for me and that's how I was even able to get on a diversity and inclusion board. So within my career, like I've been very much, with the exception of my PT schooling, they were a little bit homophobic, but they were more so racist. I think I've experienced the most racism in the PT field, but as far as, um, support for me being trans and my queerness has always been, I've never received any pushback for that. No discrimination.

Ilya: [00:31:43](#) Um, yeah. At least in my, my experience over the past 10 years. That I can say, you know, but um, but the hospital. I think especially working in North Carolina as a PT assistant, very much a good old boy network out here. Yeah. Yeah. It's very much who you know, it's like, Oh, Hey, yeah, we can make a simple phone call, we can get your job at the X and Y hospital. Like, it's a network of just, you just have to be, you just have to be in that network. Yeah. Yeah.

Tiffany: [00:32:23](#) Tiffany: Oh, that's very interesting. Um, so

Tiffany: [00:32:28](#) that makes me want to ask then I guess about what it's been like because you, you're very open. It seems to me all of your, I mean, obviously you've got a podcast, you talk about it in public on all the time. You're really open about your experience, about your sexuality, about your gender. Um, and so I wonder if, do you feel like there's, what's the trade off of that feeling of liberation or freedom in that and being open about it, versus like, where is it that you feel, um, vulnerable discrimination and, or, unsafe in that openness?

Ilya: [00:33:15](#) Ilya: Hm. I think I'll say this, the online community, which is where my most of my openness is online behind a computer. I don't feel safe. Uh, well, I feel more safe in the city that I've moved to. I don't feel safe day to day to be as free as I am. You know but online I've developed a huge network of support, which allows me to be vocal and, you know, my, my platform continues to rise because I literally, and I tell people this a lot, like I wake up in the morning, I sit on the toilet, I reflect and I write and then I put it out. And that's just my ritual and it's, it

has been so like cathartic for me because that's just really how I find liberation, at least in this day in time. But day to day I've S I've experienced so much struggle with trying to find employment with, um, with really, um, getting my business off of the ground in a brick and mortar sense.

Ilya:

[00:34:22](#)

And so when I go to my online community and I get the support from people all over the world, but then in my local areas, even in my silos, I'm like outcasted. It is hard. It really, truly is. And if people, you know, check out my following, most of my support does not even come from the state that I live in. The state that I grew up in. You know, most of my support honestly comes from like New York or West coast. And that's hard. Um, yeah. And um, you know, people think that, Oh well your platform just grew and you outgrew, you know, your hometown. And it's like, no, even when my platform was small, even when I just was starting out and this was the idea I never had support locally. Yeah. I never felt, yeah, I never, I tried to, you know, drive my liberation through my activism work, um, you know, on the streets and communities. But I think that was just in response. Like most activism work is like a reaction to a problem that has occurred and we're just putting fires out. But you know, trying to, to really move in, in this space of liberating fitness so to speak, has been all online.

Tiffany:

[00:35:45](#)

Tiffany: Oh, that is very interesting. And, and I could see that. I've, I've heard, I've heard people say before, almost like a thank goodness for the internet and social media from the perspective of being able to find community with people with similar identities. Whereas within your local community. I guess the question is, you know, it's hard to know. Are there just, just not as many people with kind of those same identities or is there too much fear around being open about it I wonder?

Ilya:

[00:36:28](#)

Ilya: Yeah, it's a lot of fear. North Carolina as we, as we kind of mentioned a little earlier, North Carolina is a state that has some of the most dreadful anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation in existence. And so at every turn and my, my girlfriend who is an attorney and also is a social justice advocate and that's how we met, um, she's been doing this work for 10 plus years as well. And so at every turn they're trying to really fight the legislation. But you know, these politicians in the deep stealth of the night are putting these things on the books and it's just like constant. So that's the restrictive state that we live in and, and it's a police state. It's a heavily policed state, like most States in the South are. And it's just, it's just difficult to move. It's difficult to gain any kind of traction with putting these movements in place in a state like this because they just have the boot on your neck.

And so thank God, like you named, thank God for online communities. Thank God. That now I'm in a place where I can travel more and be in person with some of these networks, you know? And that makes me feel good. Yeah.

Tiffany: [00:37:53](#) Tiffany: Yes. I'm so glad you're doing that. And so this is all through your organization, Decolonizing Fitness?

Ilya: [00:38:00](#) Ilya: Yes, yes. Most of it. Yeah. Most of my work now since decolonizing fitness has grown, because I had, let me back up a little bit. I had started a fitness business and it was named Forseca Fitness. And I just recently put a post up about this on my Instagram. It was dedicated to my late friend, Big J Forseca, who actually started out as a patient of mine in the hospital. He died of lung cancer and we became really good friends and on the days when he would feel good, he was a black trans person, on the days that he would feel good, we would do a little bit of light physical activity. And he was just like, wow, you really need to number one, find a way to train more trans masculine folks because of your thoughtfulness, your lived experiences as a trans masculine person,

Ilya: [00:38:58](#) Um, the way you utilize fitness as more like a healing modality, you know, the world needs that. And so when he passed away I said, you know, I'm going to do this. And so Forseca Fitness was a dud. It just was too radical at the time. And this was like, I think I kinda sorta started around 2012, made it official in like 2015 and it just, nobody was really gravitating to it. And then I said, well, Hey, you know what, let me, um, let me design a couple of tee shirts and then maybe push some merch out and see if I can spread the word a little bit more. And then my first tee shirt design was decolonizing fitness, and so I put the logo up on my Facebook page and instantly people thought I had rebranded myself. And so that's how Decolonizing Fitness was birthed, like, folks were like, Oh my God, we're gravitating to this. You know, they would just gravitate into this, oh My God, we love it. We love the message. And it was the same content. And so I gained like 5,000 followers overnight.

Tiffany: [00:40:09](#) Tiffany: Oh my gosh. The power of the tee shirt right?

Ilya: [00:40:18](#) Ilya: I'm telling you, Oh my goodness. And so I felt more emboldened to really bring my social justice work into fitness and then it just took off from there.

Tiffany: [00:40:33](#) Tiffany: I love that. I guess it does make sense because the word decolonizing is, to me, is a signaling word at least. So I almost feel like, uh, it was a really happy accident there because you

look at that and you're like, Oh, I sort of know, I have an idea of at least the direction this is going to take and I want to learn more, you know? So I think it's great because, because of course, you know that I found it, I can't even remember how I found it, but I'm sure I was Googling or I saw something on Facebook or who knows how, because it's been a little while now that I've been following you. And, um, and I'm sure that I saw something like that and I was like, Oh, I'm curious to learn more based on the actual name of this organization. Um, yeah, cause it, it really is. It's, it's powerful and it's engaging. And so what is, what are some of the, the things that you focus on within your activism? Because the organization is, you know, are you training individuals? Are you doing groups? Are you training personal trainers? I'm curious as to what all your avenues are.

Ilya:

[00:41:54](#)

Ilya: Yes. So I, I do want to say that decolonizing fitness, I'm using it as a metaphor, as way of breaking free, moving from toxic fitness culture, um, liberating purposeful movement. But I want to honor that I am for the sovereignty of African and Indigenous folks, um, throughout the world. You know, because I have had Indigenous communities that have, you know, came to me and asked why I'm using the word in this way. So I definitely want to acknowledge and honor that, that we are on stolen land. So, I started out training and training my friends who were trans folks, um, and training diverse bodies. Because of my medical background, I've always been able to train folks in larger bodies, disabled folks, folks who have a chronic medical conditions. So that's the core of decolonizing fitness is providing medicalized fitness programs as well as just basic personal training for one-on-one, online, groups.

Ilya:

[00:43:04](#)

I have, lately I've have had a wave of couples trainings that I've been doing. So that's been really cool. Yes, yes. So that's always available. And all of this is on my website, [decolonizingfitness.com](#). And then as I infuse more of my social justice work in, I, I noticed, you know that because you don't need really, you don't need to be linked to an accrediting body as a personal trainer, people are just literally calling themselves personal trainers and don't know anything, and they especially aren't educated and working with diverse bodies. So I do have an educational piece that I offer which I'll be rolling out more soon. Online webinar courses. I do have two eBooks available for people to download to learn how to work with more diverse populations. I really would like to educate folks in corporate spaces, big box gyms, boutique studios.

- Ilya: [00:44:07](#) So I do that. I provide in-person workshops. Right now I really am trying to, and I'll do more with, crowd funding because I'm really trying to get a physical space, you know, something that I can afford to rent so I can have in person workshops. And then and then I have the medical exercise piece, which I'll, um, I'm going to take time to start putting more work into that because that's a whole entity in itself that I really want to expand. Yeah. Cause I have, I have a few clients, Like when I started out doing my personal training work, most of my clients were actually in the home setting. And I struggle because I've worked as a PTA, I've worked in home health settings and, and some of it seems to overlap, but you know, I always have to practice within my scope and maintain PTA licensure of course.
- Ilya: [00:45:06](#) So, but I've had, you know, I've had clients that have been bed bound. You know, I've had clients who have maxed out their physical therapy services. I've had clients who can't afford physical therapy, who are uninsured. I've had clients who keep going through this perpetual loop of going to the hospital and then, you know, getting booted out, then getting sick and having to come back. And I just want to break that cycle for people, especially trans people, trans people who are also poor, black, uninsured, you know, living in the South. So I really feel like medical exercise is, is a wave of the future that I want to expand upon. And then lastly, excuse me for rambling. My, my last piece is the merch, the online merch that I sell, 90% of the money that I make from my online merch pours back into my business.
- Ilya: [00:46:00](#) And that's why I'm also able to train people who are marginalized for free or at a very, very reduced price. And, the only thing about that is when my tee shirt sales are down, nothing is getting poured back into that pot. So I'm coming out of pocket and because I still, I never turn away people who, or very rarely turn away people who want to utilize my services and who cannot afford to.
- Tiffany: [00:46:27](#) Tiffany: Which is a beautiful thing to do. But can be really straining on the pocketbook.
- Ilya: [00:46:33](#) Ilya: Right, right, right. Yeah. And I was using, you know, a good chunk of my money when I was working a nine to five to offset those costs. Now I'm trying to rely on my business more because I believe in my business that I know that I'll sustain, you know, with my business alone, but it's, it's been a struggle.
- Ilya: [00:46:55](#) It's been a financial struggle for sure.

Tiffany: [00:46:58](#) Tiffany: I believe that. Yeah. Can you say a little more about toxic fitness culture?

Ilya: [00:47:06](#) Ilya: Yes. Oh my goodness. So toxic fitness culture is mainstream fitness, toxic fitness culture is the fitness that everybody is introduced when you want to start working out. It's the fitness that shames you, blames you for the way your body shows up, doesn't take in account the social determinants of health. And that many of us who are on restrictive diets, cannot maintain that, actually do more damage to our body just for the sake of looking like we're healthy. Toxic fitness is in conjunction with diet culture. And says that the smaller you are, the healthier you are and we, we should know this is not true. Um, so I have at every, every area of my business I seek to disrupt toxic fitness culture.

Ilya: [00:48:05](#) Toxic fitness culture is also the culture that created big box gyms. It's also the culture that created boutique gyms in gentrified areas, which I'll be talking more about that on my Patreon. Toxic fitness culture only caters to a certain group, a certain population of people which are able body people, thin people, young people, um, and people who fit into like more of a heteronormative category. Toxic fitness culture does not celebrate diverse bodies. They police diverse bodies, they shame diverse bodies. And so we really need to think about that no matter what part of the fitness industry or the movement industry you're in, how you are, because we all uphold toxic fitness. When I look in the mirror and I'm like, you know, mad because I have this extra roll that I didn't have a couple of months ago, you know, and I feel like I need to go jump on the treadmill and not eat that donut. I mean, I'm engaging in toxic fitness. So, yeah, that's what it means to me.

Tiffany: [00:49:16](#) Tiffany: Thank you for that.

Ilya: [00:49:18](#) Ilya: You welcome.

Tiffany: [00:49:18](#) Tiffany: We get those messages everywhere too,

Tiffany: [00:49:20](#) right? Whether you're seeking to engage in, in fitness culture of some kind or not, like even just watching tv. I mean, I was watching a TV show and gosh, it could be basically any show, and I just cannot believe how many times fat bodies are used as, um, like the butt of a joke or a used as a prop to bolster this ideal, this toxic fitness ideal. Um, or how many times, you know, it's weight loss or exercise or dieting or whatever, are mentioned just in

- Tiffany: [00:50:16](#) one episode of a TV show or movies or all of these places. It's so difficult to,
- Tiffany: [00:50:24](#) to escape. And I think, like you talk about, that culture infiltrate the places that people are supposed to go in order to get quote unquote healthier. And so if people are inhabiting bodies that then get blamed and shamed, why, why would we want to go to these places? So I feel like there's also, so to me, I think that's why I'm so excited about what you're doing because, um, any place where people can go and feel like they can be uplifted in whatever they're trying to accomplish through movement, you know, whatever it is that, um, that movement is, is they're intending for movement to do for them, right? Like can they be supported and uplifted in that? Um, and so I feel like, to me that's what it sounds like you're doing. And, and in that way, you're also attracting people who might otherwise be really turned off by the idea of movement, exercise, whatever.
- Ilya: [00:51:45](#) Ilya: Yes. Yes. And I, and I actually received a lot of pushback when I started talking about fitness because oftentimes, you know, those of us who are most marginalized, fitness is not an industry for us. This is, especially if I'm dealing with, um, body dysmorphia and gender dysphoria. You know, when I, when I enter into a gym and you know, I'm a trans person who's in a larger body, you know, I'm going to get stares. If it's a smaller space, I'm not going to feel comfortable working out. I may not even know what to do. And so that's why I often talk about fitness.
- Ilya: [00:52:32](#) being used in the healing aspect to bring me back into my body because a lot of trans people are, we're in our heads because we have to analyze the world in a particular way. And if we're, if we have enough language to name our oppression, it's it's a very much of a disconnect between the body in the mind. You know, it's just, I'm always thinking about these systems, but then the system is giving me physical push back of how my body shows up. And so I want to move, remove myself from my body. You know, and this even is, I've even had clients who, and it's a difficult conversation, but I've had to talk to them about hygiene care. I've had trans patients who, and you have every right, a person has every right to move in their body, do what they want with their body.
- Ilya: [00:53:28](#) But if I'm gonna work with you and you know, especially if I've have other people in the space and then it's a small setting and you know, we're smelling things and we may need to have this conversation and I'll pull you to the side and we'll have a deep conversation. And I've had clients who've been like, you know

what, I'm so disconnected from my body. I don't even want to bathe it. I don't even want to engage in self care practices or rituals like that, because I'm so disconnected to my body, you know, because when I was really, really experiencing heavy gender dysphoria, I felt that. There was oftentimes when I did not bathe, I especially couldn't even look in the mirror like if I did bathe and dry off. So now I'm very intentional about making sure, you know, I'm saying loving, affirming things to myself when I'm drying off, when I'm, you know, when I'm touching my body and, and just, you know, thanking it for showing up the way it does.

Tiffany:

[00:54:40](#)

Tiffany: Yeah. That's so important. And I can see how it would be so difficult with anybody who for whatever reason feels disconnected from their body. But then you add the layer of the system that celebrates binary and does not celebrate anything that, that deviates from that. Right? Like I could see how that additional, um, like no matter how many affirming things you say about your own body, there's still that messaging coming in. So I could see how that would add an extra layer of challenge. And it makes me wonder too, as you're talking about going into sort of a gym setting of any kind, or any sort of, you know, fitness, wellness space that's set up in such a way, that just is, is sort of enforcing the, the typical binary we all sort of live in. It makes me wonder how do you even know what you're supposed to be trying to achieve with your body if you identify as non-binary or as trans, right? Because we also have these, these images of if you are a woman, this is what you're supposed to be trying to achieve with your body. And if you are a man, this is what you are supposed to be trying to achieve with your body. And so like if you walk in and you're trans or you're non-binary, what, what do you do?

Ilya:

[00:56:19](#)

Ilya: Right? And that's the whole point. If it weren't for the cisgender standards, there were, there wouldn't even be a need for trans cause it literally would just be a whole bunch of humans showing up however they want it to. And so with the trans component, you're simply trying to mimic what cisgender heteronormativity embodies. Um, and when you deviate from that, even the sheer fact that it's viewed as a deviation is difficult for me because you're literally just trying to show up and look how you want to look. But what the medicalization of trans, and when I named that, that means the whole, um, rigorous way that we have to undergo gender affirming surgeries and take hormones and look a certain way, and bind and, you know, do all these things. Trans women have to make sure their unique aesthetic is always on point.

- Ilya: [00:57:22](#) And trans men have to make sure that their shoulders are broad and make sure their breasts aren't showing, you know, and, and all of these things is because cisgender is the barometer of which we all have to live to feel safe because if we quote unquote deviate, there were targeted. And then on the flip side, the more visible trans people are, as we can see in today's political climate, we're more visible, but trans murders are on the rise and they're finally, um, I can't remember the governing body, but they're finally deeming trans murders as an epidemic. I think it's the medical association. Uh, yeah, but that's something that's been going on because visibility does not equal safety. You know, just because you have more trans people on TV shows, you see more trans people working out in gyms. First of all, you don't know who's trans or who's not.
- Ilya: [00:58:20](#) Trans doesn't have a look. So let's name that. But you still, you see this, you know, this big push of trans people being more visible. And you also see a rise of trans hate crimes all over the country. So it's, it's becoming a huge safety concern. And oftentimes we're spending spending loads of money and labor and time just trying to look like cis folks.
- Tiffany: [00:58:49](#) Tiffany: Yeah, that's such a good point. Like even the fact that it feels necessary to do that. And I also know, I know, I also want to name that, that there are people who have, have said that getting a gender affirming surgery, it's truly affirming for them. It's like there's no shame or like it's not wrong to do that.
- Tiffany: [00:59:22](#) And yet, why does that feel necessary sometimes? Like is it because we're so steeped in the conditioning that says, you know, feminine one has one look and masculine has another look? And when you said that, like all I can think about now, it's like, Oh my gosh, what would it be like if they're wasn't cis and trans? And it was all just
- Tiffany: [00:59:54](#) people. Like we didn't have, we didn't have to identify people as man, woman, trans. We didn't have to, like we didn't have to have the label. Um, now all I can think about is pondering what that would actually be like and how that would change things for all of us. Because one of the reasons why to me it's so important to have voices like yours, from trans folks, from queer folks in this conversation is, Um, I think that the way that we in our culture put so much emphasis and importance on these gender stereotypes and like gender norms, quote unquote norms. It harms everyone. And so to me, advocating for trans rights, for the rights of queer folks, non-binary folks everywhere, like to me that's actually advocating for a better world for everyone.

Ilya: [01:01:05](#) Ilya: Absolutely.

Ilya: [01:01:06](#) Yeah. And and I do want to note that. Cause oftentimes when we say, well, you know, everyone should just be free to live how they live. That's absolutely true. That's a liberating world that I'd love to be a part of in this lifetime. But I also don't want that to be conflated with, Oh, we all bleed red. We're all humans and we should minimize the complexities that we carry because if, if cis het people genuinely, um, interrogate how they show up, they'd see how many ways they actually break the binary. They'd see how many ways that they live beyond the gender roles that they are ascribing to, like no one does. You know, for example, my brother, you know, he has three girls and he does every one of my nieces' hair. He cooks, he cleans. He's also the primary bread winner, but he genuinely feels good, you know, being more of a nurturing parent.

Ilya: [01:02:07](#) He lives outside of the gender roles of typically what a, what a black man in particular carries. And he's comfortable in that and he still, yeah, he still can move, you know, in the cis het masculine realm and, and, you know, engage in those practices and his wife feels fine with that and there's nothing wrong. Yeah. There's nothing wrong with that. Just just imagine if we could explore with our gender expression and not receive any pushback, even if we identified as heterosexual as cisgender, you know? Yeah. Like people would totally do that if they could, if they could, if a cis het woman could shave her head and not say, well, Oh, you know, you know, I just, something happened, traumatic, and I lost my hair or this or that. Or just was like, you know what? I want a buzz cut today and I don't want to wear earrings or lipstick. I just, this is just what I want to do and not receive any pushback, in fact receive love for that. How many people would do that shit all the time? Oh, I bet so many. Yeah. That's why a lot of people gravitate to these cities where they can just be free, you know? And live in these places where they can just show up and people still like, Hey, you're cool to me.

Tiffany: [01:03:33](#) Tiffany: And what, in what ways can each and every one of us do better with the assumptions that we make and with how we, with how we treat people. I guess I always think about that too.

Ilya: [01:03:51](#) Ilya: Yeah. Yeah, and that's a really good question and that's, it's such a simple answer is really, really meeting every human you come across, especially the ones that exist outside of your small social bubble and just meet them with respect because you don't know, you, you can't assume. I get that a lot like when I, I've talked about this on my podcast when I show up in other States and, um, well really in particular North Carolina actually

when I do panels and stuff and all of these workshops and people want to bring decolonizing fitness and even when I was doing my social justice work, but now more so that I oftentimes don't put my face out as decolonizing fitness.

- Ilya: [01:04:38](#) So most people think, really most people think that this is like a nonprofit that's ran by white people, white queer people. I get that most often when I get DM's on Instagram, they're like, Oh yeah, who's on your board? And you know, are you linked with the human rights campaign and all this different stuff. And, um, and so when I show up and people are like, Oh yeah, let's welcome decolonizing fitness. Then I stand up and you know, people are cheering inside the workshop. But these were the same people that were looking at me differently when I was just a brother walking beside them in the conference. You know, I get that so much. So it's like that. Don't assume, you don't know. I don't care how many people you've seen that look like me, because the brain loves to compartmentalize. You take one thing and then anything else that feels like that or looks like that instantly you want to attach it to that meaning don't do that. Just meet them with respect. You have no idea who they are, what they're about. Yeah.
- Tiffany: [01:05:46](#) Tiffany: And you're right, our brains, our brains are hardwired to do that. So I mean, so we can also give ourselves, you know, a little bit of compassion for recognizing that yeah, that is how our brains work, and we have to intentionally practice disrupting some of those patterns so that we cause less harm in the world. Like, I need to do that. Everyone needs to do that.
- Ilya: [01:06:10](#) Ilya: Especially if we're doing this work, yeah, if we're in any kind of activism.
- Tiffany: [01:06:14](#) Tiffany: Right and you have to practice, and part of practice is like actually making mistakes and owning up to those mistakes and doing better the next time too. So I think that we can all do that, and I know something that's really supportive in that is actually, um, following and listening to and reading the words of people that do this work all the time, like you, so I'm so glad that we have this resource and you do, so you've already said we can find you at decolonizingfitness.com. Um, but you also have your podcast, which is now on, it's on Apple podcast now.
- Ilya: [01:06:55](#) Ilya: Yes, yes, it is, Spotify. Apple. Thank you so much. Yes, thank you. Thank you.

Ilya: [01:07:02](#) We're, my cohost and I, we're really trying to grow our podcast platform. Um, so I'm so excited. But yeah, we're on Spotify, Apple and SoundCloud, I believe,

Tiffany: [01:07:15](#) Tiffany: and SoundCloud and we can support you through your Patreon yeah?

Ilya: [01:07:17](#) Ilya: Yes,

Ilya: [01:07:18](#) absolutely. I am halfway to my patreon mark, I'm just kind of hovering at the halfway point. As soon as I hit a 200 patrons, I will have enough income to be able to work full time on creating a continuing ed course that I'll be rolling out through ACE fitness. So I'm super excited.

Tiffany: [01:07:40](#) Tiffany: Whoa through ACE Fitness? I'm so excited about that.

Ilya: [01:07:47](#) Ilya: Absolutely. And I'll be, I'll be putting more up on my patreon, um, I have the most amazing patreon members, but yeah, you can join for as little as \$5 a month and I'm consistently putting up patreon content, so I'm, and that patreon content, you won't find anywhere else on any of my social media platforms. So, and also with the \$5 a month membership, you get extensive show notes because there is a lot stuff that I don't get to all my podcasts because I'm just like in rant mode and I'm just on. I'm just on one and then once I like let the dust settle and I'm like, Oh God, I left a lot of things out. So that's what I tend to put on my show notes. And that'll help me also offset the costs so I can begin to have transcription available for all of the podcasts too as well.

Tiffany: [01:08:43](#) Tiffany: Awesome. Which I know costs money now because I've been transcribing all these videos for this conference. That's expensive. Yes. Awesome. Um, and then you're on Instagram, you're on Facebook. at decolonizing. Is it @decolonizing_fitness on Instagram?

Ilya: [01:09:05](#) Ilya: Yes. @decolonizing_fitness on Instagram and that's, that's my most heavily used platform. Um, I'm pretty engaging on that platform, so feel free to DM me. Uh, if you have any questions, you can definitely hit me up on Instagram and Facebook.

Tiffany: [01:09:25](#) Tiffany: Fantastic. Ilya, thank you so much for this conversation. I am really, really grateful for you. Thank you.

Pura Fe Sings: [01:09:31](#) Pura Fe Sings: True freedom unleashes the power of unity. Enables us to feel our empathy and compassion with a true

sense of identity. Who are we? Powerful beyond measure. Who are we? Power of the creator...