

Episode 2.28 Girls Resist! with KaeLyn Rich

August 10, 2018

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] I'm Hannah McGregor and this is Secret Feminist Agenda. And it is, so, so goddamn hot right now. It's the first week of August and it is stinking hot and Vancouver and tomorrow I'm headed to Edmonton and it's going to be stinking hot there too, and it makes me so sleepy and so tired and so I'm trying to do as a-week-ago-Hannah has suggested and just be okay with the fact that every task or two I then have to go just lie down for a couple of minutes and just think about how hot it is. Probably I should be like, drinking more cold water and just having a mid afternoon siesta, but that's the next stage of having figured out how to slow down. I haven't reached that level of sophistication yet. For now I'm just sticking with a staring into the middle distance in a sort of heat drunk stupor. 8/10, moderate recommendation. As I mentioned, I am headed off to Edmonton to do various things, mostly oriented around visiting friends and also a little bit of podcast recording. So I'm recording this episode a little bit early because I guess part of going slow is also maybe trying to make this time in Edmonton a gasp second vacation. Too much. It's too much. It's overkill. It's too many vacations. It's practically indecent. Anyway, this is all the heat talking. Let's let's go meet KaeLyn. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] KaeLyn Rich is a staff writer for the popular queer women's website, autostraddle.com, a feminist direct action organizer, nonprofit lifer, and sexuality educator. She is the assistant advocacy director of the ACLU of New York and former community affairs coordinator for Planned Parenthood of Central and Western New York. She skyped in with me to chat about her new book. [Music: "Run the World (Girls)" by Beyonce]

Hannah (Host): So we're gonna jump right in. We are talking today about your book Girls Resist: A Guide to Activism, Leadership and Starting a Revolution, which gives me a little tingle every time I read the title. And I was wondering if you could just start off for the listener is selling them a little bit about what the book is about.

KaeLyn: Yeah, so this book is the culmination of just under a year's worth of work, it came together really quickly. It's a guidebook.

Hannah (Host): Just under a year. Wild. That's such a fast pace in which to write a book. Wow.

KaeLyn: Yes, it was a lot. [Laughs] So, you know, this book is a handbook. It's a guidebook for girls specifically, although it's really, information's applicable to anyone of any age and any gender, about how to organize a campaign, how did you get active in your community. I think what makes it different than other books out there on a similar topic is that it's not just stories of inspiration, and those stories are really important to tell, and I think this is a good companion to many of the other books coming out right now that are about sort of like voices of young activists, of millennial activists. I think this is a good companion to that book because this is really about the nitty gritty. So it's a little bit about

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

organizing theory. It's like, why we do this work, how we do it in an intersectional way, like, you know, let's unpack the word "allyship" and what that really means to stand in solidarity. How do you do self care? Why is that important? And it's also the like, really functional tools for how to build a campaign. So, you know, how do you pick an issue? Well, you know, what is the target, why does it have to be a person? How do you do fundraising? How do you work if you have no money at all and still pull something that's really cool and exciting? How do you work with the media? How do you write a press release? So it's these really like functional tools that just like putting out there on the world for girls to take and make their own. Like they're the ones they're going to tell us what, what the future of feminism, what the future of political action looks like. And to me, this is filling this gap in the world where, even though women and girls have been meant leaders from the very beginning, we're not the ones that get written down in history books or, or have those sort of systemic ways of passing down information to each other. So this is sort of that. It's not really passing the torch. It's more of a sharing a toolbox, you know, because our standing in solidarity with young girls today who are already so smart, and so engaged, and so thoughtful about how they want to change them.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, there's so many, there's such potential for sort of intergenerational feminist relationships built into this, right? The idea that there's a set of tools that can be shared, a set of understandings of how you bring things into action without necessarily, I mean, one of the things, the book doesn't do is hand down particular projects. It doesn't make claims for what the content of the activism needs to be. Instead, as you said it, like it offers a sort of toolkit for whatever people are going to take on.

Kaelyn: Yeah, I think so often we tell, when we talk about girls and activism, and there hasn't been that much historically. I think more recently there's been sort of like a groundswell of similar sort of Y Resist and Never Again the Parkland students' book that just came out. There's, there's more, you know, Malala has like a whole, like bookshelf full of books for all ages. Those stories are so important and I'm so glad they exist. I think this is sort of like a companion to that because we spent a lot of time telling girls why they matter, which is important because the world tells them they don't. And we spent a lot of time telling them like why, why they should exist and also like why they should take action, and then this looks a little different in that it assumes that whether they've articulated it in their own words or not, girls already know why the world is unfair and this is more about like, so how, how do you fight back?

Hannah (Host): Yeah. So does this emerge out of a sort of a history of activism for you? Were you a girl activist?

Kaelyn: Yes and no. I mean, I, so similar to some readers, I wouldn't say that my activism was framed in exactly this way until I was maybe in college. But I, from a very early age, I saw what I would now characterize as activism around me or participated in what we would call service learning in my day. Back then participated in engaging community and sort of seeing what it was like to give

back. Less of the taking action to more of the giving back, I would say was sort of the framework that I, I grew up with. But this idea that the world isn't equitable and there are people who don't have the same access to things that maybe I did growing up and then I should give back. That was a really core part of my growing up. My parents were both union leaders and teachers. So I, you know, my earliest memories of seeing people doing something that I would now call organizing was like, helping them stuff folders for their union meetings around our dining room table. You know, and I didn't really understand it. I didn't really know what was happening. But, it was sort of like a part of my family history to stand up for what you believe in. I think personally, as just someone who stood out where I grew up, like I grew up in a rural place. I'm, I'm queer, and I'm Korean, and I was like the only Asian kid in my grade. And you know, so having a personal identity, or really an identity crisis growing up did it caused me to have to stand up for myself at an early age, and then led me to feel compelled to stand up for other people too who I also saw were being treated unfairly. So I'd say yes and no. Like certainly, I found my voice in college specifically as a feminist activist and leader from an early age I was doing things that were more about finding my place in the world. But I think about this book and like I wish it existed for someone when, when I was that age because I, you know, I already had all the ideas. I just needed someone to sort of open that door for me, which for me didn't happen to, into college of saying like, "all these things that are happening in the world are real and like all of these experiences you had are also real and are messed up and like you deserve more and you can, you can do more."

Hannah (Host):

The gradual and gaslighting of growing up. Right? Yeah, and I had a very similar experience reading the book of thinking, "Gosh, I wish this had existed when I was young and full of a lot of energy and very little sense of what to do with any of it, but a great sense of injustice." And that, that I don't know that that resistance to gaslighting feels to me like also a sort of structural part of the culture of youth activism, which is an insistence on saying that, that the voices of those— I mean we tell young people all the time that their strong feelings about things are a function of their youth rather than a function of the way the world is structured and that they'll grow out of it into the default adult numbness. And I, you know, we can see that happening in all kinds of responses to, as you say, to millennial activists today that telling them that they are foolish in their youth for thinking that they're allowed to fight back against things. So do you, I'm interested really in that, in that point that you made about the long history of girls' activism and not sort of claiming that this book is, is inventing it, but rather sort of, you know, picking up on a history that exists. And at the same time, as you pointed out, you know, millennial activism, girls' activism is having a moment. So do you think that there is something that is happening right now or has happened in the last couple of years that has given rise to a new movement of girl activists?

Kaelyn:

That's a great question. I don't have the sociology degree to like deep dive into a historical analysis. I will say this, I mean, I think interestingly, people think this book is a response to Donald Trump and it's not, but it's also not, not. So, you

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

know, the idea for, so I actually didn't come to the idea of this book on my own. My background is in both professional and community organizing and activism and policy and blah, blah, blah. All of that stuff. I worked for Planned Parenthood. I currently work at ACLU of New York. I've done direct service jobs and I've done a lot of community action myself just outside of my work and my personal life. And I started as a, as a college activist, so like this history and then my family history as well, and I'm also a writer. So I was writing a column for autostraddle.com, which is a, the last standing independent website for queer women and nonbinary folks, and I absolutely love them. And before November 2016, I'd had this idea of just writing a column about community organizing because it was something I had background in. Thought it'd be cool to share. So we're like, "yeah, let's green light that. We'll do a little mini series." It was under the previous administration, it had nothing to do with Trump at all. It was just like information that was necessary then, and still is now. The same thing for Quirk. My editor over at Quirk, Blair, had this idea for a teen activism handbook and similarly had been sort of like sitting on it and thinking about it long before the election happened. And then what happened was the election became a catalyst for sort of all of these things coming together. So all of a sudden there was this need because there were just more people who were paying attention than there were the month before and so, you know, I moved forward with writing that community organizing column called "Be the Change." It was sort of a like, you know, fluffy title. And it was stuff like, it was actually really similar to the book. So it was, some of it was theory, it was about like intersectionality and like love and power and why do those things matter together. And some of it was like, how to hold a really good meeting, or like how to like manage volunteers, how to, you know, what are petitions and like why do they matter, and how were they counted? And Blair found my article, I think it was one about rallies and demonstrations, like how does it affect a rally or demonstration, and reached out to me in partnership to work on this proposal together, which is really how the book came to be. So it's like of these times, but it's not of these times. So no, I don't think people aren't necessarily more engaged. I think young people are getting more credit right now than maybe they have in the past. But I don't think that it is a direct response to this administration. I think maybe some, some people were a little bit asleep before 2016 election. Right? And they've woken up and are more willing to put their privilege and like their, their work out into the world. And I think that for other people, like these struggles are not new, and this, this work is not new and they've been doing it for a long time.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

KaeLyn: So that was a long answer to your question.

Hannah (Host): No, I love long answers.

KaeLyn: [Laughs] I think young women are doing more and are getting more support to do more, but I don't think that they weren't doing anything before. If that makes sense. I just think the spotlight is on right now.

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

- Hannah (Host): I think that's a, that's a feeling we have in a lot of ways around November 2016 in the sort of everything changed, except unless you were a woman of color, queer woman of color before then, in which case actually not that much changed. But things did change, like you know, the, the, the idea of a rupture point in history that, that changes everything, but in some ways just coalesces things that were all already happening.
- KaeLyn: Right. It shines a spotlight on issues and things that were already there. Right?
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. Yeah. And brings things into a new relationship to each other, such that you know, the conditions shift so that suddenly we can hear certain voices better than we could hear them before.
- KaeLyn: That's exactly right.
- Hannah (Host): And I think if you looked back at the history of feminist activism, you'd probably find young women at the center of a lot of it. And maybe it may be understood in different ways. Right at the beginning you cite a sort of one of the early versions of girl activism, Joan of Arc.
- KaeLyn: Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): Who was probably living as a woman at a time when the sort of the category of girl didn't mean the same thing that it does to us now. So there is a sort of beautiful, long feminist history to be traced there as well. So I think the other. The other interesting thing, we'll get past the title at some point, I swear, but the other really interesting thing about, about positioning around girls is I think what you alluded to right at the beginning and describing the book, which is it's a book for any gender and that's really clear when you read the book is that you're talking simultaneously about girls; activism, and then also once you get in there you're like, "okay, let's actually unpack gender. Let's unpack the way that feminism is a project for everybody. Let's unpack the gender binary". So, so what work for you is, you know, girls as a category doing? Like why is that still sort of the audience?
- KaeLyn: Yeah, that's a great question. So that's right. I think the idea that the word "girl," number one has to be about a binary is absolutely false. And some people have asked me why I didn't just title it Resist or like, Youth Resist, or like Teens Resist.
- Hannah (Host): Let's Resist.
- KaeLyn: Just Resist. Yeah. And I think it's a really good question. I think the reality is that this is a book that's about feminism, and like of course feminism isn't just about girls, or just for girls and women, or femmes, or people who are nonbinary. But I guess what it is not for, to be just really frank, it is not for men. There are a lot of guidebooks out there already. I mean they can read it, and they will get something from it, and my dad is very excited about it, and is giving— I'm sure

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

lots of men are going to read it, but there's so little in our history that's been centered on girls' activism or even on women's activism. Right? So I read a lot of the guidebooks on community organizing, and certainly some of those foundational works are kind of like, built into my script as an organizer, and those books were almost all written by men. And where they weren't written by men, they were exclusively written by white people, almost like across the board. And it's just about who has access to publishers, to getting their ideas heard. Right? And so this is like one book in that shelf of books that are specifically calling out like, "this is for you." So all of those books are technically for everybody, but they're really, really centered around the thoughts and ideas of white men.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

KaeLyn: So I'm claiming just a little corner of that shelf for girls, or for people who feel like multiply marginalized even if it's not about gender, but especially if it is.

KaeLyn: So, so I tried really hard, even though some people see "girls" and assume that it's a book that's only about this really like binary, cisgender idea of girlhood, but it's not that. It's not just about cisgender girls, it's also about trans girls or demigirls or nonbinary people who feel comfortable identifying as like femme or as girls as well. And it's of course also like applicable information for anybody, specifically centering the experience of being not a cisgender man.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs] I love to see a version of this book that just says, "not cisgender men resist."

KaeLyn: Yeah, like everyone but you resist. You resist too but like there's lots of books for you already.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. I feel sometimes like, like as we're sort of constantly working on, on the evolutions of language and on trying to speak inclusively and saying, you know, women, girls, femmes nonbinary folks, and there's really important work done in those lists, and in and in trying to name identities that haven't been named. And then there's also always this part of my brain that's like, "But what I actually mean is not you. I mean everybody else, just not you."

KaeLyn: I know. We do all this labor to like, when really what we're just trying to avoid saying is like, "this is one thing that's not for men."

Hannah (Host): Yeah. Just not for you, the specific person who got everything. Like you get everything else. All of the other books are for you. Just this one, just this one book. So what about the particular kinds of strategies for grassroots activism feel to you like something that needs to be written and articulated from within the viewpoint of feminism. Like how is feminist grassroots activism different from those other books that you've, you know, you've pointed to that are out

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

there that were written by white women? I mean white men. Sorry. We're also part of the problem,

KaeLyn: You know, in some ways it's not different, in that like functionally I'm presenting similar tools, right? So nothing in the book is like a radical shift, like nobody's going to pick this up and be like, "and this is a whole totally new theory of organizing itself." Like it is what a campaign is, which is like goals and targets and strategies and tactics, and especially teasing out those strategies and tactics, and starting from a place of a goal. Like these are, but these are like common across, there are various different theories of organizing and models, even for organizing. There are trainings you can go to and all of them have some of those basic components. So I really just gave like a really, like if you think of this in terms of like cake recipes, I gave like a really basic cake recipe. Like this is just straight up like yellow cake and you can put sprinkles in it. You can, you can put chocolate chips in it, you can put little swirls of strawberry in it, whatever you want to do. But I'm just giving you like the cake. So I didn't create like a brand new, like masterpiece.

Hannah (Host): You didn't reinvent activism.

KaeLyn: I didn't reinvent cake.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs] cake's already good.

KaeLyn: Here's a cake recipe, like you go and do what you want with it. So in some ways it's the same in that I'm still presenting a cake. Like here's how you make it, here are the steps. What's different about a feminist lens, I think on anything, is that it comes from a place of personal experience as a multiply marginalized person and with that comes just like a different ear and a different sensitivity to inclusivity and to intersectionality, and really like uplifting those values throughout the book as much as possible. I think that's a primary difference is really like the intersectional frame is at the core of it, as well as articulating that intersectionality is not new, and giving a little bit of like history and credit to the Black women who founded that term, particularly Crenshaw, specifically and the Black women who have been using this framework to center their work without that word, like all the way back through history. Like suffrage and earlier Black women were using the sort of model of, of looking at race and gender and class as all intertwined. Right? So I think that is like the difference, is sort of like the theory comes from a different place. It comes from a different place of awareness, of intersectionality, of inclusivity and a focus more on the individual in the self as well as the community and seeing them linked inextricably.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, that's, I mean, I love the way there's quotations and citations scattered throughout the book with a very strong emphasis on, on crediting and sort of linking this work to the activism of, of Black women and women of color. And it kept making me think of, I recently read a arc of a new biography of Buffy

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

Sainte-Marie, and learned a million things about her that I did not know, including--

KaeLyn: Like what? Tell me one thing or two.

Hannah (Host): She in the nineties pioneered a new computer-based like CD-ROM based curriculum for teaching kids maths and sciences using like Indigenous community examples. And her point was like, Indigenous people engage with math and science as well. There's absolutely no reason you have to default to whiteness when you're explaining the science of how sound works. And so, you know, that insistence that you don't just talk about indigeneity when you're talking specifically about Indigenous history, you indigenized everything. Reminded me of, I mean you reminded me of it just in the way that you are articulating like it's not necessarily like you don't have to reinvent the science of sound. The point is that you, that you recenter different perspectives and different experiences. You don't have to reinvent activism. You have to make it really clear that this, these tools and these histories are about and for girls.

KaeLyn: Yeah. You said it. So you should have just answered the question. That was so good. I like your answer better.

Hannah (Host): No, I'm just doing this, this is my, this is my very intense teacherly mode. What I literally just did is resummairize the thing that you said back to you.

KaeLyn: I loved it.

Hannah (Host): It's just teaching. It turns out it's useful in podcasting too. I found out while making this podcast.

KaeLyn: I loved it. I felt very heard. It's great.

Hannah (Host): So let's talk about the grassroots. So there is this moment towards the beginning of the book that really struck me where you have, there's these pictures of a bunch of different people and you ask the reader think, you know, "who of these people do you think possesses the most power?" And how do you know that and what does that tell you about how even if you've never been taught to theorize it, you already know something about power and how it adheres to different bodies differently. And then you go onto say, you know, you might think the baby has the least power, but if that baby starts screaming, then the adults are going to have to do something about that screaming baby. And then linked that to grassroots activism. A moment that literally made me laugh out loud because it made me picture all of us as just babies that won't stop screaming [Laughs]. Which is incredible, and then also made me think about the sort of like strategic undermining of grassroots activism as a bunch of babies that won't stop screaming.

KaeLyn: Infantilizing activists, not necessarily women.

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

Hannah (Host): Yeah. So why does grassroots activism make people so mad?

Kaelyn: [Laughs] Who get mad about grassroots? Well, so somebody get mad.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs] Who gets mad? Who's mad? Who could possibly be mad?

Kaelyn: [Laughs] Yeah. So the page you're talking about has a picture of all sorts of different people, different ethnicities. I mean you're kind of like making some assumptions to0 based on the and sort of implicit bias as you have in your brain that just got shoved there by our, our culture. But there's like a white guy in a suit. There's like a Black woman in a suit. There's someone who looks maybe nonbinary, we don't know, but like short hair lipstick. There's someone wearing hijab. There's like a little tiny baby. Oh yeah, no, it's right there. I usually actually been using this handout and the workshops I've been doing around a book. Interestingly, I came up with this for a presentation I did for a Girls Rock Camp in 2011 maybe, quite a while ago. And it was actually one of the campers who like made that connection to the baby and the grassroots in the sort of discussion that we had, which was just like a mindblowing way of thinking of it. Right? So I was teaching kids that were as young as eight, and I actually just did this workshop again last week for the current iteration of Girls Rock Camp for a large group of 8 to 12 year olds. Which is not even like the primary audience for this book, but they get it at that age. Even at eight years old, they're able to name systemic inequities. It's really amazing and like we like you do that activity of like, pick who has the most, pick who has the least. Or the way I originally did it was I had a whole bunch of pictures I printed out from like Google image search and I had them put them in a line of like, who has the most power, at least power. And they had to come to a consensus on that, which is a whole other process they're learning about. But so fascinating because they always come to the same inclusion. The white guy in the suit has the most power in this case and this version of it, in the book there's like a little, a little kid that looks like maybe a baby or a toddler who also has brown skin, and they always pick that baby as the one who has the least power, no matter what. They might have different opinions about the stuff in between. But yeah, it was like an eight year old girl that had that had that revelation of, you know, she was like, "miss, when the baby cries though, then the adults have to pick it up and take care of it," and I was like, "that's exactly right. That's what grassroots activism is." Why do people get mad about grassroots activism? I don't have the answer to that. I think because people are generally uncomfortable when they're afraid, and I think seeing people assert their power in a way that in some way disrupts how you feel about yourself, the power that you have makes people fearful. It's really unfortunate, but it's true. And it's not just conservative people necessarily. It's like lots of people, even people who are liberal or progressive sometimes have to sort of like hold that and like deal with that in themselves when they react, and the reaction is usually fear. It's not even really anger to grassroots activism, so much as it's anger that comes from fear of, in most cases losing power in some way. Right? So like your voice is going to be less heard because some people are being louder than you, which is the goal. [Laughs] I think if you're like ticking someone off, you're probably doing a good job.

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

Hannah (Host): I mean I always hope so, but that's only because I'm always pissing somebody off. So.

KaeLyn: [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): Yeah. No, I've been thinking a lot. I mean I, I am often more attentive— I'm in Canada and I'm often more attentive to sort of what's happening politically up here. That's not always the case for Canadians. I think a lot of Canadians get most of their news from the states. But I've certainly been noticing a sort of a cultural moment in Canada at least of a lot of attempts, sort of devalue, for example, voices on Twitter. Or in general, the idea of sort of the social media mob, the rabble who are trying to speak back to those who are authoritative, and the ones who are authoritative have access to opeds in national newspapers. Whereas the rabble on Twitter can just be dismissed because of the platform that's available to them isn't a platform with the same level of prestige. And, and in general from people I admire, I have heard things along the lines of, "well, if you want people to listen to you, then you need to be reasonable and you need to be quiet and you need to be polite." And that comes back to, God who, who is this? I see this quote all the time and I can never, I can't remember who it is, but like, "nobody ever gained rights by asking politely for them." And so this is, this is very much sort of been in my mind as I've been reading this book as well, is the sense of creating permission maybe to be the loud, maybe to be angry, maybe to be assertive in all kinds of ways that upset people in general and upset people a lot when it comes from girls, who are, who are quite clearly socialized towards quietness and the pleasantness.

KaeLyn: And pleasantness. That's so true. It's hard to break out as of, even just as a person who identifies with with girlhood. It's like to break out of that or of any marginalized identity really, but the idea that you're just like not to be seen, or not to be heard, or that if you make someone upset then you're somehow wrong.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

KaeLyn: Right? Like you're performing your girlness wrong. It's a really hard thing to break out of. I mean, I, I wanted this book to apply to a lot of different people, particularly people on the margins, or at the intersection of margins, but also people who are the person who woke up in November 2016, the day after the election in the US and was like, "okay, like I have to do some work now." Like I want this book to be for that person too, and for the tactics to really work whether you're kind of like more liberal or more radical. Because I think they really do and I don't think those things have to be. Sometimes it feels like within the activist world, right, so maybe from the outside it looks like everyone's on the same team, but within you know that there's like fishers and divisions and people coming for each other. And I don't think that we have to live in a world that's either or in general, the most radical shift we can do on our thinking is make space for both and because that's how change historically has happened. It hasn't been that everyone met in the middle and had like a nice little

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

moment, and then we got some policy change done and then we fixed racism. Like that's just not how it has worked. Right? There's changes that happened in the courts, changes that happened in the legislature. There's changes that happen in that place were sort of the neoliberal middle kind of like meets. And I've been part of that too. Like I've worked on campaigns that are absolutely about that sort of like, "okay, how do we like court the legislators so they do the right thing." There's nothing wrong with that, but there's also nothing wrong with the people who are like staging the cry-in, which I think we should make a thing, just be babies crying.

Hannah (Host): Are they real? Oh my God, I would love a cry-in. That's incredible.

KaeLyn: So I mean there's also nothing wrong with the people that are like risking their lives and doing civil disobedience asking for like basic rights in the most loud, what some people consider like wrong way. I think both of those things need to exist, in fact, to get any change and they work, they can operate together. They don't have to be, there's not one right answer.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, those are great sort of through line in Sarah Schulman's most recent book Conflict is Not Abuse. Which is a weird book. It's a weird, weird and uneven book.

KaeLyn: That feels like a trap.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. But, but makes the point, I think the really important point, which echoes the point you just made, that sort of contemporary activism and contemporary leftist movements really need to embrace the potential in sort of multiple strategies towards the same ends. And she gives the example of, of AIDS activism in the 80s when it was like, "some of you are going to be lobbying politicians and some of you are going to be engaging in really risky acts of civil disobedience." And that's not like we've got to have it all. Like we're, we're not, we're not gonna successfully make this revolution happen without those multiple points of attack.

KaeLyn: Yeah, that's absolutely right.

Hannah (Host): Maybe sort of the last key thing I want to ask you about is something you talked at the beginning about, the sort of narrative versus toolkit, right? So there are stories out there that are, that offer you narrative examples of activism.

KaeLyn: Help you identify with a story with to like wrap your head around.

Hannah (Host): Those stories are powerful, right? We know that that's how narrative works. Within your book there's also two different kinds of things being offered, however. And things that I think a lot of the time we, we think about as being in tension with each other, which is theory and praxis. So you offer really practical, like there are chapters that are like, "here's how you make a budget and here's

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

how you balance that budget," and here's, you know, "here's how you run a meeting." And here's just the really practical nitty gritty pieces of what you need to do to pull the project off. And then there are other chapters that are like, "let's talk about vocabulary. And let's talk about why some understanding of the key theories of oppression and how it functions are necessary to doing this work." And I wonder, I mean I'm not sure if you've ever thought of this in terms of having theory and having practical things, but, but how for you those pieces fit together and why they're both necessary in a book like this?

KaeLyn: Yeah. Thank you. Thanks for naming those terms. I mean, I don't think I use them in the book, but that's absolutely what it's about. So I loved to live at that intersection of theory and praxis. I actually was a Women and Gender Studies major. I did all that. And I was also an English major. I did a lot of lit theory. So like I'm, I'm very interested in like big esoteric conversations.

Hannah (Host): Woo!

KaeLyn: But I would never, I, I adjunct a class, but I never would want to be like an academic, because I really love and live is in the work. Right? Like in the praxis of those theories into action, like moving from theory into action. And there was, you know, I don't think ever stated it in the book, but you picked up on like sort of an underlying current that I tried to seed there— so I'm so glad it came through— of a sort of taking these like things that feel inaccessible sometimes, like talking about oppression and talking about like systemic issues, and then, and talking about things that really lived in academia until very recently. Like "intersectionality" is not a term, right now like everyone's using it and acting like it's like this hot new thing, but it's been around for a long time and it's been discussed and conferenced and papers. And like there's a lot, there's a huge body of work, a lot of it by women of color out there, and there's also a lot of like putting it into action, right? That we haven't necessarily used that word. So yeah, that's absolutely a through line for me. And I, I think what you said is right, you can't have one without the other and do it justice, at least not in a book that's going to be like a feminist book about girls' activism. Right? So like just the toolkit by itself is kind of anemic and like it's just, it's just information that you could get anywhere. [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

KaeLyn: I mean you could read one of the other books or you look for it online, "How to make a campaign plan," fine. What makes it powerful is coming to it from a place of positionality and feminist positionality. So when yourself and really thinking about like how you position yourself in relation to all these other issues that you care about, which is absolutely like a feminist principle, as well as situating it in like oppression theory and an analysis of like all of the "isms," all of the ways that people experienced systemic injustice. And I think what that does is it allows people to give voice to the like, why I'm mad. I have no problem. I don't think I'll ever have any problem convincing young people, especially girls, especially people who are not cisgender men that like

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

oppression exists and to be mad about things that are happening in the world is like not a big leap to make, right? Because we all have experiences that have led us down that path already. And we really just need someone, if we have not already gotten there ourselves, we just need someone to say like, "yes, you can rip that bandaid off and let it out. Like you don't have to hold it inside anymore. You can say something about it." And in this case, in this book, it's like you can do something about it too. Like you have the tools already and you have the experience and the stories already. I mean, so the reason I didn't focus as much on the stories is because those are important too. They're important too, but I think this book is kind of assuming that you have your own stories.

Hannah (Host): And those stories might not be, you know, stories that will make the news and that's okay. That works still matters. You know, examples that you give include, organizing around a sexist dress code in your school. Like, and that matters because that's your day to day lived experience.

Kaelyn: Yeah. Yeah, that's exactly right. So I mean, yeah, trying to break down these big concepts. That was actually the hardest thing about the book in the very beginning stages, was figuring out what that dynamic was going to be between sort of like the tactical, as I would call it, and the theoretical. And also like with the audience in mind being teenage girls 14 up, you know, they're already smart, they're already informed. I don't want to talk down to them, but I also want to introduce these concepts that maybe they're not learning in their government class, so, or in their social science class. Like I don't, I don't know that we're teaching kids about things like, what is power, what is systemic power and what is oppression, and like what's your place in the world, and you know, what is rape culture? Like, you know, I can't write a book for 14 year old girls and not talking about rape culture, but also I've got a breakdown rape culture in a way that's accessible.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, I mean this is certainly my experience. I teach in a university, and so the youngest I get students is 17 or 18, but I very much have this sense that they arrive with a sense of the world and the sense of the world as structured by injustice certainly, but often without the historical framework, the theoretical vocabulary, or with increasingly, I find with any sense that anything can be done about it. And so that, that idea that like, no, actually you can do something. Like you, I know that, that everyone is telling you that you are powerless and that capitalism is too big a system to fight, but like it's the only thing that has ever changed anything is like angry young people, so like--

Kaelyn: It's really true. [Laughs] And then we all get old and we're like, "oh, young people. Why are they doing things we don't understand? What's with this Twitter? We don't get it."

Hannah (Host): I've had this conversation a number of times with friends about, at this point I am still maybe young enough and maybe just sort of in touch enough that when the youth present me with a new thing that I need to get on board with I'm like, "okay, cool. Thank you, youth." Like honestly I've, I've made this joke, but like

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

almost everything I understand literally about my own gender and sexuality I found out from a 13 year old's Tumblr page. Like, "great, yes, teach me more. I love it." Will there be for me a moment at which the youth present me with something and I'm like, "youth, you've gone too far!" And what will that be?

Kaelyn: I'm trying to commit to not be that person. But it is interesting how it happens.

Hannah (Host): Right?

Kaelyn: I mean I think one of the after effects of the in the US of the election here is that people who had kind of retired from activism, like maybe they did do it when they were younger, like Vietnam War era activists, had kind of gone through retirement. They have their lives and their families, they had things happen, and they're kind of coming back out of the woodwork because like, "oh we need to come back now." But what's interesting is I see a lot of them positioning themselves at the center and not like realizing that they've missed out on a whole lot out while they've been out and retired, and that like the work actually doesn't need to start anew. It has been happening and like are people who are doing it, and like they could really use your help too. Like centering your, your own voice in that moment isn't always the most effective way. Nor do you have all the tools. The tools have changed.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. Okay. One last question and just because it feels really topical to, to--

Kaelyn: I think I got way off topic from the book.

Hannah (Host): --to girlhood. I mean, this is also off topic from the book, but it's still, it's still like thematically related, and that question is have you seen Eighth Grade?

Kaelyn: I have not seen Eighth Grade yet.

Hannah (Host): Oh God, I don't want to spoil anything but there is this moment in it that is the most convincing example of why 13 year old girls need the vocabulary of rape culture. It's this just this incredible representation of what rape culture looks like in it's most sort of micro aggressive form when you are a 13 year old girl. It's really just a scene in which a guy tries to peer pressure her into doing something she doesn't want to do. And it's in some ways so mundane because we have all experienced something like it, and in other ways when you were watching it and feeling her absolute terror in that moment and thinking like, "you do not have the vocabulary to explain why this thing in which actually no physically bad thing happened to you was also such a deeply horrifying experience."

Kaelyn: Yep.

Hannah (Host): And it's like, "oh, but we have that vocabulary!" Like we can talk about this and that for me is at the heart of my interest in in theory is that it gives you the vocabulary to explain what you're actually experiencing and to say, "actually,

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

yes, this is real and what you're experiencing is real and valid and here is a way to talk about it and to, to contextualize it."

KaeLyn: Oh, I need to see Eighth Grade. I don't see any movies anymore, because I have a girl child and when we get out we go do like something big, but we're not like, we don't do a lot of like little movies and stuff, but I need to see it. There's a lot of movies I need to see. I need to see the Mr. Rogers movie.

Hannah (Host): I also need to see the Mr, Rogers movie. It's hard. There's so many good movies and we're all very busy and tired.

KaeLyn: Oh, I really want to see it though, especially related related to this for sure. I mean, like my earliest memory of rape culture, and actually I wrote, so they asked me for a 40,000 word manuscript for this book and I was like, "oh, I'm never going to write that many words. It's so many words" I turned in 70,000 words. I had to trim a lot. So some stuff got trimmed, which is totally fine. But one of the things I originally wrote about, and this book gave me like the motivational to like reflect on my experiences with the rape culture as a really young person, was two things that sort of like stand out in my memory that, for whatever reason, are still there because I guess they were, they, they were meaningful even though I didn't have the language for it at the time. One was in kindergarten, there was this boy who had a crush on me. He used to chase me around the playground and then eventually he got his friends to chase me around the playground, and they used to chase me and then pin me down so he could kiss me. And it was like, you know, not with tongue or anything, we were in kindergarten. We were little. And, you know, if I would tell teachers whatever, and they'd be like, "oh boys," you know.

Hannah (Host): Boys will be boys.

KaeLyn: And so this early age it was kind of like this idea. I remember feeling really gross about it. And what was even grosser that like later on when I was, I think first grade, this kid asked me to dance at the Spring Fling, which is our little like elementary school celebration thing. And my parents didn't know, they had no reason to know, but and I remember the teachers and my parents being like, "oh, dance with him. Like be polite. It's nice." And I hated him because he used to pin me.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

KaeLyn: It was such a violation of my personal space and my body, and yet I was being told to be nice to him because he was like doing me this nice thing by asking to dance.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

KaeLyn: I'm sure he doesn't even remember it. And then the second one that stands out to me is when I was in middle school, actually, right around seventh or eighth grade, and I was walking home. I used to walk home from the bus down like this long county route because it was the nearest drop off, and a trucker who was coming by honked at me. And I don't know if this stands out for me specifically because the feeling I felt was not shame. That wasn't the first feeling. The feeling I felt was pride that like a man had noticed me, because all my like, you know, at that age, like all of my feelings of self worth and I felt like, you know, I hated myself already in my body and all these things I felt like my worth was tied up in like how attractive I was to men. And I wouldn't have articulated it that way, but at that time I was like, "oh, I feel like the sexy or hot or whatever," and I'm like 13 and this is a grown man. And that's really, really, really like, and I was obviously a schoolgirl, like I had like a backpack, you know, like so gross! Super gross. Like in retrospect I'm like, "that is disgusting. That man should be so ashamed of himself." But for me in that moment, it was like some sort of validation that like eventually one day boys would want me. [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): Which is a wild thing to realize because I've, I've definitely have similar memories. Including really weird like, being 13 and being jealous that I was not getting sexually harassed to the same degree that my friends were because I was fat and people didn't want to sexually harass me. which is wild for all kinds of reasons, including that I do not want to have sex with men. So like what's up? Like, but it's such a great example of how it has to do with rape culture and Patriarchy and the way we internalize the patriarchal gaze and has nothing to do with desire, like that actually isn't playing into it at all. It really is just the way that we're taught from such an early age how to, how to make our own desires secondary to the desires of the men who are looking at us.

KaeLyn: So true. I know now I'm like really happy if nobody notices me ever. That would be great. If I could just walk down the street by myself, nobody's said a word to me. [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): I just want everybody to leave me alone. [Laughs] All right. Is there anything else about the book you would like people to know?

KaeLyn: I mean, I think more than anything, what I want for this book is to get it in the hands of young people. So I mean I appreciate all of the educators who are doing that, all the librarians. My parents are sending copies to everyone they know. It's really sweet and I love it. But more than anything, what I want is for this book to be like accessible and available to young people. So because that's who it's for. Like I'm not, this is my first book, but I also like have a day job. It's not, not counting on my royalties or anything. I mean that'd be cool, but that's not the point. The point is just to like get it out to as many young people as possible. So say if you have access to libraries in your area or to places that do like writing or reading programs for kids, like, this is a great book. It actually, you know, it's for 14 and up, it's young adult, but also I think as appropriate for middle schoolers and even like really, really smart younger kids. That's my only

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

hope for this book in the world is that like it matters to someone, at least one person, and that it gets to young people because that's really who it's for.

Hannah (Host): Wonderful. Well you've heard it folks, buy a copy of this book and send it to a youth. Ideally one, you know because otherwise that's weird.

KaeLyn: It is a little bit weird. I am doing donate one at my launch party, but if you don't live in Rochester, New York, it's not gonna work out for you to join us. Probably.

Hannah (Host): Would you like to plug the launch party anyway in case anybody does live in or near Rochester, NY?

KaeLyn: Sure. And if you want to come down over the border, it's not too far.

Hannah (Host): I live in Vancouver, it's really far.

KaeLyn: Oh, it's really far for you. It's pretty far. Okay, well if you live in Niagara Falls or maybe even Toronto, it's only four hours by car. [Laughs] Yeah. So we're having our launch party, so this book came out on Tuesday and you can get it on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, IndieBound Powell's. A lot of independent bookstores are carrying it, so just call them and ask them. You can get it anywhere that books are sold pretty much. And then I'm having my launch party tomorrow, Saturday, August 11th in Rochester, New York. It's at the Avenue Black Box Theater, 780 Joseph Avenue in Rochester. It's a free event. We're gonna have pizza. We're going to have cake pops. We're going to have the all girl band, Maxi Pads from Girl Rock Rochester. We're going to have some slam poets from Breathing Fire. I'm going to say a few things. We're going to book sales. And for every book that someone buys at the launch party, I'm going to donate one to a teen girl locally in our area, or around the state. So come out if you are nearby and if you're not, feel free to just cruise on over to whatever your your local book seller is and see if we're there.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs] Perfect. [Music: "Run the World (Girls)" by Beyonce]

Hannah (Host): If you'd like to learn more about KaeLyn's work, you can find her online a kaelynrich.com. That's KAELYNRICH.com, or on all the social medias under the name KaeLyn Rich. She recommends her Facebook page as the best place to learn more about her work. You can find show notes and all the episodes of Secret Feminist Agenda on secretfeministagenda.com. And of course you can follow me on Twitter [@hkpcgregor](https://twitter.com/hkpcgregor) and tweet about the podcast using the hashtag [#secretfeministagenda](https://twitter.com/hashtag/secretfeministagenda). The podcast's theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album Chub Rub. You can download the entire album on freemusicarchive.org, or follow them on Facebook. KaeLyn's theme song was "Run the World (Girls) by Beyonce. Secret Feminist Agenda is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh first nations, where I'm grateful to live and work. This has been Secret Feminist Agenda. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

