

Frederick Factor- The Always Learning Factor Transcript

Welcome to the Frederick Factor. My name is Sandy Dubay and I'm the Season One host. Everyone who's lived in, worked in, or visited Frederick County, Maryland knows that there's something special about this place. One of those things is the incredible, diverse community that continues to grow. Here on this podcast, we will be bringing Frederick's underrepresented business owners, entrepreneurs, and community leaders into the spotlight to share their stories with you and find out what's their Frederick Factor. If you've lived in or have visited Downtown Frederick, Maryland, chances are you popped into the Curious Iguana bookstore and perhaps got a recommendation from today's guest: Em Perper. In this episode, Em shares their journey as a transgender, non-binary person and some of the experiences they've had educating people about the LGBT community. This includes both formal settings like when Em has led workshops as part of the Frederick Center as well as daily experiences and has encountered while working and living in downtown Frederick. I hope you enjoy my conversation with Em Perper.

Sandy: Welcome to the next edition of the Frederick Factor. I am Sandy Dubay, our host for Season One, and I'm here today with Em Perper, and we are going to be talking about their Frederick factor. So Em, before we dive in, would you mind introducing yourself and just give us a little bit of background about yourself for the audience.

Em: So, my name is Em. I use they/them pronouns. I've lived in the Frederick area on and off since 2004, when my family moved to Mount Airy, and now I live downtown as an adult. I work downtown at the Curious Iguana. I'm the lead Bookseller, and I've worked there for seven years total now.

Sandy: Wow. So okay, there was a lot of information in that 30-second intro, so good. And Em has given me permission to drop an F-bomb if I need to. And I have given them permission to do the same.

Em: If the spirit moves us.

Sandy: Warning! So okay, your family moved to Mount Airy, and then Frederick, or you know, Frederick County, this area. Let's dive in on; first, I'll kind of go in the order in which you threw it out there: they/them. Tell me.

Em: So I identify as a transgender, non-binary person, which means I don't identify as a man or a woman. So I use they/them pronouns. It's a pretty common like gender quote unquote, gender-

neutral pronoun, there are other pronouns, transgender, non-binary people use, but they/them is the one I typically use.

Sandy: Awesome, and how have you found acceptance, adoption, education to exist out there in the world today?

Em: So, it varies from place to place, for sure. I find a lot of people are willing to learn and just kind of make that nudge in the right direction. There are definitely some people who kind of dig in their heels and are going to be real jerks about it and are not interested in making the world a more welcoming place for people they don't understand. But overall, people are willing to learn. And mostly, I found people are afraid, more afraid of offending people than anything else. So I think once you get over that fear and start actually putting in the work of like learning, that helps you to get over the fear of looking stupid and be committed to learning.

Sandy: I appreciate that. We started this conversation before I hit record. I have to say, I'm coming from a place of love, and I'm trying to learn and know that my heart and mind are open. But I might put my foot in my mouth.

Em: A lot of times, it's interesting, because I think there are a lot of like, well-meaning progressive people to who they think that if they say, and this is not you, I'm saying in general, they're like, 'okay, if I'm coming from like, a, quote, a good place, like then I don't actually have to do the work because I think I'm a good person.' So like, I'm good. And I also see that in terms of like, working with like, anti-racist work, too. That's a huge part of it, where it's like, okay, if I'm a good white person, that's enough, and it's like, oh, you actually still have to like, interrogate yourself and your biases, and actually, like, you know, do action-oriented things. And that's been one of the more interesting things in terms of acceptance, and like learning downtown, even, downtown is like, overall a very progressive place where I think we're more of like a, like a blue, like little bubble in a more reddish County. That's not everyone who lives downtown, but it's a lot of people are working downtown. But yeah, that's part of it. As I think like you have to, like get out of the mindset of like, I'm a good person and be like, I'm a person who still has work to do and needs to learn. I know, that applies to me, of course, also.

Sandy: 100%, I had a conversation recently on the podcast with Jackie Douge and, you know, had that same conversation. You know, when I was growing up, I felt like I never saw color and felt like that was a good thing. And then you're like, oh, no, actually, that's not again, this podcast isn't all about me. But I do try to be very transparent with what's going on because that is how I know I as a human and hopefully our listeners, want to learn and grow.

Em: Definitely, context is important.

Sandy: Okay. So tell me about the Curious Iguana bookstore.

Em: Sure, okay, so bookstore is the best job I've ever had. So Curious Iguana is owned by Tom and Marlene England, who may be even better known as the owners of Dancing Bear Toys and Gifts, which has been downtown in some form or fashion for 21 years now. So Curious Iguana just turned eight, actually, this past Tuesday, I was trying to do the math. I started there part-time in 2015, I was still working a full-time contractor position at the National Institutes of Health, but that commute was really difficult. And I eventually stopped working there, did freelancing full time and also worked at the bookstore, and eventually worked at the bookstore so long, they couldn't get rid of me, and now I work there full time as the bookseller. Curious Iguana is great, because not only are they an independent bookstore and a great alternative to Amazon and Barnes and Noble, but they're also a benefit corporation. So, a portion of the profits we make each month go to different charities and organizations around the world and locally too, so it's nice to work somewhere that like, I love what I do. But I also know they're giving back to the community in some way. That's really, really important. So yeah, a little bit about the bookstore.

Sandy: I love it. And yes, we recently wrote a blog about some of our guilty pleasures in the community. And oftentimes, I have to go for a walk, and will wander up and down Carroll Creek or just in Downtown in some capacity. And Ellen and Sophie they have their go-to places to wander, and they inevitably end up in Curious Iguana.

Em: I did see Sophie the other week.

Sandy: Yeah, it's very often.

Em: And that's part of the reason I like it, is seeing people I know from around town who just pop in, that's nice. It's nice to see my friends and like colleagues just kind of swing and you never know who you're gonna see on a day to day basis.

Sandy: So, are you in that role? Are you buying books? Are you responsible for, you know, some of the stuff that's on the shelves?

Em: No, no. So I'm not. The buyer is a different job. Our operations manager, Lauren, and our owner, Marlene, do most of the acquisitions and buying. They're really great and give all of us an opportunity for input on what to carry, though. So if there's an advanced copy of a book we've read that we're really passionate about or an author we enjoy, they'll always take that into consideration in terms of what to put on the shelves. My role is I'm there in person a lot on the floor doing a lot of customer service-type stuff. I do a lot of our displays in the store, I set those up, that's super fun for me. I pitch authors to come to the town or to do virtual events in this case. For a while, I did content creation; I helped with our Twitter account occasionally. We just

created formal job descriptions. Marlene has been working on drawing those up. And it was wild to be like, oh, there are so many different parts to like, I just think of like, I go to the store a lot. But I'm like, oh, there are a lot of parts to what I do. It's a lot of fun. And I'm kind of the point person on the weekends a lot of the time because I work Saturday-Sundays. So that's my Monday, Tuesday. So that's the start of my work week. It's very hectic, the weekends in Frederick; I think anyone who lives and works Downtown or either knows how hectic it can get Downtown. So it's a whole other whole other critter.

Sandy: There is definitely a vibe going on.

Em: I feel like everyone who is familiar, Frederick automatically becomes like a tourism bureau representative because people are like, where should we eat? Where is the Carroll Creek? Where should we park? Where are the bathrooms? So I'm like, I know so much more about Frederick working in this job than I ever did. I'm like, cool; I know exactly where the closest bathroom is. I'm on it. You're welcome. But honestly, it's great. I was an English major in college. So it's sort of a dream to be able to read books and talk to people about books and stay up to date on that, write about them occasionally. Yeah, it's a wonderful place. Really like it.

Sandy: That's great. So, our paths crossed for the first time a couple of months ago, I think it was June of 2021. And you did a workshop for us -- for the Frederick County Office of Economic Development's EmPOWER program. Can you talk a little bit about you know, that training and what you do with, you know, local law enforcement as well? I believe that you support them.

Em: Sure, so I was on the board of the Frederick Center, which is this area's LGBTQ Resource Center for, I want to say, five years, starting in 2016, and I resigned at the very beginning of 2021. And so part of my work with the board was helping to lead, along with my board colleagues, these different trainings on LGBTQ sensitivity and inclusion for lots of different organizations, law enforcement, like you mentioned, like organizations that deal with the City of Frederick and it within the city, churches, schools. One of my favorites is we do training with the nursing classes at Hood -- that's one of my favorites -- because that's so important. And those folks work so hard. So that is kind of how I got started. In the beginning, I was very, very nervous about public speaking, and now it's like my favorite part of the work. That's one of my, I think, my favorite areas and ways that I think hopefully is like tangibly helping other queer people have great lives in the community. If the people they're interacting with who might not have known how to work with them respectfully or interact respectfully before, hopefully now they're having a better experience. So I'm trying! I think Sophie reached out to me, I want to say Sophie reached out to me about that, actually. I think she came and found me at the bookstore. And I was like, *'Oh, hello!'*

Sandy: Yeah, we're all about stalking people.

Em: But I hadn't done one of the trainings in a while because of COVID. You know, things have not been...I mean virtual trainings are possible. And I know my colleagues are doing those all the time, but it wasn't something I done. So it was nice to like, kind of get back in the back in the saddle and do that. But we usually talk about terminology and vocabulary, we talk about pronouns, and then we try to tailor it as much as possible to specific organizations like concerns or questions or field, that kind of thing.

Sandy: Yeah, and that audience. And most of the audience that we work with, that we interact with, are entrepreneurs. We've had many entrepreneurs and/or community leaders on the Frederick Factor podcast, talking about their experience and life through their lens, and very careful not to put this the burden of you know, you're not representing everyone, you're representing yourself and figuring out what that... what that looks like. But you know, through your lens, I'm curious, what do you love about Frederick? And what would you like to see the community, the county in general, what could make it better or easier for others?

Em: For the LGBT community in general? Or just my opinions?

Sandy: No, for you! I mean, if you want to share that.

Em: I know, as I unroll my scroll, well. Um, I can talk a little bit about both. And like Sandy said, this is my own, personal experience, especially as like a white non-binary person, the race plays a huge factor into different people's experiences in the LGBTQ community. So, while I can say I feel relatively safe as like a white person in our city, I do not think it would be necessarily the same for a Black or Brown person. So I always want to give that caveat in terms of things I'm passionate about, and that I think Frederick needs to sort of urgently address affordable housing is huge. I think public transit and more accessible, I think, pedestrian-wise, it's gotten so much better, especially Downtown. But I do think, and I know it takes not it's not just Frederick's responsibility, there's a lot of other factors at play, but expanding like the MARC trains specifically, would be a huge asset to pretty much everyone. People in DC, and in between, people here. Also, I'm biased because I don't have a car. I don't even have a driver's license, actually. Yeah, that's my one of my secrets is that I, when I was a teenager, I was extremely afraid to learn to drive. So then I never did. So I do not have a car. And I do not want to conquer that fear.

Sandy: You could conquer it if you want to, right?

Em: No, no, my therapist and I are working on it. Do not worry. No, it is something that I would like to learn to do eventually. But right now, because I live and work downtown, it hasn't really

been an issue, which is nice. And I do like still travel and get to see people using, you know, trains and buses and other people's cars.

Sandy: Yeah, when others are driving those cars, right?

Em: I'm not behind the wheel, don't worry, everyone doesn't need to. Just like start staying home again! Instead of COVID...it was me behind the wheel, on the road. To know like that's the thing is like, when I do start driving, it's gonna be just like so trepidatious people are gonna be like, *'did you see that, like, tiny car just like moving like 10 miles an hour on the shoulder? That was weird.'* And I'm like, *'yeah, I was me, don't worry about it.'* So I'm passionate, like, for selfish reasons. I would love more access to go to DC to go to other places in general. And I think it would be good for tourism here too. We get a ton of visitors, I think we'd get even more, especially on the weekends, If that MARC route were to run more frequently, I guess, trying to think out there. There's so many, there's so many other things. I mean, I think getting people obviously being engaged locally and local elections and local politics is important. Yeah, there's a lot. I think I'm also passionate because I live downtown, affordable housing affects me too. We're very lucky that where my partner and I live, where we live, our rent is manageable and okay. But very few people I know who have like our shared income level would be able to live and work downtown. It's just...the rent is exorbitant. It's... it's... it's too high. It's too high. And Frederick is wonderful, but it's higher than it is in some big cities. Like I look at cities like Philadelphia and the rent there is much more affordable and you have access to so much more. So it's confusing to me when I'm here and I'm like, this is a wonderful place to live. I just don't know if like our rent, like really, it just doesn't make sense to me. That's not necessarily my field, but it's just what I've observed from having, you know, knowing a bajillion people down here. We all feel like everyone I know feels the same way we're like, *'why is this? This is strange.'*

Sandy: Yeah, you never hear people say, *'oh my gosh, it's so affordable.'* Yeah. Wow.

Em: A miracle! Well, and that's the thing is, I think Frederick really perceives itself as a place where creatives can come live and thrive, and I'm like, no, not if they have to pay \$1,800 a month for a one bedroom or \$1,500 for a studio, they don't no one has that money, especially right now. So it's yeah, it's difficult for me to, like, kind of reconcile that and hypocrisy, where it's like, we're very welcoming to like, young professionals and like, which ones like, where? Who are they? Yeah, I consider myself very privileged and very fortunate that we've been able to live and work here as comfortably as we have. But it may not be forever. And if rents keep going up, it won't be we would have, we would also have to leave, we would have to move. And that would be, that would be sad. I would not like to do that.

Sandy: Yeah, it is something obviously, in the work that we do through Platinum PR is, you know, we work with a lot of places, we work with a lot of cities and towns, regions around the

country, helping them promote, market, maintain their business environment and culture, attract and retain the employees that are going to work and continue to thrive. And it's an ongoing issue. And my gosh, you know, we can unpack that one for a while, you know, and obviously, this, you know, idea with the pandemic of working from anywhere is fine for many, but then not for others. You know?

Em: And that's the thing, a lot of I think essential workers, you know, weren't able to work from home. And I've seen the divide, even responses to the pandemic itself from people who were comfortable working from home, and it wasn't, obviously, a vacation working from home, it's very difficult, but like, the divide between people who are like, '*Oh, I've been inside this whole time!*' And I was like, '*I haven't!*' Like, it's been really scary. And I love my job. And I'm grateful to do it, but it's like a different level. And income can vary really differently between folks who have the ability to work at home, people who don't. So I wonder, with the other places you see around the country, is rising rents, like, endemic to like, up and coming small cities?

Sandy: Definitely. It is. Frederick is not unique in that capacity. You know, there's good old supply and demand challenges there. And, you know, in some communities, you see people shifting out of the city center because they want more land, more space, but then you add those transportation infrastructure challenges that exist and just access. So, the communities that we work with are trying to promote their particular assets or, you know, the elements that they are strongest with, but it is definitely an ongoing issue. No communities are exactly alike.

Em: No one is perfect, either. And I understand, like, everyone's going to have their own issues. But honestly, it makes me feel a little bit better knowing that other, sort of like, cities on the verge are going through this, because that makes me think there are gonna be more people motivated to like, try to change that, and it's not just like, "Frederick against the world." Yeah, no, I know, it's nice to know that like, okay, other people are trying to maybe try and to address this issue where they live, as well. So that's good, that's good to know.

Sandy: So I want to get back a little bit to the conversation about the LGBTQ community in general, and what you're seeing, what you're feeling within either that portion of the population perhaps and like how the pandemic has impacted, what's happened there?

Em: So for those of those listeners who are as addicted to TikTok as I am, you may have seen videos where people are jokingly saying, "*It was supposed to be just two weeks with a mask, like wear your mask outside, two weeks inside, wear a mask.*" And now it's been a year and a half, and I'm trans getting "*I've been diagnosed with ADHD.*" It's like an ongoing bit, but not really a bit because it's happening that a lot of people explore their gender identity during the pandemic because you had time to sit around and think about things. Not everyone, but a lot of people, you know, you're inside reflecting. And you're also, and I'm not the first person to say this, when

you're not responding to how other people are responding to your external signifiers, you get to think about how you actually feel and actually identify. So, that I think has been very interesting. So, there's been a lot of people exploring their gender identity and sexual orientation during the pandemic, and that's been really cool to see. And, like, surprising, I didn't necessarily, you know if someone had said, we're going to be in a pandemic, and then a bunch of people are going to realize, *'hey, I think I'm not as cisgender as I thought,'* I would have been like, *"okay, sure."* [sarcasm].

Sandy: I mean, if you do what you just said in terms of the pandemic, giving people time to like, do that inner work and pause for a second and reflect, you know, obviously, hopefully coming to it from a place of strong mental health and you know, not falling down and you know, any other areas, but it's kind of beautiful. Like we all, if there are great things to come out of the pandemic, hopefully it was a little bit of that slowdown and getting us to do pause and reflect, I'd kinda love that, it's funny that it turns into a funny TikTok.

Em: It's become a meme. But also, like, so many memes rooted in truth. Well, and I've also seen... there's been little things I haven't been plugged into like huge sweeping trends in the LGBTQ community necessarily. I will say Curious Iguana stocked a bunch of pronoun pins starting in June, and we've had to reorder them like two or three times. And that's great, because people come in, and they are so excited. And not just trans people, we've had a lot of parents and a lot of teachers who are like, *"oh, this is great. I'm gonna get this for like, my badge at work, or my lanyard!"* And I'm like, *"wow, I love it!"* And it's inspired some good conversations, too, with people who see them and are like, *"well, what is this? Why are these here?"* and I'm like, *"oh, great."* And it doesn't necessarily have to turn into like a huge in-depth education, but it's like, *"oh, these are pronoun pins, you can wear them wherever you can put them on your bag."* And people are like, *"oh, okay."* So, even just seeing them, hopefully, tips people off to like, *'yep, that something people are invested in.'* And then it's important to people. I could talk for hours about, like the LGBTQ books that have come out recently, because that's like what I think about 90% of the time.

Sandy: Maybe in the show notes, we'll include some book recommendations.

Em: So, it has been interesting in the way, like, social media and online communities have sort of brought people together and learn more about themselves. But also, I know, it's been hugely difficult. Gay bars and gay clubs have historically been a huge spot of like sanctuary and haven for LGBTQ people. So those obviously were not open during and have not been opened during COVID. Some I know we're slowly reopening. No pride. It's been hard. But yeah, it's, uh it's been tough. I mean, it's been tough on everyone. I also worry a lot about kids who are transgender and maybe living with unsupportive families during this time and not necessarily have had that outlet to go to like either youth groups or even school teams where they're more

readily accepted. I think about that a lot. Yeah, those are some of the things that have been on my mind.

Sandy: Yeah, no, it's yeah, it's interesting. I...I hadn't... actually I didn't know that. The unofficial statistic.

Em: Oh, yeah. My big science stat. What is interesting, though, is that there have been studies that have come out this year showing that more and more people are identifying as trans and non-binary, especially youth like 20s and teens, for sure. And I see that every day. Like, I'm like, the statistics are higher than what we're sampling like, a large portion of the younger folks I meet at work who come through, or well, I think I identify as some I'm not asking each of them their information, they have volunteered either as they're browsing, or if they like, see one of our pronoun pins and want to talk about it. But a lot of them are like, *'oh, cool. Like, I like your tattoos, I like your pins'*, I have a singular "they" tattoo. They're not just like complimenting a flower, although that would be nice, too. I do have a flower tattoo. But it's nice to know, like, oh, you see, you can see someone out in the real world again, and like recognize that and like have that moment of connection. That's been cool. It's been nice to have that.

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Sandy: Are people asking, *"hey, how did you know, how to choose, what made you know, to use, you know, the particular pronoun selection that you have chosen?"*

Em: So, I don't get those questions as much unless I'm in like a training specifically, either because my friends already know or they're also LGBTQ, so it's sort of kind of like an understood thing we don't necessarily have to talk about all the time. I do get questions from friends who are thinking about maybe using new pronouns themselves. Where like, I have a friend who uses she/they pronouns, and was sort of like, *'well, like, how did people respond when you started doing this? How did you know it was like the right time to start doing this? Like, were you nervous?'* And so, like having those conversations are great because it makes me like, think back, I don't even remember when I started using they/them pronouns, probably, I think it was shortly after I started volunteering with the Frederick Center, so 2015 probably, ish. Yeah, my mid-20s. And so, it pauses me to kind of reflect on what that period was like for me. And at first, it was really daunting and really scary. And now it feels very, very natural. So I don't have those conversations as much anymore. But what I do like, is when I'm at work, and this doesn't happen a lot, but someone will make some offhanded comment about they/them pronouns and more of like a derogatory way, doesn't happen a lot. But they're just like, *'oh, all*

these pronouns these days' kind of thing. And I get to be like, 'oh, yeah, like I actually use *they/them pronouns.*' And then they have to be like, 'oh, yes, great!' And I'm like, 'that's right.' Like, you don't know. You don't know what pronouns someone uses just by looking at them. And so it's nice to kind of be like, yes. And now you have met someone who uses those pronouns. And you cannot just hypothetically rant about them, because they're in front of you. So I always enjoy those little moments. I actually get more...more... I get a lot more questions about my name more than anything else, because I go by Em, which is an abbreviation of my birth name, which I don't usually use anymore. And I'm in the process, hopefully, of changing my name soon, like, legally, which is exciting. But people see my name tag at work. And I, and I get a lot of questions I'll get "*did your parents name you Em? Is that your given name?*" And people get really intense about it, and usually I just say, "*yeah, they did. Yes, this is my given name.*" I don't...I don't feel obligated to disclose personal information to people I don't know. And also, if I don't know that person's attitude towards trans and non-binary people. I'm not just going to like willingly offer that up. I don't owe them anything. I don't owe them anything except for, like, an incredible customer experience when they're buying amazing books. And like that I can still do that while not giving out personal information about myself. But I've gotten a couple people who have gotten kind of intense about it. And it's very interesting how much meaning and worth we attach to names, and attach to being able to like, understand people based on their names. I think it throws them for a loop because they're like, that's not a name I see a lot. Maybe that chips away, whether I think you're a boy or a girl, and now it's making me question my assumptions about the world, kind of thing. Just like zooming out. And it's like, quite the spiral. Like I kind think of what's happening subconsciously, and I think it makes people mad, because it's not just like, it doesn't feel like casual conversation, when it happens. You know what I mean? I'm like, this is very pointed, like, why are you asking me about this? You're not asking, like my manager Lauren, "*Lauren, is that your given name?*" That weirdly never comes up! As far as I know, it is. Lauren, you can correct me if I'm wrong when I see you Monday.

Sandy: And I'd love to know that it actually wasn't her given name.

Em: Well, I had a great conversation the other day. And this is my new favorite way to respond. And I just did this for the first time last week, very, very friendly FedEx delivery man who I did not know, not our usual FedEx guy, you know, the one I see you've seen every day for the past seven years. New gentlemen came in. I signed for a package. He looks at my nametag and goes "*Em! is that your given name?*" And I'm like, "*Yeah!*" And he's like, "*Oh, really? It's not short for anything?*" I'm like, "*No!*" And I looked at him and I said, "*What's your name?*" He said, "*Tim.*" and I said, "*Tim, is that your given name?*" And he like laughed, he was like, "*Yeah.*" and I was like, "*Great. Well, we have so you and I have so much in common?*" I was Yep. Yep. We both have short names. Cool. And we like kind of laughed, went about our day And I was like, that's right, Tim, don't come for me. I'm on fire today. It was one of those things where I'm like, why are you asking this? Because I'm like, well, I'll just ask you. And I think a lot of people will

be like, well, I was just curious, and I'm like, 'okay, be curious, somewhere else.' Go read a book, preferably the one you're buying from me. And sometimes, I do get sick of it. And I'm just sort of and then just tell people, 'oh, I'm trans.' Because then to see the reaction is very funny. Because a lot of times they're like, 'oh, panic, what do I do?' And I'm like, 'okay, bye.'

Sandy: What did my facial expression show there?

Em: I'm like, yeah, actually, I, you know, I'd liked this, it was a more neutral alternative to my birth name, because I'm like, if you wanted this information, I'm going to give it to you. And you're going to be sorry, you asked, because it's gonna be way more than you expected.

Sandy: But I kind of love that though.

Em: Well, that's the thing is like, I'm always torn between, like, just throwing it all out there. Because that can be empowering sometimes. And also, keeping this eye on myself can also be empowering. And finding that line has been so important in my life. And in my trainings, too, that has been huge. I used to be like, you can ask anything. And now I say up front, there are certain things you can ask that I'm not obligated to answer. And that's true of all trans people, not just when they're doing presentations, but especially stuff related to like your medical history, your name, you never ask a trans person what their name was before, you never ask that. And you never ask people like what surgeries they have. But you wouldn't ask anyone that because that would be weird. So, finding that line of privacy, that boundary, has been huge for me in my life, in many spheres, but especially in that sphere.

Sandy: It's interesting on a different level. I've recently gone through a divorce, changed my last name. *Is that your married name? Is that your maiden name? What's the name? What's the name? What's the name? What's the name?* So, I get it. And you're right, at times, I'm like, yep, divorced. Yeah, no. And like, deal with it. And at other times, again, like choose to disclose or not disclose.

Em: And it depends on my energy level, it depends on my mood. It depends on who I'm talking to. Some days, I'm just like, 'I'm not here for this.' I'm just gonna like, I don't want to engage. I just want to shut this down because it is something that is very personal. And obviously it affects an external signifier to fix your name, but it's like you said, not everyone is entitled to that information.

Sandy: Right? Even just saying that the D or the divorce, all of a sudden they're very uncomfortable, or like, you get the high five.

Em: Well, that's the thing. I'm like, '*well, this is what you asked for.*' So, you're getting uncomfortable is like funny to me because I'm like, but this is what you wanted, you wanted the scoop like, and now you're like regretting it.

Sandy: It's like they wanted to know you, but not really?

Em: Right exactly, it's like when you ask someone, '*how are you?*' but you're like you don't really want to know. And then they tell you and you're like, here we are. You're like I did this to me. I asked, this is my fault. Yeah. Good times.

Sandy: I'm pretty guilty of actually telling you how I am.

Em: Oh, no. Happens all the time. Like I have one friend in particular, who will always tell people how they are. And I'm always like, yeah.

Sandy: I would love to revisit something that you talked about earlier. So, she/they. Talk to me about that combination of people to understand.

Em: Yeah, absolutely. So I use they/them pronouns exclusively. My mom is a cisgender woman. And so, she uses she/her pronouns. Some people who identify either, you know, as some flavor of transgender or non-binary, may feel comfortable with two sets of pronouns, they're like, she/her is great, they/them is great. Both feel good to me, I'll use a combination thereof. So some prefer one to the other, and may make that clear with the people in their lives. Like maybe it's like school, they're like hmmm I'll use she/her, don't really want to deal with the hassle. And she/her still feels good. So it's not a big deal. But maybe with their friends and family who like, know them more intimately. It's like, yeah, they/them is great. Like, please use this for me more. So, I get that when I'm getting she heard from the rest of the world, even you know what I mean. But that's not true for every experience. That's just one example. So there are people who use she and they pronouns, and he and they pronouns. And just my advice, generally, is to just use them interchangeably. When you're talking about the person, give each of them ample breathing time, space, unless that person has told you otherwise. That's usually my take on that. And what I've heard, at least from people who use multiple pronouns.

Sandy: And it boils down to personal preference? It's just the vibe that feels right?

Em: Yeah. So I mean, I feel like all of gender is a vibe, [laughs]. I hate being that person. But yeah, it's whatever feels right to you, you get to decide that. And I mean, for most people, you know, it takes a bit of self-exploration and reflection and interrogation of like, how you feel, what your gender feels like, how you want other people to perceive you, when you want to feel seen with like, the capital S seen, it is personal preference. It is. I mean, no one is the pronoun

police. No one's going to be like, you can't use that one. Or you can only use this one. Not certainly not me. But I have seen folks using multiple pronouns become more common recently, and that just maybe people in my own circles doing it more frequently. But it has been cool to see I'm like, 'oh, okay, that's good to know.' And it's good for me to practice too.

Sandy: Do you get into a conversation? Do you have that conversation as to, you know?

Em: You mean, with the people that are using multiple pronouns? Sure! So yeah, I will have that conversation. Or, a lot of times, if it's someone who has just started recently integrating they/them pronouns into like that, I'll use that one more, maybe. So it's like, okay, this feels good to you, you haven't gotten to hear it a lot before. Like, let's all lean into this a little bit more. But I've gotten pretty good at using both interchangeably, like in the same conversation, if I'm talking about someone or like, oh, yeah, they need to fill up their timesheet or like whatever it is, they park their car over there.

Sandy: Being supportive, it kind of feels like where you feel like they need to be supported.

Em: Exactly and especially like, listening obviously, is the most important thing where it's like, I feel like or if it's like, I don't want you to use these pronouns around this certain person, because they don't know about this aspect of my identity. You know, just like being mindful of that kind of thing. It's just a lot of listening, a lot of practice. That's all it is. And I'm always learning more. I think that's the other thing is, I think people who are straight and or cisgender think like, once you're in the community, you are suddenly you've unlocked all this secret knowledge that suddenly pours into your brain. And you never make a mistake again, and your life is perfect forever. But like, I mess up people's pronouns sometimes too, just like, people mess up my pronouns sometimes, and I apologize and move on, and do better. So yeah, we're all learning and growing. We're learning new things about the community and new identities all the time. No one is just like, that knowledge doesn't just like spring in fully formed, I wish, that'd be cool.

Sandy: Wouldn't that be great with everything we learned how to do?

Em: "I know everything now," that would be cool, yeah. And that's one of the great things about doing these sensitivity trainings, too, is that it forces me to learn more all the time because if I want to give people best practices, I need to know what those are myself. So, it forces me to like learn like one thing we're always talking about is like this is very specific, but like intake forms when you're filling out a form it likes any kind of office or like especially medical it's like how do you write about sex and gender on those forms like when you're checking off male female? Like is "other" rude? Does other give you more options? Should it be fill in the blank? Should we list out a bunch of different options? But like, that's always changing and lots of people feel differently. So trying to like, kind of gauge where people are at and see what is the most

welcoming, affirming intake form like that's been a huge thing to learn about that's changing a lot. So yeah, it's like all these things you wouldn't necessarily think about until you're faced with them.

Sandy: Well, when you and I first met on the webinar, we talked about name tags and conferences, and you know, things like that. So that is definitely a thing as we're coming back out of the pandemic, and we're starting to do events in person.

Em: People will wear name tags again. Yeah. And now it's a little name on their zoom box, which and their pronouns on their zoom box, which has been cute to see too.

Sandy: Yeah, Zoom did great for that, they did embrace it. I do love that.

Em: Because it's also nice, because you can customize your name on Zoom. Like, if you don't use a name, that's your birth name, it's so easy to change. And I'm like, that's great. Thank you, Zoom. Thanks. So unlike Google, Google, I'm gonna call you out Google. Call me! Call me to talk about how your email will not let me change my email address ever. Like I have to make a new email with like, the name I'm changing to because like, I can't change my email. And I understand, you know, it's frustrating, because I'm like, that's not the email I want to use anymore. But you know, everyone has that email. It's a whole thing.

Sandy: Can you forward from old to new?

Em: That's what I'm probably going to try to set up, other people have written about this more than I have. There's like a whole, a lot of trans people working in tech. So other people have written about this more than I have. But yeah, it's something I think about. So thank you, Zoom, for doing that one thing. Appreciate you. But yeah, looking forward to like, name tag. Like that's been one of the things I've seen change is that now the book conferences I register for will ask for pronouns and print them, which is great. They didn't do that when I started out, because it wasn't really at the forefront of people's minds. But now enough people have made that push that they're like, *'yep, this is important.'* And a lot of like, they want to, you know, respect the trans and gender non-conforming and non-binary people in the field. So that's been nice, to know that, like, when I go there, it's like, maybe not everyone will use the right pronouns, because we've never met before, and they're just meeting me, but it's like, they're there. So you don't mess it up as much, please. Thank you.

Sandy: Nice. Is there anything you'd like to share with these other audiences, in this audience that we haven't talked about today?

Em: Oh, wow. I feel like I should have brought like a little list of talking points. It could have been my moment. I don't know if I do. And I wish I had something very wise to say, um, can I say like, three quick things?

Sandy: Of course.

Em: Okay. Can they be sort of, can I be a little silly?

Sandy: It can be very silly; we haven't said any bad words this entire time.

Em: And that is a miracle. It's really, truly. Listeners at home: that was my only like, first and only question for Sandy was, "*am I allowed to swear?*" because I was terrified. I would, or just like would and would be in trouble. I guess, shop local, please. That's important. Shout out to all of the entrepreneurs and business owners out there. Please stop supporting Jeff Bezos, he has enough money he went to space, he does not need our money anymore. There's a great book by Danny Kane, and other booksellers, called *How to Resist Amazon and Why*. I implore everyone to read it. Yes, I also buy the occasional thing on Amazon, I am not perfect, you know? During the pandemic had to buy my seltzer somewhere, I wasn't going to the store. Sorry, gotta get that seltzer. But I really encourage everyone to read about the detrimental effects of that incredibly powerful monopoly on our whole society. It trickles down to working conditions, it trickles down to affordable wages, everything. Amazon is affecting a ton of parts of our lives. So please, please educate yourself about that. This is not me shaming people who shop on Amazon, it is ok. You don't have to buy everything on Amazon. I don't know... I don't know what else to say. I guess just continue to keep learning and looking for ways to put your education into action. Right now, I personally am at a point in my life where I'm trying to figure out my next steps in terms of activism and being involved in the community. I was on the Frederick Center board for five years and resigned earlier this year. I was a company member at Maryland Ensemble Theater for five years, which was amazing. But right now, you know, it's not the right time for me to do that. Like I think all of us are kind of burnt out after the past year and a half and kind of, so I'm trying to personally find where to rekindle my volunteer-like passion and energy. So, I hope we all take time to do that mindfully, and giving ourselves space to rest is especially so important. Like you said, I think the slowdown that some of us, most of us experienced at least to some degree. Hopefully, that continues to hold over, and we give ourselves that space and flexibility in our lives forever. Forever. That would be great.

Sandy: That would be great. And I know that I'm sure that I have listeners that are first responders that never experienced that slowdown.

Em: Yeah, shout out. I wish I knew how to give that to people because one of my good friends is an ER nurse, and I'm just like, '*yo, like, I know how burnt out she is.*' I can't... I can't imagine.

Sandy: I can't either. And honestly, the economic developers that we work with. Again, I have referred to them as first responders -- they were there for businesses with grants, loans. And, I'm gonna ask my final question! ...which is the question that I ask every guest on here, what is your Frederick Factor?

Em: I feel like, for me, Frederick is a place I got to grow into and realize a lot of potential as a person, and get to know a lot about myself through avenues that I don't know if I necessarily had or would have accessed as quickly in other places. So I'm really grateful for that, everything from my bookselling career to figuring out gender identity and sexual orientation, passion for theatre, all of that came to fruition almost all at the same time, in a way that still felt very organic, because I live here. And that's really special, that's really powerful.

Sandy: I love it, that's amazing!

Em: It's true, it is kind of funny to see how that series of events kind of happened. I feel very lucky to have ended up here.

Sandy: Well, I feel lucky! How cheesy is this? That you ended up here, in this podcast studio! It was super fun!

Em: Thank you, Sandy, thank you. This was fun; this was great. I was really excited and flattered when you asked me, I was like, "*A podcast, wow, I'm coming up in the world, it's happening.*" This was great; thank you so much for having me.

Sandy: Thank you. And I thank our listeners for tuning in and invite you to listen to the next episode of the Frederick Factor. Until then!

You've been listening to The Frederick Factor. Want to find out more about our diverse community and what makes Frederick so special? Visit our website at FrederickFactor.com. You can also connect with us on Instagram or Facebook. Til next time.