The Hum Podcast

Episode 22: "This Is Me, Now You Get To See All Of Me"

[Theme music fades in]

Nina: It was. It was very isolating. The only time I could be myself was to be locked in a place that I couldn't be interrupted, that would be safe. So, yes, I was hiding.

[Music increases in volume]

Speaker: You're listening to The Hum.

[Music decreases in volume]

Gilad: Do you wear jewelry that tells your story? Delane Cooper is an incredibly talented studio jeweler and has a fascinating process of creating custom, luxury pieces. Her design process includes an interview on why you want a piece created. Research, meditation and dreaming allows her to create a distinct piece of jewelry. And not only do you get a one-of-a-kind piece of art but a unique story where the design feels authentic to the wearer. I met Delane two years ago when she designed my partner's engagement ring and I can't recommend her enough. Connect with Delane at delane.ca, that's D-E-L-A-N-E dot C-A, for your story to be told through your next piece of custom jewelry.

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Gilad: We are joined here today by Sargent Nina Usherwood, who is serving with the Royal Canadian Air Force and is an EPO Coordinator, and has served for, get this, 39 years, I'm going to be exact, one month and two days. Nina lives in Vancouver Island with her wife Rosalind. And Nina came out as trans in 2009. Welcome to hot, humid, cold, weird Toronto. How are you?

Nina: Thank you very much for inviting me to Toronto. I've enjoyed myself here. I have been here a number of times but it's nice to meet some friendly faces in Toronto.

Gilad: We're going to jump right into it. Sim, how do you feel?

Simona: Yeah.

Gilad: We're going to just go right in.

Simona: Just go.

Gilad: What does it mean to be a service member in the Royal Canadian Air Force as a trans woman?

Nina: I don't really think about that on a day-to-day basis. It's not something that really I'm conscious of. It's not something that happens. It's every so often though something's said around you and it's like, "Okay, did they really say that?" And then I go, "Did you really mean to say that?" And sometimes it's funny because they'll realize they've said something that they really shouldn't have said. And it's part of the culture. And I grew up in the same culture, and there's times when I make the same mistakes. It's hard when you are so used to that culture to suddenly stop and think about what you're saying, what it means. And, more important, what it can mean to other people. Not even necessarily the people you're directing it at, but the people that are around you.

Gilad: What are some of the sorts of things you hear? I'm curious.

Nina: Well some of the comments, frankly, are about women, about Indigenous people, about people who are marginalized in one way or the other. And being who I am, I've become much more conscious because I'm trying to actively listen to prevent myself from making the same mistakes. 'Cause when you grow up in that culture, whatever your culture is, you use the language that you hear every day, that you grew up in. And 39 years I grew up in the culture. So it's something that people actively have to work on and to change. And I'm doing that with myself. I grew up in a binary culture. My service was always binary in the military. I have to actively think of, when I'm referring to someone, to not make assumptions about their gender, that they're even binary, let alone they could potentially be non-binary. And it's not always easy to think that way. And, for example, in the military you're used to saying ma'am or sir to an officer. I've managed to stop doing that, picking up the phone and saying, "Good morning sir," because most likely it is a sir. And then if it's a ma'am, then you would correct yourself traditionally. But now I pick up the phone and I just say, "Good morning," this is who you've phoned. So I'd say, "Good morning, 47 squadron EPO, Sargent Usherwood." I don't say ma'am or sir on the end of it. And until I know somebody, I won't assign a gender one way or the other. But that's an active part. And I have to work at that because even when I'm talking about someone else in third party, I would be making assumptions to assign a gender to them. So it's not an easy process for anybody. It's something you have to work at because, like I said, I didn't grow up in that culture. And, frankly, the military's having to learn the culture and so is Canadian society.

Gilad: We talk about that all the time even at our organization, making a habit not to say, "How are you guys?" Or walking up on stage at our Human Rights Film Festival and not saying things like, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome," but friends or people or Toronto, we often say. I want to go a bit deeper. We originally met

you at the Human Rights Film Festival and you were moderating our discussion on *TransMilitary*. And you had mentioned, I remember, on stage that you were a Catholic altar boy.

Nina: Yes.

Gilad: Where did you grow up and what was your childhood like? And who were you before you joined the military?

Nina: Okay. I come from a family of service in the military. My great grandfather was in World War I. My grandfather was in World War II. My dad served for 35 years. My mom and dad actually met because they were both in the military. And so they met and married, and then my mom got out because that's what you did at the time. My sister served. I served. So I grew up as a base brat, if you want to call it that. And I was actually born when my parents were overseas in Europe. And I've lived coast to coast literally from the south shore of Nova Scotia, pretty well the south-most tip in Nova Scotia to the north-most tip of Vancouver Island as a child and moved across in Canada in between. So I didn't really grow up anywhere, if you want to call it that where except everywhere kind of thing. And then through my career I've moved all over from coast to coast as well, just not quite from the tip to tip.

Gilad: Right. At some point though you were a Catholic altar boy, yeah?

Nina: Oh, yes. My mom's family was ... She was raised in a strong Catholic family. Her dad was from France and was a strong Catholic. And although her mother was not Catholic when she got married, she must've converted because she was definitely ... My mom, growing up, definitely grew up in a Catholic household. And well that was the kind of thing that you did when you're a boy in a Catholic household. You may well end up being a Catholic altar boy. It was the first time I got to taste wine.

Simona: And so I have to ask the question. Living in such a legacy, a service legacy of a family, what was your transition like? Or how did you start to realize that you may be trans?

Nina: Well, growing up, my parents caught me dressing in my sister's clothes. And there was one time my mom, she says, "We need to go talk." And she goes and drives us out to the edge of this park. And we're sitting on a grass hill in the middle of nowhere and she's wearing a pair of sandals that she had never worn in years and years and years. But I know I wore them that week. So is this a hint? In other words, they kept catching me. They knew I was doing it. And my dad, being in the military, he actually gave me the copy of the regulations, the Canadian Forces Administrative Order 19-20. So I read it actually before I joined

the military. So I knew exactly what it meant to join the military. I don't think he, any more than I quite had the word transgender back then, he didn't have that word. I think he probably thought I was gay. Or I don't know what they really thought. It's clear that later that they did not think that I was transgender as it's commonly thought of. They did not think that at the time. But he gave it to me so I could read it and know what would happen if they catch me. I was always going to join the military. When I was 11 or 12, I don't remember when, and I got my first pair of glasses, I just knew I wasn't going to be pilot. But there was no doubt I was joining the military. There was never ... Never had a thought of anything else, doing anything else.

Gilad: What was the language around being transgender around that time? Your parents are catching you wearing women's clothing. What is the language around ... What do conversations like that even sound like at that time?

Nina: Well, to start with, I must clarify. Unlike a lot of other parents, my parents never once told me what I was doing was wrong or bad or sinful or evil or anything like that. So I don't have that legacy. And when it came to the point of actually living as Nina, for me I didn't have any doubt that they would be accepting like other people who have been disowned by their family. That was never something that I was worried about because I knew that they loved me, period.

Simona: What was life like for you in the Army? Were you open? Were you having these conversations?

Nina: Oh, no. I did not have the conversation. The regulation saying that I could not serve, it was rescinded in 1992 as the result of a court case. But I wasn't conscious that it was rescinded. So as far as I knew, it was still in effect. I noticed though that they were increasingly not being too bothered about people that were ... It was kind of like almost an open secret that there were homosexuals. But I didn't know any other trans person until ... And then, in 1999, the military actually funded bottom surgery for somebody in the military. And that was like, "Ooh, that is possible." But at the same time, the conversation that existed in the military at the time, and for that matter in Canadian society, like, "Why is my tax dollars going to fund this?," kind of thing. It was definitely not an environment that I wanted to step into. And I didn't feel comfortable to step into that. It wasn't clear in my mind that I could actually safely walk down the street in Canada, never mind being in the military. So I did not, at the time, see myself living full time. I was living a secret life and part of living a secret life meant that I had basically no social life whatsoever. Like in the film they talked about how much part of family, but it's ... Not everybody's married in the American military. It is family, but a big part of it is the social part of it. You're expected to socialize together as a group with families and stuff like that. And not having a family, not even having a partner, not even having a homosexual partner, I did not feel

comfortable in being with them. So I did not go to Christmas parties. I did not go to ... I did in the early years, but increasingly I just ... Especially once they got married, it increasingly was less part of my life.

Simona: It sounds so isolated.

Nina: It was. It was very isolating. The only time I could be myself was to be locked in a place that I couldn't be interrupted, that would be safe. So, yes, I was hiding.

Simona: And do you ever think about all the time? Because you transitioned pretty late in your life.

Nina: Yeah.

Simona: Did you ever feel like you had this huge ... There was this kind of a wasted time that you didn't get to really be your real self?

Nina: Well that side, yes. That is true. But at the same time, I wouldn't be who I was if I didn't live that life. Historically, especially for trans people, there's a lot of what they used to call stealth where you would cut yourself off from your old life completely and move to another place, not even talk to your family, get brand new friends, new job, start a new career, start everything. My career, my life, what I've done, that's important to me. It made me who I am. So that was never an option to me. But, at the same time, I could not live who I was. So it did make it a very difficult life. And, at the time, I thought I was content, I was happy. But, in hindsight, I realize I wasn't.

Gilad: I'm trying to do the math. So I'm going back and it's 1979, 1980, I believe, when you must've started serving.

Nina: Yeah.

Gilad: So for those who are listening and don't know the timeline of things, I myself included, when did all of this start becoming legal in the military? And can you guide us through what that was like for you along the way? Because you were saying you didn't come out as trans until 2009.

Nina: Yeah.

Gilad: But I understand that it was a little earlier.

Nina: Yeah, okay. I'll go a little bit. I joined in '79. The last bath raids in Toronto were in 1981, that led to the Pride and all this. So that was the climate not only in the military, but it was the climate in Canada that existed at the time for LGBTQ

people. And so in 1992, around that time, I'm not sure exactly which, the Supreme Court said that you can no longer discriminate on ... Well actually it was in Trudeau's thing.

Simona: It's like, "I don't care about the bedrooms ...

Nina: Of the nation. And that was part of it. And it also got two more, and there was Supreme court cases. But there was a court case, and I can't remember now if it was Supreme Court or if it's just a Human Rights Tribunal, not that that's just the Human Rights Tribunal as opposed to an actual court case, basically that said that they could no longer kick, and I believe the case was actually lesbians, out of the military. Because they were doing witch hunts frankly at the time. And I think, though, the lesbian population in the military was definitely hunted more than anybody else. It's easier to marginalize women. And that's what they did.

Simona: In the film *TransMilitary* and in the Q&A, they mentioned that armies have a woman problem and kind of talking about women, lesbians, were targeted first. What is the process of a witch hunt? How does it actually happen?

Nina: Well they actually had people that were ... First of all, the obligation in the military, period, is if you know that there's something not being ... If someone is not doing something, you have what they call an obligation to report. You have an obligation to prevent surprises from happening. There should not be any surprises, regardless of what the situation is. That's your obligation. So everyone knew that they had an obligation to report if they suspected that there was someone who is homosexual, lesbian or a thief or whatever. You have an obligation to report. If someone was drinking and driving and it doesn't come back to the military, you have an obligation to report that. So that's the start, the basis of it. But then there was active looking for people. And I didn't actually go through it. Although there is certainly opportunity for me to be discovered, I think one of my protective mechanisms was the fact that I did isolate myself from everybody. I didn't socialize downtown, so I couldn't be seen. The very act of being a homosexual is to be a sexual being. So it's hard to be a sexual being ...

Simona: When you're by yourself.

Nina: ... by yourself. Being trans has nothing to do with sex and sexuality. So it's entirely easy to be yourself, in a sense, in the closet. So I would lock my door or lock my house, not answer the doors, not turn on the TV. But I could get dressed and I could read a book or I could surf the internet or whatever. So, yeah, I didn't go through the witch hunt, but I knew it was there. I knew it was going on. They talked about, "Oh, there's the Canadian Forces Women's Broomball Championship." It was common knowledge. Now, whether it was true or not, that there was a spy in that group to watch to see who was, which of the people

... That's the language that was traveling around in the base. Like I said, whether it was true or not, I have no idea. But that's the language.

Gilad: What's it like for you today, looking around? You're serving now to 2018. Do you see other trans service members? Is it more open? What's that like now?

Nina: Oh, it's so different. There's kind of an informal network of people serving, the trans members that are serving. And there's people in various different capacities that actually have some input to policy and stuff like that. So they're actually being facilitated from the system in general to say, "Okay, does this make sense in the policy as it's evolving?," and stuff like this. So there's no sense of that. That doesn't mean that you don't potentially still, if you're not living as your real self, have to worry about what is the effect of my ... Could I potentially have a hostile work environment? I didn't think, worry about that when I came out. And the reason I didn't worry about that is because my work environment was very small. And the main person that I worked in an office with was ... I knew I trusted him. So it was not an issue for that. And for what the rest of the people, by that time, I didn't really care what they thought. I knew that it wasn't going to impact my career. I didn't care what they thought. And the person that I worked most closely with, I didn't feel that they would have an issue. And I don't know, I certainly didn't experience one, so I'm guessing not. But, yeah, he's been my mentor. And not just as a trans person. He's been my mentor from the very beginning, and so I trusted him. But, no, it's much different for people now coming through. To start with, they have policy. They're working on the policy. It needs to be updated. But there actually exists policy where there really wasn't policy. They added gender identity and gender expression to the Human Rights Code in Canada to the National. But what does that mean? What does that mean for employment? What do you have to do for employment? Okay, does that mean that every single time we're going to, when someone is being marginalized because of that, that we're going to have to go to a Human Rights Tribunal to find out exactly how that gets defined? So to just say that we accept somebody or something like that, they still need to fill in the background of what that will look like, what that policy ... And the military, like any bureaucracy, is all about policy.

Gilad: Is there ever ... You look down south and you see what's happening there, quite a bit of a roller coaster. The trans community, the trans military community in the US was fighting so hard to just have access to the same spaces. And it seemed like it was going pretty well under the Obama administration. And now you have the Republicans back in power and Trump puts out those tweets about trans people not being able to serve anymore. How do you feel looking down there? Is there a sense of relief that you're up here in Canada and it's just like, "Ah, I don't have to deal with that"? What is that like for you seeing that happening?

Nina: Well, first of all, I'm not worried at this current time. But, in all honesty, that doesn't mean anything. All you have to do is look at another country, Sweden. The party with the balance of power there is no different than Trump. They're a white nationalist, anti-everything that's not a white, Christian Swede. It's not just in the States. We need people to be social justice warriors, kind of like the people that you're showing in the various films that are airing at the festival. We need social justice warriors to keep on top, because who would've thought that ... I could see that a little bit in the States, but I was really surprised that that's how it went in Sweden. And Sweden's not the only country, for example, in Europe that has taken a sharp turn frankly to the dark side.

Simona: You're married to your partner. And have you started to kind of embrace the social aspects of the military now?

Nina: Yes.

Simona: Or is there still a disconnect?

Nina: But, to be honest, it's still ... Okay, we're not going to go to the children's Christmas party because we don't have kids. And our cats won't really do well there.

Gilad: Bring your cats.

Simona: Yeah, put them in an outfit.

Nina: No, it's hard enough just getting them to go to the vet, let alone driving them somewhere like that. But, no, it's still that. Even though homosexuals have been serving in the military for a long time, there's still that kind of an aspect. So many things culturally are set up for families with children. And that's not something that we have. So we still do, but, to be honest, most of my socialization, other than a few people from work, most of the socialization is with people, friendships that are outside the military. And that's not uncommon for other people too. The military used to be very much a tighter organization. But a lot fewer people, families, live on base than they used to. And more of them live downtown. And it's more likely that the other partner has a job in something else, so that brings a whole new social circumstance in for them. So we're planning to do a work lunch party, but then they're also doing the same lunch parties for their spouses at the same time, because it's Christmas time and everyone's trying to jam it all into December. So these kind of things, it's not as tight as it used to be. We do socialize. The original plan for our date night was to go to my unit Christmas party, but instead we went to a film festival in Toronto.

Gilad: Not a bad idea. So you mentioned when you walked in earlier today that you're not a lesbian, you're a Rosbian. And we're actually sitting here with Rosalind, your wife. And you're beautiful together. People can't obviously see you but you're a beautiful couple. How did you meet? What was it like at the beginning of your relationship? How long have you been together? Tell us the whole love story.

Simona: This is my favorite part of interviews.

Nina: Okay. When I decided that I was going to start living as myself, openly, I was looking for how am I going to do that. I had been aware that there was actually a transgender support group, if you want to call it that, in Vancouver for ages and ages and ages. More than 10 years ago, because I Googled the internet looking for any help. And so I contacted them. So I was going to Vancouver from Comox, where I lived. So it's an hour and a half drive, an hour and a half ferry ride. And then you're in Vancouver, and then vice versa to go back. And for an hour long meeting on a night, hour or two long meeting, that's kind of a long drive. So I started to look for someone closer, see if there's anybody closer. And there was somebody that happened to be in the valley who had a group at the time. And I looked at her profile online and I thought, "Well, this is definitely somebody who I think I could be with." As a friend, as a support group, I wasn't looking for friendships because I didn't think that was ever going to be part of my life. I never thought I'd be in a relationship with anybody. So I started and I contacted her. And, yeah, next February, on the sixth, it will be 10 years to the day the first time we met. And actually I know it was 6:00 because that's what time the meeting started. And being in the military, I'm not late. I was early. But I didn't knock on the door till six. So there's no way.

Gilad: It's beautiful. And Rosalind's looking at you smiling the whole time. You can't really see, it's so evident that you're not just in love but you're best friends at the same time, so it's beautiful to see.

Nina: And that was part of it. She saw that this was somebody that she wanted to be with. And I wanted to be with her too. But I needed a friend far, far more than I needed a relationship. Because, hey, I got by for 40 years without a relationship. Why do I need one now? I need a friend. I really need a friend. And a friend who understands me, who could talk to me and stuff like that. The first meeting, it was really ... The first time we met, it was really good because that particular night no one else showed up. The meeting's supposed to be two hours long. We sat three hours on the couch, drank tea and talked. And that was just so good.

Simona: Lovely.

Nina: So she thought that ... But I was more interested in a friend, so I pushed her away. And although she doesn't really like my story, she wooed me.

Gilad: I could see that though.

Simona: I love that word.

Gilad: I could see that.

Nina: And she convinced me that we could still be friends and be in a relationship. And that was the best thing anybody's ever done for me.

Gilad: It is really I think the best kind of love and a gift that you both have that. How are you both received? Are you in touch with family? How are you received in the community together as a couple? Do you feel comfortable or safe in places? What's that like?

Nina: Well it's pretty interesting because when Ros and I got together, and my mom and dad actually lived basically in the same town as I live in so I introduced fairly quickly. I don't remember exactly how, but that went fine. And then, shortly after that, I took Ros, just shortly after that, I took her to my mom's anniversary, her farm reunion for her family reunion, and not too many people really knew what was going on. So I'm introducing, "This is my," we weren't married at the time but, "This is my love." And so, yeah, it was ... And so she managed to survive that. But, no, my family's all been very accepting. Even some of my family that I was a little concerned about, that are quite religious. And I'm not aware of any issue that they've ever had with that. And Ros's family, she's in close contact with one of her uncles. Her mom and dad have both passed away. But her sister and her nephew are coming to our place for Christmas dinner. So, yeah, there was not an issue or anything like that. We were accepted with the family. My mom actually had probably a harder time getting used to it, not so much accepting it, she accepted it, but dealing with it than my dad did, which I actually thought would be the reverse. But, no, there's acceptance there. There's not an issue. My biggest advice to anybody who's transitioning for their family is, and I did this deliberately, I made sure that, although I look different, because I haven't changed, everything I cared about before I still care about now, that I have the same interests. This is me. Now you get to see all of me. And I deliberately though went and did in front of my family and said the exact same things consciously, "Okay, I will go do this. I will do this. I will be looking different, but I will be doing the same thing that I always did." Because for the families I think it's a lot of, and you hear this a lot from families, they're mourning the loss of whoever. But you didn't lose whoever. They're still there. And I think it really helps for family members to really understand. If you show

them that you haven't changed, you're now actually all there, whereas before part of you was not there.

Simona: What do you want to say to the people that think that transgender individuals are not fit for service, that even though it's widely accepted, it's legal in the Canadian Army, people still think that you are not able to protect us as Canadians, what do you want to say to them?

Nina: Well, there's a Navy SEAL who's transgender, or a former Navy SEAL, who served in Afghanistan and Iraq. And those are like ultimate warriors. There isn't any better than that. And the large part of the people in any military have no chance at ever being that competent a warrior, to use that word. And so to suggest that ... It's like saying that someone can't be a police officer because they're too short. Can they do the job? If they can physically do the job, then you can do the job. In the military, it is somewhat physical, but the biggest things is mental. And when you go through your basic training, it's not whether you can do it physically because if you can't do it physically they'll help you till you can do it physically. It's whether you have the mental stamina to stay. That's what the military wants. And if you actually watched the Navy SEAL training, they keep pushing them to have them prove that you can't make me quit. You can kill me or you can physically hurt me that I will not be able to complete this, but I'm not going to quit. And that's the key. And they make that so clear if you watch their training. The whole thing about going and ringing the bell, you're acknowledging that you're quitting. So what you want as somebody who's a first responder, you want someone who won't quit. That's what you want. It doesn't matter how good you shoot with your weapon or whatever. You want someone who won't quit. That's the most important characteristic for a soldier is I will not quit.

Gilad: And that comes regardless of gender, gender expression, gender identity, sexual orientation.

Nina: Exactly. Ethnicity. Historically, it's the people who are the most valuable people in the military are the people who won't quit. Those are the people that, when you have to do something that's really tough and when everything's going bad, those are the people that won't quit. And those are the people that will lead the unit forward to success, or at least survival. And so it's quit. And that has nothing to do with your physical body. It's your mental state, your emotional ability to, regardless of what happens, "I'm not quitting."

Gilad: When you look in the mirror, I hope you see the ultimate warrior that you were talking about. 39 years, one month and two days. Thank you so much for your service. Thank you for joining us here today. It's been an honor to have you here.

Nina: Thank you. But I'm in the Air Force for a reason. I'm not a warrior.

[Theme music fades in]

Gilad: Thank you, thank you.

Simona: But you won't quit.

Gilad: My name's Gilad Cohen.

Simona: And I'm Simona Ramkisson.

Gilad: This podcast is edited and produced by Brandon Fragomeni and Alex Castellani. Our associate producer is Ron Ma.

Simona: This is an initiative of JAYU, a charity that shares human rights stories through the arts.

[Music fades out]

Gilad: If you enjoyed this podcast, help us make more of them by donating whatever you can. Visit us online at jayu.ca/donate.