Participatory Action Research - Feminist Trailblazers and Good Troublemakers

Season 2 Episode 6 - Host **Patricia Maguire** with Guests Wendy Frisby and Colleen Reid: Feminist PAR with Community partners and People on the Margins – Equity in Helth and Community Recreation (No 18)

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[00:00:00] **Patricia Maguire:** Hi folks, welcome to Participatory Action Research, Feminist Trailblazers, and Good Troublemakers. I'm your host, Patricia Maguire, and our guests today are Dr. Wendy Frisby and Dr. Colleen Frisby. Wendy, welcome.

[00:00:24] **Wendy Frisby:** Thank you.

[00:00:25] **Patricia Maguire:** And Colleen, welcome to you.

[00:00:27] **Colleen:** Thank you. It's great to be here.

[00:00:29] **Patricia:** So today we'll talk with Wendy Frisby and Colleen Reid about their successes and challenges bringing feminist values and ways of being to Participatory Action Research and Community-Based Participatory Research.

[00:00:44] **Patricia Maguire:** I hope that listening to our guests' journeys will inspire and encourage you to do action research of some variety that's deeply connected to its radical roots and transformative potential. So, I'm going to start with some brief background information [00:01:00] to introduce you to Wendy and Colleen and there are longer guest bios about them on our companion website parfemtrailblazers.net

[00:01:11] **Patricia Maguire:** Dr. Wendy Frisby is Professor Emeritus in the School of Kinesiology, Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, Canada, where she was also Chair of Women's and Gender Studies in the Faculty of Arts. She has worked with and learned from women living in poverty, immigrant women, community partners, and graduate students. And of course, one of our graduate students, Dr. Colleen Reid is also our guest today.

With the research partners, their goal has been to foster social change by reducing social isolation, promoting physical and mental well-being, and pushing for more inclusive sport and recreation policy changes at all levels of government. And they have explored methodological issues that are associated with doing Feminist Participatory Action Research [00:02:00] by problematizing concepts such as feminism, participatory, and action.

Dr. Frisby and her co-researchers have been awarded 25 research grants, and while they have published in traditional academic outlets, they have disseminated findings outside of academic outlets in ways that promote knowledge transfer and, of course, policy change.

Dr. Frisby has received many awards, and about this Wendy has said, "Awards are always dubious because our work is collaborative," but being involved in Feminist Participatory Action Research received some recognition by mainstream organizations." I'll just mention one of her awards where Wendy was singled out for the North American Society of Sports Management's highest award for research, teaching and leadership, and that's the Earl Ziegler Lecture Award. And she has two lively grandchildren.

[00:02:55] **Patricia Maguire:** Dr. Colleen Reid is a faculty member in Applied Community Studies at Douglas College in British Columbia, Canada. She is also an adjunct professor in both the Rehabilitation Sciences program at The University of British Columbia (UBC) and the Faculty of Health Professions at Dalhousie University.

For 25 years, Colleen has been involved in many varieties of Community-Based Participatory Research: action research, participatory action research, and feminist research. And she's worked in promoting health equity in the context of working with stigmatized and marginalized groups. And her work focused on health inequalities such as access to leisure, recreation, and health.

She's researched with women who are on low income, women struggling with employability, practitioners striving for workplace and health care system recognition, and individuals with lived experience of mental illness, and individuals living with dementia. And indeed, I think you're going to want to look at their five-year study, Raising the [00:04:00] Curtain on the Lived Experience of Dementia, which you can find at imaginationnetwork.org.

Her recent research centers on integrating arts-based methods, co-creation, and participatory co-design. And indeed, she's particularly focused on working with undergraduate students so they get to participate in all areas and aspects of the research process. She has a longstanding commitment to democratizing workplace, and she also has a long commitment to co-authorship. So, in addition to co-writing with students and community partners, one of her co-authors is Wendy Frisby. So welcome to both of you.

[00:04:41] **Patricia Maguire:** So, let's get started with what I think is particularly trailblazing about your work. You brought participatory research and feminisms to areas not typically associated with either. That's community recreation and physical activity, and especially with marginalized [00:05:00] women. And you've said, I think, that community recreation wasn't really seen much as a critical area in feminist circles. In fact, you've said it

sometimes that community recreation has almost been seen as frivolous. It might not have been recognized much in feminist circles, nor was PAR recognized much. So, you've kind of done some uphill work here. So, let's talk about how you got there. What brought each of you to Participatory Action Research?

[00:05:29] **Colleen Reid:** Through the later years of my undergraduate program in kinesiology, where I was at Queen's University, I became really interested in women's issues, women's studies, social justice issues, and so, I knew going into graduate school that those were interests of mine, and over the course of being at graduate school in UBC with Wendy as my supervisor was continuing to pursue those interests and starting to question increasingly how we were doing research [00:06:00] with our research participants. And at that time, and still to some degree today, we were in a department, the School of Kinesiology, that really, you know, we were struggling to justify doing qualitative research, let alone more kind of quote, "alternative approaches" that were participatory or more democratic. And yet I was really interested in trying to understand different ways of engaging with our participants and Wendy was in her own ways equally interested.

[00:06:29] **Colleen Reid:** And so, we were both pursuing research and anything we could put our hands on with regards to Participatory Action Research at that time. And that this was in the early nineties. So, I think partway through, I remember having a moment where we came across, Pat, your dissertation and this was kind of, everything kind of came together in terms of thinking about how we could engage in research in a different way with our participants. And so, from [00:07:00] there, it just kind of got for me going as a, as a graduate student and inspired me to continue doing research, through my PhD, using participatory and feminist approaches and really thinking, thinking carefully about how we could bring those together.

[00:07:15] **Patricia Maguire:** Wendy, how about you?

[00:07:17] **Wendy Frisby:** Yeah, and for me, I'll admit up front that I'm a couple of decades older than Colleen, but some of the points she made are similar to me. I guess when I was doing my PhD in kinesiology - and for those who don't know what kinesiology is, well, it used to be called physical education actually, but the more scientific meaning of the term, it's the study of human movement from a cellular level on up to a societal level. And most of our colleagues are concerned more with what I would call the hard sciences. So, they're doing laboratory research sometimes with animals and sometimes with humans. Their work may be quite trying to improve [00:08:00] performance for athletes and that kind of thing.

But I was always interested in who's outside of the, you know, sport recreation circle. Because I know myself and my five younger brothers when we were growing up, being in, we weren't in a wealthy family by any stretch of the imagination, but that whole, you know, physical activity, sport piece was really important to our growing up, and I would say to my own, you know, physical and mental health. And as I was going through my studies and seeing the small percentage, and especially for girls who really drop off in drastic numbers around the age of 12, just really started thinking about what changes in systems and policies and approaches and ways of thinking about physical activity and recreation could bring, in my case, I was most interested in those girls and women, so they could enjoy the same health and mental health benefits.

[00:08:59] **Wendy Frisby:** But I was [00:09:00] trained in, it wasn't more kind of on the sociological end of things, but I was trained in a quantitative way. And I must say, I at one point thought about getting out of academia because it, it was so isolating. You know, I'd sit in my office and write up these surveys and send out them to out to people I've never met and never knew and hoped and prayed that they would send their, fill out their survey and send it back to me so then I could sit there and do these strange statistics and, you know, try to come up with something to say about the survey method.

[00:09:34] **Wendy Frisby:** And I tried that approach, because again, that was my training with my very first foray into a more participatory approach with one municipality who were concerned about access to local recreation and physical activity programs and wanted to develop what they called the Leisure Access Policy. So once again, I went in and did, you know, the survey with [00:10:00] low-income women and I encountered, you know, literacy issues, just, you know, fear towards researchers coming in with these surveys with language that didn't make any sense to them. There were women that English was the second language, and I just went, oh my God, you know, the way I've been trained does not match up in terms of generating knowledge around this marginalized group.

So, I think, you know, around that point, I really started training myself on what qualitative methods were. I had read, you know, a bit on participatory approaches and I got so excited because it sort of legitimized where I wanted to go and thought, gee, maybe I can stay in academia. And then Colleen came along and again found your dissertation Pat, talk about a trailblazer that really just gave us all sorts of guidance and direction on how to get started. So yeah, that's a little bit of my journey into this area.

[00:10:58] **Patricia Maguire:** You know, I think that's kind of inspirational and hopeful for our audience, our listeners, because so many graduate students come into programs where they may not have faculty that are supportive of either participatory research or feminisms. And Wendy, here you, in a sense, allowed yourself, if you will, to be, to take a

journey with Colleen as a graduate student, and sometimes that doesn't happen. People find themselves stymied, and so, I think that's a, sort of a ray of hope to the people out there who are trying to find places where they can find colleagues and partners.

So, tell us some about some of your earliest then Participatory Action Research together. I know you had a project, Women Organizing Activities for Women. Was that one of your early projects?

[00:11:50] **Wendy Frisby:** It was another grad student, Jennifer Fenton, who was working in the field of community recreation, contacted me because the municipality was, had a legal suit against them. Girls' gymnastics programs weren't getting equal space and good coaching and that kind of thing. And they had gotten together and were launching a legal suit against the municipality to try to equalize things out a little bit. And so, the fellow who was scrambling, he was in charge of trying to make this department, recreation department, look better. And asked me to come in and do this presentation. And so, I asked Jennifer to do the presentation with me using a leisure access workbook that we developed. It wasn't for academic purposes. It was more to guide discussions out in the community. And we were absolutely flabbergasted when we got to this workshop and there were 80 women.

The one thing they have in common is they all lived on low income, but the youngest was about 17 and the oldest was about 70 and thank goodness we had that leisure access workbook because we quickly [00:13:00] had to adjust how we were going to approach this and we worked in small groups. And out of that I guess one of the questions we asked is what are health issues that you're facing and that we could maybe get together and work on, you know, and I should back up a little bit and say the reason there were so many women in the room was, it was the community partners.

[00:13:25] **Wendy Frisby:** Jim, the recreation fellow, had, he knew his department didn't have trusting relationships with women living on low income, but he knew the women's center, community health, immigration services, community schools, family services, all those local groups that, again, weren't well tied to one another. But they did have at least some trusting relations with women and they, they just said, well, come to this seminar, it's about getting more, you know, physically active and we'll give you free lunch and childcare. We thought of that. We had the [00:14:00] childcare piece covered.

So, this group was all there. And by the end of the day, it went much longer than we thought, but it was, it was really kind of a magical moment because at the end of the day, when we started talking about all the health issues, of course, a whole range of things were mentioned. But the one thing that all the different groups, discussion groups agreed on was

that being lonely, you know, was sort of the major issue that they were facing, because living on low income, they were isolated in their communities. They didn't have the money to get on a bus to come to a community recreation program, let alone pay for the fees, and if you needed a swimming suit in order to participate, and on and on and on. So, academically, we identified that as social isolation, and at the end, I just sort of said, well, do you want to stick together, and you know, sort of collectively work on that and there was sort of a resounding yes in the group and it ended up being a four-year project and [00:15:00] We applied for federal funding with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Women wrote letters of support if they so chose to, and if they were able to. Some of the community partners wrote letters of support. And we weren't asked to include letters of support in our grant application, of course, but we ended up getting a nice, sizable grant. Colleen, maybe you can chime in as to how you became involved in WOAW, but Colleen was hired as the project manager to lead us forward.

[00:15:34] **Colleen Reid:** I remember I was starting the second year of my doctoral studies when you had just completed that workshop and so, I was aware of and I think I read the grant application that went in after the workshop and then at that point we kind of identified that if the funding was successful, then I would be the project manager.

[00:15:55] **Colleen Reid:** And so, of course you got the funding and away we went [00:16:00] with starting the project, which very quickly became an organization. Even though formally it wasn't really, we hadn't registered as a non-profit or anything like that, but the women participating identified this as an organization that they were participating in and that their role was to develop more equitable access to community recreation for women in their communities. And so, I was managing the project, doing everything from helping with the budget and supporting other student research assistants and organizing meetings and making sure there was transportation and childcare for all of our meetings.

[00:16:39] **Colleen Reid:** And as we started to meet, as an organization, we started to also recognize that there was a lot of organizing happening, a lot of attention to the things that the women were really interested in engaging in, and that there was also another conversation we needed to have around what some of their longstanding issues had [00:17:00] been and their experiences with loneliness and with living below the poverty line and so on.

And so, I carved out what we ended up calling the research team. And this was a group, kind of a subset of women who were really interested in talking about some of these issues and bringing a more research lens to their lived experiences. And so, I led that kind of arm of the organization, and we together met, I think, over 20 times. I did a number of one-on-one interviews with the women who were participating and that became the kind of the

base of my doctoral studies. So, the research team kind of was the bringing that research lens that kind of, you know, the answering our key research questions.

[00:17:46] **Colleen Reid:** And so, Wendy and I worked together really closely over the four years. And as I was kind of, carrying both hats in a sense, kind of managing the project and, you know, collaborating with the women on the research team. So, we kind of fell into the organizational structure of WOAW of (Women Organizing Activities for Women), but it really worked because it allowed for the women to engage in doing things and creating opportunities. And it also allowed for them to really talk and share and explore their shared experiences. So, it became yeah, it was really you know in a sense a really successful kind of structure to a project.

[00:18:34] **Patricia Maguire:** And what would you say for both of you along with the women who were involved in the research team, what were some of the 'aha's' and the insights you took away from that experience about participatory research?

[00:18:48] **Wendy Frisby:** Well, I guess the biggest one was how what a lack of training I had in how to really do this work. But I saw that the skills that were needed were very similar to the amazing community development skills, as many of our partners call them. And in particular, I'd really like to acknowledge Louise Hara, who unfortunately is no longer with us. But we just sat back and watched these community development skills and again, you know, they were things like empathy, and listening, and saying out loud things that I'm not sure I, well, I just wouldn't have known to bring them up. So, for example, she would, before there was a conflict, she would say, you know, we're a large group, we're going to have differences of opinions. At some point, we might have conflicting opinions. How are we going to deal with those as a group? When those come up in a way that doesn't make someone feel that they shouldn't, they can't come back to the next meeting. And it was just so brilliant, like my jaw just sort of dropped at the skills they have. And I kind of feel bad because, Colleen, that's one thing I don't think we've written [00:20:00] enough about, was the community development skills that some of these community partners did have training in, and they did have long term experience working with women. And those are exactly the skills that I think you needed to be a, you know, an empathetic participatory FPAR researcher.

But it also really spoke to our privilege as well, and I guess that's the other big 'aha', you know, after these meetings, I know I'm going home and I've got a fridge that's full of food. You know, sometimes when Colleen and I were doing interviews and we were asked into the women's homes, you know, they would open their fridges and the fridges were empty. And so, that, you know, our privilege as white, CIS, researchers, you know, was in our face a lot. But I would say, and I just don't think this project, and I was involved in four or five

others after this one, would have been successful without those dedicated [00:21:00] community partners and the skills that they had that I didn't have. Hopefully I developed some of them over time and I think that's why a lot of our publications are on the methodological piece, because we just had no training in that and were sorely lacking, but luckily we learned from others along the way.

[00:21:19] **Colleen Reid:** And I'll just jump in around acknowledging Louise and some of the other community partners. Louise, you know, was the one who said, I think you need a research team. She said, you need, there needs to be a space to talk about living in poverty and health issues and some of the struggles and some of the challenges that the women were, were facing. And, and she, I don't know if you remember Wendy, but she also taught us how to make decisions by consensus. And she took the time to guide us through that and how people could, you know, how to ensure, it's not perfect, but how to ensure that everyone around the table was able to participate [00:22:00] in decision-making. And she was just so skilled.

I just remember her also because I was a graduate student at the time. And I remember, you know, I had the strong support of Wendy and my other committee members to do feminist action research as a dissertation, but everyone else around me at my university was saying, why are you doing this kind of research? Like, this is just not, you know, you're not going to finish, this is going to be, this is going to take you forever, this is just gonna be way too messy. And I remember, you know, having the support of my committee, but also having the support of the community partners who said, yes, this is what it is. It might mean you have to go and pick up some of the women and bring them to meetings. It might mean like your role is not, you're not just a researcher, right? You need to bring your humility; you need to bring like your entire self into this project. And what does that look like? And so, that was incredible learning for me. And I'll be forever grateful for that because I think it's allowed me to step into projects [00:23:00] with the flexibility and the humility to understand, to learn, to always be learning about what it means to be doing this kind of work. And yes, what I learned in this project, I had to apply and grow from and in subsequent projects, but it was just the most incredible experience for me as a, as a kind of a new doctoral researcher.

[00:23:22] **Patricia Maguire:** You've sort of taken us into the next topic that I wanted to get into, which is some of the, I suppose, challenges, barriers, but also supports that you encountered along the way with this project, but other subsequent Community-Based PAR projects that you did. So maybe you could talk some about that, about either the resistance that you faced or the supports that you had to do this work along the way.

[00:23:52] **Colleen Reid:** You know, so I kind of spoke to some of the resistance while I was doing my doctoral studies. And I think that as I became a more kind of a more of a kind of a lead researcher, as my career kind of developed, I was able to claim using participatory methods in all my projects. And that became less of a kind of a need for justification.

But over the years, I think the challenges and the resistances have shifted. And I would say that partly because of where I've been for the last 15 years as a researcher. I'm working in a college in British Columbia in Canada, and we're not a research institution, we're a teaching institution. And so, research tends to be a little bit on, not off the sides of our desks, but it's, it's not a primary focus for, for me in my role at the college.

So, all the projects I've been involved in have been initiated by community and by community partner and those community partners in those relationships, which I think has been incredible. And it's been, [00:25:00] it's really meant that the projects I've been involved in, like, through community, mental health, and then more recently working with people living with dementia in the community, these projects have been entirely driven by community partners and folks living in the, in the community. And so, I think that brings a different kind of challenge, a different kind of resistance that we're kind of, we're still living and, and experiencing. And, and sometimes it's around who's driving the project, how we all, how we all show up to it, how we define community, who's around the table and who's not around the table at times. You know, there's sectors or parts of community that aren't represented, some that are better represented. So, I think these kinds of tensions have come up as my work has evolved and what I do feel is that because of how, how these projects have kind of been [00:26:00] initiated, there has always been very strong ownership and direction from community, but that as a, for me, as a researcher puts me sometimes in an interesting position.

So, I guess that over the life cycle of a project, there's, there can be tensions and there can be ambiguity and confusion about what it's all looking like and what we're working towards. And I'm now at a place where I'm confident that we will get there. And sometimes it's just that messiness that kind of bubbles up as we're working together. And so, I'd say that that, those are the kinds of resistances that we've, that I've experienced in the last, probably last 10 years.

[00:26:39] **Patricia Maguire:** Have you, and Wendy, I'll come back to you, but Colleen, I just want to follow up using the term community, because of course there are communities and there's diversity amongst the community that you're working in. Have you found yourself at times being a voice to try to diversify the group that's around the table or, [00:27:00] you know, how does that play out?

[00:27:02] **Colleen Reid:** Yeah, that's an ongoing challenge. It's an, yeah, and, and the partners I've worked with have been aware of that and have had a strong commitment to like equity and diversity and, but it's very challenging. You know, I can't say that we've, like this has been solved or it's an ongoing conversation, I think is the best way I can put it. There's a benefit and a challenge to having such strong partnerships in a sense because there are times when working in partnership, there's the assumption that they are community. And then, and then other times we're like, well, no, no, no, there's lots of other voices that we're not that aren't at this table and how we kind of continually circle back to that. So, I think we've been...learned to be careful about how we represent and how we acknowledge who is there and who is not there. But again, it's, it's alive and well at this very moment. [00:28:00] You know, we're struggling with that and we're identifying and recognizing that there are people missing from this project. And especially because we've had a very broad understanding or definition of community to begin with. So that kind of forces us to be continually asking that question.

[00:28:18] **Patricia Maguire:** Wendy, let's go to you to follow up on that with either resistance or supports that you've had with, say, community groups or partners or just in doing this work.

[00:28:30] **Wendy Frisby:** Yeah, well, again, I think I've mentioned the really important role that community partners played in supporting the work and that these projects wouldn't have gone ahead or got off the ground without them. But in terms of the resistance piece, I mean, I was always thinking about what is the action part of PAR or FPAR, what does that mean? And I naively thought it meant we've got to get some policy change in this community. You know, like that to me [00:29:00] was what action was. And we certainly got challenged on that notion by the women that we worked with and the partners. And we really had to think about what action meant.

[00:29:11] **Wendy Frisby:** So that a woman said, “I no longer feel as lonely as I do because I'm part of this group and I get myself to these meetings and I feel like I'm contributing.” That is a huge piece of action that I, again sort of, we had to really reconceptualize what action meant, but I was still thinking about the policy piece because I'm thinking when we leave here and this project morphs into whatever it's going to morph into, is there going to be an impact in community and are people who live on low income going to have more access to these recreation and physical activity programs that we think are important to health? And so, that's kind of where the resistance came [00:30:00] because the community partners often were not in positions of power in their organizations. And they even had to sometimes hide how much time they were spending on our project because they were working at capacity already, often on low salaries. And so, you'd get all this

momentum going and you'd raise expectations, but if the higher ups in the organization aren't buying in or don't want to hear about it at the end or certainly don't want to change anything, then can be really demoralizing, especially to the women who've been involved who are now thinking, yeah, all this effort we've put into this and it still doesn't matter.

[00:30:44] **Wendy Frisby:** But out of, it was really by accident, I'll just share one story about one project that we're involved in. I was asked to speak to City Council about this Leisure Access Policy based on that horrible survey that I'd done that I was so [00:31:00] dissatisfied with. And I just thought, oh this is never going to work... I'm, the university I'm at isn't in this community. I am they don't know me. I'm going to come in and, and really I'm being critical of my own work here because I saw the flaws in the survey design.

So, what we did instead was a single mom who had been very passionately speaking about how access to these programs would be so good for her and her children, a community partner who was an advocate who said I never thought about recreation for the clients I work with. You know, we're always focusing on housing or food scarcity or something else. But I can see its importance now. And then there was an idea champion in the rec department who just saw that it's people that can pay who are coming. It's the majority who can't pay who aren't, like we've got to do something. So he said well, let's the four of us go and do this presentation to City Council. And the young single mom [00:32:00] started off the story and in the end there was unanimous support for this Leisure Access Policy that was not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but I just kind of realized, and one of the um, fellows who'd been, we'd had dealings with him before, and he was really against this, he just thought this was it was all about making money and using taxpayer dollars for these programs, well and everything. And he came up at the end and he had tears in his eyes, and he goes, my daughter's a single mom.

And so, we knew who which one of the speakers had had the biggest impact on him. I'm sure that this department was being watched by community partners. We didn't know it was a power move, but it was a power move. They had staff saying, I'll do the work. I'll do the work. And then I have no idea if the research brought any legitimacy to it, but maybe it did. But it was that, it was a participatory approach to dissemination [00:33:00] that and again, I you know, not don't know if that policy is still in place, this was quite a while ago, but it just showed it was so interesting how the resistance to bigger, more policy- related types of action were overcome by a participatory approach to dissemination of the project. So I just really wanted to share that and acknowledge that I didn't know that was going to happen when, when we did it it just sort of did, but it was another one of those 'aha' learning moments in, in doing PAR that was a pretty powerful one.

[00:33:37] **Patricia Maguire:** It also shows how sometimes I think the two of you have mentioned that at the beginning work on community recreation and leisure somehow wasn't conceptualized as sort of critical transformative work that… and yet you show in that, in your work what the transformative potential of any site that you [00:34:00] work in is when you bring some of the values of PAR and the values of feminist work to that site.

[00:34:08] **Colleen Reid:** Yeah, I think that's a great, a great point. And I, I have an example of a partnership with a community partner. He's the recreation coordinator at a long-term care facility, like an old age home. So, and he has just been a community driver in terms of doing partnerships and really innovative things in his department. And he was the one who reached out to me to kind of initiate the, what ended up being a five-year project, looking at the lived experience of dementia. And so, he was a real driving force in this project and even to the point of providing training to all the researchers involved around what it means to live with dementia and how to, how we could really think about partnering with folks who are living with dementia and what that looks like and how to [00:35:00] handle issues around consent and at which point we're, are we do we have to really question if our community was unable to provide consent and some, some big interesting questions around engaging in participatory research with… in this community. And he had strong support from his organization, which was a much bigger 21 site organization that has different facilities across British Columbia and in Alberta.

[00:35:28] **Colleen Reid:** And so, he was the driver for the first 3 years, and then there was a change in leadership. And all of a sudden they were from a different province, were calling into the project, trying to micromanage and basically forbade him from participating. So, we had to shift the project, and this coincided with COVID, and so, then we moved online. So, this was in a way, an experience of resistance, not from the community partner himself, but from like the kind of organizational structures that support [00:36:00] him in participating. And so, it was really a very challenging time because he was such a promoter and such a driver of the project. He stayed involved in, in a kind of quieter way. We moved the project online. And completed it kind of in a multimedia kind of way, which is an interesting challenge.

But now there's been again another shift in leadership, and he's, he's kind of stepped back into our work. And so, it kind of shows the, the ways that community partners can be so integral and yet kind of vulnerable and precarious within the work. I'm just grateful that we've been working together and over now it's been almost seven years. We've found another opportunity to work together. And he's often said, and I've heard this from other community partners as well, how being involved in these kinds of participatory projects has been… given them like a lifeblood to their, to their work. It's [00:37:00] invigorated their

work, it's created a whole different kind of set of meaning and purpose around the, the day-to-day work that they're doing because of the collaboration, and because the kinds of questions that are being asked, and the kinds of conversations that are happening within the context of a research project.

[00:37:17] **Patricia Maguire:** Wendy, anything you want to add on that?

[00:37:20] **Wendy Frisby:** Well, for me, it was in the classroom. And again I, I had virtually no training on, on how to be a good teacher in a university classroom situation. In the beginning, I just sort of drew on what I liked from those who, who went before me, but just before I retired, I developed a new course on interculturalism, health, and physical activity. And I just thought I just can't do the traditional lecture approach to this. We had thousands of students in our programs and large classes and that kind of thing. But luckily it was a relatively small group of 40 to 50 in [00:38:00] this fourth-year class. So, I just walked in, and I said here's the idea behind this class and this is what interculturalism means. But I said I'm at the end of my career, and I'm quite dissatisfied as to how we evaluate courses like this. And I said, how many here want to write another multiple-choice exam? And not too many hands went up. And how many here want to write yet another paper? And not too many hands went up. And I said, okay, well, you, you've taken all these courses. You know best the best way to evaluate what you've learned in a course. So, I'd like you to get in small groups and propose to me how this course should, how your learning in this course should be evaluated.

Well, it took us two weeks, but they, they've landed on learning journals, that they wanted to write learning journals, which again, are really tough to evaluate and, and very time consuming on my end. But they said, you want to know how you can best evaluate [00:39:00] our learning? That's by us telling you what you're learning. And um, we decided the percentages and that kind of thing. And I was just, and those two courses, I've been retired for almost ten years now, are being taught by two former grad students who were also community partners in some of the projects that they worked in. And it's got a community-based learning experience, so they go out in the community and, and try to use participatory approaches with the groups they're working with for their class projects, which was the second way in which they chose to, to be evaluated. So, I was really thrilled to, at least to some extent for, in my own experience bring the work I've done in learnings from the community and find a way to bring it back into the classroom.

[00:39:47] **Wendy Frisby:** And luckily, just in terms of the policy piece, someone was appointed as Director of Interculturalism at our university. And he couldn't find many courses on, on that topic. And he ended up using it as an example in that participatory approach to evaluation in the strategic plan that he used that was presented to the

presidents. And, and again, we all know that strategic plans at universities, sometimes a lot of work goes into them, and they don't often always get followed. But again, those are two examples that I can point to that were really quite, on a personal level, really exciting for me, that's for sure.

[00:40:30] **Patricia Maguire:** As people, perhaps, out there listening know, I'm just a huge fan of Jill Morawski's work. And she has written and talked quite a bit about how one of the greatest contributions that feminist scientists can make is to changing the near environment, that is, the place and the space in which they work in science, or, you know, social sciences for us. And so, I wonder if each of you could talk some about how you think over the course of your [00:41:00] work, you've contributed to changing the near environment in which you work, whether that's the university or the near environment of the partnerships with community groups.

[00:41:12] **Colleen Reid:** Well, I just love that quotation about changing the near environment and I think that that's really where I've kind of come to with the, the value of our work. And circling back to something Wendy said a little while ago around how we see and change and social change and the results of our projects. And I think that I was really hung up on, like, Wendy said, you know, policy change or what can I, you know, what can I lay claim to from this project? And, and I think shifting the gaze back to the near environment has been really helpful for me. And it's allowed a real focus on ourselves, the people, you know, people who are partnering and we're doing this work together how we're [00:42:00] collaborating and how we're working together and also the relationships that are being developed.

[00:42:04] **Colleen Reid:** And so, I really see the near environment as the impact on my students. And in my case, particularly the student research assistants who are really engaged with these projects and how they the kinds of tasks or the kinds of things that they're, they're all undergraduate students in third or fourth year, and they're all doing every component of the research process. They're facilitating meetings and they're doing, they're really like, they just dive right in. And I try to model humility and curiosity and the kinds of things that keep us engaged as researchers kind of qualities.

[00:42:42] **Colleen Reid:** And I think that the near environment is also, I see it through the lens of our community partners. And what I have noticed has been an increasing commitment to inquiry. Through the community partnerships that we've developed and some of the arts organizations that I've [00:43:00] that I've partnered with and the artists themselves now see research and asking questions as fundamental to their practice. And so, now we've kind of really come to a place of how we can collaborate and enhance our individual practices through researchers engaging with artists, artists engaging with

researchers. And I think that's been a really gratifying kind of achievement through some of the more recent projects I've been involved in. And, and I see that as part of our near environment because a change in practice then is kind of rippling out through the community and having an impact in other ways in not only the work we're doing, but another for instance, some of our artists partners who are now working in different ways with other projects they're working in and other contexts they're working in.

[00:43:52] **Colleen Reid:** So I feel like it, focusing on the near environment, in a sense, allows us to really value those things [00:44:00] and to take the emphasis off kind of the more arm's length changes that we think we ought to be achieving, but that are more difficult to achieve in a three-year project and might take five years or seven years or who knows. And so, yeah, I, I feel like that's kind of become the new, the new emphasis of the work that I'm, I'm doing as a near environment. So, I just love that quotation because it really resonates with the work that I'm doing right now.

[00:44:26] **Patricia Maguire:** And it also showed me, I think, that change isn't just for those people over there, it's also for us in here, wherever in here is in the university and organizations that a lot of it's about changing ourselves and our approaches to, whether it's, you know, the organization, teaching, research, who's at the table, et cetera.

Over time, I know your, the focus of your work or the kinds of work you've been doing has, you know, evolved and changed, but what do you think have been some of the through threads, [00:45:00] if you will, that have gone across your work over time that have been informed by participatory research and feminisms?

[00:45:07] **Wendy Frisby:** I guess one going back a bit to resistance to the word feminism. On some of these projects we wanted to be transparent because we were calling our work Feminist Participatory Action Research when we wrote about it. But sometimes the minute we said that word, eyes would roll, and people would, you know, sit back and you could see the resistance to that. So I don't know that we ever negotiated that one well. So, we would often call our work Participatory Action Research and drop the feminism, which was really too bad. But sometimes by the end of the project we would, you know, come back, especially with WOAW and talk about what that, what the F-word actually means.

[00:45:52] **Patricia Maguire:** I think that's important to bring up, that just the resistance there is to the notion of feminisms, [00:46:00] and I say with an *s* because there's so many approaches, the resistance to it, and yet here you are in the midst of your own values and ways of being informed by that, you know, how do you keep being and doing that when there's resistance to it?

[00:46:15] **Wendy Frisby:** Yeah, and so, we just didn't use that word at the beginning because it was just going to take, you know, attention away from the health and social issues that we were, we were trying to get at.

[00:46:27] **Colleen Reid:** Yeah, like, I think that it's a really good question. I mean, I really, I think that my commitment to feminist values and kind of ways of being, in a sense, has been the, been the through line in my work, whether the project's been identified as a feminist project or not.

I think what I've brought has been, and this is like Wendy mentioned earlier, as a white middle class Cisgender person, really, it's forced my own ongoing practice of reflexivity [00:47:00] And who I am and what my real attention to what my appropriate role should be and, and how to be flexible and humble and in a place of learning in every project. And I think that's been a real through line. And I think that's what I've really worked hard to model for my students as well, which is, I think, enabled them to step in and to really deeply learn in these projects as well.

I think I've, another through line, I think, has been attention to intersectionality. And not only in terms of my own location and how it relates to me personally, but also as it relates to the community, how we define community, how we understand who's participating and who's not participating and the voices we're hearing or not hearing.

And I guess the other, the other through line that I really identified was a strong equity focus. And through engaging with community partners, but also over time, which I haven't really spoken about, but a commitment to kind of [00:48:00] peer research, which is how we engage with community and how we invite community in as researchers, as co-researchers, and what is needed to do that. And so, you know, what kinds of skills are needed, what kind of education or learning might be useful in order for everyone at the table to be on equal footing around how we're engaging in the project. And so, this kind of attention to peer research has been a through line that I'm really, I'm still really excited about and, and feel like there's strong potential kind of going forward and further understanding how that should look and, and what's needed.

[00:48:44] **Patricia Maguire:** Can you say a few more specifics about that? Like what's needed?

[00:48:48] **Colleen Reid:** Well, for instance, in a, the community mental health project that I was involved in, this was in the, you know, 2013 to '18, that was a partnership with a community recreation [00:49:00] program that was focused on providing recreational opportunities for people living with serious mental illness. And so, we did a photovoice project. And over the course of photovoice really learned from our participants that they

wanted to understand better what research was. And so, we developed, myself and two of our participants, we co-developed a 10-week curriculum around research for the participants. And so, this curriculum was delivered entirely by the peer researchers. And so, I, I was there, but I was in a supportive role. I wasn't in a kind of at the front of the classroom, but it was kind of a classroom, a 10-week class to walk through the research process. And each individual brought a question that they were interested in about their own lived experience, and we developed a research project. You know, kind of a small modest research project for each of them. [00:50:00] One of them went on to get funded and they went on to kind of conduct, gather 20 interviews in relation to their project. That's what I mean by peer research is really equipping people with lived experience to engage as equal members on a research team. And so, this is kind of, it's not as much the focus of my current work, but this really came out of that particular project. Yeah, it was really an interesting experience to kind of develop this together and to provide this training.

[00:50:29] **Patricia Maguire:** It's just so fascinating, the things that you're, each of you are bringing up of the unanticipated places where things evolve, people evolve, places that you get to, which is both the, the value, but the scary part of doing participatory work, because you don't know where it's going to go and you have to kind of give up that control, if you will.

[00:50:57] **Colleen Reid:** Oh, I was just going to say with that particular example, we, [00:51:00] you know, the proposal had nothing about a peer researcher training, a 10-week curriculum, and yet that's where it went. And we were in a position to be able to talk with our funders about, okay, this is where we're taking it. And they were okay with that, right? So that's also another piece. It's like, how do you set yourself up to be able to have that flexibility? It's not always possible, but we were really fortunate in that particular example.

[00:51:22] **Wendy Frisby:** Yeah, and just one tip that may or may not be helpful, but when we went for funding, we always talked about emergent research design because, you know, the funders want you to have this well thought out plan, you know, that you're going to implement and follow all the steps on. And of course, that just doesn't happen in, in, with participatory research. So, to try to acknowledge that and then once we have that first project under our belt, we could say, okay for example, research methods, we would say, well, based on our past projects and we know that surveys and that kind of thing aren't going to work and that more [00:52:00] conversational approaches through interviews and, and so and so, will more likely be successful. But we want to work with our study participants at the beginning to get their take on that because that's what being participatory is about. So that that term emergent research design, both, you know, getting things through ethics at the university in terms of funding that ended up, you know, being a term. So I don't know if that created a like an institutional shift, but certainly when I started

out my projects, there was just no room for that, and you wouldn't have got funded. Yeah, I just wanted to mention that.

[00:52:40] **Colleen Reid:** I think in the Canadian context, there has been an institutional shift in terms of that approach to, to grant writing. And also, I know at my institution, I only ever apply for ethics for one year, right? Because it's always, well, you know, this is what we know for more than, you know, for the next year and we will be applying, revising [00:53:00] and updating our plans as we, as the project emerges, right? As it, as it unfolds. And so, and now there's a real understanding that that's just how it goes. So, I do feel like broadly speaking, there have been some shifts around the recognition that the research can unfold as we're engaging in it.

[00:53:19] **Wendy Frisby:** And I think there was other participatory researchers at our university that were quite successful in working with ethics to broaden what they saw as acceptable and that kind of thing. You know, for example, if we had brought in those institutional ethics letters to the women in our group on letterhead with all our academic jargon, they would have been turned off right at the beginning, but we had to bring them because that was part of the ethical process. But we would sit down and just say, okay, here's the first paragraph, and this is what it means, and you know, this is why it's in place, and it doesn't necessarily sort of apply to our type of approach, but you know you know. Our own institutions [00:54:00] certainly created resistance as other podcast speakers have, have talked to, but by pushing back and getting others who are doing this type of work together it is possible to get some institutional change, whether it's with funders or ethics review boards or with how classes are approached and again, that's why I love the quote about the near environment as well.

[00:54:26] **Patricia Maguire:** It just shows how long term the work is and how you're talking about projects that have been five years, seven years, three years, and the, just how, how long term in a place the work is to begin to change, say, the ethics committee and what they're asking, the institutional ethics board, or how courses are taught or what's taught.

I'm reminded of what you were saying about the community development skills that like, where do you put that in a Participatory Action Research [00:55:00] course? I taught action research for teachers over a yearlong course that we did. And continually, I realized how challenging it was when, even though they were teachers, many of them didn't have a lot of experience working in participatory ways. And it's like, okay, where does all that go? In just group skills, you know how, how you change courses to build on that skill set, which people may not have coming in to an action research or participatory research context.

[00:55:33] **Colleen Reid:** I think that also speaks, Pat, to the, in a way it's like a, it doesn't have to be, but for me, it has felt like a lifelong commitment to this kind of work, right? And I think of myself now and what I would bring to a project versus, you know, who I was as, as a doctoral researcher and, and how much I've learned and, and grown through that and how much has changed over those years as well. And [00:56:00] and I think that that's a really not that to do participatory research, you have to have a lifelong commitment. But I think that the learning is just so ongoing and it just makes you better able to handle all the uncertainties and the question, you know, there's so much so much that comes up through doing this kind of work that over the years, it just, it evolves and you become, in a sense, better at it. Just better at understanding how the ups and downs of it or the challenges, you know, riding out the conflict that might come up or handling challenges that arise and so that I do, you know, the opportunity to do this podcast has been really interesting to kind of reflect back and say, oh yeah, like things have evolved and changed over the last 20 years.

[00:56:50] **Patricia Maguire:** What has sustained you in this work?

[00:56:52] **Wendy Frisby:** I'd say it's definitely relationships. Here we're talking about social isolation, but when I [00:57:00] was in my office trying to do the kind of work that just didn't fit with my values, it was the relationships with those out in the community and later on with other researchers and with grad students who were interested in this kind of work, so you weren't on an island by yourself. And you know, reflecting back, that's the best part of, of the work for me and it, it's definitely what sustained me, hands down. And even the difficult ones that, you know, I mean, that they pushed you and made you think and made you think of new ways of you know, keeping relationships that were important going. So, for sure, that's the most sustaining piece for me. How about you, Colleen?

[00:57:48] **Colleen Reid:** Yeah, I would say that the same has been the relationships. And I think alongside that, which is kind of part of building relationships is, for me, there's been a really strong desire [00:58:00] to understand other people's experiences and especially experiences that have not been well understood. And so, I, that has always kind of inspired me to continue to do this work through building relationships.

[00:58:18] **Patricia:** As we start to wrap it up here, is there anything that you came wanting to talk about, wanting to put out there, in terms of, you know, reflecting on the work that you've been doing that we haven't gotten to?

[00:58:30] **Wendy Frisby:** When Colleen and I were talking about doing this podcast, there were two points that we wanted to make. One was the important role of community partners in all of this, and it wasn't just about the researchers and the women, right? They

were conduits to resources and space and skills we didn't have and those trusting relationships, and I feel we've had the opportunity to talk about that.

And then the other is the role of community recreation and [00:59:00] physical activity as a site for feminist participatory action research, which when it's sometimes it's seen as a frill given all the other issues that community members and obviously very serious life threatening issues that community members can be facing, but you know, this does have a role to play in people's lives physical and mental health. And a lot of our systems and policies exclude people. It's a, it's a tree going up where, you know, the Olympic athlete is at the top of the, top of the pyramid and but what about everybody else from a health point of view? So, those were two messages that we sort of agreed on that we wanted to emphasize, and I feel with your lovely participatory approach, Patricia, that you've allowed me anyway to make, make those points. So, thank you for that.

[00:59:56] **Patricia Maguire:** What do you want to say to beginning action researchers [01:00:00] out there? I mean, on the one hand, you've said you think that things have changed to make this work, in a sense, more acceptable. And yet I hear from the people I hear from the most in response to the podcast are young emerging scholars or people who want to do action research but find themselves in places where it's not supported. So, what words of encouragement do you want to give to people starting out in this work?

[01:00:27] **Wendy Frisby:** I guess one suggestion would be, can you find mentors or people engaged in this kind of work and, I don't know, even observe or volunteer and take on a role so that you can, you know, sort of watch what's going on and make sure that when you're, you're watching what's going on that, that excitement, like it really is a good fit with your own personal values and if you're, you're watching what's If you're in a place where you are totally isolated and those relationships [01:01:00] seem impossible and they're not developing, can you go somewhere else to find it? Like don't, don't stay stuck if you can help it. I know that's, that may not always be possible, obviously for a whole bunch of reasons, but seek out the people that are doing that kind of work. And it may not be other research. It may be someone like our wonderful Louise who had those community development type skills and same with another project I was involved with, with recent immigrant women, the person there just had this amazing set of skills and every time I was out in the community with her and came back, I was bolstered back up. So, there's different ways of finding those relationships, but if you can't find them where you are, try, try your darndest to find a better place to be.

[01:01:47] **Colleen Reid:** I think that's well said and to that, I would add that for every, in my mind, every like 10 great ideas I had about a research project, the one that really, where

there was traction was when there was strong drive from the community and from community partners in particular.

[01:02:04] **Colleen Reid:** And so, those were the projects that have evolved and that I'm still involved with and that have just grown over time because they're driven by the community partners, and they are seeing a role of participatory approaches to research in their day to day. They, they see the relevance, they, they see, they see the importance, they have experienced the benefit of this kind of work, and they want to stay engaged.

So, I would say that trying to do this work in isolation when you don't have support is incredibly tough. And so, how can you find connections? How can you network to put yourself in a place to be having those conversations with like-minded people? And if you're at, you know, a student, at the very least, you need the support of your supervisor and your committee. Like that …it won't happen. Like, that's the only way that it happened for me was through that ongoing support, despite everybody else saying you shouldn't be doing this. [01:03:00] I had the, you know, my committee and my supervisor had my back in doing this work. And that's what allowed me to continue with it. So, I think that is key.

[01:03:11] **Patricia Maguire:** You know, and it also, I mean, this is a whole other conversation that we don't have time to get into today, but it also, I think, shows the importance. I mean, I focus with my question on students, newcomers to action research, but I think Wendy, you are an example of a student brought to you, Colleen brought to you and introduced you to PAR. So, there's this whole other piece about faculty being open to learn with and from their students and try to learn some, you know, more participatory approaches when we're often in settings that don't value that. You know, that, that really, in all the ways that you get reward, that you get institutional rewards, do not reward that kind of collaborative, participatory, long-term work over time.

[01:03:58] **Wendy Frisby:** I found very little information on how to be a good supervisor. You know, I was fortunate that I had good ones, you know, who were supportive. But yeah, whereas it's, you know, sort of guidelines on how to be a more participatory supervisor because the benefits are great. It's, you know, again, a two, two way or more relationship where there's co-learning going on between all the parties and that energy and enthusiasm and new knowledge and questions and everything that grad students bring. I mean, that in addition to connecting with community, that was by far the best part of my career in reflecting back. But if we have those old hierarchical power relationships where I'm the one with all the knowledge and I'm going to pour it into the empty vessel in your head, so you can be as smart as me. I mean, those approaches are just so, you know, outmoded and, and really need to be to be [01:05:00] challenged. That's for sure.

[01:05:02] **Colleen Reid:** And one piece of advice I always give to students of mine who are considering graduate school, is I say you're interviewing like faculty supervisors, just like they're interviewing you. And go to where, you know, a potential supervisor is really excited about you and your work, right? And, and if that's not there, then that's, you know, that will make your journey through graduate school a lot tougher. And so, again, that's, I got that advice and, and I was able to put together, like I said, this my committee that was really excited to support me. And I think that's, in particular with this kind of research, this kind of approach to graduate school, I would say that's, that's fundamental.

[01:05:45] **Patricia Maguire:** All right. Well, I'm going to wrap this up and I want to thank each of you so much for talking with me today and sharing your journey with our listeners. And I want to thank our listeners who are out there. You can help expand our audience by sharing the episode link with your colleagues and networks. A transcript of today's podcast and additional information about Dr. Frisby and Dr. Reid and their publications will be posted on our companion website, parfemtrailblazers.net. So that's it folks for Participatory Action Research, Feminist Trailblazers and Good Troublemakers. And as civil rights icon John Lewis urged us, go make some good trouble of your [01:07:00] own.