

Episode 2.2 Law School & Feminist Friendship with Kendra Marks & Sylvie Vigneux

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Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Welcome back. I'm mentioned last episode that I was breaking up the podcast format to make space for longer interview episodes, of which this is the very first one. Hold onto your stylish yet practical hats and let's meet Kendra and Sylvie. Kendra Marks is a second year law student at the University of Victoria, a writer and editor, and a secret redhead. Sylvie Vigneux is finishing her final semester of law school at UVic. We met at the University of Guelph a thousand years ago. She is also a secret redhead. The three of us gathered at Sylvie's place in Victoria to talk about law school activism and feminist friendship. Check it out. [Music: "Fool" by Perfume Genius]

Sylvie: Hello. My name is Sylvie, I am a student at the University of Victoria Faculty of Law, and I am a friend of Hannah's, and so it was my brilliant idea to bring us together into this space today to talk about our experiences at law school, which have been mixed to say the least. Okay. Kendra.

Kendra: Hi, I'm Kendra. I'm also a student at UVic Faculty of Law, and I've been friends with Sylvia for a couple of years and now I'm friends with Hannah too. Yay.

Hannah (Host): Oh, okay. To set the scene a little bit. We're in, I've traveled all the way across the ocean to Victoria. There's some ocean in between, that's true. Kind of. We're in Sylvie's very beautiful apartment. Sylvie has given us tea. There have been chips involved and we're going to talk about, this is a really good response to a number of listeners who have said, "you know, we're really enjoying how you're profiling a lot of academic feminists, but it would be really neat to hear from some feminists doing work in other realms." So here we go. Law. We're going to talk about, we're going to talk about law school. And in particular it sounds like we're going to talk about feminist activism within law school and feminist friendship within law school. So do we want to start with the friendship or do we want to start with the activism? We'll start with the activism because that's where the friendship came from.

Sylvie: I think you have to start with the activism, because I would say that was how I met Kendra. In particular, I'm thinking about Kendra's work on trying to make the law school a gender inclusive space. And if it's okay with you, Kendra, can you tell us a little bit about what that saga has been?

Kendra: Oh Gosh. Well, so when I started law school in September of last year, I realized pretty quickly that there were no gender inclusive washrooms in the law building. And so I thought that we should have some. And I also noticed that--

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Sylvie: Novel idea.

Kendra: Novel idea. I also noticed that there were a lot of just binary gender pronouns floating around in, you know, syllabi, articles, things like his/her. So sort of this motion towards greater gender inclusivity but not really encompassing that many genders. And so yeah, I just started noticing all these places that there could be more.

Kendra: So I started asking professors to be more inclusive, and some of my friends in different clubs and I started a poster campaign. So that was mostly the feminist law club who funded a poster campaign to just make gender inclusive washrooms look really fun and exciting like, "Yay, everyone can pee here!" And that was a pretty lengthy and sometimes really challenging campaign. We had a lot of problems with posters getting ripped down, and at first it was really discouraging because we thought it was other maybe other students, but over time we realized that actually all the students were really supportive and the problem was more with the infrastructure of the school itself. So a problem with faculty and a problem with the administration and a problem with maintenance. So a couple friends and I wrote a really long proposal about why we should have gender inclusive washrooms and what that might look like for the law school and gave it to the deans of the law school, and in the past few months the deans had begun putting that forward and it looks like we will get gender inclusive washroom signage in the next couple months. It might be longer than that, but it seems like it's actually getting closer. So yeah, that was one of the big projects we've been working on in the last little while.

Sylvie: I want to jump in because I'm thinking about how the first time I met Kendra, it was, it was when you were starting first year and a few of us who are a year ahead, were putting on a presentation in the legal process session that happens for first years during their first two weeks at law school. And this was a project that we had tried to get underway, it had taken us a year to get this implemented. Basically the full year that we'd already been at the school, we were trying to implement a session in legal process. Okay. There was a gap in my experience of legal process where there was no discussion of the fact that there's going to be a lot of traumatic and triggering material that you talk about in law school classes. That's kind of the nature of working in an area where you're dealing with people whose lives are in turmoil. And that's okay, but it's really important to be able to prepare students and equip them in a good way to like have those conversations and that's something that legal process it's, It would be the perfect space to have that kind of prep work to lay that groundwork for students and it just didn't happen. So what legal process does is it is a time where people learn sort of like, the nitty-gritty, you know, how to read a case, how to brief a case, the differences between like, civil law and the common law or criminal law and civil law, these kinds of things. It's also a place where they talk about the social systems that are all bound up in the law. And there's a lot of good conversations that happen at UVic for instance, about like the law is a colonial construct and the impact on Indigenous people of law as like a system of power. So there's lots of a legal process that's really positive in

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my experience. It just didn't quite get at the issue of like what it might be like as a survivor of sexual violence, for instance, to sit in a classroom where you're talking about a case that involves sexual violence. So a lot of us in the feminist law club had gotten together and we were trying to get something in place for the next group of students where this would be like part of the conversation. We'd be able to talk about what it means to discuss potentially traumatic material in class, how professors can do that in a way that feels open and welcoming to all voices and how students can be like equipped to have those discussions, ask hard questions, but do it respectfully and it was so difficult to get this workshop put in place and there were, was barrier after barrier thrown up in a way that just felt really artificial. Like it made no sense to me why this was so difficult. So I met Kendra the day that we ended up putting on this workshop, which ended up being not really what we had envisioned. It was shorter than we had hoped for. It was in the big hall with all the students instead of in separate breakout groups where there might be more discussion possible. It was put on by us, the students who had proposed it, rather than by professionals and instructors who were actually going to be teaching this course material. So it wasn't what we had hoped for, but it was something good that we had worked towards and had worked really hard to do. And so Kendra came up afterwards and was like, "thank you so much for your efforts to make this happen." And it was just a moment of like, yes, this student gets it. I'm so glad this worked for one person if no one else, it worked for one person. And that was the goal. And then I've had the opportunity to just like watch Kendra continue doing that work that I got pretty burnt out trying to do in my first year and like hammer away at it and chip away at it. And finally we're seeing something happening like it's moving forward. So it's really exciting and as much as I kind of roll my eyes and I'm not sure how successful it's going to be, like you're always going to be taking two steps back. It's been really nice to see the way that Kendra, that you've worked on it and the way that other people have sort of rallied around you to work on these things, and it's been exciting as much as it's been discouraging.

Kendra: I also remember that day, where Sylvie and a couple other students spoke in front of all of us and I remember thinking that they were just so brave to be so vulnerable in front of 125 brand new law students. It looked really scary--

Hannah (Host): That's incredible!

Kendra: --and also at some point during that legal process experience one of the professors had said, "you know, there's gonna be a lot of tough material. It's law school, so maybe you're going to want to trigger warning. Here's your trigger warning for law school."

Hannah (Host): [Laughs] Sorry! That's, that's rage laughter.

Kendra: And I was like, oh, okay. That's how it's going to be. And having some students like Sylvie come and speak and say, these are the kinds of things that you may need to prepare yourself for, was really valuable. Like that is the value of a

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trigger warning or a content warning is to let you know what's happening in the moment that you may need to prepare for it. Not to say you're going to be traumatized for three years straight and have fun, which was pretty hard to hear. So yeah, it was pretty, I think pretty early on in my law school experience I was like, okay, so anything I want to get done, I'm going to need to work with other students and help out with things that they want to get done and it's going to need to be collaborative and collective and not really involve the faculty as much. That kind of turned out to be true. There are definitely some faculty members who do more, but in general I found that it's the other students who really make things possible and have really great ideas, which sounds really kind of obvious and clichéd. Like, we can work together and make things happen. But like honestly, it's so exhausting. Like I think I have forgotten how much work I did in first year just trying to get a single person in the administration to talk about gender inclusive washrooms. It wasn't until October of my second year that I actually had a sit down meeting about gender inclusive washrooms, so it took 13 months. And you do get really burned out because you are also doing law school and it is a lot of work and it is really traumatic work, and it's often really boring work. And it's really boring and it's really expensive and you were doing all this work and paying all this money to be potentially a really shitty human being if you're not careful. So I don't know. It feels very stressful. High stakes.

Hannah (Host):

I want to ask about where you think the impulse comes from to do activism within a school setting. Because I've been noticing for a lot of my students that tuition is expensive. They are all working multiple jobs. They are exhausted, they're burnt out, they're worn down. Which is all part of the larger strategy of the neoliberal university to depoliticize students. Like we know that, that's how this institution works and law school seems like a really amplified version of that. Right? It's super expensive. It's super, super busy. And I imagine for a lot of people the impulses like keep your head down, work hard, get out alive. So I wonder, like what is the moment when you sort of look around and say like, "this isn't okay the way this is being run isn't okay and I need to do something about it."

Kendra:

So for me a large part of it has been my friendships with other people at law school that have led me to I guess, do activism. And I never think of myself as an activist or doing activism, I'm just like, well this sucks. We should change this. I guess that's all activism really is. So with, with gender inclusive washrooms, I mean that work really started for me on the first day that I noticed there weren't any. And as a person with some cis privilege, especially around washrooms, I was like, I have the space, so this is the thing I'm going to take on. And for other stuff that's come up, it has really been listening. I think listening to people I know tell me what their lives are like at law school. And really early on in my first year I set up a collective first year dropbox full of old exams that I had scanned in the library and I put my outlines in there and other people put their outlines in there. I didn't know what outlines were except for that scene from Legally Blonde. That was the extent of my knowledge about outlines. Basically outlines are just your notes in a condensed form that you can look at really

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quickly while you frantically type your law exams. And so this collaborative approach to law that I was really trying to foster I think happened because one of my best friends told me before law school that the part I was gonna hate the most at first was the other students. And that sometimes is true. There are sometimes students that I don't like and can be really difficult to be around. But generally, actually students are pretty awesome most of the time. And so when we have this collaborative kind of approach going, we hang out more and we have study circles, and now there's a secret collaborative Facebook group that I started that's full of people's outlines and encouragement and questions and answers and cute animals and whatever else is on the Internet. And I think just having people connect more with each other, give them the knowledge about something that someone is experiencing that's not great. So some folks had never thought about washrooms before because they hadn't had to. And when you chat about it, they're really onboard and then they want gender inclusive washrooms and then they go and put posters up around the school and that's very encouraging. And then you learn about issues that didn't touch your life in a particular way. Like, so UVic Law doesn't have a prayer room for Muslim students. So there are students who have to pray in like, closets, which is a problem. And you learn that Indigenous students aren't allowed to smudge in the building, which is a problem. And the more that we can talk about these things with each other, the more that people have the space to take on the fight for someone else because we're just kind of creating that space all the time by collaborating on the workload.

Hannah (Host): There's also this way I think where sometimes you have more space to fight other people's fights because when it's your own fight, it's so deeply exhausting. When it's somebody else's fight there's this way you can step in and be like, I'm going to do this work and it's not going to damage me as a deep, visceral level every time I do it. But you do that work via friendships. Yeah. That's really beautiful.

Kendra: Also I found that being disabled at law school was really, really shitty, and the law school was really ablest in many ways. And about a month in I was feeling really down about it and just really like I was not going to be able to do this. And I felt really alone and my law buddy— So at UVic incoming first years sometimes get matched up with the upper year law student as their law buddy— and my buddy was great, and she started a secret students with disabilities group on Facebook. And now there's a bunch of us in there and it's really, really nice. So I think I saw early on from her example that you could just do this really seemingly small thing, like you just make a Facebook group and actually, it makes it survivable in a way that it really wasn't before. So thanks, Gah.

Sylvie: Kendra, what you just said is exactly right. I think, yeah, I wouldn't necessarily call it activism either. It's trying to create the conditions that you can survive in a place that doesn't want you to survive, or just isn't, it's not that it cares one way or the other. It doesn't care. It's a very lethal indifference. For me, I came into law school with this energy thinking that I was going to be able to like, be learning this language of the law and use it to work on the things that I thought

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were important, but you are confronted so quickly as Kendra, as you're saying with this realization that if you have any hope of doing that, you have to be able to survive the program itself, which is incredibly alienating in ways that I just didn't anticipate. Yeah. Like I, I recognize that I move through school in particular, like, academic spaces with a lot of privilege. Even so, I just find law school so unlivable. So for me, trying to be engaged and trying to make the shitty things better, that's about just surviving law school. And it's created these awesome friendships which make law school not just survivable, but also exciting and fun and fulfilling in ways that I didn't expect either.

Hannah (Host): I've been thinking a lot, Erin Wunker has a phrase in her book *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy* about the world building capacity of feminist friendships, the way that you sort of remake the world via these subversive friendships that I've been thinking about a lot lately. I have also been thinking a lot as I sort of work with my students to grapple with various kinds of ideas that are challenging and unfamiliar to them and I think about how much of people's resistance to change comes from the communities that they do or do not know, or do or do not have friendships from within. So in the class that I just finished teaching, there are no students who identified themselves to me or to the class as Indigenous, which I have learned via the experience of teaching to now know better than to assume that that means that there are no students in the classroom Indigenous. But we were talking about Canadian publishing policy and the way that it excludes Indigenous knowledge production and the number of students were really caught up on language like, "what are we supposed to be calling people now?" seems to be a sticking point for a lot of students. And I try to understand where that's coming from for my students, like from a place of fear of being wrong, fear of speaking incorrectly. There's often a sort of very class-based dynamic to knowing what to say and the way in which you'll be shut down in a conversation cuz you don't know the right words for things, but I also think that that idea of like, "oh, what do those people want to be called now?" comes from like, oh, you don't have any friends who are members of that community. Because when people are your friends, your attitude isn't, oh, how dare that person want to be called by a particular name. You call your friends by their names. Like, you just, that's just what you do. And if your friend tells you tomorrow that they're going by a different name now or using a different pronoun now or identifying with a different nation now you don't say, "fuck you. How dare you try to tell me what I can and cannot call you?" Like you, you call your friend, your friend wants you to call them. And maybe you screw up a few times because you got into one habit and it takes you a while to, to get out of that habit, but you, you correct yourself and you try because calling people things as part of being in community with people. And, you know, your ability to sort of name the people you love is part of that gesture of being in community with them and to think of entering an environment that is maybe built to be hostile towards you, like law school. Not as like I'm going to be fundamentally alienated by everyone here, but as here's an opportunity to build friendships that are going to bridge the gaps between us that are going to allow us to understand where everybody is coming from and that is, thus going to build the kind of solidarity that allows us all to

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survive this institution together, is like, I think a really radical approach to law school.

Sylvie:

I think that's so beautiful and I think that's also so true to my experience of law school so far, which is that I've encountered people in law school students who shocked the heck out of me with how wonderful they are to share a community with and how supportive they are. Like, there are students who occupy positions of power institutionally, like in our law society and in different clubs and organizations, who also hold a lot of privilege personally and they have been amazing. And a lot of the friends that I have, like my close friends who I, you know, have built up into my family here in law school. Like these are people who I wouldn't necessarily have known before law school and they always surprise me and they always surprise me like these really delightful and wonderful ways. And then sometimes people surprise me in really horrible ways, and usually they're faculty, which is disappointment is one of the most jarring emotions.

Kendra:

And I think too, that kind of disappointment, I would say it's also really enraging, is something that I feel quite a bit in law school. I didn't go into law school thinking that I liked the law or that I really liked the colonial construction of Canada. Like I didn't come into law school with, you know, thinking that those were good ideas, and I have been so shocked at my own capacity to be disappointed and enraged by things that I thought I had already knew about. Getting to see sort of the infrastructure of the law that is so harmful to all of the communities that am a part of like over and over again is really disheartening and exhausting. And again, often these sort of negative surprises come from people who are not students and people who have a significant amount of power in law school, who in some ways act like allies and then actually throw up the greatest barriers to any sort of change that would make things a tiny bit better for students, is so frustrating. And it is sometimes offset, if there's a balance of emotions, which I'm not convinced that there is, but sometimes it makes me feel better to pretend that their is, like as Sylvie was saying, who occupy positions of great privilege and power in other ways, who put a lot of effort into making spaces better for students who don't have that privilege. And so it's, it feels kind of like every day is this, you wake up and you go to law school and you see and you physically experience all the ways that it is violent, and then maybe you run into someone in the hall who you didn't think was going to be your friend, but is actually pretty cool, but then you have a meeting with someone who you thought was pretty cool and it turns out they're not your friend, and meanwhile you're reading pretty horrific cases with no content warnings cuz you just had one for the three years that you're there. Or you're asked to research really brutal cases to write a completely arbitrary law memo. That happened to half of my class in first year. So I think sometimes to come back to sort of that earlier question of "what is that impulse?" I think, you know, I intended to come into law school and like not talk in class and not really hang out with people, and just like head down and do my work and I guess that's, I just couldn't help it. It's so fucked up. Like, it's so fucked up in law school and the law is so fucked up and the system is really shitty, and I'm not that thrilled

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that I'm part of it, and I just couldn't be in that space and watch it devastate me and all the people I love in and out of law school and all the communities that I am part of over and over again and not do something.

Hannah (Host):

I want to try to articulate something that I think is the subtext of what both of you are saying and that I think you both know, but I want to articulate it for listeners and maybe for myself cuz I think out loud. But that is that the law as an oppressive structure, which institutionalizes and reinforces things like colonialism, things like rape culture, things like cisnormativity, take these sort of oppressive structures and enforce them and ingrain them. And that, for a lot of communities, in order to be able to work against the way that the law enforces those things, you need to understand the law and be able to grapple with it. And in order to understand the law and grapple with it, I mean, one of the main ways to do that is to go to law school. Amongst other things, law's also designed to be hard to parse. It's a thing that it's incredibly difficult to have a lay understanding of. And so it's like, here is this huge barrier to access to this incredibly powerful thing. That barrier is law school. And law school itself is a space that is saturated with exclusions and microaggressions that are designed to prevent the people who most need access to the law from getting access to it. So that to say to students, you are not allowed to have trigger warnings, which means we're doing everything we can to keep sexual assault survivors from being able to go to law school, which means we're doing everything we can from keeping the people who are most impacted by current laws around sexual assault, from gaining the power to change those laws. So today Alyssa Milano tweeted "the micro makes the macro." So we talk about these like macro structures of oppression and where did they come from and how are they sustained, and there's sustained via these microaggressions that are particularly designed to keep people out of positions of power so that, you know, you go into law school thinking "I'll be able to keep my head down" and then you're like, "oh actually like you've designed this space so that I can't keep my head down because it's just not like, it's so aggressively not a space for me." Not for me. I can't. So aggressively no space for me, I can't even imagine it. So forming these communities that are about solidarity, but that are also about resistance is like, part of this larger strategy of saying that we need to intervene in the law itself and how it works.

Sylvie:

The surprise to me comes in the form of student clubs. So what you're saying sparked that thought in my head that you form these communities to try to intervene and make changes so that you can survive because this is such an aggressively exclusionary space, and that takes the form of clubs. And I was so surprised when I came to law school and joined like five different clubs that they actually were like a lifeline for me. You know, I, I dunno, I loved clubs in high school, but then I got too cool for clubs. Now I'm in all these clubs again like, 10 years later. But clubs like the Feminist Law Club or the Queer Outlaws Club. I mean, I'm not going to say that the clubs that we have at law school are sort of sites of radical upheaval of the system. You know, anyone and everyone is part of those clubs who wants to be. And we all have different political views, and we come from different backgrounds, and intellectual traditions, and all of

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those things. So it's not these super radical spaces, but it's spaces where you come together and you get to have those conversations that just don't happen in the classroom the way that you hope they will. Clubs, right? Who knew?

Kendra: I had actually never been in clubs until law school, and I had a really difficult time in first year with experiencing other students who interpreted my disagreeing with them to be me personally attacking them. So for a lot of the first couple months of law school at lunch I would just like run away from, well I would walk away, because I don't run, I can't run, but I would walk away and I will call my partner and I would just eat my lunch on the phone and be like "I hate this place so much." And then I started going to clubs sometimes at lunch, like Femme Law and Outlaws. And that was really, really awesome. And I started kind of paying more attention to the inner workings of the school, like the Equity and Diversity Committee. And yeah, I think it was just through meeting people a lot of the time through these clubs, like meeting people like Sylvie and hanging out more that I was like, "okay, there are ways to live in law school, there are ways to get through and this is kind of the way through." And it also helped me get this better sense of context about what was happening to me specifically with these specific men in my year who really disliked me for having a opinion in class. I'm sure they have other reasons, but that's how it felt to me at the time. And by learning more about what's happening in the school, I realized that there was actually this very strong sense of conservative men feeling like they were being silenced by this leftist feminist agenda. It's really strange to me because like they keep saying they're being silenced, but they keep talking a lot. And I'm like, what is, like, what is it that you think silencing means? Like, do you think you could just say whatever you want without us saying, "I disagree with you." Like is that really the worst thing that's happened to you today? That some woman disagreed with you? Some men even expressed that they felt that unless you were a queer Indigenous woman, your opinion at UVic Law doesn't count.

Hannah (Host): Can you imagine? What a dream.

Kendra: That was my response to. And it really helped me contextualize and I was like, oh, I'm not actually like a really shitty person all the time that these people don't like me. These people are sexist, and these people are racist, and these people are homophobic, and they might not know that's why they don't like me, but that is part of why they don't like me and I'm okay with that. And it actually by engaging more with people that were great and like, getting to see that kind of like, structural thing, it helped me feel less individually shitty. And it helped me feel like it was just, it was structured really shitty in a way that was a little bit easier to live with because I felt like I could do something about it or, or survive it.

Hannah (Host): When I don't talk to other feminists for long enough, I started to gaslight myself. I start to think, "oh, I must just be terrible and incompetent, and also maybe hysterical because I'm crying everyday," and everyone around me is like, "There's nothing bad. The world is fine. Why are you crying all the time?"

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Sylvie: You have a wandering womb.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, it's my wandering room. It's my hysteria. It's, you know, my personal, individualized inability to live in the world and then I sit down and talk to some other feminists and I'm like, "oh, thank you for the reminder that this is not me." And that's an urgent part of this project is like the world is gaslighting us all the time. And like, we need community and solidarity to work against that. Can we talk a little bit more specifically about the inclusive bathroom work that you, that you have been doing? Because I feel like that's the one other, or at least in this context, the sort of concrete like, here is a way in which this space is designed to say you don't get to participate in the conversation that you were like, "Oh, here we can actually do something about this." So I was wonder if you could talk a little bit about like, the, the need for schools to have inclusive bathrooms.

Kendra: So Laverne Cox said, and I don't remember the exact quotation, but I quoted her in the proposal I ended up sending to the deans about why we should have inclusive washrooms, and it had to do with recognizing that if you don't have washrooms where people in a public space, they are not welcome in that public space. And it is, it seems like it's just about peeing, but it's really about who is allowed out into the world to occupy space, to feel that they belong somewhere, that they have a right to be somewhere, they're allowed somewhere, and that there'll be relatively safe-ish in those spaces. So when you have binary washrooms, you are telling trans people that they are not welcome, that space is not for them. And in particular, you are telling nonbinary, agender folks that they aren't welcome. But you are also really making it dangerous for trans women and trans feminine people, who are the most likely to experience violence in a gendered washroom. And so having a gender washroom in a law school just sort of reifies the idea that law is for cis people, and that you don't get to be a lawyer if you're not cis. And that especially you don't get to be a lawyer if you're nonbinary. And I think for a lot of students the first time they hear about it, and part of the support we've gotten for it, it's like, "well of course! Like, why shouldn't you have a washroom? Like, that sucks. Yay, more washrooms!" Because it seems really simple, and I think that's part of, sometimes it's part of the problem is like why are we having so much fuss about a washroom? And on one level you're like, "I know. Right? Like can we just get a washroom already?" And on the other level, like you're fighting everyone's transphobia, and you're fighting their transphobia that they don't even know about and you're fighting it at every step of the way. And so instead of just being this pragmatic consideration about, okay, how much of the budget can we allocate towards funding for the partition around the urinals? It becomes this whole long, drawn out process of someone saying, "well, if you want us to take you seriously, you need to write a proposal." And that--

Sylvie: The bureaucracy of law school.

Kendra: The bureaucracy of law school is pretty brutal. So in March of my first year I was finally told by a person of power in the administration that if I wanted my

request for gender inclusive washrooms ever to happen, I would need to go away and write a proposal, like something that would be respected, like a respectable proposal. So, and one of the great things about many law students is that most law students are really used to working very hard. And when you ask a law student to do something and they say yes, they really fucking get it done. It's pretty cool to see the amount of just work that can come out of a group of law students. And I don't actually include myself in this because I do not work as much as most law students like, I get tired and I play video games. But like my friends like really get shit done and it is super cool. So I went away and I got my friend Gah, who is my rockstar law buddy, and we had a couple Google Doc hangouts. Like, physically we were sitting next to each other on our Google Docs, just like hammering, the literal kind, just like hammering out a proposal and you know, why we need gender inclusive washrooms and what it means to have these washrooms and who is really at risk in washrooms. And we talked about some of the myths that come up, like cis women aren't going to be safe in washrooms. And that is a myth. And we debunked it. And we talked about, you know, a person in a position of power and authority had said, "well maybe the washrooms will be less clean." Which just seemed very surprising to me. But it is also a sign of transphobia because you don't know what genitals, people have a women's washroom. You don't know how people are peeing. You can't look at someone and know what pronoun they go by, or what their body is like, or how they identify, or their name, like you can't know these things. You have to wait until they tell you. So trans people are already using the washroom, this is just a very public way of making it safer. So anyway, and then another pal helped out and read through and added a few things. And we talked also a lot about the decolonization of the gender binary, and we talked about the gender binary as a colonial imposition on Turtle Island, which has a rich history of many diverse ideas about gender and that as part of UVic Law's responsibility to Indigenous people it needed to work on decolonizing these things. So it was a long proposal, and we sent it I think sometime in April and we didn't hear back. And so I sent it again in August and I didn't hear back. And then I sent it again in September, maybe a bit more pointedly, and then I got an email back from the dean saying, "Thank you so much for bringing this to our attention. Yes, let's have a meeting right away." So Sylvie and I had a meeting with one associate dean and with the dean and we just laid out our concerns, we went through the proposal, we made suggestions for signage, including what maybe equipment was in the washroom, if it had toilets or urinals or both. All that kind of stuff. And I was really glad that Sylvie was there. It's actually really hard to go and talk to deans. And the other thing too that when you're ever talking to faculty at a law school, like they're also lawyers. And it can be really difficult when you're faced with that much power to feel like it's okay to say what you're saying. So after that meeting, the dean said that he would take some steps into getting maintenance and facilities on board and seemed quite promising, and that was a couple months ago. I don't know, it was a really long, it was a long. Yeah, it was a really long process and I definitely got really tired and I'm glad I had friends who were helping out and there was also a, I think we talked about earlier postering campaign that Femme Law did. That was really great. So it felt like, you know, student support was really there, but the bureaucracy of it was

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really, really difficult. And pretty much every excuse possible was kind of thrown at me like, "we don't have the budget" and I'm like, "you could put a sign up. Like, you could put a piece of paper up. You are like, you are a law school. Like figure it out." And then, "well you know, people are going to be uncomfortable." And I'm like, "No! no students are going to be uncomfortable." There's other washrooms in the building. We were only asking for one in the short term to be changed. And so it felt by the time that I, Sylvie and I had that meeting with the deans, I was pretty much done. And so, Sylvie, I'm going to turn it over to you for the last two months, cuz I got really tired and I was around, but I don't remember.

Sylvie: Most recently the big success is that the dean sent out an email to all students saying that this is a proposal that is underway, and it's happening, and if people have questions they should contact him, but this is something that they're hoping will happen I guess in the new year. So there is this feeling of momentum and this feeling of, for me at least, a sense of excitement and hope. I hope my hope won't be crushed, but you just never know because I think the bureaucracy of law school is this silencing mechanism and I've seen it used in all these different ways that always surprise me. I don't know why I keep being surprised.

Kendra: I think often in academia and in law school and really in lots of spaces, there's this often, this idea that intelligence will save us from shitty things. Like, oh, we can think our way around it, and so why can't we just figure out the solution? And I spent a lot of my adult life in academia and I find it to be a really unkind place, and for a long time I have thought that being intelligent is something that you are very often born with that, and if you think in a way that matches up with what your society calls intelligent, but that being kind is something that you really have to work at. I think a lot of the work that I have been doing for myself and, and in the law school is really about finding these, these spaces where people are being mean. Not intentionally necessarily, but there's some unkindness and not having, for example, a washroom or not having an opportunity for someone to use a gender neutral prefix, as just mean. Like, it hurts people's feelings and you could just not do that and you can do this other way. And it kind of presenting people like, well actually what you're doing, even if you don't understand why, it's really hurting people and you could just use this other language instead and then it wouldn't hurt them. And people are pretty onboard with that when you presented in a really based on kindness kind of model, I find that people surprising people, sometimes they just want to be decent human beings and sometimes that works. [Music: "Fool" by Perfume Genius]

Hannah (Host): I want to end with a little postscript, which is that this very Monday I got a message from Sylvie that says, "just in time for the podcast" and underneath are some photographs of the brand new, newly officially signed gender inclusive washrooms in the law building at the University of Victoria. I'm really delighted that this happened in time for the podcast to come out so that this story would not only include a lot of really beautiful thoughts from Kendra and Sylvie about

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the kinds of organizing that they've done at law school, but would also have a happy ending. [Music: "Fool" by Perfume Genius] If you'd like to hear more from Kendra or Sylvie, you can find some of their previously published work in the show notes. You can find those notes and all of the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor. Also, that's where I am on Instagram too, if you're into selfies and pictures of cats. You can also tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. And don't forget about the cleansing power of recommending the podcast to a friend. The podcast theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album *Chub Rub*. You can download the entire album on freemusicarchive.org, or follow them on Facebook. Kendra and Sylvie's theme song was "Fool" by Perfume Genius. I'll be back next week with my own secret feminist agenda, which, spoiler alert, is probably going to be crying uncontrollably in bathroom stalls. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]