

**Sithara (she/her):** I know we're right at the top of our podcast , but I'm already going to throw in a Star Trek reference.

**Jade (they/them):** I'm always here for a Star Trek reference.

**Sithara (she/her):** Fantastic. You'll love it.

**Jade (they/them):** I'm Jade Pichette. They/Them.

**Erin (she/her):** And I'm Erin Davis and I use the pronouns she and her.

**Jade (they/them):** Welcome to Uncovering Belonging,

**Erin (she/her):** a podcast that explores the professional and personal stories of unique voices of what it means to belong

**Jade (they/them):** and the journey to finding our authentic self.

**Sithara (she/her):** Erin are you a Star Trek fan?

**Erin (she/her):** Um, So I've, I've already made a note that I'm going to need to do some homework

**Sithara (she/her):** You'll love it.

**Erin (she/her):** It is my pleasure to introduce my friend and Star Trek, fan Sithara, Fernando, she/her. Sithara has her MBA and RPF, and is currently the Academic Program Manager at NorQuest college. And is the recipient of the Council Commendation Wildlife Metal, the YMM Magazine, Top 50 Under 50. And EDify's Top 40 Under 40.

Sithara has supported the Pride Center of Edmonton in multiple roles . She is a passionate advocate and one day hopes to write a book about all her experiences

I would also like to provide our listeners with a content note: throughout the conversation, Sithara shares experiences of suicidal ideation post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. We encourage you to take a quick pause and check in with yourself so that you can decide whether this content is what you can engage with today, or listen at another time.

**Sithara (she/her):** On Star Trek. There's a character named Worf. He's played by a Black actor, Michael Dorn, and he is part of the crew of the Enterprise, but he's a Klingon, and it's always interesting to see how that character interacts with the rest of the crew, cuz he's part of that crew, but he's also a little bit separated and I remember watching star Trek and sort of like understanding that.

**Jade (they/them):** I always found myself resonating with Data.

**Sithara (she/her):** Oh, yep.

**Jade (they/them):** And also this outsider part of, but not fully part of which now I understand is because I'm autistic, which is why I resonated so much because this Android is autistically coded in some ways.

**Sithara (she/her):** Jade, "A Measure of a Man," Season Two, I'm gonna get the episode number wrong, is one of like, probably my all time favorite episodes, which is all about Data.

**Jade (they/them):** I think it's really interesting how the characters we connect with, especially when we don't see ourselves represented in media, says a lot about a person.

**Sithara (she/her):** Absolutely.

**Jade (they/them):** So as a person who relates to Worf, I wanna know your personal story and how you got into the equity, diversity and inclusion space.

**Sithara (she/her):** The way I got into this work is this is my life.

I'm a person of color and a queer person, a lesbian, and my parents immigrated here in 1981 and settled in Edmonton. And when you are children of immigrants or sort of forging a new identity, that's not mainstream, you end up existing in this corridor. That is not, you know, I don't really have a place to go back home, quote unquote, but I also don't quite fit in where I am, which is really interesting because what ends up happening is you end up moving through your own personal identity in ways that for me were unhealthy or not super helpful for my life

**Jade (they/them):** mm-hmm

**Sithara (she/her):** and I have struggled. I really, really struggled to come out of the closet. I really struggled with my identity. I really struggled, sort of adapting to the Caucasian culture around me, where I really didn't fit.

Didn't feel like I was a part of that. And in high school, my parents wanted us to go to a private school, which ended up being a Christian private school and the views. There were very, very much, I'm not gonna say, well, you know what? I am gonna say it, they're pretty extreme and it's pretty black and white in terms of who's going to heaven and who's going to hell and what happens and what doesn't.

From that place, I adopted this idea that if I pretend hard enough to be straight, if I push my own culture, my Sri Lankan culture aside, if I pretend hard enough to be all of these things that I'm supposed to be, I can, I can be those things. I can become a quote unquote, "normal person".

**Jade (they/them):** Mm.

**Sithara (she/her):** And so I basically took that internalized it and went through a lot of my university years into the early part of my professional life.

Being somebody that I absolutely wasn't.

**Erin (she/her):** Hmm.

**Sithara (she/her):** And thinking that if I get a degree and then if I get a nice car and if I buy a house and get the job and sort of tick off all of these boxes that eventually I would arrive at happiness and. It never happened. And the reason it never happened is because I never put myself in that equation.

**Erin (she/her):** Right.

**Sithara (she/her):** I put things, I put achievements, I put boxes that I needed to check off into that equation.

**Jade (they/them):** Mm-hmm

**Sithara (she/her):** And in 2016, so I was living in Fort McMurray and there was a wildfire. We all had to evacuate our town and huge thing on the news, all of those things. But I remember driving and I had come home from work.

Grabbed my dog and my cat, and a few things from my home and headed, uh, south to Edmonton and like 80,000 people were evacuating. So it took 12 hours. And during that drive, I thought my house had burned down. It didn't burn down, but I thought it had burned down and all of the pieces that I had worked for.

All of the stuff that I had accumulated was gone or I thought was gone. And I just couldn't take that. And this very carefully crafted sort of fake world of happiness and things and being somebody that I'm not was essentially ripped out. And in that moment, I realized how profoundly lonely I was and how difficult I had made things for myself by not being the person that I am.

**Jade (they/them):** Ah,

**Sithara (she/her):** and what followed. That was essentially a whole bunch of months of just really, really trying to. And, um, and I think this is probably one of the one, one of the things is that I wish I would've reached out for help earlier. But when I went back to Fort McMurray, after the fire, I really doubled down.

I said, you know what? If I try hard enough, if I lie enough, if I pretend enough, I like this is a me problem. I can fix this. I, I can put all of the effort in. And then what followed was post traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety. and eventually it culminated in, um, some suicidal ideation.

**Jade (they/them):** Mm.

**Sithara (she/her):** And you know, it is one of those moments where, and I think this is probably one of the most in things about mental illness is that it is not one big event.

**Jade (they/them):** No,

**Sithara (she/her):** it is a series of these small little pieces that just stack up over time and undoing the damage that I had done to myself. I will say a monumental task, but it's not that I, all of a sudden said, you know what? I'm gonna come out of the closet and everything's going to be fine.

**Erin (she/her):** Right.

**Sithara (she/her):** That's not how it worked, but it is recognizing that I did not want to be lonely anymore.

**Jade (they/them):** I hear that.

**Sithara (she/her):** And the way I got into this work was essentially recognizing that my story is not unique in any way, shape or form that depression and anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder in the queer community is a huge problem. And that these are things that kill people.

Depression kills people. Right?

**Erin (she/her):** Right.

**Sithara (she/her):** You get to a point where you are no longer yourself and you are no longer thinking about all of the things that could be, and you're stuck in all of the stuff that's not working. And so part of getting into this work was one, recognizing that I was profoundly unhappy at my current role to recognizing that one of the things I like doing is teaching people and talking and writing.

And I'm comfortable discussing these things, right?

**Jade (they/them):** Yeah.

**Sithara (she/her):** And so part of the reason I got in, into this work is because I think more people need to hear about this. And I think when people recognize that if you don't look like the majority, if you are feeling like you're on the outside, if you are part of a marginalized group, if you exist on the fringes, you have to recognize that in a lot of ways, society was not built for people who don't fit a certain mold and Canadian society in the nineties was really white centered.

**Erin (she/her):** Totally

**Sithara (she/her):** Even looking at things like pop culture - like the TV show "Friends" is problematic in so many, many ways,

**Jade (they/them):** so many,

**Sithara (she/her):** But was something that, that, that people just really, really clung onto and thought this is the pinnacle of television. And so people need examples.

**Erin (she/her):** Exactly.

**Sithara (she/her):** People need examples of people who can come out and say, look, a world is not perfect.

However, it's not horrible and you're not alone. And this work makes me feel like I belong because I know. That I'm no longer lonely.

**Jade (they/them):** I hear that.

**Sithara (she/her):** And it's not about having a spouse or finding a spouse or getting a wife or coming out of the closet. It's about being okay with who I am and being happy with who I am and not trying to impress other people or even look for happiness outside of myself.

It's understanding that I build my own sort of happiness within myself, and I can make decisions around that. And I'm incredibly proud of the work that I've done since essentially early 2017, with both in my mental health and my personal life and my professional life to really put myself in the center.

Of my life and my true self, not affect of who I think I should be not fulfilling somebody else's expectations, but asking myself what are the things that make me happy and how do I do.

**Jade (they/them):** You know, there's so much power in what you just shared. And as somebody also, who has lived with PTSD, suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, I can resonate in certain ways and empathize in others.

And sometimes people don't realize that. Sometimes the reason we get into this work is almost a matter of survival for ourselves, for seeing ourselves, for being seen by others, that we wish to see us and truly see us. And I think this will resonate a lot with some of our listeners, especially seeing, as I find at Pride at Work Canada events, we'll wind up with quite a number of people who come.

Are not out where sometimes this is the only space that they're able to engage with, who they are. And it is that role modeling. It's that connection. It's that vulnerability that makes people feel not alone. So I wanna pass it over to Erin.

**Erin (she/her):** Yeah. Thanks Jade. You know, I wanna take a moment to sort of recognize some of what you've just said, Sithara, because it's not until you were truly finding yourself that you're able to really thrive. And I do think not everyone necessarily gets there and it's not. So thank you for sharing your journey.

**Sithara (she/her):** Oh, thanks guys.

**Erin (she/her):** As you do this work around equity, diversity and inclusion. What have been some of the barriers for you?

**Sithara (she/her):** So the barriers I see is that we don't recognize the impact of our fundamental worldviews on the world, around us.

**Erin (she/her):** Hmm.

**Sithara (she/her):** And I had the privilege of working and living in Fort Chipewyan, which is an Indigenous community. And that experience changed my life. I remember talking to one of the Elders and she told me the story of Sky Woman, which is the origin story of Turtle Island, which is where we currently reside.

**Erin (she/her):** Hi, it's Erin. And I'm recording this after the fact before Satara shares this Chipewyan version of the story of the Sky Woman. We'd like to disclose that we confirmed with Sithara, that she shares the story with the consent of Alice Rigney, Elder with the The Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation. This story was conveyed to Sithara with the obligation of sharing and respecting this knowledge, as it applies to Sithara's journey.

This story is one of many different origin stories held by Indigenous peoples here on Turtle Island. We encourage you to listen and learn from Indigenous Elders in the territory you are on.

**Sithara (she/her):** And so Sky Woman falls from sky world and she comes down and the geese cushion her fall. The turtle allows her to sit on her back the animals around her, bring a whole bunch of things to support her and assist. And then there's the Christian origin story of Adam and Eve where a mistake gets made and they get pushed out of paradise into this world to do what they need to do and live their lives.

And the reality is even if you're religious or not religious, we are affected by these fundamental world views. One sees this place as a place of belonging as a place of abundance as a place where the world is going to provide, and you have a responsibility to it. The other sees this place as a waiting room to paradise, where there are dangers, there are things that can happen.

This is not a safe place. And so when we have discussions about things like using pronouns in people's work signatures, or adding an extra box to forms



where someone can identify whatever their identity is, or just removing that question, altogether. You see, people get really upset about that because they feel either entitled to having a world that's less confusing or being part of something that belonged to them and is now getting taken away.

**Erin (she/her):** Oh yeah.

**Sithara (she/her):** And so if you look around and say, you know what, none of this actually belongs to me. I am a part of this and I have a responsibility towards it. All of a sudden, somebody using pronouns, somebody deciding that they are going to create their own identity. Isn't threatening. It's an evolution of the abundance that exists around us.

**Erin (she/her):** Absolutely.

**Sithara (she/her):** And, when you come to engaging employers, what has worked well for me and dealing with the barriers is you have to recognize, we don't need to continue to drive and drive and drive for external validation, whether that's sales or in my case, numbers of students, what we need to do is make sure that every person in our workplace feels safe and comfortable being themselves.

**Erin (she/her):** Absolutely.

**Sithara (she/her):** Our vision, mission goals, whatever you want to talk about, however you wanna put that comes from a place of abundance and comes from a place where as an employer you are looking at, this is the work we can do. Right?

**Erin (she/her):** Right.

**Sithara (she/her):** And the amazing thing about this is that when you let go of trying to be the best in a single metric and start to pay attention to yourself and the things you want, the results follow.

**Erin (she/her):** Wow, you are articulating for me something that I've been personally thinking a lot about why aren't we all going back to this way of being, and having that mindset of abundance and that everything we have is here. And the other piece that I think is gonna be so relevant for our audience is how we can get lost in the very strict ways that we think about business.

**Jade (they/them):** Definitely.



**Erin (she/her):** And if we can wrap our heads around this idea, Of belonging and maybe it doesn't have to be a quantitative number every single time, but it can actually be a qualitative one,

**Jade (they/them):** definitely that

**Erin (she/her):** like when we feel as human beings and someone can share that story of belonging when they come to work and say that every part of me matters, it's not the part of me that shows up from eight to five that does all the work and meets all the metrics.

Then I think we've actually unlocked a better world.

**Sithara (she/her):** Absolutely.

**Jade (they/them):** Yeah. I also wanna echo Erin's comments about the importance of going back to that abundance mentality. And I want to talk more about what that could look like, you know, how could that impact the work that we do? How are we gonna get there?

And do you have any thoughts

on that?

**Sithara (she/her):** Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I see the future being more inclusive. And when I say more inclusive, what I mean is that every part of my life is a reflection of the world around me is a reflection of the diversity around me. And so it's not this thing where there are equity and diversity and inclusion statements, and maybe that's where people start, but that's not end.

It is a continuous improvement of understanding what the world is asking of us. And the world is asking for us to listen.

**Erin (she/her):** Yes.

**Sithara (she/her):** To listen to the people around. To listen to the environment around us and all of the stuff that comes with that. Now these are all very sort of ephemeral ideas in terms of a more concrete example.

So I work at a community college and it is really interesting to see where education has gone from the time that I was in university to. It used to be like, I

remember going and memorizing Latin names of trees and trying to cram all this stuff into your brain and then regurgitating that onto a sheet of paper.

Now, the information is available all the time and the critical skills students need. The critical skills. All of us need is the ability to disseminate good information from bad. And to take that large amount of information and deliver it in a way that makes sense to people.

**Jade (they/them):** We are

definitely in this place where it's about deciding where the good information is.

And it's definitely a bigger challenge than usual. I mean, we've seen how that has. Done a lot of harm in terms of vaccination, in terms of disinformation and intentional misinformation is a real serious issue. And I wanna give a shout out to another podcast being Science Vs, they actually made the decision lately to focus on doing disinformation and misinformation and uncovering that.

So I love that you bring that up because I think for us to reach. True future. We also need to be able to access good information and that good information is stuff that has to be connected to different people. Cause I feel like we're getting more disconnected in some ways as we become more connected in others.

**Sithara (she/her):** Absolutely. And I think one of the things is that we also get more disconnected from ourselves.

**Jade (they/them):** Definitely.

**Sithara (she/her):** There is a ton of information out there that tells people. You need to look a certain way or you need to be a certain way, or you get your Instagram likes or whatever, or your TikTok followers and all of a sudden, that's the thing you want to be, but that's not who you are.

**Jade (they/them):** Yeah.

**Sithara (she/her):** And so part of this disinformation misinformation is finding that piece inside of yourself that says, you know, something doesn't quite seem right about this and listening to. And as we get more and more disconnected from sort of reality and what is correct, and what's incorrect and that type of stuff, you lose your internal confidence to really critically look at what it is that is out there and what it is that makes you, who you are.

So part of working towards a more inclusive world, a more focused world is recognizing where we come from, but also recognizing that you are you right?

**Jade (they/them):** Yeah.

**Sithara (she/her):** And so the world that we're working towards and the future where we see ourselves in our communities is one where people are free to not only make decisions, but also make mistakes.

Significant ways and recover.

**Jade (they/them):** I hear that.

**Sithara (she/her):** Um, coming back to one of the things we mentioned, sort of at the top of the podcast was I used to live in Fort McMurray and I had a really great job. It's a beautiful place, right in the middle of the boreal forest, I was making really great money. And my girlfriend at the time, now my wife had moved up with me and we were sort of starting to build our life there.

But one of the things we recognized is that even though there is a small, very devoted queer community there it's a difficult place to be a queer person, right?

**Jade (they/them):** Mm-hmm

**Sithara (she/her):** and part of doing this work and being out and being somebody who talks about this stuff is making the decision of where can I set myself up for success.

And sometimes that means making really, really difficult decisions. Like I had to foreclose on my home in Fort McMurray to enable ourselves to move to Edmonton. And it was a heartbreaking decision, but it was the right decision and it was an empowering decision to choose to move forward, going in a different direction.

**Erin (she/her):** I hear that

**Sithara (she/her):** I'm, I'm going to use another Indigenous metaphor for the future state. Sweetgrass. The braid of Sweetgrass in different Indigenous communities has different significance. Now when somebody braids their hair, you always have three strands. So if you sort of imagine this as there is you.

There's your community and there's the world around you.

**Jade (they/them):** Mm-hmm

**Sithara (she/her):** and you are trying to braid that together. Now, a good braid needs three even parts. If one part is larger than the other, it's unbalanced. The other thing is a good braid needs a little bit attention or in my mom's case, a lot of tension. So you do have to pull a bit and it can be uncomfortable and it can be to the point where it hurts a little bit.

But what you're doing is you're building this foundation that once you let go. It stays

**Erin (she/her):** Uhhuh.

**Sithara (she/her):** And so our future state is to look at our lives and try and understand what are our three or two or whatever, but what are our fundamental building blocks and who we are as people and what we want our world around us to look like, and then recognize that tension has to be there.

**Jade (they/them):** Mm-hmm

**Sithara (she/her):** Through my mental health journey, I remember reading about different folks who had come out of the closet. And there was a story about a woman in her sixties who was in a male, female marriage. Um, had kids always knew she was a lesbian, just tried like the same path that I was on was checking off the boxes.

Right. Find a husband, get married, do this and do that. And then had a mental breakdown in her sixties. And I remember one of the things she said that really struck me was that the energy doesn't disappear. You either have to do the hard thing at the beginning and come out of the closet or you have to deal with the hard thing at the end or throughout.

Right.

**Jade (they/them):** Definitely that.

**Sithara (she/her):** And so it's not like that tension all of a sudden you avoid it and it comes back.

**Jade (they/them):** Right?

**Sithara (she/her):** And so part of that is, as Brené Brown says, putting on your armor and understanding that, you know what, I'm gonna move forward in a way that serves me in a way that serves my community and in a way that serves the world around me.

**Jade (they/them):** Thank you. That was, I feel very, very appropriate in terms of getting to the close for podcast. I want to shout out to the comment that you made in terms of braiding and sweet grass and mention to our listeners that they should check out *Towards Braiding* by Elwood, Jimmy, Vanessa Andreotti and Sharon Stein who put together a really important book to talk about that concept. And it's available online for free. We'll have the, uh, message in the notes in terms of how to get there. And And so thank you so much. This has been such a great discussion, but before we close, we have the rapid fire question round.

**Sithara (she/her):** Fantastic.

**Jade (they/them):** So are you ready to go?

**Sithara (she/her):** Absolutely. Let's do this. I promise they won't all be Star Trek

related, but

**Jade (they/them):** I'm disappointed then

**Erin (she/her):** Listen, you gotta be authentic to yourself. Yeah, no, I got, so I'm gonna, I'm gonna kick us off. And the first rapid fire question is if you could recommend one book to our listeners,

what would it be?

So, sort of the theme of what I was talking about today, *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer is just this fantastic book about integrating Indigenous culture and Western science together.

I really wish I would've read this earlier in my career, but it's fantastic. And I'm going to cheat and recommend the second book. Which is *Becoming* by Michelle Obama and where she says as a Black woman, she had to be twice as

good to get half as far. And that statement has really just resonated with me in so many, many ways.

So, yeah, those are my two.

**Jade (they/them):** Our listeners have a couple things more to read. So what brings you joy? No matter what.

**Sithara (she/her):** Oh, my dog, Hank. So, there's something just amazing about having a creature that just like chills in your home and just vibes for whatever reason. I just absolutely love the energy that he brings into our house, but also we go to the dog park and we've met so many people and built this little community around this being and yeah, just fantastic.

Pets are fantastic.

**Erin (she/her):** Pets are fantastic. Okay, here's the next rapid fire. What is your theme song for today?

**Sithara (she/her):** I think it's called Under Pressure, but it's from the movie in Encanto. It's the one Louisa sings and it's amazing. And I watched Encanto with my niece on the weekend and it was a life changing event.

**Erin (she/her):** Encanto is a brilliant movie. I have two kids, so it definitely came high

on my list.

**Jade (they/them):** Yeah, that's a good one. So for our next rapid fire question, other than potentially Bruno, um, who is somebody that inspires you and how they create belonging, but doesn't receive enough credit.

**Sithara (she/her):** I'm

gonna say my mom, and I'm gonna say that in kind of like a broader sense of all immigrant parents who take that journey.

That is just to me, bananas and drive this huge change in their life. So my parents, my mom,

**Erin (she/her):** my mother

immigrated to Canada as well. And it almost seems unimaginable to me, to be honest. To make that decision of that journey and to make a greater place for their children if they choose to have children.

But I think about that as a parent. So last question here, what is one call to action? You'd like from our

listeners,

**Sithara (she/her):** Don't be afraid to be ridiculous. There's far too much pressure to do things in a certain way. So just go out and do something ridiculous. Be ridiculous. Feel ridiculous.

**Jade (they/them):** Absolutely love that answer.

My first work was dressing up as a fairy. Amazing. I teaching children art workshops, and I looked ridiculous. I really did, please. No one look up those photos though, but I, I feel you podcast. Yeah. So I, I, I love that call to action. I hope we get some comments in terms of the ridiculous things that people do.

And so I'm so grateful for this conversation and I didn't expect us to turn into a bit of a Star Trek podcast, but I'm here for it and need more

of that.

**Sithara (she/her):** Absolutely . Thank you so, so much for having me today, I am always up for a conversation with you folks. So really appreciate this.

**Erin (she/her):** Thank

**Sithara (she/her):** It was such a great conversation. It was, it was, you know, the, thought that kept going through my mind is if we think from an abundance mentality instead of a deficit mentality, including in the workplace, the amount of difference that would make, really struck home for me.

**Erin (she/her):** Yeah, I totally resonate with that abundance mentality

**Jade (they/them):** I think this ties really well into Star Trek. I know I'm being a bit of a nerd, but anybody who enjoys. Hi. Um, and, and really cuz like within Star Trek, it is in many ways this abundance mentality, energy has been figured out and therefore nobody has in access to food, to water, to housing to survival.



And so we started with Star Trek and I really think this abundance mentality is saying, let's get to Star Trek..

**Erin (she/her):** Wow. I love that as a, you know, example that we can point to you to say it's possible. And you know, it might be in a TV show, but it role models to us, this idea of how can we create a space of abundance and also create a space where everyone does have that belonging.

**Jade (they/them):** I totally agree

**Erin (she/her):** Thank you so much for tuning in. We hope you enjoyed, learned, and uncovered deeper belonging with us. Connect with us on LinkedIn and let us know what part of today's episode resonated most with you many. Thanks to our production team editor and producer Shawn Ahmed, communications Luis Augusto Nobre, and production support, Connor Pion. We would also like to thank and share a brief message from our sponsors Shaw.

**Jade (they/them):** Today's episode is sponsored by Shaw communications at Shaw. They connect millions of Canadians every day to brighter technology solutions. And they're proud to celebrate the rainbow of identities on their teams that make that possible. The richness of diversity among their staff and communities is what makes them uniquely Shaw and impacts everything. Shaw is a place where everyone can bring their whole selves to work and feel a sense of belonging. And we're so grateful that they believed in us and supported our podcast to learn more about Shaw. Visit [shaw.ca](http://shaw.ca).

**Erin (she/her):** And of course, most of all, we'd like to thank you for joining us on our second episode. For more information about today's guest links referenced and a transcript, check out our show notes, which are available on Pride at Work Canada's subscribe or follow wherever you get your podcasts, Join us for our next episode. where we will be joined by David Lewis-Peart. And Thank you so much for coming on this journey with us to uncover belonging.