



38: Anan Bouapha on becoming an LGBTI activist in Laos

Part of a special series: And Then Suddenly; Rising Voice(s)

Angela Santillo

You ever wondered what it would sound like to be one of the Grand Marshals at Montreal Pride Festival, going down the parade route in a golf cart decked out and red balloons? Well, today is your lucky day, because it sounds a bit like this.

This is And Then Suddenly, the podcast about the unexpected moments that turn our lives upside down. I'm Angela Santillo. And welcome to the first episode and the special new series. And for the first time on this podcast, I will be interviewing people who live on other continents. I am really, really excited and honored to be part of this partnership. I could definitely go on and on about my feelings about this, but let's just get right to it, shall we? Welcome to And Then Suddenly; Rising Voice(s). Now this is the first episode of about eight that will appear throughout the rest of 2019. So, it will appear alongside regular programming, if you will.

Now, on this series, I will be talking with partners from Voice-more on that organization soon. So these guests are going to be based in Asia and Africa, they're often going to be the leaders of organizations or small groups. And they are working really, really hard to make sure that their voices are heard along with those that they represent, so that they can be at the table and not on the menu. Now Voice is an innovative grant facility and they promote inclusion and diversity and 10 low and lower middle income countries in Asia and Africa. And this is directly from their mission statement. "It aims to amplify and connect thus far unheard voices and efforts to leave no one behind based on the principle of nothing about us without us." And a fun fact, Voice is an initiative of and it's financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. And it's executed by a consortium between Oxfam Novib and Hivos. Now, you might be new to this show, you might be a frequent listener. But just to recap, I do talk to people about sudden moments that turn their lives upside down. But the catch is, I can't know what my guests are going to talk about until we meet, because I believe we tell clichés about big life moments, and I'm here to change that. So that premise still remains. I don't know what these guests are going to talk about until we chat. And so they're going to share their moments and then the conversations that follow will be impromptu and candid.

And it just so happens that my first guest today Anan Bouapha, I was able to meet in person, because Anan was one of the Grand Marshals of Montreal Pride Festival this year. And in between his marshal duties, he came down to New York City. I live in New York City. So, on a busy Sunday, we met in Central

Park. We sat on a rock. It was super glamorous, but seating is very-like proper seating in Central Park is pretty hard to come by. So what you're going to hear in the background of this audio is a very lively Central Park on a weekend. And just in case you didn't know, Montreal Pride Festival is the largest of its kind in the Francophone world. So it's a pretty big deal to be a grand marshal there. Just a fun fact. Alright, let's get right to it.

Anan Bouapha

My name is Anan Bouapha. I'm the Founder and President of Proud to Be Us Laos, which is the organization that founded the first Pride back in 2012.

Angela Santillo

First Pride in Laos?

Anan Bouapha

Yes, but it's not like a New York Pride. Of course we don't have the marching, the parade, but it was the event that gathered everybody who works on LGBTI issues including sexual health, social protection, and etc. Just came together in groups, never more than 300 people attended, that's quite uncommon in Laos because according to our law, if you gather up to 10 or 20 in a public place that means that-that's consider as a demonstration.

Angela Santillo

10 to 20?

Anan Bouapha

Without informing the local authorities, but even if it was organized in a public place, but it was assisted by the American Embassy at that time. So, you know, there were pros and cons. Yeah.

Angela Santillo

Yeah, yeah, yeah. All right. So what is one moment that changed everything for you?

Anan Bouapha

I think is-it was when I joined social work, like HIV/AIDS prevention volunteer program, and I started to see the whole world. I mean, the whole world in my context mean that I started to understand how human reality is like- I got to see friends who passed away because of HIV/AIDS. I got to do something, that little thing can help people. Before that, I was like, my goodness, who could- who could imagine that a person like me in last 15 years ago, would do this kind of work. I was just like, general kid who doesn't care about what's going on. And then when I joined that, it started to change my life. It motivated me to do good things to society. And I was a really like, negative student. When I was in high school, my family didn't even think that I would, I would make it this-I would come this far. After this work, it opened so many doors. Yeah.

Angela Santillo

So what was that? Were you part of an organization? Did you start volunteering for organization or what was the pathway into starting this work?

Anan Bouapha

Actually a friend. A friend introduced it to me. And I didn't even like, to be honest, I think I came that because of friends. I didn't even think about the course.

Angela Santillo

It was just like a social thing.

Anan Bouapha

Exactly.

Angela Santillo

Your friends are there so you're gonna join. Whatever.

Anan Bouapha

Exactly because you know, like, there is as a camp if you join. Let's say if you finish the second, the third module, and then the fourth module will be like a campfire outside of Vientiane, and there will be a bunch of gay people, trans party. You know? All I thought it was like that. I just said, "Okay, cool."

Angela Santillo

Yeah yeah yeah. But that wasn't it.

Anan Bouapha

That wasn't it. The first day that I attended the workshop, I found myself-I felt it that, "Oh my gosh, that's interesting."

Angela Santillo

Oh.

Anan Bouapha

Yeah, I like, "Oh, wow. Like-what have I done like in the past years. Do nothing." Come meet these people just like-it inspires.

Angela Santillo

What were they teaching that first day at the workshop?

Anan Bouapha

Very basic. So the first module was HIV/AIDS in general. What's the difference? It's very, very, very simple concept. Like what is HIV, what is AIDS? How you get it? How you can prevent it? And if you live with HIV, how can you take care of yourself? If your loved ones or your surroundings, living with HIV, how can you help them? Something like that. And then gradually, that switch to something about your life. Your identity, your sexual orientation, gender identity, and that's yeah, that that's how I grew up. I grew up from there.

Angela Santillo

Wow, cause what was your exposure to those issues before that? You just knew they were happening? But I mean, yeah, what was-what was your knowledge of those before that?

Anan Bouapha

Oh before that?

Angela Santillo

Yeah.

Anan Bouapha

I heard about HIV, heard about AIDS, and yeah, I had to say that before that I was quite negative about it. I was like, "Oh, my goodness, that's scary." You know, like-

Angela Santillo

Like a social judgment about like-

Anan Bouapha

Yeah.

Angela Santillo

You have that, you're bad person kind of deal? Or-

Anan Bouapha

Yeah. Like you-you don't know. You know, you have you-you judge.

Angela Santillo

Yeah.

Anan Bouapha

And after you learn about that, you like, "Oh, my God, I want to help people who live the HIV/AIDS. I want to do more. I'm going to help people." Something like that.

Angela Santillo

Yeah. As opposed to being like, "I think that's bad. I think you're bad. You should stay away from me."

Anan Bouapha

But not in that judgment.

Angela Santillo

Yeah.

Anan Bouapha

Yeah, but it kind of you know, like, "Okay, that's your life. Sorry about that." You know, like that.

Angela Santillo

I got my own stuff.

Anan Bouapha

Yeah, I got my stuff. "Okay, sorry. Okay, right. I hope you're the best." But life after that no, it's like, "Okay, sister, we need to talk. How can I help you? You don't have to feel bad. I know how to get you treated." And then I just like call-I used to, you know, call a bunch of local district hospitals to get friends treated. Yeah.

Angela Santillo

So what was it pretty simple? Like you saw that information at the workshop-

Anan Bouapha

It used to be complicated, but now I think the Laos government do a pretty good job. And then we have like, almost their district- no, not the district. The test center for almost every province in Laos. Yeah.

Angela Santillo

For STD-

Anan Bouapha

STD and HIV checkup. Yeah.

Angela Santillo

So did you-what were you planning to do with your life or trying to do with your life before that moment happened?

Anan Bouapha

Before I join that?

Angela Santillo

Yeah. Like what was your career? What were you hoping to do?

Anan Bouapha

I was confused. I was living in the dark, you know? I didn't even know what I wanted to do. Like I told you about in high school. I didn't do very good at school. And I'm glad I made it because of my-the support from my mom, my parents. And yeah, they make it past that moment. And yeah, just hang out every day. I didn't know, I didn't know what to do with my life before joining the community work really.

Angela Santillo

Wow. And it was pretty easy for you to decide to go into that. Were you-were there any doubts or conflicts you had about moving straight into that work?

Anan Bouapha

No, because all I thought at that time, which is for fun and my friend's just like, "OK girl come," you know, "When you finish this, they're going to take you to other provinces of Laos and it going to have a big camp, you got to do a Miss Universe Show" And I will say, "Okay, I'm all for it." You know, I didn't, I didn't know that it would be such a life changing or so important to people or even change the kind of person that I was in that time. Yeah.

Angela Santillo

Did that happen pretty fast for you? Or-because it sounds like there was a social aspect that kept you going and there are elements of like "Oh, performing. Sure. That's great. Like, I'll do that." When did you start to notice you were becoming different?

Anan Bouapha

The second year, the second year.

Angela Santillo

What happened?

Anan Bouapha

What happened? Right? I was lucky because, as you know, Laos is small right? And 15 years ago, there were not many people speak English. And I, I was able to speak English. So as you know, this kind of volunteer work is funded by international donors, right? And I was very curious. I was a curious kid, you know, but very fast, very, like, responsive. And I talked with the donor when, when there was a few present, or something like that and outreach. And I just talked with them and they're like, "Oh, this kid knows stuff, he can communicate in English." And then I was persuaded by a local staff of that-of my organization back then- to work as an assistant project manager. Just to help the project manager, you know, in that time, I was like, "Wow, are you serious that you would get me to work with the boss, like my supervisor? "You can try but I bet-I think I have a feeling that you can do it." And that's how I went deeper in this kind of world.

Angela Santillo

In some ways they saw something in you that you hadn't seen yet. That you weren't aware of, right?

Anan Bouapha

I was not aware. I was not aware what I had back then. I just thought that, "Well, maybe because I speak English." I even telling you that maybe because I speak English, but my supervisor said, "No. I want you to try."

Angela Santillo

That there's something about you.

Anan Bouapha

Yeah, maybe. Yeah.

Angela Santillo

So then you become an assistant project manager.

Anan Bouapha

Yeah.

Angela Santillo

And this was about-then it would be 13 years ago that happened?

Anan Bouapha

Yeah. The second year or third year. Yeah. After being a volunteer, a peer educator.

Angela Santillo

And that was still in the realm of HIV/AIDS?

Anan Bouapha

Yeah, still.

Angela Santillo

So at that time, what were you advocating for as far as the policies or-what was happening that you guys were trying to fight for in your country?

Anan Bouapha

In that time just only HIV/AIDS. We didn't even call it a fight. We just like-trying to save friends, by educating them about HIV/AIDS and STI. Trying to talk to people about HIV/AIDS, increase awareness, change that behavior at that time.

Angela Santillo

So like preventative, like understand how you get it,

Anan Bouapha

Exactly.

Angela Santillo

How to write a check for it. I know in America, we now have medication that people can live-I don't know if comfortably is the right word- but have good lives with that disease as opposed to the-you know, 30 years ago, people passing away rather quickly. Do you guys have that kind of medication available?

Anan Bouapha

Yes, we have that medicine after The National AIDS Committee was formed back in 1997 or something. Yeah. And then we started to have ARV drops.

Angela Santillo

So bringing awareness, helping people and acting as their advocates if they get the diagnosis as positive.

Anan Bouapha

Yeah.

Angela Santillo

Interesting. And was that-was there a miss-education happening? Like, was that- was Sex Ed not very clear at that time?

Anan Bouapha

Like in terms of what?

Angela Santillo

As far as knowing what to look out for, knowing how to protect yourself.

Anan Bouapha

Like me personally or-

Angela Santillo

Just like, what's available to people in the country like as far as...what do I want to say. Like out here, there's Sex Ed that children in schools get, you know, at the age of 12. And they're instructed like, "Well, this can happen. Make sure you use protection." Were those elements already in place?

Anan Bouapha

Oh no.

Angela Santillo

Or was there no knowledge whatsoever?

Anan Bouapha

There was some little knowledge. And then as you know, that, in our country, talking about sexual health is still a taboo subject.

Angela Santillo

It is for us too by the way.

Anan Bouapha

Oh really.

Angela Santillo

Oh, yeah. Well, yes I would say.

Anan Bouapha

Well, if it is to you guys, that means that it's huge there. It's like crazy.

Angela Santillo

Really? So very, very taboo.

Anan Bouapha

Even speaking of condoms. You know, I think we even had a debate that condoms should be only in the pharmacy, not in public. Because if you distributed publicly, that means we encourage people to have sex.

Angela Santillo

We still have that debate over here.

Anan Bouapha

Oh god.

Angela Santillo

Certain parts of our country are like, "If we don't talk about it, it'll never happen." And it's like, no, people are gonna have sex. Make it available.

Anan Bouapha

Yeah, you can't stop them.

Angela Santillo

Yeah, you can't act like it doesn't happen.

Anan Bouapha

Exactly, yeah.

Angela Santillo

So there was a stigma around it. Not a lot of information.

Anan Bouapha

Not a lot of information. And then especially when you want to do an outreach program or an advantage increase program at the University or school? Forget it. You couldn't do that. Yeah.

Angela Santillo

So how are you guys educating? How were you allowed to educate people given those constraints?

Anan Bouapha

We went to-what we did, we go to entertainment venues, like beer shops, discotheques. Where the community-oh, I forgot to tell you that, that my program was designed for most marginalized population. So LGBTI specifically. To be exact it's like for men who have sex with men they call it-it's an HIV term, they don't call it LGTB. Men who have sex with men and transgender people, so only two target population that we targeted. So we went to the places where these people, where this group socialized. But we don't do it in their education institutions or you know, like national universities.

Angela Santillo

And in Laos, are those locations only for LGBT? Is it like, specifically a gay club, let's say or a gay brew-beer hall? Or were there different populations that you're just targeting?

Anan Bouapha

In Laos, it's not like in a gay related- it is general. The whole mix.

Angela Santillo

Okay.

Anan Bouapha

And then what you had to do is just like, observe. Because-

Angela Santillo

Really?

Anan Bouapha

Yeah, you observe. We call it in Laos a ghost can see ghost.

Angela Santillo

No way. So you're sitting there like, "I think I got one."

Anan Bouapha

Yeah, that's my sister.

Angela Santillo

And then what would you do?

Anan Bouapha

And then we just approach them. Yeah? It's kind of crazy, right.

Angela Santillo

Very grassroots, very undercover grassroots-

Anan Bouapha

Yeah. For example, if I spot you, I'm like, "Okay, I think you're on my team. Okay. I think she's our sister." And then I'll be like, "Hello, sister. Do you have a moment to talk?" Some of them can be like, very participatory, right? Some of them can be like, "Oh, no, come on. Go away."

Angela Santillo

They think maybe you're hitting on them?

Anan Bouapha

Yeah. Because it's strange. We had like a bunch of leaflets, brochures, and then condoms. And be like, "Hello, you have moment?" You know, like-

Angela Santillo

Like, "Take my postcard, take my condom."

Anan Bouapha

Yeah. And then 15 years ago in the small city. So you can imagine people like...yeah.

Angela Santillo

And did you find people did not know information?

Anan Bouapha

Oh, some of them. My goodness. They even gave me a very, like, funny definition of HIV. Like you get HIV because you have too much anal sex. And I said, "What has to do with that? It makes sense, yes. Anal sex is very risky. But what makes you think that?" "Well, because anal sex is so dirty. That's where we get diseases from. But have sex in vagina is not dirty. That's why people don't get-" See?

Angela Santillo

Yeah, there's a lot of that kind-I mean, you hear things like, "If I have sex with a virgin, and I can't get it." But it's this idea of a purity source.

Anan Bouapha

Exactly. And then I even like, I can say it right? Even if it's not- it can be rude. Some words. Like, "Because there is shit inside. Shit, cause disease. Shit is AIDS."

Angela Santillo

I get it, but also no. Cause you're talking about infection but you're like it's a virus but sure. You know what I mean?

Anan Bouapha

You see how naive.

Angela Santillo

Yeah. And that's in-what would that be? 15 years? Oh, don't make me do the math. 2000...

Anan Bouapha
2005.

Angela Santillo
Yeah. There should be more knowledge at that point. But it wasn't available.

Anan Bouapha
Well, biggest reality. We've ranked number 171 or 72 the limited press in the world. You can imagine press is strictly controlled-

Angela Santillo
Cause you're a communist country. Right?

Anan Bouapha
Yes. So that means that we don't really get to see lots of this information from national TV or radio and stuff. They do, but not for this population. So and then 2004 in Laos, I believe in America to, you didn't have the cell phone like a Smartphone in that time.

Angela Santillo
Where was I in 2004...no we did not because I was a junior. No I did not have a Smartphone in college.

Anan Bouapha
Yeah. So you know, yeah.

Angela Santillo
It was like the Nokia that you would hit 12341234.

Anan Bouapha
Right. Exactly. Even in America, right? So, you can imagine in Laos 2004-

Angela Santillo
With limited information.

Anan Bouapha
Even now. If we go to rural area a bit like outside of Vientiane, like 50 kilometers, you will see some weird- I don't want to call weird people, maybe naive expression about AIDS. Yeah.

Angela Santillo
So did you-I mean, this is clearly a story about you becoming an activist and this journey to that. I'm curious, especially being part of that community and then helping that community, how did your role in the community start to change or your- cause you're talking about it started as social moment for you, right? I'm going to go hang with people. But how did that start to shift your viewpoint of LGBT-

Anan Bouapha
After I worked as an assistant project manager for a few years, then I went to America. I got a scholarship to study in America in 2009 to Wyoming.

Angela Santillo

Oh!

Anan Bouapha

Yes, it was, it's great. Because-

Angela Santillo

That must be crazy culture shock.

Anan Bouapha

Crazy culture shock. Because, you know, as a kid from Laos, thinking about going to America, you thought that Wyoming is gonna be like New York City.

Angela Santillo

No! You get there and you're like, "All I see is the sky."

Anan Bouapha

Yeah, you watch "Sex in the City" and you're like, "Oh my god, I'm going to Wyoming, I'm going to do that."

Angela Santillo

Oh, no. You're like, "I'm gonna get my Cosmo, I'm gonna wear my heels."

Anan Bouapha

Exactly, yeah. But you know, the opportunity I was given was because of this work as a peer educator, as an assistant project manager. And after I came back in 2010, every scholarship-oh no. Every scholar who got their scholarship to study in America, that we have a monthly meeting or an annual meeting at the US Embassy for the alumni. And then there was a public affairs officer at the US Embassy just like, "Okay, guys, this year we have the alumni fund. We want you guys to do some good things for your society. And then the fund is not a lot. It's not too small. But you can write a proposal and send it to us. We give you the money based on what you learn in America." And in that time, remember that Hillary Clinton was Secretary of State and Obama was the President. They talked a lot about the inclusiveness of the LGBTI rights as human rights.

Angela Santillo

That's when gay marriage passed out here and it was all about grassroots community.

Anan Bouapha

That's how America play a very critical role in during that moment. And then, and then the officer was like, "Oh, Anan may I have moment. Do you have a moment? This year, you know, as you heard about State Department, they're pretty supportive about this course, blah, blah, blah." Okay, so let's make the long story short. We came up with the idea of organizing the first Pride.

Angela Santillo

That's how you came up this.

Anan Bouapha

That's how I came up with the Pride. And you know what? I always heard about Pride but I would never imagine that Laos would have a first gay Pride. Because of that officer, I still have to thank him. His name

is Mike Prior. He works for the State Department now, I think Foreign Service in some countries in Africa. Yeah. And I'm like, "Mike, are we going to do the parade?" "Yeah. It that's what you want?" I said, "No, forget it. In Laos is not like that. If we do the parade, in Laos, walking, marching, I don't want to say what was going to happen." But we had to keep it a low profile and stuff. And we did it at the property of the American Embassy, which is huge. And then we had like, more than like, I told you at the beginning, more than 300 people came. 300 people is a big deal in Laos. When you come to the certain cause, a social course and you get in groups, you know. And we were like, "Wow, so many people." And yeah, they came. Also the NGOs, the UN, embassies, public, non-LGBT, LGBT community. They came and they show support. And yeah, that was the first time that we did that in Laos. But the thing is not-it didn't end there. If it end there, only one night, that is nothing, right? That would not be Proud to Be Us Laos.

Angela Santillo

It's like a party.

Anan Bouapha

It's like a party and that's it. But I think somebody maybe, I couldn't share you where, but somebody reported to the world news-

Angela Santillo

That what happened?

Anan Bouapha

And they said it in very huge, like headline. Like "US backed the first gay Pride in communist Laos." And it was on Telegraph. It was not just like an e-news, blah blah blah. But it was on Telegraph and it was spilled all over and it went viral. And people- you know, one of the big headlines are like published? And the big press publish and then the small press they do it.

Angela Santillo

They take the AP's article or whatever-

Anan Bouapha

You know you type gay Pride in Laos and you see a bunch of stuff. Okay. That's how Proud to Be Us-it was not an organization at that time. It was the name of the event. That event went viral.

Angela Santillo

Oh, wow. So you never like-

Anan Bouapha

No!

Angela Santillo

Were like, "I'm going to have my own organization."

Anan Bouapha

Oh, I thought it was just one night, one day, and that's it. Angela! I think that, "Okay, I'm done. Thank you Embassy. I'm done." No. And after that the government officials like, "What are you doing?"

Angela Santillo

You got called in by the government officials?

Anan Bouapha

Not like got called by we met them at their social events. You know, Vientiane is very small. So when you get invited, you get to see the same crowd all the time. And it's like, "It's not meant to be like this son. And be careful." And I was like, "Doctor, that's not my intention. And if you-you were there. You saw that it was not about fighting the government. We respect our government. And we live in Laos. We love Laos. We love Lao people. And Lao government is our leader. So we have no intention to fight a government or put shame on you. It was just a foreign friend help us to pursue the course that we believe in. And it was peer HIV/AIDS and sexual reproductive health awareness. But of course, we talk about ourselves as an open person, like being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, in this field. Because it's reality that getting HIV/AIDS more or the most infected is our community. So it was very tough-it was very tough time. I didn't have a good night's sleep. I always panic. You know, like, when I drive a motorcycle...my friends say, "Anan stop. Nobody's following you." Because if you read about that, you know. You know about, yeah.

Angela Santillo

Things happen, yeah.

Anan Bouapha

And I was like, "Oh, my God," You know, I was like, crazy. And guess what? Even I was worried, we did it again, the second year. Proud to Be Us number two, in 2013. And this time is special because the national media came. The national media, the government media came and they filmed it.

Angela Santillo

Was it still at the Embassy at that point?

Anan Bouapha

Yeah, still at the Embassy. And then they film, they just put it, "Okay, the second annual Proud to Be Us aim to create awareness." So it's good because the government came there, and then they film it, you know. And they air it to public. So I think the government is kind of, "Okay. Not too sensitive. It's good." But they're still don't say that, "Okay, I accept it." Because, you know, they want it to be taken by a local. Once you associate with foreign government, I think our leader, or our people, like you think that is a foreign agenda. They think that LGBTI is a Western influence, it's not a human reality. But we, Proud to Be Us, we try to claim that us being LGBT is not influenced by anybody. It's not influenced by America, by Canada, by France, by Europeans, its human nature. That's what we try to advocate. But I think our people still think like that. So it was sensitive even the second year, even the local media came. And then the third year, it didn't happen, because the civil society partners-like all the organizations, they're like, "Anan, sorry. It doesn't smell so good. We can't work with you this year." And then we didn't do anything in 2013.

Angela Santillo

Interesting, because it sounds like you went from suddenly being engaged, to having like a good time being engaged and in a way kind of an adventure, right? Doing this grassroots work. And then it sounds like this moment turns you into like a full fledged activist.

Anan Bouapha

Yeah.

Angela Santillo

That comes with the threat of being an activist. The fear, I assume. You know, now you are a cause? And not just you?

Anan Bouapha

Yeah.

Angela Santillo

And you're the face of an organization suddenly. Right?

Anan Bouapha

Yeah. And then the second year, third year, I started to think about, "Oh, my goodness." I had to think about somebody's life. Because if I invite them, if something happened to them, I will feel so guilty for the rest of my life. And that is how the leadership came in the second year of Proud to Be Us event.

Angela Santillo

Now you're super invested and not only in the people you're working for, but the people that you bring into your own work.

Anan Bouapha

Exactly. Yeah. And then, "Anan what should we do? What should we do?" I'm like, "Don't ask me."

Angela Santillo

And here you are—it seems like people keep being like, "No, you're a leader." And you're like, "No, I'm not." And you do it, and you're like, "I guess I am." Which I think is a common story actually. I think you get responsibility thrust upon your like, "I'll roll with it." So then the last Pride has—So okay, first question is because you were mentioning that you can't do a parade. What did your Pride look like? Like, what were the events? What did you do?

It looks like most Prides around the world, but it's in the—what you call—a private zone. Let's say they do it in Central Park. And this area, and only this area.

Angela Santillo

So like a gated area?

Anan Bouapha

Yeah.

Angela Santillo

Okay, did you guys march within the area or you just—

Anan Bouapha

Oh we do whatever, you know? Singing, all kinds. Like the Pride but just—

Angela Santillo

In a contained area. Kind of like in America, like carnivals.

Anan Bouapha

Yeah.

Angela Santillo

Wow. So the last Pride happened in '13.

Anan Bouapha

Yeah.

Angela Santillo

Has it happened since then?

Anan Bouapha

Since then. But in 2015, we, we took one year break, and I thought Proud to Be Us was over. I'm like, "Okay. It's over. Weren't we great?" And then in 2015, we had a new development partner, which is European Union. Because the European Union, also very pro LGBTI stuff. And we marked the first international day against homophobia and transphobia for the first time with the European Union in 2015.

Angela Santillo

In Laos?

Anan Bouapha

In Laos.

Angela Santillo

In their courtyard?

Anan Bouapha

In the courtyard. And then it's small but the message was not. It was like boom another nuclear bomb. Like boom.

Angela Santillo

Picked up by the press, European news?

Anan Bouapha

And the local press even came to film it. And I've heard that..You know, that within the government, you have a left and right.

Angela Santillo

Sure.

Anan Bouapha

Even with a one party country.

Angela Santillo

Oh really?

Anan Bouapha

But you think you have like- you never know, right? Some support, some not. But maybe the press was supportive. They came, they film it. They even put the key message from human rights-UN Human Rights about LGBTI in Lao television. And there was a big letter L G B T in the national media. Yeah.

Angela Santillo

So, was there previously-was the word like "LGBTQI" never ever said in the media?

Anan Bouapha

No, no, no.

Angela Santillo

Never?

Anan Bouapha

Never no. Never. They would never talk about- only in AIDS work but not even like LGBT, they say something like "marginalized population."

Angela Santillo

A very comfortable blanket term, that you don't have to face it head on. Or even identify people as existing.

Anan Bouapha

Right. But it's the first time that they put it on air with their, you know, human rights related term, LGBTI. Talking about the inclusiveness of LGBT, you know, that's how it got started. And that's how many international friends like-were on internet-like, "What is going on?" And then they found something like Proud to Be Us Laos. And that's how we became more vocal and vocal ever since.

Angela Santillo

So your work got a whole government to recognize a group of people by name.

Anan Bouapha

Yeah.

Angela Santillo

That's a huge deal. So how do you feel now about being a leader?

Anan Bouapha

You know, what? You really...Yeah, your question really make me...Normally, you know, when I get to talk with many journalists and stuff, I was like, "Well, you know, seems very confident." You got me to talk about my past. And then I talk about this. I feel like, I feel like me interviewed last 15 years ago.

Angela Santillo

Like, oh, how you were back then?

Anan Bouapha

Yeah.

Angela Santillo

Well good. Well I'm not a journalist. I'm just a nosy girl. Or woman, I can't even go by a girl anymore.

Anan Bouapha

Okay, now I have to move myself in 2019.

Angela Santillo

Yeah. So recognizing your experience and your strength that you've gained and the fears that you've confronted. And I should mention, which I'm sure I'm going to say at some point in the intro is that you are on a break right now from being a Grand Marshal of the biggest Pride parade in Canada in Montreal. So yeah, so how you doing these days as a leader?

Anan Bouapha

Okay, so your question like how to be a leader?

Angela Santillo

How do you feel about being a leader now?

Anan Bouapha

Okay. I think being a leader is not as fun or about positive-like the name leader is. But I think being a leader is a lot of work. You have to, like I said, you have to think of others before you. Because there are many people who ask for your advice. If you give them a wrong advice, if negative consequences happen to them, you feel bad.

Angela Santillo

Yeah.

Anan Bouapha

So sometimes a small decision can cause people's life, you know, negative positive. So I had to think a lot about the action or decision that I make. So yeah, that's how I see as a leader.

Angela Santillo

So, still feeling that...oh gosh. There's that Spiderman, quote, do you know Spiderman? It's a cartoon. Well it's not a cartoon, it's a superhero. And they have this quote, like, "With great power comes great responsibility."

Anan Bouapha

Oh, yeah, something like that. Yeah.

Angela Santillo

It sounds like you just keep gaining power, not in a bad way. But that like as a voice, as someone who people run to be part of, you know, your organization. But with that comes increased responsibility.

Anan Bouapha

Yeah. Yeah.

Angela Santillo

What do you hope for the LGBT-LGBTI? There's so many different acronyms. I'm like, "Which one are we using?" What do you hope for that population in Laos, in the future?

Anan Bouapha

Well, very simple. Hope. I really want them to get the education that they're supposed to get. Of course, there's no discrimination and stigma in education. But when it comes to, you know how to act or how to dress at school, I don't want that to be a burden in school, to be a problem in school. I want them to-our teachers, lecturers, University-to see the importance of them.

Angela Santillo

That they can be themselves and express themselves-

Anan Bouapha

Their potential, their capability. Rather than look at them like how they act, how they walk, how they talk. I think that the greatest human potential or ability is-her or his, you know, holistic thing? Is-

Angela Santillo

Everything your-

Anan Bouapha

Is everything.

Angela Santillo

Your capabilities and your intelligence and your willpower is different than how you walk.

Anan Bouapha

Yeah.

Angela Santillo

And to not judge people and allow them to be-the full them.

Anan Bouapha

Yeah. And allow them to be part of the national development and count on them. I think they want to help so much. But when they see that, "Oh, you're not appropriate to help. Thank you." And then that's how you accidentally-maybe you don't mean it- but you accidentally pull them away. And when they are away from the mainstream development, they become like, the burden of the society. And at the end of the day, you have to pay so much price to take care of them.

Angela Santillo

When you ostracized them.

Anan Bouapha

Exactly. So when you get them all together, the consequences you don't have to pay so much price later. Because they are educated. They are, you know, taking care of their their ability to do good things.

Angela Santillo

Now, it isn't every day I get to meet a Grand Marshal from Montreal Pride in Central Park. So I feel like this is the perfect opportunity to share with you a slogan that's being used a lot by the Canadian

government, which is, "Diversity is a fact, inclusion is a choice." And it's also important to note that Anan did talk about what impedes Pride and Laos. And just to clarify, or just a reminder, that it's the right to assemble more than 20 people in a space that stops the event, not the LGBTI concept in and of itself.

To learn more about Proud to Be Us Laos, you can go ahead and find them on Facebook or on Twitter. Head on over to voice.global to learn more about Voice and you can also follow them Facebook, Twitter, and on Instagram. And check me out, And Then Suddenly podcast, on Facebook or Instagram or on my website andthensuddenlypodcast.com. I always say this, but I really do love to hear from you and hear what you think about the show. So feel free to send me a message on any of those platforms and I will definitely respond. And I will include links to all of these organizations in the show notes for this episode. Alright, thanks so much for listening. Have a good one.