

Tiffany Puett

April 28, 2023

Eleonora Anedda [00:00:02] Okay. So, today is April 28, 2023. My name is Eleonora Anedda. I am IDCL's oral historian and curriculum specialist, and I'm joined here today by our founder, Tiffany. Tiffany, would you like to introduce yourself a little bit?

Tiffany Puett [00:00:24] Sure. I'm Tiffany Puett, and I am the founder and executive director of IDCL, the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life.

Eleonora Anedda [00:00:35] Wonderful. Where are you joining the call from, Tiffany?

Tiffany Puett [00:00:39] I am joining from Austin, Texas.

Eleonora Anedda [00:00:42] Perfect. Okay. I am in Sardinia, Italy. And just to start off, Tiffany, would you like to tell me a little bit about your childhood?

Tiffany Puett [00:00:52] Sure. So I grew up in Oklahoma. I grew up with my parents and my younger sister. My parents were public school teachers. When I was younger, we lived in some very small towns, towns of maybe 3,000 people. And then when I was in high school, my parents moved to Tulsa, where they still live. I think I had a pretty nice and in many ways idyllic childhood, growing up in the late seventies into the eighties, most of my childhood. I graduated from high school in the nineties. And yeah, I think about things of my childhood that were formative. There were a lot of things about it that were really sweet and lovely. And living in a small town, there were a lot of - everyone knew each other, and there was familiarity and comfort and safety and a lot of freedom to be out and explore, like wandering around the neighborhood and riding bikes through creek beds and things like this. And so there were a lot of those kinds of things about my childhood that I think were really lovely and really great.

Tiffany Puett [00:02:20] But there were other things about my childhood that were formative in maybe some more negative kinds of ways. The places I grew up in, they had a broader culture that was really oriented around the status quo, reinforcing dominant culture and the status quo. And that meant Whiteness, heteronormativity, patriarchy, and also evangelical Christianity as well. And my family was more liberal, at least in terms of the politics of the area and a bit more open-minded and not evangelical Christians, though we were Protestants, we were Methodist. And we went to church regularly but did not have an evangelical theology that was really focused on things like -

Tiffany Puett [00:03:28] I just grew up around a lot of kids that shared a lot of this hellfire and brimstone theology, this idea of the importance of being saved, the danger of going to hell, and that anyone who did not think like them, who was not part of the same religion, was going to go to hell, not receive salvation. And that kind of exclusivity - as well as I grew up hearing a lot of racist jokes, homophobic jokes, things like this, people that would reinforce the status quo through, sometimes it would come out through the way that people would joke around and tease. And all of this for me felt stifling. And I think it really influenced my desire to explore the world and better understand the world and look for a more open, inclusive, and even equitable environments.

Eleonora Anedda [00:04:42] Since you're talking about this, do you remember if and

when - I mean, I'm assuming it's an if - when you saw diversity. Like, there was a turning point where you realized there was more than just that 3,000 people in a small town.

Tiffany Puett [00:05:05] Sure. Yeah, so I lived in a couple of small towns. The first small town we lived in was called Watonga. We lived there through elementary school, and when I was in fifth grade, we moved to another small town called Cleveland. And Watonga actually did have some diversity. While it was White dominant, I had friends that were kids who were Native American. Oklahoma has a large Native American population, so I've always been around folks who were Native American throughout my childhood. But there were also African-American kids, Mexican-American kids, and some kids as well - because it's an agricultural area - that we're children of migrant workers. So there was some diversity. It wasn't exactly that everyone was exactly the same. But this pressure to assimilate into a dominant culture, and there was a lot of segregation as well. That was pretty significant.

Tiffany Puett [00:06:19] And I was not exposed to any religious diversity until I went to a summer camp, a summer day camp. I was later in elementary school, maybe fifth grade. And it was a camp for gifted kids. And it was put on by a graduate program for people getting a master's degree in gifted education. And so they would put on this camp, and it was this practicum for the students who would lead the classes and things for the kids. The camp leaders, teachers who were also graduate students, they were fairly diverse. And this camp was in Oklahoma City. And the director of the camp was Jewish. And then I had a teacher in the camp who was Buddhist and from Thailand. And I really loved these people, and I thought that they were really wonderful, and I loved this camp.

Tiffany Puett [00:07:32] And then not long after that, after camp, I was at Sunday school, and a conversation came up that a Sunday school teacher was talking about, that if a person wasn't Christian, that they would go to hell. And I remember saying, "But I had these teachers, and they were really wonderful, and they're really good people," and I just couldn't see how it would be possible that they were gonna go to hell. And the Sunday school teacher was like, "Well, I know it's sad, but unless they accept Jesus Christ, that's what's gonna happen to them." And at that point, I was like, "I'm not sure that this religion is for me now." [laughs] I had always been interested in these bigger questions about existence, and "Why are we here? And what's the meaning of all of this?" as a kid. But I think that was one of those pivotal moments where I was like, "I think I have to explore other religions, other versions of Christianity. What I'm getting right here is way too limiting for me.

Eleonora Anedda [00:08:49] So it sounds like if you looked like you had to belong to the dominant group, then you had to assimilate to that group.

Tiffany Puett [00:08:59] Yeah, yeah. There was a lot of that. There was a lot of pressure to assimilate and really establishing the dominance of Whiteness, of heteronormativity, of evangelical Christianity. All of those kinds of things, it was clear. And patriarchy for that matter, there was a fair bit of sexism around, and so it was clear that these were the terms in which this community was built. And other people could be part of it, but they had to meet the terms of that community.

Eleonora Anedda [00:09:37] And you've talked a little bit about your family's spirituality. Do you want to say a bit more about that? You said that you would go to church sometimes, but not regular churchgoers.

Tiffany Puett [00:09:53] Sure. So I grew up Methodist. I think that that was something my mother was more committed to than my father. We actually were regular churchgoers when I was a kid. We did go regularly. And actually there's a lot about that that I think was really good, that I had this foundation of - even today, I still remember the hymns that we sung in church. And I was exposed to the ritual, and I understood what this lived religious experience, what that really looked like. My mother had been raised Southern Baptist, and she felt that the Southern Baptist, which is an evangelical denomination, that was too restrictive for her. And so before I was born, but when she was in her early twenties, she started going to a Methodist church and felt like it was theologically a bit more liberal.

Tiffany Puett [00:10:54] And it's interesting, because I grew up with my mother sharing this narrative that we were part of a liberal denomination. If you ask people today about, "Is the Methodist Church a liberal denomination?" I think it depends on how they define liberal and where you place those markers from where conservative is, so it's very subjective. But in general, the Methodist church is not considered an evangelical denomination. And so they aren't involved in the same mission-izing and evangelism that you see with, say, the Southern Baptist Church. Not that there aren't missions and evangelism, it just looks a little different. It's a little more low-key. And they're not focused on this idea of the importance of being born again and converting that a lot of evangelical denominations are. So that was something that contrasted.

Tiffany Puett [00:11:58] I have memories of being a kid on the playground and having friends ask me if I had been saved yet and being confused about what that meant because that wasn't the meaningful language that was used in the Methodist church. That said, there were still people that were members of our church that were more conservative and maybe their own theologies were a little more evangelicals, like the Sunday school teacher I was mentioning. I think that in some ways what she was sharing was a bit of an outlier within the Methodist church. She was a little more on the conservative side. But this is the way churches work. You get all kinds of perspectives and there's not this hardcore, like, "This is what we all believe and everyone's gonna stick to it."

Tiffany Puett [00:12:44] But yeah, and my grandparents were also Methodist, and they were very active and involved in their church. And so we were regular churchgoers. By high school, though, I stopped. I was fairly disenchanted and stopped going to church. Disenchanted for some of the reasons that I had mentioned. In college, I started reading about other religions, exploring other religions. I started going to a Unitarian Universalist church, which is a more liberal denomination, I think by anyone's standards. And that was really affirming. It was eye-opening for me, but it was also very affirming for me and my ideology and worldview. And it felt like a comfortable community. But I also started reading a lot about different religions. I took classes on world religions. I started my study of various religions that, as you know, I'm still engaged in today [laughs].

Tiffany Puett [00:14:01] So and then I also, along the way, practiced other religions as well. I visited some Buddhist temples when I was in college. Then I joined a neo-Hindu meditation group called Sahaj Marg that I was part of for a couple of years. And then when I went to graduate school, I was twenty-four, and I moved to Boston and started a masters. I did a master's degree in ethics at Boston University. And when I was there, I joined a Zen meditation center, the Springhill Zen Center. And really, I would say I didn't exactly formally go through the process of what one might call conversion, but in my mind, I began to

identify as Buddhist, and that was my primary practice. And I was very focused on that and went to this meditation center daily and read and went on retreats and really immersed myself in that for several years, and then got busy with life when I was a bit older.

Tiffany Puett [00:15:28] Well, I say I got busy with life. Part of that life, as well, was that I had, as part of my job, I later lived in New York, and I worked at an interfaith organization. And as part of my job, I directed a program. We would take people to visit different religious communities in New York on the weekends. It was a program to help people learn about religious diversity in New York. It was very cool. I liked it a lot, and I learned a lot from it. But it was also my work. And so because I was doing that as my work, when I wasn't working, I had no interest in religion. I just was like, "I don't want to. I don't need to go anywhere religious or think about religion, because that's what my work is." So it wasn't until I had kids that I started thinking about wanting to be part of a religious community again. And my family has been involved in the Zen Buddhist community here in Austin, and we've also gone a bit to a Unitarian Universalist church. I would not say we've been terribly rooted in an either place at this point. So in terms of my current identity, I suppose I see myself as, something of a marginal Zen Buddhist and Unitarian Universalist.

Eleonora Anedda [00:16:53] I have a few questions, but I just want to say this first. When I moved to the US for my masters, I started to realize that people's religious lives were a lot different from the ones that I had experienced here in Italy. So here, for example, even if your parents do not go to church, they're not regular churchgoers, every kid will be baptized. And it doesn't matter what you actually think, but that's just custom. And at this point, it's more cultural than it is what you actually feel like. And I've had a friend when I was in New York, she was my age, and she decided to be baptized because she decided that. And I'm saying all of this because I wanted to ask you, because of your experience, when you had kids, how did you explain religion to your kids? As a parent, what do you like your children to know? And how do you approach this conversation with them?

Tiffany Puett [00:18:10] Sure. This has actually been something that's been really challenging for me, I think because of the meandering personal experiences that I've had with religion, but then also because I'm a religious studies scholar, and I have a PhD in religion, and so I have a difficult time. Very often when I think about religion, I think of it very academically and intellectually. I sometimes have a difficult time thinking of it in a more personal, spiritual kind of way. So thinking about how to share this with my kids, that's not a lesson, that's not like I'm teaching them a class on religions, has been a bit of a challenge. And at times they have complained about that, like, "Oh, I don't need a lesson from you, Mom, about this. Thank you very much."

Tiffany Puett [00:19:14] But when they were younger, I mostly exposed them to Buddhism. There was a children's program at the Zen Center that I took them to. I had a bunch of Buddhist kids' books that I read to them. We talked about a lot of Buddhist values. And these are values I don't want to say they're exclusive to Buddhist, but these Buddhist books would talk about these values like compassion and kindness. And I did not talk a whole lot about God or ultimate reality, though those aren't really Buddhist ideas. There's not a lot of emphasis on those things in Buddhism. But those are bigger ideas in our society that get thrown around.

Tiffany Puett [00:20:15] As I got a little bit older, and I knew that they were talking to friends who would talk about their own religion, we tried to talk a little bit about like, "Oh, what is your friend's religion? What do your friends say? What does that mean?" We also

would occasionally, when we would visit my family, go to church with them. It wasn't very often, more on holidays, but they would have some of that exposure. So then later we would talk about like, "What is it that you just saw?" Even today, though they've been to church many times, it still feels fairly unfamiliar to them. We, as a family here in Austin, have gone to a Unitarian Universalist church, but the Unitarian Universalist churches don't include a lot of Christian rituals that they saw at my family's church, like, say, communion, and some of the particular kinds of prayer and God language. And so we have tried to talk through some of that.

Tiffany Puett [00:21:17] I think that it's left them feeling maybe uncertain about where they stand. I don't think that they feel that they have to choose or decide, though. And so we've never told them that they have to share our religion or that they have to choose one for themselves. But I had a funny moment. My son, he's now a teenager, but at the time when he was - trying to think of how old he was. Seven, maybe. And they did learn a little bit about some religions in their school, kind of a cultural studies. And I think they had learned maybe about Hanukkah or something. So we were in the car one day and he says, "Hey mommy, we're Jewish, right?" And then I was like, "Oh, wow. I guess I have not done a very good job of [laughs] teaching them about religions, because we're not Jewish." [laughs]

Tiffany Puett [00:22:24] So yeah, it might be interesting to ask them what they've come away with. They've gotten a lot of information, but how have they made sense of it, and what have they come away with? And they have not had the experience of being told like, "This is our religion. This is what we believe. This is what you believe." I think in many ways, I think that's better, but at the same time, I can understand that for a kid that might also be confusing, that there is something to be said of when you're raised in a religion and you're told that that's what your religion is, then if you choose something else for yourself, you're moving away from something in particular. I don't know that my kids have anything in particular to move away from. We'll see how that unfolds for them in their lives.

Eleonora Anedda [00:23:15] Thank you for sharing that. It was so funny. I wanted to ask you to just go back a little bit. So you mentioned college and you mentioned your graduate program. Do you want to just trace your steps back a little bit and just tell me where you went to college, what you studied, and what made you decide to study, to embrace religion studies?

Tiffany Puett [00:23:39] Sure, sure. So I did my undergraduate degree in Oklahoma at Oklahoma City University, and I majored in philosophy and political science. Through my philosophy major, I took some classes in philosophy of religion. And there were also some classes that cross-listed in philosophy and religion that I took. I took a class on Confucianism and Daoism, and I also took a class on Buddhism, and they cross-listed. That was a big part of how I started to learn about religions, though I wasn't technically a religious studies major. I also started reading just on my own personally, reading books like Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* and other things from the Beat Generation. There's a lot of that Buddhist influence in that, and that was also influential on me as well, but that was not part of my formal studies.

Tiffany Puett [00:24:54] At the end of college, I also started taking Chinese language classes. I had taken French earlier in college, and then I took a couple of semesters of Chinese my last year of college, and that was prompted by this class I had taken on

Confucianism and Daoism and had really liked a lot, and thought that I was really interested in Chinese philosophy and religion and wanted to study that more, and thought that I might want to study that in graduate school. I visited some graduate programs, the summer after my senior year of college. No, sorry. The summer before my senior year of college, I visited some graduate programs thinking about doing graduate studies in Chinese religion. And basically what I realized is that I just didn't have the language skills, and that I needed to improve my language skills before I could get into a more competitive program in that area. So then I started looking at language programs in China to maybe go and do an intensive language study in China.

Tiffany Puett [00:26:11] And then I found that I could get a job teaching English in China where I would actually get paid to go do that. And then the thought was I could also try to study Chinese while I was there. So when I graduated, I took a job teaching English in China. And I lived in China for a year doing that. And when I first went, I think I thought that I would stay longer, and that I would find a language program there, that I would be focused on language learning, that going to teach English was just going to get me there and help in my investigation. This was in the late nineties, so Internet was new-ish, and there wasn't as much on it as there is now. So I know right now the idea of like, "Why would you need to go to China to investigate programs there?" seems crazy because it's like, "Of course, you would just look at their websites." But it was a little different in 1998.

Tiffany Puett [00:27:08] Anyhow, that was an amazing experience living in China for a year. It was a really transformative experience. I had never left the country before, and so the first time I left the country was to move to China was a big thing. And I ended up only living there for a year. I did not stay longer. I came back to the US, honestly because of my boyfriend, who's now my husband. And so it was just personal reasons. So I did not end up pursuing that study that I had thought I was going to pursue. But I was still interested. I came back, I taught English as a second language for a year at an intensive English program for students that were studying for the TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language] to go to a US university.

Tiffany Puett [00:28:04] And then I applied to graduate programs, and I applied to a program in ethics at Boston University, a master's degree program. So I think at this point, I decided that I wasn't going to do the intensive language study, but I was just generally interested in comparative religious ethics. So I went to BU, studied there for two years, and finished my master's degree. And then at that point, my boyfriend, now husband, wanted to live in New York. So we decided that when I finished, I would move to New York. He moved there before I did and got a job there, and that I would move to New York to be with him.

Tiffany Puett [00:28:49] And when I moved to New York, I got a job at an interfaith organization called the Temple of Understanding, which is an older interfaith organization. It was founded in 1960. It's one of the oldest interfaith organizations in the US. I also think being founded in 1960 probably played some role in naming it the Temple of Understanding. I feel like the name might have a different resonance today than it did then [laughs]. Despite the name that sounds like it could be a religious community, it was not a religious community.

Tiffany Puett [00:29:26] It was just an interfaith organization, and it was founded by a woman who was inspired by the United Nations. In 1960, the United Nations was not that

old. And so she wanted to create a spiritual United Nations, bringing religious leaders together, that was something new in 1960, to better understand each other and promote world peace. And then she had this initial plan, she wanted to build this big center that would be a library and research center and have resources for all of these different religions. And then this was what the Temple of Understanding would - the place you would go to understand different religions. That physical space didn't ever come to pass. It was just a regular old office. It didn't become this destination that she had once hoped. And we did educational programs to teach people about religious diversity in New York. **Tiffany Puett** [00:30:29] And I worked there for six years. And towards the end of that - and it was a really good experience, but that experience raised a lot of questions for me that I wanted to further explore. And there wasn't exactly the space in doing that work to research and unpack some of these kinds of things. So this is what led me to decide that I wanted to do a PhD. And for this PhD I went to University of Waterloo, which is in Ontario, Waterloo, Ontario, a little outside of Toronto, and it was a religious studies program with a focus on religion in North America, a sociological, historical study of religion in North America. And then even within that, I was focused on studying the politics of contemporary religious diversity in the US. I think that gets you from undergrad through grad school.

Eleonora Anedda [00:31:45] Absolutely. So when was IDCL born?

Tiffany Puett [00:31:53] Sure. So IDCL was founded in 2015. I finished my PhD in 2014. My family moved to Texas in 2010. I moved to Texas in 2010 while I was still working on my dissertation. There were various reasons that we moved here that were just very practical reasons that had to do with my husband finding a job, also wanting to be a little bit closer to family. And I think when we initially moved here, I wasn't for sure that we would stay. I didn't know how long we would live here. And then I think I also thought when I finished my PhD, maybe we would move. I would apply for jobs in various places at universities, and we would move to where I found a job. But by the time I finished my PhD, which is four years later, we had already been here for four years. We were fairly settled and had a good community, and my husband liked his job and didn't want to move our family anywhere in the country.

[00:33:01] And so being geographically constrained to the Austin area puts some limits on some job opportunities. I did some adjunct teaching. I taught at Trinity University in San Antonio for a year as a visiting assistant professor. But I began to think more about what it might look like to do this kind of work, the kind of work that I had been trained in, that I was interested in, that was part of my research in a way that would be more public-facing than in a university. I wanted to contribute to the public understanding of religious diversity in Texas. I saw a need for this. I saw an unfilled niche in terms of that there really weren't organizations doing research and educational programs on religious diversity. There was a little bit happening in some universities. There are some interfaith organizations doing some interfaith dialog work, but not the kind of deeper research and documenting and really trying to tell the story of religion in Texas. So this is something I felt like Texas really needed.

Tiffany Puett [00:34:31] When I moved to Texas in 2010, I already had a lot of familiarity with Texas from having grown up in Oklahoma, which is a neighboring state. However, a lot of the ideas that I had about Texas were outdated. My dad's family was from Texas. I knew that we had these Texan roots. We'd been to family reunions and things, but it was very much my 1980s version of Texas that I had in my head. And so moving here in

2010, though I had in the interim visited Houston and Austin, but really spending time here, I saw how much more diverse Texas was than I had realized, how much it had changed since was a kid.

Tiffany Puett [00:37:07] And I also realized as well that a lot of my perception of Texas was not just based on my own experience, but based on this larger media narrative of what Texas is that I had also bought into. And so in seeing the diversity of Texas and seeing what was really happening on the ground, it made me feel, too, that Texas had a messaging problem. There was a minority group, really, who is the majority in the halls of power in Texas, who basically claims to speak for all of Texans and claims to represent all of Texans. And then they don't. And they also put out this narrative of who Texans are, and they end up ignoring all the people that really live here.

Tiffany Puett [00:38:08] And so when I was thinking as well about wanting to do this work in the public understanding of religious diversity in Texas, part of what I wanted to do as well is think about these untold or marginalized stories. How do we create programs that create spaces for everyone to tell their story, to tell this bigger story of Texas and then to help other Texans understand what they're missing, those stories that have been left out. So that is how IDCL came to pass in 2015, although it took a few years. We started with this mission of wanting to build and create a more inclusive Texas, but to try to figure out what that would look like in terms of implementation and what our exact programs would be.

Tiffany Puett [00:39:09] I think the idea started in 2017, but the program itself didn't really get started until 2019 that we started the Religions Texas project, which this interview is part of, this large-scale oral history initiative to record and preserve the many stories of Texas using religious diversity as a lens for that. And as far as I can tell, even today, these several years into this project, this is the only project of its kind out there. While there are plenty of other oral history initiatives in Texas. They don't really investigate or look at religion in the same way. And especially thinking about religion as this lens for understanding diversity in Texas.

Eleonora Anedda [00:40:07] Absolutely. And so I joined IDCL in 2020, and at that point, the project was already up and running and we had interviews. We had an archive. There had been already a lot of initiatives, and that happened before COVID. And so I wanted to ask you, were there any challenges that IDCL faced in general and also during the pandemic?

Tiffany Puett [00:40:46] Yeah. The pandemic was interesting, because when it started, we were still a fairly young organization. We were doing all of our work in person up to that point, as everyone was. But we occasionally had some Zoom meetings and met with people remotely. We were just getting the Religions Texas project going, and we started out doing in-person interviews. And there can be challenges with in-person interviews, traveling, having the right equipment, and getting set up. There's a lot more variables, I think, and audio issues when you're interviewing people in person. And then when the pandemic started, we had this moment of thinking like, "Oh, what is this gonna mean for our project? We can't meet with people in person." And then we thought like, "Well, we'll just try some interviews on Zoom and see how that goes. Everyone's using Zoom, so this will be the norm of these times that we'll follow."

Tiffany Puett [00:41:52] And as it turned out, the Zoom interviews actually work quite well. And they have some limitations, but they have different limitations than in-person interviews. And I feel like if you weigh them, I think one could make a case for going one way or the other. I don't think it's clear that in person versus online, that one is better than the other. They're just different. And for our purposes, especially because we want to be talking with people across the state, being able to do these interviews that don't require driving across the state - and anyone who knows Texas knows that Texas is a ginormous state - it makes this whole project much more accessible and allows us to be in conversation with people that we wouldn't be otherwise.

Tiffany Puett [00:42:47] Also, the other part of the shift to Zoom that happened with the pandemic was that we started working with folks like you. When we were only working in person, we were only working with people that could come to our office in Austin. And once we were working online, then it seemed like, "Well, doesn't matter where someone is for us to work with them." And now our team is pretty much entirely remote, and we don't have the office anymore because it's not needed. And not only is it not needed, but if we tried to meet in person, it would leave out team members. I'm not sure that we'll go back to working in person.

Tiffany Puett [00:43:33] So there were challenges with the pandemic, but I think for us they were not insurmountable, and they actually ended up - there were silver linings in some of those challenges, where I know some other organizations that have this long history of like, "We always work together in person." It was much harder for them to pivot because it meant they had to transform their entire organizational culture. And that's the nice thing about being a young organization is that we don't have that burden of institutional history to hold us back in any way.

Eleonora Anedda [00:44:12] So what do you hope for IDCL, for the future?

Tiffany Puett [00:44:20] Yeah, good question. I mean, I hope for longevity. I hope that IDCL is around a long time. I hope we continue to grow. Structurally, I would love to see us have a bigger staff and expand the reach of our programs. I think there are a lot more stories for us to tell in Texas. I'd like to continue to do this work, and I also hope that we can reach bigger audiences and reach out to more people and bring them into our conversations, both people to interview, but people to be aware of our work. And then I hope we can do a lot more work, as well, bringing our resources, our oral histories, our training programs, our online resources, the research reports and curriculum guides and other things that we produced. I hope we can find more ways to integrate those into Texas classrooms, companies, other kinds of organizations that could really benefit from the work that we're doing.

Tiffany Puett [00:45:36] So I also hope as well that we can contribute to the kinds of social shifts in Texas that I think will definitely happen. And that Texas right now is a majority-minority state. And it actually has been since 2014. So almost twenty years now that White Anglos have been less than 50% of the population, and there's not a majority population in this state. Although, as I said before, that's not the demographic makeup of the Texas legislature. But also Texas is religiously diverse. Texas certainly has plenty of evangelical Christians. And we hear a lot about evangelical Christians in the media, evangelical Christians in Texas, I mean.

Tiffany Puett [00:46:35] But Texas also has one of the largest Muslim populations of any state in the country, one of the largest Hindu populations. And in general, the Asian population, especially the South Asian Desi population in Texas, is really quickly growing. And that's especially happening in large cities like Houston, like Dallas, San Antonio, Austin. The people who live in Texas want to be seen and known and represented, and they want to see people who look like them in positions of power, and they want to see policies that acknowledge them and acknowledge their needs and their lives. And I hope that the work that we do at IDCL in elevating these stories can help support the kinds of political transformation that really has to happen in Texas if democracy is going to prevail, because right now Texas government is not really representing the people who live here.

Eleonora Anedda [00:47:52] I wanted to ask you something else. So this is a very general question, but what do you like about Texas? What things or food or landscapes or people do you like that belong to Texas?

Tiffany Puett [00:48:13] There are really a ton of things that I like about Texas. So I think my answer to that question could potentially be very long. I love the landscape of Texas, but I also love there isn't a landscape of Texas. Texas is a huge state, and there are a lot of regional differences, and when you drive from one region of Texas to another, you definitely feel like you're in a very different place. And that aspect of Texas is something that I also like a lot that, that it changes, that there's so much within its borders, both just the physical landscape of Texas, from the beautiful deserts of West Texas, to the hill country in the area around Austin, to the coastal areas, and to the pine forests of East Texas. Having all of this in one place, I think, is really amazing and spectacular.

Tiffany Puett [00:49:18] But then all of these regions, they have their own distinct cultures. And that cultural diversity within Texas, which again, I think gets overlooked sometimes in narratives of Texas, like how different many of these regions are. I love that aspect of it, of Texas, as well. Of course, I also love Texas is a very dynamic state. It's growing and changing all the time. And I love that aspect of it as well. I love that I regularly meet people in Texas from all over the world, that it is this interesting mosaic or melting pot, especially in the urban areas. The urban areas in Texas, they have their own distinctive character, but they're also other urban areas that you can find in the country, New York or Boston or Philadelphia. And I don't mean to say that they're all the same, but I mean that they have that similar quality of cosmopolitanism, of people coming together from a lot of different places. And also when you live in a major urban area, people become invested in figuring out how you can live together in close proximity with people who are different from you. And that is something that I see in cities in Texas that I value a lot and that I think makes Texas special as well. Of course, I love tacos also [laughs].

Eleonora Anedda [00:51:04] Wonderful. I love asking the question because I'm getting - and I've started incorporating it in the interviews very recently - but I'm getting a lot of different answers. And so I always want to know what people say that they like about Texas. Before we near the end of the interview, I wanted to ask you, is there anything specific that we haven't talked about or that we talked about just a little bit, but you'd like to say just something more? Anything that comes to mind.

Tiffany Puett [00:51:46] I think maybe just to add on a little bit to what I had been saying before about talking about what I love about Texas and then also talking about my hopes and vision for IDCL. And then I think this connects to my own personal commitments,

what's led me to do this work, what keeps me doing this work. I think Texas has the capacity, has the potential to be a really amazing place that actually includes and takes care of all the people who live here. The resources and the means are here in this state. I'm really committed to working towards a Texas that's more equitable, that's more inclusive, that better meets those needs.

Tiffany Puett [00:52:54] And I regularly meet other people with those same commitments. I know so many other people that have those commitments that inspire me and inspire my work. And I don't feel like I'm working in isolation. I don't feel like what we're doing is this outlier. I feel like it fits solidly within this really robust landscape of activism and social justice work and liberation work in Texas. And I love that I get to be part of it, and I feel hopeful, even though this particular political moment in Texas also simultaneously feels dark and ominous, but just knowing the people that I know who live here that are doing this work, really is what keeps me going and makes me feel that while things might be very difficult right now, I do think that we're on the precipice of change. I do think that another Texas is coming.

Eleonora Anedda [00:54:17] That's wonderful. And I love that you said that you don't feel like you're working in isolation. So before we close the interview, I wanted to ask you, you know that this interview is going to be archived, and so people might listen to it in twenty or fifty years. And so I wanted to ask you if there is a message you'd like to shoot into the future, maybe one that's more personal to you or to your kids, for the future.

Tiffany Puett [00:54:56] Yeah, I think I would just say, just to mark this moment in 2023, that the current political climate across the United States, but especially in Texas, is really challenging and really difficult right now. And that there's been this doubling down on a small minority group trying to claim power for themselves at the expense of everyone else. And we're seeing, as part of this, this Christian nationalist, White supremacist, and frankly, fascist or anti-democratic agenda that people are trying to enact in policy that comes at the expense of Texans who aren't White, LGBTQ+ Texans, Texans who are immigrants, and in some way all Texans, because they're trying to take away our children's right to an accurate education about who we are.

Tiffany Puett [00:56:27] And I think I would just want to say, maybe to my kids, that's part of why I'm committed to doing the work that I'm doing is for them and for their future and to create a Texas that they can live in and feel safe and seen, and that their friends can live in and feel safe and seen. And so I hope, listening to this in the future, maybe they will be in that Texas, and that the kinds of things that I'm describing right now will be a distant memory.

Eleonora Anedda [00:57:07] That was wonderful. Thank you, Tiffany. And thank you for taking the time to do this interview.

Tiffany Puett [00:57:15] Yeah, well, thank you.

Eleonora Anedda [00:57:16] All right. I'll go ahead and stop the recording.

Tiffany Puett [00:57:20] Okay.