

What Does it Mean to be Childless in a Child-Centered Society?

New Legacy Radio-Episode 1: Hilary Fennell

NLR Open 0:05

Welcome to New Legacy Radio with Christine Erickson. Are you someone who doesn't have children by circumstance, choice or chance? This show is for our collective community. Are you someone who influences policy, DEI initiatives or media narratives? Learn how you can co-create inclusive, equitable policies and environments for people without children. Now, here's your host, Christine Erickson.

Christine Erickson 0:31

Welcome, everyone to the premiere episode of New Legacy Radio. Thank you for joining us today. I'm your host, Christine Erickson. I'm the founder of New Legacy Institute, which was created to address the issues that we share in common as diverse communities within the collective community of people without children. Due to the unconscious biases, and pronatalist culture and policies, our community remains largely unacknowledged in media, policy and education narratives, as well as DEI initiatives. New Legacy Radio is an opportunity for us to more visibly share our experiences and perspectives to incite meaningful change for our community. We look forward to taking this journey with you. Today we have an incredible guest with us. Hilary Fennell. She is an award-winning programme maker and journalist with extensive experience working in television and radio as a series producer and director. Her work runs the gamut from current affairs to arts and human interest. She most recently released her groundbreaking radio documentary, *Childless*, *Childless*, is a beautiful and engaging documentary, which shares the stories of six women who are involuntarily childless. Hilary's own voice and experiences are also woven throughout. Now, I'd like to share with you a brief introductory clip of *Childless*, followed by an engaging conversation with its creator, Hilary Fennell.

Radio Documentary Audio Clip: "I don't talk about this. I don't talk about not having children, so many tiny, tiny, things that you will never have like school plays or sticky hugs or grown-up kids coming home from university with girlfriends and all

the continuity in life that that gives you in some ways, the choice just kind of disappeared.”

Audio Clip 2:26

That's experience that I have had as a childless person. I have had this, "Well just go sort it."

Audio Clip 2:31

The number of women who are childless, but not by choice is on the increase. I saw shamans who broke eggs into glasses of water and hovered them over me. All these things like "Oh, you'll never know, love until you're a mother." But surely, I do know love. I'm taking you to meet six of these women, seven, including myself, at different stages in our stories, and to discover how it is possible to create a life of meaning being childless in a child centered society.

Christine Erickson 3:06

Hilary, thank you so much for being here with us today, and I have to say this was such a moving documentary, I just have so much gratitude for you making this for our community and to share with others. Well,

Hilary Fennell 3:21

thank you very much for that praise, and also for inviting me on. So it's so lovely to be your first guest. I'm very honored. So thank you and such lovely words. And I'm so glad that you appreciated the documentary because I kind of put my heart and soul into this one.

Christine Erickson 3:35

Yes, yes. And it feels that all the way through. Can you share a little bit with us about why you made this documentary?

Hilary Fennell 3:43

Oh, gosh, that's a long story. I mean, it's something I've been thinking about for a while, as in, I don't have children. And whenever I'd bring it up, you know, the usual

thing, it seemed to be quite difficult to discuss it. And this went on for a number of years, but I wasn't quite sure that it was a thing. You know, I thought it was just in my head, and I was being overly sensitive, etc., etc. But when I began to talk to more and more people about it, it became clear that this was actually some kind of silent it's just something that wasn't spoken about, but it was taboo. And then I had an opportunity to kind of take some time out. I was writing. I was writing a book, actually a novel, and you know the way sometimes in those kind of silent times, these things can come to you. So I was in an artist's retreat at a table with six women. And three of them were talking about their children. And then they were talking about their grandchildren. And then they took out the photos, which normally go around, like normally, in these types of places, you talk about art and politics and so forth. But the other three of us I noticed went completely silent. And then it twigged, I said, "Oh, we don't have kids", but we were being really polite and saying oh thank you shows the photos. And then I think one of us just spoke up and said "Do you know that we don't have children?" And I think the response was, yeah, like lucky you, like, you know? And we said, no actually, we might have liked to have children. It kind of completely changed the conversation. And also, for me, it just was a kind of a lightbulb moment where I said, this isn't just me. This is an actual subject that does not get discussed and that merits discussion. And the other women who were not childless, they like me, they said, we never talk about this. So actually, the beginning that clip there, that woman who begins by saying, I don't talk about this, she's one of the women I actually met at that table. So then I was like, but hang on, this is crazy. It's not fine. It's as if it's a criminal act or something, you're ashamed about it. So you asked you, that's where I came from. But it took, you know, it took a little while for me to kind of go there because oh, I know if I do this, I'm going to have to look at my own pain more, etc., etc. So I kind of it took me a little while to actually get it off the ground. But that's where the Act came from. It came from personal experience, and actually being kind of disgusted that this was in this day and age. That people don't feel comfortable to discuss this subject.

Christine Erickson 6:12

Yeah, it's those moments that kind of take your breath away, because they're so unexpected. They happen. And you step back and go, oh, this is what's happening.

Hilary Fennell 6:22

And I think because I was in that kind of headspace where I was in a creative space anyway, that I didn't just brush it aside and say, oh, it's probably just me and the way I feel today, or it's, you know, chop, chop, I've got to go on to the next thing, and the next thing. I actually sat down and said, this isn't right. Like, this isn't right, that we feel so, so just not, you know, it's self-policing, isn't it really, but we just don't feel I just felt people weren't comfortable talking about it. And I was really, and then of course, I'm like a dog with a bone. So once I see there is something there, I'm like, okay, let's dig down into it and see. And so I was educating myself, as I returned to start the documentary, because as I said, I came from a place where I would be, oh, just being very stoic about my position, I suppose. And thinking, you know, because I was getting responses, like, if I kind of tentatively said, I might have liked to have children saying things like, well if that's the worst thing that happens to you in your life, what have you got to complain about, which kind of tends to shut one up. It wasn't something that I had really allowed myself to really experience the pain of it, I suppose, because I was always minimizing it. So the documentary allowed me to really look at that and see why are the reasons behind that?

Christine Erickson 7:43

Yeah, brilliant. Yeah, there's so much to navigate. And when you're kind of in that protective space, of how far do I go to this? And again, I just think it's like having your breath taken away. I already said that. But for me, it was too those outside moments that you don't just don't expect, and you're like, how do I mitigate this is where I always go, like, how do I immediately mitigate this?

Hilary Fennell 8:05

Mitigate, yes, yes, absolutely. For me, it was minimizing. So I would always, you know, kind of say to myself, like, it's not that bad, it doesn't matter, it's okay,

they're, right? Like, it's, you know, compared to a lot of people, it's not all of those things, which are true, but then we know, what that does is it just pushes the kind of problem or the feeling, it just pushes it under the carpet and you don't actually deal with it. So I really wanted to delve into it. And I thought a radio documentary would be a really good place to start. It's less intrusive than coming along with cameras and filming for television or making a film. So I thought I'd begin with radio, which is a little bit softer, and more accessible, it allows people who might not want really want to be in it to feel well, at least I won't be seeing, you know, obviously, they were happy to have their voices heard. But I also think it's a great medium for people for dealing with those types of very sensitive subjects.

Christine Erickson 9:10

Absolutely. Yeah, I felt so connected listening to it. And also related to that feeling of, you know, how many of us don't want to necessarily be visible in this, you know. It's a different type of place to be in to express that experience fully, amidst all of the things that are coming at us. And I just think it was a beautiful way to start to delve into this and to share these voices of these women, including your own. And while you were doing this, that in the process of making this documentary, who are you thinking of making this for beyond these six stories and your own perspective at that table that day?

Hilary Fennell 9:53

For everybody really, I mean, to educate people I suppose, who might not know that, which was a really a response I got that this is a thing that there is such a thing as involuntary childlessness. But also, and for the people who are currently in my position, who might be over the age of, say, 45, which is where the statistics really begin, but also to really in an altruistic way to say to us, what kind of society do we want to live in, because unless we address this now, so there's the cohort who might have children now, and policy wise, when they're aging, who's going to be there for them in the future, though they we have taken into account. Also the fact that I think people who are childless, would like some empathy, if they've not had children, but then looking forward, I was thinking also about younger generations coming up so that we can fight for policy change, for better education around

fertility and the fact that fertility treatments are very have a very low efficacy rate, much lower than people think, maybe 30 percent. And also the need for free childcare policies like that, so we can encourage people to have maybe have their children younger, so that, you know, it's easier, they don't need, I'm just making generalizing greatly, they might need support. But then within their career, that they feel like they can still sustain a career and have a career path rather than leaving having children until later, after they've kind of established their career. So there would be very serious reasons why I did this. But I think whether it's only 46 minutes long, I look at it as my first kind of salvo into this area, because I think there's a much bigger piece to be made, which would feature, you know, being much more in depth. But for this piece, I just really wanted to put it together to start the conversation. So it was made everybody, but also to I hope, give some support to people who might feel gosh, this is my journey. This is this is speaking for me, so it might be a help. And then I'm also put people in touch with supports that they might not have known existed such as one of the guests, Jody Day, who I think you know, who runs a group called Gateway Women, and a lot of women join that and find it very useful. So there was a myriad of reasons why I made it, but it's really, I see it as a general, a documentary that would be of interest to everybody. Really,

Christine Erickson 12:29

Yes, I agree. And really to have packed all of that into 46 minutes was so brilliant. I was amazed by it, it touched on all of those points. And people are often in so many different places in their journeys, whether they're just beginning to become into acceptance of not having children or in acceptance, or going through the second stage of now, people are not having children, they're having grandchildren, their peers. And listening to that, from my perspective, where I'm in a space of acceptance, I was just still so moved to hear and feel and experience that empathy throughout, you know, maybe from the spaces where that hadn't been acknowledged before in my own life. And so I really appreciate that. And then to have this as a venue for education and to share. I'm so excited to have you here today, so that we can do that; so more people can hear this and have access to it. I just so appreciated all of it.

Hilary Fennell 13:31

Thank you, because that's my you know, that's my aim is to get it out to as many people as possible like I'm based in Ireland. That's where the piece was made it interviews Irish people, but I feel it's a global reach. So the great thing is that the Internet, etc., and being on Instagram, and then we connected, and I'm getting, I'm getting replies from people all around the world. So the fact that it is available, you know, for anybody to listen to on my website. It just makes it from the old days where if you didn't catch it on at nine o'clock on the radio, that was it. You have something here to really it's very tangible, you know, and it's very relatable. So I do agree with you there I think I was trying to pack a lot into the 46 minutes, but I didn't want to overwhelm people. So I did make a decision to concentrate quite a lot on the just the stories because I think that's really what connects with people is the stories, and as you say to choose people at different stages in their in their journey.

Christine Erickson 14:37

And can you share more with us about what was your process of making this?

Hilary Fennell 14:41

The process, well, let's see. So it would have begun I'd say it's two years ago now. You know with COVID It's so hard to keep track. But whenever I had this aha moment in the artists retreat, I would then start to research. I started to write a proposal. I then had to think well, I think one of the first things I found was Jody, Jody Day and Gateway Women and a few others like Cristina Archetti, who'd written a piece about the representation of childless women in film. The lovely guy called Robin Hadley, who is an academic in England and writes about childless, not by choice, men. So I had quite a few people, and I was trying to see; initially, I thought I'd do men. I'd child free as well, and I do I do it all in one. And this is just, this is like taking, you know, the whole of it, there's no need to do that. So I said, no, no, I will wait, this time I'll just go with women. So my process is normally like that, that tends to go out before it goes in. So and then I applied for funding. And there's a scheme in Ireland, that it's public service broadcasting, so it's public

money, but it's very additive. So you have to first get a broadcaster to you say, to the press group is to get a radio station to say their broadcast it, to apply for the funding. So I got News Talks that they would broadcast it, which is a national radio station. Then I wrote the proposal, and got the funding from it's called the BAI the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. And in order to get that funding, you have to have quite well thought out what's going to be in the program, so at that stage, with no money, I began to research people try to find people to take part, which I thought would be relatively difficult, because I've made a lot of documentaries. But I had no idea Christine, it was probably the hardest thing I've ever had to cast, but nobody wants to do it. Like they'd say, because I began with my friendship circle, or my people I knew. And then I said oh my God, I know tons of childless people. I think are they childfree by choice or childless? Or they you know, I didn't even know if they were childfree, so and it's quite a tricky question. So I then I'm quite you know, I'm used to researching and producing, so I'm upfront and asked and found people who then were in the category, say, of being childless not by choice. But they said, I will talk to you for research purposes, but I won't go on air. I can't, I can't. And I'm going... Not only I won't, I can't because I don't want to be seen with the losers, and I don't want people to feel sorry for me and so. And then a lot of people were quite ambivalent, they were like, oh, I'm not really valid, because I didn't try nine rounds of IVF. Like I only tried once. You know, as if it were some kind of competition to be allowed to say that you wanted children. So it was really interesting, but also quite challenging to find the people. And then so let's say I wanted different stages as well, like I wanted a younger woman, maybe somebody who's been more in their 60s, maybe, you know, I wanted people at different stages. So in order to have those six, I would have to probably have to interview at least four people in each category, if you know what I mean to get that. So 24. But to get that I probably had to interview 40 people, so it was a lot of people, and at that point there would have been men involved as well. And then it just kind of coalesced, and sometimes it naturally happens that some people self-select to withdraw or whatever, it's I was left with a good amount of people to choose from finally, but it took a lot; it's a long way of saying it was difficult to cast, it was difficult. And then once I had those people, I said, well, can I put your names in this proposal? So if I get the funding, would you agree to do it? And they more or less

said yeah, so once I got the funding, I think maybe one or two people maybe two of the original line up pulled out. Because I think it's one thing they think in theory, and then when I have the funding and we're interviewing you next week, or next month, I think a few people realize, oh gosh, this is actually maybe going to be quite not just that they will be exposed to their family and friends, but also, I think maybe they realize that would be quite maybe triggering. Like myself, you'd have to confront them these feelings maybe all over again, maybe feelings they thought they had dealt with last year or the year before or whatever. So I would be very sensitive about how I hope, about how I treat my contributors.

Hilary Fennell 19:33

I didn't really want to interview somebody who was like in the depths of despair because I felt that was probably unethical as well. I am so delighted with the women who did it, they're just amazing. The dreams, like they're funny, they're articulate, and the stories are all different, yet all the same. They're honest. They just were a joy to interview and a joy to work with. Yeah. And I'm so thankful, because if it wasn't for them, there would be no programme.

Christine Erickson 20:09

Yes. How their energies all work together made it so powerful. And really, I wanted to go back to something you said quickly about, you know, I think childless by circumstance, women, this comes up a lot. Just the underneath shame there can be in that comparative analysis or comparative pain, which you mentioned earlier, you know, well, it could be worse, you don't have children, and you could have a worse situation. And that has come up in so many conversations I've had particularly about like, how hard did you try; it's not always spoken. But if you haven't tried to have a child, you know, in all the ways possible, even if you have access to that, or you're ambivalent, there's an assumption that you know, you wanted this less, or if you really wanted it, and those kinds of stories or those kinds of responses from people really stay with us, and in a really heartfelt way, that I think, does block a lot of us from sharing our stories more openly.

Hilary Fennell 21:15

Yes, and the way I came to understand it, was when I heard about disenfranchised grief, which is what the psychotherapy community call it, which is a grief that you really are not allowed to. Society doesn't allow us to experience such as joblessness, such as the death of, say, an ex-spouse, or an ex-partner, which happened to me, that you split up 10 years ago, death of a pet, those type of things, which are just like oh sure that's not really important. And when I realized that the grief around childlessness is seriously disenfranchised grief, then it made sense for me, because that's why I would just internalize it and say, because I was thinking, what's wrong with me? Like, why when I tried to bring this up, does nobody want to talk about it? Like I thought to be quite tentative as well, you know, you are kind of waiting for that point in the conversation. It's one of those things to bring it up, and you're brave enough to bring it up, and your friend kind of says, if that's true, if you wanted kids, you would have had them in your 20s. Okay. And you kind of go, go on, leave that, that didn't go so well. And I did a few of those, which really, at the time, I didn't allow myself to even be upset by those comments. I thought, probably thought oh, they're right. It's a bit like, because you're in such a minority, that you're thinking oh gosh, I'm being terribly self-indulgent here, aren't I? It was really only when I talked to Jody, she was saying, you are not alone. She said, there are so many of us. Really, I thought it was just me. And when I realized that I, that made sense to me. Because if it was my experience, then surely it is other people's experience, because I'd be normally a very private person as well. So it's not something I would be talking about normally, anybody who knows me, would be shocked at hearing this, but it's like, I probably allowed people to think I was childfree, because it was just less painful. And also, the last thing I wanted was any kind of pity. So but then I was going hang on, that's not really fair. It's also not really true. And it's also like, how dare they and who is they? I mean, I'd internalized it. But as if, you know, as if it was my fault that I was childless. That's how I felt, as though I hadn't maybe tried hard enough. But in my case, it was just purely bad timing, because I did not really want a child on my own. Like, I wanted a family unit, which I thought was going to start with my husband or a partner, children. So when that didn't happen, I just now realize and not only are you grieving, the breakdown of the relationship, which is why I thought I was so upset, but I was actually also grieving this other shh, don't even talk about it. I didn't even know there was a

word for that grief because I didn't know why I was so upset and now that's why, so if I can do anything, you know, when they say take your pain and make art out of it all, well I hope I'm going to do that, to take art and make pain that would be terrible. This is my journey and I'm hoping like if it helps anybody to actually, I suppose say own the pain and say actually, I'm allowed to feel really upset about this because it's something I wanted and I just think we have to break that thing that we have to prove how many rounds of IVF we had or how many you know...it's not fair. I mean, surely, I should be allowed to our articulate this was something that I thought was going to happen and it didn't, and it really upset me. And it's awful when you feel judged as being oh, she's probably so into her career, or maybe she's so selfish. When did I ever give off, I mean when did I ever give off that vibe? Like, I mean, if you looked at how I live, I mean, I think I'd be brilliant parent so that you've also got that, so then you go, maybe I wouldn't. And I think that's because I had nobody to talk to about.

Christine Erickson 25:31

Absolutely. And then the comparative analysis or the projected assumptions, it's again, it's just like this process, there are all these layers where the shutdown can happen. Even somatically. You know, depending on someone's experience, how you're responding to what somebody comes back to you with, it's, it can be quite jarring. Even when you're comfortable with your story.

Hilary Fennell 25:55

Like, what, like the bingo things. Yes. Yes, absolutely. You could have done it in your 20s.

Christine Erickson 26:04

Yes, or have you thought about adoption, all the things that you've combed through and thought about or that you know, aren't options for you, or weren't the options at the time.

Hilary Fennell 26:18

Yeah, and I think that needs to be unpacked really more depth?

Christine Erickson 26:21

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. So we're going to be taking a short break here soon. And when we come back, we will continue with Hilary and learn more about your process and what it was like to put yourself in your own work. What that was like, having your own voice there. And having such a brilliant piece, that was also a departure from your other work.

Hilary Fennell 26:49

Absolutely. I mean, that was that was definitely difficult. It wasn't something I'd normally do. So I had to think long and hard about it. But I mean, there are ways of, you know, at the end of the day, I'd say I couldn't interview people in that position, and not kind of join them. I think that would have been very churlish so. And also, I think it was very good for me to see why I felt so uncomfortable about it. And I suppose the main reason is just a logistical one, which is that I am a programme maker. So I do not want to get identified with one subject. I'm normally the one doing the interviewing and throwing stories out and I'm not normally in the programme, but it's just a different style of making. It's just as different side of programming and it's still the programme. It's still very much similar to the type of program I would normally make. So otherwise, it's just that some of my story is in it more, but it was I mean, that was tricky enough to do that. It was a hard line to navigate.

Christine Erickson 27:55

Yeah, thank you so much, Hilary. We'll be back with more after this short break. Thank you so much.

VoiceAmerica 28:13

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New Legacy Radio 28:21

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NLR Rejoin 29:03

You are listening to New Legacy Radio with Christine Erickson. Now back to the show. Here is Christine Erickson.

Christine Erickson 29:11

Thank you, we are back with Hilary Fennell, the creator of Childless, a radio documentary featuring involuntarily childless women and their stories. Hilary, before the break, we started talking about what it was like to put yourself in your own work. Can you share a little bit more about that with us?

Hilary Fennell 29:30

Yes, I found it a challenge to be perfectly honest, because normally I would make programs about other people and that's one of my skills, I suppose is that I have been an interviewer for years, and I draw people out and I love that. And it was a real case of poacher turned gamekeeper. Where I felt then I had to be I felt I couldn't ask women in this situation when I am childless myself to talk about it without revealing I am, but then that made me wonder why am I so uncomfortable about it? And A, it made me feel very vulnerable, because a lot of people I know in my life don't even know this is an issue for me, and I didn't want to be judged. I didn't want anybody's pity, because I would be somebody who I hope people think is very cool, and together and all that, so well, isn't that the point? I suppose more from the main reason was more from a business sense, I do not want to be identified with this, because I'm going to make programmes on lots and lots of different subjects. But then I thought, that's just really an excuse, you know, there's no reason why I can't do this and ask others, so, but the main thing I found was, my

resistance was kind of shyness is the wrong word, because I have been a television presenter and reporter in the past, so I've been on camera before. So it's not that, it's more vulnerability about people judging me, I suppose. And then I've gone before, should I do wrong? Like, I'm not like, I just want. And so the more I, you know, it's like a circular I'm sure you've had this? And then I then a part of me said, oh, for God's sake, like if I can do something good in this world, with this why not bloody do it. Why not, so that was really the energy behind it. But it was challenging for those reasons. But I'm very glad I did it. It took a lot. It was a tricky one to make, because it kind of triggered my own sadness around this, which, when you don't need to look at it, you can kind of be busy and get away and you know, get away from it. But I really had to look. And also talking to the wonderful women, who I spoke to, some of them still in the huge grief around this, it really made me very proud and very honored that I was bringing their stories, but I also realized, I had a huge responsibility to speak up myself and to speak my own truth as well, so.

Christine Erickson 32:01

Yeah, even when I listened to the documentary, the first time, it really moved me it, you know, I cried. And I felt, I mean that identification with it and being seen, but also just the clarity of it in a beautiful way that everything was interwoven. It was me in so many ways, it made me so proud to be connected in that way, to these women and to you. And I just I felt seen, I felt acknowledged, I felt something that I hadn't experienced before via another medium, you know, the way that you did it, and I just kept being moved, and when I spoke to people briefly about it in between, I kept getting choked up. And I thought, what is this? It's not a new grief. It's a familiarity. It was a resonance with the familiarity of it. And it felt so wonderful.

Hilary Fennell 33:00

I'm so glad. Because if I could have said what we actually did want in my ideal listener. That's exactly what I wanted. Because, as I say, for me as well, I just felt so close to these people, I identify so much of these stories, and all of this, obviously we've all got different stories, but that feeling, that feeling of loss, and because there's nothing you can't prove it's a loss. It's like it's not really a loss, it's a

disenfranchised grief. And you can't prove the loss, it's not like a miscarriage. It's not like, your child died. But it's tangible, and it's real. And that's what's so frustrating is you're trying you're going Why am I crying? Why am I upset? Like I didn't lose something. But you did lose something. And I think Amanda puts that so beautifully at the start, which really resonated with me when she said we're losing that continuity of life. So now okay, I might not want a screaming baby right now. But I'd like a little 10-year-old or, you know, then they'd be 20-year-old. You know, I'm extremely close to my own mother, my father passed away, but I likewise was so close to him. So I kind of kind of find it cruel that I won't have Hillary do you know what I mean? Of course, yes, what will happen and I could leave you and go live in Australia. But I'm saying the way our family is like we're quite close. So it just seems cruel. And it's that continuity of life, though. It's so I think I wanted to make it clear, and maybe this is something I'll have to do in another documentary. You're losing that continuity. Like it's not just the baby phase. Yeah, it would be so nuts if women of every age would want a baby. It's the being tired, and then it's a teenager, and then it's the young adult. And it's all the myriad of things that a family life entails. So, and not to be Pollyannaish about it, of course, it's a great challenge. Like I have four nephews, my brother and sister both have kids, but I have tons of friends with kids and I know how challenging it is, but it's that loss. Once Amanda said that something clicked for me as well as, I said it actually is a loss then. Because normally I think, isn't it very-don't you find that it's very intangible?

Christine Erickson 35:11

Yes. Like, absolutely. And yeah, I loved that quote too when she said that the continuity because I think there's this spectrum of when something is physical, the loss of a child, the loss of a baby, or a miscarriage, there's this whole spectrum of what is visible and what is not visible. And the less visible something is, the less relatable or believable it becomes in so many cultures. And so that piece of not having physically had something and lost, that conversation gets very lost and separated in a very different way. And I think that's where a lot of the pain comes into. I mean, we talked about disenfranchised grief. But even in expressing that story, however, the continuity of life, we have all lived that in different ways. We

have lived those relationships and who we are to other people. So we do know it. We do know it.

Hilary Fennell 36:07

Yes, and I think you've put, you've put it very well there. So let's take that as a given. And that's the truth. But I also did not want to end on. I wanted to end on a high note, because I wanted to also really dig down into it, which again, I can only touch on it in such a short programme. But so why are we convinced, you know, when you say to somebody like I would interview- I used to do a column in a newspaper for years; you know, what's your favorite achievement, all these things, those types of questions. A famous celebrity every weekend. And I would say 90 percent said my kids, 90 percent. Answer the question, what's your biggest, what are you most proud of? My kids. Oh, my God, like, every week. And I was so young, I thought I'll never be happy. Like, I'll never have kids, like I'm never going to be like you in some way. Oh, I don't have kids. I can't be I'd be 100 percent happy. And in some way, I thought I'd be 100 percent happier if I had a child. And then I had to really dig down into that and say, but hang on, then I'm sentencing myself to an unhappy life in this lifetime. Who knows what would come again, and I just could not accept that. So I want to actually challenge that and go, that is just pronatalism, telling us that's not true. Most people are lying. A lot of them probably don't get on with their kids, but it's the it's a done thing, isn't it, in society; it's what we say if we have kids. Oh, I love them. They're brilliant. So it kind of leaves us with like, what the hell do I say is my best thing I've ever done?

Hilary Fennell 37:44

So I really wanted to look at that and say, you know what that is an absolute lie, and to really dig into it. And I do think the people I know who don't have children, because we've had to really dig down into what is the meaning of our lives? What do we stand for? What kind of morals do we have? What kind of people do I want to work with? What kind of work do I want to do? Like I've been through so many, you know, really rigorous changes in that, and I hope I have high standards, because I'm just going I don't want to like, it makes you really look at things that maybe if I had children, I'd just be so busy, I wouldn't even have had time or the need to look

at but when you don't have children, I think it is a kind of an existential crisis in a sense, is that you have to look at these things in a way that I don't think people with children do until their children grow up, and they leave home, and they have an empty nest. So I think it makes us actually it's actually in a funny way, it's the positive. We have to find meaning in other ways, and we have to be honest about life and say, it's a cop out to say, oh children are the best thing I ever did. The meaning of my life is having children because that's just it's A. it's not true, and B. Then that's not fair for the growing number, and might I say my reasons for doing this is because the number of childless people is increasing hugely, and it's going to affect our demographics and how we it's just something that isn't spoken about that needs to be from a financial, global level. But I just thought that it's not fair like to say that a quarter of the population aren't as good as the three-quarters with the children. It's just not fair. So I found that part, when I feel really down about it, that's what I think about and go, it's a lie to begin with, so don't go there, you can be as happy as, as you could have been without children. Does that make sense?

Christine Erickson 39:40

Yes, you're called to show up to your life, because there isn't that other space or someone in front of it. It's actually you know, the play on the word legacy it long before I knew I wouldn't have children. I just always thought Why do people call other people their legacy? You know, so it was kind of a tongue in cheek thing I thought, but we were each living our own lives. And so legacy is very fluid in the way that I use it and why I call this new legacy. It's not that we're replacing, not having a child with something else, and some big life, as you address in your work, or having to do that. It's about who are we becoming? Who are we being every day with ourselves with this? And to others, you know, what does that look like, and how can we be well in that not having to replace that big identity that is assumed in pronatalist societies, or people with children? But how do we really let go almost of that idea, even though I'm using that word, and new legacy is, how are we all treating each other? Our group, childless people, child free people, how are we included in not, to me, that's new legacy, what our inclusion is, of all people and all of the things that we speak about in that, but we're not yet seen as a part of that.

Hilary Fennell 41:07

That really, because I was going to ask you about that, thank you for the background on that, which is so clever. I totally agree. But it's like because we're silent, people don't even know we exist. So until policymakers really know that we exist, they're not going to take us on board, they're not going to take the quarter of people without children on board who are aging without children, and are going to have to pay for every single thing after tax money to come on. TV, somebody to come, you know, if you don't have a kid to come show you how to use the new internet, when we're like, whatever will be available when we're like in our 80s, you know, yeah. And also the fact to be very blunt, that we already contribute our taxes to people's children, to the education of the child, and the now the free medical care in Ireland for people's children. Whereas that's of no benefit to me, I don't get anything back for it. You know, I'm self-employed. I have to earn everything, then pay tax and pay privately for every bit of medical care, etc. So, and that's just me. I mean, there's a quarter of women in Ireland and men, I'd say, but the statistics are from our new census is out this year. Probably a quarter of women and men probably, over the age of 45 are in that cohort. And yet, they are completely ignored. In all the advertising, all the media, it's still happy families with the mortgages and the banks. And the supermarkets. And I'm just going like, you know, when you see something, that phrase when you see something and you can't unsee it. I had that moment, maybe two years. And just rights now, I will say where I would have done a lot of work with the LGBT community years ago, when it wasn't legal and cool in Ireland to do actually a documentary about the Irish lesbian and gay organization trying to march in the St. Patrick's Day parade. Can you imagine that would be allowed? Oh, my goodness, I think we are without making too much of a song and dance about it, we are a hidden group, that because of our own, not that it's illegal or anything, or that it's socially, we've just silenced ourselves. And until we're bound together and support each other, we won't get the recognition that we deserve. So I mean, I'm so thankful that you're doing what you're doing, that we've hooked up, and it needs more people to just to be really have their eyes open, because I thought, oh, it's just my personal sadness about my marriage broke up, didn't have kids, and then going right, it's much more than that, and you dig down into it, and you see these societal, systemic, you know, I'm really interested

in all that now. I mean, and I say, once you see it, you cannot unsee it, and you're going, this is just unfair.

Christine Erickson 43:51

And even just base concepts of calling Family Policy, Family Policy, but meaning families with children or families that are, you know, people that are married to people that are married with children, I mean, we need to start there, you know, what is family? People who are single pay all those bills on their own? You know, I mean, we can go on and on. But I think once you start unraveling that, you see all of the systemic layers, and really the web of what those economics have been for so long.

Hilary Fennell 44:22

And why it probably suits them, that we shut up and that we don't, you know, it behooves the people who are controlling those systems because the status quo can continue. I just actually looking at the statistics now, if you say it's probably closer to one in four, in Ireland, and it's growing. Unless we inform younger people about, you know, that fertility treatments don't always work, all the things we said at the beginning. You know, there is a need for free childcare so that they can have maybe children younger, etc. Unless we start to actually really get that in place, I'd be worried about what's going to happen because it's just, it's not going the other way, like it's increasing. But childless, I read yesterday, in the Financial Times like era that Naomi Campbell having a baby at 51 around this very issue, so every, everywhere I look, it's like, okay, I'm really with the zeitgeist, and so are you as in this is, it's, as I say, when you've seen it, you can't unsee it, and you just have to try and do something about it. So making the documentary was almost like a first step. I don't see it as the final step.

Christine Erickson 45:35

Right. But I do love it and appreciate it so much for our work as well, because integrating, you know, looking at our, as I said, in the beginning, our diverse communities within this community, childless, childfree, non-parents, people who don't have children, yet, people who don't have children, because they've lost

children. I mean, it impacts all of us in certain ways, similarly, and I think until we come together for that kind of collective conversation and action, if we keep staying in our corner, so to speak, then that change isn't going to happen. And that's what I hope to see. And it does need to be well represented, you know, the voice that you bring through this radio documentary, and I know you're going to do so many things going forward. Other films that are about childfree, if we can bring that together and look at, you know, what is this common ground? Where are we being impacted? That's, I think, where we need to begin.

Hilary Fennell 46:35

It's not like trying to be divisive. And say there's childfree people childless, people who don't have kids yet, people whose kids have died. It's really not. I don't think I can tell that's not where you're coming from either. We're going to we can work together. Yeah,

Christine Erickson 46:50

Yes, and those ageing without children. And so I do think, you know, those identities and how we come to our story, and sharing those narratives is really important and our stories are different. It's a completely diverse community, you're talking about a quarter or more of any population, really. So of course, we're diverse, and we have all those intersections. So where are crossroads? And I think listening to these things, helping us understand each other coming from those different spaces is so powerful as well, with your documentary. So I'm curious, what has been the response to your documentary?

Hilary Fennell 47:28

Incredible. I am really overwhelmed. So I've made a lot of things over the years. And I can honestly say, I've never had such a response. So I know it, you know, people say I made a groundbreaking thing. And I think this is really, really, it is. And it's been challenging, because I got an awful lot you know, because I'm visible on I'm on Instagram, you can people can contact me. So I was getting literally emails, direct messages, private messages from complete strangers, all over the world, not just on, but it was like a tsunami of grief as well. Luckily, I was able to point people

towards Gateway Women, which you know, because I'm not a trained psychotherapist, you know, what I can do is type back something nice, but I couldn't believe it. Like it was quite upsetting. At the beginning. I was like, it's a month ago since it came out. So I was quite overwhelmed at the beginning, because I felt oh my god, this is such a responsibility. What am I going to do? I have to reply to all these people. But then, I was then I was kind of thrilled because I said, Isn't this the idea? And then a lot of the thing, oh, we heard that you might be wanting to do a TV series or something? If you do, this is my story get. So I have a whole list of people now for that. The response was unreal, but I mean, it's been unreal as in people saying, I can't believe you're saying all the things I thought I didn't know, I thought it was just me. I've never spoken about this. And you have really, and then another group of people saying thank you for educating me. So I had three more men and women who maybe went to university with me or know me, you know, they still know me, but they don't know me very well. And they were just like, oh my god, we had no idea. We're so sorry. Like, we just thought you were delighted and childfree. And so I got that, isn't it interesting? And someone saying we didn't even know this was a thing. Like we thought women either had kids or they didn't, like you. We didn't want kids. So that to me was really interesting. And also just what was really nice for some people who knew me on a personal level would have said almost sorry, like we didn't know.

Christine Erickson 49:51

Yes, just the acknowledgement. I always say the acknowledgement is so important because it's just so missing. It's so skirted around in conversations within families within friend networks. Yeah, I can remember sitting in a circle of all women at a professional event we were going to facilitate. And it just mentally calculated, oh, none of us have children, but none of us have ever spoken about this to each other.

Hilary Fennell 50:19

That's exactly where this came from. That's exactly the same experience. So the response was really, when I say overwhelming, that sounds kind of negative. But in the beginning, as I say, I was just so over, I was so taken by surprise, because I've done quite a lot of press around this as well. I've been in the newspapers. I've been

on a national television and national radio. So again, you are kind of going oh, my God, why did I do this? But then the response was being it's so positive. It's so encouraging, because people were with grief, and the thing I feared, which is people feeling sorry for you, and all the rest, I mean, yes, incredible response. But also, I felt, gosh, this is a responsibility now I have to, and I was delighted. So therefore to have something like, Gateway Women to say, look, if you want to join them, that's a group of people.

Christine Erickson 51:08

Yeah, exactly. Yeah. I refer people all the time too, it's a wonderful resource. Yeah, so what is next for you just quickly, we're coming to the end here, but your mentioned TV, so.

Hilary Fennell 51:23

In terms of this space, I would love to do a television documentary if anybody wants to get in touch with me, my website is Hilary at Hilary Fennell.com and all my contacts are there. And I would like to do that I would on this area I would like to do a television series and not necessarily just I'd like it to be global. So I don't know what shape that will take yet but it certainly would be wider it would take all facets of this and really look at the demographics and talk to experts, demographers, sociologists to see the impact of this so we also have context historically so yes, it'll be personal stories but it will be much wider than the piece I did.

Christine Erickson 52:04

It is so needed. Yes.

Unknown Speaker 52:06

I'd love to do that. Then in terms of other work I've just got a commission to make an arts documentary here for BBC, which is fantastic, I do a lot of work with artists. It's about artists trying to get their work into a show in Belfast called the RUA, the Royal Ulster Academy, and lots of other productions, which as you know, yourself, it's called development tail, which are in now.

Christine Erickson 52:29

Yes, yes, it is happening.

Hilary Fennell 52:32

Now, that COVID is lifting it looks like we can shoot again. But that's why. So yes, and lots of lots of other things. I do you know, lecture I love that, and I teach in an MA program. So lots of things like that. But in terms of the childless space, if people want to get in touch, I think this can't be this has to just be the beginning, you know? I hope.

Christine Erickson 52:54

Absolutely. Wonderful. Thank you so much Hilary, for being here today and for sharing your documentary. And you can listen to the documentary on Hilary's website, Hilary at Hilary Fennell dot com. We look forward to continuing this conversation on Twitter, the mediums that we are both on, please email us at radio at newlegacyinstitute.com. And we look forward to your feedback and questions and our continued learning and sharing. Thank you so much.

NLR Close 53:28

Thank you for listening to New Legacy Radio. We hope Christine and her guests have given you the context and insight to connect with our community in new ways. What personal or professional change might you consider to acknowledge and include our diverse community of people without children? Until we speak again, we invite you to engage with us on any of our platforms.