

Trans Heartbeat, Episode 8, Michelle Matlock On Location in Washington, DC at Creating Change 2026 - We Are Unstoppable

Day 1 - Welcome to a very special on location episode!

[mellow guitar] 🎸

[lively chatter in the background]

MICHELLE MATLOCK: Welcome to a very special on location episode of Trans Heartbeat. My name is Michelle Matlock, your host, and I encourage the use of all pronouns.

I'm here in Washington, DC at the Creating Change Conference 2026. One of the largest gatherings of LGBTQ+ change-makers in the country.

[energetic funky music]

The TRACTION team has arrived energized and ready to connect, share and build. We have Michael, Aspen, Elle, and Mia Byrne, including myself with us on this journey. So this is gonna be a little adventure that you get to go on behind the scenes at a Creating Change Conference.

There's so much to do here at these conferences. Each hour is a different session or gathering from Buddhist meditation to Black activism, to politics, to safety, to cabaret performances. It is an amazing collection of events. And in this episode, we'll also take you inside of TRACTION's presentation that we did here at the conference, where we shared the powerful story of Project Open Arms, our grassroots trans+ resettlement initiative. And we celebrated the joy and strength of community with our very first Open Arms transplant, Elle Cree. So buckle up. Prepare for the ride. Here we go.

Day 2 of Creating Change – TRACTION'S big day of presenting

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Day 2 of Creating Change, and it was TRACTION's big day. Our presentation was called "From Banished To Belonging - Building Trans+ Community Power Through Domestic Resettlement."

That morning, we did a quick practice run, feeling ready, feeling grounded, then the room started to fill up with participants. And right before we began, we all got the text message. The main conference event was running over. All workshops delayed 30 minutes. A little moment of, 'oh, no!' But thank goodness we had Mya Byrne on our team. Mya grabbed her guitar and gave the room an incredible mini performance, turning the delay into something joyful and unforgettable.

(Mya singing a country song)

♪ I'm way too fucking famous to be this poor ♪

♪ I'm way too fucking famous to be this poor ♪

[cheering and applause]

[energetic guitar music] MICHELLE: And then we launched. I started by introducing TRACTION, our mission, and the programs we've built to create connection, visibility, and belonging for trans and gender nonconforming people.

Michael shared how Project Open Arms was born in response to the growing crisis of anti-trans laws and forced migration.

Aspen walked through the real work-- volunteers, safety, support, and helping people rebuild their lives.

And then Elle Cree, our very first transplant, featured in our Episode 6, brought it all home with the truth of what it means to finally not feel alone. We talked challenges, we talked hope, and we left that room reminded of something powerful. This is what community looks like, and this is what belonging sounds like.

Day 3 at Creating Change – A few of the incredible voices we met along the way

Day 3 at Creating Change. And honestly, this was the day we could finally breathe. After the intensity and heart of presentation day, we woke up with something rare at a conference, a little freedom. This was the team's chance to explore, to split up, dive into different sessions, and soak up the brilliance happening all around us. Workshops on community care, safety, joy, organizing and survival. Every room held people doing real grounded work for LGBTQ+ communities across the country. But the best part of day three, it wasn't even the sessions, it was the people.

What's so powerful about Creating Change is the sheer diversity of who shows up. Different identities, different regions, different movements, all coming together with the same purpose, to change the world. And that's what you'll hear next. A few of the incredible voices we met along the way.

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HOPE GISELLE-GODSEY: Hey, everybody. My name is Hope Giselle-Godsey, and my pronouns are she, her, and Beyonce. And, yes, I do mean that seriously.

ANNA DESHAWN: Family, it's Anna DeShawn, your favorite queer radio personality. Pronouns-- anything respectful is amazing. Coming from Chicago, Illinois, South Side all day, we bear down all day.

BAMBY SALCEDO: My name is Bamby Salcedo, and I do have the privilege to be the president and CEO of The TransLatin@ Coalition, which is a national advocacy organization that is based on Los Angeles.

LOVE LATONIA: Well, hello, beautiful people. I am the one and only Love Latonia. I currently live in Jackson, Mississippi. I am the founder and executive director of Awakening Love.

LORELEI ERISIS: My name is Lorelei Erisis. My pronouns are she and her.

JOY IWANCIO: Hi, I'm Joy Iwancio.

ALEX KAPITAN: I'm Alex Kapitan, and I'm from Western Massachusetts. It's always great to be in community.

BAMBY SALCEDO: It's always great to see beautiful and amazing people who are organizing and strategizing for all of us to have a better world.

HOPE GISELLE-GODSEY: This is a space where I feel like I get to be a Black trans person unapologetically despite everything else that's going on in the world. And I get to see like-minded folks that are not always Black, but share a similar lineage understanding of policy, culture in the world, around me and around us. And I just love it. I love it here. It feels like a family reunion, but I also learn a lot of things every time I walk through these doors. I wanna be able to help people tell their stories authentically and in a way that speaks true to their community and the folks that they want to reach most.

ANNA DESHAWN: I own two media companies out of Chicago, E3 Radio and The Qube. E3 Radio is our radio station. We're playing queer music all day long. Alright? And I'm hosting my award winning queer news podcast, five or six queer news stories every Monday morning wherever you get your podcast. Tap in. Okay? I know you'll find stories that you do not hear anywhere else. And then we've got The Qube, Q-U-B-E. We're building the largest database of Black and brown podcasts so you can find the content you have been desperately searching for. So we out here just trying to solve problems and making solutions. That's all, we here. And we're doing it for you. So tap in.

LOVE LATONIA: So Awakening Love is an organization that we aid trans and nonbinary people with abilities of self determination. We just opened the very first trans drop-in center in Jackson, Mississippi. We're making history, and of course, we wanna bring you on that ride. So we would love you to reach out to us any way you can. Look us up on any of our social media. That's gonna be Awakening Love Mississippi. (@awakening_love_ms) Awakening Love Mississippi. We would love to hear from you, connect with you, collaborate with you.

ALEX KAPITAN: We have had each other's backs for generations and generations, way before anyone even wanted to admit that we existed. So this current political moment is really tough and it's not everything. It doesn't define you. It can't stop you from being who you are and we got each other.

LORELEI ERISIS: Transitioning is the best thing I ever did for myself. It made me a better person. It gave me these amazing perspectives on the world. It let me meet all kinds of wonderful people. And most importantly, it let me be myself. If I could go

back and choose again, I would make exactly the same choice. I would transition again with everything I know, even today in a heartbeat.

JOY IWANCIO: There is a path forward that is open for you. Okay? So please know that you are loved and the world is better with you in it.

BAMBY SALCEDO: I just wanna say for the beautiful, amazing, incredible young people to remember that you do have power, that individually and as a community, you have power, that you are a divine creation, and bring your light everywhere, anywhere. Don't be apologetic about who you are. Always be you.

LOVE LATONIA: We're here to do the work. We're here to love on trans people, and we're here to love on you because we need our allies as well. So thank you so much for just being you and thriving and moving forward towards our community because you matter too, and we love you. Love. (kiss) Mwah!

[house music]

Day 4 at Creating Change – Ballroom, Baby

MICHELLE MATLOCK: Day 4 at Creating Change. Our final day and, wow, we went out with a bang. The conference actually had to wrap early because a massive snowstorm was rolling into the East Coast, and we knew we had to get out of DC fast if we didn't wanna get snowed in.

But even with the early goodbye, day 4 did not disappoint because that night, we stepped into the Agents Of Change Ball. And I mean a real ball. Think Paris Is Burning, think Pose, runway, categories, costumes, judges, trophies, giving face, giving realness, giving excellence.

And just a quick note. Ballroom culture was created by Black and Latino LGBTQ+ communities building House and Ball spaces for survival, artistry, and chosen family. And it's shaped dance, fashion, and culture for generations.

The room was electric. We even ran into the magnificent Rio Antone. Yes, our Episode 4 icon who absolutely brought the house down during the Songbird Competition.

And then the moment: Guest Judge, Dominique Jackson, Elektra Abundance-Evangelista herself, walked the runway and reminded everyone in the room of our power, our beauty, and our legacy.

DOMINIQUE JACKSON: This honor is not just for me because I am not the only advocate for change. As a Black trans woman, as a Caribbean immigrant, I've been scared. I've been very scared. And when I look to people to help me, they turned their backs because they thought I was a star. So I had to remember that I am a star.

[crowd cheers]

And in remembering that I am a star, I had to remember that it is each and every one of you that got me here. It is each and every one of your stories that helped me. It is each and every one of you that said to me, "Here's a drink" at the bar, "You going through it. I'm gonna help you." And to those of you who said, 'I love you.' 'I support you.'

So this award, Advocacy For Change, does not belong to me, it belongs to each and every one of you in this room and to each and every advocate that I named. Thank you all so very much. Thank you all.

[crowd cheers and hollers]

RIO ANTONE (singing a cappella)

♪ We're beautiful ♪

♪ Yes. We're beautiful ♪

CROWD: Yess!!! (cheering)

♪ And we're freeeee... ♪ (holds out note)

[crowd cheers and hollers]

[house music resumes]

MICHELLE: What a way to close Creating Change. In joy, in glamour, in community. Ballroom, baby. [lively chatter in the background] That's a wrap from Creating Change 2026. We came to DC with open hearts and left with new friends, powerful partnerships, and renewed hope for the future of our trans+ communities. The energy in these rooms reminded us that we are not alone and that when we come together, we build the world we deserve. Until next time, keep your heart open and your joy loud.

[house music continues]

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