

Transcript: Philip “Sharp Skills” Jacobs - *Ripple Effect: Positive Change Around the Sound*
Show Intro

-Gentle piano music fades in-

Show Introduction:

Welcome to *Ripple Effect, Positive Change Around the Sound*, where Mirror Stage amplifies the stories of local changemakers whose positive impact ripples across Puget Sound. Join us as our guests share in their own words what brings them to this moment today, what drives them and inspires them to create a better, more inclusive world, and how you can get involved. Sometimes it only takes one person to make a difference, and that person could be you. If you like what you hear, be sure to like, share, follow, and subscribe.

Thank you for joining us. Let's get started.

-Gentle piano music fades out-

Episode Introduction:

How can storytelling facilitate difficult conversations? What kinds of bridges can it build?

Philip “Sharp Skills” Jacobs is a creative communicator with many mediums. He is a hip hop artist, a writer, a board game creator, a financial educator, and a visionary who hopes that we all have the tools we need to reach our fullest potential. His board game “Reveal the Elephant” strikes conversations about race and identity at organizations around Washington state, and through all his mediums, he hopes we can all find common ground through telling our stories.

Let's hear from Philip.

-Gentle piano music plays for a few moments-

My name is Phillip “Sharp Skills” Jacobs. My pronouns are he/ him, and I am the founder and CEO of Rebel Firm LLC.

I'm originally from Los Angeles, California. I came out to the Pacific Northwest around the time I was a senior in high school. I'm a preacher's kid, so the denomination that my mother and my stepfather were involved with moved them first to Omaha, Nebraska when I was a freshman in high school. I stayed here from my senior year of high school to college. And then I moved back to California in 2008. I stayed out there until 2014 and then I relocated back to the Pacific Northwest in 2014. And so I've been here ever since and I live in Spanaway, Washington now. In terms of just like what I do, I started off solely as a hip hop artist. I still am a hip hop artist by the name of “Sharp Skills”.

But from there I've expanded into creating books. So my fifth book called *Gladiator* is modern parables for building mental toughness and resilience. And it's about helping people build the capacity to not only survive, but also overcome life's most challenging situations and to learn how to thrive despite them and using those tools to actually seize bigger and better opportunities. I also created a board game called *Reveal the Elephant*, which is a racial equity board game to help organizations and folks have conversations about race, specifically in the workplace, but also in the community, families. And right now I'm actually, I've been leading trainings through my board game, which I call racial equity gameplay sessions for organizations here in the state of Washington.

-[musical interlude here - "Catch A Vibe" - all songs are by Philip, except for the piano interludes at the beginning and end of the episode]-

Storytelling is paramount, I think, to the human existence, because it acts as a bridge. I think we learn better as people by hearing stories. It is a connectivity point that I think is very primal, and it's a way that we're actually wired as humans to be able to relate to each other through our stories. So even though we might have different backgrounds, our stories, I think, are what connects us in a way that really no other medium can. And so for me, as a hip hop artist, as a writer, as a communicator, I do my best to try to funnel my messages through stories, which is why the last two books that I've written, *Gladiator* being one and then the other one, *Elephant in the Room*, which is a racial equity book, those are written as modern parables. So essentially they're fiction stories, but they deal with real life situations that many of us can relate to. But they're written in that story narrative as opposed to me lecturing you through a book or telling you something in a book. The message is actually in the stories.

-[musical interlude here - "Catch A Vibe"]-

I used to work in the energy management field. That was my first job out of college. And I don't know why my brain is wired like this, but back then I had the idea of teaching my colleagues about energy because we were energy services representatives going into businesses, helping them to reduce their energy load. If you know anything about energy, there's so many different definitions and formulas and all this other kind of stuff, right? I'm not necessarily into all of that, but I figured, hmm, what would be a great way for people to learn about this that isn't boring? And what would be a way that I would want to learn about this that isn't boring? Because a lot of times we would have to sit through workshops and lectures and things of that nature. Huh, a board game. I think at the time I went to like a Michael's or a Joanne's or something and I made a prototype of an actual board game that talked about energy and how people can learn about energy in a fun way. That idea didn't really pan out.

I did get kudos from the people that ran the company that I was working for, like it was a great idea, but it didn't really go anywhere. Plus at that time, I didn't really have the means to produce a board game. While that idea, and goes back even to the idea of failure, like you put one foot in front of the other, and then eventually, if you keep kind of just living and working, you will discover kind of where you're supposed to be at. Even though that idea, technically you could say that that was a failure, it still planted a seed for me.

So fast forward, I get into racial equity and DEI work around 2017. And I was very fortunate that I was working with Fortune 50, Fortune 100 companies, going in there with the consulting company that I worked for at the time, Great Heart Consulting, and getting to talk to executives. And we were talking about these difficult topics, DEI. And I remember the fight back then just to say the word race in a workshop.

This was prior to George Floyd. So it was just a different time. Seeing how difficult that was for these brilliant people to broach this topic and then fast forward even from there in 2020, when I became the first executive director of an organization called Washington Employers for Racial Equity, where I was meeting CEO of Starbucks, CEO of Boeing, CEO of Microsoft, all of these CFOs, all of these folks. And even after what happened with George Floyd, people were still terrified to have these conversations, these brilliant people that have billions, if not trillions of dollars under management, leading hundreds of thousands of people.

And so my mind went all the way back. I think even before I created the energy management game to when me and my family would play games during the holidays and how that would bring us together, unless we were playing Monopoly, which would usually divide our house, but the board games Scrabble, Life, other things like that, that brought us together, that created a sense of love and togetherness. And so I put two and two together and said, huh, this is worth a try. If I can create a board game that makes this conversation a little easier and more approachable, then maybe we can begin having them in the workplace and it will actually lead to creating solutions that many of these organizations, at least at that time, were saying that they were committed to.

That's really the genesis of where that idea for a board game came from and how I got to the point now where, you know, we have revealed the elephant and we've done it with several state agencies at this point. But looking to expand it, I think definitely more in the corporate space and really I have a goal for there to be at least 125,000 units throughout the state, which I think is very doable. What I learned is that the tabletop game industry itself, just in the state of Washington, is a \$2 billion industry. So there's definitely people out there with an appetite for board games, and I think especially a board game like mine, which combines the social justice aspect.

-[musical interlude here - "On My Way Up"]-

The game, it's conversation driven and it's collaborative. So folks work together to reveal the elephant. That's the name of the game is "Reveal the Elephant". And the elephant in this case represents racism because racism is often the elephant that folks don't want to talk about, but it's the elephant that's in the room. So you're working together to reveal this elephant that's covered up with all these little tiles on them. And as you have the conversation, you practice skills.

And as you practice those skills, such as repeating back what you heard or talking about how your bias might actually impact the way that you are hearing one of your colleagues, or even just something as silly as getting up and like pumping your fist and saying, "hell yeah!" for something you agree with. Those earn you points in the game, peanut points that you can then take over to the portion of the game that has the elephant that's covered up. And then you can take the tiles off as you go along. So it's collaborative. Folks work together to have these conversations. And it really just acts as something to bring folks closer together around a topic that often divides us. It's actually on the prompt cards that are not the tiles, but the prompt cards where the conversations are driven. I should say probably one of the more controversial cards is essentially you're talking about which presidential candidate you're going to vote for and your friend wants to vote for a candidate that you think is overtly racist, how do you maintain the relationship with your friend knowing they're going to vote for this candidate? And for me, that was a real life situation. And so a lot of these cards deal with either things that I've gone through or just scenarios that I've seen with other people.

Another card is one of your family members post something disparaging about the Asian American community because they feel like Asian Americans weren't there for them when their particular racial group was going through a challenging situation. And how do you respond to that family member based on what they posted? All of these things kind of put folks in a place of having to put yourself in somebody else's shoes and practice the skill of empathy, of active listening, of putting maybe your perception on pause for a moment, or being courageous to share your perspective when you haven't before. So those are some of the things that come up on prompt cards.

I want this game to be something that helps people approach the conversation of race. I don't think it's ever going to be easy necessarily to have the conversation, but I want us, especially in the U.S., to normalize having these conversations and in a way that's productive, in a way that's solution-oriented. Because what I've found is a lot of times when we have these conversations, it can get to either reliving trauma, or it can also lead to guilt and shame, which neither of those are productive in terms of moving us forward as a society. And so the hope is that as we play the game and folks learn how to communicate around some of these difficult topics, it gives them the

capacity and the ability to approach these conversations from a place where they're not afraid and also where it leads to solutions.

Like, let's actually work towards something that changes the history that we have in our nation. If I can play a small role in that, if this game can play a small role in that, I think that that would be huge, especially for future generations to come. The experience that I've seen people have, like, it's not uncommon for people to cry during the gameplay sessions, but it's also not uncommon for people to laugh and have joy while they're discussing a very difficult topic.

I'm talking about people from various racial backgrounds and ethnicities coming together, getting to know each other in a way that they might've worked together for 20 years, but now they're really learning who the person they sit in the cubicle next to is. That has been very powerful just to see that the human connectivity point outside of race, outside of any difference, but to see the human connection that is being made.

And for me, every time that I see that, just makes me know that all of what I've done is just, worth it for people to be able to connect at that level.

-[musical interlude here - "I'm Goin' In"]-

My books undergird that, especially the one around racial equity, but my biggest thing, I think, even outside of solely racial equity, my purpose is to help people realize their full God-given potential. I think a lot of people are living underneath their potential. They don't understand it. They don't know it, which is what causes a lot of misery and frustration in life. And then in turn, we convey that frustration and misery to other people, which makes the overall experience that many of us are having in life frustrating and miserable. But the more we can tap into our full potential, where we're not living under oppression, we're not living underneath our privileges, we're not living underneath what we're capable of, that's gonna make us not only happier, but more fulfilled. And then we can live our lives with cups that are filled that we have an abundance to give to other people, as opposed to trying to take what you have or only holding on to the little that I have, and we can be more abundant as a people and as a society. So that's really what I hope that my books do through the various topics that I write about. I have a book about entrepreneurship. I have a book about hitting your mark in life. I have a children's book that helps them through grief and loss. But all of them are designed to help people realize their full God-given potential and make sure that you're living in a way that you are fulfilled and that you can overcome many of the barriers that would try to limit you into one certain particular box.

Rebel Firm, what I've coined as a "heroically creative consultancy and production company", it's really a fancy way of just saying I do a lot of different things from music production to creating books to writing, speaking, the board games. And at some point that might evolve into something

else. Like there's actually been talks of potentially me working on some scripts and things of that nature for films. I produce, I'm a producer, I'm a creator.

And so Rebel Firm is the imprint for that. I have a company that I started this year called Fades & Finance. I'm also an investor in the stock market and I teach barbers and stylists how to build wealth in the stock market because oftentimes that's an underserved community as it pertains to learning about wealth and financial education. That was something that I saw was in need and also something that I have good amount of knowledge in that I think could be valuable to that demographic.

So a lot of it is just producing, creating, and looking at where my life is aligned in that moment, and determining kind of maybe what my niche might be to fulfill certain voids that I have a unique point of view and experience that could lend itself to helping people in that particular area.

Interlude:

If you're enjoying this podcast and would like to support it and other Mirror Stage programming, you can make a tax-deductible donation via our website at [mirrorstage.org slash donate](https://mirrorstage.org/donate). That's M-I-R-R-O-R-S-T-A-G-E dot O-R-G forward slash D-O-N-A-T-E.

I think at my core, I'm a communicator. And whether that is through my artistry, which I would consider that to be my music. For me specifically, I do think art encompasses more than what we call the creative arts. I think that there are accountants that are artists. I recently led a Fades and Finance session today where the barber who oversees that shop, he calls his barber artists because literally that's what they do when they're cutting hair and all the designs and stuff.

But I think at my core, I'm a communicator. So whether that's through books, through music, through even the board game, it all is a piece of me that is communicating a message. And again, it ties back into helping people realize their full God given potential. That would probably be the nucleus of everything that I do is that communication piece.

-[musical interlude here - "Peace"]-

For me, I've been in so many different scenarios where I can't help but believe that there is a God that is ordering my life.

I mean, I've just seen it from near-death experiences to even just positive situations where I was in the right room at the right time, and it made absolutely no sense why I was there if I was to kind of map it out myself. And everything that has happened in my life that has been significant,

it has always been what I feel is a creator's touch to it. And so that's the vantage point that I come from and everything that I do that is my foundation.

I believe that my faith is the thing that has kept me sane in many circumstances that probably would have driven most people crazy just based on what that experience was and the result of that experience. That is my foundation. I believe that that will be my legacy as somebody who carries faith in a real way. Not saying it's always the right way, because I'm not perfect, but just from a relatable standpoint, where people can probably identify with the things that I've experienced, that I've gone through, and I don't seek to be anything but myself, but I carry this faith inside me while I'm having this very real human experience.

-[musical interlude here - "Peace"]-

I think it's always a challenge when you have an idea that you want to bring into the world. Using the board game, for an example, I mean, that was an undertaking. It took us about two or three years to bring that to fruition. And you don't know if it's going to work. You don't know what you create is going to be deemed valuable in the marketplace. And how do you monetize that? How do you market it? How do you position it? All of those things. And I think...having a certain conviction and resolution and belief in yourself, which I've cultivated over many years because I have a lot of reps that I've put in. I have seven albums that I've put out. Like I said, this is my fifth book. So all of these things gave me the confidence to be able to say, okay, I can put out a board game. I'm going to be doing the first hip hop residency in the city of Tacoma starting December 13th. That's a big undertaking.

But because I've cultivated this resilience all of these years by trying, failing, learning, rinse and repeat, having some success, going through failure again or, quote, supposed failure, learning from that and then rebuilding and then going from there, a continual cycle of that, it has built up a capability where even the challenge that I just mentioned, it doesn't really act as a challenge. It becomes more of a puzzle.

Okay, well, we don't have this piece. We don't have these pieces, but this part of the puzzle looks like it goes with that part. So it's kind of like just finding the different elements that you feel like you need. You're not going to have all the pieces at first and that's okay. Work with what you have and you build from there. What is a prototype that you can create? What is a representation of what you want to make? And you use that and that's your testing board. And then from there, you're able to build on top of that until you look up and you do have a board game. You do have not just one book, but you have two, three books. You have several albums. You have tours that you're putting together. I'm just using myself as an example. But you have this proof of concept that continues to reinforce itself now because you started with what you had and you kept kind of leveling up from there.

-[musical interlude here - "Rise Like a Phoenix"]-

I really have to give a lot of credit to my mother and also have an aunt. They both put out books years before I got started in my writing journey. Both of them are also accomplished musicians. My mother is a singer. My aunt's a singer as well, but my mother has released the albums. So I grew up with that being something that was normal. It was normal to put your music on a CD because I saw my mom do it. You know, it was normal to be in a recording studio. It was normal to write books.

Those are the building blocks, I think, that helped me know that it was possible because it was already what I saw. I have two sons, 13 and 10 years old. And even if they don't necessarily follow in my footsteps doing exactly what I'm doing, I feel like I'm laying a blueprint that allows them to believe that living out your dream is possible by just going after it. And that's what I saw my mother and other members of my family doing. So I was very blessed to see that. I learned how to harness my passion early as a kid, almost to let failure or to let setbacks fuel me, really. One of the reasons that I feel like I've become such an accomplished hip hop artist now is because the very first time that I got on the stage to really perform, I got booed off stage. It was at a church and I was like 10 years old. That put a chip on my shoulder in a way where I'm never gonna let that happen again. And also it wasn't just to prove people are wrong, but it was also because I had such a passion and a love for rap music and hip hop music, which I still do to this day.

-[musical interlude here - "Hold the Faith"]-

I'm getting better at just being intentional about where I put my efforts and my energy at now. I'm not going to say I say no more than I say yes, but I'm very selective in my "yes's" now because I know when I go all in on something, I'm all in on it. And there's only so much of that that can go around. And so I think I'm getting better at kind of understanding the different places in my life that are weighted. A certain percentage is weighted in my family. So that's a non-negotiable. A certain percentage is weighted in music. A certain percentage is weighted in other aspects and ventures. And then I just get to a place where I think I intuitively realize I can't do certain things. And that's when I have to make a decision to either walk away from them or just say, is not the time. The other thing is I just practice self-care.

Being a person of faith, usually every day that I wake up, I'm praying, I'm reading my Bible, I'm meditating, I'm going to the gym, I'm working out, I'm walking, I'm putting myself in places where I can try to clear my mind so that I can operate at the most efficient level. But also, I do rest. I really do rest. I cut on the fireplace, especially on great days like this. I'll recline back on my couch and I will take a nap. I'm a firm believer in taking naps and resting.

I think it's just realizing this value lies in terms of serving other people and my purpose, reserving the majority of my energy for that. And even when I say serving other people, really a big part of that is serving my sons, making sure that their dad is there for them. I don't want to gain the world and lose them. So I have to make sure that they are my first priority and that I'm able to give them as much as I can. I don't always get it right, but it's just being mindful of who are the people that I'm really responsible for and making sure that they're getting the best version of me. And then hopefully I have an abundance where I can pour that out into others too.

Try your best to learn to love the journey as soon as possible. Love the parts of the journey that suck because the parts that suck are really the ones that give you a better story. It's one thing for me to talk about the books that I've written and the music that I've done, but I can guarantee it's more interesting if I tell you, yeah, I got to this point, but the first thing that I did, the first time I stepped on the stage, I got booed. And at that time, I didn't know I was young. I didn't know you should just laugh at it. You should learn to laugh at that. You should learn to just enjoy it. Or even if you cry or if you go through certain emotions, have a mindset of gratitude for all of that because it's really going to work together in a way that makes your story, that makes you as a person more compelling. If you have an easy path and you accomplish all these things, it's just not as interesting. People are not gonna wanna read that story as much as somebody who went through hell and back and they've accomplished something.

So I think it's just like embracing the journey and embracing the parts that are great, embracing the parts that are not so great, embrace the parts that don't feel like they're gonna work out because a lot of times it is gonna work out better than you even expect.

The other thing is just like, don't overthink it. Okay, so let's say the goal is just to cross the street, simply cross the street. And they are so stuck on just what shoes they're gonna wear to cross the street. It's like, all right, at some point, you gotta cross the street. I don't care if you're barefoot. I don't care if you got slides on. I don't care if you got on the latest pair of Jordans. You got on a pair of red bottoms. You got a pair of, I know they're not around anymore, but payless shoes. Just put some damn shoes on your feet at some point and cross to the other side of the street. And then from there, you can decide, okay, now this is a direction that I wanna head into. But a lot of people get stuck at that. I don't know what shoes to wear, you know, as an example. So just get started.

You got to put one foot in front of the other and you have to be consistent to where you build up reps because reps is where the data comes in. That's where the gold is at in terms of knowing yourself better, your purpose better, and essentially what contribution you're ultimately going to make on the folks that you're meant to help.

Follow me on social media, specifically on Instagram. My handle is @thesharpskills. And I also have a handle for Rebel Firm, which is @RebelFirm. And then there's also one for ad fades and finance. And they can go to my website www.rebelfirm.com where they can purchase my books, board game. They can listen to my music. But also I would just say like, come out to the events. I have the first hip hop residency in the city of Tacoma's history. So I think that deserves for a packed house. I think in this time now more than ever, I'm learning to lean more on community because even like the larger organizations, the funding has shifted around DEI and racial equity, but I do think that there's still a need there. But community often, when it wants to and it's galvanized in the right way, can still help people have a good quality of life.

-[musical interlude here - "Hold the Faith"]-

I'll give you an example of what I feel success looks like. And it's a microcosm of the greater macro success that I want to see. So as a hip hop artist, a lot of times when I get invited to things that have to do with music, and this is something that I've learned, is when it's not related to hip hop, if it's an event that I'm invited to, a lot of times I might be the only black person there that goes, right? Or it might just be a handful of us and there's a clear divide, even if nobody's talking about it, you can feel it. Like, okay, there's the black side or the people of color side, and then there's the white side. I tend to be able to navigate both worlds just because of my upbringing, and I've experienced a lot, and I've been around a lot.

I recently went to a show where I was the only black guy at the show. A friend of mine who was in the band, she invited me there, and I went to the show. I was by myself, and I was sitting at a table. These three women, well actually it was one woman who came up to me and she asked if she could sit at the table. I guess they had got there a little late and this was a white woman. And then she said, is it okay if my friends come too? I have two other friends. I'm like, sure. So one of them was an Indian woman. Another one was a white woman. And we sat at that table and you would have thought we've known each other all our lives. The things that we talked about, they were all mothers. And so I talked about being a father and we talked about faith. We talked about music. We talked about Tacoma, which is where we were at.

They learned about me, I learned about them. And at the end of that show, we took this picture where I'm like in the middle and then they're around me. And I was like, these are like my new homies. And it was just a beautiful moment where even though I know that I'm a black man and I wear that with a lot of pride, I didn't feel like I was "other" in that moment. I just felt like I was part of community, right? I think having more experiences like that on a macro scale where people, in general, have experiences like that where they don't feel like they're "other". They just feel like they're part of. And I think that that's what this looks like. Because I'm not going to be the guy to say, eradicate racism. I mean, of course, that is a goal, right? But what does it feel

like? What does it look like? And I think in that moment, that's what it looks and it feels like I'm just part of the fabric. I'm here, you know?

So that's what I would say, that's what I hope my board game produces. I hope that's what even my music and the experiences that I create produce, where people feel like they're just part of it. We're together. And I think now more than ever, that's really important because with the ubiquity of artificial intelligence and even a lot of the changes that this new administration in the White House is making, people need to feel a part of something positive and something that they're valued.

Sometimes you might be invited to something you still don't feel like you're part of it, right? So it's like how do we get to just where people organically can come together and be a part of something? Know that their value is seen and acknowledged and respected and that they can also convey that back to other people.

-[musical interlude here before outro - "On My Way Up"]-

Outro:

Thank you for listening to *Ripple Effect, Positive Change Around the Sound*. We hope this episode not only provides a deeper understanding of efforts in our community to make the world a better place, but also inspires and empowers you to take action. Find resources and more information in our show notes. And remember to follow, subscribe, and join us next time as we continue to amplify the voices that are too often overlooked. Create ripples in your community by advocating for change in the areas and issues you find meaningful, helping build a better, more inclusive world for us all. Mirror Stage acknowledges that we live, work, play, and learn on stolen and unceded homeland within the context of broken treaties and unresolved harms to Indigenous peoples. Here in Seattle, we are on the land of the Duwamish people and of the Coast Salish, the Stillaguamish, the Duwamish, the Muckleshoot, and the Suquamish who have made and continue to make their homes around the magnificent Salish Sea in the shadow of the great mountain Tehoma. We also recognize that we reside in a nation in a state of great wealth, a nation with wealth created by the subjugation and exploitation of African peoples brought to this land through chattel slavery, a state with wealth that stands indebted to exploited Chinese immigrants who built the railroads to Japanese Americans whose livelihoods were stolen in the internment camps of World War II and to immigrant and migrant workers who, to this day, labor in the rich fields and farms across our prosperous state. We honor and uplift the original indigenous stewards of this land, the forced contributions from generations of Africans, and the exploited labor of immigrants and migrant workers yesterday and today. In acknowledging this stolen land and stolen labor, we recognize that the impact of these wrongs reverberates and in many cases is still being perpetrated into our present day. This podcast is made possible in part by support from Four Culture, the City of Seattle Office of Arts and Culture, the EPS Fund, the

Paul J. Allen Family Foundation, and the Washington State Arts Commission. If you like what you've heard and would like to support this podcast or other Mir Stage programming, you can donate via our website at [mirstage.org slash donate](http://mirstage.org/donate). That's M-I-R-R-O-R-S-T-A-G-E.org forward slash donate.