

The Heumann Perspective Podcast
Mental Health Disabilities with Dior Vargas
Transcript

Kylie Miller:

Welcome to The Heumann Perspective, a podcast with the internationally recognized, bad-ass, disability rights activist, Judy Heumann.

This episode, Judy interviews Dior Vargas. Dior is a queer, latina, feminist mental health activist. She is a leader in intersectional mental health activism with an emphasis on queer communities and communities of color. Please be advised that this episode does discuss mental health and specifically mentions suicidal ideation, suicide attempt, and psychiatric hospitalization. Another content warning for our Ask Judy segment, there is discussion of abortion, as well as sexual assault.

The Heumann Perspective is produced by me, Kylie Miller, and Judy Heumann. So let's roll up, lay down, dance around, whatever makes you feel best. And let's meet this episode's guest.

Judy Heumann:

Hello everybody and welcome back to The Heumann Perspective. Today our guest is Dior Vargas, and I think you're going to find her compelling, very interesting and you're definitely going to learn. And she's got a lot of areas of expertise and one of the things that I thought was of interest to me is a couple of weeks ago, I got an honorary doctorate at Smith College and at NYU and lo and behold, I found out that, Dior, you also had gone to Smith and to NYU and Pace. So welcome, Dior. It's so nice to have you with us. Could you tell us a little bit more about who you are?

Dior Vargas:

Sure. So I'm Dior. I'm a mental health activist and I grew up in New York City. My family is Ecuadorian and Puerto Rican and I'm very close to my immediate family which includes my mom, my stepdad, my older sister, and my maternal grandparents. So I identify as a feminist. There are complications within feminism, but I definitely look at feminism through an intersectional lens. And so I'm not exactly sure how else to describe myself, but for some reason, people think that I'm an artist, a creative, and I'm trying to find that within myself because that's just not something that I see, but I think that'll be an interesting journey for me to take.

Judy Heumann:

So why do some people see you in that way?

Dior Vargas:

I'm not sure. I think maybe because of the photo project, maybe other reasons, but I'm not entirely sure. So we'll see what I find out in that discovery. I used to do theater of the

oppressed back in the day and did other things in theater, so maybe that's also where it comes from.

Judy Heumann:

How old were you when you first started experiencing symptoms of mental illness and how long did it take before you got a diagnosis which was helpful to you and to others?

Dior Vargas:

So I was about six years old and that's when my father left home. My parents got separated. And so from the age of six, I started feeling very depressed. And this goes beyond your question, but from the age of eight to 18, I was dealing with, trigger warning, suicidal ideation, and from the ages of 11 to 18, I very frequently attempted to end my life. And to be specific, I have PTSD, dysthymia and traits of borderline personality disorder. I didn't get my first diagnosis of depression until I was in high school.

Judy Heumann:

How was it playing out for you and your family when you were six and eight and when you went to high school?

Dior Vargas:

Right. There was a lot of turmoil in my house, a lot of domestic violence and living paycheck to paycheck, and so we were struggling. And for me, I just felt like I couldn't share what I was going through. And so I felt that what my mother and my family was going through was much more important and I didn't want to be burdensome, so that's how things went.

Judy Heumann:

How old are you now?

Dior Vargas:

So I'm turning 35 next weekend.

Judy Heumann:

Ah, great.

Dior Vargas:

Yeah, so 34 for a couple of days more.

Judy Heumann:

And the reason I'm asking the question is even today, discussions around mental health issues for adults or children, I think are not happening as they should. So at that point in

your life given everything else that was going on, did your mother have any knowledge or experience or your grandparents on mental health issues?

Dior Vargas:

So in terms of my mom, she definitely experienced depression as a young girl and I think she's still experiencing mental health issues. So I think personally she had some of that experience, but I don't think she truly realized what I was going through back then. She did notice that I was isolating myself and getting irritable and maybe she just chalked it up to growing up. And then in terms of my maternal grandparents, there were some stirrings where people did experience mental health issues, but it wasn't something that was addressed or prioritized.

Judy Heumann:

And mental health services, like today, are still not available as they need to be. So you were going to school and none of your teachers noticed anything going on until you were a teenager?

Dior Vargas:

Not at all. Until college, I was a straight A student, always got first honors, was part of National Honor Society. And so I don't like the term high functioning, but I would say that that's what I displayed and I think that's what made them not even think that I was going through mental health issues.

Judy Heumann:

You're smart. And I think frequently for girls in particular, also with learning disabilities, people don't look to girls and teenagers the same way they do to boys and boy teenagers. Yeah. It's very understandable. You are achieving more than many others. And so if people only associate mental health issues with someone who is not functioning and showing their best, I'm sure that's another part of it. Would you agree to that?

Dior Vargas:

Absolutely, yeah. I think that there are a lot of misperceptions when it comes to mental health. And the idea that if you have a mental health condition, you are going to act a certain way or even look a certain way because people think that there is a look or a specific one to mental health conditions, so I definitely agree.

Judy Heumann:

So when did you start thinking about yourself as someone who was having mental health issues?

Dior Vargas:

When I was in high school, I think that was when I started realizing that I was experiencing mental health symptoms and that's when I tried to learn as much as I

could. Because not knowing what was going on with me, being very confused, like the student, I was focused on doing whatever research I could so that I could figure out how to deal with it or if there was something that I could do to alleviate the symptoms. So it was then when I started really focusing and admitting to the fact that the way I was feeling and the way I was living wasn't sustainable, but also just, I don't want to say not normal, but I shouldn't be dealing with mental health symptoms in that way. So that's when I really started to focus on it.

Judy Heumann:

So when would you say you started doing advocacy work for yourself and for others?

Dior Vargas:

So when I think about advocacy, oftentimes I'll think about self-advocacy like you mentioned. And so I think that when I started doing that research in high school and started trying to see a therapist, that's when I really started to focus on how I could help myself and defend myself in whatever situation I was in, and that was around the age of 18.

Judy Heumann:

And so when did you experience what some might call a crisis?

Dior Vargas:

Yes. I'll speak to one major crisis because that's the thing that really prompted me or was the catalyst for me to start focusing on my mental health and eventually identifying as a mental health activist. But when I was 18, it was my first summer after my first year at Smith, and I returned home and I was just going through a lot and I felt that there was nothing for me in my life and that it was just too troublesome. I was going through too many struggles and like I had before, I had decided to end my life. And that's when I was hospitalized and then placed in a psychiatric ward. So prior to then, I didn't think that those attempts were going to have any real consequences until that time. So that's what really got me into focusing on my mental health.

Judy Heumann:

So when you were at Smith, were any people aware of the fact that you were having some problems?

Dior Vargas:

Definitely not my teachers or administration. I wasn't very close or had developed any sort of relationships with my professors. So the only person that really knew was my sister, but also one of the students at Smith, but it's not something that I particularly wanted to share.

Judy Heumann:

At that point, were there services available on campus for students who might want to speak to a counselor?

Dior Vargas:

So I didn't know about those services until after that summer after my first year, but they do have a counseling center that you can go to. So I started using those services but I wish I had known about it before, because I could have taken more preventative measures.

Judy Heumann:

Yeah. I think this is an issue in many places where there are things available, but like in your case as a freshman, there's so much going on that there's no way that you can know everything that's happening. And I think you see that a lot with disabled students offices or disability services offices, where they may even have good services, but if you don't yet identify as having a disability, whatever it may be, you don't necessarily think about going there. So I think since you were in school, and when I was in school, I think things are improving on more college campuses. Would you agree with that?

Dior Vargas:

Yes. I think that it has improved. I think that students know more about what's available to them and they're not as afraid to disclose that information. And I think that they feel probably more positive about it. So I think it definitely has improved, but that doesn't mean that every student knows about the resources that are available to them.

Judy Heumann:

Or that they feel comfortable in using them even if they know they're there. So tell us a little bit more about how are you advocating with others regarding mental health issues? How are you helping people become more educated, both people who themselves have mental health disabilities and others in the community?

Dior Vargas:

So for the past couple of years I've been working with colleges and universities, sometimes the employees, but mainly the college students. And I've also been working with employees at various companies talking about mental health and wellness. And so that's what I've been doing the past couple of years, in addition to my photo project, which I thought was a really great way to start the conversation. And so with these various talks, they are panels, keynotes, workshops, and basically I use my personal story to inform the work. I think it's an opportunity for people to feel vulnerable and open about their mental health issues. And so I give them the opportunity to really think about it. I give them ways for them to self-advocate specifically when it comes to their job if it's with a company, and then when it comes to students, that's where I make sure that they know about the resources available specifically when it comes to the Office of Disability.

Judy Heumann:

When you're doing your trainings or your discussions with people, do you talk at all about 504, ADA, other relevant protections that people may have available to them?

Dior Vargas:

Absolutely. When I was in college, I didn't know about those resources and I probably would've been a much better student. So when I do go to colleges and universities, I do make it a point to acknowledge mental health resources in general, but mainly the protections that they receive from the Americans With Disabilities Act. And so I can definitely speak to that from personal experience. When I got my second masters, I had already been doing advocacy for a while. And so through that, I got the education that I needed so that I could go to the Office of Disability and access support and receive accommodations, like getting extra time on exams, being able to take my exam in another room away from my classmates. So those are just some examples of the accommodations I received.

Dior Vargas:

And I was a much better student for my second master's. And so I don't want any other student to struggle when there are resources available to them because that's even more of a shame when there are things that can help. And so I definitely make it a point to share, and often a lot of students that will be news to them. So it makes it really worthwhile that I know they will be proactive and find ways to advocate for themselves and get the accommodations they need.

Judy Heumann:

I think this is a very important discussion, in part because frequently high school students with invisible disabilities but not exclusively, don't want to be identified as having a disability. Did you have a 504 plan when you were in high school?

Dior Vargas:

Not at all. I had no knowledge of any of that. And since I had a certain understanding of disability, it's not something that I claimed.

Judy Heumann:

Yeah. I think one issue for kids who are in high school is understanding that if you have a disability and you're getting accommodations, that it's important to let the university know so that there can be no break potentially between high school and college. And clearly as you're describing it for yourself, you didn't learn about this until you were on your way to your second masters. I have a friend who, with ADHD, didn't get identified until she was in her masters program, exactly like you, was talking about what a difference it made to be able to get accommodations. So do you talk specifically also with people to find out whether they're reluctant to discuss their disabilities and how do you encourage them to do that?

Dior Vargas:

Sometimes when I do my workshops, I try to do some sort of poll just to get a better idea of where people are when it comes to mental health. And sometimes it's overly negative, sometimes it's positive, which is a nice surprise. And so I think that gets them to start thinking about what they've experienced. But I definitely give them different ideas, tips, and tricks on how they can better advocate for themselves. And I think that that's a great opportunity for them because sometimes we don't have the time to just sit down and think about our mental health or to focus on that. So I am really proud to be able to give that opportunity to whoever I do work with.

Judy Heumann:

Now, like many of us you're a complex being and you have multiple identities, both as a Latina and queer person. How have those particular aspects of who you are influenced your work?

Dior Vargas:

Right. I definitely use my personal experience, my lived experience, for my work. I think it's a way for me to connect with others and it takes time to trust someone, but I think that really opens the floor for people to be open about that.

Judy Heumann:

I think what's important is that you're able, because you tell your story, you're quite personal and revealing and you share who you are. Does your ability to be able to be reasonably transparent help other people also be willing to discuss things that they otherwise may not have done in the past?

Dior Vargas:

I think so. I think that when they hear about the struggles that I've overcome and it gives them a representation that maybe they're less likely to have seen when it comes to mental health, I think that that gives them the opportunity to see something that they can connect with. When I did my keynote for Disability Rights Iowa, there was this young girl who came to me in tears telling me that when I was talking, she felt as if she was talking. And I also overheard that after my talk, she started sharing that she wants to be a lawyer. And now that she's heard about how I've been able to accomplish a lot of things with my mental health condition, she feels that she can apply for law school. And so that's so meaningful for me and it definitely validates the work that I do.

Judy Heumann:

And I think it really underscores one of your strengths which is being able to be honest and forthright. And my presumption is that you do this because you want other people to be able to move forward in life where their disability is one which they can identify and know about resources and things that they can do. Are there any particular resources that you direct people to?

Dior Vargas:

So it also depends on the audience. If I'm doing something, for example, for Latinx heritage month, I'll encourage them to access Latinx Therapy or Therapy for Latinx. They provide directories for Latinx mental health professionals. And so I think that's really a great resource because often it can be very hard to find someone that you can relate to or even find someone who takes your insurance if you do have insurance. And so I think that makes it a lot easier. And then when it comes to just communities of color in general, there's a National Network of Queer and Trans Mental Health Professionals of Color. If they're college students I'll refer them to The Steve Fund. So it depends on the audience, but it's definitely whatever might be helpful to them. So in general, it could be Crisis Text Line or the National Suicide Prevention Hotline, things like that.

Judy Heumann:

Thank you. Now let's move a little bit forward. You launched a project called The People of Color and Mental Illness Photo Project in 2014. So why did you do that?

Dior Vargas:

So when I decided that I wanted to become a mental health activist, again, it feels like a broken record, but I wanted to do research. I wanted to educate myself on the topic as best as I could. So I started volunteering with mental health organizations and learning about the topics that were being discussed. And so through my research, going through Google and entering terms like mental illness or depression or anxiety, you usually see the images pop up at the top of the page. And so I saw some images that were very interesting to me. And so that's when I went fully into the images section and saw that a lot of them looked extremely negative. They were in black and white. They just looked like they were suffering to no end. And while that can be valid for a lot of people, that's definitely not something that at least I can speak to experience on a daily basis or all the time.

Dior Vargas:

And what else I saw was I saw a lot of white people in that representation, specifically white women. And so it brought me back to when I was younger and how the representations that I saw, or the lack of when it came to mental health, really impacted me and contributed besides other things to my feeling like I couldn't be open about it and that it was something that only I was experiencing. So I didn't want anyone else to experience that. And also noticing my family didn't talk about mental health, so I thought if I focused on communities of color, that that would be a great way to start that conversation. And usually there isn't a focus on communities of color, specifically back then. So I thought it would be a really good way for people to see people who looked like them and be able to connect and feel like they weren't the only ones going through this.

Judy Heumann:

How is it project going?

Dior Vargas:

It's good. My online version is ongoing. There's no deadline to when you experience mental health symptoms or get diagnosed. And I definitely didn't require people to get diagnosed because often we don't know about resources or we don't see a mental health professional so often we don't get that diagnosis. And then when it comes to the book, yeah, it's doing well. I have two versions, but the last one that I published was one that was in both English and Spanish, so I wanted to also create another way to make it more accessible to people.

Judy Heumann:

So is it still called People of Color and Mental Illness Photo Project?

Dior Vargas:

So the online version is, but I decided to be a little more creative with the book. And so the name of the book is The Color of My Mind, Mental Health Narratives From People of Color.

Judy Heumann:

Beautiful. How do people get the book?

Dior Vargas:

So it's on Amazon. It's on BarnesandNoble.com. And then there's this website, I think it might be bookshop.com, but it's basically where you can decide to buy it from independent book sellers. So that's something that I wanted to make that available to them in case they didn't want to buy from Amazon or Barnes and Noble.

Judy Heumann:

And we'll put that information in so people don't have to write it down right now. You'll get it later. What are some of the responses you're getting from people?

Dior Vargas:

A lot of positive responses. A lot of people have shared that this is something that they needed to see, that they used to talking about their own mental health struggles, also a way for them to start the conversation with family, friends, and loved ones. And a lot of times people felt that they were the only one so they're very appreciative of the project and the conversations that we're starting as a result. So besides that, also just getting feedback after any of the talks that I do, that's also really rewarding. I did admittedly get some negative responses when I started because a lot of people thought that I was excluding non people of color. And really, it was just a way for me to highlight and uplift these stories that are usually not told. So there is always going to be a group of people who don't particularly like what you do, but I stayed focused on that mission and I think that's been really helpful.

Judy Heumann:

I mean, I think the point that you're raising is when you don't see yourself, that's a problem. And so you as a researcher, where many people aren't were clearly seeing, that you weren't being reflected in what was happening. So I think it's really important that you've been able to broaden people's understanding and horizons so that they understand that mental health disabilities are something that occur in all communities and there are different issues and problems that people need to face that may be more prevalent in communities that are less served and may not have health insurance, et cetera. So I appreciate what you're doing. What are some of the messages you want people to know about mental health?

Dior Vargas:

So while it can be hard to deal with mental health conditions, it's not something that will ruin your life. Your life is not over. If you start feeling mental health symptoms, or if you do get that diagnosis, that it's something that a lot of people experience that you're not alone and that it is a community issue. So just not to think so negatively about mental health struggles and knowing that there are people that are there for you that love you that want to support you. I think often we can feel so alone. So if we can really look to those who can support us, I think that that can be very helpful. And you can accomplish so much with a mental illness or a mental health condition, so it's not the end of your life or the end of the world. You definitely will be able to cope.

Judy Heumann:

Who are some of the people in your life that have been important to you around your mental health disability and understanding and supporting you?

Dior Vargas:

Yes, my maternal grandmother. I remember one point she was telling me that it was okay to cry. My general upbringing was that crying was a sign of weakness, that you need to toughen up. And so for her to have told me that it's okay to cry, I felt like I had that permission to express my emotions, which is not something that my family in particular did. Men were the ones that were able to express anger but women weren't. So I think my grandmother was definitely a support to me as well as my maternal grandfather, and also my sister. She's been by my side. She's my best friend. So she's always been a constant support to me.

Judy Heumann:

So it's great that you've had this really important family support network. I'm sure you know, as a teenager, many teenagers have difficulty relating to their family because that's part of growing up and maturing, so additional issues that go on when people are younger. How do you think we can improve the inclusion of mental health in the disability community and vice versa?

Dior Vargas:

I think it would be great for the mental health advocacy community and the disability community to connect with one another more often. I think it would be great to have some sort of conference or just ways for them to have those conversations to find common things that they can relate to or that they have between one another. And also for people to just get a better education about that their mental health condition is something that is considered a disability. And I think the disability has taken on that word and really made it a source of pride. And so I think that that's something that can really contribute to the mental health community because they will feel like they're part of a community that is working to get better access to support. And I think that that's really uplifting and encouraging and gives you that agency to get that support for yourself. So I would love for these two communities to really connect with one another and eventually just become one. I mean, you can definitely have your offshoots and focus on a specific issue, but it's definitely important to see the commonalities.

Judy Heumann:

Yeah. I very much agree with you. And I think one of the common threads across all the different disability communities is people being able to tell their stories and to be proud of who they are, which you emulate so well. And I think that's what we see in many communities, the ability to really come forth and not feel ashamed about who we are and to also be able to own disability as a part of the communities that we're part of. So what advice do you have for aspiring mental health advocates?

Dior Vargas:

So definitely learn as much as you can. Work with different mental health organizations. It's important to network and have those connections. And then also try to learn as much as you can in terms of what the discussions are when it comes to that. For me, I didn't see a lot of conversation, if at all, about communities of color and mental health and how there's a lot more nuances to that. And so I think if you look and see what's being discussed and what's not being discussed, I think that's where you can find a way to focus on a specific aspect of it. So definitely see what's lacking and how you can contribute to that. And mental health advocacy can be difficult, specifically if you are using your personal experience. That can get triggering at times. It's important to really think about why you want to be a mental health activist because when there are times that you worry you're not helping anyone, I think when you return back to your why, that's something that can help you continue fighting and moving forward.

Judy Heumann:

You know, one thing that I find unique about you is you love research. And I think it's a critical component in disability in any area that research can be so very important in really helping to more clearly identify both what the problems are, and then to be able to look at solutions that are working, not working, that we need to continue to work more on. So how would you like to see research education and resource advancement? If you could control the world in this, what would it look like for you?

Dior Vargas:

I mean, there's the [inaudible 00:27:27] community that has their ideas, but I think it would be great to really look into the DSM and see the ableism in it to really investigate and really go through what that looks like and how that impacts certain communities. I would love to see more mental health professionals of color, more of a push towards mental health professionals to get more of an education related to cultural competency or cultural compassion. And just for there to be more spaces where mental health is discussed and no longer brings any shame or stigma to it.

Judy Heumann:

What role do you think the media has to play in presenting the issue of people with mental health disabilities in a way which is informative and inclusive?

Dior Vargas:

It is such a crucial aspect of the way people think about disabilities. Whatever you see in the media, I think is really reflective of society as well. And so if you can have more positive representations, show the complexity of people's experiences, and that if you live with bipolar disorder that the symptoms or your experiences are definitely not going to look the same as someone else's. And so showing the diversity within living with a mental health condition is extremely important. And showing that people are moving forward, that with their mental illnesses, it does give them the strength to move forward and live a better life. So I think that it's so important for the media to show more positive representations because I think that leads to more discussions and more of an openness to talk about mental health.

Judy Heumann:

COVID clearly has had a very big impact on children and adults. And I'm wondering, are you noticing anything in the area of COVID and its impact on people's mental health? Are people reaching out to you more? What are some of your thoughts?

Dior Vargas:

I definitely have received a lot more requests for speaking engagements since COVID started, because I think that we had no choice but to realize how important mental health is. And a lot of people's mental health because of COVID have been deteriorating and more people are experiencing mental health symptoms. So it definitely has impacted communities. And it's unfortunate that COVID had to prompt these discussions, but I think making the best of it and finding ways to help other people through this process because we're all going through it, I think is something that I definitely want to continue doing.

Judy Heumann:

Are you doing any work in the area of peer support?

Dior Vargas:

Back in the day I did. I feel like in some way my work is sort of a peer support.

Judy Heumann:

Sure.

Dior Vargas:

But I think I would like to think about other ways that I can support people with mental health conditions, so that might be something that I return to.

Judy Heumann:

Yeah. And I think also getting other people who've been experiencing mental health issues right now who have been able to, have helped put their life in balance and maybe also can be working with other people. When I worked at the Center for Independent Living in Berkeley, we started a peer support program, and so it was made up of other disabled individuals. Most of them were not therapists, but they were people who were able to articulate their story and also to listen well, and help people move forward or get services. So I think that's very important.

Dior Vargas:

Absolutely.

Judy Heumann:

So we're coming close unfortunately to the end of the program. And I typically ask all of my guests, what is something you'd like to share about yourself that people may not know?

Dior Vargas:

I think that I do share this enough, but maybe it's something that I want to put more of a focus on because I think that there can be misconceptions that if you're a mental health activist, that your mental health is squared away, that you're completely fine, that the idea of recovery isn't really a thing. And so I want to be more open and really humanize who I am and share more of the doubts that I have, the insecurities that I have, and that it is a tough process to fight for others and feel like you can't fight for yourself or that your lack of confidence impacts how you go about it. But I think I'm always going back to my why and remembering that I want to help people. And my insecurities come, but I kind of have to put that to the side and then focus on how I can make a difference, but definitely going to therapy and working on that, too. So just trying to be more vulnerable and honest about how I don't have it all figured out and that I still do have mental health struggles.

Judy Heumann:

Yeah. And I think it's also important, too, for all of us because you and I and many others are on a regular basis talking to people who are really struggling and they'll look to us for answers. I think it's always important to allow people to know that A, we don't have all the answers, B, they're the ones who have to be looking at how to get the answer that works for them. And that's difficult because there's so many legitimate

issues that people are facing and you can see them struggling. But on a little lighter note to end this and that is, what's your favorite food?

Dior Vargas:

It's hard to pick a favorite food. I love all types of food. I don't know exactly what a foodie is, but I think that I am. And I don't know if it's just eating all types of food, but it would be hard to pick something, but I do love chocolate. That could be...

Judy Heumann:

What about dark chocolate versus milk chocolate versus white chocolate?

Dior Vargas:

Dark chocolate all the way.

Judy Heumann:

Me too.

Dior Vargas:

It's just so good.

Judy Heumann:

I will end on this funny note. I decided many years ago, I'm always a little bit obsessed about my weight because it's hard to move me if I get too heavy. So I decided I really like dark chocolate. And what I would do is whenever I would go by a store that was selling individual dark chocolate cherries or dark chocolate raspberries, I would go in and buy one. And I've lived by that. And so for me, dark chocolate cherries is amazing.

Dior Vargas:

Yeah.

Judy Heumann:

I look forward really to meeting you in person, coming up to New York and we can go to some good restaurants, and thank you for all the work that you're doing. And there's so much more that we could discuss. Anything else you want to say?

Dior Vargas:

I am so thankful to you and for everything that you've done. I do feel that this is a surreal moment for me because I've always admired you. And so I think I must be doing something good if I am able to share a space with you. So I'm quite honored.

Judy Heumann:

Well, it's very mutual.

Kylie Miller:

Now it's time for Ask Judy, a segment where Judy answers questions sent in by listeners.

That was a really great episode with Dior. We've been wanting to do an episode about mental health for a while and I think she was a really good person to talk with.

Judy Heumann:

I think she provides us with a lot of new information, but most importantly, how she herself has engaged in a way that also is allowing her to be an example for other people. And I think learning from others is a great way to help advance our movement. In this case, people who have mental health disabilities, the whole issue of pride in who we are.

Kylie Miller:

Definitely. And Dior also has some experience working in reproductive rights, which is something that obviously has been a big topic this week. So we thought it would be a great opportunity to talk in this Ask Judy segment about the overturn of Roe v. Wade. So Judy got several questions on her Facebook and Instagram posts about how this decision is going to affect disability rights and disabled people.

Judy Heumann:

I would like to answer that in two ways. One is I sincerely hope that the disabled community will get more involved in elections, local elections, state elections, national elections. And I say that because the vast majority of people in the United States, and I'm sure this includes disabled people, believe that a woman has the right to choose. We can get into discussing the adversity that this decision will have on disabled women. We know that it will have a more significant impact on disabled women because of all the barriers that we face, even when abortion is allowed. The risk of violence and rape against disabled people, pregnancy as a result of it. I'm so deeply distressed about how this decision which has been in the making for 40 years, has not resulted in those states that are looking at putting in place the most drastic provisions in law, not only prohibiting abortions after a certain number of weeks, but also prohibiting abortions based on rape and incest.

Judy Heumann:

I very much believe in a woman's right to choose. Whether I personally would choose to have an abortion is my personal opinion and something that I need to be in control with. I don't believe that we should be dictating to women, disabled and non-disabled women, how they should control their bodies. And I want to also say that I am so deeply distressed that while this opinion, and many states will be requiring people to have unwanted children, that they are not following it with money and legislation that would provide people with the opportunity to financially support the growth and development of

their children with health care, with food, with money for rent, etc. It's to me, so hypocritical.

Judy Heumann:

I'm Jewish and my religious beliefs do not coincide with what the majority are saying in the court and given the separation of church and state, I also fundamentally believe that it is wrong for the court to be putting down these blanket rules and overturning Roe, which has as we all know, been the law of the land for the last 50 years. So please take this seriously. Feel empowered, not disempowered. Make sure that you learn about the work of Rev Up. Make sure that at the local level, city council, school boards, judges, state representatives, federal representatives, all of these positions matter. We need to look at who is running. We need more disabled people who are running. And we need to make sure that we are protecting the rights of all people, including disabled people.

Kylie Miller:

Yeah. Thank you very much, Judy. And thank you to everyone who reached out asking about this. And if you want to learn any more, I will include some resources in the description of this episode relating to the overturn of Roe v. Wade and disability, as well as voting as Judy mentioned, Rev Up. Thank you.

Thanks for tuning in to The Heumann Perspective. Be sure to subscribe, rate and review our show on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. You can also follow Judy on Twitter at Judith Heumann and on Instagram and Facebook at The Heumann Perspective. If you want to find out more information about this episode's guest or resources relating to the discussion, check out the description of this episode or visit judithheumann.com. You can also find a shortened video version of this interview on Judy's YouTube channel dropping a week after this podcast is published. Otherwise, be sure to check back every other Wednesday for a new podcast episode. The intro music for The Heumann Perspective is Dragon, which is produced and performed by Lachi, Yontreo, and Jaurren. The outro music is I Wait by Galynn Lea.