

The Heumann Perspective Podcast
How Art Feeds Us with Writer Kathi Wolfe
Transcription

Kylie Miller

Welcome to the Heumann Perspective, a podcast with the internationally recognized, bad-ass, disability rights activist, Judy Heumann. In this episode, Judy is in conversation with Kathi Wolfe. Kathi is a writer who works in both journalism and poetry. She often writes about topics involving the LGBTQ+ and disability communities. In this episode with Judy, Kathi discusses her journey to poetry, the various topics she writes about, characters she's created, what inspires her, and so much more. She also reads two of her poems, which is truly a treat.

Kylie Miller

Be sure to check out the description of this episode to find links to more of Kathi's writing, including her most recently published book of poetry called "Love and Kumquats," which is available on Amazon and Barnes Noble. The Heumann Perspective is produced by me, Kylie Miller and Judy Huemann. 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, welcome back to The Heumann Perspective. Today, our guest is Kathi Wolfe, who is a journalist and a poet. And in her own right, a comedian. Although she would not describe herself that way. Her sarcasm definitely has kept me and Kylie rolling in preparation for today. So welcome to our program, Kathi.

Kathi Wolfe

Thanks. It's fun to be here.

Judy Heumann

I'd love to hear you read one of your poems. We were wondering if you had read "Tasting Braille"?

Kathi Wolfe

Ok. So I got the idea for this poem because I was listening to the radio one day and a social scientist was talking about a book called "Touch," which basically says about how babies don't do well if they're not touched and held. But in the middle of everything-- and he's talking on NPR-- in the middle of it, out of the blue, the guy says, "By the way, you can read braille with your tongue and lips." And I just thought, this is just so weird because I don't know braille, but everyone I know uses braille and I've never heard of

anybody learning or reading braille with their tongue or lips. So I kind of obsessed about this for several months. And then one day I just sat at my desk and wrote this poem. So it's called "Tasting Braille."

Kathi Wolfe

Whitman is a foot-long sub
of grass-fed beef,
Falstaff, a fat onion ring,
Ophelia, a wailing wine.
Judas Iscariot's kiss
turns my lips against themselves.
Emily D makes my tongue
want to fly a kite.
The tongues of angels,
I cannot swallow.

Judy Heumann

Has this been published?

Kathi Wolfe

Yes, it was published in Poetry Magazine about 4 years ago. I was thrilled to get into Poetry because they only accept 2 to 3% of the poems that are submitted, so I was just so excited. My brother died several years ago, but we were really close and I called my brother, who's not a poet. But I said, "I got into the top poetry magazine" because it was started in the early 1900s and it's published T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, all the poets we've heard of. And I said, "David, I got into Poetry Magazine." And he said, "Great. What's its name, Sis? I'll go and get it." And I said "Poetry." And he said, "I know your poet got in it. What's the magazine's name?" And I said, "Poetry" He said, "I've been to your poetry readings, Sis. My butt is still sore from the last one, it went on so long. What's the name of the magazine?" I said, "It really is Poetry" and he goes, "You guys are wordsmiths. Is that all you can come up to call it Poetry?"

Kathi Wolfe

But anyway, Poetry Foundation and Poetry, they've done a really good job I think in recent years, really considering the work of poets with disabilities. Every day, they have a Poem of the Day and they've run the work of some fine poets with disabilities this month. And anyway, they don't tell you that your poem is going to be the Poem of the Day. So I woke up and I got all these emails saying, "Your poem is the Poem of the Day." So it was just one of the biggest thrills of my life, just to be the Poetry Foundation's Poem of the Day. It was just really exciting.

Judy Heumann

When did you first have an interest in writing and what type of writing did you start out with?

Kathi Wolfe

I think like a lot of writers, from the time I can remember. I mean, I've been legally blind since I was born and I didn't talk to I was 3, so my parents were a little worried. But then when I was 3, I started talking in paragraphs. And ever since then they said I've never shut up. I was like, I think 6 and my brother was 3 and I just started sleeping in the attic. We'd been sharing a bedroom and my mom and dad were like, "Why are you sleeping in the attic?" And I was like, "I just need my own room because I need peace. I have to think about and write down my stories." So I think I just wanted to write since I've been a kid. I'm not sure why. It's just always been there.

Kathi Wolfe

And you know, I wrote poetry when I was young and in college and grad school, but it wasn't very good and I stopped. I finally realized that it wasn't good at that point and I went into journalism. And then after my partner Anne died, we had been together for 12 years and grieving was as you can imagine. It's always difficult. And for me, I just started writing poetry again and my bereavement counselor kind of took off her counseling hat and said, "I think you have some talent with poetry. Why don't you take a poetry class?" And I did, and that was about in 2002, and then I just started writing poetry and reading in some small venues here.

Kathi Wolfe

And then I got a grant to do what they call a poetry residency. I don't know why they say residency. In a way it's kind of funny because you're thinking of your doc with a stethoscope around your neck. But it's because you go somewhere to an artist community and you live for a month. I went to Vermont Studio Center, which is in Johnson, Vermont. It's a beautiful place and there's nothing much to do. And so I went in February and just started writing. And I think for the first time, I really started to think of myself as a poet and gave myself permission to think I was poet.

Judy Heumann

So how would you say you divide your writing between poetry and journalism?

Kathi Wolfe

Well, a lot of the time I'm doing journalism because it's deadlines, you know, trying to earn money I can. Sometimes I write poems in spurts. I'll have periods where I'll write a

poem a day for maybe a month or two and then I'll go back and maybe do more journalism. I think the journalism and the poetry feed each other in a way. Although they're very different because when I'm writing a news story, or an interview, or if I'm doing a commentary, an editorial, even if I'm writing something that's my opinion, I'm sticking to the facts to what really happened. Whereas in poetry, even if it's something that happens out of my own life, I'm imagining things and making up stories.

Kathi Wolfe

But they're somewhat similar in that you're using words concisely and precisely. And I like doing both. I think that they feed into each other. I think journalism keeps me grounded because poets, we don't live on Mount Olympus or up in the clouds. We're very much here in the Earth, in our bodies dealing with everything from the personal to the political. But being a journalist keeps me very much grounded in things that are outside of myself, which is good. Poetry gives me a chance to be imaginative and connect the personal with the political.

Judy Heumann

You've mentioned Anne and I'm wondering if we could speak a little bit more about her. You were together for 12 years. And was she a writer also?

Kathi Wolfe

Anne studied cultural anthropology and she also really cared about social justice. She was a really fabulous cook. She loved food. She loved dogs. She worked for the Humane Society. And she was very kind. She was not disabled. She was the office manager of the American Council of the Blind in D.C. She was very interested and supportive of civil rights movements. I think she viewed everything from the eyes of a cultural anthropologist, which sometimes was helpful.

Kathi Wolfe

We were opposites. Anne love gardening. I'm like unintentionally the Darth Vader of the plant world. Anne loved the country. I love the city. I'm in Northern Virginia, and it was a good compromise for us. Anne had a garden and a nice yard, and I could get to D.C. to hang around museums and cafes. One day we went to an exhibit. It was a French impressionist exhibit. And Anne gravitated to all the pictures of the country, and I really loved the paintings that were people in cafes and smoking cigarettes.

Judy Heumann

That's a great explanation. How did Anne's presence inspire your poetry?

Kathi Wolfe

I think I really began writing poetry really seriously after Anne died because we met when we were in our 30s ,and we were together for 12 years, and we felt that we had found our person. And then she got suddenly sick with cancer. And so her death at 46 was not expected. And so I can't tell you precisely how, but I think I began writing poetry out of my grief from her death. And I'm not grieving like I was then. But I mean, Anne is always there in a sense. Both in my life and my poetry. The same way it's like on your computer or iPad. There's always the operating system and it's always there. Even if you're not thinking every moment, "Oh, there's windows" or "there's IOS," she's always there.

Judy Heumann

So who is the Uppity Blind Girl?

Kathi Wolfe

Well, she came to me one day. Sometimes characters just come to you. So I was at a poetry reading. They have an open mic where anyone can go and say a poem after the feature reader. So I did that. And a poet got up and read a really overly long poem about his penis. And then Penis Man, as I named him, came up to me and started asking me the kinds of questions that non-disabled people ask you which are inappropriate. So they went from the normal kind of "How do you get around?" to "Do you sleep with your eyes closed?" to things about one's intimate life. And I didn't know what to say to the guy, except that I just kind of was really glad that they had restrooms at which point I went to it. But then when I came home, it was suddenly this Uppity Blind Girl came to my head and Uppity just had all these great comebacks to this guy and she just started asserting herself.

Kathi Wolfe

I mean, sometimes these characters come and you don't even want them to come. It would be like this great dog came to your house. Maybe you didn't have room for a dog or didn't want a dog. The dog just really liked you. And it came into your house, and it just made itself at home, and it took a drink from your toilet. And then it decided it was a caffeine addict, so it took a sip from your coffee. And then when you were at your desk, it just decided to type on your computer. And you just couldn't get it to go away, and it was smelly, and it drove you nuts, but you liked the dog at the same time so you kept it. Sometimes these characters are like that. So I guess I kind of grew to love Uppity.

Kathi Wolfe

I mean Uppity, in a way she's an alter ego for me. Uppity is ADA generation. She was born in 1988. I mean, she's blind, I guess, from birth defects. But when her mother, even though it's 1988, doesn't know what to do with having a disabled baby or blind baby. The mother is wondering, "Is my kid going to have any future or is she going to be like the girl in the movie A Patch of Blue?" And then Uppity-- her real name is Elizabeth, but she just names herself Uppity because she gets so tired of being boxed in as a quote, blind girl. And I mean, I think fictional characters, they're not like us. They can stay their age so Uppity is still 25. But her expectations? She's in New York City, for one thing, and so she can get around. I don't know if she went to camp, but she grew up playing baseball, and she just assumes that she can do everything.

Judy Heumann

Is she a New York Mets or a Yankees fan?

Kathi Wolfe

Probably the Mets, if they're the underdog. She calls herself a "Blind-ista" because, unlike me, she loves fashion. And she was a fan of Sex and the City, which I am, but she sees herself as the braille Carrie Bradshaw. And she is a writer, she has a blog. And I guess by now it would be an Instagram or something. . But she writes about perfumes and wine tasting and beer tasting. And her editor, at first she says, "I want to write about fashion," and he says, "How can you do that? Because you're blind." She says, "You idiot, I'm going to write about wine tasting where everybody's blindfolded anyway." And her girlfriend is named Sabrina. And I mean, she does have her serious moments. I think she went through a lot during Hurricane Sandy because she was dealing with all the devastation of that and helping people get through that. Anyway, it's interesting to have a younger alter ego.

Judy Heumann

How has she been dealing with COVID?

Kathi Wolfe

Well, I think she and Sabrina have been hunkering down. You know, glad to be together, but sometimes getting on each other's nerves. I think it's a little hard for her to get around because I think some of us who are blind or low vision, we have a problem with the social distancing stuff. I haven't spoken to her recently about and I guess I should. Or sometimes she just speaks to me.

Judy Heumann

Do you include her in your poetry a lot?

Kathi Wolfe

I haven't for a while. It's kind of like when she sort of comes by. It'll be like having a friend from college or, you know, someplace where you worked and you were close friends with them and you didn't see them for a while. But then when they stopped by, you picked up where you left off.

Judy Heumann

Do you have a mentor for your writing?

Kathi Wolfe

Oh, I've been very, very lucky. Washington, D.C. area is a really good area for poetry. So, I mean, I couldn't name everybody. I took a lot of classes at the Bethesda Writer's Center, so I had some very good teachers there. Grace Cavaleri is now the poet laureate of Maryland, and she hosts the public radio show The Poet and The Poem. And Grace has been a good friend and a mentor to me, as she has been to zillions of poets. Yeah, I've had many mentors and that's really helped. As well as having other poets who have been able to both be friends, but you really need feedback for poetry because, inspiration is part of it, but a lot of it is hard work and discipline. So it's very critical to have a community, whether virtual or personal, it doesn't have to be tons of people. But you need some people for support, but also not to give you mean feedback, but to give you critical feedback so that you can work on your work.

Kathi Wolfe

It's sometimes like I get an idea for a poetry project. Like I did a book of poems in the voice of Helen Keller. And it was a great idea, but it took years of work and research and refining things. But it's kind of like if you get an idea for a poem or a book of poems, like if you had an idea like, "Ok, this piece of legislation is needed, so we really should be passed" and having the idea is great, but of course, as you know more than anybody, you have to lobby for it, and organize, and it takes years of work. There's all that element into poetry as well.

Judy Heumann

What are some of the reactions that you've gotten from people about your poetry and your journalism?

Kathi Wolfe

Well, first of all, I mean, I think it's true for a lot of writers. I mean, if people like what you write, you often don't hear from them. Usually people write when they're ticked off. So

I'm a contributor to the Washington Blade, which is, I think, the oldest LGBTQ paper in the country. I sometimes get, you know, letters that are positive, but I've gotten a few death threats. Hate mail. I've written op-eds on disability stuff and occasionally I get some, you know, very interesting negative mail about that.

Judy Heumann

What types of things do people say from a negative perspective? For me, it's positive what you're doing.

Kathi Wolfe

Well, I did a lot of writing for the Progressive Media Project for a while. And I remember I did something years and years ago, it had something to do with the Boy Scouts, and I think I said that it was good that the Boy Scouts at the time were trying to be more inclusive of gay people. Something like that. I'm going back to the 1990s. And I remember the editors forwarded to me a piece of hate mail. And it was somebody had written with a red crayon on black paper and it said, "Dear Kathy Wolfe, you are the cause of the decline of Western civilization." Ever since, I've been really impressed with myself for having that kind of power.

Judy Heumann

It did bring a smile to my face, too. I didn't realize you had this much power.

Kathi Wolfe

Any time you want a civilization destroyed, just come to me.

Judy Heumann

All right, Kathi Wolfe. Thank you.

Judy Heumann

Can we talk a little bit about Helen Keller? I know that you recently have been on a panel that came after the showing of the Helen Keller documentary on PBS. But if you could also talk with us about when Helen Keller came into your life and how she has influenced you over the last number of decades.

Kathi Wolfe

Well, the American Masters people that made the documentary, then they convened a panel to discuss the documentary, Becoming Helen Keller, as part of the package connected with it. So I was thrilled to be on the panel. As a child, like many kids with disabilities, I didn't really want much to do with her because, I mean it's not Helen Keller's fault, but I think particularly because of the Miracle Worker and the scene at the

pump, a lot of us who are blind or deaf-blind or disabled, just we got tired of that. I think partly because of the Miracle Worker and partly because Helen Keller was such a celebrity. And Helen did a lot of good things, but Helen had this saintly quote, inspirational image. And so people would expect me to be quote, inspirational. My 4th grade math teacher-- I've always been horrible math. I can destroy civilizations, but I can't add worth anything. So my 4th grade teacher said one day, "You would get a gold star in arithmetic if you were Helen Keller." So I was like, you know, forget this.

Kathi Wolfe

But then one day in my 20s someone said, "Here's an interesting book" and they started reading to me from this book that was a collection of Helen Keller's essays about socialism. And then my ears were really perked up because I learned that Helen was a co-founder of the ACLU, the American Civil Liberties Union, and she was a socialist. She was an early supporter of the NAACP. She was an early feminist. She did lots of really cool stuff. And then I got really fascinated by her, and so it stuck in my head and I wrote a couple of articles about her.

Kathi Wolfe

And then when I started doing poetry, sometimes poetry teachers will give you a prompt to try to get you to write something. And the poetry teacher mentioned Helen Keller, and all the stuff came back, and then I just started thinking a lot about Helen Keller. So I wrote a book of poems about Helen Keller called *Helen Takes the Stage: The Helen Keller Poems*, and the book is out in print. But in my most recent collection, *Love and Kumquats*, a lot of those poems are included. So I wrote a series of poems about Helen Keller out of her life and her voice, and they come out of the research that I did about Helen. Although when you're doing poetry, you take some liberties. And I mean, Helen Keller, she's kind of almost like your parents. I mean, sometimes she does some things that I don't agree with, but she's kind of my part of my DNA.

Judy Heumann

What are some of the things you didn't agree with?

Kathi Wolfe

I'm very far left politically, but Helen Keller, I don't think that she ever quite understood the harm that Stalin did. For a period in her life, she supported eugenics. Not racial eugenics. The later there was some thought that she recanted that. And that was in part because she was friends with Alexander Graham Bell and Alexander Graham Bell had a deaf wife and, I think, a deaf daughter. But Alexander Graham Bell believed in eugenics. And he was very bad for deaf people because he got sign language banned at deaf schools. And Helen became friends with him. I mean, he helped her because

when she was a child, he helped her mother enable Anne Sullivan to come and to teach Helen. And for Helen then to go to Perkins School for the Blind, which at that time was helpful.

Kathi Wolfe

And then that, of course, led directly to Helen Keller went to Radcliffe College, which graduated in 1904. So like any historical figure, you have to look at them within the context of her time because a lot of really progressive people supported eugenics. And I really do respect and admire Helen. She also had a really funny sense of humor. She was friends with Mark Twain. One of the first things he did when he met her was he taught her how to play pool. Which I think is a riot because, you know, somebody comes to my house, I'm going to make sure they know where the towels are and offer them a drink. But I wouldn't think to say, "Hey, here's how you spit tobacco, and here's how to play pool." Helen Keller had a wicked sense of humor. She performed a Vaudeville act, kind of like Will Rogers. Partly to make money, but she also really loved hanging around with all the other theater acts. Annie Sullivan hated it, but I mean, Helen just loved being around people.

Judy Heumann

Why do you think poetry is so important?

Kathi Wolfe

It's hard to put into words. I used to think that it was a good thing, but kind of a luxury. Until one day, when I was up in Vermont on this poetry retreat, there were all types of artists. There are filmmakers and visual artists. And a documentary filmmaker who was from Haiti came up to me. We had just done a poetry reading, and he was crying, and he said, "Your poetry just means so much to me. It's just like food. We need it just as much." And he wasn't being melodramatic. He was being serious. And I think that poetry and art, I don't know how to say it that isn't a cliché, but it really does, I think, nurture us or feed us. Whether it's poetry, or music, or dance, or whatever the art form is.

Judy Heumann

What advice would you give to aspiring writers?

Kathi Wolfe

Well, you need to have a mixture of chutzpah and humility. And you need to have kind of a thick skin because it's a lot of hard work and you'll get a lot of rejection. I would say to read. Whether it's graphic novels, or poetry, or the newspaper, fiction, but I would say to read. You know, if you're a poet, go to poetry readings. If you can go to any kind of

workshop, whether it's poetry, or fiction, or creative nonfiction, personal essays, if you can go to an in person or or take an online workshop or class. And a lot of communities might have them for free or on a reduced cost for people, that would be worthwhile.

Judy Heumann

So have you been a mentor to any other people interested in writing either journalism or poetry?

Kathi Wolfe

Yeah, I think so. One of the things I did, which I really enjoyed, was for a year I worked with a social worker who was very cool and I taught blind teenagers from, I think 13 to maybe 18 or 19, poetry. And they were blind and basically inner city kids who probably had never seen a poem in their lives. And it took a while for them to trust me. But they did because one night we went out to play bowling and they taught me the "granny shot" and I made a strike. So after that, they liked me. But by the end of the year, they had done a little booklet of their poetry. And I'm proud of that.

Kathi Wolfe

And I mean, I don't do the main work of it but I was one of the people who had the idea for it, of a group that works with disability poetry to find space for people in the poetry world, and to get the poetry world accessible, and so that disabled people have a place at the poetry table. And the people who founded the group called Zoeglassia. I mean, I haven't done the work, but I had some of the ideas and I'm happy and proud of that. I was first keynote speaker at their first retreat. I've lectured a couple times, guest lectured, at CUNY and a couple of other universities. My hat goes off to people who teach writing regularly because it's a hard job to do. I have done manuscript consultation some times and that's rewarding to do.

Judy Heumann

Kathi, are there any other poets that you particularly get inspiration from?

Kathi Wolfe

Well, Emily Dickinson. Adrienne Rich. Rita Dove. There are a couple of anthologies of poets with disabilities. One is Beauty is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability. Another is QDA: A Queer Disability Anthology. And I know I'm leaving some things out, but those are just a couple that I can think of. There are just so many amazing poets with or without disabilities. It's just fabulous.

Judy Heumann

Well, I wanted people to really get a broader understanding of what you listen to, what you read, what you like. Where is the best way for people to find your poetry and other writings?

Kathi Wolfe

Well, if you Google "Kathi Wolfe poet" you'll find some of my poems. My book Love and Kumquats is available from Barnes and Noble and Amazon. And I mean, I love reading my poems. I think I'm an uncured ham or something.

Judy Heumann

Kathi, we're coming to the end of our program I'm sorry to say. Would you be willing to read us another poem? And if you could briefly explain the origins of this poem?

Kathi Wolfe

Ok, so Helen Keller met all sorts of people. But one of the people that she met was the choreographer, Martha Graham. And Martha Graham designed a dance and Helen danced in it. So this poem, this is Helen thinking and speaking in the poem, and it's imagining how Helen might have felt when she was dancing. It's called Dancing with Martha Graham.

Kathi Wolfe

Flying is only for the gods, I think, until
you hold me so close your sweat becomes mine,
my sandals barely touch the ground,
my silk dress melts into your organza gown,
you twirl me like a pixelated top, and I fly
quick as Teletype, smooth as a martini
on a summer night, beyond sound,
beyond sight.

Judy Heumann

Beautiful. I really love that poem.

Kathi Wolfe

Thank you.

Judy Heumann

I really hope, for our listeners and our viewers, that you look up Kathi's poetry. And I really want to thank you for joining us today and opening up a new world for many of us. And most importantly, I look forward to seeing you get recognition from the great work that you're doing. So thank you so much for being with us.

Kathi Wolfe

Thank you. It was great.

Kylie Miller

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