Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 35: Mentoring

Guest: Yolanda Vargas and Judy Heumann

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

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Introduction

[radio static and hip-hop]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Greetings, people of Earth! Welcome to the Disability Visibility Podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host Alice Wong.

Did you know the third Wednesday of every October is Disability Mentoring Day? This day is connected to month-long activities for the National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Today's episode is about mentoring, featuring two dynamic disabled mentors: Yolanda Vargas and Judy Heumann. Both Yolanda and Judy share what mentoring means to them, their experiences mentoring others, and the mentors they had throughout their lives. Intergenerational conversations are so important, and I am thankful for this opportunity to learn from both Judy and Yolanda. Are you ready? Away we go!

[electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: Yolanda, thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

YOLANDA VARGAS: Thank you for having me, Alice.

Introduction to Yolanda Vargas

ALICE: So, Yolanda, why don't you just, I guess, introduce yourself and share anything you'd like to share about your life.

YOLANDA: Oh, my life is pretty interesting. I am, you know, a 20-something here in Sacramento, originally from Northeast L.A., Highland Park. Shout out to the 323. Before it was a hipster paradise, it was where working-class Latinx families kind of raised a whole generation of leaders. I'm the 8th child of nine, many of whom also have disabilities. I have cerebral palsy. I have a sister who has ADHD and dyslexia. I have a younger brother who has Down Syndrome. I have another brother who has another intellectual/developmental disability. So, we were just like this big disabled family. My dad has had strokes in the past. So, he's a stroke survivor. So, it's all real fun stuff.

But for most of my life, I'd been very like, "Oh, I don't wanna be pigeonholed into disability." But then I moved up to Sacramento and ended up in this really amazing program called Youth

Organizing Disabled and Proud, and that's really when my journey into disability rights and disability advocacy kind of took off!

What does mentoring mean to you?

ALICE: So, because this episode's on mentoring, I was wondering, what does mentoring mean to you?

YOLANDA: Mentoring to me means having somebody that's in your corner. It means being able to go to somebody not only for advice but to be heard. It means having somebody that will be honest with you when you mess up but won't judge you or think less of you when you do. And I think that's really, to me, what I wanna be in a mentor and what I want from a mentor.

Yolanda's mentor growing up

ALICE: And I guess, as a kid growing up, I'm curious about who your mentors were growing up in Southern California. I mean you'd mentioned you have CP, so, you know, both you and I were always disabled as children. So, I am kinda curious about who supported you?

YOLANDA: You know, it's weird because I've always been disabled. Like, I love my dad, and he's great. But I think one of his main goals for my life was kind of overcoming my disability. And so, even though in a lot of ways, he's my mentor, [laughing] for disability he is definitely not! Even though he lives with his own disabilities, he doesn't recognize them as such.

Mentors as far as like disabilities growing up would have to be my best friend, Tanya. She had also been disabled since birth, and she was like me: she was kind of nihilistic, she was a bit of a pessimist, she was definitely a smart ass, but she got things done. And I think the thing that I loved about her is you couldn't really get her mad, but when you did, she wouldn't let things go. And I mean this in the best way possible. And it sucked for her because she didn't get mad so often, so when she did, she would kind of tear up, and people would mistake that for weakness! And she would get so frustrated with them because, you know, she could tell that they thought oh, they kinda won, or they got a hit in. But in actuality, she was plotting their destruction and how she would bring them down!

And I've known her since I was six, and she was about seven or eight. We met in elementary school, and she was like my true, truest, bestest friend that I could literally say anything to, and she would just be like, "Yeah, no. People are ableist, and they can pretty awful sometimes. But you're awesome." And so [sighs], she passed away pretty recently, unfortunately, after I got my job. But she is still my mentor because it's kind of like, what would Tanya do? And I know the answer is "fight." So then, I just keep going.

ALICE: That is such a beautiful and wonderful way to remember her and pay tribute to her because, you know, the spirits are, that our ancestors, our friends, our mentors, they are always around us, whether they're with us or not. And that's such a really wonderful gift to have had that friendship and mentorship as a kid. I mean 'cause you know, I didn't really grow up with anybody really like myself.

I mean, I think like you, there's a lot of internalized ableism that we grow up with in terms of not wanting to be part of the disability community or you know, just feeling kinda uncomfortable about our identity and all that stuff. And what do you think your life would've been like if you didn't meet Tanya?

YOLANDA: I think I would be sadder. I don't think I would have as many of the great happy moments that I've had that make it possible for me to go up to a person that's struggling and really, truly be able to believe when I say, "Things will get better," that they can, you know? Because I think there are a lot of people that have never known unconditional love, unfortunately, you know. It's never promised to anyone. But the fact that I've had that and I've experienced that in somebody that has followed me throughout my life, that has taught me things to help me survive life, is something that not everybody gets. And you know, I definitely don't think that people should just be like, "Oh! Hey, things get better," if somebody's actively struggling. Like, I'm not saying do that. Because you know, don't minimize people's pain or suffering. But I can go to them, and I can be like, "There are good people and good things in this world," and truly mean it because I've experienced it. And I think without Tanya, I don't know if I would've had that.

[mellow music break]

What makes a good mentoring relationship

ALICE: So, what do you think makes a good mentoring relationship? Like because clearly, you know, it's a two-way, it's a relationship. It's made up of, you know, two people. So, what do you think are some of the elements of a good relationship?

YOLANDA: I think having a good relationship with your mentor and even with your mentee is one where you are honest and human with them, you know? Because I think oftentimes, especially when you're the mentee, the idea of letting your mentor down can kind of create a divide and can kind of create animosity. And I think something where you can kind of go back and forth as, you know, switching roles where even though you're a mentee, you're still teaching your mentor, and that a mentor's open to learning from their mentee. Like, on a more professional level, I think Christina Mills is definitely one of my mentors. But she's always open and able to tell me like, "Oh, I didn't know that terminology about the LGBTQ community. That's never something I ever thought of." Or, "I've never considered that when planning an event for youth," or something. So, just hearing that from somebody who, in the back of my mind, I'm just kinda like, she's got it all figured out! She's who I wanna be when I grow up. Like, the fact that she can still tell me like, "You have taught me this thing," just shows that she's open to learning, and that just makes me respect her more as a human being.

Yolanda as mentor

ALICE: That's awesome. Is there anybody that you are mentoring right now in terms of whether it's like formally or informally? But you know, are there any kind of things you talk about in terms of your experiences kinda paying it forward?

YOLANDA: A big shout out to Bryan who I met at YLF, the Youth Leadership Forum. We sparked up a really great connection because he was this passionate youth who had all of this energy. He just needed to learn how to focus it into things. And we still stay in touch, and part of that is because he is so persistent and so understanding with my schedule. And he's just the absolute best, and I want him to know that.

And I think one of the things that I do as a mentor is just letting him know that when he needs me, I'll be there, no questions asked. You know, if he's going through something, he can talk to me about it. I won't judge him. You know, there's nothing he can say that would push me away or make me regret being in his life. So, he can be open and honest with me in a lot of ways that he might not be able to do with other people in his life. And I'm honored to be that person for him.

For a really long time, Bryan's parents wouldn't let him express the gender that he actually identifies with, including not letting him cut his hair. And so, if you're a queer youth, a lot of your identity and your expression and self-exploration is kind of through your hair. So, I'm a little bit of a bad influence 'cause, I was talking to Bryan, and he was like, "I wanna do colors in my hair. I wanna be radical. I really wanna like, I want everything to pop. I wanna walk into a room, and people see the real me."

And so, he told me that, and he had said which his favorite colors were. So, then I send him like three screenshots of hair dyes. And I was like, "Oh! Which of these do you think looks the coolest?" And he was like, "I can't really decide." So, then I bought all three and sent them to him for his birthday. [laughs] And so, the cool thing about that was it was, because he was super nervous about bleaching his hair, but this was a type of hair dye that even if you had really dark hair, you can just kind of put in, and it would have tints to it. So, that way he'd know that his hair would be colored, and people could see it, but maybe his parents wouldn't pick up on it. So, that's just a gift that I was able to like give to him. Because I remember the first time I dyed my hair, and I had to wait until I was 20-something because my parents would not allow it. And I was like, no! That's not fun. I just, I wanna be a mentor that gives joy as well as knowledge.

ALICE: This is the spirit of Tanya.

YOLANDA: Oh, definitely! [chuckles] Definitely. I definitely think Tanya was like, "No, you can go to the movies, Yolanda. You need to sign up for paratransit, and you can go on your own. You don't have to rely on your parents. And you can be in a place on your own. I don't have to wait with you." 'Cause prior to that point, I had never traveled on my own, even if it was something like going to the mall. So, it's just like, oh! Wait. OK.

And so, Tanya did push me to be braver because so many people had been like, "It's better and safer if you stay in this box, you know. There's so many horrible things that can happen to you." And it was like a self-fulfilling prophecy with those people where they don't teach you real-world skills. And then when you fail because you don't have those skills, they're like, "See? I told you." And it's like, "No! What? [laughing] That's not how that works. You set me up to fail." But Tanya was like, you know, "You gotta, you gotta push the envelope. You gotta do what you wanna do. Because at the end of the day, it's your life."

Final thoughts on mentoring

ALICE: Do you have any final thoughts on mentoring?

YOLANDA: I think if you're open and honest with people about what you like about them and what you're needing, especially in the disability community. Because I think we have so many more shared experiences than we even know. Because sometimes we don't like talking about the painful, lonely moments or you know, little things like, oh, I couldn't just hold somebody's hand and walk with them. Or you know, I was afraid to ask people out on dates, you know, beyond even being queer, just because I thought they would reject me regardless of the gender or orientation that I was approaching. Like, moments like that are shared across disability, and it's just kind of like, if we were more open about those moments that make us awkward and the needs that we have in our life about learning how to navigate whether it's interpersonal relationships or professional relationships, things like that, I think more people would be like, "Oh, yeah. No, I felt the exact same way! I actually don't really know how I do what I do, but you know, let me give you whatever pointers I might have."

Anybody can be a mentor. You don't have to have your life together. You don't have to be perfect. You don't have to be the most successful person in the world just to mentor somebody. And if they come to you with a problem that maybe you can't relate to or you can't help them with, then direct them to somebody who can. You don't have to have all the answers.

Wrap-up to Yolanda's interview

ALICE: Well, Yolanda, thank you so much.

YOLANDA: Thank you so much! I'm so glad we finally got to do this.

[upbeat music]

Introduction to Judy Heumann interview

ALICE WONG: Judy, I just wanna thank you so much for sharing your story with us. I guess, do you wanna just kind of introduce yourself and just say a little bit about yourself?

JUDY HEUMANN: Sure. Thank you, Alice, really very much for doing this. I really admire the work that you're doing. And I love the—kind of strange to think as I just turned 70—but the intergenerational aspect of this. Because I think we're all learning from each other, and for me, that's very important.

So, who am I? I'm a girl from Brooklyn, and I always speak about that because Brooklyn, I think, very much in my family made me who I am because in New York, you really grow up to just expect that you have to be a demanding person. And so, I had polio in 1949. I'm a post-polio quadriplegic. I use a motorized wheelchair. I walked until—I mean I never walked but—I walked till I was 18 months old before I had polio and then never walked independently again. I used braces until I had my spinal surgery—I had a curvature of the spine—and then went from a world where I was wearing braces every day, all day to not wearing braces ever again when I was about 20, 21. And that's a whole other conversation.

But my experience growing up as a younger person and the discrimination that I experienced, 'cause of course many, many, many other disabled people really helped to formulate and frame my life over the last number of decades. And I think it's been very important for me to really work in a collaborative way with very diverse groups of people, not just disabled individuals, but others. And working collaboratively with people, I think I've been able to be a reasonably meaningful part of legislative changes that have gone on in the U.S., work that I did with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, colleagues and friends that I've made around the world, and my ability to meet with other disabled people around the world and to learn from them and speak at their meetings. So, who am I? I guess I'm a change agent, I'm a fighter, I'm a believer in civil rights and human rights.

Judy's role models growing up

ALICE: Well, I was born in the 70s. And when I grew up disabled in Indiana, I did not have any disabled women as role models. And I was wondering if you don't mind sharing, when you grew up in New York as a young girl and a young woman, who were your role models?

JUDY: [chuckles] That's a perfect question because I didn't have disabled role models. I mean my mother was a role model. There were other strong women that I was learning from. But I didn't really know other disabled kids, for example, when I was growing up. And I didn't go to school until I was nine. And so, people like Eleanor Roosevelt, my mother loved Eleanor Roosevelt. And so, in some very real way, she was a partial role model for me. When I learned

of women like Rosa Parks and other people who were strong women who were speaking up on an issue, Gloria Steinem, many, many people, I looked to them to learn from them. But of course, they didn't identify as having a disability. And so as I was, like millions of other disabled women, it wasn't until we, as disabled women, started to have opportunities to come together. So, for me, summer camp was very important.

Camp Jened and mentoring experiences

ALICE: Yes, I know that you're involved in the documentary *Crip Camp* about Camp Jened. And I was wondering, is that when you started kind of mentoring others or having other people mentor you? Or can you speak to that in terms of how that was a real formative experience for you and other people who attended that camp?

JUDY: So, I would say that we mentored each other. And there was a woman there, Carol Camarata, she is a friend. She was a little older than I was, and she was a little more street savvy than I was. I really looked up to her. But I think when I was working with people in this organization we set up called Disabled In Action, and then when I went to California and was working at CIL, there I think people like Kitty Cone and Mary Lou Breslin and others, they were my mentors. They were peers and equals.

And I think for myself, it's very important to me that I take the time to talk with other people who wanna talk about disability-related issues. Because whether they're actively involved or not, I find that people need to be listened to. They have questions. You know, my answers aren't necessarily the right answers, and you try to help people think through a process to become more empowered.

I think today, there are definitely mentors out there for disabled individuals because the movement has really grown. And I think honestly, media has played a very important role: television, as it evolved over the last number of decades, newspapers, magazines, radio. But the ability to get information that you would otherwise not know about. And as someone like yourself and myself who are wheelchair riders, getting and learning, for me, learning about demonstrations, what they were and how they were organized and what they could do really was very important as Disabled In Action in New York City was beginning to do protests in the 1970s, which really hadn't been done very frequently.

There was work done in the 30s by disabled individuals during the Depression, Paul Longmore's research showed, but it wasn't something that was typical. So, veterans might've been involved in demonstrations around veterans' issues, but disabled individuals involved protesting, demanding, stopping traffic, taking over buildings, things of that nature, that was very unique. And when you look at Cece Weeks' comments in the 504 DREDF film, it was such an empowering experience for her and others that—

Yeah, I think I'm going on too long about this, but I just think we energize each other. Which is why I think it's really important that we have time together. Segregated schools are not a good place because the learning is bad and etc., but we need times when we can get together to really talk to each other. Younger people, I think, very much need time to be able to talk about what's going on in their lives, what's happening with their non-disabled peers, how they're feeling, what they wanna do, whether they're getting the right messages to do what they wanna do, whether they're getting the right opportunities to be able to do what they wanna do.

And as I said earlier, people who are acquiring disabilities over the course of their lifespan, they need to be able to talk and learn and express and be supported. Because typically, there are

not many people with a disability in one family, and so that, again I think, puts us in a different situation. The family members are not— If you're the only disabled person in a family, my experience was, although my parents are very loving and supportive and became strong advocates and had experienced discrimination themselves as Jews growing up in Germany, it's still different. My experiences were different. I could learn from them, but when they began to be supportive of my learning from other disabled individuals and helped with getting people to demonstrations and helping support our disability rights group in New York, that was all very important.

[pensive music]

What makes a good mentor?

ALICE: What do you think makes a good mentor?

JUDY: What makes a good mentor? Well, I think what makes a good mentor depends on the person who's wanting to be mentored and the person who's being a mentor. And I mean that sincerely because, you know, not everybody's gonna click. So, I think it's for me, a good mentor is someone who wants to listen and wants to help people work through something. And a mentor, I think, will also for me, needs to be somebody who recognizes that it's not just a giving, but it's a sharing experience. So, I learn as much as the other person learns.

And I think mentoring also is something where somebody needs to be reasonably available to help people at different points in time and also can help people link up to other people and learn about different things that are impacting them, you know, that are causing them to wanna come and talk with somebody and learn more about something, share their personal experiences, talk about things that are difficult, talk about things that they've done which they're feeling proud about. So, I think you have to be a relatively patient person. I mean patient as an activist. I mean patient in recognizing that people move along at their own pace.

And yeah, I think for me what's very important, as I've said a couple times, I like to respect the person that I'm working with. I don't ever formally work with somebody. But, you know, someone who's calling or wanting to meet, I need to feel that they're genuine. And then, you know, I'm there to try to do as much as I can to really help people become empowered and give them an opportunity to be a sounding board.

What is it for you? Because you mentor a lot of people too.

ALICE: Yeah, I think that, I think a lot about what you said in terms of being open-minded and not expecting them to hit sort of expectations. I don't wanna have any expectations of what I want that mentee to turn out. I don't wanna impose my ideas on them. I think like you said, it's about being open and honest and really coming to a place where I don't think of myself as an expert, but I'll share what I can. And I think that's what people really need is just, you know, a place or a person where they feel safe to really be vulnerable.

I really wanna demystify the idea of role models because I think we're all very fallible, vulnerable people. And we're not that different, you know? The mentor-mentee relationship, I feel like if we can connect on a real human level, that's where a lot of magic can happen in terms of a real, honest exchange. And I honestly think that mentors get more out of their relationship than the mentees. It's definitely not a one-way street at all. Does that make sense?

JUDY: Yeah, I definitely agree with you. Totally agree with you. Yeah, yeah. [chuckles]

ALICE: Thank you so much for talking with me today, Judy.

JUDY: Well, I appreciate it, Alice. And I really wanna say that the work that you're doing is so highly respected. And, you know, I believe that collaboration is so very important. And you're using newer forms of media, you're able— I'm like [chuckles] struggling and learning about how to use various things, but I'm loving learning. And I'm loving learning from you, so I really wanna thank you for this.

ALICE: Great. Feel free to hit me up any time. I love to help out in any way, and I'm learning as well all the time. And I think that's, we're all in it together, and I think collectively, we can really make a change. So, thank you so much, Judy.

JUDY: You're welcome!

[hip-hop]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes including text transcripts are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find links about Yolanda and Judy on our website.

The audio producer for this episode is me, Alice Wong. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Well, thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeeeee!

♪ Little people living in a big world

Successful married couple that have kids? Girl.

Lemme guess

They eat dinner too ♪