The Upstander Ripple Effect Episode 9: “Keeping Memory Alive” featuring Bob Mermelstein & Joyce Kamen

transcript

**Kevin Aldridge** 00:02

What do we mean by the upstander ripple effect?

**Werner Coppel** 00:06

Stand up against hate and prejudice, even if it does not affect you.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:13

From moral dilemmas in today's headlines, upstanders who rose for justice, and stories of survival,

**Kevin Aldridge** 00:19

Be prepared to walk away from this conversation inspired and motivated.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:25

Hey everyone, and welcome to Episode Nine of the Upstander Ripple Effect. It's hard to believe we've done nine of these, but this is, this is going to be, I think, a really meaningful one. Our theme this time is keeping memory alive,

**Kevin Aldridge** 00:39

yes. And as of this date, we're in the midst of commemorating and remembering the life and keeping the memory alive of one of the great Americans, in the person of the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, whose contributions to racial justice and equality have spanned decade, the decades since his passing, since his assassination, and continues to be a guiding light and force in in many of our lives, in the work that we do. And so I think as we think about this theme of keeping memory alive, there's no memory that I can think of that's that's more important, no life that's more important to keep the memory alive than that of Dr King, yeah.

**Jackie Congedo** 01:22

And he was pretty influential in terms of, like, your own trajectory, personally, right? I mean, you talked a little bit about this when we were before we got into tape this.

**Kevin Aldridge** 01:32

Yeah. I mean, I just sort of feel like as someone who deals and who works in communication and who deals with the written word, you know, I've studied King, his writings, his sermons, and he is, in my opinion, one of the greatest, if not the greatest, orator or communicator of our time. I mean his ability to just be so precise with his language, and to be able to clearly convey, you know, complex ideas, and do it in a way that both touches your intellect as well as your your heart and your emotional center. You know, when you work in communications, you know how incredibly difficult it is to do because you know, so often we speak so imprecisely, we speak so vaguely that it's just very hard to do what he did, and he was able to do it in such a way that he tapped into the consciousness of an entire nation, and was able, was able to through his through his words, through his speeches, through his sermons, really changed the trajectory of this nation. And so he didn't do it alone, but he certainly, he played a key part in it.

**Jackie Congedo** 02:43

Yeah, yeah. You know, thinking about sort of model upstanders and the ripple effect of what it is to be an upstander. I mean, his ripple effect is just so broad and wide and deep and continues today. And, you know, I was thinking, there's this practice of called strength spotting, right? We talk a lot about the VIA character strengths, these attributes, 24 of them that we all have within us that can sort of activate our capacity to be an upstander in any given moment, or that allow us, enable us to do that. And so there's this practice called strength spotting, where you can actually think about different people throughout time, or each other, you know, in contemporary time, and say, What are... I wonder what that person's top strengths are. So we were talking earlier about Dr. King and his his top strengths. And, of course, unfortunately, the science of character strengths, you know, came about many, many years after, decades after he was killed. So we'll never really know, because we can't ask him, and he can't take the assessment, but you can look back in his writing, in his action, in the history, and sort of spot what you think might have been some top strengths. So we were thinking about that. I mean, what do you think his top strength?

**Kevin Aldridge** 04:04

Well, I definitely think, and I think it's a combination of the two. I think love and spirituality are probably at the foundation of his character strengths. I mean, I think Dr. King's capacity to love, I think was based in his spiritual understanding of who God was and what God expects of us, and even how God loves us. And so I think he he discerned his and developed his ability to be able to love people who were perpetuating terrible things against him and his race of people and and he even talked about, you know, sort of rising to that level of being able to to hate the deeds, but not the person, and to be able to love the person instead, I think, was probably the greatest character strength that he had. And, you know, really, again. Was, was what helped changed our nation. He changed our nation through his ability to love and teach us how to love each other, despite sometimes the horrible things we do.

**Jackie Congedo** 05:09

Totally, and I think connected to that, you know, forgiveness, right? The the capacity to love people.

**Kevin Aldridge** 05:15

Yeah.

**Jackie Congedo** 05:15

Despite their deeds and to see past that, in some way, was transformative, um. And, you know, also just this transcendent character strength of hope.

**Kevin Aldridge** 05:29

Oh, yeah.

**Jackie Congedo** 05:30

I mean, talk about, like, the the capacity to be able to see a world, I mean, a dream, yes, when it wasn't realized, yeah,

**Kevin Aldridge** 05:39

Yeah, I think, you know, again. I mean, it's, it's, it's so funny when you think about these 24 character strengths. I mean, he, he probably had all 24 of them, yeah, really, we were going through the list. I was like, well, there was that one and that one, yeah. I mean, when you really get right down to it, and again, going back to again, if you asked me, what is his greatest I would have to say the spirituality, because I think out of his spirituality comes the concepts of love and hope, which are, which are all based in the faith belief. And I think, as you mentioned, the ability to hope, to see a future, a future that he didn't even get to live in himself, but to be able to see that and cast that vision in such a way that everybody else caught it, I mean, that is just, that's a remark... that's a truly remarkable thing to be able to... to be able to do. And, you know, I wrote something down, you know, just about about this concept of evil, and how, sort of, how love and hope sort of play into that. And I was thinking about it in retrospect, about his assassination, you know, it's, it's sort of like King's dream, and his vision endures despite the fact, yeah, yeah, that an evil act, you know, extinguished his, extinguish his flame, right? And there's a there's a natural inclination when something like that happens, when an evil act takes away such a good person, it it makes you recognize the relentlessness of evil, and that the entirety of the purpose of evil is to destroy our hope or our belief that somehow good is attainable, right, that that in some way, shape or form, evil is more powerful than good. And sometimes we can find ourselves in those dark situations where where you lose a King, or you you lose an election, or you lose something, and you start looking around, and you're just like man, evil seems to be everywhere, and it seems so much more powerful than good, but that is the deceptive nature of what evil is, is that its sole purpose is to convince us that it's stronger, to try to get us to buy into this belief that hate, fear, all of these concepts are greater, despite the evidence that shows what can be accomplished, and King is a perfect example of that, of what can be accomplished through the power of love and hope, you can literally change change the trajectory of history. You know, we've seen terrible things, from the Holocaust to slavery to Jim Crow, all of those things were overcome through all of the things that we talk about on this podcast. Love, hope. You know, endurance, perseverance, all of these great qualities that we talk about, we got to recognize those are stronger. You know, when we employ them, and we can't allow the relentlessness of evil to dispirit us to the point where we start to think that is strong. Yeah,

**Jackie Congedo** 08:45

yeah. I mean, this is what a number of survivors have spoken about in terms of, you know, I think about Victor Frankl and "Man's Search for Meaning," you know, his just the the hope that he maintained, right, this was actually a survival mechanism for him to just maintain that sense of hope and and even an act of resistance, to be hopeful amidst such depravity and hopelessness, or to just to be able to envision a future so radically different from, you know, from the current reality in that case, and certainly in Dr King's case as well. I mean, it's, yeah, it's interesting. You know, it's easy to look easier, I guess, to look back on these things in hindsight and say, "Well, clearly that was wrong." Or "Clearly, you know, it all worked out in the end," right? But like in the in the moment, sure, it was, you know, it was all playing out. And to maintain that hope in the midst of such dire circumstances is really, it's a superpower.

**Kevin Aldridge** 09:56

Yeah. Well, it reminds me of a concept, I think that. And I could be butchering this, but it's, it's called the Stockdale paradox, and I think Jim Stockdale was a prisoner of war in the Hanoi Hilton POW camp. And the Stockdale paradox is, is sort of being acutely aware of your circumstances, sort of not denying the reality of what is the bad situation that you're in. But even in the midst of that, never losing hope for the possibility of something greater, something better.

**Jackie Congedo** 10:02

It's a lot to have to hold at once.

**Kevin Aldridge** 10:10

 Yes, yeah, and but all but everyone who survives, you know, everyone who endures, everyone who comes out on the other side of that, I think, to some degree, is able to channel that sense of hope that says, "Despite what it might look like right now, and I'm not in denial about that. I'm acutely aware of where I'm at. I'm in this I'm in this death camp. I may not make it out. You know, there's a high likelihood that I probably won't, but in the midst of that, I still have the fortitude to kind of maintain a hope that one day I'll be free of this situation." I think that's that takes a tremendous amount of of of strength to be able to

**Jackie Congedo** 11:17

absolutely

**Kevin Aldridge** 11:18

have that.

**Jackie Congedo** 11:19

Yeah, yeah. And then, you know, the other character strengths I was thinking about, related to Dr King, the idea of self-regulation, to have the, I mean, the self regulation, the restraint, really, to be able to operate in a method, in a mode of non violence, when such unimaginable injustice and violence and atrocity is happening to you and to the people you love and to people like you. I mean, that's that is, I want to say self regulation, maybe in that I don't think it's transcendence and the values bucket, right? So there's different buckets of these strengths related to what values they fall within, and but that's one where it's like, you know, forest for the trees, like just trying to remember that the end goal is this, and this is a method to achieve that. And he was so committed to that work of non violence, and then his leadership and teamwork strengths, you know, a whole nation absolutely followed him, right? And, and just like, you know, so many of our great leaders and heroes from years gone by, he didn't set out to draw a following, you know, he just set out to speak the truth and to committed in his own values of what was right and what was fair and, and people followed.

**Kevin Aldridge** 12:41

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I think it's important to to recognize that while he certainly didn't do it alone, and there are a lot of names that both known and unknown, that were a part of the Civil Rights Movement that led us to where we are, there was something exceptional about him that allowed him to rise, um, kind of galvanized, yeah, yeah, to rise above everybody else that he was seen as sort of the leader and and that's why, you know, you know, some people say, you know, leaders are born. They're not made. But I think if you look at King, it's probably a combination of the yes that he definitely had some qualities that that were in him that made him who he was, but we know that there was a community that that surrounded him that allowed him to become the man that he was, that that poured into him and built into him, that made him into the leader that he ultimately became, became and one that we revere, you know, even until this day. So...

**Jackie Congedo** 13:49

Yeah, that's something. It's an interesting sort of aspect of upstanding to think about, because so often we think about, you know, our choices, our individual choices, how we conduct ourselves, the acts that we take or don't take, actions we take or don't take, and the implications that those have in terms of our own capacity to stand up, but thinking about how what we pour into other people or the community that we create, and what that does in terms of enabling others to realize their full potential in their strengths. I mean, you know, there's this piece out of Chapman University by two academics there talking about this very concept that really, you know, Dr King's legacy, certainly, you know, wouldn't have happened without his individual fortitude and strengths that he, you know, he came into this world with. But the fact that, you know the title is "Making Heroes is Community Work," and how it was a community effort to realize the force that was Doctor King at the end of the day. There's some really beautiful stuff in here.

**Kevin Aldridge** 15:04

Yeah, great stuff. I mean, there's, there's a line in that piece that speaks to kind of what you're saying that really resonated with me. It said, you know, "Heroes find themselves ready to accomplish good often because they have been formed by wisdom and love from a community." And I just thought that was a powerful notion, because what it says to us is is that we we mold and we shape, you know, as a community, the heroes that rise, that rise up out of that. I mean, whether that's in your neighborhood, whether that's in your church, whether that's in your school, in our country in general, the those who rise up to be heroes, in our eyes, are all cultivated in some way, shape or form, by the things that are poured into them by the people around them, starting, first and foremost within, you know, within your home and and we, we can see from you know, Martin's story, the the the incredible impact his his family had on him, his father, who was a preacher, and we talked about spirituality being the foundation of his character strength. So what his dad, a preacher himself, poured into Martin, what his mother poured into him in terms of of showing him how to explaining to him how segregated society that is so powerful.

**Jackie Congedo** 16:22

I don't know that I had read that piece

**Kevin Aldridge** 16:23

Yeah, but, but not allowing that to allow him to become vengeful or embittered by that, despite even how Martin felt at that young age. So, so you can see that type of sculpting. And then moving on from that, you know Martin's love for learning, which is another character strength, right? And how he immersed himself in the teachings of Thoreau and Martin Luther and Mahatma Gandhi. It was his love for learning and his ability to soak in the teachings and the principles, you know, of these, of these philosophers and and these social act social activists that helped him formulate, you know, his strategy for how he was going to lead the Civil Rights Movement here in the United States. And so, you know, sometimes in this country we all we like to buy into this notion of rugged individualism and the self made man or woman. But the reality is, if we're being truthful about it. We're all byproducts of people who have poured into us, who've cultivated in us a love of learning, and whose books we read, who speeches we listen to, podcasts we watch. You know, all of that goes into shaping us.

**Jackie Congedo** 17:34

Or, I mean, we can think about this in terms of, like the, you know, the ying to the yang of that. You know, we're all products of people who've also taken away.

**Kevin Aldridge** 17:43

Sure.

**Jackie Congedo** 17:44

So, you know, when we think about the choices that we make day to day, are we pouring in? I in our household, we call it, are you filling? Are you a cup filler or a cup cup taker, you know, and are you filling somebody's cup? And because there's, there's choices to do the opposite and in the study of the Holocaust, I mean, I think that's what's so powerful about the museum, is it explores, you know, the worst decisions we can make as human beings, and then the flip side of that, which is, what does it look like to make cup-filling decisions?

**Kevin Aldridge** 18:15

Yeah

**Jackie Congedo** 18:16

And certainly, there were so many in Dr King's life who made made those cup filling decisions and impact on him,

**Kevin Aldridge** 18:21

Well, to that point. I mean, the reality is, is, in most of our lives, we have, we have both. I mean, King certainly did. He had a country for sure, yeah, country that was pouring out of it or pulling pulling out of him, yeah. But he also had enough that was pouring into him to help offset that, and maybe even take him up a notch, because think of how much more you have to have being poured into you in some way, shape or form, from some source. I believe that source was, was God primarily pouring into him that gave him the strength and the ability to be able to endure so much of what was being taken away from him. And I think, you know, a lot of times when we look at people around us and in our society, and people who have just had so much taken from them, but nothing being poured into them, and they may not have a spiritual foundation, and then you wonder, how people can make certain choices, dehumanizing choices, choices that show not a particular affinity for life or care for life. And you wonder, how do people get to that point? Well,

**Jackie Congedo** 19:32

Nobody's pouring in. People are taking out.

**Kevin Aldridge** 19:34

Right. Yeah. And when you're empty, you know, yeah, you make empty choices.

**Jackie Congedo** 19:39

That's right, yeah, so well said. Certainly, I mean an incredible legacy that we're still reflecting on 90... What's it 96 years right later. And you know, as we think about that, it occurred to me, we're just talking with Anne, our producer, about this, that Dr King and Anne Frank were actually born in the same year, born in 1929 Dr King in January, obviously, and then Anne Frank in June of that year, which is just kind of mind blowing to think about, because so often we consider these histories in separate contexts and sort of in isolation, and really, they were playing out, you know, around about the same time, yeah. And in fact, there's some pretty incredible sort of art that's come out of that conversation. There's a, I know, a play that features sort of excerpts of Dr King. It's just a two person play, and Dr King reading excerpts from letter, "Letters from a Birmingham Jail," and then Anne Frank reading excerpts from her diary. And you know, it's like a conversation of the two of them talking about just the general state of injustice and what it what is it to pursue love and hope and justice in the midst of dehumanization and very powerful and also chilling to think about. You know, had history not gone the way it would have gone, we would be here today with two 96 year old sages.

**Kevin Aldridge** 21:16

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I mean, and how much more would they have added, I know, you know, as we think about, you know, taking away and pouring in, I mean, think of, think of what we lost, in terms of what would have been poured into the discussion, into the conversation, into the psyche of the country, had they, had they lived. And, you know, those are always the great "What if" moments, right and, and all that we can do is try to take what they poured into us while we had them, and then try to take that and expound on it, and hope the next generation of heroes can rise up from that and add on to the add on to the story. And, yeah, but I often think about that, you know, and many have mused over the years, you know, if King had lived, How would things be different in the country? How would things be different for, you know, for Black people, what would he be like? How? What would his commentary be on various things that have, that have happened? And, yeah, would he have evolved and changed?

**Jackie Congedo** 22:17

Yeah, you know, yeah. And that's why this theme, I mean, this work of keeping memory alive, is so important. I'm thinking a lot today about our friends at the Freedom Center who are doing that important work in the legacy of Dr King and so many others. And they have a new exhibit about Emmett Till, which also, again, in terms of parallels with Holocaust history. Emmett Till and Anne were about the same age when they were murdered. There's another, you know, theatrical presentation of that kind of imagines them as teenagers in dialog with each other. So it's just, and it's from what I understand, a very powerful exhibit at the Freedom Center. I'm sure a lot of people are taking, you know, going to check that out today and but, yeah, you know, 2025, 70 years later, after he was murdered, just another legacy that's so important to keep alive, and that's the work that we have to do today, because those those people, those upstanders, they're not, they're not with us anymore.

**Kevin Aldridge** 23:14

Yeah, and I think it's important for us to understand too, like, why it's important to keep you know, these, these stories, these legacies alive? And it's not just simply, you know, if you want to take a cynical approach or view that some people have taken with history, now it's sort of like, oh, well, you know, we want to teach people to hate America or to make people feel bad about, you know what happened in the past? And look, you know, none of us alive today...well, few of us alive today, if any of us, you know, had any hand or any impact in history that we're learning. But the important part of keeping the legacy is one to pay homage to the individuals who sacrificed, who who did great things to allow us to be in the position that we are. And I think whether you're Black, white, man or woman, you know Jewish, Christian, you know, whatever, Muslim, whatever, whatever you are, we all stand on the shoulders of the accomplishments and sacrifice sacrifices these individuals who've made our country, our world, a better place.

**Jackie Congedo** 24:19

Humanity.

**Kevin Aldridge** 24:19

Yeah, through, through their actions. And it's, it's incredibly important to remember that. Because I think all of us, if we were in an honest moment and we had contributed that, we would want to be remembered, right, like, that's, that's, that's kind of the, the whole point of, you know, human existence, to a degree, is we want to be remembered by the folks that we impacted, whether that's within our family. You know, nobody wants to think that in 25 or 30 years we're going to be forgotten by our grandchildren and great grandchildren, or whatever? We want them to remember our contributions and so and then the other part of that is to also show what we've rise... what we've risen above, what we're capable of rising above, and what we don't want to repeat again.

**Jackie Congedo** 24:59

Yeah.

**Kevin Aldridge** 25:00

So it's not about trying to make people feel bad or feel guilty. It's trying to say to take pride in the fact that we're better than that.

**Jackie Congedo** 25:01

We learned those lessons

**Kevin Aldridge** 25:08

We shouldn't go back there. Yeah, we shouldn't go back there. And how do we what can we learn from this? What principles can we learn from this that keep us from from going backwards but moving forward into a great future. Yeah,

**Jackie Congedo** 25:22

yeah. And that's why these anniversaries and commemorations are so important. Another really meaningful one in January is the International Day of Holocaust Remembrance, which is sort of the day that is commonly regarded it was set forth by the UN marks the liberation of Auschwitz, the day of, sort of remembering this history, and we commemorate that at the center in a number of different ways. Of course, you know, thanks to the generosity of the Schneider family, we've had free admission all month, which has been a really lovely way to, you know, to welcome people in to learn from the history. But also, we have this amazing new testimony in our Dimensions In Testimony exhibit with Henry Fenichel, one of our treasured survivors, who was able to record his story in an interactive format. So now you can come anytime more open and talk to Henry about his experience. It's, it's, it's really incredible just to be able to ask these questions and he, you know, received the answers in real time. And for those who are wondering, yes, Henry got to test it out. He gave us a thumbs up, thumbs down, like, this is, this is good, or it's not, but, you know, he got to go and ask himself a bunch of questions. And it's just, I mean, it's a remarkable, it's really a remarkable opportunity to continue to kind of keep that work of keeping memory alive, intentional and active and human, one piece. As you know, over the last month, we've been talking about the launch of this testimony. I've been talking a lot with Henry that came out that I just think is so incredibly beautiful about his story. And it's the first time I had heard him share it. So he talked about, you know, when he was, when he was in in a concentration camp with his mother. His father was murdered at Auschwitz, and he and his mother, I believe, were both at Bergen Belsen. And every day, or, I guess, I'm not sure even how frequently, but when they were fed, basically given these, like scraps of what he called black bread, or, you know, whatever slop. You know, they had marginal amounts of food that they were given, and very poor, stale food at that, his mother would always conserve a piece of what he called the black bread and save it for Shabbat at the end of the week, because it was so important to her that they maintain their identity amidst this dehumanization that was happening. And I just thought, you know, clearly, it's stuck with Henry all these years. I mean, just and just the act of resistance to insist on your own identity and pride in your own identity, even in such dehumanizing circumstances, just like, yeah, yeah, it's really stuck with me.

**Kevin Aldridge** 28:12

That's just powerful, because it it speaks to however small, whatever small bits and pieces that you can use to hang on to your identity, your humanity, to sort of resist being, allowing yourself to become or be portrayed like what somebody else wants to portray you as, and the lengths to which people will go to find that no matter how small, I think, to even take a mechanism of dehumanization to allow you to maintain your humanity, I think it's just an amazing... it's transformative. Yeah, I always think like those, just those juxtapositions of things. It reminds me of scripture that says, what, what man intends for evil, God will use for good. And that's a perfect example of black bread and slop, something that was in intended to be used for evil, to dehumanize, to demoralize. That even in the midst of that, she was still able to take that and and use it, you know, use it for good. I just think those, those are amazing stories that, again, highlight why it's important to keep this stuff alive.

**Jackie Congedo** 29:28

Yeah, we have a couple of incredible upstander and survivor stories to highlight this month too. Yeah,

**Kevin Aldridge** 29:36

yeah, this month we're sharing the story of Bob marble.... Bob, excuse me, Mermelstein. He tells the story of his mother, Joan Mermelstein. And Joan was born in 1917 the youngest of 12 siblings in a small village that is now part of Ukraine. Her father had died prior to the war, and in 1944 Joan her sister, Helen, and their mother, the only three left at home, were all deported.

**Jackie Congedo** 30:00

Yeah, and they were put in a ghetto, sent to Auschwitz, and that was the first of three camps that Joan survived. Joan's son, Bob joined Trinity Johnson for a conversation about his remarkable mother.

**Trinity Johnson** 30:14

To get us started, I want to share a quote, because your mother was so eloquent and in such a beautiful author writing her experiences, and at one point she said, "Remembrance serves many purposes. It is important to look back not only to the endless path of Jewish martyrdom, full of persecutions and death, but also to the rich lives that our relatives and ancestors lived." So before we really dive into her story during World War II, and especially the Holocaust, I wanted to just ask... share... some of the memories of your relationship with your mother and really just who she was as a person, because she was such a wonderful educator and just eloquent author.

**Bob Mermelstein** 30:58

I regarded my mother as a saint, Trinity. Can't think of anyone else that I've interacted with in my life who was closer to that description as a saint. She was very selfless and really sacrificed for the sake of myself and my younger brother also I treated me as an adult, I think even in childhood so forth, was very encouraging with me as I pursued, you know, school and my careers, when one sign that we were very close after I moved to Cincinnati to take my first job at Procter and Gamble, my mother wanted to join me. My mother, father and brother followed me to Cincinnati less than a year later.

**Trinity Johnson** 31:56

I admire the close relationship you have with her, and I know when you speak to students, and on behalf of our Speakers Bureau, that beautiful relationship that you two had really shines through. So thank you for sharing about

**Bob Mermelstein** 32:08

I'm glad it does, and I'm, you know, really continuing her mission, because it was truly a mission for her to to want to speak of her Holocaust experiences.

**Trinity Johnson** 32:21

When did you realize she was a Holocaust survivor? Was she very open with you as a child, or

**Bob Mermelstein** 32:27

She was, which isn't always the case, as you know, I was. This was pre-school for me. I remember sharing with my mother that friends of mine, my playmates, boys and girls, had grandparents who were coming to visit them in our in our apartment building in New York City. And I asked my mother, I must have been three or four years old, why I didn't have grandparents like they did. And I and then that's the point where my mother started telling me, and I know she was frank. I'm not sure how much she told me at that early age, but I did know that I lost my of my both of my grandmothers during the Holocaust, it turns out that both my grandfathers had died prior to World War Two, but by both my grandmothers perished, and then I learned about a host of other relatives too.

**Trinity Johnson** 33:36

Did she ever talk about her arrival to Auschwitz?

**Bob Mermelstein** 33:42

Oh, she she remembered clearly when the train had stopped and where German guards were shouting at them to to get, get off the train quickly, to throw your suitcases in a pile on the side, and then to line up for Dr Mengele's quick inspection. Dr Mengele would would size up a person getting off the train and point to the left or point to the right where they should go. And then one one side was to be, to be killed in the in the showers, and, you know, in the to be gassed and then cremated. And that's where my grandmother wound up going to that to that line other relatives, too.

**Jackie Congedo** 34:49

You can really see the weight of that story, and having you know, the the weight of what it is to, you know, to hold remembrance, to keep memory alive in the way that Bob shares that. Joan, his mother, wrote her memoir, which was titled "Out of the Ashes" she said in direct response to an episode or moments of Holocaust denial that she encountered, and she made it her mission to share her story, and you can see how powerfully Bob is still carrying her mission forward. We're so grateful to him for sitting down with us to share the full story of his mother's experiences and his family's experiences during the Holocaust. Just an absolutely chilling, just a chilling testimony.

**Kevin Aldridge** 35:42

Yeah, yeah. I think it, you know, in hearing that story, and you know, it just really makes you angry at the Holocaust deniers, right? Because it's like when you listen to these stories, just the the level of disrespect that it takes for one to say that stories such as these are somehow fictitious or made up stories, and then, in order to combat that, people have to sort of relive and share some of the Worst opportunities or the worst experiences of their lives to combat that. I mean, so it's almost like, it's almost like a double slap. Now, of course, we get the benefit of, you know, hearing these, these stories, and, you know, pulling nuggets of wisdom and and hope and all of those things from it. But you almost want that to be a voluntary sharing of those stories, you know, where someone reaches a point in their life where they're like, You know what, I'm ready to talk about this, versus feeling like you have to defend your experience, yes, and, and, you know, that's, that's just sort of, what I came away from that with, is just being really, just really annoyed, really angered by the the notion that that folks have to share their truth to combat such ugly and vicious lies, I think, is, is unfortunate,

**Jackie Congedo** 37:16

Absolutely, and that's the story of a number of, I mean, many survivors, or survivors of violence, atrocity. I mean, this is not necessarily unique to the Holocaust. But, you know, Werner Coppel, reminded of his experience with Holocaust denial, with the, you know, paid editorial that he read alleging that, you know, the diary Anne Frank was a hoax and and this is what motivated him. He said, "I have to speak about what happened to me." And so, yeah, just so powerful. And I would encourage anybody who's listening or watching to actually go, go as as is the case of any of these interviews. Go watch the full interview with Bob. It's, it's an amazing story. And what a what a wonderful sort of homage to his mom and his family that he is he's doing in continuing to keep their legacy and their memory and their story alive.

**Kevin Aldridge** 38:11

Yeah, you know, and just the last point before we move on. And I think this sometimes goes under appreciated. I mean, when you listen to the story and you think about the trauma, the extent to what she had, went through, the tremendous loss. I mean, just think about how random it is. You know, you get off a train, and depending on which line someone tells you to get into, you could be alive or dead, and then if you happen to be the one that gets selected to go into the... the survival line, so to speak, but you have family members who don't wind up in that line. I mean, just to to endure that, but then to come through that and just sort of have just the mental fortitude, the wherewithal to have, like, a normal, functioning life and and to and to raise a family, you know, often think about this concept of grace, right? A lot of times when we talk about, you know, grace from a spiritual standpoint, what it looks like, and often times, we don't think about grace in those terms. That grace is the ability to be sane, you know, after experiencing something like that, and be able to to to live a functional life, to raise a to raise a family, to raise a son who is able to come on and tell your story and who's functional, you know, in spite of that, I mean, that's,

**Jackie Congedo** 39:43

it's just worked for P and G, you know, right? That's amazing,

**Kevin Aldridge** 39:47

I mean, and it just, should, you know, sometimes, you know, sometimes I think you know we, we under appreciate. You know what that you know what it takes, the power of that

**Jackie Congedo** 39:57

Yes,

**Kevin Aldridge** 39:58

to be able to be functional, to be. A quote, unquote normal, you know, in the wake of something like that, yeah, that deserves, I don't know that, just to me, that deserves a bit of a calling out, because I just think it's extraordinary.

**Jackie Congedo** 40:10

Well, this is that, yeah, I couldn't agree more. And this is, this is why, you know, when I think about all of the survivors who have allowed us to share their stories, it's it's just the fact that they are continuing to thrive, yeah, and you know, had did survive, and now are, you know, living relatively normal lives. I mean, it's from, it is remarkable. It's completely extraordinary. And, you know, Werner Coppel kind of summed that up in his quote that's in our museum, which is, you know, talking about his life in two very distinct like, almost like he lived two lives. You know, "I came to this building with a wife, a baby in a suitcase, and that," I think, "ended the first part of my life." So I think there's some compartmentalization, I'm sure that has to happen for people in order to be able to summon the stamina and the fortitude to just. And now we proceed with Chapter two here. But it is extraordinary. It is nothing short of extraordinary. And just to think about how many people you know have had to do that, certainly in in circumstances that are as, you know, intense and traumatic as the Holocaust or, you know, some act of deep injustice or violence or or loss. But, I mean, so many people walking around with so much weight, yeah, and they're able to manage, you know, it's, it's just, you never know until you walk a mile in somebody's shoes.

**Kevin Aldridge** 41:40

Absolutely. I mean, I think we would all understand. I mean, if, if any of these survivors were just a complete mess, I think anybody, yeah, I don't think anybody would blame them. I think anybody would would certainly understand, given that, and say, you know, hey, I can see how I wound up like that. But I think the extraordinary nature of of you know, what these individuals have become, I think, is, it's inspiring. It's it's it makes you challenge yourself to you know, as you're going through your your your daily grind, and you want to complain about, so

**Jackie Congedo** 42:19

that's perspective,

**Kevin Aldridge** 42:20

yeah, complain about some minor annoyance or something that, you know, we're making the seem like the end of the world, it's like. And some, some, some of us aren't mentally tough enough to handle, you know, these small things, you know. And these folks have endured some, some truly horrific things, and and are still standing, you know, which is, you know the essence of upstanders, which is going to be what, what we're going to talk about next. The the upstander of this month is a name you you might recognize. Joyce Kamen is credited as Consulting Producer in every episode of The Upstander Ripple Effect and Hear My Story, but she has worked to preserve and share the experiences of Holocaust survivors for decades.

**Jackie Congedo** 43:09

We... this so this woman is so near and dear to us, we call her aunt Joyce, because she's really part of the part of the family. In the 90s, she was asked to lead the collection of 42 video testimonies of local survivors. Joan Mermelstein, Bob's mom, was among that group, also liberators, partisans and other eyewitnesses to the Holocaust, and those testimonies became part of the heart and soul of the Holocaust and Humanity Center. Joyce talked with our own Cori Silbernagel about the process of interviewing these eyewitnesses and ultimately delivering them to the care of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

**Joyce Kamen** 43:50

I realized what import this would have in the years and generations to come, as did everyone else at the table and so following that guidance, and studying the guidance that they gave us of how to conduct these interviews, the most important questions to ask. In what order should we ask these questions? When to when to give the interviewee a break, when it's necessary to do that make sure that they are comfortable, don't, you know, don't keep pressing when you know that they're really at the limit. And that did happen several times. We had to shut down and just let, let the person just, you know, recover and calm down. Now this was back in the days of tape, not digital, so we had to stop down every 30 minutes, because these were 30 minute broadcast quality beta cam SP tapes. That was the industry standard back then. But now we have all digital, but we had to naturally stop down every 30 minutes. Some interviews went I don't think any interview. Were less than 30 minutes. Most were an hour. Some were an hour and a half. We asked them to bring, per the instructions of the museum people, we asked them to bring artifacts, pictures of their lives, if they had any you know, pre World War Two, pre Holocaust, any artifacts from their homes, or sometimes we went into their homes to interview them as well so that we could put on tape, just as a record of what you know they brought with them and their lives before the Holocaust. So once we started shooting, we had a good road map of how we were to proceed, and that was just incredibly helpful to me and to all the interviewers who were going to be helping out in this. So we always had in mind that these tapes would not just remain in Cincinnati. These tapes would need to be brought to the Holocaust Museum. And there was, Oh, should we ship them? Should we do this? And I thought, no, no, we're not going to do that. We are going to find a way to hand carry these as lovingly as we possibly could and as carefully as we possibly could to the museum where they would be loved and cared for, and putting them on a UPS truck just did not seem congruous with The mission of the project. So coincidentally, right after the project finished in August of 1993 the museum had recently opened and added Israel congregation, of which I am a member, was going to take a congregational day trip to DC to tour the museum and come back that night. So I asked the rabbi who happened to be my brother in law, Rabbi Irvin Wise, if he would be willing to, sort of, you know, help us, you know, bring these tapes to the museum in in a quasi formal presentation up in the archives. And that's what we did. We brought all of the tapes that day, August 2, 1993 to the museum, met one of the archivists up in the archives. I don't remember exactly what I said to her in the company of some of the people traveling with us and our Rabbi, Irvin wise, but it was something along the lines of, "These are here and permanently gifted to you to rest here and tell these stories in perpetuity that are just so vital to all of human history."

**Jackie Congedo** 48:05

So Joyce is retired, but continuing her efforts to encourage future generations. And now, as you can imagine, this woman does not know the name, the meaning of the word retirement. She is working now with her granddaughter, actually writing children's books about upstanders. Her granddaughter illustrates these. She writes them. They've now written two in this series of, you know, lessons from the Holocaust, from upstanders in the Holocaust. And actually, the most recent one that just came out is about the story of our own Zahava Rendler. So it's uh, it's incredible. And you can just see that the work of remembering, you know, the work of keeping memory alive, just runs through her blood. It's just part of her DNA and who she is, and the responsibility that she takes for making sure that that work is done with the utmost care is so admirable and beautiful.

**Kevin Aldridge** 49:04

Yeah, it is. Well, you know, one of the one of the great pleasures that I've had in being associated with the Upstander Ripple Effect was, was meeting Joyce and getting to know her. And we love you, Joyce, she's just a fantastic woman, someone who, who I've come to admire and appreciate greatly. And, you know, you said it right there. I mean to a lot of, a lot of times when we think about stories, we don't think of them as, sort of, like tangible, sort of objects

**Jackie Congedo** 49:37

That need care, right

**Kevin Aldridge** 49:38

Yeah, right. That's how, that's how she treats them. You know, it's like, it's almost as if she was handling some fine china, or just some something, you know, very fragile and delicate that that she wants to make sure that these, these stories are, are cultivated and curated and cared for and and disseminated and stored and handled, just as you would any. Sort of physical object. And I think that's just an amazing attitude and way of thinking about the work that she does. And you know, a lot of times, and you know this better than I do, because you work in, you know, visual media, where you have producers and things of that nature, the folks who are behind the camera, and it's oftentimes the the personalities, you know, the the the glamorous folks like yourself and you know, and actors, and actors and movies, the people who are, who are in the front, who we see, who get all of the credit. But really, you know that it's, it's the people, it's the Joyce Kamens, it's the people who are behind the scenes, who are doing that, that production work, who are making sure that interviews are handled in the proper way, the right questions are getting asked and and who are really doing the leg work. That's why I love our Anne Thompson here, and the work that she puts in, she's another to make sure you and I look competent on well, more me than you probably in this regard,

**Jackie Congedo** 51:01

she's got her hands full with the both of us,

**Kevin Aldridge** 51:02

yeah, for sure, but it's, but it's the it's the folks behind the scenes who do such a great job that bring us these these stories, and handle them with such care that they just want to, you know, say, Hey, thank you, Joyce, for all you're doing

**Jackie Congedo** 51:16

Absolutely

**Kevin Aldridge** 51:16

marvelous.

**Jackie Congedo** 51:17

And I mean, you know, her fingerprints are all over the podcast, all over the everything from just like the design of the studio to the the level of professional, professionalism and quality and the recordings, you know, I mean, she, you know, all the pre-produced elements like this. Joyce had her just this. This was her labor of love to help help us get this up and running. And so we're, we are indebted to her and really grateful that she was, she brought her commitment to caring for these stories to help us. You know, in this effort as well, so

**Jackie Congedo** 51:54

Well, I think before we wrap, we should maybe do our upstander shout out,

**Jackie Congedo** 52:00

at the at the end of our time here, and we were thinking about, you know, who has sort of come up in the news lately, who really deserves, you know, some, some our admiration and recognition for the upstander work that they did. And this, this is sort of a post mortem shout out this is to the legacy of the late president, Jimmy Carter, who recently passed away. And you know, there's been a lot that's been written and said about him and his leadership and his legacy, but one piece I think that really stands out is the way he was able to champion, you know, the work of Habitat for Humanity. And there was a condolence page that sort of popped up tied to that nonprofit, and some of the you know, outpouring of gratitude on this page is just really emblematic of the ripple effect of his upstanding in this space.

**Kevin Aldridge** 52:00

sure

**Kevin Aldridge** 53:03

Yeah, absolutely. Families who live in housing built by Habitat had expressed their Thanks, and we'll just share a few of those thoughts with our audience. Maria Blanco wrote, "Our sincere sympathy to the grieving family of our former President Carter. We are grateful because the Blanco family was one of the recipients of Habitat for Humanity. God blessed us with a condo at G Avenue national, National City, California, in February of 2012 Thank you, Mister Carter." Again, just you know Amar Ali, "President Carter's remarkable legacy is one of service, compassion and unwavering dedication to humanity. As a homeowner, through Habitat for Humanity, I am deeply grateful for his commitment to affordable housing and empowering communities. His vision of a world where everyone has a decent place to live inspires us all to build, serve and make a lasting impact."

**Jackie Congedo** 54:04

Yeah, it's, it's, I mean, that... talk about it a physical like an actual representation of what the ripple effect looks like. I mean, you create affordable housing for a family, and you know, the dream of homeowner, home ownership, and the way that changes the trajectory of the people who live in that house, of their children, of their grandchildren, and anybody who comes and goes through that home. I mean, it's, it's, um, it's really foundational. And so just, you know, a sliver of his impact, and this one way he was able to champion this important work of affordable housing, and the way that continues to impact people today. It's certainly, we say in the Jewish tradition, May his memory be a blessing.

**Kevin Aldridge** 54:45

Yeah, absolutely,

**Jackie Congedo** 54:45

and certainly, I think we know that it will be, yeah.

**Kevin Aldridge** 54:48

I mean, think about too think about the humility a guy who is a former president, but it's not beneath him to pick up a hammer and a saw and some nails and help to build houses for people. People who have far less than than what he what he has. And it speaks to, it speaks to the heart, you know? I mean, I think a lot of times when we talk about politics and policies and and the extent to the success or failure of someone's presidential tenure, I think, you know, President Carter is a perfect example of someone who was maybe a better man than he was a president, and that, you know, sometimes you can have a greater impact. You know, outside of the politics that you can even have inside of the politics. We know there are so many things that can hamstring, you know, the politicians sometimes from getting worthy things done. I mean, we see it, you know, even here in the city of Cincinnati, where, you know, there's, there's no shortage of conversation about the need for more affordable housing here and and how, how is government going to fix it? But sometimes it might just be as simple as, you know, you and me and other people who care, you know, picking up a hammer and a saw and some nails like Jimmy Carter did, making it happen.

**Jackie Congedo** 56:06

Yeah, if he can do it, you know, certainly we can as well, and well as we wrap up, just encourage everybody to let us know how you are doing this work of keeping memory alive, thinking about your own contributions, the contributions of your family and your friends. I, you know, I think now about all the questions I wish I would have asked my grandmother. And you know, it's for this lifetime, too late. So, you know, just to think one step ahead of that, who are the people who you're witnessing, the strength of character, the lessons that they are leading with, and how can we make sure that we maintain that legacy in their keeping their memories alive? If you have something particularly meaningful to share in that in that space, send us a note. We'd love to hear about it. So

**Kevin Aldridge** 56:57

absolutely.

**Jackie Congedo** 56:58

Thanks for joining us, and we will see you next time on Episode 10, the Upstander Ripple Effect. Let us know your thoughts on this episode. Our email is in the show notes. You can listen anytime on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or visit Holocaustandhumanity.org/podcast. You can also connect with us on Instagram and TikTok @Holocaustandhumanity and X Facebook at @CincyHHC. The Upstander Ripple Effect is a production of the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. The Center's mission is to ensure that the lessons of the Holocaust inspire action today. This series is part of the Cynthia & Harold Guttman Family Center for Storytelling. Visit us in person at historic Union Terminal in Cincinnati, Ohio, or online anytime@holocaustinhumanity.org.

**Jackie Congedo** 57:41

Managing Producer is Anne Thompson. Consulting Producer is Joyce Kamen. Technical Producer is Robert Mills, and Technical Director is Josh Emerson. The opening sequence is by Ken Furman. Select music is by Kikc Lee, and this is recorded at Technical Consulting Partners studios in Cincinnati, Ohio.