

Disability History Association Podcast

Interview with Jim Odatto

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Kelsey Henry: Hello, and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association podcast. I'm Kelsey Henry.

Caroline Lieffers: And I'm Caroline Lieffers.

Kelsey: And it's our absolute pleasure today to be in conversation with James Odatto. James is a freelance journalist and former reporter for the *Albany Times Union*. He is also an adjunct professor at the University of Albany who teaches courses on writing, research, and advanced reporting. James, it is so exciting to have you with us today.

Jim Odatto: Well, thank you very much, Kelsey. You can feel free to call me Jim. I answer to Jim and James and a lot of other things. But Jim's fine.

Kelsey: Perfect.

Jim: Thank you for having us.

Kelsey: So Caroline and I recently had the pleasure of reading Jim's new book, *This Brain Had a Mouth: Lucy Gwin and the Voice of Disability Nation*, which is a biography of advocacy journalist and disability rights activist Lucy Gwin. I'm wondering if you can start us off by just telling us a bit about how you first learned about Lucy Gwin. And where did this project start for you? Why did you feel compelled to tell her story among other stories?

Jim: That's a good question. And it's a long answer. And I'll give you the intermediate one. The thing that I do and have been doing for a long time is writing stories. I've been a daily journalist and a freelance journalist. And I have been a student of narrative journalism and a student of biography. And I have always pursued a good story. I've always looked for good stories. And when I instruct my journalism students, I have always told them ways to find good stories. And I have built into my syllabus a trip to the university archives. And the students that I teach are usually upper-level students, juniors and seniors, undergrad journalism majors mostly. Almost all of them are journalism majors. Every once in a while, I get a communications major or something like that. Anyway, what I find several times is that even though they're upper-level students and have been walking around the campus for four years, they've never been to the archives. I build into my syllabus a day at the archives. And I tell them, this is a place filled with story ideas. There are documents everywhere. I always talk about the value of documents and records, primary source materials. I suspect – I know that Yale has a beautiful archive. I hope you folks have been there at least once. You may not have been. And if you have been, you may be among the minority of your colleagues at that college.

So as I told you, I'm going to give you the intermediate answer to your question, not the long one. It's already started pretty long. But anyway, I finished up one semester of teaching. And it was May. And I decided that what I was going to do was I was going to tour archives within a couple hour drive of my home in Schenectady NY. And I went online. I looked at the finding aids at various archives, various schools. And I was looking for a good story. And I found some very good possibilities. And they took me to various campuses. And one of the campuses they took me to was the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. And on the 25th floor of what was the tallest library in North America, it may still be, is their

archive. And in that archive is six boxes, the papers of Lucy Gwin. And I had checked that out. I had circled it on my finding aid. It's something that looked interesting. There's an abstract you can read. And it tells you about a woman who was a founder of a magazine and a disability rights activist. I said, "That's interesting. I'm a journalist. Maybe there's something there." Well I went, and I spent the day looking at that archive. And I said, "somebody ought to write a book about this woman." I said, this is interesting stuff."

I thought I might be able to go there and get an idea for a narrative, a long-form story, at least. And what I came back with was an idea that maybe this could be a biography. And that's how I got started. I had never even heard of Lucy Gwin before. And when I looked at her papers, I said to myself, "I think a lot of people have never heard of Lucy Gwin before, and maybe they should."

Caroline: Thanks so much for that answer. I love your comment that someone should write a book about her, and that someone turned out to be you. That's always a nice sort of full-circle moment. Can you say a little bit more about how this book relates to your larger or previous body of work as a journalist? Did it feel like a big departure? Or was there kind of a connection to some other work that you've done?

Jim: You know, Caroline, the thing that you do when you're a reporter is you're turning over stories pretty quickly, right. Most times, if you get a week to do a story, you're in good shape. I have been lucky in my career to have the opportunity in which editors gave me multiple weeks to do stories. So I have been free to write and research lengthy stories during my career. I enjoy doing that. That's something I appreciated. But by the same token, there's always that drumbeat, you know, that you need to churn stuff out. You need to be productive. You need to be doing your share to fill those news holes, right. But in connection with whether this was a great departure, it was not really a great departure. It was more an opportunity to do what I've done for a long time but concentrating on one subject. It required all the skills that I've been telling my students about and trying to instruct them on: interviewing, document research, the value of records, checking all kinds of public repositories.

What was different was once I had everything, and once I thought it would be, like I said, a book, the difference was I had to pitch this to not a news editor. I had to go find a publisher who might be interested in it. And that that was a little different. And then when you get into the process of putting a book together, there's a lot of things you don't do as a journalist, a lot of indexing and footnoting and Chicago style writing, which is totally different from Associated Press. And it's almost like a foreign language to a reporter. So that was different. But in terms of the work, it was really just-- like if you know how to play basketball, you can play basketball for 15 minutes. Or you can play it for a full game. It's just a matter of your energy and the muscles you develop. But I had time. And I had interest. And I didn't have a deadline, you know. There was no deadline. It was just a matter of once you had that manuscript, and it was ready to go and get polished and all that stuff. But yeah, it was like the news business, but only more so. So I hope that answers your question.

Caroline: I think it does. Yeah. I feel like I owe you some sort of apology on behalf of the historical profession for, a) making you do indexing and, b), making you learn a new style because that's always a big hassle, so gratitude to you for doing that [laughs].

Jim: Well I think academic people who get involved in academic journals and scholarly research and stuff like that can empathize with what I'm talking about. This Chicago style and all those rules, it's just a different playground, I guess. Yeah.

Caroline: That's a gracious way of describing that. Yeah. We should be talking about Lucy Gwin -- we should ask you a few questions about that. So in your book, you describe Lucy Gwin's induction into, quote, "Disability Nation".

Jim: Yeah.

Caroline: And it comes after she experiences a traumatic brain injury in a car accident. So even though Gwin becomes descriptively disabled following this accident, can you say a little bit more about how she becomes politicized, right, as a disability activist?

Jim: Yeah. Okay. I think I understand your question. Well here's the thing. What happened with Lucy Gwin is that she gets into an accident, she goes into the hospital, you know, the ambulance takes her away. She's in a hospital for a while. They care for her. They see that she's got a traumatic brain injury. She's behaving erratically. She doesn't like being there. She's strapped down to some degree. She lashes out at some of her nurses. They decide they need to medicate her and that she needs to be treated at another, a specialized facility, a rehab facility that deals with brain-injured people. And that's what they do. They send her to this rehab facility. And she feels as if she's a hostage. She said she loses any agency over her body and her care and what care is administered. And she indicates that it was very modest. Essentially, she felt that the rehab facility was shaking down her insurance company and the insurance companies of other patients, not providing any services, simply collecting hundreds of dollars a day on her bed that was filled. And so she gets politicized because she realizes something's wrong here. And she gets angry. And she gets a friend of hers to break her out of that rehab facility after about three weeks.

And she goes back to Rochester, New York. And she takes her anger out on this rehab chain. At the time, I believe they were the largest rehab chain in the brain rehabilitation or head injury rehabilitation field. And she gets politicized because she realizes that politicians, public prosecutors, investigatory agencies might be able to do something about this. And that's what she did. She starts writing to politicians, to health departments, to prosecutors, to the FBI. And she gets, I guess—politicized, I mean, she makes this a political matter. She takes it to the government. Is that what you were trying to get at? Yeah. Okay.

Kelsey: Absolutely. No, I thought that you described really, really effectively in the biography the ways that this traumatic brain injury as a result of this car crash resulted in a series of events: Gwin's institutionalization, her mistreatment that she experienced there, the experiences of injustice that she witnessed while she was institutionalized -- all were galvanizing or politicizing experiences. But in the biography, you also mentioned that after that initial kind of sight or scene of politicization at that rehabilitation center, that Gwin's political education in disability rights also came out of relationships that she would subsequently go on to build with other disabled activists, artists, writers. I'm wondering if you can share a little bit more with us about who were some of Gwin's teachers, who were her collaborators as she started to understand herself as a disabled person and as a disabled political advocate.

Jim: Yeah. Okay. You're right. Well she was like me when she started this whole journey. She didn't know much about disability rights movement. She didn't know much about the issues. She walked by people who had disabilities and didn't give much thought to their lives and their issues. Okay. I think that she-- as a matter of fact, in one of her speeches when she was talking about what she was doing, she started becoming-- after she created *Mouth* magazine, when started writing about these issues, she started becoming in-demand for speeches and things like that. And she says in one of her speeches that she was dumb as a

box of rocks when it comes to these kind of matters. She had to learn from day one. First, she learned by looking around and seeing what people like her were going through at the rehab facility. And then she started getting on the phone and talking to everybody who had been in rehab at any of the facilities that were run by this chain. She created a network of people that she was talking to about what was going on inside.

And then she started talking to disability rights leaders, all of them. You name any of them that were on the planet when she was doing this work, and she would have interviewed them and interacted with them. Some of them were big influences on them. And I could rattle off all the names. If you look at any disability rights catalog of leaders who are alive in the 80s, 90s, and 2000s, she interviewed them all. They helped her understand what their agendas were, what their concerns were. And I'll tell you right now-- and this is not a criticism, this is just an observation. And this is probably a fact. I don't know where you folks are who are listening to this podcast. But if you got in your car right now and went to your local mall and talked to 100 people and ask them for the names of one or any disability rights leaders in the movement for disability rights, pre-Americans with Disabilities Act and post, any time, name one, you walk up to 100 people in the mall and ask them for the names of a woman's suffrage movement leader, you'd probably get one or two names. An abolitionist leader, a anti-war, Vietnam War movement leader, a gay rights leader, you name it, a civil rights leader. Okay, you better get somebody out 100 who would come up with Susan B. Anthony or John Brown or Harriet Tubman, you know, Abbie Hoffman, you name it. Martin Luther King better come out of somebody's mouth, right. Harvey Milk, okay. One disability rights leader. There are many. There are dozens. How many can you name?

So if I asked you-- you asked me the question, who did she go to? She went to them all, any of them who are alive. But nobody knows who these people are. I sprinkled their names in my book. And one of the things I wanted to do in this book is I wanted the book to be read. And I didn't want it to be an encyclopedia to the disability rights movement. I sprinkled names that you can easily Google and find out about these people, names and a little background. And this was a narrative non-fiction biography. It was done in a structure that was a journalistic structure, right. You won't see the word-- this was not an I, I, I. And this was not one of these hero-worship biographies. It was a biography about a woman and her life. And she happened to be very active in the disability rights movement. I didn't want it to be all about the disability rights movement. But I wanted that to be the heartbeat, kind of like a drumbeat in the background. And you knew it was around. You knew there was something going on. And she was covering it. And there were people involved in it besides herself. She was a part of a movement, part of that chorus, right. But I mean, I can name the people. But they're not going to mean that much to a lot of people.

But the people that she was really learning from-- I mean, Ed Roberts in California, she had a telephone relationship with him. And she wrote about him. All these people who were the leaders became sources for stories in *Mouth* magazine, her magazine. They also became featured. She would do Q&As with them, "What's on your mind?" What are the issues? It was like, "What Kelsey says was--" or, "What Caroline says--" that was the running feature. But instead of Caroline or Kelsey, it would be Justin Dart or, you know, Ed Roberts. You know, it would be Marca Bristo. It would be some of the leaders that were out there on the frontlines getting arrested, rolling down Constitution Ave toward the Capitol, doing all that work out in the field to try to get the ADA passed, and then after the ADA was signed into law, trying to get it complied with and improved. And what were the other issues? I mean, just because the ADA got passed doesn't mean it gets implemented-- oh excuse me, it doesn't mean that people comply with it. And there were other things they were looking for in terms of using money for people to get services in the community or at their homes rather than in some

kind of institutional setting. I mean, there were all kinds of things that these people were fighting for and demanding and in some cases, succeeding in getting.

But you name it, Justin Dart was someone who she worked with quite a bit and who respected her quite a bit. And Justin Dart is the closest thing to a leader in the movement probably that-- I mean, if, he's-- you might want to start with him. I don't know if there is an MLK in the movement. But perhaps he is as close as you're going to get. That's my opinion. That's not necessarily true. But she was very close with him. But there were a lot of people who were leaders in the ADAPT --organization called ADAPT, right, who were actually on the frontlines, chaining themselves to doors and blocking government buildings and getting arrested. You know, these are people nobody knows. And she was more, I think, aligned with them than she was with government people and big shots, people whose names, like I said, you would not know: Kathleen Kleinmann and Michael Oxford and Roland Sykes and a lot of people like that. I don't know if you know the name Wade Blank, but Wade Blank, a big influence on her ways of thinking. And she was working with-- a lot of the people who worked with her, came to work with her on the magazine were people who were in the trenches, including Tom Olin, perhaps the premier, pre-eminent photojournalist who has been documenting the movement for decades in black and white. So those are some of the names. You can look them all up. And everyone probably deserves a book.

So you know, I told you, some of my answers will be short. Some of them will be long. I'm trying to make them intermediate because this podcast doesn't go on forever. What else can I do for you folks?

Caroline: No worries at all, Jim. I really appreciate that answer. And just to underline what you were saying about Justin Dart, I'm pretty sure in the photos where President George H. W. Bush is, you know, signing the ADA into law, Justin Dart is right next to him, right. So yeah, just affirming the connection she had with some really extraordinary leaders and really influential people in the field.

Jim: You're right, Caroline. In the Rose Garden, when the ADA was signed to law in July of 1990, the President was flanked by two people. One was Justin Dart Jr. And he was on one side. On the other side of him was Evan Kemp. And Evan Kemp was another person who Lucy worked with. And as a matter of fact, Evan Kemp's widow was very active with ADAPT and was a writer for *Mouth* magazine. She did a lot of work with Lucy. And they worked on some projects together. And this was before and after Evan passed away. So yeah, it's almost a small community of people who were very active in the movement. And Lucy was part of that community. She made herself part of that community. But she covered it too. That's what an advocacy journalist-- that's the difference between an advocacy journalist and what I did for my entire career. I mean, I'm a mainstream journalist. I'm a big supporter of mainstream media. I love mainstream media. I love the *New Haven Registers* of the world and the *New York Times* and all those, and the *Washington Posts*. But you know, those mainstream publications had a different way. They have a different way of covering the news, right? Lucy was an advocacy journalist. She didn't care about balance. She didn't care about both sides particularly. She cared about giving her community a voice and to let them know what was going on in connection with issues facing them.

And this was before the internet. This was before social media. Her publication, *Mouth*, was so important to connecting people and letting them know every two months about protests that have happened or were about to happen, about legislation that was being passed or should be passed, about first-person stories, what's it like, what are you going through, how do you feel.

Caroline: Thanks for that. I mean, I'd love to ask a little bit more about *Mouth*. Were there particular issues that, you know, came up over and over again or themes that were kind of consistently appearing in this magazine? Or any particular articles that you think were really influential? I'd just love to hear about any kind of standout things, right, that emerged as you were looking at this magazine.

Jim: Well that's a really good question. You know, Lucy published more than a hundred editions of *Mouth* from 1990 to 2008. And I've read them all. I've read every edition of *Mouth* magazine. And it was an education. And that's what she was doing. She was chronicling the post-ADA period. And nobody, I don't think, did it better. There were common themes. She was very concerned about Olmstead and the ability for public money to be used by recipients of public money in a community setting of their choice, their home, some other location. That was a very big thing. She was so against institutionalization. It abhorred her. It abhorred her so much that if someone, even a close friend, suggested that you couldn't release people from institutions, she would literally slap them in the face. And she was a woman who had great passion, great passion. I mean, more passion than you can imagine, more than the average person who is passionate. And she had a hard time controlling her passion sometimes. But one of the things-- another theme that was prevalent in her coverage was her campaign against the right to die lobby, the right to die movement. She was part of a movement called Not Dead Yet. And Not Dead Yet still exists. And she campaigned against Dr. Kevorkian and his ilk. That's her word. I don't know if your listeners remember Dr. Kevorkian. But they can certainly look up Jack Kevorkian and see that he was part of the other side of what she was representing. And Lucy actually organized a big rally outside the United States Supreme Court when they were debating whether to allow the Dr. Kevorkians of the world to continue doing assisted suicide, physician-assisted suicides. So that was a big theme of hers too.

But you know, the major theme I think that she-- or the major work she was doing, she was chronicling the work of the ADAPT protests. She wanted people to know that there were people like her and others who were willing to go out there and be radicals, to make noise, to be militants. And I was telling you about how passionate she was. And she would tell you that the disability nation, the disability communities are probably the largest minority group in America, right. And a very small fraction of that minority group was active in the movement. It disgusted her to some degree, if that's the right word, I would say disgust, that she couldn't get more people moved toward the movement. And that was one of the things she was trying to do too. The thing about her magazine was that it was both educating and writing to the people who were already in the movement. But she was also trying to appeal to others to join, to get involved. It's for you too. It's not just for these people who are active in ADAPT and some of those organized movements.

So she was educating, agitating, energizing, trying to excite. And she was doing it coming from—you know, the thing is, she came from an advertising background. And so she had a way of packaging that was very accessible. She had a way of capturing your imagination and putting together stories and magazines and pictures and cartoons and witticisms that was compelling. And whether you agreed with her position or not, it was tough to not notice it. And a lot of people really looked forward to their next edition, next issue of *Mouth* magazine because you didn't know how she was going to package, what she was going to lead with. The covers of *Mouth* magazine, and I'm talking about in the 90s, in the 2000s, she was putting stuff on the cover of *Mouth* magazine that was not stuff you saw on the covers of magazine. If you went to the supermarket nowadays, you see all kinds of stuff on the covers of magazines. But in the 1990s, she was putting people of color on the covers of the

magazine. She had two women without a stitch of clothes on, embracing in wheelchairs. She had children.

Kelsey: James, I'm wondering if you can actually go back to something that you said that was really fascinating about Lucy's background in advertising and how it impacted her journalistic style. And you used that language of packaging--

Jim: Sure.

Kelsey: --that she packaged her stories in a way that was very unique to her. And you said earlier that as an advocacy journalist, she was disinterested in this idea of impartiality, of necessarily telling the story of both sides, which meant that she was writing pieces that were intentionally trying to persuade or convince.

Jim: Yeah.

Kelsey: And I'd love to hear a little bit more about how you feel her background in advertising and sort of the art of persuasion in advertising impacted her journalism.

Jim: Yeah. See, she was influenced by-- I mean, all journalists are influenced by their backgrounds, right, and their experiences. She did not have one moment of journalism training. She didn't work for her high school yearbook or newspaper. She didn't go to college. She was just well-read and very smart. Some people use the word genius. I think that word gets thrown around too much. But I don't know what genius was. But she was very bright. And I read her work. Her writing was excellent. But getting back to advocacy journalism and packaging, I think she understood because of her advertising background how to put together short and clever headlines, graphics, images. She understood that with a turn of a phrase you could capture someone's imagination. She came up-- I believe it was she, came up with the phrase, handicaptivity, right. I mean, she would come up with words like that, phrases like that. And they're like, "Where do they come from?" They're coming from probably a very exercised brain, a trained brain who had been in many smoke-filled brainstorming sessions in advertising, "Okay. How do we get somebody to buy that cleaning agent, those bran flakes?" You know what I mean? It's like, "How do we get them?"

And you know, one of the things that she regretted about her brilliance is that she could put together an ad that housewives would watch, and in a survey after the ad ran, would get excellent ratings. And then she would realize that something that she spent a great deal of her effort on was simply going to sell some Mr. Clean so that you could get those spots underneath the refrigerator cleaned. And it bummed her out that this was her way of getting a fat paycheck. She ended up skipping the rest of that career. She quit it at age 30. She could have easily, in the 90s-- or excuse me, what am I talking about? She turned 30 in 1960—let me see, I got to do the math now. Yeah, 1973, she turns 30. She was born in '43. '73, she says, "I don't want to lie for a living anymore," right. So she ends up, like we were discussing, talking-- I mean, she has this background. She knows how to do this. She could have easily made six figures for the rest of her life. It wasn't for her. She found a purpose in this magazine. But she had skills.

And one of the things she did was she did study some magazines that she thought were getting through. And one of the magazines that influenced her was a magazine called *Madness Network News*. And it targeted the psychiatric industry. And it was particularly against shock therapy, right. So she knew that if you had a target, if you had an enemy, you could focus your resources toward that enemy. And to her, she was in a war. And her war

was with all those people who were oppressing and not recognizing the needs and the civil rights and the humanity of people who were her audience. And she knew how to reach that audience. She figured it out. She figured out that graphics, bold statements, some humor, and absolute willingness to share her pages with people who are going through the struggles. There were a lot of first-person narratives that she would have in her magazine. She realized that people like to talk and share their experiences. And she gave them an opportunity to do that.

I don't know where that came from. I don't know if that came from the advertising industry or not. But maybe it did because, like I told you before, her advertising campaigns and the success of them were tested. As soon as a new ad ran, for instance, on a Sunday night or on a weekend, that Monday morning, there would be survey teams calling up people at their homes saying, "Were you watching a show last night? Did you see the ad? Did it appeal to you?" And so they got feedback. I think she understood that feedback can lead to a successful campaign. But I don't know. I never got to interview her. And I never saw in her many journals and records the theory that she had. I'm simply reading between the lines after reading over 100 editions of *Mouth* magazine that she had a flare. She had a way of writing short. She would have a, at the end of-- or usually at the end of every magazine, she would have like an editor's note, "This is what's on my mind." It was short. It was sweet. It was personal. And I think she understood that, you know, small bites of powerful words can be penetrating. I think that was her style. And it may be traced to the ad business. I think so. Like I said, you're influenced by your experiences.

Caroline: I mean, you've already alluded to this to some extent, Jim. But you're welcome to say more about it. Were there places that Lucy really sort of diverged from or was distinct from other activists of her time, whether in terms of her beliefs or her tactics?

Jim: Yeah, I think there was-- yeah, I think she was distinct from a lot of people, whether it was a journalist or others. But one of the things that was clear about her is that she was, in her mind, very clear on what she wanted and what she thought was right. And even close associates, people who had gone through some tough times with her, she would disagree with fiercely. And she wasn't easy to deal with as a result. And she didn't care that she wasn't easy to deal with. A lot of people care. You know, they want to be collegial. They want to go along. But that didn't seem to be an obstacle for her. But one of the things that made her a little different is that there were other publications writing about the disability rights movement, but none as in your face as *Mouth*. She believed that you had to really grab people and shake them. And I think her style was to not hold back, not to pull punches. She would even criticize allies if she thought they weren't living up to her standards, doing enough, doing it right from her perspective, being militant enough, being agitating enough. So she held, like I said, allies to her standards.

For instance, there was one individual who ran a very big program for people with disabilities in the United States, a very big program. And this person got lots of grants and got lots of money and was able to build a new facility, a nice new facility to provide services. But Lucy went after this person because this facility was built outside of town, not on the bus line, right. How do people get their services? She was very concerned about this. And she took this person to task. This is a person who was an ally, who nobody took to task. She took him to task. So she didn't care who you were or what you were. If you didn't live up to her standards, she was going to criticize you. And she did. And believe me, you didn't want to get criticized by her. She packed a wallop. And so that's the kind of-- she was policing not just what the government agencies were doing or not doing, not just what the Department of Justice was doing or not doing in terms of making sure violators of the ADA were prosecuted

or sued or whatever. She wasn't just going after those public agencies. She went after her allies and criticized them and said, "You could do better. You can rethink this."

And like I said, she actually had a column that she ran in *Mouth* magazine for a while. It was called the bestest and worstest CILs, CILs being Centers for Independent Living. And she would go out-- went out with one of her colleagues. Some of her staffers would sometimes visit some of these Centers for Independent Living. They'd get in the car, and they go drive there. And they'd ask them for their 990s, those being IRS documents, the 501(c)(3), not for profits, got to generate, and look at how much you were getting paid, how much money you're bringing in, and the services you were providing. You know, this was a woman doing investigative reporting who, like I said, was not trained to do this stuff. It just occurred to her, "This is something we ought to do." And believe me, you did not want to be on the bestest-- or on the worstest CIL list. You wanted to be on the bestest CIL list. And, you know, this is unique. People weren't doing this kind of stuff. And this is one of the things that she also was trying to do, is educate mainstream media journalists about ways you could approach covering the movement. I worked for mainstream media all my life. And I still do. And how well or how poorly did we cover this movement? And you would think about all the movements to get front-page coverage in the history of movements, how well did we cover, have we covered, are we covering this continuing movement? She was very concerned about trying to get people in mainstream media to take attention and make this part of their coverage.

And one of the things she did, she put together packages of information that she sent out to mainstream media editors and say, "Hey, look, this is what's going on. You might be interested in it. You might want to send somebody out to cover this." How many advocacy journalists do this? You know, I mean, she was doing stuff. I think she was she was working hard at her craft. And I think that if you wanted to-- look, I teach mainstream media techniques. That's what I do. But if you want to learn how to become an advocacy journalist and to do it effectively, I would say get yourself some copies of *Mouth* magazine. Okay.

Kelsey: Oh my gosh, that was such a brilliant answer. And there are so many different directions that I could go in. I have a lot of questions for you.

Jim: Follow-ups are okay. They're permitted.

Kelsey: I'm glad. But I wanted to pick up something that you said earlier about the ways that Lucy Gwin was unafraid of sort of taking on allies, so addressing other advocates. And I hadn't made this connection until just now. But because she wasn't writing for a mainstream media news outlet, she was very much catering to a specific audience. She was addressing advocates and activists. That meant that she could be inclusive of a different range of issues. In mainstream media, there's an assumption that you're not writing for kind of this niche market or a readership of disabled people necessarily. I think a lot of the mainstream media coverage that I've seen about disability rights issues takes on a sort of educational tone of trying to teach able-bodied people about the disability rights movement or about disability. And *Mouth* magazine was unique in that it was the voice of activists and advocates talking to each other somewhat. So I want to zero in on the relationship between *Mouth* and major disability rights organizations like ADAPT, which you mentioned earlier. And for those of you listening who haven't heard of ADAPT before, this stands for American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today. And I'm wondering, Jim, if you can say a little bit more about the role that *Mouth* played both in supporting organizations like ADAPT but also challenging their approaches, their strategies for organizing.

Jim: Yeah. Well mostly, I would say that *Mouth* magazine was an ally of ADAPT and a supporter. And *Mouth* covered ADAPT's actions. And when I say actions—and when I say action, an action in ADAPT speak is a demonstration or protest, an activity, an event. And so they covered these actions where people would go to Washington in particular. Usually, they would be meeting in-- and usually, they would have one big action a year, usually in some city. But they often were doing things in DC. And *Mouth* covered these things. And they covered the personalities, people who were ADAPT leaders. And they photographed them. They were more supportive than anything. But look, she had writers with different perspectives, and she supported their perspectives. And she had her own perspective. Every movement has divisions. Every movement has differences of opinions. The New York media covers the New York Yankees, right. They generally want the New York Yankees to win. And when they don't win, they get down on them, right. When the manager loses, when he makes a decision that costs a game, they criticize, right. There are things you do when you're covering a movement, even if you're supportive of the movement, that you point out.

And she was willing to point things out whether she believed in them or not, sometimes. For instance, one of her writers, one of her very talented writers was covering the movement and had an observation that the movement's actions, the ADAPT philosophy of going to a public building and blocking the entrance and requiring police officers to clear the field so that people, members of the public can enter, employees of that agency could enter or exit, that maybe it was not the way Martin Luther King would want a movement conducted in peace and with love. And there might be another better way because isn't it violent to require a 160-pound man, who happens to be a police officer, to pick up a 260-pound wheelchair with somebody in it, and move it, and ruin their backs, and be on unemployment or worker's compensation, or whatever it is? Is that the right way to do things? She allowed this writer to write a column, a perspective piece about this. And it was very critical about the way ADAPT was led.

Now you can argue, and maybe this would be a good subject for further review, that ADAPT, at one point at least in its evolution, was male-dominated and didn't listen to a lot of women and their perspectives. And that was something that might be—that might be true, it might not be. Maybe it's unfair. But one of the things this writer did was, said that, "The ADAPT leadership did not listen to all perspectives, was not open to different views and that they could learn from what other people were thinking and talking about relative to their philosophy of actions, of protests. Maybe there was another way to do things. Should we talk about it?" So it was quite a provocative piece. Now, I don't know if Lucy agreed with every word of it. But she allowed it to run. And it really got ADAPT upset. And some people, according to what I'm told, canceled their subscriptions. Lucy was willing to do that. Now, I don't know that it made her comfortable. I'm not saying that she didn't care. I'm not saying that she was not afraid to do that. She might have been afraid and still allowed it to happen. But she allowed her writers to have an opinion. And at the same time, like I said, Lucy would be willing to write about some of the divisions, some of the concerns, just like a Yankee beat writer would be willing to write about some of the things that were causing damage to the local team, the Bronx Bombers.

So, you know, it was a way of, I think, being responsible while still supportive of the movement, a way of being a responsible watchdog, but at the same time rooting for them. You know, I mean, she would participate in some of their actions. She would hand out protest banners. And she was active with them, covering them while she was participating in them. I mean, it's like you can't do that as a journalist, right. We can't do that as a mainstream journalist. There's no rooting in the press box, right. You don't care if the Yankees win or lose. You're not supposed to show it. But she cared. And she showed. And that's the

difference between advocacy journalism and what a lot of other people practice. I hope I answered your question. It was a very good question. And I hope I gave it justice.

Kelsey: You absolutely did it justice. And I loved what you said about how she viewed-- it sounds like she viewed publishing a multiplicity of perspectives even if she understood that there could be an outcry --

Jim: There would be repercussions.

Kelsey: Right, that she felt like she had a responsibility to publish a multiplicity of perspectives. And it's making me think about, honestly, conversations that I've had with contemporary disability justice advocates or activists. And from what I understand about movement history, there is often some discord or some anxieties about this idea of airing your dirty laundry, of publishing work, or speaking openly about dissent within the ranks because it could be perceived as revealing a weakness—

Jim: Yeah.

Kelsey: --you might want to keep under wraps so that it doesn't fall into the hands or the mouths of people with more power who could shoot down a new movement of minoritized people. But in the conversations that I've had with other activists, I've really appreciated this reframing of critique as a demonstration of love and support, as an extension of this idea of responsibility, that we want to create strong movements that are responsive to a multiplicity of perspectives, that adopt a variety of strategies. And I think that Lucy Gwin, her publication history, the way that you've written about it, really embodies that kind of showing up as an advocate by showcasing the many different perspectives that comprise a movement and giving them space. Yeah. You mentioned a publication that I don't remember the name of earlier, *Madness*.

Jim: *Madness Network News*.

Kelsey: *Madness Network News*, and I know in the biography you also mentioned *Disability Rag*, which would become *Ragged Edge*, and I think that that predated but also ran concurrently alongside *Mouth*.

Jim: Yes, you're exactly right.

Kelsey: Right. So I'd love to hear more about the ways that *Mouth* was distinct as a publication. What were the differences between *Mouth* and other publications like *Ragged Edge*? And did you get the sense that *Mouth* inspired other disability rights or disability justice publications after it stopped running?

Jim: Yeah. Well that's a lot of good questions. And let me see if I can address it from the beginning. In terms of *Madness Network News*, that phased out by the time *Mouth* hit the streets. But it was a publication that definitely inspired her. And in terms of Mary Johnson's work with *Ragged Edge* and *The Disability Rag*, the two of them worked as kind of allies but in different ways. Mary Johnson's publication, Mary Johnson was more wedded to trying to cover the movement in a mainstream manner. She was influenced by mainstream journalism. And if memory serves me correctly, her husband was a mainstream journalist. And Mary played it a little more straight, right. Now, the interesting thing is that many of the writers, or several writers who worked for Mary, including Lucy sometimes, and several photojournalists who worked for Mary, also worked for Lucy. The difference was the

approach, okay. Now, there are ways to approach a story that are different, right. And you see it all the time. This happens in Washington. You read it in one publication. And then you see how it appears in another publication. Or you see it on one cable channel and then you see it on another cable channel. And you realize the same story can be packaged, and the themes can be changed, and the emphasis can be different, right. And it depends on the audience you're trying to capture and speak to and energize and agitate.

Okay. You see it very clearly and unfortunately, this is the way journalism is produced when divisions are exploited. Now, Lucy was writing *Mouth* magazine in a different time, a different era. There was no CNN at the time. You name the letters, they weren't there. All we had was a handful of networks. And we had Lucy packaging. And we had her doing it in a way that was maybe-- maybe her way is influencing some of the ways we see news packaged now, right. I haven't really given it that much thought. But when you look at the way she packaged, like I told you before, she was not that concerned with both sides. You could find both sides. But she wasn't concerned about both sides. She was concerned about appealing and informing her people, her community, Disability Nation, of things she thought they should know about, that they should be incensed about that, that they should be active writing their legislators. This is back when people actually wrote letters. They didn't text. They didn't write emails, okay. They didn't put stuff on social media. They didn't shame anybody on Instagram.

So she wanted them to take action, okay. And Mary Johnson had a different way of approaching things. And she did it very well. Someone should write a book about Mary Johnson and her publication. That's for someone else to do, maybe. But Lucy, in terms of influencing and what-- I think I've explained to you the difference between her approach and others. And in terms of influencing others who are now doing stuff-- now, *Mouth* went out of business in 2008. Lucy died in 2014, six years later. She was failing physically in 2008. They were trying to find somebody else to take over *Mouth*. They were unsuccessful. And I don't think there is anything-- I'm told, at least by people of Lucy's generation, people who subscribed to *Mouth*, who looked forward to it, that there is nothing that's filled the void. Now, that may be argued. That could be argued. The thing is that the new generation of disseminators of information, they have publications online. They have blogs. They have things that aggregate. They're doing something. They're a younger generation. They have a different approach. They have a different way of appealing. But some of these people, I suspect, don't even know who Lucy Gwin was. Maybe they'll read the book. Maybe they'll discover her. But they're young. And they're doing things that-- they're getting the word out. They're getting the word out in their way. And so there are people doing things in the vein of Lucy Gwin. I don't think anybody's doing it quite the same way. But they may not even be aware that they have a predecessor who was doing this kind of work.

Kelsey: On this topic of legacy, one of the things that I appreciated so much was how accessibly written this biography is. And I can imagine it having appeal both to very academic, formal disability historians. But also activists and advocates, I imagine, will also be reading this book. And it's exciting to imagine that a young disabled journalist or, like, someone working on a podcast could interact with and read your book and be inspired by Lucy Gwin's approach to journalism and storytelling. I really think that that's a distinct possibility. And it's really exciting.

I have another legacy question for you that picks up on something that you mentioned earlier about sort of what were the hot spots for Lucy in terms of her advocacy work. What did she feel the most passionate about in terms of the issues that she was foregrounding or showcasing the most? And you mentioned that she wrote and organized around corruption in

the rehabilitation industry. She organized and wrote about physician-assisted suicide, in part, through the organization of Not Dead Yet. And I'm curious to hear a little bit about what impact you think her work had over time when it comes to taking on the rehabilitation industry or through the legacy of Not Dead Yet, so thinking more about physician-assisted suicide and people who have organized against that issue.

Jim: Yeah. Well I wish I could quantify how her efforts might have moved the needle in the direction that she was trying to move it on the issue issues that she cared about so much. But I will say that if you just start at the onset, the thing that got her going to begin with, the head injury rehab industry, okay, she wrote about it, that was what the publication was first known for. And the publication was first known as *This Brain Has a Mouth*, okay. And it later became simply *Mouth* magazine because she was including people of all walks, not just people who are brain injury survivors or survivors of brain injury like herself. But when she first was waging her campaign against the rehab industry and writing about it, she was also imploring federal agencies, state agencies, local agencies, anybody to do something about the brain injury rehab industry. And she was part of the reason, maybe a big part of the reason, that a very large chain broke up. And the FBI did investigate that chain. They, as a matter of fact, carted away 750 boxes of materials. At the time, the agent in charge said it was the biggest raid in terms of volume of material taken from one of their targets. And they investigated.

And while that investigation was going on, at about the same time, congressional hearings took place looking into the brain injury rehab industry. And a big reason that the congressional hearings took place is because there was somebody in Rochester, New York, making a lot of noise about the lack of care and the amount of insurance money that was going into questionable, if any, service to people who needed service, who needed help. And Lucy testified at that hearing. And it was conducted by a guy named Ted Weiss, a congressman who cared about civil rights matters quite a bit. And that hearing took place in 1992. And Lucy wrote on *Mouth* stationery, *Mouth* magazine stationery, she wrote a very effective piece of testimony for that hearing. That's in the record. And one of the things that she talks about is the questionable care. But she also talks about brain injury and talks about how there are no two cases of brain injury that are the same. You know, brain injury, if you read between the lines, what she's telling you, it's not like breaking a leg or breaking an arm in which you get an x-ray, and you can see where the break is, and you can see where the repair is. And it's not like that. And she was trying to explain that brain-injured people are unique people. And every injury is different.

And she was trying to explain to them what she, in 1992, was going through, the frustration that some entity could, from her perspective, milk the system and be allowed to do this. And she got them-- she got this before a congressional panel. People from New Medico, the chain that she was particularly concerned about testified. Former employees supported her perspective, some of them. Now, New Medico was never charged with any crime. And it's important to note that despite the FBI investigation that there were never any criminal or civil charges. But they did break apart. They sold off their businesses. And they were investigated. Now, was that something that Lucy should be credited for? I'll leave it to you. I'm just writing. Like I told you, I wrote this biography as a journalist. This is a journalistic product. Journalists don't put opinions in their copy, okay. So you don't know. If you read my stories, you don't know if I'm a supporter of Joe Biden or Donald Trump or Hillary or any of the other galaxy of politicians out there. I just write, okay. You decide what's -- you read between the lines. You determine.

So I can't tell you what her legacy specifically is. I can tell you that she wrote an awful lot about how the Department of Justice had a very powerful tool to make sure that people with disabilities were treated in a certain manner and that public buildings and any public entity that got public money or any entity that got public money had to do certain things to make sure that the playing field was equal. That elevators, bathrooms, drinking fountains, hallways, entrances to buildings, exits to buildings were built a certain way. Now, like I said, just because a law is on the books, it doesn't mean it's going to happen. I'm sure you can go down-- you could probably go out and find buildings that are under construction with public money that are not ADA compliant. You can find hiking paths, bike trails, snowmobile trails, you name it, okay, can everybody use them? Right?

Kelsey: This is a little bit of a pivot, Jim. But I wanted to really compliment you on how personable and intimate your writing style is in this story. And I think that it really beautifully reflects Lucy Gwin's character. You've already mentioned that she wasn't too concerned with being likable. She could be combative. She could be fiery. She was very persistent. And she was a really passionate person. And I think that your writing style captures that combativeness and her tendency towards being an agitator for change. And you also do a really good job of, I think, balancing Lucy's involvement with *Mouth* and with the disability rights movement and grounding the story that you're telling in a more personal, familial life history. And one thing that you write about extensively in giving this backstory about her family, you mentioned details about the deaths of her parents and her sister.

Jim: Yep.

Kelsey: And I remember one passage from the book. You write about Gwin's own self-awareness of having an overdue bill. Like, that's the language that you use, an overdue bill, as the only remaining member of her immediate family. And I'm curious if you can say a little bit more, and I know that this might just be you inferring, like, based on the sources that you encountered about Gwin's life, how you think Gwin's really personal relationship to death and illness and suicide and institutionalization in her family went on to influence her disability politics after her car crash.

Jim: Yeah. Well again, like I mentioned to you earlier, Kelsey, is that I'm a journalist. I'm not a psychiatrist or a psychologist. I've never studied Freud. I know of these theories and philosophies out there. But what I would say is that-- I would restate what I said to you before, that, you know, you bring to your writing and to your work your experiences. And she had some tough experiences. It's clear to me that her upbringing in Indianapolis, in a creative family, with a father who was in the advertising business, and a mother who was an educator and an artist affected her. And the fact that the-- it's very clear that the father was a very dominating figure, a big personality, a drinker. And he left the family several times, and then completely. And he died in a situation in which his brain in his skull enlarged. It was a tough death. And her mother died of some sort of dementia or Alzheimer's situation. I'm not quite clear which it was. Her sister, who was her best friend, died suddenly and abruptly as a 21-year-old in 1968. She didn't make it out of the 60s. Now the older sister lives on, perseveres, bounces back, and is an adventurer and is searching and is carrying the weight of loss around for a long time and maybe even the guilt associated with some of these losses. It weighs on her.

Her father behaves as a man. I can't say that he was suicidal. But he behaves in a way that is somewhat reckless. The mother at one time asks Lucy to put her out of her misery. The sister is suicidal. Lucy reveals that she has suicidal ideation. And then when all these people are no longer on the planet, when her mother finally passes away, Lucy's alone. She's the

last member of her family. And there are a lot of people in the world who go through mental illness, periods of depression. And I think Lucy can relate to that or related to that. And she had some low periods. And she wrote about it. And she talked about it. And that phrase that you just referred to is something that she thought about. She thought about ending her life when her sister died. But she didn't want to do that because her mother was still alive. Now when her mother passes away, she's wondering if this is the right opportunity to get to that item on her checklist. She didn't do it, as you know. And she lived for another 25 years.

And what she did with that extra 25 years that could have been snuffed out somehow was a lot. It was over 100 issues of *Mouth* magazine. It was a lot of connecting people in the disability community to each other and letting them know about things that were going on in the movement and in their lives. It's one of the powerful themes of the story, if you ask me. I mean, that's one of the reasons you want to do a book about, like this. It is like, what did someone accomplish after they got up off the mat, right. Some people don't get off the mat. She did. That's one of the things that separates her and distinguishes her, right?

Kelsey: Yeah. And I think that what you're describing is also sort of the beauty of biography as a genre. You really beautifully capture a multi-dimensional history of a human being. I loved that this wasn't just the publication history of *Mouth*, that we really get comprehensive insight into formative experiences from Lucy's childhood, relationships to family members that further flesh out even though we can't say definitively-- like you said, you never got to interview Lucy Gwin or ask her questions about the ways that her life history influenced her politics. But as a reader, when given that information, you can ask more questions about what were potentially the many different influences that went into her politicization eventually. And it was really, really beautifully rendered.

Jim: Well here's the thing, Kelsey. Thank you very much for saying that. I appreciate it. But Lucy lived for 71 years, right. A lot of things, a lot of moments happen in 71 years. And I learned about a lot of them in big moments of her life. And what I wanted to do is not just write about what she did as a disability rights activist and advocacy journalist. That was one of the things she did for a big chunk of her life. I wanted to figure out how Lucy became Lucy. And I wanted to help the reader kind of understand how she became who she became because-- as you were trying to, I think, ask before about how she approached her journalism and how she approached her activism-- and it gets back to everybody carries with them in their field of work their background and where they came from and the things that bruised them and scarred them and made them who they are. So I wanted to go figure out where she was bruised, how she was scarred. And she left a pretty good trail for me. She was not quiet about her thoughts. This brain had a mouth. And she talked to a lot of people and told them a lot of things. I talked to a lot of those people. They remembered a lot of the things she told them. She was not easy to forget.

She also left quite a legacy of writing. And like I told you, when we started this conversation, a lot of it was at the archive. A lot of it happened to be in other people's private collections. Many people opened up very important, private of collections to me, very important. And Lucy also wrote a memoir. It came out in 1982, we neglected to mention this, well before she got into the disability rights movement. She was searching. She was an adventurer. And she spent a year on big, very large boats as a deckhand servicing the oil rigs off the coast of Louisiana. Okay. Now you could have written a book about Lucy Gwin at that point in her life. She was a very interesting person. She knew that her year of experience in a male-dominated field was a good feminist story. And she wrote it. She was a first-time writer writing a memoir. And Viking Press read her manuscript and said, "I'm going to publish this woman's work. It's pretty well done."

Lucy, at this time, was in her 30s, right, first time, first-time memoir. Okay. You write your memoir when you're 30, 32, 35. Okay. Call up Viking. Tell them you got a manuscript waiting for them that they've got to publish. And you wait for the rejection, okay. It's going to come. Don't feel bad. It happens to everybody. Lucy didn't get rejected. Her book comes out in 1982, *Going Overboard: The Onliest Little Woman in the Offshore Oilfields*. Come on, you're kidding me. The woman didn't go to college. Not only didn't she go to Yale, she didn't go to any college. She didn't go to anywhere. So she was a remarkable communicator. And this is after she was in the advertising business for a while. But she was a remarkable communicator. She put together sentences very effectively. So like I said, I'm sitting up in that archive, and I'm reading this stuff. And I'm saying to myself, "Somebody ought to write a book about this woman. And the first publisher I went to with the pitch agreed. I was ready for the rejections. I was lucky too. I mean, I didn't get it-- I didn't try Viking. I tried the university press route. But my hat is off to the University of Massachusetts Press that saw it as I did. This was a compelling story about a woman and her life and her interesting work in the field of disability rights. So I hope you have at least one more question.

Kelsey: We do. We do. So a couple of times, you've mentioned this really fantastic anecdote of going into the archives, unsure about what you would find, encountering Lucy Gwin and looking at all of those materials and realizing, like, this will support more than like a long-form journalistic piece. This is, like, a book. I am really curious if you could reflect a little bit more on how your perspective and your approach, your skillset as journalist meant that you wrote this book in particular in a way that is likely different than what a disability historian would write because of your toolkit and your experiences. So how do you feel like your background as a journalist influenced the shape of this book, what you gravitated towards, the way you wanted to tell the story?

Jim: Okay. That's a good question. Okay. Let me see if I could start here. First of all, this biography is the work of a fellow who has come to appreciate biography in particular and historians in general. Historians and biographers do incredible work. I like memoir. I think memoir is wonderful. There's great memoir out there. And you can learn a lot from memoir. And memoir is one person's perspective about perhaps a slice of their life. And the reliability of memoir is questioned, can be questioned because the memoirist is writing about his or her own life. They may leave out some stuff that they don't want the reader to know about, right. A lot of memoir is about, "I accomplished this. I did that," particularly political memoir. And every politician running for president writes a memoir. It's all about their accomplishments. Okay.

Getting back to biography and history, I have been an investigative reporter for a good deal of my life. And that's a highfaluting phrase. Every reporter is an investigative reporter. As a reporter, you're asking questions and looking for things and trying to put together the truth. Now, I had the title of investigative reporter because I got to spend a great deal of time investigating. But every reporter is doing some degree of investigation on every story because people just don't show up and give you the story. You have to go out and get it. And then you have to double check it. And you have to verify. And you have to get to the root of information to make sure it's not BS.

But investigative reporting allowed me to learn how to go to public repositories and see what was there and extract information and interview documents to see what they told you. And then they also-- as a reporter in general, I got pretty good at interviewing people, getting them to talk to me, being willing to share stuff maybe they wouldn't, on first blush, want to share with someone, particularly a stranger. So all those things are valuable. But getting

back to biography and history-- and this is a phrase-- I've studied biography. I was trying to become familiar with biographical work and structures. Biographers approach biographies different ways. There's all kinds of different ways you can approach a biography, including-- there are some biographers to get into speculating, "He did this. He did that. It must be because of-- they must have been wanting to do that." They conclude, they suppose. They use words like seems and appears.

And there are some biographers they are, do psychological biography. They say, "Well obviously, because this happened to him when he was a child, this is why they grew up to be this way," right. And they get into Freud and all this other stuff. You know, there's different ways to approach biography. And there are many biographies that are 600, 800, 1,000 pages long. Now, I'm a journalist. I know that you try to get to the heart of the matter and you respect the reader. You respect the reader's time. But I have a great respect for biography and for history and for historians because what they do-- and this is not me who came up with this phrase. I read it somewhere in my research on biography. But I love this phrase. Historians are investigative reporters of the past. Now, think about that. I'm an investigative reporter. I know how hard it is to be an investigative reporter of today. To get to the truth of what happened today is hard. And you see every day on the news and in the newspapers and particularly in social media, people talking about what's going on in the world, and it's not true, right. We have all this stuff that's available to us to check things out, to get to the heart of matters, to weed out the BS from the fact. And we still are deluged by misinformation, disinformation. And it's hurtful.

So think about historians and what they're doing. They're going back and they're digging out information that is tens of, decades old, centuries old, people writing about wonderful people who haven't lived on this or haven't walked this planet in eons. And they're going out, and they're writing biographies about these people. It's amazing what they do. I have great respect for it. So I approached this project with deep respect and awe for what has been produced in the field of biography. I was going to try to add to that literary universe a short item about a big person. And you folks were undergrads not that long ago. I can tell from the sound of your voice. But maybe you can remember way back in your undergraduate days, not you, but maybe some of your classmates did not read every assignment that was assigned, right. Okay. I'm an instructor at a university. I know that some of my students will read every word and more of what I've assigned. And then there are some students who will not read an assignment that you could read at your average stoplight. It's a one-minute read, okay. Now, I am very cognizant that people's time and interests are limited. So I wanted to write a biography that was accessible, that someone, if they read the first page, there's a chance they might read the second page. And if they read the second page, maybe they would continue for a couple of more pages. And then they would realize, "Wow, I'm already on the second chapter. Yeah, I'll give it one more chapter," right.

Okay. So I studied biography. And there's some wonderful biographers that have written some beautiful pieces, much more researched, much better written than what I produced. And I learned from them. And I saw what they did, their structures. They'd made sense to me. And I distill, and I tried to figure out how I could do that in a shorter piece. And one of the things that I do, Kelsey and Caroline, is I listen to my students. I learn from them. And what I encountered-- one of the things I do is I talk to my students about what they're reading, okay. None of them are reading 1,000-word biographies. And some of my students who aren't particularly good readers, I would ask them, "What are you reading?" And I would see the glint in their eye when they talked about the books that really appealed to them. And it struck me that-- one student in particular talked about-- and this is an author who was on my radar for various reasons, a former journalist, a current journalist named Mitch Albom. He

wrote a book called the *Tuesdays With Morrie*, a short book, powerful. And he also wrote a book, *Five People You Meet in Heaven*, a short book and powerful. One's fiction, one's nonfiction. This student talked about how she read the fiction book multiple times. And this was a woman who didn't do a lot of reading, assigned reading, okay.

And it struck me that you can write a book that's potent, that doesn't have to be a thousand words, that people will remember and talk about and say to someone else, "I read this book five times," right. And I just want somebody to read this once. Okay. So I had a goal, short, I wanted to include information about the disability rights movement and some of the leaders and people who should be recognized. And I wanted it to be a narrative. And it was structured. Now, at the risk of sounding immodest, I would tell you that my book-- or this book, Lucy's book, it's really her book because it's her words, it's the words she left behind, I just collected them and organized them, is a book that followed some of the biography that I was influenced by. You start with a life-changing event. Or you start with a moment that characterizes the person. A significant moment. You don't start the book with a chronology, "Caroline was born in Edmundston, the daughter of--" right, "And she went to public schools. And she got all As." You don't start it from day one. You start it with a moment, a significant moment. And I started with a significant moment, a life-changing moment, right.

And then you back up. And then you go back to the chronology. And then you bring it back up to that moment, and then what happened after that moment, right. So it's a structure that I use that I thought was the tried and true. And it's a journalistic structure too. The story starts in one-- in the prologue, it starts one place. And in the epilogue, I return to that place. This is a tried and true journalistic structure. Narrative journalism is often this way. You start somewhere. You go full circle. And you come back to it. And what happens in the middle is the story. And like I said, at the risk of sounding immodest, this is a structure a lot of people can use, not just in biography, but in memoir, in fiction, in all kinds of writing, in creative writing. So I didn't invent it. I just applied it. And I think that one of the reasons I did it this way is because, you asked me, Kelsey, how my background in journalism might have impacted this report, this long report about a woman, this is how-- these are the things you learn in many years in journalism. You learn how to structure stories different ways. And this is a narrative non-fiction structure, okay.

Caroline: Thank you so much for that, Jim.

Jim: Look, I feel terrible because I sound like I'm a lecturer. I'm really just trying to answer your questions. But they come out like a lecture. I'm sorry about that. And I apologize.

Caroline: No, no need. I was just going to say I think Kelsey and I both-- if I can speak for Kelsey, both really appreciated learning not only about Lucy Gwin, this passionate partisan for justice, right, but also about your craft, right, and your process of putting this together. And I think we, as disability historians, often worry a lot that our work is not actually reaching the communities that we want it to reach, right. We're not writing in ways that are really accessible. Or we're not necessarily always able to get at the emotional core of some of the important stories that we're trying to tell. And so it's really wonderful to hear more about this from your perspective and hear about the craft of biography and the craft of storytelling. And I think that's really valuable. So thank you.

Jim: You're welcome. I loved your questions. These are, really, you folks are a credit to your university and to your field of study. So I really appreciate what you've asked me to dig in and think about. I appreciate it.

Caroline: Well I have to give Kelsey all the credit for those. She was the one who drafted these ones. So kudos to Kelsey. Before we let you go, Jim, we wanted to ask if you have any other current or upcoming projects or work that you want to share or you want to take this opportunity to plug. I think our audience would be delighted to know more about what you're up to.

Jim: Okay. I don't have any specific next project. I am glad that I accomplished this one. And one of the things that-- I got to tell you something. This is going to sound like a cliché and hackneyed. But doors open, and you walk through them. And you see what's there. And a door opened when I saw this file. And I walked through it. Another door has opened recently that's giving me an opportunity to do some editing for a magazine. And I'm busy doing that right now. And it's really amazing. I'm telling you, the longer you live, the more you realize that things happen, and you shake your head. Doors open. And I could bore you for a long time with my doors open speech. But I won't do that to you. You can tell that once you wind me up, I can get going. But right now, I'm editing a magazine, okay. It comes out every two months. It's not advocacy journalism. It's mainstream journalism. It's got a niche. And I think about Lucy putting on a magazine every two months, managing staff, organizing, crafting, and going through this process of reading over 100 *Mouth* magazines and analyzing them and thinking about what she did. And writing about it has helped me prepare for what I'm doing right now. And sometimes, I sit there, and I think about Lucy when I'm doing this work. So we can save my lecture on doors opening for another show, okay.

Kelsey: Oh thank you so much for talking with us this evening, Jim. This conversation has been so enlivening. I learned even more about Lucy from you in this conversation than I did from the biography itself. And I know that our listeners will find this conversation to be a really exciting, informative complement to the book.

Jim: Thank you.

Kelsey: That's exactly what we want.

Jim: Super.

Caroline: Thank you so much, Jim. It's just been an absolute pleasure to have you on the podcast. We really appreciate it.

Jim: The pleasure was mine. It really was.