

Can You Hear Me, Now?

By Katherine Magnoli

“I want to see feisty disabled people change the world.”—Judith Heumann

These motivational, transformational words were spoken more than 50 years ago by the internationally-known disability advocate Judith Heumann. Her words helped to unite a generation of people with disabilities who crawled out of the shadows of discrimination and into the light of freedom and inclusion.

Today, the purposeful energy of her words can be heard through keyboards clickety clacking away with words of fury and fight. You can hear them in the tears of mothers shouting into their phone cameras and webcams about how their son or daughter deserves a real place in this world. You can hear them through megaphones and boldly-written signs on the street by people with disabilities fighting not to lose services allowing their basic needs to be met—basic needs that help them get closer toward not only a seat at the table, but to having their voices heard.

OT Services and a Life Changed Forever

An example of the power these services hold can be seen in the simple fact of my typing this article today. This would not have been possible were it not for occupational therapy services I received as a child and what I learned at what was then called St. Agnes Children’s Rehabilitation Center. The skill of holding a pencil, taught to me by my wonderful occupational therapist “Kathy,” unleashed a world of opportunities for me. This one action helped me find an activity that I loved to do.

Many adults, when looking back on their childhood, will remember their favorite doll or hula hoop. For me, I remember hours of lying on my living room floor tracing letters in one of my training booklets. Then, after mastering this, I began writing independently, an action that would later become my main source in expressing my imagination and emotions when the world seemed cold and distant in a small town with little to no diversity. All of this would not have been possible had it not been for “Kathy” putting that pencil with a rubber grip in my hands and teaching me the proper placement of each finger.

THE WRITER'S LIFE UNFOLDING

Over the years, my love for writing has only grown from booklets tracing letters, to writing essays for schools, to coming home and expressing my emotions in diaries—an action that started in my teens, but that I still practice today. At the age of 25, after years of self-loathing from the bullying and abuse that I received from peers, I decided to turn my love for writing into a career. This occurred after I met a man at my dialysis treatment who offered me an opportunity that would change my life forever. The opportunity I am referring to is the one to be a volunteer teacher assistant at a school for children within the Autism Spectrum and other learning disabilities.

THE KIDS, THE BOOKS, THE HEALING

I will never forget the first day that I wheeled into the classroom and met each of their smiling faces. Their warmth, compassion, and acceptance of me helped me to find my own. This, coupled with observing their inner strength to navigate their peers teasing and ostracizing them, inspired me to heal the wounds I had carried for almost two decades.

Now, as an adult, I use what I have learned to help children who may be dealing with the same feelings I so remember. I do this by writing children's books about characters with disabilities that turn supposed weaknesses into strengths.

- The first character of whom I have written is [KatGirl](#), a superhero in a wheelchair. KatGirl's

adventures thus far have included helping children who cannot hear or have difficulty doing so, childhood obesity, cultural challenges, and mobility disabilities. In these stories they find their worth and have a real chance to showcase their abilities and break down barriers.

- The second character is Pete, a blind detective, who shows us that we can use our other strengths to guide us through life and help others, too. These stories have educated and entertained thousands of children.

None of this would have been possible if not for the occupational therapy I received as a child. In those years, I learned skills for a lifetime and opened doors through which I never would have entered.

Let's Keep Changing the World

In conclusion, to paraphrase the immortal Judith Heumann, we ought never lose our feistiness and our insistence on change that will make a difference in so many lives.

So let us continue to hear those keyboards clickety-clacking, those tears speaking truths, and those megaphones and signs that shout to pay attention to our existence because we are worthy of our place in this world.

About the Author



Katherine Magnoli is an inclusion advocate. She began her journey of advocacy by writing and publishing Children Adventure Books about a superhero in a wheelchair. Her books are titled *The Adventures of KatGirl*. Over the years, Katherine has read her stories to thousands of children. Since then, Katherine has expanded her advocacy by participating and being the title holder of Ms. Wheelchair Florida 2017. During her time Katherine developed the Abilities Program, whose activities were used during Disability Awareness Month and Inclusion Week in 2018. She also created beach access in Sunny Isles Beach, Bal Harbour and Surfside.

After this, she joined Miami Inclusion Alliance to help bring awareness to the epidemic of Abuse against People with Disabilities. In 2021, she was awarded the Idelio Valdez Advocacy and Leadership Award by the Florida Developmental Disability Council and became the representative of District 11 for the Commission of Disabilities Issues Board. In January of 2025, Katherine was elected as Chairperson for the Commission of Disabilities Issues Board. In late 2023, Katherine Magnoli had the honor of becoming a Regional Champion for the Christopher Reeve Foundation. This led to Katherine being interviewed on their podcast entitled Nurse Linda, along with conducting a seminar about signs to look for if someone with a disability is being abused by their Peer Support Group. Her connection with CRF grew and in early 2024, she was asked to Emcee their Annual Summit in Washington DC. This recognition has helped Katherine expand her advocacy by conducting disability etiquette training for students at University Level and prestigious Organizations such as American Civil Liberties Unitraining forne is currently very active on social media helping educate the masses on inclusion of people with disabilities.

Katherine books can be found in two prominent locations the first being her very own nonprofit website; KatGirlandFriends.com The second location is Bridges - .Unique Boutique at the Palisades Mall in Rockland County, New York to get her book series on their shelves.