Hear My Story: Kathrine Switzer transcript

**Lisa MacVittie** 00:00

I'm the last survivor of the Holocaust in our family,

**Jackie Congedo** 00:03

Behind the words, pictures, and artifacts in the museum are people whose stories of survival and hope come alive to inspire new generations of upstanders, one by one, these stories stir the soul.

**Al Miller** 00:18

Can there really be hope for us?

**Bella Ouziel** 00:21

Mine was 40018. My sister was 40017

**Jackie Congedo** 00:28

Holocaust survivors, their descendants, liberators, champions of justice and courageous upstanders ask only this - hear my story - so that the lessons they teach will echo for generations,

**Elisha Wiesel** 00:40

I will never meet someone else like my father, but there are many of us who, if we come together, can keep his voice alive.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:48

These stories will change you. They will move you to action, inspiring the best of humanity every day.

**Kara Driscoll** 01:02

Hi. I'm Kara Driscoll, Director of Strategic External Engagement for the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. This episode is part of our celebration of the Cohen Family Upstander month, and we're especially excited to welcome our guest to Cincinnati as the honorary Marshal of the Upstander 5k. Kathrine Switzer was the first woman to officially run the Boston Marathon in 1967, paving the way for millions of women, including me, to embrace the sport and claim their space. She's an author, activist, founder of 261 Fearless and a powerful example of what it means to be an upstander in motion. Kathrine, welcome. We're so happy that you're here. I mean, it's just personally a thrill to be able to sit down with you and interview you. I can't believe we're here.

**Kathrine Switzer** 01:54

Thank you. Kara, it's great to be here. I'd heard about the Holocaust & Humanity Center, but I had no idea of the work you're doing and the research and the poignancy that this exhibit displays. It's just astonishing. The whole world should really see this. It's amazing. Congratulations.

**Kara Driscoll** 02:16

Thank you, and thank you for the work that you're doing as an upstander. And it was wonderful to be able to walk through the space with you and show it to you and and you got to see a little bit of Cincinnati. What did, what did you think of our town?

**Kathrine Switzer** 02:30

I love your town. I it's more liberal than I thought it would be. And I love the fact that it was pride day today. And actually, I have to say that after you're taking me around the exhibit today, I really am humbled. You think that you've done your share in life sometimes, and I know I've accomplished a lot, and I've worked hard, but you know, we you hear the stories of heroism here and and you wonder, would would I have had the guts to do that? Would I have been that much of an upstander. I did mine in sports, and my life was never really seriouslyin danger. And so you just wonder, could I do that? Do I have that much resilience and strength and bravery? I don't know, but I would love to think I do.

**Kara Driscoll** 03:19

we I hope that we all feel that way. And I think walking through the space and being in the space every day reminds me of the resilience of humans and what we can endure. And you have that story yourself, and you know I told you, hopefully I won't ask you all of the same questions that you always get. I want to go back to that moment of you at the Boston Marathon, running this race in your in your sweat suit, that image of the race official jock, semplin, simple, simple, simple, almost there, trying to shove you off the course, that that's such an infamous and iconic image. But what's something about that moment or that day that people don't know or don't ask you about?

**Kathrine Switzer** 04:07

Well, I don't think most people know the back story. I think people just think I showed up to run and a man attacked me because I was a woman. And actually, it's more complicated than that, and that is that, I mean, I had parents who were very, very strong role models. And my father especially encouraged me at a very early age, like I was 12, to not go off and do something frivolous, like being a high school cheerleader, which they were when I was growing up, but but to to do something else. And he said you should run a mile a day, and you'd make your field hockey team and be one of the best players. And I thought, I can never do that, and, and, but I went out and I ran the mile a day, and it was such an empowering experience for me that I fell in love with running from, from the standpoint that I felt so strong physically, but I was also very strong mentally, because I knew I could run a mile a day and other people couldn't. And so, you know, for. Long young kid growing up, that was very powerful weapon, and it stuck with me. And then, when I heard about the Boston Marathon, I really wanted to run it. Luckily for me, I was had just transferred into Syracuse University. I wanted to study journalism, because I wanted to be a sports writer. Again, a very unusual thing. And while I was there, I met a guy who was really old. He was 50. I was 19 and and he had run the Boston Marathon 15 times, and he took me under his wing, and he never thought a woman could possibly run a marathon. And I told him that I really wanted to do it. And we argued and argued for weeks, and I reminded him that Roberta Gibb had actually run the Boston Marathon in 1966 by jumping out of the bushes. He wouldn't believe it, like so many people, but he did say, if you show me in practice, I'd be the first person to take you. And I said, hot diggity, I got a coach and a dream, and we trained hard, and the day came to run 26 miles, and I didn't think we'd gone far enough. I felt so good. And he said, I said, let's run another five miles. And he said, you can do another five? And I said, Yeah, can't you? And he said, Well, I guess. And we, we did 31 miles, and he passed out.

**Kara Driscoll** 06:15

And you were still standing

**Kathrine Switzer** 06:16

and I was still standing. And he said, women have hidden potential and endurance and stamina, and that's when we knew that we could, I could go the distance. I couldn't go as fast as the guys. I didn't have that kind of speed and strength, but I had the endurance. And that's what we're discovering a lot about women's sports today, and something that I have been an upstander about, you know, really showing women and showing the world that women deserve that space and can produce the goods and can be very, very talented. I mean, of course, what they're doing now is beyond even my imagination, which is pretty big, you know. But the interesting thing is, is that it was that, moment, and then the Boston Marathon, when my coach insisted that I sign up for the race and I signed my name, KV Switzer, because my dad misspelled my name on my birth certificate. It was always misspelled. So I started signing my name KV Switzer, which was cool for a sports writer, too. He collected the numbers for the team, because there were a group of us that went and there's a series of coincidences here. And I pinned on the bib number. It was snowing and sleeting. We all I had on baggy sweatsuits because it was so cold, I was pushed into the starting area, and my number was checked off like everybody else's. We thought there was no problem. And the men were wonderful, by the way, terrific to me. "I wish my wife would run," they'd say, "I wish my girlfriend would run. Give me some tips," and and so it was about mile and a half into the race when the press truck and the officials truck went by, and the press went crazy, seeing a girl in the race wearing a bib number, and the race director tried to get off the bus, and Jock Semple, the assistant director, pushed past him and just charged after me, and he was just like a bull in a china shop, and he was furious. He thought I was a clown, and I was making fun of his race and trying to pull one over on him. And obviously, because when he grabbed me, he just grabbed me by the shoulders and he threw me back and tried to rip the bib off and screamed "Get the hell out of my race and give me those numbers." And my coach was pulling at him and saying "Leave her alone." And he hit my coach, and then my boyfriend. This was another story, but he was only running because of a girl. Could do the Boston Marathon. He could run the Boston Marathon too without training. He was a 235, pound ex all American football player, so he took the official out with the most incredible shoulder charge. And Arne, my coach, said, "Run like hell." And down the street we went. And it was so horrible. It was so embarrassing for me, and humiliating. I felt like I had disrupted a really important race, like an Olympics or something. And the press were really aggressive, like, "What are you trying to prove?" And I said, "I'm not trying to prove anything. I'm just trying to run." And finally, I just knuckled down, and I turned to my coach. I said, "I'm going to finish this race on my hands and my knees if I have to, because nobody believes women can do it. They think I'm a clown. I am not a clown. I'm very serious about this," I said, "and I don't know about you, Arnie, but I'm finishing the race." And he said, "All right, all right, we're going to do it." And we did, and it changed my life. I often say, you know, I started the Boston Marathon as a girl, and I finished the Boston Marathon as a grown woman, because you go through a kind of lifetime in a marathon and and I just went through the whole thing about, why did the official do that? And I really wanted to kill him. And then I just relaxed, and I said, I. He's a product of his time. You can't do that to somebody because he doesn't get it. And I said it's up to women like me to show people like him, by example, by mediation, by working with them, not hitting them back, but being there and being an example. It took five years, and we finally got women accepted officially in the Boston Marathon by doing our homework, and he had to accept us into the race,

**Kara Driscoll** 10:28

and you kind of became buddies with him later. Is that right?

**Kathrine Switzer** 10:34

Empathy is really important. It really is, and that's one of the most important things I think about being an upstander, and I think that's a quality I really do have. I immediately knew it was a rainy, snowy, cold day. He was trying to get his race off on time, and he thought I was a clown. So he just had lost his temper. He didn't think women should be there. He obviously thought women should be home in the kitchen and and I said, it's just, you know, I said it's up to me to show him I'm serious, and that other women are serious, and that, of course, you know, you also, your mind goes crazy when these in this long race, you're thinking, you know, women, women aren't allowed, even those days we they couldn't go to, you know, Ivy League universities. So how are you going to get a degree from Harvard and compete with somebody who has a degree from Harvard and get a decent law job, you can't even compete. So give me the opportunity. And then the light went off in my head, and I said, "Oh my gosh, if I could only create opportunities for women, then they will experience this. But right now, they're afraid. They believe these myths of not just limitation, but of that their uteruses would fall out, that they'd turn into a man, that nobody would want them in life." And they were afraid of sports. They were afraid of taking on anything that was challenging. And I knew if I could just take them by the hand and show them that running is fun, it's easy, it's cheap, it's accessible. You feel so empowered, you feel like you can do anything. And then I worked out ways to create that, which we'll probably talk about.

**Kara Driscoll** 12:13

Well, I mean, from that moment, it seems like you stepped into really an advocacy role and took this on, and as an upstander or someone who's advocating for change, that can be, you know, really exhausting. So you know, during your career and your decades and decades of doing this, have you ever kind of hit a wall emotionally and thought, you know, I want to hang up the hat and do something else? Or how did, if so, how did you kind of like, get through that?

**Kathrine Switzer** 12:44

Well, running itself is its own reward. And so, you know, as exhausted as I was, and I mean, I had a full time job, I was putting the hub through graduate school. I was going back to graduate school at night, myself working on weekends. We had no money, very little money. And because graduate school was very expensive for him, and I was paying and I but every night, I'd go out and run, and I would get over the trauma of the day and my worries. If you run long enough, you don't worry anymore, you figure out things. But it's a great time to think. And I would come up with these different ideas. And the biggest idea I came up with was, if I could create women's events for women only, then the women wouldn't be intimidated, because we're not afraid to not wear our makeup in front of each other, right? We just don't want to go out and do it in public, but with each other, we're not intimidated, we're not too slow, I'm too fat, I'm too old. Everything women always say about participating. And so I started writing down what would what could happen, and I created a business plan and a marketing plan, and I took it to Avon cosmetics, which is at the time, the world's largest cosmetics company, and it's a women's company, see, and if a cosmetics company is going to endorse women's sports. It's got to be okay, it's got to be safe, right? And then it also gave an opportunity for women who really wanted to be an athlete, because we would create the event for you. So we had everything from from 10k races all the way up to a full marathon, and the full marathon was, was a global championship, and then we began using those events to leverage the International Olympic Committee and the International Amateur Athletic Association to encourage and endorse and make official women's events. And eventually we were successful in 1981 in convincing the IOC to include a women's marathon for the first time in the Olympic Games, which was in 1984 and interesting here. Do you know here in Cincinnati, in that first 1984 games, Julie Isphording was the third member of the US team on that first Olympic. Team. Yes, she was, she at the Olympic trials. She was, that was her graduation day from university Xavier, or Xavier University, I'm sorry, I don't know whichever. But anyway, she was in at the Olympic trials, and I was doing a television commentary, and I was talking about, I said, everybody with their mortarboards is cheering for her right now, as she's getting the third place for the Olympics,

**Kara Driscoll** 15:23

there's always a tie back to Cincinnati with everything.

**Kathrine Switzer** 15:27

Always. I thought that was great. I was driving into town last night, and I was thinking, hey, you know, I wonder where Julie is. I gotta look her up.

**Kara Driscoll** 15:34

Oh, that's incredible. You talked a little bit about the Olympics and getting the women's marathon added, was that kind of the proudest moment of your career, or when you look back at all all of these remarkable ways that you've impacted women's running and equality for women in sports? What are you most proud of?

**Kathrine Switzer** 15:54

Well, I would, I would definitely say, up to that moment, yes, definitely getting the women's marathon included in the Olympic Games, was, was one of my proudest moments. Wasn't the only woman who was pushing for it, of course, but but for me, with the program, I know it was a program that pushed it ahead and and made it happen eventually. But there were individual moments leading up to that, and then afterwards, of seeing women who like in Brazil, had no shoes, and they would show up for a race, and I'm not talking about Nikes or Adidas. I'm talking about they were so poor, they didn't have a pair of shoes. And if somebody is so poor, they don't have a pair of shoes, and they come out and they get a free T shirt, and they get a medal. When they finish, they suddenly feel like somebody, and they become somebody. It changes our lives entirely. Now, running was, there are other ways of doing it, I'm sure, but for me, the running vehicle was, was the most powerful. Believe it or not, a lot of those women finished an education. They learned to write, and they wrote me letters, and they would send me trinkets and and say, you know, "You changed my life." And I just, I just say, like my dad always used to tell me, "Pass it on."

**Kara Driscoll** 17:07

It's that ripple effect

**Kathrine Switzer** 17:09

yes,

**Kara Driscoll** 17:10

you know, giving them an opportunity and that empowers them and pushes them and inspires them to do

**Kathrine Switzer** 17:16

definitely, my dad, dad always used to say, she said, "Honey, you can't always thank people for everything they've done for you, but the best way is to pass it on to somebody else." So you're asking me then about a proud moment, the proudest moment in my life, right, when I came out of the Olympic Stadium in 1984 after after doing the broadcast of that race, we did it. We did it. And about a week later, I started getting this sort of postpartum funk, and I'm thinking, because, I mean the oh my gosh, what next? Yeah, sure. And I thought, well, you know what? That's really great for women who have the wherewithal to train and can it, can be an Olympic athlete. What about those women who can't drive a car, not allowed to get an education, not allowed to go out of the house by themselves, not allowed to choose their own husband. Have no control over their own lives whatsoever. Who are not allowed to run, who are not allowed to do anything with themselves, they are non people, right? How am I going to reach them? And I said, I'll never be able to reach them in my life. I can't do that. Well, then the bib number in the Boston Marathon, 261, here we go. That was my bib number in Boston became this because of that iconic photo of the official trying to throw me out, that number suddenly became a number meaning fearless in the face of adversity and and people were writing to me, men and women, saying, I'm wearing that on my back in my first marathon tomorrow to give me courage. And then they were inking it on their arm and saying, I look at that, and it gives me courage. And then they started sending me pictures of their tattoos. Now he's going to tattoo themselves with 261 I'm thinking, what does this mean? This is serious, because that's permanent. And what they were saying is, is they related to being told at one time or the other in their life they weren't good enough, they couldn't do it, and running showed them the way. If I could get that message out there. So the short answer now to all of this is that we created, sat down with some girlfriends of mine, one in particular, Edith Zuschmann, from Austria, and we created a nonprofit because I said, "I can't do another business. I don't see a business here." And she said, "Let's do a nonprofit." And I said, "I know nothing about nonprofits." And she said, "Well, we can learn." So we did, and we created this nonprofit where we reach out in the community. We go to them. You can't have people come to you, go into the community, be there and say, just say, "Hey, come along with me. Be my friend. Let's go out for a walk. Let's jog. Let's have a coffee together," you know. And they will come, and they did, and we're in 14 countries. And last summer, after the Paris Olympics, I went to Austria because we have, believe it or not, our first cohort of Afghan refugee women who escaped the Taliban with their shirts on their back. And they've joined 261 fearless, and they're becoming coaches, and they're learning how to run. And you know what? They're on their phones back home, saying, "You don't have to live like this." Wow, yeah, now I'm probably going to get assassinated, but I'll tell you what, I never thought I'd see it my lifetime. And I look at the pictures of my day with them, and I'm and I look really sad. The thing is, is that I was crying the whole day because I thought I would never, I would never make this breakthrough and and so I'm what is exciting also is that the nonprofit has grown, and the women we have working with us are man. They're in their 30s and 40s and 50s, at the top of their game, and they are full of passion and verve and and I, and I'm really, I'm excited about that, so I would have to say now that that's become my happiest moment in life, because I really see a future, and I really see it happening.

**Kara Driscoll** 21:18

Well, I'm sure it'll keep growing, and I'll wrap it here in Cincinnati. So, you know, you've talked about your nonprofit growing the way that running has grown, and we've really seen kind of the world shift around gender, sport and power. You just talked about the, you know, Afghan refugees running. What gives you the most hope today and what still worries you?

**Kathrine Switzer** 21:45

Well, I think, I think seeing, seeing that, that the ability to reach these people, these these women, I'm going to say women in particular, and please, this is not an anti male thing. Guys have been wonderful to us, and I'm hoping that we can continue to make that space grow, because I think there are a lot of guys who really want to be more allies and help, and who are, you know, sensitive New Age people.

**Kara Driscoll** 22:12

So you've had so many men throughout your life who have, you know, Arnie, and you know, so many others who have stuff done, yeah, you know,

**Kathrine Switzer** 22:20

I think in general, people are good. Yes, all right, guys, guys are wonderful. But like, for instance, I mean the whole issue of women's running safety, you know, we're going to have to be doing something in that space that's better. And I think guys were willing to help there too. But now I've forgotten the question, so sorry.

**Kara Driscoll** 22:37

Well, I just, I wanted to, what makes you hopeful about, kind of the shift in sports and job.

**Kathrine Switzer** 22:44

Oh, so I've told you that's, that's the hopeful part. What worries me is the political situation in the world right now. I mean, we're I just, I am very, very concerned about and I'm trying very hard not to be depressed about it, and I'm trying very hard to find ways of helping to change and help to be an upstander with that situation here, going through this museum and seeing what did happen in the world, and everybody thinks it's unthinkable, and yet there is so much hatred, there is so much derision, there is so much selfishness and preoccupation that I never thought I would see an end is taking a different form of the same thing, and I think we've got to do something about it. And it may not be easy. It never is easy. Actually.

**Kara Driscoll** 23:34

It's never, you know, and that's that's the thing about being an upstander. It's not easy in the moment, and you might be celebrated for it later. But you know, whether it's running and pushing through that's that was a horrible moment that turned out to influence your life. But it's not all glitz and glamor when you're trying to stand up to injustice, right?

**Kathrine Switzer** 23:54

I guess the other thing I really worry about are younger people you know, who seem to be so preoccupied with their phone and social media that they're not paying attention to the world, not voting, not taking an active part in their communities, not making things happen, not getting it, not really concentrating on the education and learning from the past. And maybe, maybe I, maybe I'm prejudiced about that, but I, I went to a No Kings march the other day, and there was a good turnout, but there wasn't anybody there under 60. That was worrisome to me. It's that's not the case naturally across the country, but I definitely would love to see young people step up more.

**Kara Driscoll** 24:38

Yeah, it's going to take everyone. It is really making an impact today and all kinds of different issues. Well, I could ask you questions all day long, and I'll be asking you more questions tomorrow at the upstander 5k but I want to leave on just one one more note. You know, being an upstander isn't always public or obvious. Sometimes, you know, we just said it, it's hard, but it can be lonely and quiet and sometimes deeply personal. Can you tell us about a moment in your life, maybe big or small, when you kind of knew in your bones this is what it means to stand up?

**Kathrine Switzer** 25:18

Yes, but it's funny.

**Kara Driscoll** 25:22

Humor is one of our character strengths.

**Kathrine Switzer** 25:27

The head of the Federation in Brazil, when I went to talk to him about organizing race, and I had a nice sponsor, and we had a good team organizing and everything else, he didn't really have to do anything, told me that my race wasn't going to be successful, that maybe we'd have 120 women show up, and that would be all, and that his daughter would not come. He wouldn't permit her to attend. And I said, "How old is your daughter?" And he said, "14." I said, "Such a pity, sir. A real pity." And he said, "By the way, my wife won't come either. Anyway, she's not interested. This isn't going to be a success." 7000 women showed up for the race... He was in helicopters, and he was a hero for for a week, you know, for and he was and I said, "Oh, Senor, we just couldn't have done this without you. Aren't you glad you came?" This is really me. Oh yes, this is wonderful, because I'm not stupid. I knew I had [to get] his vote for the getting the women's marathon in the Olympic Games, right? And he wasn't stupid because he looked like a hero, and he had a great sponsor in South America. So, you know, those are the things though, that that make me chew nails, but, but you need to. You need to cooperate. And like, certainly, after that particular meeting, I went to the ladies room and screamed, but, but you, you learn to hopefully work with people that are extremely difficult and and convince them. And sometimes it takes a long time, or sometimes it takes a big example,

**Kara Driscoll** 27:10

it's incredible. I need to pick your brain on how to do that a little a little bit more.Well, Kathrine, I'm so grateful that you're here with us. We're so looking forward to spending the weekend with you, and we just thank you for being the person and the upstander that you are.

**Kathrine Switzer** 27:27

Well. Thank you very much, and I want to congratulate you on creating the first upstander award in conjunction with the event, the upstander running event. I think that that's great, because I think a community rises when they see somebody receive such an award, and maybe, maybe not, aspire to get the award themselves, but aspire to do better and be braver. That's the... congratulations.

**Kara Driscoll** 27:53

Thank you.

**Kathrine Switzer** 27:53

Thank you.

**Jackie Congedo** 27:53

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