Hear My Story: Kayelin Tiggs transcript

**Jackie Congedo** 00:00

I'm the last survivor of the Holocaust in our family. 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** 00:20

See, mine is 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.

**Brittany Pavely** 00:59

I'm Brittany paveley, Director of Youth and Professional Learning. And in this episode, you'll hear from a woman who has worked to better the lives of others. Kayelin Tiggs is a scientist, researcher and advocate for women. She was an Upstander Award winner in 2023 here at the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center for her work, and we're so happy to have her here with us today. Welcome, Kayelin,

**Kayelin Tiggs** 01:20

hi,

**Brittany Pavely** 01:21

hi, thank you for being here.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 01:23

I'm so excited.

**Brittany Pavely** 01:24

Well, I mean, can we really just start by having a conversation about the work that you were recognized for?

**Speaker 1** 01:30

Yeah, sure.

**Brittany Pavely** 01:30

Yeah. Just tell us a little bit about you and the work that you do.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 01:33

Yeah, sure. So for the past almost four years now, I've been working to increase the accessibility of menstrual hygiene products to incarcerated women. But not just incarcerated women, girls in schools, just girls who have been left out in the margins. So this includes refugee girls and women, but my main focus has been on the incarcerated population. So in the past four years, we've been able to pass statewide policy so that all women in the state prisons are able to access their menstrual products for free. I was part of the coalition that actually included the Commission on Women and Girls here in Cincinnati, and the organization called Period Out at Ohio State. I was part of that coalition that secured $5 million in funding that schools could use to to get access to menstrual products and dispensers for the girls bathroom in grades six through 12. So we've accomplished a lot in four years. It's been a bumpy road, but the goal is to make sure that every girl and woman across the state of Ohio, you know, has access to these products, so that they're not missing school, they're not having to have accidents while they're behind bars, and just having basic their basic needs met. This is a basic need at the end of the day.

**Brittany Pavely** 03:05

Yeah, yeah. It's a it's a human right to be able to be sanitary and clean and healthy. Can you talk to us? Last year, you came and spoke to our Teen Upstander Coalition, which was amazing. Can you talk to us a little bit about the women that you worked with and what they were going through that that really kind of inspired you?

**Kayelin Tiggs** 03:28

Oh, yeah, absolutely. So all of this started in 2001 I was the Chair of Women in the NAACP, it's one of the oldest civil rights organizations in the country, and as Chair of Women, I was really big on women in leadership. That was what I wanted to see at the time. I wanted to see so many women in leadership positions. And then I thought to myself, one day, do we ever ask incarcerated women if they see themselves as leaders? Do they view themselves as leaders on the inside? And then how do they view themselves when they're released? And so I met with the woman named Heidi Arnold. She is a professor out at Sinclair University. She teaches in the prisons across the state. And so meeting with her, I spoke to her about my goal, I want to talk to formerly incarcerated women. We don't talk to them enough. And she set up a Zoom meeting, right? This is 2021, COVID time, so we couldn't really meet in person - everything's in Zoom, yeah, I'm a grad student. I'm working full time, so I had a Zoom meeting with about 36 formerly incarcerated women. They were just telling me all about their different experiences behind bars. And then somebody said out loud, one of the hardest parts about managing a menstrual cycle. I mean, one of the hardest parts about being behind bars was managing their menstrual cycles. And it just stuck with me. Yeah, and what was crazy was I experienced so much imposter syndrome when all of this work started, because I was like. Like this is blowing my mind. What do you mean you don't have access to menstrual products behind bars? And so what I realized that I had to do was I had to get proximate with these women. I had to gather testimony, I had to listen to their stories. Because when I started to do research on this, I was realizing that what the jails and prisons were saying was different than what the women were saying. There wasn't a lot of research out there around this for incarcerated people specifically. And so I realized, like, one thing that I'm gonna have to do is I'm gonna have to get close.

**Brittany Pavely** 05:36

Yeah,

**Kayelin Tiggs** 05:36

it's very uncomfortable because I haven't been incarcerated. And I was thinking, why would these women listen to me? So I realized one thing I had to do was to get proximate. I had to be in these uncomfortable positions. I had to visit jails and prisons. I had to listen to these stories that made me very uncomfortable to hear. And honestly, I was just astonished at my own ignorance and and what I learned was, while listening to these stories, not once did I ever think about the fact that these women were incarcerated for breaking the law, for something that they had done. To this day, all of the women that I work with, I don't know what they were incarcerated for, I never asked, because it was never important to me.

**Brittany Pavely** 06:21

Sure

**Kayelin Tiggs** 06:21

And one thing that I learned is, when you get proximate, certain things just don't matter anymore.

**Brittany Pavely** 06:23

Yeah,

**Kayelin Tiggs** 06:24

and so, I mean, you asked me, what I my experience is with the women, their mothers and daughters and sisters, and they've paid their time, and they're in prison for whatever they had done, but at the end of the day, they're still human beings. And so if anybody asked me what they're like, they're just like you and I

**Brittany Pavely** 06:50

so yeah, yeah, thanks for speaking to the overall humanity, right? Like, that's part of what we do here, is talk about how the broader humanity is what links us all, and that's so important, and especially for a marginalized group like women that are incarcerated, right? Thanks for bringing attention to their voice. Yeah, so the work that you did earned you the Jim Tojo award, right? And just a little bit about him. He was a physician here in Cincinnati, and prior to that, he had lived on the West Coast and was interned for being Japanese, yes, yeah. He actually graduated high school in an internment camp and eventually came out here to Cincinnati, but he also served in the military as a military intelligence officer, and it's a really interesting piece of his story that he initially was registered as an enemy alien with the US government and couldn't serve in the military, and he actually worked really hard to fight against that and continue to serve. So you know, he's an upstander for many reasons, but he eventually did go on to win the Congressional Gold Medal and for patriotism. So that is an incredible life award, right, to be to be given, and I know in the process you met his widow, Peggy. Can you talk to us about, you know, what that was like, and what Peggy was like, and what you could learn from her?

**Kayelin Tiggs** 08:29

Yeah. So while, first of all, I was just so shocked that I had won, so when I was on stage receiving the award, I was just like, blanked out. I was like, Oh my gosh, I can't believe that I have actually won this award and that people understand the weight of my work and so admittedly. So initially I was just in this kind of shock factor. But then reading more about Dr Tojo's life and his family and his wife. I understand their sacrifice. I wish I could go back and, you know, thank her for being a woman at that time and supporting her husband. Because I don't know if anybody asked her what it was like, right? You know, to support her husband during that time. I worked for the military. I understand how demanding that could be. He was a physician. I could only imagine how demanding that could be.

**Brittany Pavely** 09:25

Yeah,

**Kayelin Tiggs** 09:26

and they had nine children, so I really just, I don't know it was, it was great to meet someone who could understand what it's like to go through this journey of seeing the ups and downs when someone is trying to advocate for a good cause, and standing beside that. My family does that for me. My husband does that for me, and so I admire her for her work and being, you know, a supporter of all of this.

**Brittany Pavely** 09:58

Yeah, nine children. Wow, I can imagine you the like viral Beyonce moment when she won Album of the Year. Do you know what I'm talking when she was shocked? You know that's, that's what I see in my mind when you tell me that story. So part of the work that we recognized was your effort to craft legislation, right? And so can you tell us about the the journey, the legislative part of your journey, right? I asked you about kind of the women behind your inspiration. But can you talk to us a little bit more about the mechanics of that?

**Kayelin Tiggs** 10:33

Oh, absolutely. So when I first started this work, I started it working with a paralegal, and I believed that I could just get a petition started, and the Ohio legislature would pass some kind of policy. So the beginning phase of all of this started with research. I I thought that I could just get a petition going and that people would listen to me. And one thing that I quickly learned was that people aren't going to listen to you. There's so much work that has to be done to make sure that the voices of these women are being heard and they're on a platform and it makes enough noise so that people understand the gravity of what it is that you're trying to do. So we started off with the petition, and then the organizer of the petition suddenly passed away.

**Brittany Pavely** 11:27

Oh, wow.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 11:28

And so I was left on my own to do more research on what I could do next. Like I believe most people, they're ignorant to the legislative process, right? So one goal for me in this too, was to not only just try to make a difference, but to understand how laws are passed and how policy and legislation affects things like this, affects access to menstrual products, and understand how this issue is being perpetuated systemically. So I started with a whole bunch of research, and that's when I realized that what the jails and prisons were saying did not match what the women were saying. And so I went to Montgomery County Jail in Dayton, because they were the only jail that responded back and was willing to meet with me about this issue. And when I asked them what their policy was on how they administered hygiene products. They didn't have one, and this is when I knew that we were going to need state legislation, because they were saying that this wasn't an issue, but the women were saying that it was one of their biggest issues. What's the missing piece here? It was policy. So if you cannot, if you cannot prove that this isn't an issue, because you have a policy in place to make sure that this isn't an issue, then how can you deny the experiences of these women? So I started to use my military research brain, and I started to think about what it was that we needed to fill this gap, and I knew it was going to be legislation, and I had reached out to a bunch of different state representatives to try to help me with this, and I was ignored. This was 2021, this was a time where we as a state were arguing about what we should do with women's bodies. This is seen as a reproductive health issue at the time, so no one wanted to touch it. And then when I realized that there was no language around this issue in the Ohio code, I decided to write the language myself. And this is when I realized that people can legit write their own bills.

**Brittany Pavely** 13:40

Yeah.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 13:41

You just need to get a representative that believes in you, believes in what it is that we're doing, and is willing to shepherd this through the ohio legislature.

**Brittany Pavely** 13:51

Yeah.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 13:51

So I wrote the language. I went through a couple of different representatives, and finally I landed on Representative Latyna Humphrey, and have been working with her the past about four years now to get this bill passed. So that's how we started.

**Brittany Pavely** 14:04

That's how you started. And can you update us as to where things are at now?

**Kayelin Tiggs** 14:09

Yes. So when we first introduced this bill, it was House Bill 743, and then it was House Bill 30, and now it is House Bill 29 so we have gone through a couple of different general assemblies in four years, and right now, after the bill failed this past fall, we've reintroduced it, and this time around, we have joint sponsorship, both Democrat and Republican sponsorship of the bill, because we made so much of an impact on the house in the last general assembly, we failed in the Senate because one of the senators didn't believe that this was an issue, and they had the power to shut down the bill, and they did, but we understand. Understand the importance of this work. The house understands the importance of the importance of this work, and so we were encouraged to keep going. Our now Speaker of the House actually told us that they wanted to shepherd this bill through the House quickly, because they understand how important this is. So actually yesterday, we had our proponent testimony, and we had five formerly incarcerated women who went to the State House to speak about their experiences behind this bill.

**Brittany Pavely** 15:29

Wow, how incredible.

**Speaker 1** 15:30

Thank you.

**Brittany Pavely** 15:31

Oh my gosh. You're just really elevating their voices and all of this, and I really appreciate that.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 15:38

Well, they already have a voice. And I think the most important part of all of this, we initially started with just trying to increase access to menstrual products, but the most important part of all of this is to help people realize that they can advocate for themselves. Because I was wondering why these women weren't fighting for themselves, that this is something that they had gone through, and so now bringing them into this, asking for their participation and writing up the bill and asking them, you know, what is it that you want to see happen, has given them the tools to be able to now advocate for their own bills, and we have some of those women who have been poorly treated when they were incarcerated, and now they're taking it upon themselves to start writing their own legislation, and they're advocating for themselves, yeah? And advocating for the way that they were mistreated while they were behind bars, yeah?

**Brittany Pavely** 16:39

And what I hear is that, like, this is a journey, right? This is like a transformative journey that you're able to help support people through. It's like this collective understanding of agency and being able to be a change maker. You have to believe that you can do that before you go out and do it,

**Kayelin Tiggs** 17:01

yeah, and these women have so much hope, and that's what's been so inspiring, is because, despite what's happened to them, and if you listen to their testimony, will break your heart, despite all of that, they have so much hope, and I think that's a crucial piece in order to keep going. Yeah, you know when this legislature is telling you we think this is important, but not important enough to be a law. We know that this is important but not enough to put money towards it or to continue to edit the bill so that it makes more sense for them. It's the hope that keeps you moving through all of those changes

**Brittany Pavely** 17:37

and those continual like rejection points. Yeah, certainly hope is a huge aspect of that. So you currently work for the US Navy. You mentioned that you had a military

**Kayelin Tiggs** 17:51

Oh gosh I worked for the Navy years ago. Now, I'm working with the Air Force.

**Brittany Pavely** 17:55

Oh, she's in the Air Force now. Okay, yeah. And so without, you know, obviously going into too much detail. What can you tell us about your work and any kind of like synergies and what you're doing in your career and with this journey, and what you like about it?

**Kayelin Tiggs** 18:11

Yeah, so when I first started this work, I was working with the Navy, and I was conducting different research projects for Navy soldiers, essentially, and I felt like that work really assisted me in knowing how to research and advocate for these women. And now I'm a program manager in the Air Force Research Laboratory. And what I have learned through that work is that all of this advocacy work I'm doing, it extends to multiple areas, including the military. So historically, I think that we've just been focused on making our military more lethal, sure, you know, but unfortunately, I'm realizing you cannot train the human out of a person. So in order to create a military and inspire people who are willing to fight for this country, you have to speak to their humanness first. So I have been a part of different base organizations that do just that. We make sure that our soldiers are taken care of, and we make sure that in order to inspire individuals to want to sacrifice so much for this country that we have to understand them and what comes with that sacrifice on an individual basis. Yeah, you cannot train the human out of anyone.

**Brittany Pavely** 19:36

Yeah, that makes so much sense. And the continual thread of you, right? It's just like continuing to encourage people to see others as your whole self, right? Not you're an incarcerated woman or you're a military member, like that's not the only piece of them.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 19:55

It's interesting, because, you know, we incarcerate people. People in this country for killing others, but we give people in the military permission to kill others, right? And so I feel like it's all connected. Sure, if we believe that, you know, individuals can be trained to go overseas and kill other people and potentially have impact, then why don't we believe that incarcerated individuals who may cause harm to others may also experience an impact from that? Why is one different than the other?

**Brittany Pavely** 20:33

Yeah,

**Kayelin Tiggs** 20:34

and I think it just speaks to our our values, sure, and what we choose to label as criminal,

**Brittany Pavely** 20:41

right? Or acceptable, exactly.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 20:43

So the narratives between those different experiences is something that I've had to navigate. And what I've learned is that both groups of people are human,

**Brittany Pavely** 20:55

sure, absolutely kind of going back to your personal life again, you have committed so much time to volunteer work, and you know seeing this bill through the Senate, and what is your you mentioned at the start, you were part of the NAACP as and women's leadership was important To you, right? But what is the underpinning motivation for you, right? Like, what propels you forward to continue spending so much of your personal time on these amazing causes? But nonetheless, they're they take time and they're hard, right? So, yeah, can you talk to us about your motivation?

**Kayelin Tiggs** 21:39

There's a couple of different things that motivate me. I feel like I can find inspiration from anywhere. Honestly, I'm very inspired by, again, the hope of the women, by their courage to come out and tell their personal stories. Because without them, none of this is as tangible as it could be. I mean, when I came to speak to the students, right? I had to bring a formerly incarcerated woman with me, because I believe that only they can tell their stories. Yeah, so that courage that they have to speak about some of the most vulnerable aspects of their incarceration is very inspiring to me. It just reminds me that I don't have a choice but to continue with this work and to see it all the way through, and then I'm also feeling like this just kind of runs through my blood. So my grandmother, she was inducted into the Ohio senior citizens Hall of Fame, oh, in 2005 for her advocacy work in the 60s and 70s.

**Brittany Pavely** 22:38

Really?

**Kayelin Tiggs** 22:39

Yes,

**Brittany Pavely** 22:40

wow.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 22:40

So she's got a scholarship in her name,

**Brittany Pavely** 22:44

really?

**Kayelin Tiggs** 22:44

Yes. She was an amazing woman. She passed away shortly after in 2005 when I was in middle school, but she worked with pregnant teenagers who had just been marginalized and separated from their families because of this right in the 60s and 70s, but she was an African American woman who took this on, took on this role, and she created the Bethune Center. It's no longer standing, but this was a center for unwed pregnant teens, and her long list of of advocacy work landed her in the Ohio senior citizens Hall of Fame. So I feel like I have some of that flowing through my body, and then finally, I'll just let you know that I feel like I have a mutual obligation to justice. I feel like one thing I've learned through this work is that for so long, I waited for someone else to try to fix this issue because of the imposter syndrome that I spoke about earlier, I waited for someone else to fix it for months. I was talking to everybody. I was like, we need to fix this problem. We need to do something, but waiting for someone else to initialize the work. And then I realized that I had to be the one to initialize the work if I wanted to see this through.

**Brittany Pavely** 24:06

Yeah.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 24:07

And so I changed, you know, my attitude and my way of thinking from this kind of finger pointing to more self reflecting. I actually call this mirror justice.

**Brittany Pavely** 24:23

Ooh,

**Kayelin Tiggs** 24:23

yes. And this is where we are turning the tables away from kind of like finger pointing politics to more self reflecting justice.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 24:33

Wow.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 24:34

And we ask ourselves, What can I do in this moment? I'm the one who noticed this problem, so I should be the one to take this on? What is stopping me from being able to do this and then to go out and find the resources that you need, and to really just create this network of people who have this ideology of fixing a problem that they noticed, rather than pointing the finger? And waiting for some something else to get done. We do so much blaming right in the incarcerated system we have now it's everybody's fault. We're all so complacent with this. We allow narratives of fear and anger to separate us from these incarcerated individuals, and we label them as criminals and thieves and this and that, and it allows us to remain complacent and say somebody else needs to fix that problem, or that's somebody else's problem. It's not our problem when we when we are full of fear of something or someone. It allows us to be complacent in their maltreatment. And so I'm trying to change this ideology of pointing fingers to more of self reflecting.

**Brittany Pavely** 25:49

That's the upstander mindset, right? It truly is, I mean, that you could not have explained it any more beautifully.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 25:56

Thank you.

**Brittany Pavely** 25:58

One thing that sticks out to me, well, first of all, just the the courage that it takes to essentially, you know, like you said, look back on yourself. That takes courage and bravery, because you have to level with yourself about what you are actually able to do, you know. And so that's scary for some people. But also, I like how you mentioned the piece about, you know, when we're giving people these labels, right? It creates fear and it it creates disengagement too, right? Like, it's easy to label something and say, Well, you know, I'm not that something, so it doesn't, it's not relevant to me. And we see that in our work here a lot, you know, with the history of the Holocaust and the power of words, and I really appreciate how you're thinking through those things and letting all of our viewers hear about it too. Yeah, that stuff's in our mindset.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 26:54

Thank you.

**Brittany Pavely** 26:55

Yeah, it's not like, oh my gosh, I don't know what to do. It's what can I do right now?

**Kayelin Tiggs** 27:03

And once you've adopted that mindset of I have to do something, you will find the resources. You will talk to everyone that you need to talk to. You will do all the research that needs to be done. You will literally find a way. And it's almost like this creativity, just it starts coming to you because you will experience rejection. You will experience people who believe that what you're doing isn't important, and once you have that mindset, it's what is going to keep you going, Yeah, and

**Brittany Pavely** 27:32

propel your perseverance, right? So, incredible.

**Speaker 1** 27:37

Thank you.

**Brittany Pavely** 27:38

So besides leadership, right, we've been talking about hope and perseverance and a little bit about perspective. I think we haven't named it right, but your ability to see an alternative perspective that maybe isn't the status quo, I think, is really incredible. And so can you just reflect a little bit on how you see yourself using those strengths in your in your daily life,

**Kayelin Tiggs** 28:02

absolutely so for me, advocacy has not become an extension of what I do. It is who I am at this point. So I feel like I have to embody all of those things that I've talked about, resilience and a mutual obligation to justice, and self reflecting justice, and all of those things. Because if we really want to see other people, you know, start working in these areas, then it's something that we have to embody. Because when we embody it, then we move like that, right? There's only so much you can fake. Yeah, there's only so much of it that you can fake. And so I think the work has really just shifted my mindset on justice. I feel like people believe that justice is this finite destination, like we've overturned this policy, that you can pass this law, and then we say that we've achieved justice. But I think like, well, what if justice is more like a mirror, right? What if it's more proactive? What if it's more like what can I do to make sure that these things don't even happen? Sure? So justice. A lot of people would think that justice is us passing the bill. In my opinion, Justice would have been us never having to initiate this whole process, because women would already have access to what it is that they need right, and even if we missed something right? Because, historically, jails and prisons were created for men, but we're seeing a dramatic increase in more women going to jails and prisons faster than we can change policy and legislation and infrastructure. So even if we were to miss something, if somebody comes, you know, forward and says, hey. This is an issue that we're overlooking. Justice would be to investigate that issue, understand the impact of that and start to make the change.

**Brittany Pavely** 30:08

Right?

**Kayelin Tiggs** 30:08

Justice shouldn't be we have to fight for four plus years for basic legislation and basic access, so

**Brittany Pavely** 30:16

and things like hygiene,

**Kayelin Tiggs** 30:17

yeah. So if we had a mirror, and we thought of justice of as more like a mirror, where we are constantly self reflecting, yeah, then more things would get accomplished a lot faster.

**Brittany Pavely** 30:29

Yeah, it's like cyclical, right? There's no finish line or check check box.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 30:34

So that's what I embody. I feel like I have a duty to do this, where the things that I do have to be more than something that impacts me. And if you start thinking in that way, then you can easily understand how something that may not affect you, you know, may affect me, right, right? And understand that and

**Brittany Pavely** 30:55

the linkage between all of us, right? It's so important,

**Kayelin Tiggs** 30:59

exactly,

**Brittany Pavely** 31:00

okay. So lastly, I feel like you've you've spoken to this a lot, but you know, what does it mean to be an upstander in your own words, in your own eyes? How would you define it?

**Kayelin Tiggs** 31:15

Yeah, I think that an upstander is someone who is proactive in their pursuit of justice, someone who embodies it like we previously talked about, it's seeing a problem, but understanding the human beings that are affected behind this problem, and constantly growing and adjusting yourself so that when other Issues arrive, you're more prepared to deal with them because you've done the self reflecting. You've done the work. So I think being an upstander is, again, not just some finite thing. I think it's a way of thinking, a way of being, a way of envisioning justice, and I believe that's proactively. I believe that if you are self reflecting enough, if you are thinking about other people and all things that you do and how it affects them, then you are an upstander, and you embody this in your everyday life.

**Brittany Pavely** 32:14

Yeah, I hear you saying upstanders humanize people, right? And they proactively look for opportunities to do that and also to reflect on themselves, right and upstanding isn't a a check box, it's a way of living.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 32:31

Yeah,

**Brittany Pavely** 32:32

that's incredible.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 32:33

Thank you.

**Brittany Pavely** 32:34

Thank you so much for your time.

**Kayelin Tiggs** 32:35

Thank you so much.

**Brittany Pavely** 32:36

I appreciate you

**Jackie Congedo** 32:38

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