

LBS4E2 – Arts-based Career building- A Multi-faceted Life with Kim Kilpatrick

Transcript – November 1, 2023

Naomi

So today I'm joined by Kim Kilpatrick. Kim was born totally blind and started out her career as a music therapist working with people with dementia and in palliative care. Kim has also been an "Access Tech" trainer and created and founded the "Get Together With Technology" program. She has served on many boards and committees, including Braille Literacy Canada, where she is currently the Vice President. And Kim has also been a professional storyteller for more than 20 years. She is working on her fourth solo show these days, and also on several other storytelling projects. So welcome to the show, Kim.

Kim

Thank you for having me. Thank you so much.

Naomi

So even in that short biography, I can say I know you have a lot going on, but I'd like to start from the beginning. So can you tell us a little bit about I think you're based in Ottawa? Is that right?

Kim

Yeah, yeah, I am. And I spent a lot of my growing up years here, although my dad was a diplomat. So I was actually born in Mexico, and they were posted there. And we lived in the U.S. a little bit, but we didn't live in too many exotic countries over my childhood. Although my dad did get some postings, like as I was older teenager and stuff, but I didn't live in those, those countries, but most of the time spent in Ottawa. Yeah, I was born blind, I have retinopathy prematurity. So it was really premature and was had only a little bit of light perception in one eye, which is what I still have. So pretty much totally blind, so that I was from a young age learning braille learning to use a cane, all of the all of

the things that I needed to know, to, to go through life. So I had a great set of parents who just encouraged me to do everything everyone else did. And were really good at showing me how to advocate and advocating for me, and, you know, just giving me lots of experiences. So I really am, I'm grateful for my family, you know, being so open about it, and learning about blindness and all of that. So, yeah, so I grew up, I went to W. Ross MacDonald school for 10 years. And then I finished high school in Ottawa, and then went to University where I studied music, and then music therapy. I always loved braille. I love learning to use the cane. I loved... not when I was a teenager, so much, I guess, using a cane and all that kind of thing. But, you know, I just grew up that way. So I just really love braille and started to really be interested in other technologies. Even when I was, you know, when I was younger, they didn't have as many as they do now, obviously, but you know. Some of the first braille displays I saw when I was a teenager, and other things, Opticon and things like that,

Naomi

Just for the listeners, can you explain what an Opticon is?

Kim

Oh, well, an Opticon was one one of like the first devices. It was a device that you, you ran a camera along a page of print, and it brought up the print letters in the shape of print letters on your finger, which you were reading, in a little display, like you had your finger in a little display. And I was never as proficient as some blind people that were reading everything with the Opticon. I learned it when I was at school for the blind a little bit, but I never really persisted with it. But it was the first kind of way of reading print before there were, you know, scanners and all the ways that we have now, our phones and everything to read print. I remember the first scanner I saw was probably the size of a desk, you know, it was huge. And now we have all the apps, you know, in our phones that we can scan everything. And so it's it's really quite amazing. It's amazing that my parents told me that when I was about two or one or something very young baby, they had seen a doctor, an ophthalmologist, and we're talking to him about things and he just told them that, you know, I would never see and that they should just let me do everything everyone else did. And they could teach me everything. And then he did say and this was in you know, this was way back in the day before all

of this. He said technology will make a huge difference. So obviously was a forward thinking ophthalmologist who cannot perceive some of the things that have that have happened in my lifetime, as technology has moved so quickly and so fast. But the really interesting thing I find when I think about it, as quickly as technology moves and how great is it is those basic skills of braille, and "O and M", and I still choose to use a travel with a guide dog. So, I mean, I trust my dog over my GPS, anytime. I trust my, you know, cane over apps that will say, you can cross or if there is such a thing, you know, like I, it's interesting because of all the tech and I love my tech, there's no replacement for basic good basic skills. And I don't think there ever will be. So it's a very interesting sort of juxtaposition between tech and you know, non tech things that you learn.

Naomi

It sounds like you've had so many different experiences, whether it's moving around from different places in the world growing up to being a part of technology changing so quickly over the years. I think we'll definitely come back to talking about how technology has influenced your life, because I know like you said, you're involved in in the community around tech. But that's a good point that you made that sometimes the basics, it's important not to forget those and that those skills clearly have really served you well, even though you've embraced new technologies along the way.

Kim

Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Naomi

One thing that I think has been around for, well, I guess it's the beginning of humanity is music.

Kim

Absolutely.

Naomi

Speaking of low tech. But I'm wondering, so how did you get interested in music?

Kim

I always loved music. I was always very creative. I, as we'll talk about storytelling, too, but apparently I was I was quite a storyteller and writer and I liked I liked the arts very much. And I was was playing music. I don't come from a musical family. But I was wanted to play instruments, piano and different instrument clarinet, and guitar and all these things. And I. So when I went to university, I studied music. And I pretty quickly realized that although I loved studying music, I really loved working with and being with people. So I was trying to find something that would mix these two interests that I loved. So I didn't really want to compose music, and I didn't want to not that I didn't necessarily want to be a performer, but I, I just missed interacting with people. A lot of my summer jobs growing up, my first summer job was a camp counselor with a regular, you know, sighted kids. And then I started to work in camps for kids with disabilities, and including a camp for a day camp for blind kids. I ran that in Ottawa University when I was in university. So I, I really love people, I would have loved them. And so I was studying music, and I just wasn't sure what I would do with that, and whether to change out and study something else, you know, social work or something, psychology, something to be with people helping people. And then a lady came and gave a guest lecture about music therapy, in one of my music education classes. And I just, I really felt almost immediately that I really wanted to do that. And I was so excited that I dragged my friend like, up the stairs and up the hall to ask her if, you know, I could register for this intro to music therapy course. And I did that. So it was an interesting thing to study music, but I was really glad that I found music therapy because it sort of mixed all the things I'd love to do together. And so I applied to study music therapy. Now, there are many, I think there are I don't know how many, there's a lot of blind music therapists in Canada, but so far as I know, I think I was the first so like, they had never had a blind student in the program. So I went to BC to study there. And at Capilano College, which was, I think, the first one that was there, and they hadn't had a blind student, but they, they were very great and open. And it was a small class, so you know, we were all together and everybody knew everybody and the Profs all knew us. It was small, small program, so it worked. I mean, there were some challenges with it. But in general, it was really good for me. So it was kind of it was great. It was great to do music, but it was also great to find that place where there was a mix of music and helping, you know, professions together. And I had a placement in

a dementia unit. And I absolutely hated it at first and I I said I could get through 12 weeks and I would never want to do it anymore. By the end of 12 weeks. I loved it and that was what I really, I really wanted to work in those type of places. Uh, you know, I really, really did love it there. Of course, it has challenges working in those units, when you can't see because, you know, there's a lot of interesting things that go on around you. And people don't remember you can't see. And so, but it's usually great because you just have to remind them and you just have to, you know, go with it, music therapy is using music to meet the goals of the people you're working with. So it's not like musical performance, where you entertain people, and you just, you know, that's, that's, that's all, I'll not say "that's all it is", because entertaining people is really a therapeutic in itself, and really beautiful and beneficial. But when you are a Music Therapist, you think about the goals of the person that you're working with. So someone is trying to rehab from an injury or from a stroke or something you are thinking about, "can we get them to use their hands again?" You know, "can we get someone to walk again?" Helping them by using music. So either playing music, playing music for them, that helps motivate them, try getting them to, you know, write a song to help them with any kind of emotional things. A lot of the goals for people with memory loss were socialization. So sometimes they remember music long after they remember words, or they can sing, and they can't necessarily talk very well anymore. Music brings back memories, good memories for them, they would often respond to music and move to music when, you know, they weren't as able to do it in other ways. So a lot of socialization, a lot of, you know, stimulation and, and just for them to be able to communicate with someone and be with someone and interact social interaction and help them from like loneliness, isolation, reminiscing, you know, they would remember things when there would be music that was meaningful to them. And, and also, I think, you know, just giving them choice. So sometimes they are living in a place where they have no choice of when they eat, what they eat, who, you know, when they go to the bathroom when they have a bath. But they do have choice whether or not they interact with me. So I would always ask, "would you like some music?" And sometimes they say "no", and I knew they loved music, but it was kind of like, it gave them a choice to say "no, I don't want that." And if you came back in five minutes, they might love you and say, "yes", they did. So you know, it's kind of usually they say, "Oh, my dear, I haven't seen you forever", you know, then you like, okay,

that's good, you know, but sometimes also, give them the choice. Would you like music? And then sometimes would you like a slow song or fast song? Or would you like to play an instrument or not, you know, so you're actually giving them choices that they can, they can make choices about what they're doing with you. So often, Music Therapists, Art Therapist, Recreation Therapist, you know, all of these people are way more popular than medical staff, because they love you, and you're just, you're doing something they like, and, but you're also meeting their goals, if they're really agitated, you can sometimes calm them down. There were lots of lots of examples where, you know, I could be with someone who's really, really anxious and pacing and wandering, and just do music with them and help them, you know, come back sort of to themselves a little bit, you know, and lots of lots of cool examples of, of those kinds of interactions where, you know, they couldn't talk very much anymore, but they could sing. And then sometimes after they sing, they would say, "thank you very much." There are lots of books written now about music impacts all parts of your brain. So from the very most primitive to, you know, the most advanced, so even when you're, some of your advanced centers of your brain are affected, and you're not able to think in that way anymore, you still have that ability to, you know, to respond to music and sounds. So, I mean, that was always amazing to me to have those type of interactions with people. You know, and I just, I love those spontaneous kind of in the moment, interactions that I had with people, even though they knew they couldn't remember sometimes that I couldn't see. I think they really they understood it in some way. Because, you know, I might be looking for something and sometimes they put my hand on it, or, you know what I mean? They seem to have a sense that about it, a lot of times. Some of the people that super are taught me were concerned at first that it wouldn't be safe for me to work in those environments because there's sometimes people that are quite, there can be some, like violence there. I never had it myself, I never had it. And there were times where I walked. Well, there was one time where they had called a code on this lady, that not to approach her not to walk with her because she was really in a state. But I didn't know what that was, I was new, and I didn't know and I just walked with her, and my dog, and she just walked with me. So she didn't, you know, she didn't, she didn't do anything with me. And I never, I never felt that unsafe. Or if I did, I would just like back up back up and leave the room. I guess I was also lucky in that I, I always had my I had my guide dogs with me in the units

and actually working on a unit was the reason I applied to get a guide dog because I would be on the units and sometimes I would bump into people in wheelchairs, and I didn't mean to right, my cane would just hit that. And it would startle them. And it was started on me, but they weren't able to tell me they were there, some of them. So, you know, I would just bump them and then there would be so I started to think about it and and thought, you know, if I'm ever going to try using a guide dog, maybe this is the time and I really found that guide dogs on those units were extremely helpful because they take you around the wheelchairs and all the carts that are in the halls and you know, all of the stuff that that is just never in the same place. And also, but I used to joke with my bosses that I would just send my dog over in a car, and they could send my paycheck back with her because because you know, they just love the animals and "oh is your dog gonna be there?" And, you know, they just, they just they found that they found it great to have that come combination music and animal and, you know, so it was tricky a bit, because when I would apply for dogs, I would tell them, it's a bit of a challenging environment. And they would need to be able to work where people are actually patting them, because they would forget not to pet them. So I'd walk down the hall and there'd be hands on my dog's back. And I just moved the hands out of the way, because there's nothing, you know, you could tell them, and they'll forget the next minute. So I would tell them, you know, they have to be comfortable around wheelchairs and walkers and all this. And these people sort of yelling and calling out and you know, putting their hands on my dog, and my dogs were all really good about that they they were trained and taken into nursing homes, or like long term cares, during training, you know, before I got them and just checking to make sure they were good with that. And they were like they were I know sometimes at the end of the day, it's like "don't pat me anymore, like I've had enough of this" and, you know, kind of thing. But it was a nice combination. I think it was a, it was a good combination. I also worked quite a lot in palliative care, which is interesting, because I'm currently doing a project in palliative care about storytelling, so not music at all. And I really love that too, because it's kind of like being with people at the end, you know, hearings are less sense to go. So music is there, you know, up until the last. And also sometimes we would make meaningful music or collect meaningful music that they loved to play but also give to their families and sort of musical life review, you know, kind of things like that

Naomi

I was just sitting here listening and thinking about how many different experiences you've had, right? Like, learning, learning music sounds like that's not necessarily something you did at a very young age. So you picked up music and then you studied at a university, and then you know, finding a way to turn that into a help a helping profession through music therapy. And then you know, not taking the easy way out working with folks with dementia which is such an important thing I think you touched on you know, I if people want to know more, there is a lot of work with, you know, memory loss or, or challenges with thinking and memory and how music can be really really therapeutic. But also palliative care which can be you know, very challenging. Emotionally it can be you talked about how it can be draining physically but it sounds to me that your passion for helping people has just made it I guess that's been your your motivation to you know, advocate for removing those barriers, making the workspace more accessible, modifying things. It just sounds like I can tell how much you care about people and it sounds like that's your main driving force through moving through these environments and moving forward in your profession.

Kim

Yeah, one thing I will say, as much as I loved it there, and one of the reasons why I got into doing tech and kind of more storytelling and less of that best music therapy was I, I, after a while felt kind of burned out on it. And not that I didn't love it, but it was kind of like, I've never seen anyone improve, I don't see any. You know, everyone slips down, no matter what I do, you know, no matter what I do, no matter. And that's the nature of of that work, right. But I, I was told, and I helped, I said, they said, you should maybe find some balance, where you're doing something really fun, like, you know, something that's lifting you up to it, which was interesting, because I would say, but I love my work so much like, I love it. But the thing is, still, like you said physically, emotionally, it's kind of, so that's when I got into storytelling, like actually got into storytelling, learning about storytelling, taking workshops, and starting to perform and sort of craft, you know, craft my own material, which was a nice balance of, it's still creative. And it was still, you know, engaging with people. But it was, it was a way of kind of balancing that emotional side and physical, you know, physical sight, and you

know, just that whole, this population. You lose people all the time you lose them, and you lose them, you get more, but you're never you're never getting someone that says, Oh, I'm going home, I'm walking out of here I'm doing, you know. So it's kind of, I mean, I guess everyone has to find their own path. But it was nice, that I could find a kind of a balance in that, you know, and that's something I learned along the way that you can really love something. And but you have to just watch yourself a little bit and see, you know, are you needing something else? To balance that part of it? And yes, advocacy. Yes. And that was where I also started, I used to one of the places I worked, I had a lunch for blind residents there. And we had lots of fun, but a lot of it too, was helping them learn to advocate for things in the, in the long term care that weren't accessible to them. So one of the things I remember at the beginning is people are putting down a drink, like their cup of tea without, if they weren't in the room, they just leave it on the table and wouldn't tell them about it. And they said so many times I go back and I, I spill it or I knock it over. And I don't know it's there. So we had a sort of a campaign to educate the nurses that and health care aides that they shouldn't give that it shouldn't leave it there. And they were very proud of themselves. At first, they said, No, you do it, you tell the nurses and I said I'm going to show you, you know, we're going to show you we're going to do it together. And then they would advocate and they've their learning sighted guide, and they would tell people, no, you're not helping me the right way. And you need to hold, I need to hold your arm and stuff. So that was a lot of fun to where I was helping them and they were helping me. But also, at that time, too, I would often help them with their talking watches, or they're talking book players. You know, because staff didn't know how to help with them, you know, maybe. So how do i Oh, my watch is going off all the time my alarm is going off or my. So in a way I was actually you know, that was kind of a seed, right for tech training. And helping people with tech too, is kind of that. You know, that time when I did that. And it was fun to do. And we did, it was a bit of a highlight for me. And I know it's a highlight for the residents, blind low vision residents because they could talk to each other and they could, you know, share experiences. And so it just kind of, I don't even know how it started. I don't remember but it just kind of rolled into a program that I did. And yeah, it was, it was great. It was a lot of fun to do. And I think it kind of started that, that seed for me to where I could help, you know, with tech and other things and storytelling kind of started there. At the same time too.

Naomi

I love how everything you're doing is kind of woven together, right? Like you're you talked about music and now we're getting more into the storytelling side of things and and even though you were maybe there for one reason it turned into something else, you know, whether it's connecting blind and low vision or residents with blindness or low vision or Yes, I'm very familiar with helping with the talking watches and they As the players and all of that, you know, you've taken that passion into not just the helping profession or healthcare side of things, but into the performing arts. Can you tell us a little bit about your work there in with your solid performances or even I think you have been making, performing arts more accessible in your work as well?

Kim

Yeah, well, um, so it's funny because as a Music Therapist, I was sort of performing all the time, but I was so nervous to perform as a musician, I don't know why. Like, I was performing as a Music Therapist, but it was as if it was because it was for the residents, other goals that it wasn't... I didn't feel it was performing sort of, but so I would get really nervous. But storytelling, I don't. I mean, I do, but I, it's, I love performing as a storyteller. I got into it, and almost right away, I felt, I took a couple of workshops, and I went to a festival. And one of the things about storytelling is it's a perfect art form for someone who's blind, blind or low vision, because there's, it's all about the words and the language and the stories and the voice. So it isn't, it's totally accessible. There's no audio description needed. There's not a lot of set props, all of those things. So it's a very natural art form. I come from, I think, a family of storytellers, not performers. But, you know, I grew up listening to everyone telling stories all the time. And, of course, listening to audiobooks and listening to things and listening to people. So it was a natural kind of progression for me. When I started, I said, I'm not going to tell stories about blindness. I don't want to do that, you know, I don't want to be cliché, the blind storyteller, I don't want to do it. But I did a few stories about things that happened to me, and everybody just really, really loved them. And were really fascinated with them. And some were funny, and people laughed at them, laughed with me at them. And then I thought to myself, but there are no, like, I don't know very many storytellers with disabilities. I know a few, but very

few. And I started to kind of think about it and think about artists with disabilities, and how much how many artists with disabilities are there? And are they getting out there? And are their stories getting out there? And I realized, no, you know, they're not represented people are not hearing stories, unique stories from different perspectives, like disability perspectives. So I started to get pretty fascinated with this. And I started to do more of my autobiographical material, because people really seem to respond to it. And I enjoyed, you know, create crafting it and creating it. And, you know, I thought, it's educational to like, it's educational in an interesting way and, and entertaining. And so I started on that path of doing that. And I got a grant to create my first one women show, which is called "Flying in the Dark", which I, I still do for schools, some some for schools and for other groups. And, you know, it's still quite popular. And that was, I got some work from some storytellers, really experienced storytellers to create that show, which really helped me learn how to really not just take a bunch of stories, but weave them into something that's kind of a whole, which is really tricky, because you have to, there has to be sort of an arc. And you have to do that. And then I started kind of performing that. And there was a while after that, that a friend of mine was raising puppies for a guide dog school, for Canadian Guide Dogs, and she's a visual artist, and she was painting pictures of the pups she was raising. And I said one day, oh, wouldn't it be great if we could do stories in front of your paintings and so it kind of took off and has become the second show which I created with her and with a videographer and a musician and a director. So it became a whole theater piece, which is embedded audio description within the piece of the paintings. And I perform in front of a screen with the paintings and there's the you know, there's music and there's there's all kinds of stuff ASL in the video captioning and we produced only braille and large print programs. And you know, it became a big accessible thing that we did. So that show is has been performed and then there was a break from during COVID and last winter. I was in Calgary where I did that show 23 times at a theater. And so it's back again, it's a guide dog show. And, and of course, my guide dog had changed in that time. So we had to change the show. So when there are autobiographical shows, sometimes you have to evolve them as your life evolves. You know, I, I had to take out some bits and put in some bits so that they understood that the dog on stage was not the dog in the pictures and the dog that was, so it was a bit tricky. So I did that. And then during COVID, I created a show about blindness

and COVID called "Dangerous Touch", which is all about what it was like. It's kind of like a journal, what it's like to live through COVID as someone who's blind when they're saying, you can't touch anything, you know, now we have plexiglass, you can't hear where anyone is now we have x's on the floor, you can't feel those. Now we have one way aisles, you can't, you know, whatever. So, and I was waiting for a dog in that time, I supposed to get a dog in the spring of 2020. And of course guide dog training was put on hold and everything was, you know, on hold. And so I didn't get a dog till 2022 In this in the fall. So it was long, long time. So I really wanted people to know, because I think that the public didn't understand some of the challenges that we had during COVID. And I know at the beginning, of course, everyone had to do their part to to keep everyone safe. And I totally, you know, I'm all for that. But at the same time testing, like how do I get tested? You know, I can't go by myself to a testing center. Do I inflict my sick self on family and friends? Do we have you know, so just all of these things that were challenging, I wanted people to understand what what the challenges were what it felt like to go through that. So that show I performed... let me see was in 2022, I think. And so last year when I was in Calgary performing, so standing right in front of a poster of our guide dog show with my guide dog. I was refused by a cab, and he said he wouldn't take the dog. And he said, put the dog in the trunk was what he said. And so we got into this big argument. Oh, anyway, we got into an argument. And then when I went back to where I was staying, I called the company and they were very dismissive and said, I had to "ask for a pet friendly vehicle." And I said, "no, I don't." And so it's quite funny because the theater had lots of contacts with the media. And the mayor had actually seen our show. And the mayor really loved our show. So also, my friend saw the show, and he's blind and has a guide dog. He's the lawyer for the Chief of Police of Calgary. So I called all these people said, "okay, what do I do?" I mean, I know I'm in the middle of performing, but I don't want to let this drop this is not right. And so the city took it on, had a great great Officers, By-law Officers who were helping, and we he got a fine and got suspended. And you know, there was a lot of media publicity about it. And like, it was just a good educational, you know, opportunity I guess. Even though I was performing a part of me was like, "I don't want to waste the energy on this." But I felt I really had to do it. And of course, everyone around me was so supportive, everyone at the theater and everyone helped as much as they could. And, you know, it was a it was an

experience. But when he said put the dog in the truck, a part of me is just fighting with him. And another part of me saying that is the best title for a show I've ever heard. So my next show is called Put the Dog in the Trunk." And it's about advocacy, blindness and advocacy. Which is going to be performed next spring, I think, by auto storytellers. So anyway, so that's, that's the weird trajectory of, of that. But I also I really enjoy performing for, like audiences of all ages, and I love, I love sort of enhancing the disability arts, but also trying to make the arts more accessible here where I live, so trying to get more audio description, trying to get talk to theaters and talk to theater people in arts people about, you know, it's not as hard as you think to make things more accessible. And it's, you know, "look, this is what we did with our show, like our guide dog show, which is totally accessible from the ground up, you know, this is how we did it. This is what we did, you know, you could you could do more?" So it's um, it's a lot of fun. I just, I love storytelling. I love creating the shows. I mean, it is nerve wracking at times, but I love creating material and I I love performing it and I I love learning and working with other artists to make myself a better artist. I I really enjoy that. And I guess I'm kind of tagged as a disability disabled storyteller, blind storyteller, but I don't really mind anymore. You know, I think I do other materials sometimes. But I really feel like this is a bit of a niche, but it's an important niche to be in so I, I certainly don't mind that anymore.

Naomi

You talked a little bit about how people really responded to your own story. And clearly you've given lots of performances over the years. What's been some of the feedback that you've received that really stuck with you?

Kim

Well, I think that people realize that we're all the same in a lot of ways, like, my challenges are different, or what happens is different to me sometimes. So, but we all have challenges. And we all have, you know, advocacy struggles, or we all have, we all have funny moments we all have, you know, so it almost makes people understand we're all similar. But the other things, I think what it does is it sort of makes you understand why things are as they are, or why someone might ask for something. So, for example, one of my shows I talked quite a bit about reading traffic, my guide dog show about, you know, "how to, you know, when

the light is red?" You know, the Mobility Instructor would tell me, and I'll explain, like, I hear the cars going this way. And, and sometimes things like that, will you hear an audience member? Go? Oh, like, you know, because of kinda like, like moments of "oh, that's why", or "that's why we don't have a dog when they're working", or "this is why it's hard to, to find your way around during COVID." You know, "this is why the X is on the floor. They are "Oh, yeah, of course, you wouldn't be able to feel the X or if you can't touch anything, how can I know what anything is?" So at the beginning of COVID, when, you know, we weren't supposed to touch anything, well I could, I have to read elevator buttons, I have to feel things to know what they are in public, I can't not touch. I can't not touch I can't. And if I wear gloves, I can't feel, you know, I can't feel things. So it's kind of, you know, would you take away the print signs, like the braille signs are important, right? Or something like, something like that, and people just get a moment, like a light bulb moment. I like I love that. But I also love when people laugh at sort of funny incidents that happen and sort of breaks the ice and makes them be more open to talk to you, or someone like you presumably, like, you know that the ice is broken. You know, if you make a joke about something, or just, you seem approachable, then I think people are more likely to come and ask you questions, or to try to try to break that ice that sort of around us sometimes where no one, they're afraid, they don't want to talk to us. They don't want to say the wrong thing. They're not sure, you know. But then you kind of are with them, and they they hear you laugh about something or find something funny, and then they, they're aware that this is possible, you know, this is okay, talk to me. I'm not gonna, you know, I'm similar and it's all right. So, I love that I love the questions kids ask. I really find the questions kids ask are great, very perceptive, but also very funny, like the little kids will ask know, if the guide dog like when I said "the guide dog went to school and learned" and they go "oh, did they have to do math or something like that?" When they ask funny stuff, I just really love it, you know. Because and, but also very perceptive, you know, perceptive questions that kids ask. It's nice to perform for kids, because they're getting sort of an education and a comfortableness, like early early on. You know, where they can ask you questions, and they can, they can talk to you about things and feel comfortable. So, I just, I don't know, I love it. And I love when there's blind people in the audience, because they, you hear them reacting at different times, like, oh, yeah, like, like, they get it. They know, they understand. And I think it's nice for them to

have. I've heard blind people say, Well, I just resonated with them. You know, it's, they might not have heard, they might not know a lot of other blind people, or there was someone who came to one of my shows, that was just starting to lose vision. And she told me after like, "Oh, thank you, because I felt it was gonna be terrible, like losing, you know what I mean? And I see there's hope, you know, in that". So there's lots of things that have happened.

Naomi

I think our time is coming to a close soon. But before we go, I wanted to ask you to tell us a little bit more about your advocacy and tech work because I know we didn't touch so much on your I know that you're on some boards. I know you founded a technology program and you're an advocate for braille literacy. So any final thoughts on that part of your life right now?

Kim

I mean, I know I've done a lot of tech work and we kind of talked about my love of tech, but I will say about Braille, I just stem I love working with Braille Literacy Canada, but I also I am so passionate that braille, you know, people say "audio audio, braille is dead." You know what braille is not dead. braille is a vital part of, I couldn't do my storytelling scripts without braille. I use braille all the time every day with my computers with my phone, I'm lucky enough to have a braille display. I know not everyone can have that right now. And hopefully we can advocate for, you know, maybe a national program for tech, you know that people can get access to what they need, what they could benefit from in terms of braille technology, but I really feel braille is really making a resurgence. And braille is literacy. So if I use braille, I can spell more accurately, I can spell people's names. I know I use it, as I said, for my storytelling scripts, for reading for, for everything for doing everything on my computers. So I just, I mean, I could plug tech, but I just really wanted to plug braille and that everyone, everyone that wants to learn braille should learn, it doesn't matter what age you are. And even if you're just learning it for, to read elevator buttons, or playing cards, or to label a few things in your house, don't have to read the greatest novel, but I just think Braille is, is awesome. And I just I always love to sort of plug braille and say, "yeah, we have all this technology and all this audio, and all this apps, but there's no to me, there's no replacement for braille."

Naomi

And I don't know if you ever ever did this, but for people listening in, you can also read music with braille.

Kim

Absolutely. I didn't, I did. But I didn't do a lot of music braille, because a lot of my music teachers were sighted and didn't know it. But I did use it, yes. And some people are much more skilled at it than I am. But it is a it is also a an important, you know, it is an important part of braille "music, braille", "math braille", you know, all of these types of braille. I mean, I, I, I was never that good at math, so I don't want to talk about "math braille" but, but definitely in languages, learning languages, if you're learning languages, then braille is probably really beneficial for that. So it's I just wanted to plug braille because I, I love braille. It means for the very first, earliest times when I could read in the dark and not get caught when my brother got caught.

Naomi

So Kiim, I know that technology is also a really big part of your life. Can you tell me a little bit about your connection with the "Get Together With Technology Program"?

Kim

So I started this "Get Together With Technology Program" in 2011-2012, with a friend of mine, a former teacher of mine, who was sighted. He and I started it together. And it was kind of for selfish reasons, because it started to be where a lot more mainstream technologies were available to us. The smartphones had started to come out, the iPhones and Android with accessible software. And there was there were so many things now that were available. But it there wasn't support for them necessarily, you know. So when I got my first smartphone, I went into the Apple store and I they told me to turn on Voice Over but they didn't know much beyond that. So I really had to play with it myself. And I don't mind doing that. But I thought, you know who better to help each other than our community. So how do we do something so that we can help each other learn our tech? We got a local grant, in here in Ottawa, to kind of start do a meeting

once a month. And our first meeting, you know, we had about eight people, and then it it really grew more, and people were really excited by it. So we started this here locally, and we were just doing local groups together. And it was really beneficial because someone had already bought a certain piece of mainstream technology. And they were using it and they would explain, you know, how did they use it? And then there was the whole forest of apps, you know, is this app accessible? Is that accessible? How am I supposed to do this? So it was a big learning curve, but it was really helpful to do this in a community. You know, who better to to help each other than our people because we knew more than the experts knew of the of the companies like we knew more than the Apple Geniuses or the, the, you know, because we used it every day. And I still believe that, you know, I know that they try and there are support lines, and you know, they do know quite a lot but we know more and we always do know more, I think so. So that got started and then it sort of grew. And then, the CCB hired me full time to like to do more with it in 2014. And I worked on it, I just left doing that last spring, I still do some hours for them, but not coordinating full time or doing full time because I wanted to focus on a lot of my art go back to when I was getting some contracts that were really interesting to me. So I decided to, you know, to still do a little bit of work for it, but not to focus on it all the time. So I could do other things. But I'm really proud of it, I am proud that I got it going. I'm proud that you know that our community helped see each other so much I love when we help each other so much and that's kind of what BALANCE does as well, you know that our community is helping our community. And that the experts, like we know that blind people are experts to help each other on these things. And so they should be doing that. So I really, yeah, so it's been really great. And it's, it's, it's a big learning curve all the time because for up until that time, when technology really opened up, most people would know, say they would know how to use a computer with JAWS. That would be what you'd get, right? So there was a learning curve, or maybe a talking book player, the learning curve was not as high as now, when we have all kinds of apps, and we now we're getting into AI and other things. And we've got more and more things that we can use, mainstream things. And people are trying to figure out, "what's the best thing for me, what should I be... you know, how should I be scanning? How should I be reading books? What device is the best for me?" Like who would have thought that you know, you could pick between any number of computers that you could

set up your computers yourself that you can choose from free screen readers or paid ones that you can, you know, decide, am I going to just use a tablet? Or I'm going to use a computer? Am I going to use a phone or am I going to use a computer? You know, and to me, it's amazing that we have all this choice, but because we have all this choice, we do need people who keep on top of this and are helping people learn these things. So you know, it's it's been a lot of fun. It still is I still do calls. I started some specialized groups that I still help that I run, including a "Braille Display Users Group", because there's not a lot of support for people using electronic braille. I mean, and that's been the other really miraculous thing to me electronic braille and pairing that with your smartphones. And I don't remember this, obviously, because I was a baby, but my mum said that we went to see a specialist when I was a baby. And he told my parents that, you know, just to let me do everything everyone did. But he also said that technology, and this is interesting, because this was a long time ago, that "technology would really level the playing field for me and others like me." So there was a forward thinking physician who sort of, I don't know if he knew, well, obviously, I don't think he did know what that technology would be, but sort of knew that technology would help us in so many ways. What I find sometimes is to find that balance between when do I use the technology and this is another thing, kind of, we cover sometimes this, because we also will talk about low tech things... and when do you use the technology, and when do you use your skills? Like your skills that you learn in "O and M", orientation, mobility, independent living? You know, what, how do you balance all that? How do you figure out when am I going to use my apps and when am I just gonna use my own senses and my, you know. So it's, it's an interesting time, and it continues to evolve as we get into all of this AI. AI, whereas, we're talking now in the fall of 2023. So if someone listens later, there's probably way more stuff going on than that. But you know, now it's all about the AI and what, how it can describe things to for you, and how much do you want to do that? And you know, all of these things. It's pretty fascinating. I guess the other thing I would say about the progress is I wanted to make sure and I'm not like, I'm "techie good" but I'm not a programmer type person. So I'm a people person who happens to love tech. So I think what I really felt too is the people teaching people to use the tech need to be "people people" first and know their tech. As opposed to you know when you call when you call help support line for your your modems or whatever you're,

you sometimes get people you don't understand what they're talking about because they talk in tech language, right? Really strong. And I always felt like the people, especially people new to vision loss and people uncomfortable with tech are not quite sure, need to have people that take them at their level and that are happy to be "people people" who know about tech. So it's almost like sometimes when people hire people to do tech support, they hire techie people who aren't people, people. And I don't. Personally, I just don't think that's the right way to go, but... So I've started to think that that was another thing about GTT is that we felt, you know, it's gonna be the people who understand vision loss and understand our community, who are "people people" who really know their tech. It's been a fun journey with it and it's still I'm still sort of on the journey, but I'm not doing that full time. I just needed to do I needed to shift myself and, and do these other projects, ou know? It's been a great program, and I'm really honored, you know, that it took off the way it did, I think we started at it just sort of the right moment, I guess. And it seemed to be needed at the moment that we, we started it, so.

Naomi

It's such a wonderful story to hear how this program just started from you and recognizing a need among the people in your community, and then to have the Canadian Council of the Blind pick it up and support you with the with employment. And talking about the evolution for from, you know, not having a lot of choices to having lots of choices. So it sounds like the program's really evolved over time. So maybe, could you tell me a bit about, you know, the nuts and bolts how, how you worked with people, and maybe how that's changed over time.

Kim

Originally, the local group met in person, and always met in person and is still meeting our local Ottawa group. We always had, from sort of from, you know, 2014-2015, on, we had a national call once a month, that was, at first it was a phone call, eventually, it got to be a Zoom call. But before COVID, really, there was a little bit of Zooming, but a lot was phone support, or in-person support, or, you know, or in-person meetings that other people, you know, ran, you know, and those things. When COVID came, I think we pivoted very, very quickly, after

the first couple of weeks of COVID, to doing a lot of Zooming, like three support tech calls a week, which at the beginning of COVID ended up being a lot of support about COVID. You know, just because no one really knew what to do. How do you get grocery delivery? What are we doing? Like, how are we supposed to do this? How are we supposed to go out? Like, are there any ways we can and teaching people how to use Zoom, because, you know, everyone went over there at the beginning of COVID. And we thought after COVID, that it would, it would swing back to local things. And we have tried a little bit to be in person. It seems though, that people really prefer Zoom. Like I think people would prefer in person if there were product demos or something like that. But there's a lot to be said for Zoom when there's people coming from all across Canada, or, you know, even people new to vision loss. Like it's easy, especially we meet at night, like some of the meetings at night, some people in the winter, like at first we were thinking oh, maybe we'll meet in person in the fall in the spring and over zoom in the winter. And we actually did that before COVID. Like if we went it was January, February, who wants to be out waiting for buses at like nine at night? No, thank you. You know, so, so we had done that a little bit. But we haven't really come back in person we've tried and a lot of people still weren't as comfortable or they didn't, they said "I just really prefer to do this over Zoom." So it's gonna be interesting to see what happens with that too, because there's a lot to be said for Zoom. You know a lot about you don't have to get para or take your bus or do your you know, but sometimes in-person meetings, you want to actually touch a product right? Or you want to you don't want that done over Zoom. So it'll be interesting. I thought it might have swung all the way back. It hasn't. It'll be interesting to see what the community wants going forward. Because it's, you know, because we would give the community choice as to what they want to do and how. So it will be interesting to see. You know, will this change or won't it change?

Naomi

Thank you so much, Kim, we've touched on so many different topics. You have done so many different things in your life and your career, and I'm sure there, is much more to come. But where can people find you and find your work in case they want to know more about you?

Kim

So a few places one is "OttawaStorytellers.ca", you can find things about me there. Also, where I work for schools is through MASC... "MASC online.com". And I'm also doing some work with the Palliative Care Unit Storytelling Project and some other things with an organization called "RadicalConnections.ca". So those are good places to find me. You can always send me an email at "KimStoryteller@icloud.com" to if you want to get in touch with me.

Naomi

Amazing. Well, again, thank you so much for your time Kim. I look forward to... I'm sure I'll be hearing more about you and your and your shows going forward. But thanks again, so much for being on the show. It was absolutely a pleasure speaking with you.

Kim

Oh, it's a great pleasure speaking with you. Thank you so much, Naomi.

Deborah

Hi, I'm Debra Gould, CEO of BALANCE for Blind Adults and Executive Producer of "The Living Blind" podcast. Wasn't that a great conversation? So inspiring to hear about the many different work and career opportunities that Kim has had, and to realize that that is possible, and, and very much probable, you know, many adults go through many different careers in their lives, and to talk to somebody who's had so many different experiences in line with her changing wishes, desires, talents and skills is, is inspiring to all of us. In that vein, I wanted to put in a good word for BALANCE's "Pre-employment Program", available to the people living in Ontario. It is sponsored by the United Way Greater Toronto, and we're very proud of it. And we are giving people an opportunity to explore their wishes, dreams, their to self reflect, to explore their knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, gaps and needs in terms of a move forward for them what the next steps might be. And often to prepare them for coaching within a an employment service that might be provided in the city of Toronto. So if you want to learn more, the program is ongoing. And you can learn more by visiting www.BalanceFBA.org and looking for the "Pre-employment Program" description there. So thank you very much for listening today. I want to thank the entire

BALANCE team. Naomi Haslett our host of the podcast, Jeffrey Young our Editor of the podcast and everybody involved with his production and a big, huge thankful expression of gratitude to our donors, who without whose support, the podcast wouldn't be possible. Thank you so much, and we will look forward to seeing you here next time.

Deanna

Hi, everyone. I'm Deanna development officer with BALANCE. Have you checked out BALANCE's annual fundraiser "Because of BALANCE" yet? Head over to our website, www.BalanceFBA.org to read or listen to the stories from grateful clients, staff, board members, volunteers and general supporters. They tell their story of how because of BALANCE, their life has changed. You can make a donation in recognition of our incredible staff team or another powerful story. All money raised supports the programs and services BALANCE offers. Thank you for giving generously.