

## Episode 4: “Always More to Learn” with Judy Abdo

### Youspeak Introduction:

**Jasper:** This is Youspeak radio. With generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, an intergenerational project by one institute and the outwards archive on Tongva land.

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### Episode Introduction:

**Milo:** My name is Milo Drake. My pronouns are he/him. I'm 17; I'm from Los Angeles. I'll be interviewing Judy Abdo, who is the first openly lesbian Mayor of Santa Monica and a lifelong educator. We discuss community-based and policy-based change in the queer community, particularly voting power. Overall, we explored the importance of self-care and open-mindedness within the community.

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**Judy Abdo:** Connecting to the past and the future is part of what life is about. What's important is to learn from it. What is it that people didn't know at that time? What do we know now, and what would we wish had happened that was different to solve that problem earlier? It's really important to be aware of what is going on in society and what it is that we can do or not do. There's always more to learn. There's never a period of time where you say, “Oh, I know everything. I need to know.” That it just doesn't happen.”

**Milo:** As activists, when we connect to the past, we have a better idea of how to get to the future and create these new worlds and new ideals for us to live in.

**Milo:** I absolutely love my community. I love the people that I see every day. I love the people that I work with, and I really want others like me, other trans people and other trans youth to be able to create communities and find others that they feel comfortable around, especially when trans people often feel so isolated because of the world around them and the political state and how others perceive us.

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### Interview Begins:

**Milo:** Hello, I am Milo Drake.

**Judy:** My name is Judy Abdo. I was an “out” lesbian at the time that I was elected as mayor of Santa Monica.

**Milo:** Tell me a little bit about the changes you experienced in your childhood.

**Judy:** I did not know about being a lesbian early on in my life. I was married to a man and was in a relationship with him from high school on. It was 14 years total, and, when you start a relationship with somebody when you're 13, it was just kind of normal. We were a family together. He lived close to me in

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**Judy:** the Hollywood Hills, and our families knew each other. We had a relationship that was pretty much half marriage and half not.

**Milo:** That's a long time. There's a lot of people who fall in love really young, and they just try to stick with it. What was it like to move on from that?

**Judy:** He moved on. I was willing to stay and so that was hard for me because I had sort of built in my mind what my life was going to be like. Suddenly, it was very different. I had many, many choices. I had to rethink what my goals were and what I was going to put my energy into. After we divorced, the women's movement was happening, and then the lesbian movement began. I was involved in lots of different things: one of them being a shelter for battered women. It was started by many women, who identified as lesbians. So I learned a lot about what it was to be a lesbian and who I was. That's kind of how I came out. During that time, I was not yet an elected person. I went to University of California, Santa Barbara, and it was very small at the time. Everybody knew each other. I was in the early childhood program, and it turns out that my professors lived together in a trailer in Santa Barbara. We all sort of just understood that they were a couple and have been for a very, very long time. I did my student teaching in Burbank, California. And I was observed by the same professors who came down to Burbank to see how I was doing and to oversee what I was learning. It turned out that the principal of the school where I was doing my student teaching the first semester was a lesbian, and the teacher that I was with was a lesbian. It was just kind of normal to me that they were all in my life and that they all had lives that were a little different than mine at the time, but I was so comfortable with them.

**Milo:** So from a young age, you were very comfortable with the idea of being gay, or at least being around gay people. What was it like to come to terms with your own identity?

**Judy:** I hadn't ever thought about it until I fell in love with a woman, and it just felt comfortable and real and natural. She and I were working together on several different levels, one of which was the Sojourn Shelter for Battered Women, and there were other community-based social service things that we were both involved in.

**Milo:** When you fall in love, it really just feels right. So many young people really wonder if their love is real and if their relationships are going to last.

**Judy:** I think it was real love when I fell in love when I was 13, but it was very different when I fell in love with a woman. It felt very natural. I think it was partly because I was working around a lot of people who were LGBTQ. They were so comfortable, and I felt comfortable with them.

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**Milo:** Can you tell me a little about the work you did in the battered women's shelter?

**Judy:** We were starting a shelter at a time when there weren't other shelters, so we were making it up as we went along. We didn't have any money, but somebody gave us a house that could be a shelter. There were about 20 of us, and we were a collective. Nobody was paid, and everybody had to make a commitment to work a number of hours every week to make the shelter happen. In our planning for the shelter, we knew that we were going to have women who were in crisis, and that we were going to need to offer a safe place that was secret so that no one could find them. About halfway through the planning, we realized, "Oh, they were going to come with their children." We had to rethink the whole thing and realize that it was battered women and their children who would be coming to us, and they would all be in

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**Judy:** trauma, and they would all need specific help from us. Since we didn't have a model for how it would work, we were making it up as we went along.

**Milo:** Starting from scratch is so brave and so difficult. Is there anything that you would want to share with anyone who is a bit younger and is thinking about these big ideas that they want to implement and really change the world?

**Judy:** I think what's important is to have a group that is working together and to work very closely with the people in that group so that you're all of one mind about whatever it is you're trying to accomplish. It doesn't mean you have to agree about everything in the world, but about what you're going toward. That's a really important thing not to be arguing about that.

**Milo:** Can you tell me a little bit about the friends and the support you had when you became

**Judy:** When I decided to run for City Council a number of people said to me, "You should not run. It will be this big issue. You'll never win. And people will highlight this aspect of you, and it will not be good." But I really felt like I was ready and the City was ready, so I decided I would run anyway. I ran my campaign, I was elected with a group of people. Our campaign was run together, so I wasn't running as just myself as a lesbian. In Santa Monica, the issue was still actually rent control. We were all very, very pro rent control, so we were speaking mostly to people who were in rent-controlled apartments, which is most of the people in Santa Monica. Nobody attacked me during the campaign, which surprised me greatly, But nobody attacked me. And there were loads of people who ran that year. I think there were nineteen people who ran, So it was quite an experience. After the campaign, when I had won, I talked to one of the opposition leaders and asked, "Why it was, I wasn't attacked for being a lesbian?" And you know what he said to me? "It would have been wrong." That tells you something about Santa Monica as a place. Even back then, in 1988, when I ran, it was not okay to be attacking somebody because they were LGBTQ.

**Milo:** That's a really, really nice lesson.

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**Milo:** Can you tell me about the work you did to develop West Hollywood?

**Judy:** Both of my parents grew up in West Hollywood, so to me, it felt like coming home to be there even though I was living in Santa Monica. I worked in the City of West Hollywood for five years, right when they had created the City of West Hollywood. Before that, they were just a neighborhood in the county. They decided to become a city. It was, of course, very LGBTQ friendly, but that wasn't the only thing. There were ethnic groups. There were lots of other kinds of groups, and people needed to get to know each other and know how to support each other in that, citywide way. That was a really learning situation for me as a lesbian working for City Hall and trying to help a city become a city. When West Hollywood became a city, it chose to have elected council members. But each council member at that time had a deputy, a person who was working directly for them. And I was a council deputy there. I worked very closely with one council member, but all of the council members worked together really well. That was important in a brand new city that didn't know how to be a city yet.

**Judy:** Everything was brand new, and we all worked together to make the city be the best city it could possibly be.

**Milo:** It sounds like you've worked on a lot of projects that have had very little examples to go by. Can you tell me a little bit about how you figured everything out?

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**Judy:** I ran for office while I was working in the City of West Hollywood. It wasn't like I had already been on a council, but I was really close to council members, and I knew a lot about that, so I was able to bring that into the mix of, "How do we make a city?" The people that had organized to make West Hollywood a city had done a lot of studying about what cities are like and what they can do and what kind of city they wanted to have. I learned a tremendous amount from them because they had thought it through in ways that I never thought about.

**Milo:** What kind of projects did you work in West Hollywood?

**Judy:** What we were working on was to make rent control or rent stabilization work for that city. "What do you do when a tenant has a problem? What is the City's responsibility? Who within the city would help people?" Looking at all of those *nitty-gritty* things that people expect to have from their city. When there's no city there and all of a sudden there is a city, it's not like everybody has expertise already. They don't, so it was, everybody trying to do their very best to be the best city that we could be and not having an example for how to make it happen.

**Milo:** I'm so glad that you've worked on rent control. It's very important to me, personally, because I know that it helps support socioeconomic equity, and it helps people move places that they really want to be. I live in an area, which has a bit of rent control, and that's why I was able to go to the high school that I went to, and I got a better education than I would have if I hadn't gone there.

**Judy:** It's very important to me. I was a renter for a couple of years, and then, we bought a house. I was trying to build community among the people who lived around me, and this was before rent control. What I learned was that many, many people moved to Santa Monica knowing that it would be a temporary move. They would move to the beach, enjoy the beach, and then go on with their lives somewhere else. People didn't come to Santa Monica and think, "This is where I want to be." It was, "I want to be here for a short period of time and then I'll move on." So it made Santa Monica be a very transient kind of city where people were not committed to making friends, to making the city work better, because they weren't connected. Rent control allowed people to come and live in the City and know that they didn't have to move because nobody was going to raise their rent beyond what was allowed. They had a stable place that they could live for a long, long time. It made Santa Monica more of a place where everybody could live, not just wealthy people and not just people who were in transition in their lives, but anybody could live here and stay here. It did stabilize the community tremendously.

**Milo:** I moved to Santa Monica when I was eight, and I've always viewed it as somewhere who had a very stable community and always had people that were very interconnected and knew each other. It always felt like it was almost a collective instead of, just, like you said, "a transient place," which is so interesting.

**Judy:** It really does have to do with whether people feel that they have a home that they can stay in.

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**Milo:** With your running for office, people really supported you because you shared their goals and you shared what was important to them. What do you have to say to voters who might not feel like they want to vote in this upcoming election?

**Judy:** What I learned at the time was for me, and we're talking about a local election, is knowing people. I had worked in community organizing quite a lot. There was the shelter for battered women group but also

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**Judy:** we had been working on having people within our neighborhoods form block clubs to find out who their neighbors were and work together. Many people were connected because of the work that I was doing. That didn't mean that I knew all of them. They knew that was the kind of work that I was doing. I think community organizing is one of the major, major things that help in any kind of an election. Even in a national election, it's the organizing that happens locally.

**Milo:** So it sounds like, voters should really work on connecting with others and creating community to work through these issues.

**Judy:** And to learn as much as they can about what the issues are. I believe in voting. I'm wearing a t-shirt that says "Vote." I believe it is so important for people to have a voice in who is being elected to represent them. It's really, really important to make choices and learn as much as possible about what each of those people is about what they believe, and to find as many ways as possible to support the people that you agree with.

**Milo:** Having the ability to cast a vote and the ability to choose who represents you is absolutely the most important thing in upholding democracy right now. There's a lot of threats going on, and one of the ways that we can come together as a community is to defend ourselves and pick people who are in our best interests.

**Judy:** That's absolutely true. It's really, really important to know more people locally.

**Milo:** Definitely. Community organizing is really in the heart of everything. It's in our voting. It's in supporting each other. It's in the work that we do. I absolutely love my community. I love the people that I see every day. I love the people that I work with, and I really want others like me, other trans people and other trans youth to be able to create communities and find others that they feel comfortable around, especially when trans people often feel so isolated because of the world around them and the political state and how others perceive us. What's the best way that young people can work towards building a community?

**Judy:** It depends on your community. If it's a community within a college, there are lots of ways of getting involved. Getting involved in electoral politics is one choice that everybody has. I think it's really important to be looking at what the electoral politics are locally, countywide, statewide nationally to see where you fit in and where you can have the ability to make change, which is what organizing is really about. And what the political world is really about is making things better.

**Milo:** To make the world better, we really have to focus on ourselves as well. There's a lot of systemic things and a lot of personal things that go into creating community. A lot of students are pretty much at the jeopardy of their parents' systemic situations.

**Judy:** Students have the ability, just like everybody else, to form their own cohort. It may be that they don't live on campus and that they build a community around where they live, or they build a community around where they work, or maybe they build a community around the students that they're studying with. All of those are absolutely wonderful options.

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**Milo:** How has preserving history changed your life?

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**Judy:** My mother was very much into preservation of buildings and communities and the history of LA. She spent a lot of time as I was growing up volunteering and helping people learn about the history of Los Angeles. I'm eighty years old now. I'm getting more involved in the Santa Monica Conservancy and the Santa Monica History Museum because it just feels right to build on the history of where I live. In Santa Monica, there were tribes living here, Tongva and other tribes. What was it that they were doing here? And as people moved into Santa Monica, what did they decide they wanted from this place? To me, it just feels comfortable to know more about those kinds of things. One of the things that the Conservancy is doing is they have a little house, and they are trying to grow plants that are the same kind of plants that grew when people were very first living here. It's very different from what we have in our yards or in our grocery stores.

**Milo:** It's living history. Preserving history allows communities to be stronger. It allows people to know where they've come from and to have common ground.

**Judy:** I'm more involved in local history than I used to be. I was so involved in trying to make things better that I didn't really think about the history of where I was, either in Hollywood or West Hollywood or Santa Monica. Why things are the way they are? Why are buildings here? When did they come? I live in a house that was built in 1890, and it wasn't until recently that I learned much more about the people who lived in my house. I never thought about it, other than knowing that it was a very old house, but it's now a landmark and people have studied to know more about it. Connecting to the past and the future is part of what life is about.

**Milo:** I feel like as activists, when we connect to the past, we have a better idea of how to get to the future and of how to create these new worlds and new ideals for us to live in. Is there anything people should really pay attention to in the past queer people to work towards a better future for us?

**Judy:** There's much work being done right now to document our history. I think it's really important to seek those out and find out what was happening and learn from that. When I was in West Hollywood, it was the time of AIDS. There were people who one day would come to work and say, "I've got this sore on me," and within a year, they were dead because there was no cure for AIDS. Luckily, there were people like Dr. Fauci and others who worked very hard to try and figure out what to do. But lots of people thought, "Oh, that's not important. It's a gay thing. And let's not put any money into it. Let's not try to solve this problem." It took a long time before there were significant advances in treating people who had AIDS and then learning to avoid getting AIDS. What's important in all of that is to learn from it. "What is it that people didn't know at that time? What do we know now? What would we wish had happened that was different to make it to solve that problem earlier?" And to look at, what kinds of issues there are now. Figuring out how to make things better is important. There was not a "Oh, we should do this. Follow these steps." We just didn't have that. People who contracted AIDS couldn't really hide because they were in a community where everybody knew when something happened to them.

**Milo:** You mentioned that AIDS was considered not important because it was considered a "gay disease." What are some ways that our communities have worked towards destigmatizing AIDS?

**Judy:** It was kind of like "coming out." People who had AIDS had to go through a personal decision-making about what they were going to come out about. Maybe they were going to come out as LGBTQ. Maybe they were going to come out as trans. Maybe they were going to come out, as a person who knew that they had AIDS or were living with people who had AIDS. All of those things fit into a decision about how you're going to live your life and who you're going to share which parts of your life with.

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**Milo:** The work we've done as a community has gotten us places that we couldn't have imagined forty, fifty years ago. How can we motivate ourselves to keep doing better?

**Judy:** We do not live in a perfect society. If we all sit down and think about what we would like to have society be like in six months or a year or five years, and think about which piece of it we could spend energy on: "How could we fix a piece of that? What am I going to do as my career? Is it going to be a thing that allows me to make money enough so that I can do other things? Or, am I going to choose a career that is about social change?" There are many, many decisions that get made along the way, and some of them are personal, and some of them are more societal. It's really, really important to be aware of what is going on in society and what it is that we can do or not do. If we do not show up on issues, nothing will change. We will have no power to make a difference, so it is so important to figure out where you can make a difference and then go there.

**Milo:** Educating and picking our battles are pretty much our best tools available to us.

**Judy:** That's always really important, is learning more. There's always more to learn. There's never a period of time where you say, "Oh, I know everything I need to know!" That just doesn't happen.

**Milo:** It doesn't. There's always something more in the world.

**Judy:** It's really, really important that you're thinking about all of these things, and I hope that you find ways that you can connect with people who are thinking similar thoughts and figure out what your next steps are.

**Milo:** You talked a lot about working without examples and starting from scratch. I definitely relate to that. I have done a lot of work at my high school where there's been absolutely nothing for me to reference, and I've just had to completely guess. It's been very difficult, but the way I got through it was by working with others and asking for suggestions and second opinions. Connecting with others is really at the center of everything we do and how we can create community.

**Judy:** I think that is very, very important.

Interview Concludes.

[MUSIC]

YouSpeak Outro:

**Jasper:** This is...

**Jasper, Milo, Kelly, Madeline, Charlotte, Ameer:** YouSpeak Radio!

**Jasper:** We are Jasper Chen,

**Milo:** Milo Drake,

**Madeline:** Madeleine Lee,

**Kelly:** Kelly Hsu,

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**Charlotte:** Charlotte Ly,

**Ameer:** Ameer Flores.

**Jasper:** With generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, an intergenerational project by One Institute and The Outwords Archive on Tongva land.