

Episode #36 – Resilience in Full Color with Artist Judith Bigham

Donna Ferris: [00:00:00] Welcome to Bounce Back Stronger, the podcast that explores ways to find peace and purpose no matter what happens. Today's guest, Judith Bigham, is a master of blurring the lines between fine art and decorative art and is an inspiration for anyone seeking to use creativity to overcome loss. Judith is a graduate of the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design, and her eclectic life journey has taken her from the vibrant streets of New York City to the serene landscapes of the Pacific Northwest.

After facing the sudden loss of her husband at the age of 49, Judith turned to her art for solace, ultimately forging a remarkable career as a printmaker, painter, and designer. Through her beautiful botanical paintings, she infuses love, passion, and audacious beauty, spreading light in a world that it.

But her story is not just about art. It's about [00:01:00] resilience, rebuilding, and rediscovering purpose. So join us today as we unravel the inspiring narrative of this incredible artist whose journey from grief to empowerment embodies the essence of bouncing back stronger.

Thanks so much for being with us today. I am so excited to speak with you.

Judith Bigham: Thanks for having me. And I'm excited too.

Donna Ferris: I am just mesmerized by your art behind you. It's so beautiful.

Judith Bigham: Thank you. These are my recent pieces that I made while at an artist residency in Rajasthan, India.

So you're seeing just parts of them behind me right here.

Donna Ferris: They're beautiful.

Judith Bigham: Well, the colors of Rajasthan were incredible. And I think I said, as I was posting pictures of these, that my color sense got reprogrammed. I've always loved using color, but when you're in [00:02:00] India, it's all about textiles there, and people wear these colors daily.

Yeah. They wear them all day, every day, doing everything. The baker, the tea maker, everything.

Donna Ferris: And so it must have been kind of a shock to come back and have the color change. And it sounds like you've held on to the colors you picked up in India.

Judith Bigham: I think that what I really felt is that my color sense was reprogrammed so that it can't go back now.

There's no way it can go back because it's as if something gets reprogrammed in you. You know, there's a new program in there now I'm not surrounded by it, but it did change me.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, there's this new idea that things that we look at, so creativity, art, beauty help reprogram our brain.

And it's interesting, you kind of just really led to that. It's called neuroaesthetics, and it's really helpful in mental health and [00:03:00] helping people kind of bring themselves out of difficult times, and, you just kind of really described that I think, in some ways.

Judith Bigham: We are just sort of big computers, right?

Yeah. And they say program for children. If those programs are problematic, we try to reprogram ourselves. So I think of it as being reprogrammed because I've sort of had to reprogram myself through things I've gone through in life. And I've used meditation, and they kind of say that meditation is like reprogramming your brain and bad patterns in your brain.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. Befriending it to a certain extent, right? I understand where you kind of get stuck and then come back. Yeah. Absolutely. Right. Oh, very helpful. Well, well, maybe you started to kind of touch on this, maybe talk about some of the experiences that you've had and maybe in particular when you have a major loss.

Judith Bigham: 17 years ago, my late husband died windsurfing in extreme conditions on the Sea of Cortez in Baja, Mexico. He did extreme sports and took risks all the time. I lived in a place in the Northwest where a lot of people were getting injured or dying. And it wasn't unfamiliar to me, except that this time it was my husband, my, so the, mostly men, but I know two women who passed away also took a lot of chances.

I'm a person who doesn't like risk, but I love sports, so we are a good combination. I was a stay-at-home mother. We had a very nice marriage. I was very lucky. I had a really nice life.

So he died suddenly at 49. Right. And my kids were little girls, nine, 11 and 14, so I had to deal with that. I had to deal with my grief. My shock, their grief also, because they're children that I had to rebuild my life. [00:05:00] I was really unprepared to take on the responsibility of. Doing the taxes every year, taking care of the home.

So, having to change and figure things out was absolutely shocking. It's really shocking. And I try at this point; it's been 17 years, I try not to make that my story. Although it makes me who I am today. I learned all these things because of that. So I had to be resilient. Luckily, I have my children. And I knew I didn't have any choice. Yes. And then that's what I would say to people. I would say, what choice do I have?

And actually, I sort of loved it when some people said, Oh, you have a choice. You can be a mess. You can do this. You could do that. You know?

Donna Ferris: I think that's incredible. And we haven't talked about this because we just met, but you know, about.

I guess it's almost six years ago. I was in a relationship with somebody, and we were engaged, and he actually died suddenly. He did go through a brief illness for nine days, but then [00:06:00] he died. So, you did decide that you had to do things for your kids, and you did; those are big things.

And I had the same kind of thing. I said I have to do this. What else am I going to do? And that kind of can get us through it, I think, to a certain extent, too.

Judith Bigham: Yes. It's a bit of a coping thing. Totally a coping thing. Yeah. I had to take the dog for a walk. That's right. I couldn't wallow because my youngest was nine.

I had to get her in the bathtub at night. I had to go to a school conference. I had to, you know, other, well, you know, people say they dive into their work, and I guess that was my work at the time.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. And what better work, right? You know, taking care of your kids and, and getting them through it because it has ramifications with kids.

It continues; it kind of reverberates, I think. I don't know if you've experienced that.

Judith Bigham: Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. Yes, I have experienced it. It's funny. Someone said something to me six months after he died, someone who hadn't experienced [00:07:00] loss and they said something like, everything, okay, everything back to normal.

It's never normal. It's never, it's never going to be normal. Do you understand?

Donna Ferris: It's never going to be normal. It will be different, but it's not going to be normal.

Judith Bigham: It's absolutely shocking. So I felt very lucky I had my children. We were all together in Mexico and when they were pulling his body out of the water, we were in a very remote place, and his friends were there, and I was looking at him, and I didn't even go to him, but I turned around cause my kids weren't with me. My kids were in the village.

We were in a very small fishing village. I went to get my children because that part of my life was over. I went on instinct. I turned around, and then we walked into the village to get my children.

And I feel like that's the moment. That's the moment when my life changed. Boom. I pivoted and I pivoted. And from that moment on, it was different. And I had to think differently and be a different person. I don't wanna be the person that says like, those are my glory [00:08:00] days.

He was perfect. And you know, because I wanna be able to move on. My mother said to me you didn't have him as long as I had your father. But you have the chance to have another life with someone.

Donna Ferris: That's a gift. That happened to me too. I had a woman at a retreat center actually say to me she was from Sicily. She says, I, you know, in my country. When the man dies, the husband dies, women wear black for the rest of their lives.

And they never go out and have life again. She says you don't have to do that. And you're young, you can still have a lot of happiness, which was such a gift because we do get in our heads about that, the aura of grief you know, what's the optics of it?

Judith Bigham: Yes. And it was, it was very freeing. Yes. Yes. And that's not my story anymore. It's not my daughter's story. And, you know, it got me to a place, and then from that, I'm a different person.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. There's a phrase I use, and I'm just finishing this book: we have to become more than what happens to us.

Judith Bigham: That's it. You have to [00:09:00] become more than what happens to us, and I did not want that to become my story that I had the perfect marriage, person, and the perfect life.

Donna Ferris: Nobody's perfect for one thing. You know what I'm saying?

It's easy when you lose somebody to put them on a pedestal and make this whole thing, but it's important to see the whole thing.

Judith Bigham: Yes, I think it's helpful for us. Yeah, yes. And I think my daughters are allowed to see him that way. But I have to put it in a different category as a person who wants to have different relationships with people.

Donna Ferris: That's right. And, and it changes you, you know, so, so maybe let's talk about that like how did you move forward? Your art is behind you. So it, it, it kind of leads the, it leads the subject really well.

Judith Bigham: It does lead the subject. I dunno what other people do, I think Misha said the same thing.

Misha is a person that you interviewed. Misha Archer, the award-winning illustrator.

Donna Ferris: Yes.

Judith Bigham: And she's a friend of mine. When we met, we were 13. [00:10:00] I'm 65, and we're still dear, dear friends. We both say. I don't know what people do. It's confusing to us when they don't have this in their life, this outlet to work, and this passion to work.

So,, for me, my children were my passion. The second thing that happened was that my artwork became my passion, and I had to start doing it every day. In the beginning, I did these very, like, very grief-filled pieces, which were really just for me. I found old maps in his car, and I stitched them together.

Then, I stitched words in them like I would write down phrases. One of my favorite ones is the elegant bravery of a tender heart. So I stitched them together in a very sloppy way and they're on my everything's on my Instagram and that's really the best place to look if somebody wants to look and see what is she talking about and they're way back there.

Maybe like nine years [00:11:00] ago. You know, scroll down, but there are these maps, and they're maybe like, eight by ten, and I just I stitched pieces together, and I stitched them very sloppily, like a big Frankenstein stitch, and then I stitched words in them again, like kind of messy writing.

You can read it. It was things like that. And it took me so long because I'm stitching and doing embroidery like somebody from a Jane Austen book, that it was very meditative. Yeah, exactly. These words and I'm making this artwork, and it was very sad and very beautiful.

Then I did a few of those pieces, and I felt like, okay, now I need to move on. So I probably did that for maybe the first year or so after he died. You know, I was mostly taking care of my kids and then that kind of artwork, and then at a certain point, I thought, okay, now it's time to move on. I've got to do something different.

And I started working. The best thing [00:12:00] was that I started working for an art consultant, doing all sorts of work for new public construction that was going up in Seattle. I was living in Seattle at the time. And she had great taste, and she would just hire me. She would say can you do this?

Can you give me an image? Can you do something like this but do it in red? And I'd say, Yes, I can do that. And I know some artists that can't do that. At the time, the best way to dive back into my artwork was to have somebody else give me an assignment, and I felt lucky I felt like I was going to get paid for this.

I feel like I'm in school, and someone just gave me an assignment; it became a design dilemma. As you said in the beginning, I'm really one for mixing design. and art and not putting one on a higher level than the other. Right. I love wallpaper as much as I love a beautiful painting.

And I don't know why we value a [00:13:00] beautiful painting more than we do wallpaper or a beautiful sofa.

Donna Ferris: I couldn't agree more.

Judith Bigham: Well, and also, to me, it seems very democratic, like, oh, everybody can see this piece. Everybody can understand it. And experience it. Yeah. Yes, experience it. I think I just lost patience for things that were very esoteric.

What's interesting is working for an art consultant, creating artwork for public places, condominiums, restaurants, and office buildings. You had to communicate something.

So it really was a feeling. Usually, it was something nice. It was, but nice is a funny word. It was about beauty. It was inviting. You wanted it to be warm and inviting so that everybody could understand it and everybody would enjoy it. So, that was a great place for me to be.

Donna Ferris: And that was a good place for you to visit. Probably too.

Judith Bigham: It was a great place for me to visit because it wasn't about me just pouring my [00:14:00] emotions into something where I'm just getting deeper into the badness of the grief or whatever it was, I'm making something to make somebody else happy. And I loved doing that.

And then, through that, I had a couple of assignments to do botanicals, and that just really resonated with me because I love the fact that it was using my imagination and painting something that's also real that somebody could relate to. I don't sit and paint like this is a dahlia.

I make up every flower. That flower looks like a dahlia, but maybe the stem will look different or something next to it. Like these are fairly look like tulips, and that's kind of a dahlia-looking thing, but I don't always do that.

I take a stem from this plant. I take a color from this plant. I take stamens and leaves from another plant, and I just put them all together, and I have great freedom from it. So, I started doing this, and it made me really [00:15:00] happy, and they were so pretty.

Also, at the time, almost to this day, I still can't look at sad movies; I don't like sad books; I just want to look at happy things.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I mean, somebody told me once and I think it was it was maybe one of my writing coaches. And she said many people have a high tolerance for sadness and trauma, like trauma-related media, but when you've had trauma in your life, you don't. I totally related to that. I don't need to bring

more of that into my life. Thank you. Yeah. I'm good. I believe it happens. I'm good.

Judith Bigham: Yeah. That's true. That's really, really true. I believe it happens. I'm good. And I just sort of felt like the world didn't need any more of it. The world really needed more prettiness. And I also [00:16:00] felt like with flowers, I really had this idea that it was this sort of trope was this stereotype of women, mothers older women painting flowers, and I thought I'm gonna own that. I'm gonna take it back and like turn it on its head, and you have it's just a great thing. I love what's beautiful. Why wouldn't I make it mine? And why is it that we have such in the intellectual art world?

Why do we have such a bad feeling and why is it so frowned upon to have to say that work is beautiful or pretty. Well that's so pretty, but you're not supposed to say that. You should say oh, that's deep, and it means something.

I want to bring pretty back. I want to be able to say I like that painting because it's pretty. I like to be around it. It speaks to me. It's a pretty piece. And I don't think the flowers are necessarily pretty; they're a bit loud, a little bit strong.

But I do think they're pretty also. And I think that's a good [00:17:00] thing.

Donna Ferris: I love it; why don't we bring pretty back? Bringing pretty back, like bringing sexy back.

Judith Bigham: I was bringing pretty back. I mean, in beauty and it's okay to like something because it's pretty. Everybody's got their thing, but this is what I needed in my life. What's interesting is I found that so many people related to it. And needed it, and wanted it in their life.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I think that's amazing. It makes me think about meditation because in meditation, you're really, in some ways, trying to raise your vibration to use that phraseology.

So tell me a little bit about your meditation practice. You mentioned it early, so it must be important to you.

Judith Bigham: Well, I'm very ADD, and so I tried to meditate through different things on my own forever. And then I found this guy called Sam Harris. He is a neuroscientist, he writes about meditation. He spent a lot of his twenties meditating with [00:18:00] Buddhists and he describes meditation. He's got a waking-up series.

It's the only thing that ever taught me what meditation was his explaining it because he explains it in a practical way. Instead of a wooley, like woo, get in touch and using very abstract words. He basically says, your mind does this.

This is what it does. This is how to calm it down. This is why it's happening. And I thought, Oh my God, this is great. He also had an introductory course that was maybe 10 minutes a day. And it's the only thing that has ever worked for me.

It really helped. I'm still not good at meditating on my own, but I use his method, and it really helps a lot. I also do yoga. I'm a yoga instructor who doesn't teach.

So that helps, too, because I was always very physical. I actually had this great doctor in Seattle who was an MD who worked with these naturopaths. And she said, your ADD really worked for you for so many years because you got to be the stay-at-home mother.

So [00:19:00] there's nothing wrong with that. It's just that my brain works in a different way. And she said the reason it starts to be a problem later in life was because I use that ADD energy towards worry and sadness and mostly worry, actually, and trauma. After my children's father died. Yoga really helps. And that's a form of meditation. And I think, well, you know, I'm very physical. I love to exercise, walk, and hike. But when I tell people I do yoga, I really do it half for my head. At least half of the reason I'm doing yoga is for my brain to calm down.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I think that's a really intelligent way. I was having a talk with Stephen Cope, who's pretty big at Kripalu and has been a yoga aficionado, a psychologist, and so forth. He said yoga was the way for him to [00:20:00] kind of down-regulate his system, and he really thinks that most people should do yoga and meditation.

You know, he's like, he tells all these 40-year-olds to do it. And what happens is people go to yoga to start in fitness, right? They want to get fit. And what the pandemic has done is kind of made everybody focus on these hot yoga classes and not the meditative, you know, benefits.

And that's really where the gold is - in the meditative benefit.

Judith Bigham: Yes. I did my first yoga class when I was 11, because I grew up in kind of a hippie town in Amherst, Massachusetts. Nice. And then I

became a yoga instructor a few years ago. I went to Bali because I've always been doing it.

And then I came back. I took another course in Seattle, and I mostly took those courses for me. And then I use some of that stuff actually to teach because I teach kids art and I'm using some of the things I learned in yoga to be a good yoga teacher in my classes with children [00:21:00] because it's so much about communication.

The yoga that I do like isn't Bikram, but it is a core yoga class, not at a gym. I just found an amazing place here in Jersey City, where I'm living now because my children live here. I moved out of Manhattan. That is it's amazing.

It has a spiritual part to it, but it's also a good workout. They're hard to find something that really combines them. I could probably use, like in yoga, to sit there, but it's hard to do.

Donna Ferris: It's really hard to do. , I always tell a story about the restorative yoga class I took, right in the midst of my divorce on a Thanksgiving day thinking, “Oh, it would be a really great thing.”

Worst thing in the world that I ever could have done to sit there that long.

Judith Bigham: Yeah, I understand it. You lost it with your feelings.

Donna Ferris: Oh yeah. And I had absolutely no tools to do it at that time. I love what you did with your mind at that time you were creating something that you had to actually stitch a piece by piece. Keeping active but not taking on something really [00:22:00] big and also not sitting completely silent.

I wrote, I went right into writing, especially when I was dealing with the hardest scenes of my memoir, which is my first book. My writing coach told me you have to write it in longhand, and I hated that because I really like to type. She said the best thing you can do is with your hands because you're going to let go of that energy, and what you did with the sewing was letting go of that energy.

It's fascinating that you picked that up and instinctively went there.

Judith Bigham: Yes, but I've always been doing something with my hands. Do you know I think shakers who say it? Hands to work, heart to God. They were the ones that made all the furniture.

Donna Ferris: That's right. And I love shaker furniture.

Judith Bigham: Hands to work, heart to God. Yeah. And it's true, though. I think.

Donna Ferris: Yes, it is. I mean, it can go to extremes, I guess. But in those early days, in those early days. You need something to keep kind of moving.

At least, that's how I found it.

Judith Bigham: Yes, [00:23:00] because it's hard to just say, okay, I'm going to meditate and think and really sit with my thoughts.

You can't. No. No, thank you. No, thank you. Not right now. No, thank you. Exactly. You just want to numb them. You just don't want to look at them.

And I was lucky enough to have children. To really keep me busy, so I needed to be grounded for them.

I just show up for them. I have to be there for them. And, yeah, they're, they are, you know, everything.

Donna Ferris: They are. Everything. And they know it, right?

Judith Bigham: They do, yes. And it's all girls, too.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I have that, too. So maybe I'd like to ask one question about Misha and your friendship and how that helped you through these times because I so enjoyed speaking with her.

So maybe tell me a little bit about that and how you've supported each other in your art and life.

Judith Bigham: I think that I was living on the North Coast when I went through the most trauma, but actually we help each other now. [00:24:00] Because really what we both did is we both were, we really focused on our families the longest time. So I met her when I was 13, and that was kind of a great time because, you know, to still be friends with someone, you know, I knew her parents, I knew her brothers. She knew my family. I knew the house that she lived in. I saw exactly, and I really understood who she was. And so all of a sudden, life happened, and all of a sudden, we're 65.

So how did we get here now? And maybe since I moved back to this coast, I would say when, maybe in 2020, I moved back to this coast. And that's really when we connected again, physically connected, because we were close to each other. I was always talking to her and seeing her as much as I could, but that doesn't happen all the time in these years when you're raising kids.

And then when the kids grew up, [00:25:00] hers are a little bit older than me, she was really able to focus on her illustrations, and then on writing stories, and then she's really can now focus on being Misha Archer the children's book writer and illustrator. What happened to me was that I did something very similar. So we're just these great cheerleaders for each other right now. So, you know, really recognizing and also saying, I think it was those years of taking care of our children that really maybe added to this, I don't think that I was ready.

I don't regret any of it. I felt very lucky. She was working at the time, too. I wasn't working, but she was a teacher. Then she worked as a carpenter with her husband for a while, but she was very family-focused and not focused as much on her artwork.

Of course, she was always doing things like I was, so it's amazing. We just went to India together, and I realized that part of my [00:26:00] interest in India was because she had spent a couple of years of her childhood there.

I was just intrigued by this. Her mother was an artist, and I was intrigued by the Indian things that they had around. Her father had Indian friends, and we lived in a college town. So there were people from all over the place. But I didn't realize that until recently. I think that maybe that at first sparked my interest in India.

I saw something on Instagram about this artist's residency. I said we've got to go. And it was just sort of a crazy whim. All of a sudden, we have time in our lives.

We have a little bit of money to do this. We never would have had this before.

We just had the most amazing time at this artist residency in Rajasthan, and being really supportive and giggling all the time, and [00:27:00] talking about things that we knew when we were 13, and talking about something that happened yesterday.

And I feel like the conversation started the minute. We met at her daughter's house in Brooklyn, and I don't think we stopped the conversation until we said goodbye.

Donna Ferris: What a gift.

Judith Bigham: It was great. This particular residency called Farm Studio India.

It just all came together. It was very magic.

I think that women, because we've had to be so fluid and we've had to figure things out with the life with children we're both just wanting to do the next adventure.

And so just the idea of us being in this little village, like in the back of a tuk tuk, we would look at each other, and we'd say, "Most people would hate that. Who do you know that would like this?" and then she'd look at me, I don't think anyone would like this that I know, because it was sort of rough, basically camping.

Donna Ferris: This was not glamping at all. Well, I think one of the things that, [00:28:00] and I wonder if this resonates with you is that after our kids are grown. It's our time. And I wouldn't change it a moment of the time with my kids, but I know there are women that are struggling kind of with who they are after their kids are grown and after that time of their life is over.

And maybe as we close here, what would you say to them about that?

Judith Bigham: Take all that energy. that you put in your children because that's a lot of energy. Think of what you did, you know, and, send them off nicely. My daughters live nearby. I want to see them all the time.

Donna Ferris: Same.

Judith Bigham: but for your children's sake.

Yes, have a full life so they don't have to worry about you. And so, for me, I think that's what Misha and I were talking about. What do people do who don't have this? I would say you have to be brave. If your children were your life, then do it for your children. Go [00:29:00] explore, be a yoga instructor, or start writing. Do that thing.

Because you know what? As we're older, I don't care what anyone thinks about me anymore. I'm not 14 where I'm really worried that I'm not wearing the right shirt. In school. That's right. Or someone's going to say something to me or whatever. No, we have such freedom.

There's a funny movie or that TV series, Frankie and Johnny, is it? .

Donna Ferris: Frankie and Gracie, Gracie, Gracie and Frankie.

Judith Bigham: I saw, I think the first season and then got busy, but Lily Tomlin says to Jane Fonda, let's go to the store. We can steal things. And Jane Fonda says, "What are you talking about?"

And she said, "Oh, we're older women; people don't see us." And so there is sort of a gift to that. There is. There absolutely is. Yes, I thought it was just the most brilliant line. You can't be afraid of anything at this age, believe me, of course, I have traumas and fears of, of [00:30:00] things like my finances or my children's health or things like that, but you can't be afraid of putting yourself out there and trying something new.

Because no one's looking at you, by the way. That's sort of the truth. People are very self-involved and take that to their advantage; I think I learned in one of my yoga teacher training, the one in Bali, that if do not share your gift, do not try something new, not to put yourself out there is actually a selfish way of being.

If you have something, if you have a gift, you really should be; it's up to you to share that gift.

Donna Ferris: It's almost a sin not to.

Judith Bigham: Yes. Yes. You need to be generous with what you have.

Donna Ferris: And that is a great way to end the podcast.

Judith Bigham: It was really fun, and thank you so much.

Donna Ferris: Oh my gosh, it was just so much fun, and, and pretty. It was beautiful background the whole time, and pretty.

Thank you so, so much, that's all for today. If you want to learn more about Judith and her [00:31:00] work, those links will be in the show notes. Thank you so much for listening. I hope this episode was helpful. If it was, please subscribe, drop a review, or share it with your friends and family. That's the best way to get it in the hands of those who may benefit. And if my daughters, Sienna and Sylvie, are listening, I just want you to know how proud I am of you, and I love you so much.

Bye now.