



STORY BY PRUDENCE BAIRD P'11

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# Georgina Kleege Turns a Blind Eye to Art and Helps Others See What They are Missing



GEORGINA KLEEGER '74 says she is not interested in being a “nice, quiet blind person”—Georgina is on a mission—to explore and share life’s “visual feast” with both the visually impaired and the sighted.

While the latter may seem paradoxical, Georgina believes that “vision involves more than merely aiming the eyes at a particular object”—Most seeing, she says, takes place in the mind where we interpret the images our eyes take in. To make sense of these images, we run them through lenses of expectation, desire, and circumstance; we engage our other senses that lend context and texture. Yet, we ascribe all of these actions that scaffold our visual experience as “seeing”

If you’ve never thought about vision in this way, join the club.



Georgina explores the Haptic Encounters exhibition at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco. From the CJS website, “Haptic Encounters ... investigates how tactile and kinesthetic explorations of works of art can engage all visitors with the possibilities for appreciating art through a non-visual sense.”

A writer, an author, an advocate, a professor and teacher, Georgina’s résumé is impressive—a degree in English literature from Yale, and professorships at the University of Oklahoma, Ohio State, and UC Berkeley.

Now a Professor Emerita of English at the University of California, where she taught courses in creative writing and disability studies, Georgina returned to New York in 2022, still on a mission.

As a 2022–23 New York University Steinhardt Scholar-in-Residence, Georgina collaborated with the university across multiple disciplines, raising awareness of and access to culture and education for all.

Today, Georgina works at the intersection of arts and disability, helping organizations, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC, the Tate Modern in London, and others better accommodate their visually impaired staff and museumgoers. With detailed audio descriptions and intuitive displays that welcome further exploration, all museum-goers benefit. She also works with artists and museums to create hands-on and walk-through experiences for the visually impaired, inviting them to explore sculptures with their hands or walk inside exhibits hearing the sounds that echo off the materials as the patrons move through them.

Her strong affection for the arts has roots in Georgina’s early years. Born to two artists living in a loft in Greenwich Village, her childhood was set in the bohemian East Village of the 1960s.

Her father, a sculptor and painter, allowed young Georgina to create her own art with scraps of metal in his studio. She was the subject of paintings and drawings by her parents, who were curious about her experience with their art, especially as she began to lose her sight while still in the single digits.

I spoke with Georgina in early January, and again a month later. Here is what this remarkable woman had to say.

**You were diagnosed as legally blind at age 11, while still attending elementary school in New York City. Why did you choose The Putney School? Were you offered accommodations?**

(Laughs) The fact I was blind never came up—before or after I came to Putney. I chose The Putney School because my mother went to Bennington College. I was familiar with Vermont and felt comfortable with the school’s dedication to the arts and its progressive outlook.

**Did anyone along the way suggest you learn Braille?**

The ophthalmologist who diagnosed me at 11 didn’t suggest it, so it was years before



I learned Braille as an adult. Based on the reaction of the adults in my life at the time, I had the impression that accessing both the world and schoolwork was on my own shoulders. I would have to figure it out. And I did.

**How did that work at Putney?**

It was a struggle, but I managed with magnifying glasses and getting very close to instructions on the page or blackboard. Classmates walked with me around campus, and my years at the Martha Graham School for Contemporary Dance taught me to be aware of my surroundings—what’s in front of me, what’s in back, and where I should aim my gaze.

One old-school Putney teacher stands out to me—Felix Lederer, who taught French and Latin. Before he pulled down the map to cover the quiz questions on the blackboard, he would gesture for me to come close and copy the quiz. He taught me a lot

about teaching. I asked him what his secret was and he said, “Say everything three times using a different vocabulary. The best students will get it the first time, but by the third time, all students will understand—I still use this method.

I’ve used Felix’s methods to help me teach my classes over the years. One of my sighted students told me, “I’ve never thought about being sighted before your class”—that’s the whole point.

**The federal Rehabilitation Act passed in 1973, making you eligible for disability support at Yale, although it did not apply to your high school years. Did this change the academic experience for you?**

The Department of Rehabilitation in downtown New Haven provided me with recorded books from two libraries for the blind—very handy for an English Lit major! When there was not a recorded book available, I had a small fund from the Department of Rehab to



hire students to read to me. And when that ran out, I would type and edit my classmates’ papers in exchange for them reading to me. I sharpened my writing and teaching skills from this experience.

Also, for the first time, I joined an advocacy group for blind students. We lobbied for oral testing—and got it.

**The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed in 1993. By this time, you were a working adult. Where were you and how did your life change?**

Before the ADA, when I applied for work at a company or organization, I felt like I was asking for a favor, a handout. To support myself, I had had a patchwork of jobs—teaching, freelance writing, translating other writers (including Lebanese author Etal Adnan), authoring three books, including one that was published in 1989 (*Home for the Summer*).

With the ADA, however, I was able for the first time to get a real job, with benefits, teaching creative writing at Ohio State in Columbus, where I moved with my husband.

In 2003, we moved to Berkeley, California, the birthplace of disability rights. I had excellent support during my two decades there.

**In *Sight Unseen*, you describe yourself as “intensely visual.” Please explain.**

For decades, I studied and taught about sight, vision, and seeing. Besides writing and





literature, I now work with museums, opening up art spaces to the visually impaired, places that have catered primarily to the sighted. By making art more accessible, we can reflect back to the sighted patrons the world in which they live and may take for granted. It's such an unexamined norm. The average blind person knows infinitely more about what it's like to be sighted than the average sighted person knows about how it is to be blind.

**Why is that?**  
The world is created for sighted people by the sighted. We visually impaired have to do the same things sighted people do but a different way. So, we need to know how things work, public transportation for example. We need to know how many steps to take in which direction, where to stand, how to find what we need, when to get off the bus without visual clues, and where to go from there.

**If a museum had an ideal set-up for patrons to experience art, what would that be—if all of the patrons' inclusion and access needs were met?**  
You approach artworks through time and space, and if we change these, we change everything. For instance, moving artwork in from the walls to the center of the room allows for access from multiple sides. Audio delivery of information describing the art teaches us how the art was made, who the artist is or was. We can learn about the context and time in which the art was created,



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and even hear archival recordings or music. The sighted appreciate this additional material, as it bolsters their overall experience.

**Many of these organizations receive government grants. Does the work you do fall under the rubric of DEI?**  
Fortunately, most of my recent work is to augment access. Therefore, it falls into the education department.

I've always felt there's a letter missing from the spirit of DEI—the letter A for “access.” I'd like to believe access through

the ADA is safe; it is the law. That doesn't seem to stop this administration, however.

**Five, ten, and 20 years out from Putney, you were on a trajectory marked by many successes, long hours, and dedicated work. How did technology assist you during these years?**  
1979: At Yale, I had recorded books on both tape and vinyl records from two sources: the National Library Service, run by the Library of Congress, as well as from Recordings for the Blind. The latter organization, now

Reading Allies, was founded by blind WWII veterans and serves both the visually impaired and those with dyslexia.

Rough the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, I had a small fund to hire aides to read my schoolwork to me, and two caseworkers who helped gather resources, such as my schoolbook recordings and the giant, brightly colored plastic tape players and record players that they played on. Those were bulky and looked like they belonged in a pre-school, not on a university co-ed's desk.

1984: I had an early Macintosh computer, which was really a glorified typewriter, but it was accessible in that it could enlarge type for me. I still used the two libraries for cassette tapes. Vinyl was on its way out by then.

1994: I started using a very fundamental assist at this time—one that was available my whole life, but I'd never used—the white cane. It's not only a useful with making my way through the world, but it gives me license to ask for help. And conversely, it welcomes others to approach me if they want to help.



Georgina explores art built for accessibility, moved in from the walls, and with audio descriptions.

Computers evolved; my Macintosh performed text-to-speech, but not [the natural voice] as it is today. Books on cassettes from my two libraries were still in use. By then, books on tape were for everyone. People could follow along with a book while they drove or jogged. I also got my first closed circuit magnifying device, which is a screen mounted above the table at eye level. Underneath it is a camera that you can aim at a book to enlarge text.

Today, a lot of what I once used is obsolete. My desk is no longer covered with microphones, speakers, screens, cables, non-interchangeable chargers, and devices that all do different things.

Now, I have almost everything I need on my smartphone. I get around easily with the phone's GPS and all my reading material can be accessed in the palm of my hand. I am a writer; I compose on my phone, and I also receive and send correspondence. During the initial Covid pandemic, I even could get my test results via an app!

Lately, I've been working with various institutions to create indoor navigation systems that patrons can use on their smartphones.

**Finally, you wrote an epistolary memoir, *Blind Rage*, in which you send Helen Keller letters demanding that she “explain herself.” Would you share with us the reason you took on this icon?**  
When I was a child, Helen Keller was held up to me as someone for me to aspire to be; she was always cheerful, she was very accomplished. I took this as an affront to me and my less-than-perfect life.

As an adult, I read the letters Helen penned to others, but they were her letters. I never saw the other half—the letters to which she was responding. This is less an opening for interpretation, an area I felt I needed to explore.

One of my reviewers called my book “speculative non-fiction” and it is written in second person through a series of letters sent to Helen from me. I was, in a way, trying to answer that question you hear so frequently about Helen but could very well apply to me, “I can't imagine what it was like to be Helen Keller.”

The point of *Blind Rage* is that you can imagine what it is to be like to be Helen Keller. The book starts out perhaps a little testy but ends up a somewhere else. Trying to understand Helen Keller—her life and motivations—was a really a way to understand myself. ■