



Youspeak Radio Episode 1 – Keep Going – With Helen Zia

Audio transcript

Full audio: <https://www.onearchives.org/youspeak-radio-episode-1-keep-going-with-helen-zia/>

Automated Introduction ([00:00](#)):

This is Youspeak Radio. A project by ONE Archives Foundation with gender support from the California Humanities.

Cassidy All ([00:15](#)):

Hi, I'm Cassidy All. I spoke with Helen Zia, a prolific writer, journalist and activist about her experiences with funding, activism, and journalism, and her advice for aspiring writers. We also spoke about how much has changed since she began her career exemplified by the fact that our interview is conducted with me in Colorado and her in California.

Helen Zia ([00:38](#)):

"I would just say that keep going. That's all the more reason you have to be there and it's unpleasant as it can be to be there and to realize that you are paving the way for people behind you. And to know that you're not alone."

Cassidy All ([00:59](#)):

Helen's words are a must listen for aspiring writers or journalists, especially those from marginalized groups and those who are grappling with finding a career that pays the bills and incorporates activist work.

Cassidy All ([01:20](#)):

I'd like to ask, what is it like working in journalism? I've written some for local papers myself, what is it like to kind of be a professional journalist? And I was wondering if you had any stories or anything about that kind of exemplify that or about any challenges that you've faced?

Helen Zia ([01:39](#)):

Well, great. I want to hear about your life as a journalist. Seriously. So for me, I had no journalistic training when I was in college. There were probably only a few schools that even had journalism classes, where I went to, well, there was English literature, which I did not take. I majored in public affairs, public relations, not in the PR sense, but about international relations, politics, history, sociology, stuff like that. And not English, even though I loved writing. And so I didn't come to realize that I really wanted to tell the stories and chronicle what I was seeing.

Helen Zia ([02:21](#)):

And that was when I was in Detroit and there were so many layoffs and there was so much Anti-Asian hate going on in the time that Vincent Chin was killed. And I was there. I was laid off with millions of other workers, because I had worked in a factory, a car factory, and I knew had friends who were my co-workers and their lives and their suffering and mine weren't being reported anywhere.



Helen Zia ([02:47](#)):

So that's when I realized nobody's selling a story, somebody has got to share the real stories of what people are going through. And if nobody's doing it, I'll do it. And that was my beginning. And it was all coming from a place of having no training, no contacts, no articles published to be able to show and to just try to find a way as a freelance writer, to even get any print. And that's a long story, but I mean, I started out sending, typing on typewriters because there were no [inaudible 00:03:25] those days. Typing every query letter out, hundreds. "I would like to write a story for you about the collapse of the auto industry and how the labor and union movement has changed." Something like that. That was my query because that's a big story. It's an ambitious story.

Helen Zia ([03:48](#)):

And I would get no response or no we don't take freelancers, which I found out was a lie. Like the village voice wrote me a photocopy kind of thing, except it was mimeograph paper, which you don't do anymore. Just saying we don't take freelancers, which was not true. And finally, I got a break from one local alternative weekly and they said, "Oh, we really liked your query letter. And we'd like to give you a break." And I said, "Okay, great. You want me to write about the United Auto Workers? They said, "No, no, no. We want you to write about plants. You know, we want you to write about flowers in the winter that grow in Michigan and in a Michigan winter, because we're doing a special supplement on winter interiors." So I said, "Oh okay great. I'll do that story."

Helen Zia ([04:35](#)):

Even though I had killed every plant I ever looked at, it was the one break I had. And so the Detroit Metro Times gave me that break. And I wrote that for them for free. It was on spec. They told me you're not getting paid for this, but here. So, I did it, I quit everything and the next story was something similar to that. And the next one, but everyone I did, I learned more and each one was another thing with my byline on it that got public. And so it probably took at least a year before I got to write the story about the labor movement and the UAW. And that was in a monthly magazine in Detroit. But in the meantime, there were a whole lot of stories that got progressively more interesting related to politics, the world, what was happening in a city where, that was in a state of depression and it was all a way to step-by-step learn the craft of being a journalist.

Helen Zia ([05:46](#)):

And I think it's probably not all that different today, except you have a lot more platforms. So, you can choose what platforms. I mean, trying to fight to get into a print newspaper today is like why? You want to do it online and get a lot of hits and create your own blog or podcast or something like that. But there's, that's more accessible, but otherwise it's the same process. It's the same skill. It's the same what are the important stories? What's your take on it as the journalist, your filter, your eyes, who are you going to use as sources? What is your point in your story? So all of that is still the same. And it's hard, it's hard work, but it's good work. It's about trying to tell the truth as you see it.

Cassidy All ([06:44](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). It's really good to hear about your experience. A little considering the amount of rejections that I have in my email, from writing and emailing to people. Although obviously I did not have to typewrite letters.



Helen Zia ([07:03](#)):

Like with that rejection, just take it as they're missing out, and there is nobody in the universe that has a point of view of the stories that you're seeing, that you have, you are the only person who will tell the story that you want to tell, and that's it. And so just keep going. I have like lots of rejection, but eventually you will tell the story, you'll find a way to do it, and the world will be better for it and too bad for the ones that rejected you. They lost out and don't take it as a rejection, one day, just like I'm telling you, somewhere I have a file of a lot of copies of letters I sent out. Hundreds of them and only one mattered, the one that let me write about plants that flower in the winter.

Cassidy All ([08:07](#)):

You mentioned talking about having unique point of view, and you also mentioned the story you wanted to try to write originally being delayed for a little while. I guess I'd just ask in your experience obviously writing about some topics, people in power might not necessarily like. Did you experience hostility to kind of presenting your point of view? How did you kind of deal with that or move forward or past that?

Helen Zia ([08:42](#)):

With different stories, I have met reactions that were unpleasant. Yeah. I mean, it really depends on what the context was. I mean, most of the stories were just, you do your best reporting on a story about, Earth Day or about kitchens and, and people feel like you uplifted them and that's great. But there were stories when I was in Detroit, I had to interview a local black leader who didn't like my line of questioning. And he said to me, and he was a former athlete and he balled up his fist and put it right next to my head. And his fist was about the size of my head. And he said, "What happened to Vincent Chin should happen to you? Or it could happen." And that was not great, but that's just, whatever it got and we remained professional about it, but that was an encounter.

Helen Zia ([09:46](#)):

There was another time when I was working at Ms. Magazine, a feminist magazine and you know the iconic feminist magazine that Gloria Steinem had founded. And, we had a policy that if you were writing about a particular community, whether that was, LGBT community or Latinx community or Black or Asian or Irish or whatever, that we should try to find a writer from that community, they would have the insight. And so there was a story that came to us that somebody proposed about having to do with lesbians. And I can't remember what specifically it was, but I asked her, "Are you a lesbian?" She said, "No." And I said, "I'm sorry. Our policy is X, Y, and Z." And then she took that... which she took it to some, I have to say, right wing media people who then blew it up. And it became this thing that actually even was in Reader's Digest.

Helen Zia ([10:53](#)):

Then, you know, I don't know if people even know what that is today, but The Washington Post, Howard Kurtz and all these people and Jonathan Leo, people that I think are not progressive people who then started attacking Ms. Magazine and me saying, "Ms. Magazine says only lesbians can write about lesbians." Well, that's not what I said, but it would be a very homophobic attack. And, and that was another kind of thing that you just basically, you ride it out. I mean, if anybody wanted to know the truth, we said, "Hey, look, Newsweek Magazine just ran a whole thing about World War II, and guess what? They had a World War II veteran write it. Are you going to attack them for that? We're not saying



that only lesbians can write about lesbians, but in our magazine, we want somebody who understands the community that's being written about."

Helen Zia ([11:49](#)):

So, those things happen and as a journalist, you can only stand on your integrity that there was nothing sleazy about any of these things. I wasn't trying to do anything bad to the man who put his fist to my head. We had a policy and I think it's a very understandable policy and a good policy to have if you're not looking for ways to attack and undermine and misrepresent. So, that's what they did.

Helen Zia ([12:22](#)):

So, those things, I think, come with the territory. You're writing about things that are going on, and if they are things that people are passionate about, somebody's going to disagree with you. And hopefully, as long as you are telling from the truth as you know it, and I say, truth as you know it because it's not truth with a capital T, we are all filters, we are all interpreting things. And as journalists, we are the filter, we screen things. And so just from that, we're not going to be representing every view out there. We can't, but to the best of your ability, it's how to represent this and to make clear why and how you chose these things. So criticism comes with the territory along with rejection, and then you just keep going forward and try to do the best you can.

Cassidy All ([13:20](#)):

Yeah. So having spoken a little bit about your professional career, I guess I'd just like to ask, obviously there was activism kind of in those professional settings, but also probably outside of the workplace. And I was wondering if you had any thoughts or wisdom about the differences between kind of being an activist in those professional settings compared to maybe in less professional settings than a job and what the difference in those experiences was like?

Helen Zia ([13:57](#)):

Hm. Well, let me see if I'm understanding your question, right. I mean, I describe myself as an activist first. I got into journalism. I became a journalist because I wanted to tell the stories of people who I felt were missing, missing in the stories, missing in the news, missing in history. And so I knew that I had a point of view. And so I am not one to say that every journalist must have no emotional content whatsoever and that we all have a completely blank mind. I think that idea that any human being can be totally quote, objective unquote, is bullshit. So it's really, the important thing is to know what your own biases are, to the extent that you can understand them and try to keep understanding them and to try to be fair in your outlook and balanced. And so I knew that I was coming in with stories that I wanted to put forward.

Helen Zia ([15:04](#)):

So if you're asking, where does the activism begin and where does the journalism begin or what's the line in between them, if there is one? For me personally, I guess I considered my writing and my reporting to also be a form of the activism. And what do I mean by that? I deliberately, tried to find audiences like Ms. Magazine, for example, I knew I wanted to work for a publication that stood for progressive politics that stood for advancing people that didn't shy away from looking at people's lives



and analyzing what could be better. And then even standing up, standing up for what is wrong, standing up for reproductive justice and things like that. That was given at a magazine like Ms.

Helen Zia ([16:03](#)):

And, you could take that in other ways and corporate setting, you wouldn't go to work for an automotive magazine, if you hated cars. It's sort of understood that if you're going there, you're going to uphold that or a baseball magazine. It's like, we love baseball and we're going to write them. So I sought out publications where I could hopefully express myself and shine a light on the stories that I thought needed to be told. It didn't mean I was writing it from me, me, me, this is what I think, but it was that I would look for the stories that would for Ms. Magazine be talking about women's rights, women's equality and equity and the treatment of girls and against violence and stuff like that.

Helen Zia ([16:55](#)):

So, it wasn't the case that every article that I wrote for, for every publication I wrote for was like that at all. I had to write plenty of stories about the latest real estate trends or what's going on and in the travel industry or in workplaces, and what's hot, and what's not, I wrote stories like that, but where my activism came in was I wanted to make sure that there was a diversity of people that I interviewed or that the pictures that went along with those stories and the headlines were also reflective of the people in the communities that they were part of, that it wasn't all pale male sources and stuff like that.

Helen Zia ([17:50](#)):

So, that was another form of taking a point of view that the whole community should be reflected in my work. Even if the story was about what is the latest trend this summer in recreational activity, which was a story I had, but I got voices that were different or a mother's day article for Ms. Magazine to make sure we had plenty of women of color and that we had actually a woman of color and Asian American, South Asian woman and then her daughter on our cover. I mean, that was something that people might not realize is also activism within the journalism profession and craft, but that was something that I tried to do as well. So for me, I don't really feel like there was a line, I mean, all through it. I tried to be fair, tried to be balanced, try to not hammer a certain point of view, but let's let the story evolve and, and to see what the people who were doing whatever were saying about, about that work.

Helen Zia ([19:06](#)):

And so that's the part of the journalism craft of being able to do that, because if we don't do that and people just feel like, well, you're standing on a soap box, then they might be attracted to the soap box, but they're not going to go to it for factual news. And so there is a line in terms of being fair, showing representation, having integrity in your work so that people will believe what you're saying, that you went through some real effort to try to get the information and to distill it in a certain way and come out with an article or a podcast or a broadcast or something. But for me, that's also part of my activism too.

Cassidy All ([19:53](#)):

Yeah. It's really great to hear that you were able to find spaces and ways that not everybody might think of per se, as ways to kind of make change, but to still be able to incorporate that.

Helen Zia ([20:08](#)):



Yeah. And, I mean in my early days as a journalist, I took what the jobs that I could get, I had to pay the rent too. And some of those jobs where working for a business magazine, this subject matter generally did not lend itself to feeling like it was what's going on there in the hood. But after I came home and did my work during the day, I also did freelance writing about sweatshops and what's going on and the women's movement or what's going on against hate crimes and stuff like that. So it was kind of extra... the real journalism that I wanted to do the real stories that I wanted to do, but I still had to get jobs that could help pay the bills.

Cassidy All ([21:03](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative) Well, it was super great speaking to you. We're almost out of time. So I guess I'll just end off with one final question and that'd be asking if you had any advice for people who might come from underrepresented backgrounds in professional fields in journalism. Just if you have, and just in general, I guess in life, if you have any advice that you would like to share.

Helen Zia ([21:34](#)):

Sure. I guess I would say having spent most of my life working in areas that I was one of a few and whether that wouldn't heal me, Asian person or cis female in the room or something like that, or woman of color, I would just say that keep going, especially that's all the more reason you have to be there as unpleasant as it can be. And I'm sure I've been in many of those unpleasant situations of just like, "Who are you? Did you, did you have something to say?" like who cares, what you have to say? But that's all the more reason to be there and to realize that you are paving the way for people behind you. And to know that you're not alone.

Helen Zia ([22:35](#)):

And so to not be alone, my advice would be to find like-minded people, allies, people who are supportive, because if you're experiencing that, there are other people too, and you find the people who will nurture you and have your back too. And that might be in your workplace or wherever you are, or it might be outside, but you have to have that team with you so that when the road really feels rough, that you can actually go and get the nurturing and the support and healing that you might need so that you can go back another day.

Automated Introduction ([23:21](#)):

This is Youspeak Radio. We are, Cassidy All, Savi Bindass, Dean Campbell, Gabriel DuBransky, Jaileen Vargas-Garcia, Téa Wagstaff, Erik Adamian and Umi Hsu. A project by ONE Archives Foundation with gender support from the California Humanities.