Hadley

Vision Loss and Navigating the Aftermath of Natural Disaster

Presented by Ricky Enger

**Ricky Enger:** Even if you feel fully prepared for an emergency like a wildfire, or a hurricane, there may still be aspects you haven't considered.

In this episode, Judy Davis joins us to share her experience navigating Hurricane Helene, and its aftermath with vision loss. I am Ricky Enger, and this is Hadley Presents.

Welcome to the show, Judy.

**Judy Davis:** Thank you. I'm glad to be back.

**Ricky Enger:** Yes. It is so good to have you. We've had a great time together on this show. We've talked about support groups, we've talked about audio description, and today we're going to talk about something a little more serious, but I'm really looking forward to it, I think it's going to be very informative.

So, before we jump in, why don't you just give us a brief little intro for those who maybe haven't heard the other shows that you've been on.

**Judy Davis:** Sure. Of course. I have retinitis pigmentosa. I lost vision fairly quickly. So, no useful vision, and I live alone. So, that can be more challenging at times. And I have no local family, but I have a great group of friends who really pitch in along with neighbors to help me do things I might need help with.

And then I live with my retired guide dog, who is 11, and then I have an active guide dog, who is five. So, I do have family in my home. They're just the four-footed kind.

**Ricky Enger:** Yes. So, we did a podcast on disaster preparedness, going through some general things that you might think about with vision loss that are in addition to those typical things that we do to prepare for an emergency, or a disaster, or whatever.

It was such an odd thing, because we recorded that episode, and a week later, Hurricane Helene hit, and then as we were about to release that episode, another hurricane hit Florida.

So, it was really quite the summer. But you were in Helene, and we thought we'd give you a little time before we recorded an aftermath story. What kinds of things did you learn? What we went through was very practical and very general, and I think it's very useful information, but it helps so much to hear from someone who has been through it.

So, I'm curious. Before Helene hit, how well would you say you were prepared for a hurricane, or really anything, I guess?

**Judy Davis:** I feel like I was somewhat prepared, because I think Asheville, which is in western North Carolina, which is where I live, is an older city. So, occasionally, it has some water outages, but we're just talking for part of a day.

So, I had on hand, like, two gallons of water, and then probably a flat of water besides that. And I had low maintenance food. I had nuts, I had dried fruits, I had cereal, I had apples. So, I felt like I had a lot of food and water supplies, and then a friend gave me a power bank a couple of years ago. So, I had that.

I had certain things that made me feel like I was reasonably prepared for things, but you never know what you're getting into until the disaster actually arrives.

**Ricky Enger:** Yes. And were you expecting a hurricane where you are? Because a lot of things that we talk about is get to know where you are, and what sort of disasters might happen. If you're in the Texas Panhandle, you could be prepared for tornadoes, and that kind of thing.

**Judy Davis:** Yeah. That's a really good point. So, one thing I want to mention is this happened in western North Carolina.

So, we were probably 400 some miles from the ocean. So, it's not like they evacuate us on a regular basis, because we're not close to the ocean. And where I live, I'm 50 miles from Tennessee. So, I just want people to understand that it's not like we're at a high-risk area.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah. So, you were in this area where it was not reasonable to expect a hurricane, but you had a little bit of a warning. Like, they're telling you to get some food and get some water.

And so, from that perspective, you probably went into this thinking, "Oh, it'll be a day, or two of power loss and then we'll be okay." Is that about right?

**Judy Davis:** Yes, exactly. That's what we were told. "Prepare for three days of chaos," but it was going to be minimal.

**Ricky Enger:** So, this was a surprise to everyone, and, certainly, for the people living there going through it.

And as it happened, you get through what you think is the worst of it where finally the winds die down for the last time, and things are much quieter, and one thing I always think about with this sort of thing is, "Now it's time to investigate, but I don't want to go running toward the danger. I want to do that safely."

You mentioned you've got two dogs and dogs need to go outside at some point. So, when it was time to get out and let them do what they needed to do, how did you approach that? Making sure that you were going to be able to do it safely.

**Judy Davis:** Yeah. The night before, the temperature was good. So, I had my windows open. So, all night, I was listening to things falling, and that is scary. And then my power went out at 3:45 on that September 27th in the morning.

I got up at seven, and it was still raining really, really heavily. And I still had connections with my cellphone. I FaceTimed my daughter who lives in Charleston, and I tried to get her to tell me what was happening outside. Just so I would have a feel of what I was getting into, not just that I knew it was pouring.

But it was just raining so hard, she couldn't help. So, it's like, "Okay." And like you said, dogs have to go out. So, we went out in the pouring rain.

**Ricky Enger:** Right.

**Judy Davis:** I did not have a fenced-in backyard. And I took them out with my cane one at a time, and I got drenched. I stayed close to my front door, because I had no idea what was happening further out of the parking lot.

So, that was my first experience, and then around midday, the rain had slowed down and had almost stopped. At this point, I had no connection with anything. It's, like, I don't know if there's still an eye to this hurricane storm if I need to take them out now, or what.

So, I took one of them out, and conveniently, my neighbor who lives right next door, it's a duplex, he came out at the same time. I asked him, "What do you see? What's happening?" He said, "Well, there's a lot of trees down," but not on any of the buildings that are a part of my apartment complex. Then we walked up the street, and it really felt like that disaster movie thing where people are coming out, and just aghast at what they saw in things, and they wanted to check on each other.

I asked my neighbor, "Can we walk up the street to see what happened to our street?" And he said, "Oh, there's two, or three trees down across the street, and everybody was just checking in with each other," which was just a beautiful thing.

**Ricky Enger:** Absolutely. If you didn't have the dogs, if it was just you, and you didn't have to venture out, how long do you think it would have taken you to decide to step out, and have that chat with the neighbors and be among the community? Would you have stayed inside, or would you have gone out still?

**Judy Davis:** I probably would have waited a little longer, because like I said, I didn't know if we were in a lull, or if there was going to be another ring coming through again.

But I probably would have gone out shortly, because I am a huge get out and go person as far as walking in my neighborhood. It's good for my mental health, I love connecting with people and just having that experience in your environment.

So, I probably would have gone out, maybe not quite that soon, but fairly soon.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah. And you talk about going out and walking in your neighborhood. That was a routine that you had, that you no doubt missed, but really nothing was routine for a long, long time, but you still had to figure out what was going on. So, figuring out where is a safe place to get water, where are supplies available, what's generally happening in the community.

What kinds of tools did you use to keep up with what was going on? Because cell connection is spotty, and all that stuff.

**Judy Davis:** Oh my gosh. Not just spotty, just basically not there.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah.

**Judy Davis:** I think with my texts I had a 95% failure rate. It was just you couldn't get a text out because cell towers were down. But luckily, the neighbors were really communicative about what they saw, and I remember that I had an emergency radio that I had never used.

So, one of the times I had crossed paths with the neighbor, I said, "Look, I have this emergency radio, if you all can figure out how to work it," and it was one of the hand crank ones. And so, we learned pretty quickly that the county was doing community briefings twice a day, and as a group, we got together and listened to that for the first couple days as people found out how they could connect on their own.

And it was just, again, nice to check in with my neighbors and have that community, sharing how everybody was doing, what people needed, those kinds of things.

So, that emergency radio was just key.

**Ricky Enger:** Right. Right. But in that respect, I guess getting the info was pretty accessible. So, it's not like sometimes now where if you are figuring out things, they're showing it on TV, and there's a, "Call the number on the bottom of your screen," or there's something scrolling past, but this seems like because it was audible, it was accessible for you.

So, I know that I am a huge technology person, and you, at least, to some degree, rely on it. You use it as a tool in your daily life. But in this instance, it's so integral, but, suddenly, it's missing. Either because that connection is spotty, or you have to conserve power, or whatever the reason, maybe a tool that you are accustomed to using wasn't there anymore.

So, were there some things that you used and were happy to have that weren't your traditional tech stuff?

**Judy Davis:** Yes. That's a really good point, because I did have all my devices charged, but you just don't know when you're going to have that option to use them. So, you start rationing your talking book player, you ration your computer, you ration your phone. So, two things that were very valuable to me is I still had a talking clock that I keep on my bed with me, and then braille. Braille was just a lifesaver for me.

I'm one of those people that can't read a book in braille, but for self-communication, it was just wonderful, because I could no longer walk into my kitchen and say, "Alexa, put this on my to-do list."

**Ricky Enger:** Right.

**Judy Davis:** Or "Put this on my shopping list." So, I had to have some other way to do things. It was really great. I had a couple of my neighbor's phone numbers, but I didn't have everybody's.

So, as things got connected, I wrote down people's cellphone numbers in braille. So, I would not slow them down while I added them to my contacts and stuff.

**Ricky Enger:** Right. Yeah.

**Judy Davis:** And then a list of things to do and phone numbers for resources, and things like that, because as I mentioned, I lost power on September 27th, and I did not get it back until the night of October 9th.

I did have friends, or neighbors that would take my book player to get charged in somebody's home that had a generator. And it was just that loss. But braille, and my talking clock really got me through this.

**Ricky Enger:** And was there any tool now that you're looking back, you're like, "Oh, I wish I had had that, and I will have it from now on"?

**Judy Davis:** One thing I wish I had; I think I would like some kind of solar-powered generator so I could have charged my talking book player. You don't realize my days are walking with my dogs, listening to my books, doing things on my computer, talking with friends, and none of that was easily done.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah. All of that was affected.

So, one of the biggest ... I suppose a silver lining to any cloud is community tends to come together at times like this. It's a shared experience, and you have all gone through the same thing, and there's a sense of camaraderie, I guess.

You've mentioned several things throughout this. Your neighbors would help you charge your BookPlayer, you walked with them to the street right after the disaster to see what had happened, and you would all come together, and listen to the briefings and just so much of that togetherness.

So, it does feel like you were all helping each other in a way. Was there something in particular where your neighbors helped you, and then a way that you were able to give back as well?

**Judy Davis:** Yeah. A couple ways that I gave back is there was one person that ended up having a family come stay with her, and they have small children. And small children need to be entertained.

**Ricky Enger:** Yes.

**Judy Davis:** And when you don't have electricity, that makes it difficult. So, I had some old large print calendars that I kept for my grandchildren to use for coloring on. So, I gave them that, and then I also found some chalk when I had done some tidying up before Helene, and then I also offered them some toys.

And then that first day when I could get connected with my daughter, I let one of the neighbors try to use my phone to try to call some of her family, because that's what we all needed to do. We wanted to tell people, "We're okay."

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah.

**Judy Davis:** One thing that happened is there was a big pile of debris on the street where a tree had come down, and taken down power lines, and taken down a transformer, and because of that blockage on a main street, everybody was driving on our quiet little street.

I am very confident walking with my dogs on my quiet little street, but once it got flooded with traffic, it's like, "Okay, Judy. You hear one car, there's probably going to be three, or four more behind it."

So, I knew I could count on drivers being attentive. So, I actually asked one of my neighbors, "Hey. Can you use this?" And I gave them one of my big thick markers that I used to be able to see with, I said, "Can you please create signs that say, "Blind pedestrian, drive slowly?"

And so, the neighborhood really took that to heart. Not only were those signs created, but another neighbor had tape that said, "Attention, please." So, that was taped above these signs.

And so, that made me feel safer when I was out walking. Like I said, they just care, and I care. So, that really did help.

And another thing that was really great, my daughter in Charleston was very willing to come up and get me. We all know, as people with vision loss, we are so much more independent in our home. I didn't want to leave because I could manage things here. So, it's like, "Okay. If I go to Charleston, I'm going to be in a place where I'm not very comfortable, cannot be very independent. It has an open floor plan. It's a four-story town home. No sidewalks." And just a lot of difficulties with what to do.

But as the lack of water continued, it's like, "Okay. I just need to think about going to Charleston for a couple of weeks."

My daughter had been getting donations from friends and family members, because they knew she would eventually be coming to the Asheville area, and two people in the support group that I help run do not live in the Asheville area. So, they had been trying to reach out to the support group people to say, "How are you doing? Are you okay? What do you need? And what do you want?"

And so, the plan was that my daughter was going to bring supplies from Charleston through those donations of money that she'd gotten. And so, when she came to Asheville, she brought supplies, and she and I delivered the supplies to the people that we'd been able to reach. And it was so sweet, because those two people, Tara and Mark, they do not live in North Carolina, they checked in with people, and they would get things that the people would like because they needed them. But it's like, "Okay, but what do you want?"

One person in our support group said, "If I could just have some yarn, so, I could crochet while I'm stuck in this challenging world?" And another person said, "Oh, if I could just have some Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, my whole world would be bright."

And so, what was happening in the community, somebody brought me a box of canned items, which was really sweet, but as people with vision loss, it's like, "Okay. What's this a can of? What's this a can of?" They said, "Okay. There's a bag of beans in here." It's like, "Well, I already have beans." "Well, just take it." But you're just adding more chaos to my chaotic life.

And it happened to a couple of other people in the group where they kept getting all of these supplies. One person's table was full of stuff that she couldn't identify. And so, the fact that my daughter was able to bring things that people specifically asked for made a difference.

**Ricky Enger:** And this is actually such a good point, though, because when a disaster like this happens, to some degree, you may feel like you are at the mercy of what other people choose to do. So, some of the ways that you generally get things done, maybe that's Instacart, or getting things delivered as you shop online, or going to the grocery store and knowing that there will be someone there to walk with you and help you pick out things, those things maybe go out the window.

So, just having that moment where people are willing to say, "What do you need? What do you want? What's going to help?" in a way that doesn't add to what you're already dealing with, that had to help so much.

**Judy Davis:** Yeah. And that was the neat thing about the community. I think other places that have had disasters find that too, that Flush Brigade was great, another way that volunteers would go to a certain place in downtown Asheville, and get assignments of places to go, and everything.

It was just really, really sweet about how many people jumped in to help, and other people just chose to leave, because no water, no electricity, if people can easily leave, then they go.

**Ricky Enger:** That probably makes the most sense. Right. If they can, why not?

So, I do think that you can make something like this a learning opportunity. You're bound to discover some things just by facing that challenge that you didn't know about yourself, or you didn't know about the people around you.

Were there things that you found out from going through this that you were really surprised by, or didn't expect?

**Judy Davis:** I am naturally an organized and detailed person, and I go with the flow. It's like, "Okay. I can get through this. It's going to be okay." I don't panic, things like that.

But when you lose your comfort places, the ability to go out for walks, the ability to listen to books. It's just a hard hit on your mental health, and trying to find substitutes was tricky.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Judy Davis:** And like I said, what can you replace that with? Because I enjoy cleaning, because I listen to my books, and so, it's not a big deal. But when I can't listen to my books and I can't really clean, then that's a challenge.

**Ricky Enger:** Yes.

**Judy Davis:** And just that disruption of schedule.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, and those are things you don't really think about, because what we always hear is, "Make sure you have supplies. Make sure you have food and water, and contact info, and your meds are okay."

But you don't often hear someone say, "Plan for some disruptions to your routine, and are there alternatives that you can occupy yourself if this goes on for a while?" So, it's a really good point.

**Judy Davis:** And the other thing that surprised me, again, I feel like one of those people that usually let things go, is "Okay. I got through that. I'm okay." But I and other people in our support group have talked about how now we are more nervous.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah.

**Judy Davis:** Once we hear that the wind speed is going up, and we know that there's a lot of trees that are down, and trees that should be coming down, the storm has made them vulnerable to any wind that might come. And so, it's like, "Okay. That."

And recently, we were supposed to have some snow, and they said, "Make sure your devices are charged. Make sure you have water for three days. Make sure you have food for three days." It's like, "Oh my gosh." And I didn't realize how I would have these flashbacks of, "Okay. There's this." So, I didn't expect that to happen.

And another thing, I feel like I'm usually a pretty good advocate for myself and that's something talked about on the previous episode, you have to be prepared for that. But it's hard, especially when you don't know.

And so, just learning that, and I think FEMA tries hard, but, again, with people with disabilities, I don't think they actually get it. I talked to them initially, because they said even if you didn't have any damage, you should contact them.

So, I contacted them, and then I got a denial. It's like, "Okay." Well, then I contacted them again to see if they would help with where I was staying and things. And, even though, I explained to them, "Look, I have a vision loss, I can't go stay at a hotel unless you're going to send somebody with me to show me how to navigate and get food, and things like that."

I got a prerecorded message saying, "You've been approved for staying at a hotel," and I'm like, "Okay, well ..." Because they made it sound like they were going to make some kind of accommodation. I didn't know if they were going to pay for travel to Charleston, just for gas, or something, but, anyway, I think they need to be made more aware.

And so, that's something I need to do as well.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah. And they are assuming that it's a cookie-cutter situation where everyone needs the same thing, but you have to figure out how to ask for what you need.

**Judy Davis:** Yeah. Exactly. And then there was another situation that I tried not to advocate for myself for the longest time. Again, to have a feel for what happened in my community is that there was 10.5 million cubic yards of debris from Helene in my county. And to visualize that, one of the things we heard in the community briefing was to picture a football field without the end zones and debris would go about a mile up into the air, up into the sky.

**Ricky Enger:** Yikes.

**Judy Davis:** There were three piles of debris. There was a pile of wires, and then there were two piles of trees and things like that. So, they finally moved that first debris pile. So, I could walk to the first sidewalk and 20 more steps, and then I'd have to turn around, because the debris was taller than I was. Walking on the yard side, I couldn't get around that way, and walking in the street would have meant that traffic would have not been able to see me until I stepped into the street.

So, I was told by several friends, "No. Don't even try that." So, I had to do these endless loops in my neighborhood, which got tedious.

**Ricky Enger:** No doubt.

**Judy Davis:** And I kept thinking, "I could call the pedestrian safety people and say, "Hey. Could you get these debris piles?" But they kept saying, "Be patient. Be patient," because, again, 10.5 million cubic yards of debris.

And so, it was actually, kind of, sweet. I went to Guiding Eyes for the Blind, and they call it Dog Day, the first day you meet your new guide dog. So, on January 18th of 2025, I was like, "Oh, I want to email those puppy raisers, and just say, "Hey. This is what's been happening. We're doing okay," that kind of thing. We walked to that first driveway on that sidewalk, and then we walked our 20 steps, and my dog did not turn around. It was like, "Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh. We can keep going.”

**Ricky Enger:** Hey.

**Judy Davis:** And then we walked down the side street that has a cul-de-sac. And then I kept walking, and texting people, and I was just so excited and so thrilled. And then I turned around and came back, and I got back to that block where the debris pile was, and we were walking along, and all of a sudden, we brushed up against something. It's like, "Oh. Did they put up a temporary retaining wall, or something?" I reached out and they had just cut the trees off the sidewalk." So, what I was touching were trees that had come down.

**Ricky Enger:** Oh, wow.

**Judy Davis:** And it just broke my heart, because for people who haven't had vision for a while, we can't visualize these kinds of disasters.

So, for me, encountering these trees, it just reminded me of how many trees we lost. Western North Carolina, we're known for our mountains, we're known for our nature. It's just such a lovely area, and trees are just so important to me, and just hearing about all these trees, and then finally touching these trees.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah. That really brings it home because you're right. You can't watch what's happening on the news. You don't get those visual images. And so, hearing about it is one thing, and then encountering that in your environment just-

**Judy Davis:** Yeah. And that was one thing I asked my daughter when we were coming back from Charleston. I said, "Would you please tell me what you see?" And she said, "Okay. There's some trees down on the side of the road." And then she said, "There's trees down now that have crushed the metal railings alongside the road." And then she said, "Oh, there's trees that have been cut, so that the road is open again. This is highway."

And so, trying to find that reality, and then the loss of lives. They know that 100 some people died in western North Carolina, and I am so afraid that as the year progresses that more bodies are going to be found, because there was just so much flooding and wind and just who knows? It's just a hard picture to visualize.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah. For sure. So, as we are bringing this to a close, we talked about a lot of stuff, and in that first episode, we had some steps for disaster preparedness with vision loss, and now that you've gone through it, I know you've learned a lot.

Are there points that were covered in that that maybe you would reiterate, or things that you would definitely add? Or anything really that you would leave people with who are listening that we haven't covered already?

**Judy Davis:** Yeah. There’re so many things that I think were just right on with that podcast, and then other things I would suggest. That emergency management person, reaching out to them before the disaster happens, just because it needs to be a two-way street. They need to know how some of us didn't get what we needed.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah.

**Judy Davis:** And we need to know what we could have done differently to get the things we needed. Again, I had that emergency weather radio, and it was very blind-friendly, just be prepared that your smartphone may not work. That was one of the things. It's, like, we all depend on our smartphones now, but if the cell towers come down, they're not going to be there for us.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah.

**Judy Davis:** Another thing that I think is key, you always hear about the go bag, but I think you also need to have ... I call it now a stay shell, or a stay box, or something. And it would be the water and the food, and the batteries that you all talked about having in the go bag, but then it might also be the paper products. Because, again, we didn't have water. We were stacking up dishes and things like that. So, having paper products made a difference.

And to add to that, you all mentioned having a contact list, and that is great. Two things that were a challenge for me is I tend to give people my landline number. I still use my landline number more than I use my cellphone for personal calls.

So, not everybody had my cellphone number, and that was the case for other people in the support group. The TalkingBooks library director found a person who had my cell number. So, the talking books library director in Raleigh called to say, "What's going on? What can the library do?"

**Ricky Enger:** Wow.

**Judy Davis:** So, making sure that people have your cellphone number is key, if you're like me, and still have both. The other thing that was challenging is that, of course, my family members knew how to reach me, if they could, because of the cell towers being down, but also, I wanted people to know that I have friends like you and Mark Arneson at Hadley.

And so, one of the times I was out, and I was able to get hold of my daughter is like, "Would you please let Mark know I'm okay." And, again, it's just I was regularly brailling people's phone numbers, or brailling out people's email addresses. So, I could ask my daughter to reach out to these people that I'm sure were concerned about me, including, the puppy raisers for my dogs.

Another thing, leave a message on your voicemail on your cellphone. So, if people do try to reach you, put a message that says, "I am okay." So, that if they cannot get through to you, if they can get through to your voicemail, they know that you're okay.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah. Because you've had that opportunity to record it after things happened, and that's a really good point.

**Judy Davis:** Again, they're small things, but being ahead of the game before the storm hits is a good thing.

**Ricky Enger:** Absolutely. Yeah. And that way, when something does happen, at least, you've done all the things within your control while you had that opportunity.

**Judy Davis:** Yeah. And one more thing I want to add. I still remember the first phone call on my cellphone that I got when I was in my home. It was just like a miracle, because, again, I had been struggling trying to connect with people, and finally, my cellphone rang in my home. It was my daughter and my grandson, and I just stood very still and talked to them on my phone.

**Ricky Enger:** Like, "Don't move.”

**Judy Davis:** Yeah. Exactly.

**Ricky Enger:** So, you don't lose the signal.

**Judy Davis:** But yes. It was a life-changing experience, and it's scary.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah. No doubt. But you did come through it for which we're all so grateful, and I'm so glad that you could share this with us, because if someone else is in a similar situation, that wisdom can really be helpful.

And much as we would like to say, "Yeah. I wish that had not happened," it has, and you learned a lot, and now thanks to that, so have we.

Thank you so much, Judy, for sharing this with us, and just spending a little time going through those little details that we don't really think about.

**Judy Davis:** Yeah. And there are so many little details. You just never know what all is going to be involved.

**Ricky Enger:** Absolutely. Well, thanks so much, Judy. We so appreciate it and thank you all for listening.

Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at Podcast@HadleyHelps.org. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T at HadleyHelps.org. Or leave us a message at 847-784-2870.

Thanks for listening.