**RespectAbility Report to Donors**

Thank you for your generous and continued support of RespectAbility. Because of you we are on the front lines in fighting stigmas and advancing opportunities for people with disabilities. Your support has helped us with key initiatives in Hollywood to advance inclusion and positive portrayals of people with disabilities, as well as to improve education, skills and job opportunities for people with disabilities. **At the same time, thanks to you and others, our National Leadership Program recruited, trained and empowered 26 National Leadership Fellows this year.** It enabled us to advance critical work on behalf of people with disabilities.

While we are working on several fronts, I want to share information specifically on our National Leadership Program because it builds a diverse talent pipeline of leaders that can impact millions of people with disabilities for generations to come. Below is our progress report that spans September 2016 to September 2017. I hope you will find it as exciting as we do!

***Program Content***

Our four impactful and measurable goals and outcomes for the program year were: a) the National Leadership Program will provide intensive job-training in strategic communications for at least 24 college students and graduates each year, as well as online training for thousands of others; b) participants will directly help RespectAbility’s work on inclusive employment and stigma reduction as well as faith inclusion; c) the Program will develop a successful and replicable model to enable college graduates with disabilities to successfully enter the career ladder; d) it will develop confident leaders and self-advocates trained to solve issues in the future. The replicability of the model is still in process, and that is further explained below. Nevertheless, the other goals were exceeded. We recruited and trained bright, creative, diverse, results-driven young leaders who achieved breakthrough results while receiving hands-on professional experience and contacts that will advance both their careers and the objectives of the disability community overall.

***Benchmarks***

We had three groups of Fellows over the year, with the summer cohort as the largest. Fellows heard from more than 60 speakers who are active in disability, policy, communications, philanthropy, strategic communications, Hollywood, the faith community and more. All of the Fellows learned key information about all of our issue areas and additional areas of interest from these speakers. Before each speaker, a fellow introduced the guest speaker in front of the group. Fellows wrote and published blogs about each speaker after the presentation. Please download the [PowerPoint](https://respectability.egnyte.com/dl/082PnzO0Qv) for a list of speakers and links to published blogs. Some fellows further worked on their public speaking skills via internal presentations on a topic of their choice, including diversity and intersectionality and living with their disability. Also, speakers and staff taught fellows about core office and advocacy skills, including online research skills, Excel, PowerPoint, writing and publishing, event organizing, sending out large mailings and cold calling. Fellows utilized these learned skills in their everyday tasks and during special events.

We brought in Professor Deborah Kaplan to be their personal writing coach. When Deborah retired, we hired Stan Goldman, PhD, a former college English professor and previous Program Director for Disabilities at the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation. This is a massive new human resource for us as he is exceptionally insightful and writes quickly. Two of our fellows had break-out publications: Ming Canaday published a major piece (<http://atfp.co/2hLCsjN>) in *Foreign Policy* that offered a first-person perspective on the conditions of children with disabilities in orphanages in China. The piece has been shared more than 1800 times. Another fellow, Eddie Ellis, published an important op-ed (<http://wapo.st/2x8ed6x>) in *The Washington Post* on criminal justice.

Fellows also played a role in planning and preparing nine webinars this year on employment for people with disabilities, stigma and Jewish inclusion. In February, the fellows collaborated with Rep. Brad Sherman to host events in California on inclusive philanthropy, the entertainment industry and workforce development. Each session was composed of local leaders who want to fight stigmas and advance opportunities for people with disabilities. Fellows were instrumental in preparing for this event by creating contact lists, cold calling individuals and preparing event materials. The event was the beginning of conversations with leaders in philanthropy, entertainment and workforce around including people with disabilities in their work.

More recently, our Fellows provided essential research, editing, logistical and other support for our Community of Practices (CoPs) in Hollywood, which works on stigma reduction for people with disabilities in the entertainment industry, and in Long Beach, which focuses on advancing educational and employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Fellows also helped prepare ideas and worksheets for a focus group and event with stakeholders on diversity and inclusion in TV and films. California stakeholders for the CoPs include the school system, service providers, self-advocates, parents of children with disabilities, workforce organizations, employers, philanthropists, the faith community, the healthcare industry and more.

Fellows also helped promote and champion A&E’s reality show *Born This Way,* which stars seven young adults with Down syndrome and earned six Emmy nominations and won two this year. Our team provided educational toolkits on key disability topics for the show and its fans. The show recently was renewed for a fourth season and will expand global syndication. We were on an episode this past season that focused on employment for youth with disabilities.

Several fellows helped plan and implement a full-day summit on Capitol Hill about fighting stigmas and advancing opportunities for people with disabilities, especially through the entertainment industry. Fellows went to every Congressional and Senate office before this event to educate staff on this issue and invite them to the event. Speakers included Casting Director and Producer Leah Daniels-Butler, Golfer Tommy Morrissey and Television Host Marc Summers. This event was shown live on CSPAN and has re-aired numerous times nationally since then.

***Services***

When fellows need accommodations, we meet their needs whenever possible. For example, we have had visually-impaired fellows who use accessible technology, so we make sure that all documents are in the proper format. We provide a personal care assistant and American Sign Language (ASL) when necessary.

***Participation***

This year we served 26 young leaders: 19 identify as people with disabilities, 12 are people of color, four are members of the LGBTQ community, 16 are female and 10 are male. Diversity is important as it is critical to have authentic leaders and self-advocates in a variety of communities. More than 900 people participated in webinars organized by the Fellows this past year, and an additional 200+ people participated in-person for our cohorts in California. More than 100,000 people are on our email list, and we have nearly 60,000 “likes” on Facebook. Fellows find contact information, invite individuals to the webinars and assist with our social media pages.

***Strategic Plan***

Our board streamlined our mission statement at our board retreat and prioritized our work. There are four key takeaways moving forward:

1. **Educational obtainment must be woven into our other issues.** We originally thought it would be enough to educate employers about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities to get them to do so. However, only 65 percent of youth with disabilities graduate high school, and only seven percent of people born with disabilities complete college. Most graduates are white. Thus, we have added a big focus on educational obtainment and skills building to our work. This is especially important for people from marginalized communities, including English as Second Language learners and people of color with disabilities.
2. **There is a huge demand for our services, and capacity building is needed quickly.** Governors, policy makers, Hollywood decision-makers and others are eager for our insights, contacts and services. We are not having problems getting in the door of these decision-makers, but we have trouble keeping up with their needs, interests and demands. Our capacity is extremely limited because of our small staff, and we’ll need additional funds to grow.
3. **We need to grow our competency in mental health supports.** Many of our previous fellows have visible disabilities and/or are on the autism spectrum. However, mental health differences are more common than ever in today’s youth. Thus, we have to increase our competency and contacts in mental health differences as an organization, and we expect that mental health will be more involved in our work as well.

***Marketing***

Since day one, we have recruited through online ads, top colleges, Hillels and more. We have now also created new lists and connections to find potential Fellows from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges, Multicultural Fraternities/Sororities, historically Hispanic-serving schools, the top college programs for acting and film, as well as the top 50 most disability-friendly schools to support our fellowship recruitment. These lists, which include career services, disability services and program staff, were also distributed to other disability organizations to help diversify their talent recruitment as well.Because we pay some of our Fellows, RespectAbility received more than 100 applications for the Summer 2017 Cohort. We were still able to fill the program with talented young leaders, but we did lose some of our best applicants because we could not pay them.

***Development***

**We want an anchor matching gift to inspire other donors.** We have a terrific new board chair, a new treasurer and 10 new board members. We are optimistic that if we can obtain an anchor gift, we can get it matched with new gifts to advance our work overall.

**We have secured a funding commitment from the Ford Foundation.** Since we helped the Ford Foundation understand the importance of adding the disability lens in its work, Ford has also awarded millions of dollars to a variety of nonprofits that serve people with disabilities. Ford is also asking its other grantees to do a better job of disability inclusion and is conducting a revamp of their funding areas to include the disability lens. Judy Heumann, a major disability leader, has also joined Ford’s team, which we suggested. We want other foundations to follow the Ford Foundation’s lead. We are currently in the beginning stages of working with key foundations that have not yet included disability in their work. Over time this will collectively yield many millions of dollars to a broad array of disability organizations.

We hired a new development manager who has a very solid background. He starts soon. Also, we now have all the legal paperwork in place to apply for government grants if there is an appropriate opportunity in the future.

***Staff***

Every member of our team is deeply involved in the National Leadership Program, the president included. Training, mentoring and helping place the fellows into jobs or graduate school take an enormous amount of time and is not just the job of the fellow’s director. The program is not easy to replicate because few organizations would spend so much time and effort on getting to know young leaders with so many issues and on mentoring them even though they rotate out so quickly. Indeed, once the fellows become fully proficient and complete the fellowship, it is time to bring in a new cohort. With all that said, however, we have just hired two new staff members and have promoted Ben Spangenberg to run the fellowship program. We are very excited about our trajectory.

***Lessons Learned and Future Plans***

1. **Racial and Diversity Issues are Important and Difficult:** This year was significantly different because of new funding from the Ford Foundation that now enables us to pay $15 an hour to a subset of the fellows. The goals of that funding include building a diverse leadership pipeline that will be committed to issues that impact marginalized people with disabilities who face “double discrimination”. This includes people with multi-minority status (i.e. people of color, English as Second Language learners and LBGTQ individuals).
2. **The National Leadership Program Takes a Tremendous Amount of Staff Time:** It would be far easier for RespectAbility if fellows stayed longer as once they learn their craft they leave. However, then far fewer people would be able to benefit from the program. Additionally, if we paid all the fellows, we could also have an even higher-level group, and they could all be full time. Still, we are passionate about this program, and it is our pride and joy. Nonetheless, we have created a budget that shows how much it would cost to pay all the National Leadership Fellows. That budget reflects that we want the Fall and Spring Fellowships to be 16 weeks in length instead of the 9- to 10-week length of the summer program.
3. **The Best Part is When the Fellows Fly Out of Our Nest and Succeed:** We love our fellows and are deeply proud of their success. Each time one gets a job or into graduate school, we know that we have advanced not only their personal agenda but also that of the disability community overall. Several of our fellows are in their late 20’s or early 30’s before they come to us, and they have never had a real job. When they get their first job – and some making as much as 60K a year plus healthcare – the relief, pride and joy they experience is priceless. We are especially proud of our former Fellows who are now working on Capitol Hill and in advocacy organizations. Two alumni also went on to spearhead nationally televised protests that helped sustain ACA/healthcare for people with disabilities. One of the happiest parts of our work is also when our fellows get accepted into graduate school and are ready to succeed there.
4. **We are Working to Lock in Consistent and Expanded Funding for RespectAbility:** The foundational work that you have supported has been instrumental to our early success. We hope we can count on you to continue and expand your involvement in our work.

Thank you for believing in us and for making our work possible!