

**Empowerment Training for Latinas with Disabilities**

May 18, 2019

>> [Allilsa Fernandez]: *Buenas tardes, mi nombre es Allilsa Fernandez, y yo soy defensora de los derechos de las personas discapacitadas. Bienvenidos a todos los que se encuentran* aquí *y aquellos que nos acompañan virtualmente.*

Good afternoon. My name is Allilsa Fernandez, and I am a disability rights advocate. I am so honored to be invited to open up this training for RespectAbility, which is a national nonpartisan nonprofit that advocates on behalf of people with disabilities by fighting stigmas and advancing opportunities. On behalf of RespectAbility, I would like to welcome each and every one of you, those here physically with us and those joining us virtually, to our *Empowerment Training for Latinas with Disabilities.* Today's training is our sixth training in our *2019 Women's Disability Leadership, Inclusion & Advocacy Series.* This is my fourth training in attendance, and I am so blown away by the content, creativity, respect of intersectionality, and the work that RespectAbility is doing. At this time, we ask that you shut down all of your phones, make sure that they are silent, and let's get started.

[Applause]

For those ‑‑ at this time during this training, feel free to wander over to our self‑expression graffiti wall to write or draw either in English or in Spanish in one side your disabilities, and then the other side your abilities. We are going to do something critical later.

If you look at our slide, you're going to see what that looks like from our past training. Also, if anyone needs ear plugs to quiet things down in here, there's music and other actions going on, so you may want quiet time. Just ask Debbie. She has a pocket full of them. And just know that your level of participation throughout the training is up to you.

So, we want to open up with a few motivational quotes by Selena Gomez, who lives with disabilities.

"Always be yourself. There's no one better."

"You have every right to a beautiful life."

"Being yourself is all it takes."

Other Latina role models with disabilities are former assistant US Secretary of Labor Kathy Martinez, who is blind; actress Michelle Rodriguez, who has ADD; Cristina Sanz, who has downs syndrome; Salma Hayek, who has dyslexia; singer Demi Lovato, who has bipolar disorder.

Today's quote, transforming Selena’s quote until deliverable tools, today we aim to empower you to take charge of self‑advocacy. It's not just what self‑advocacy means, but in general, it means being your own cheerleader and asking for and getting what you need. Take action, getting involved in New York City's civic life in the lecterns or general community and take home new experiences, new connections, new resources.

Disclaimer: As you see in this disclaimer, we understand that when it comes to disability advocacy, folks have and should have strong ideas and opinions; hence, we want to clarify to everyone here today that everyone here is exercising free speech, and that their views solely represent their own views. Thank you. Gracias.

[Applause]

We also want to make sure to thank our very generous hosts here today, Guttman Community College, which does a remarkable job supporting its students with disabilities. Thanks to the other collaborating organizations listed on our slide, and a very big thank you, *muchas gracias*, goes to the New York Women's Foundation and the Coca‑Cola Foundation for their direct support to this effort.

It is now my pleasure to pass the mic to Elizabeth Jones of RespectAbility.

>> Elizabeth Jones: Thank you so much. *Buenas tardes* everyone. Hi. Thank you. Thank you so much for coming. I am really thrilled to be here with you all. So, it goes without saying that we need some music to get this training started. So, it is my honor to introduce Amanda Lopez, who is a singer, dancer, actress here in New York City with Cuban roots. We learned about Amanda through her performance with the off-Broadway show *Addy & Uno*, which is the first family musical about disabilities. It's based on the Real Abilities comic book series. We highly recommend both the musical and the comic book series.

And now Amanda, and her guitarist, Rebecca Muller, will set the tone for today's awesome training with the song *I Am Woman.* Let's give Rebecca and Amanda a big round of applause.

[Applause]

I am woman hear me roar in numbers too big to ignore.

And I know too much to go back and pretend.

But I've heard it all before.

And I've been down there on the floor.

No one's ever going to keep me down again.

Oh, yes, I am wise, but it's wisdom born of pain.

Yes, I've paid the price, but look how much I have gained.

If I have to, I can do many things.

I am strong.

I am invincible.

I am woman.

You can bend but never break us.

Because it only serves us to make us more determined to achieve our final goal.

And we come back even stronger.

Not novices any longer.

Because you've deepened the conviction in our soul.

Oh, yes, we are wise.

But it's wisdom born of pain.

Yes, we've paid the price, but look at how much we have gained.

If we have to, we can do anything.

We are strong.

We are invincible.

We are woman.

Somos latinas, watch us grow.

See us moving to and fro as we spread our lovin' arms across the land.

But we are still an embryo.

With a long, long way to go.

Until we make all ableists understand.

Oh, yes, we are wise, but it's wisdom born of pain.

Yes, we've paid the price, but look how much we have gained.

If we have to, we can face anything.

We are strong.

We are invincible.

We are Latinas.

We are woman!

>> [Debbie Fink]: Great! Okay. The roaring has begun! Hi. I'm Debbie Fink, the Director of Community Outreach & Impact and Project Director for this meaningful training series. It is with the greatest joy, honor, and gratitude that I introduce our keynote speaker, Carol Robles‑Roman, whom I tracked down with thanks to her cousin Bo.

Carol, I know you love the song that Amanda just sang for us, and you are ***The Woman!*** To paraphrase Kobi Yamada, you *“turn your can'ts into cans and your dreams into plans.”*

>>[Carol]: I like that.

>> Debbie Fink: Currently general counsel and dean of faculty at Hunter College, Carol is a board member with the E.R.A. Coalition. She has quite the story to share and feels very strongly about our training as it is the *Convergence of Women's Rights, Disability Rights, and Civil Rights, all within the Latinx community.*

With no further ado, we are so honored and psyched to hear from you, Carol.

>> Carol: Thank you. Thank you so much. What's the ‑‑ I don't know how many of you saw the headline in the press release that went out about this wonderful series. Nearly 500,000 women and girls with disabilities live in New York City, right? That is the headline. And it is big that the New York Women's Foundation, and other wonderful organizations, are working with RespectAbility to do unprecedented empowerment training for Latinas, for women with disabilities. And let me explain to you from a legal perspective and from a policy perspective why this is a, as we say in law school, a big damn deal. We have ‑‑ right? We have the EEOC, right, the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission. We have the New York City Commission on Human Rights. We have the New York State Commission on Human Rights. We have the Attorney General's Office, et cetera. New York has the best court system and best judges in the world to handle our issues with people with disabilities, right, when we get discriminated against. Why do we need empowerment training, and why do we need to know about self‑advocacy? Because all of those entities that I just described, these entities are complaint driven enterprises. They are run by political entities. Many are well‑run. Some are not. When I ran them, they were very well run.

[ Laughter ].

Just saying. But, here's the point: Complaint‑driven means that someone has to file a complaint, fill out a form, put their name on a piece of paper, reveal something that they may or may not want to let anybody know. It's private. It's confidential. It may be embarrassing. So, I say this: We have learned very powerful lessons in the Me Too movement. Victims of sexual harassment and assault are similarly embarrassed. Sometimes we are ashamed, and that's a personal right to decide how to proceed, but this decision should not be made because there is no help or because the entity has no expertise on how to help us.

So, it's because of this, much of my personal passion throughout my career has been to champion the right to self‑advocate in all of its forms and to demand that all organizations that I have worked with have helped lead, been on the board, or just volunteer with have this ethos. People have fought very, very hard to pass these civil rights laws that protect us, for us to enjoy these rights.

But, I want to ask you this: What is the purpose of having a law on the books that looks so grand when people talk about it if it's not enforced? What good is it if we do not ask, if we do not report, if we do not sometimes complain or even demand? And, worse, if people don't even care that they need to follow these laws, because they know we usually do not ask or report or complain or demand?

So, that's why I am so grateful to RespectAbility for leading this conversation and for creating this platform for us to discuss self‑advocacy and opportunities for civic engagement. The sad truth is our voices are not usually present in the halls of power with these laws are made, but that's now changing. Thank you, AOC, Alexandria Ocasio‑Cortez, who happens to be my elected congresswoman and who my families had the honor of voting for. We are not at the enforcement agencies that are setting the agenda, that are funding the priorities, but that's now changing too, right? Thank you, Attorney General James, a former colleague who served on the council with us and champions us today. We are here, we are now, and we are organized, and that is not going to change, because together we will change these outcomes; we will shift our conversations, our voices, the voices of Latinas, of women with disabilities in New York City will be heard.

So I have been asked to share some of my stories, some of my strategies that I hope inspire. I have never shared some of these, but my friend here [clasps hand of Debbie Fink], has been such a tremendous influence to me and has told me that these are the stories that women with disabilities need to hear, and I needed to hear them coming out of my own mouth as well.

So, part of my journey actually started in 2002 as deputy mayor. One of the agencies that I oversaw was the New York City mayor's office of people with disabilities, and I came in with a very hard charging view, right? Understand that I was the former inspector general for bias matters. I was a former assistant Attorney General, so anyone came to me with an issue about discrimination, and I wanted to investigate. I wanted the death penalty for ‑‑ but it wasn't a criminal matter. I get it, I get it. I wanted a full investigation, full on law enforcement. Our commissioner of disabilities chatted one day. His name is Matt Sapland, if any of you had met him. He mentioned that he had gone to a restaurant with his service dog, and they refused to seat him because of Compass, his dog, for those of you that remember him. It was like a joke, that he was being discriminated against, and the mayor loved Compass. I said we are sending the Human Rights Commission, tomorrow we are going to do an investigation, and I looked around and said the Department of Health too, just for good measure.

[ Laughter ].

He said, no, let me handle this. I don't think they understand the law. If it doesn't work, you can come back and send in the Human Rights Commission and the Department of Health, and he comes back, and he tells us, you know what, it is solved. They really didn't understand, and frankly, thank you for that Department of Health threat, because it made me think that they are in restaurants all the time, and they are such a strategic partner for us to now, to go into the restaurants and train them on the issue of service animals, et cetera. What a powerful life lesson that was for me, self‑advocacy, education, public information, with the specter of law enforcement in the background, right, and the power of government to make a powerful, powerful change.

So, I championed my inner Matthew Sapland a few years back, when three years ago I was diagnosed with a major ailment that would change my life and my advocacy forever. So, it turns out my work as a court administrator in 2001, in the immediate aftermath of the World Trade Center exposed me to toxins. I was in a zone with the courts. Imagine a city with no courts. The chief judge at the time told me, Carol, justice delayed is justice denied. We have to get the courts back up and running, and we did. And we were a block away from the zone, and we also worked with the bar association to help recruit lawyers for the victims, and my reward for my good disease, I found out, was stage III lung cancer. So since that initial diagnosis, I am now certified as a 9/11 first responder under the Zadroga Act, a statute developed to help first responders in the aftermath. Well, first, a first responder, I'm going to ask you, what does a first responder look like? Doesn't he have a hose and carry a badge and a gun, right? No. This is what a first responder looks like, a Latina lady lawyer, right?

[Applause]

So, a life lesson. So my treatments were an ordeal in every sense of the word, and my employer at the time handled it all terribly. They were thinking, is this like a comedy skit? Is it like Matt Sapland, the commissioner? Civil rights attorneys' civil rights are being discriminated against? This feels very weird. And out of the blue, I was recruited to lead a national organization whose mission is, as a coalition, to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in Congress, and I always wanted, that was like my bucket list. I always wanted a job in Congress, walking the halls and knocking on the doors of Congress people, but this was like bad timing, right? And so I thought about it, and I channeled my inner Matt Sapland, and I said, you know, I'm going to be transparent. I'm going to be honest. And my employer to be said, well, when can you start? So they worked around my treatments, my schedule, and all of those issues, and I have to tell you, I never worked harder in my life, but at the same time, on my own terms, and while I am sort of negotiating, you know, the things that happen when one is not 100% and going through treatment, I am leading the charge around the country in having the first hearing ever on the Equal Rights Amendment, and I'm thinking ‑‑ I know this is bad talk in an interview with someone who is going to hire you, but I'm actually going to Congress to try to convince them to do it, and they said sign me up, and there I am, two months later, in a table just like this, testifying before 15 Congresspeople, sitting next to an international celebrity, who then releases a video of the hearing, and like in three days, that video is seen over a million times, right? And I don't even know about the video.

[Applause]

My daughter called me up, and I have told this story, my daughter called me up. She's a student at Georgetown, and she's like, Mom, my friend just called me ‑‑ she looks exactly like me, right, so she's like me, but minus some years. She said, I saw a video of a lady with Melissa Milano, and it looks just like you, but obviously it's not you. My daughter was like, wow, the video has been seen over a million times!

Instead of seeing the video and being like, wow, I'm in Congress, this is bad ass, look what I'm doing ‑‑ I see a bad haircut! Like, I look terrible, my hair is falling out, there's a tacky head band. And my husband is like*, you just accomplished something that hasn't been done in 40 years.* *You are about to pass a civil rights amendment.*

[Applause]

And I created the tagline *ERA, Women of Color Lead the Way,* because we got everyone to testify, and they were all Women of Color.

[Applause]

So, I'm thrilled, because I'm actually living out the advice that, as a lawyer, I had been giving throughout my career, which was to be as authentic as you can be within the realm of what you feel comfortable with, and that was hard for me, because even though I was saying it, I wasn't really doing it. So, one story that I had shared with my friend here [Debbie Fink], who said, *Carol, please tell the Delta story.* I said, *I can't tell the Delta story*. She said*, you must tell the Delta story.*  So if you hate it, this is the woman!

So I'm traveling. My husband is like, you have got radiation tomorrow. How are you going to be in Virginia? I said no, no, no, the doctors explained it to me. I come in at 5:00 in the morning, get the radiation, and then get on the plane. He's like, I don't know how you're doing it. Good luck. So I did one of my things, I'm in Virginia, I'm flying back, and I'm not feeling well. Right? We all know what that's like. There are some days that are not a good day, and you know it, and you need to look at somebody and say I'm going to need a nap, I'm going to need this. I'm at the airport in New York, with my mask on because of my compromised immune system, and the woman says,

*There's something wrong with your ticket. You can't board or stand here.*

I said, *I'm having a problem standing. I was supposed to get a wheelchair, I didn't.*

She says, *you have to stand right there.*

I said, *ma'am, I'm a person with disabilities. You see my mask and everything?? Please, priority boarding is for us.*

She said, *no, it's first class.*

I guess she didn't appreciate my self‑advocacy -- and I was THE LAST PERSON to board the plane. Something happened to me that had never happened in my whole life. *I started to cry in public.*

Imagine, I'm standing there with a mask in Virginia in an airport standing there, like an idiot, I guess – with a dunce cap, because I didn't understand what I had just done. Now I'm on the plane, I imagine more frazzled and not feeling well. I go to the stewardess, and a man yells at me,

*Get out of the way;* ***you people should know where to go*.**

And I said, *oh, my God, I'm ‘You People’ now.* Somehow ‑‑ so I turned around.

This was during the Brett Kavanaugh hearings, and he looked like Brett Kavanaugh, and so I turned around, and I'm crying, and I said,

*You know what,* ***I cannot****‑‑ I* ***cannot*** *let Brett Kavanaugh get away with this!!!*

[ Laughter ].

So, I looked at him, and I said,

*Listen, Brett Kavanaugh, you just verbally assaulted me, and that's not allowed, so stop it, and I'm reporting you right now.*

I look up, and the stewardess – who’s saying,

*How can he talk to you like that? It's outrageous*!

I'm like, it's your job to do something, not sympathize. I said,

*Ma'am, what are you supposed to do?*

She said, *I'm so sorry, I don't know. I really don't know. I'm really sorry*.

Sheapologized. She had no clue. I sat down, feeling sorry for myself, crying, and I said, *wait a minute!* I took out my phone and I tweeted the CEO. I looked it up in two seconds flat before we were on the air. I tweeted the CEO of Delta. I wrote the customer service line. I sent another email, and I thought,

*Oh, nothing will happen, but at least I feel better.*

So when the plane lands, just before ‑‑ once we hit, my phone rings.

*Hello? Hello, this is James Smith. I'm the special assistant to the CEO of Delta Air Lines. I want to let you know that the captain is aware of your complaint. We have taken the necessary steps against that abusive passenger.*

I picked up the phone, and he goes,

*and the captain will be there shortly to escort you to a special area because now he needs information about what happened to you in Virginia.*

So I said, *oh, my God, am I in trouble?*

*It was an apology. And oh, by the way, as soon as the captain is finished talking to you, he's instructed to call the CEO's office and give a full report on what happened.*

Oh, man.

So I tell the CEO everything through the captain, and then the captain is very apologetic, and I say,

*Captain, how do I know I didn't just waste half an hour telling you this?*

He said, *No, I swear, I swear, I'm going to make sure.*

And I said, *Prove it!*  *Put up your hands,* and I made him take an oath!

[Clapping and Laughter ]

I said, *I swear,* and he goes “*I swear I will report to Delta Air Lines, you must change your policies on how to treat your people with disabilities. I will change the policies... "*

When I got home and I told my husband, he said,

*I think you went a little nuclear with that one!*

He said everything was okay before the part where you told me you made him swear. He said, *that's just over the top and that's just wrong!*

[ Laughter among all ].

So, one last self‑advocacy story, and it's something that I think all of us should really put into our heads to decide, and, you know, you'll find yourselves in some place, and it may have nothing to do with medical, but I was getting treatments, all kinds of good, but the hair grows back really weird. If that's the worst of it, that's okay.

>> Debbie: *It looks great!*

>> My kid was like, *Oh, mommy, your hair!*  I was like,

*How come you didn't cry when they took out my lung*?

She said, *Oh, because I couldn't see it.*

Anyway, I start doing my research, and I find out that there is this, like, cutting edge medicine that is like ‑‑ it had just been passed a year before, and I qualify for it. It's my same illness. It's my same genetic makeup, you know, blah, blah, blah.

So I asked my doctor, and I say, *oh, my God, look at this.* *I'm not stupid.* *I know the prognosis for what I have …*

And she says, *Oh, Carol, I'm so sorry, you don't qualify for that. That's not for your stage.*

And I'm like, *Lady, I have got Stage III.*

And she's like, *No, you don't qualify.*

So I'm like, *No, I'm going to put on my ‘don't take no for an answer’ hat*, which I think you may have picked up. I put on the hat, I do a little research, and I find like the world expert in the country for this genetic makeup, with my kind of illness, blah, blah, blah, with an expertise in the kind of medicine.

He's in Boston. I ask a friend for an appointment and get it in two weeks. I fly to Boston. I'm ready to make my case. I don't even know what I'm doing; if you don't qualify, you don't qualify, you don't qualify. The other piece of it was that the medicine is so state‑of‑the‑art and so new that insurance doesn't cover it, and it's *one thousand dollars a pill*. So, I'm thinking, I'm going to have to sell the house, I'm ‑‑

But I'm ‑‑ you know, I want it, so I get to the doctor. I'm pitching, and he looks at me and he goes, *I agree with you. You should get this medicine. You should.*

And I said, *Well, I was told –*

And he said, *the Food and Drug Administration just changed those guidelines the day before yesterday. You could start tomorrow.*

(Gasps.)

And I said, *What am I going to do? Yeah, but the cost.*

And he says, *Didn't you say you were a first responder?*

I go, *Yeah, 9/11.*

And he goes, *Oh, the 9/11 fund will pick up every cent of this.*

[Applause]

*So, as of last week, after being on the drug for about a year,* ***I'm cancer free!!!***

[Wild applause, tears, laughter, hugs between Carol and Debbie]

[ Laughter ]

[Applause]

*And I will tell you, as of last week, I got my scan ‑‑ the doctors looked more shocked than my husband.*

My husband was like, *I knew she was going to pull this off.*

The doctors were like, *Wow.*

So, that last story is very personal, but I share it, because think of just all of the obstacles that I had to like tease out there – like the cost; the fact that it wasn't in my stage; and I'm not mindful of all sorts of miracles that just happened also, that I just happened to be there.

I put myself in the right place at the right time, certainly through the grace of God who was leading sort of a lot of magical miracles in the back.

So, I look forward to meeting all of you and seeing how we can work together moving forward on the issues around women with disabilities, on the issues of empowerment, and just how to put on that "don't take no for an answer hat," and don't take it off until you want to take off your hat. Thank you.

[Applause, tears …]

>> Debbie Fink: Okay. She saved the best news for here, and thank you for your courage in self‑disclosing and sharing your story, Carol, and thank you for that ‑‑ the fairytale ending. That's really a gift. Wow.

So, we have time for a few questions, so there are cards on the table. So if you have a burning question for Carol, please feel free to write it down and pass it to Rebecca, and Rebecca will bring them up to Carol. But, Carol, I have to say, in the meantime, when you told me the Delta story, you left out [the having the Captain swear part!] ‑‑

>> Carol: I left out ‑‑ I was embarrassed. I couldn't tell anybody that. It was crazy.

>> Debbie: I love, love, love that story. I loved that story.

So, you also shared when you were telling me that story, and I would like you to sort of brush into or step into this, if you wish, your thought when it happened to you and you burst into tears: Your thought in terms of *if this could happen to you, who has the education and the background that you do, you know, that you saw the bigger picture in terms of how it must impact others without those skill sets that you have.* Can you address that a little more?

>> Carol: Yeah. I mean, I felt that at two points in my last three‑year journey, but that was the most dramatic one, and that was the reason as I ‑‑ listen, we go to shopping centers, and people don't take care of us, and things happen to us all the time, but at that particular moment, I said, you know what, I'm not going to be satisfied with just doing a teachable moment, you know, speech to somebody here or writing a note. I want to make sure this never happens again, and usually, in the olden days, I used to write letters to like general counsel and get letters back, and I have become a little bit media savvy, and I said, you know what, I'm going to see if this Twitter thing kind of works, and it does. And it does. And that was the purpose. And what I do is I'll send a tweet, and then they direct message you, and then I send them a copy of my bio. And like, *oh, by the way, this is who you just messed with.* So that's the other little...

>> Debbie: Right. And they messed with the wrong woman(!), thank goodness, because your self‑advocacy in that moment has clearly impacted lives! So, thank you, for so many travelers with disabilities, and so on behalf of all of the travelers with disabilities, we thank you.

>> Carol: Thank you. And the other issue, and this I had done when I was running a women's rights organization, there is another issue around just the treatment of women on airlines and the fact that most airlines are not trained, so I actually already knew that if there is something happening in the flight, something short of, you know, a criminal act, they really don't know what to do in real‑time.

>> Debbie: Right.

>> Carol: And so that's something ‑‑ that's a message that needs to be, especially in this post‑Me Too era, that we are cognizant that crazy stuff is happening, and people need to put a stop to it right away.

>> Debbie: Thank you. *[pause.]* Okay. So we have time for a question.

**Can you please share a bit about your upbringing?**

>> Carol: Oh, boy. That's a great ‑‑ that's a great question. I was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, and ‑‑

(Cheers.)

Yay Brooklyn. So I'm number 3 of 5 girls and one boy, so I was raised in New York, and I was also raised in Puerto Rico, so it was one of those ‑‑ which is kind of traditional. I'm going to be 56, so in my era, people went back and forth, and my mom was supposed to go to law school and didn't. You know, she had kids and et cetera, so she always had this ethos of, you know, that's not right or that's not just, and I never really thought about it, and my sister who was actually a professor at the Brooklyn College, she interviewed my mother for an article that was subsequently published in the Encyclopedia of Latinas, and it's sort of my mother's history of how at a very young age, she was always sort of inserting herself in things, and when she became a social worker and a teacher, she was always looking at the social justice fabric, and that was the first time that I realized that she had passed that on to many of us, many of her kids.

>> Debbie: Thank you for that. Thank you.

All right. Okay. So I wanted to say that we are going to move on, but we are going to, for those with other questions, you will have the privilege and honor of joining Carol in a small group session, ***Conversations with Carol***, so let's give Carol a round of applause.

[Applause]

Don't go too far, because while words cannot suffice; no, they cannot suffice; but we have a special gift through music for you. [Song that Debbie knew has great meaning and significance for Carol.]

>> Amanda Lopez (singing: *The Impossible Dream*) and Rebecca Muller on guitar.

To dream, the dream.

To fight the unbeatable foe.

To bear with unbearable sorrow.

To run where the brave dare not go.

To right the unrightable wrong.

To love pure and chaste from afar.

To try when your arms are too weary.

To reach the unreachable star.

This is my quest, to follow that star.

No matter how hopeless, no matter how far.

To fight for the right.

Without question or pause.

To be willing to march, march into hell for a heavenly cause.

And I know if I'll only be true.

To this glorious quest.

That my heart will lie peaceful and calm.

When I'm laid to my rest.

And the world will be better for this.

That one woman scorned and covered with scars.

Still strove with her last ounce of courage.

To reach the unreachable star.

>> Allilsa Fernandez: *The Impossible Dream* sung today during the month of May. May is national Mental Health Awareness Month. As a mental health advocate, I am a proud Latina with a mental health condition. I am also a board member of DREAM, which stands for Disability Rights, Education, Activism and Mentoring. With this mission, we are all dreaming together today.

DREAM is a national organization for and by college students with disabilities, supported by the National Center for College Students with Disabilities. We advocate for disability culture, community and pride and hope to serve a virtual disability cultural center for students who want to connect with other students with disabilities.

Today, I dream the possible dream. I am honored to have been invited by Debbie at RespectAbility to play an active role here today. I am honored to follow Señora Carol Robles‑Roman in her incredible leadership as a woman, as a Latina, as a first responder, as a woman who publicly owns her disability, signaling to the rest of us that it is okay, that we can have a disability and live a life of leadership.

[Applause]

And I am honored to introduce Dr. Shirley Leyro, a critical criminologist and professor in the CUNY system. She is also an instructor in Mental Health First Aid, which is a national program, so today, I, we, dream the possible dream, because we are gathered here today to empower ourselves, our sisters, our aunts, our mothers, and our daughters, as we bust the stigma on mental health in our community. We are not *locas.* We are *loco*motives [locamotives]!

It is an honor to introduce Dr. Leyro.

>> Dr. Leyro: Good afternoon. I needed to check the time. It has been an honor to be asked to speak today. Thank you so much for the invitation and for the fabulous introduction!

On a personal note, you know, when we talk about our mental health, there's such a stigma and such a mysticism around it that many of us are very reluctant to talk about it, and I'm happy to discuss my own personal history, because it's definitely brought me to where I am today in terms of how I try to advocate, not just for myself but for my students, for the people I deal with in my research.

I study the immigrant population in particular, those who are vulnerable to deportation, so I look at how being deportable impacts folks on a psychological level, right, the trauma that is imposed upon by the state upon these folks. But also as a person in a community who lives in a heavily gentrified area, we know that people who suffer from mental illness become funneled into the criminal justice system unfairly. We know that there are all of these different paths, whether it's a family member, ourselves, a student, a person we live with or work with, deal with in our everyday lives, mental health is always at the forefront, and many of us don't know, clearly, sometimes we see when someone is at the precipice of a mental health crisis or is experiencing a mental health crisis, and we don't know what to say, we don't know what to do. Sometimes we want to, and that's when I got involved in the Mental Health First Aid Initiative through the NYC Thrive. There is also information in the back [on the resource table] if you're all interested in it.

I find it a privilege to be able to conduct those trainings. I took the training, and I liked it so much that I became an instructor, so ‑‑ because I don't have enough to do.

You know, the value of addressing our mental health, right, there is that stigma. People aren't well informed. In the Latinx community, right, we know that our people don't go to therapy, right? Like we said ‑‑ and the fact is that we can't deal with everything on our own. At some point, everyone needs help, right? If it's more than a healthy level of anxiety ‑‑ all of us experience anxiety, healthy before a big job interview or big test, but at some point that anxiety gets to be too much, and when it is too much, how can we help ourselves and other people.

So I think part of the mental health training that I conduct is just educating people on what mental health and what mental illness is, right, and it's okay, right? It's okay to experience. We all have some hard times, and some of us handle it better than others, and some of us need help, and that's okay, to need help. Once we get rid of that stigma, right, once we accept that sometimes we all need help, you know, occasionally, then I think that opens the door to more people seeking and getting the treatment that they need and that they deserve, right?

A couple of years ago, I went through some issues, some personal problems, but I buried them, because I had a dissertation to finish, and when you're a Ph.D. student, it is ingrained in your head, the only D you're interested in is dissertation. The only anything, the dissertation has to be the number one priority in your life. I remember, I had professors tell me, if anyone is contacting you on social media, then you are not taking your dissertation seriously!

I remember I buried a lot of trauma and went through a really, really terrible relationship that traumatized me. But I buried that trauma, right, because I needed to finish my dissertation, and so when I finished my dissertation, about four months later, I found that I couldn't get out of bed, and I found that I couldn't function well, and I was not interested in doing anything that I enjoyed, right?

I like reading; I like working out; I also like going to the movies; and you know, sports. I was having a hard time just doing anything that I enjoyed, and it impacted my life. It truly became a disability, because it disrupted my life in a variety of ways. My ability to live, laugh, learn, and love.

It really did, and I didn't know what to do. I was convinced not to seek therapy, because I was like, I don't need therapy, this will be all right, it's just a passing phase. And I had to be convinced that I needed help, that I couldn't do this alone. Then after the election, when I saw the people that I work with, my undocumented students ‑‑ I'm their faculty advisor. When I saw the people that I work with in my research, when they started to exhibit clear signs symptomatic of PTSD because of what's happening in the political world, I really started to get interested, and that's when I started to go right in.

We know that our people don't seek help. We know that *it takes about ten years* for a person who realizes that they have a mental illness to actually seek medical or some sort of attention! That it's too long of a time, that we need to shrink that amount of time, and that the way we do it is to remove the stigma and the mysticism that surrounds mental illness.

One of the things that I wanted to bring up, because I know I'm going to run out of time, because I gab ‑‑

>> Debbie: You're good! Take more time.

>>  So, the latest numbers from the Centers for Disease Control, almost one in two, right, almost 50%, 48% of Latinx high school girls have felt persistently sad or hopeless within the past year. I'm an auntie. I don't have children, but I'm very involved in my nieces' lives ‑‑ that's a scary number. More than one in five, so almost a quarter have seriously considered suicide within the past year, and one in ten have actually attempted, right, to complete suicide. That is a scary number, and when we think about the level of anxiety, and I'm sorry that I'm doing this ‑‑ the level of anxiety that our young people feel, just in general, right?

I think that we discount our young people. You know, we say things like ‑‑ they refer to like microaggressions, like, what problems could you possibly have? You're too young. But we know as teenagers, there's a lot of stuff going on, developmentally, physically, also identity issues. Right? So we go to the next one, for queer Latina girls, 64% have felt persistently sad or hopeless, and yet one in two have seriously considered suicide, and a quarter have actually attempted to die by suicide. We talk about specific communities, so just as Latina populations, Latina girls, the amount of depression and suicide is high, and then when we think about the LGBTQ community, it's even higher, right?

I think those numbers deserve the attention, that we need to get away from this "our people don't seek treatment," right? This is where the self‑advocacy and the self‑empowerment comes from. I think one of the things that we do is get away from the microaggressions. We don't want to dismiss the problems that our young people feel, like, oh, boy, midterm exams come and all of a sudden everybody is stressed out. That's a habit that I had to get out of, dealing with young people on a daily basis. I think we need to give credence to our young people, particularly our young people who belong to vulnerable communities. Right?

So the number here is for the LGBTQ community, but I can tell you firsthand, and I'm writing an article about it, that the number of young people who have noncitizen status, it's also very high when you talk about depression and suicidal ideation. It is a very high percentage for all of the young people who belong to these vulnerable communities, whether it's gender based, religion based, or citizen status based. So one of the things that I would like for all of us to do as older people, and I know there are some young people here as well ‑‑ not many young people. I'm just a little bit older than you.  ‑‑ is let's do better in asking our friends how they are feeling, and maybe we'll notice something.

One of the things that I like people to say is practice the “*I noticed”* statement. So, it's

*I notice that you haven't been joining us for coffee lately. Is everything okay?* Or,

*You know, Shirley, I noticed that you were crying the other day. Is everything okay?*

So, if all of us practice that one *"I notice"* sentence and **use** it, we get it out of the way, and then we can use it for someone that we are friendly with, and it will help and it will take us a long way. My time is up. Thank you very much.

[Applause]

>> Thank you. That was amazing. Thank you, thank you. Thank you.

>> A little stage shift here. One moment. Who has the other white binder?

>> Is it this one?

>> [Debbie]: Oh, here it is. Okay. *People make plans, and God laughs.*

[ Laughter ].

Okay.

>> Vivian Bass: Thank you, Dr. Leyro. That was so incredibly meaningful, and what a powerful way for us to highlight the awareness month. What a rising disabilities advocate you are.

[Applause]

>> I am Vivian Bass, and I am so proud and pleased to serve on the executive committee. It has been such a pleasure, playing a pivotal part of this training series, and I know, speaking for several of us, how bittersweet it is that this is our grand finale. We are so moved to be sharing this day with each of you.

Of note, Dr. Leyro will be facilitating a small group session on *Self‑Advocacy and Mental Health* later this afternoon. We are looking forward to that as well, and Dr. Leyro's colleague, Dr. Kaliris Salas‑Ramirez of CUNY School of Medicine will be leading a powerful small group session on *Self‑Advocacy and Racial Bias.*

And Crystal Vazquez will facilitate a small group session on *Self‑Advocacy and Housing and Other Benefits.*

I now have the honor and privilege of introducing two truly amazing allies, both from the world of HR Fortune 500 companies, who will engage in a ***Fireside Chat***, entitled *Self-Advocacy at Work.* Please join me in introducing Clarissa Ramos‑Cafarelli, corporate head of employee relations with JPMorgan Chase, and Jessica Palacios, vice president of human resources at BlackRock.

Please, everyone, I invite you to imagine a warm fireplace, sitting in comfy seats as they chat together while sharing a hot pot of coffee or tea. Let's join Jessica and Clarissa.

[Applause]

>> [Jessica]: Thank you so much. I think the fire is in this room! I can feel the heat a little bit, so thank you all so much for getting everything warmed up, and thank you to Debbie and team for putting this amazing event together.

I have to admit to all of you, this is not the first time that Clarissa and I have been on stage together. I have the privilege of being mentored by Clarissa when I started my career in human resources at JPMorgan Chase, so really it is my honor to have a bit of a reunion here; so, so great to see you, and thank you so much for having us again.

When I was preparing with Debbie for this particular session, she asked what does self‑advocacy mean to me, and how do we translate that over to Spanish. And I said ‑‑ (speaking Spanish, *auto empoderamiento)* ‑‑ so it feels a little bit like not an every day word. I called mi mama, papa, abuela, and said, “Help me! I’m crowd sourcing a little bit for this definition!” and what I came up with was ‑‑ which is a little bit more on the empowerment side, and I think a really nice theme to dovetail into for our fireside chat.

>> Will you say it again, please?

>> *(auto empoderamiento)*

And with that, I would just like to spend a few moments here diving a little bit deeper into Clarissa's background and maybe what got you interested in a career in HR.

>> Clarissa: Sure. First off, I want to say thank you *so much* for the invitation. I feel honored to be here, and the power in this room is *extraordinary,* and I am *very* touched by it, very touched.

So ‑‑

>> So let's get started with ‑‑ yeah, let's get a quick personal story. What got you involved in human resources and maybe tie it into why you consider yourself an ally to this community.

>> Clarissa: I didn't know that I would end up in human resources. I took a journey in my life that I had no control over, but it ultimately got me to a place where working with people was important to me. I was raised in orphanages, so I made a lot of change in my life, going from institution to institution, different staff, different schools, different dynamics, always feeling that the earth under me, the floor under me was unsteady, that I couldn't control the unsteadiness. I didn't know what that was. I didn't know what that was about. I couldn't label it, but I realized there were people around me in similar conditions, in similar circumstances that *I* could be helpful to, and that actually empowered me. It made *me* feel more steady in my present state as a child, in the past, and in my present state today as an officer in a very significant organization, and it has helped me to realize that I can do it in a couple of ways.

I have done some work in a not‑for‑profit with some sex offenders and substance users, and that was useful, but I realized I could take my past into the corporate environment, and there's a lot to be solved in the corporate environment. It's not perfect. With people, we all come from a place of anxiety, concerns, physical, mental, and other kinds of issues. Some of them are very obvious, others are not, but all of that has brought me to where I am today.

>> Thank you for sharing your story. I'll take a moment and share as well why I consider myself an ally to this community. My aunt is actually a C4 quadriplegic, and she suffered a gunshot wound in her brainstem, and so she can't move from the neck down, and my wonderful grandmother, who now that I'm a mom, I understand why she takes care of her and will probably do so until her last day, so, again, thank you so much for having us here today.

Similarly, I am inspired in the career in human resources because I can go home every day and feel like I helped someone, and I did help advocate, whether it is on behalf of an employee, on behalf of a manager, on behalf of, you know, society or just enlightening folks, really what is important out there.

What resonated with some of the stories earlier is that people really don't know, and sometimes giving that ‑‑ assuming best intent and giving the benefit of the doubt is really rule number one of engagement for our line of work, and going into it with that humility and that education mindset is incredibly important. So we are talking about sharing stories, and we really want to help you all navigate what it is like to disclose in the workplace, and that's really what we are going to go into next. So there's a little bit of a how, what, if, when, you know, kind of scenario. So tell us, [Clarissa,] what are some themes at work and what are some of the best practices that you can share with us, specifically with respect to disclosing a disability in the workplace.

>> In workplaces in general, there is that unsteadiness, that discomfort, that worry, that anxiety, that you're not sure if you can fit in, and there is a shyness around talking to anyone about that, the fear of someone finding out, and what that implication might be to you in the workplace. What's important is that we are encouraging people to come forward, to feel comfortable in a work environment, to feel like it's safe. That's important, private work that I want to do when I'm with employees inside the workplace and outside the workplace: that it's really okay. It's an environment where we are open, we are supportive, and the reality is if we don't know, we can't really think about what the accommodation might be, and we can't serve to the individual what that reasonable accommodation may be, so it's really two‑sided. We need to be there to listen and be supportive, but we also need to understand what the need is, and we depend on individuals to do that.

>> Jessica: Uh‑huh, absolutely, and I can share from my experience as well, like I say, *we don't know what we don't know.* So it's really up to the employees and the managers coming to us and seeking us out to obtain that knowledge and even obtain a level of knowledge that they may not have any experience with, and so that is kind of our role, is to kind of guide the organization through that process.

Tell us, first, though what happens after disclosure. I think people in the room are probably also thinking about their privacy, so can you talk a little bit about that.

>> [Clarissa]: Privacy is at the core. It's critical. It's very important. Because you've taken the risk in any environment, particularly in my environment, just because an individual has taken the risk to disclose doesn't mean that we have the right to tell that story. **It's not our story. It's the individual's story, and I feel very strongly about that. And there are privacy laws that are very important that we want to make sure that we stand by.** The fact that you've disclosed in a work environment, you should be able to feel confident that that disclosure is about finding the right solution for you as an individual. It is not about any other reason. It is really about making sure that you have the tools, the access, and the opportunity to be at your very best when you walk into the workplace and when you're in the workplace, and most of us spend most of our time in the workplace, so to make it the right situation to the best that we can is really at the core for us.

>> [Jessica]: Uh‑huh, absolutely.

So, we do have a few minutes left here, and we want this to be as useful as possible to anybody who may be navigating a tricky situation in the workplace, and so I would like to open the floor for questions, if you have any. I think the procedure is to write them down on a card, right? And we will be able to answer those, if you would like to submit anything anonymously.

While we get those questions queued up, I'll just tell a quick story with respect to best practices that I have seen in the workplace for an individual, where, again, human resources is brokering a transaction between the employee and the manager. Similar to our friend Carol, who has shared her story about the CEO of Delta feeling strongly, that HR has a point of view. We believe privacy is important, disclosure is important, and tact around all of this is important, but of course organizations are filled with people, and sometimes people make mistakes, and so don't be afraid to do what Carol did and go around your manager to the head of human resources or whatever resources are available at your particular workplace, because it may be that a manager does not know or has not crossed this bridge before, and it's important, again, to just assume that the person does not have the right information before kind of jumping to a place of feeling that it is intentional and it is discriminatory.

The other thing that I will share is I have seen plenty of compromises, and maybe Clarissa can share as well, it's not always the accommodation that is requested that is actually implemented. What is required by law is for us to engage in a proactive dialogue as to what kind of accommodation would be possible, so just something to know when you enter into this conversation of requesting an accommodation for your disability, know that it may not be the exact thing that you requested, but the employer is working with you to try and create a solution. It might not be your top choice, but that is something that I have seen as well.

Anything on that before we take our question?

>>[Clarissa]: I think that's really important to really appreciate that. It may feel like the other individuals are discriminating, but more often than not, what we find is it's a lack of understanding, a lack of experience, a lack of knowing what to do or fear of moving forward. And so some of it is on us, and some of it is on the individual to take that risk, to move into that discomfort, to start that dialogue.

>> [Jessica]: So, how to ask for help, what's your advice to students out there?

>> [Clarissa]: I would say just tap into yourself, really hear *your* voice, and bring that voice forward. *You* know what you need and what you want. You articulate it the best way you can, and you hope that the other person is receiving it and would be willing to spend the time to explain it, because the information that comes from *you as the individual* is the best information we have.

>> Uh‑huh, absolutely, and it doesn't hurt to practice the conversation before you go into the conversation, and if you plan to have that conversation over the phone, which can be difficult, but that may be the case, because of an interview or because the manager is located in another city, et cetera. If you are having a conversation over the phone, my advice is to take that call and **stand.** Something happens differently when you deliver a message and stand. They don't know when you're standing, but I just find when you stand when you are delivering a message, you can do so more confidently when you're standing – if you can.

Any other questions that we have in the last minutes here? Okay.

Clarissa, how do you report microaggression types of issues, especially if not directed towards you? So we have an ally in the room that wants to potentially notify HR on behalf of someone else.

>> Clarissa: So I'm in a position where I hear about the issues, the concerns, the worries, the complaints. And where we sit in this part of my organization, employee relations, we want to hear those concerns, and we want to be able to problem solve. So I think you'll find in lots of organizations and in school systems, there is a way to raise concerns. They have formal ways and informal ways. You find an ally or someone who is influential or someone who really has the empathy and really wants to spend the time, and you let them know what's going on, and perhaps they can help you bring it forward; or, again, tap into that voice and just push it out and just put it out there. It's scary, but I really encourage people to do that. It's really important, to advocate for yourself.

>> Advocate for yourself, and don't be afraid to tweet the CEO of an airline, if you ever find yourself in that situation.

Yes, Carol?

>> Carol: The advice you've given ‑‑

>> Please use a mic so that our virtual listeners ‑‑

>> Carol: You have given such valuable advice, and one piece that I would like to offer in my perspective as the general counsel of a university, where people will similarly come and report, it's always helpful in giving your experience, *know what the policy is* when you're speaking to a subject matter expert. Read it in advance, so that when you know when you are going through a conversation about how to have questions ready. You mentioned that you may not get your first-choice accommodation. That's usually in the FAQ on everybody's website, when it has to do with FLA, for example. Know the institution's policies, read the FAQs ahead of time, and be prepared to cross‑examine them a little bit.

>> Thank you. Thank you so much, Carol, and Debbie, I'll turn it back to you.

>> Debbie Fink: Thank you so much. That was sensational. The good news is later this afternoon, they will take an even deeper dive on this critical topic when they co-facilitate a small group discussion on *Self‑Advocacy in the Workplace.* We can't wait, right?

Okay. So, we opened our webinar with music, and now we are going to close the circle with our final songs, so, Amanda and Rebecca will share a really empowering song, which Amanda has called M*i Libertad.*

If you happen to know, feel free to join in, and irrespective of whether or not you know it, we invite you to take the message into your head and heart, that each of us is strong and free and empower us to be what -- and who -- we choose to be.

(Singing in Spanish.)

*Mi Libertad*

>>[Debbie]: From the bottom of my *corazon* [heart], I have to really thank Amanda and Rebecca for your gift of music and soul and what you have brought to this experience, so thank you. One more round of applause.

[Applause]

So, at this point, I also want to make sure to thank Clarissa and Jessica, Elizabeth and Vivian for the wonderful experience that we all just shared. I also want to thank our virtual participants who have joined via webinar or Facebook livestreaming, and I want now to take this moment to share, with permission, that one of our facilitators is unable to join us today due to a need for emergency surgery. So, Steph, I know you're watching, and we together here are harnessing all of the healing energy and/or healing prayers and/or healing powers that is in this room today, wishing you a speedy recovery.

[Pause / Applause]

This is where we part ways with our virtual friends and all media, so we can work our magic here and keep participation confidential and private. Thanks so much for joining us. We can't wait to hear your feedback on our virtual experience, and we need to change the slide really fast, really fast. Don't leave yet, webinar people, because we really want to invite all of you to our upcoming free annual Summit in Washington, DC on July 22nd. It's a Monday, and we would *love* to have any and all of you there for this *tremendous* experience, where we bring in people from Hollywood, and we bring in people from the policy world and the ‑‑ world and politicians are coming through. We are nonpartisan. We really welcome you to come.

Oh ‑‑

July 22nd. I thought we fixed that one. Thank you, that's Monday July 22nd. If you wanted to come last year, it's July 29th!

[Laughter]

Okay. So, once again, thank you to all of our virtual participants…