Jennifer: Our next person is Cal Harris but before he comes up to introduce our speaker, I just want to say that Calvin Harris is amazing. He is our Chairman emeritus. He was the second Chairman of RespectAbility. He is a superstar at social media. He's also a self advocate. And well, he just is a new dad of the cutest baby in the world. Other than my kids who were really cute when they were young. But his son's so cute. So Cal Harris, I turn it over to you.

[Applause]

Calvin: All right. Good morning, everyone. So as Jennifer said, I am the past Chair emeritus of RespectAbility and my time here has just been absolutely amazing. I mean, the folks within the organization have become family and just meeting all the partners around the country that are working passionately to move the needle. It's just been really, really motivating. So see ago lot of the new faces in here, the folks that have traveled from all across the country to be here, it just continue to give me hope and give me optimism. So I just want to thank you all for being here this morning. But right now I have the distinct pleasure to introduce you to Mr. Ollie Cantos. He is a strong disability advocate and attorney, not only that, but Ollie adopted and raised 3 amazing young men who are triplets, who are also blind. They are Eagle Scouts, they've been featured in various national media across the country and they're currently in college and working right now, just doing amazing things. So I'm happy to introduce you to Mr. Ollie Cantos and hear a little bit about his story. So Ollie?

[Applause]

Ollie: Thank you so much for that kind introduction. I am really grateful. And Good morning everybody! When we look at the history of the world of persons with disabilities, we necessarily reflect on the fact that we are on an ongoing journey of transformation and change. There was once a time when we as people with disabilities were subjected to such low expectations that we had no voice. And because of those low expectations, we ourselves had no expectations of ourselves. Until eventually some of us rose up to realize and to recognize that our own life journeys need not be and must not be determined by what others think of us, but rather must be determined by what we think of ourselves and through the years and through the decades, we as a cross‑disability movement have grown and have come together to say to the world that we are here to determine the course of our own lives. We are here to say what our expectations are of ourselves and to say to the world with pride, that we have much to offer and we stand with those without disabilities in a spirit of equality and partnership.

But over the years, what tends to happen is a tension, a tension between the old ways of thinking and new ways of thinking. We as part of the disability community have seen both. There are those, even within our own midst, who still doubt their own ability to have an impact on their own lives in a positive way in the sense that they wonder about their own true abilities to be successful and to reach their own dreams. There are those who are still warehoused in institutions who only see the walls of those institutions and who wonder if they ever can get out. There are those of us who are outside of institutions who are demanding that they be let out and who are demanding that they be apart of the broader community so that they can take their place in society and give and grow just like everybody else.

We as members of the disability community who comprise people of physical, psychiatric, intellectual and learning disabilities stand together in partnership in this regard because we know that they cannot divide and conquer. We also know, that across political lines, across all political perspectives, the fact is that we, those who are active in the disability community from wherever we stand are dedicated to doing whatever possible to change those old expectations by living our own lives according to the highest standards and by coming together to speak for ourselves and not have those around us speak for us. That has always been our mantra, but that is stronger now more than ever.

Consumer organizations have risen up and have organized and have rallied resources, RespectAbility, our organization here represents that very thing. And today, as we look at that reality of how we come together as people with all types of disabilities, embracing one another for the backgrounds that we have and recognizing the diversity of talent and ability in our midst, we also see necessarily the importance of embracing each person for the individuals that they are, and celebrating all that they have to offer and all that they have to give. Long have we said in the disability world, "Nothing About Us Without Us," but two weeks ago I attended a convention of the National Federation of the Blind. And they modified that statement in one of the remarks made during Convention, and I love it! And, the modification is, "nothing without us.”

So we merely do not come together to speak for ourselves and say to say to the world "Nothing About Us Without Us," but we say that we are here to integrate ourselves into every aspect of societal life, including those beyond the world of disability itself, indeed we are all family members, we're friends, we're parents, we're employees of different descriptions, we're entrepreneurs, and yet we recognize that there are those who still struggle.

So what do we do in that regard? How do we build large and influential networks? Here, yet again, we call attention to our history. We have seen over time that by contributing and adding value to those around us and by calling others to action that that begins to change. Specifically, within each of our own lives, we recognize that we each have spheres of influence, both online and offline, social media is a significant part of that sphere of influence representing opportunities for us to communicate in time effective way to share our views and to invite constructive dialogue and to call people to action to encourage them to stand with us with the respective causes that celebrate and that we embrace and that we advance each and everyday.

But beyond even that, social media, and beyond all the tech savvy it comes down to starting by looking to others around us, seeing what they have to offer, but also asking what their needs happen to be, and offering to be of support with those needs. Whether it be employment or transportation, or healthcare, or benefits, or entrepreneurship, whether it involves those who have been in military service or those in civilian life whether it involves even the mere wanting in people's lives of simply wanting to believe in themselves more. We have that role to play and we do that by deciding proactively to compliment people for what they are, but also to add value to them by sharing the many resources that are available to them. But it goes far beyond that. Because each of us does that continually because of our respective professions here in Washington, D.C. And for those who are watching online, all of you do so in your respective communities.

How do we each build our networks further? We do so by looking for common ground, specifically regarding what it is that are the priorities of those with who we interact and then moving beyond that to contribute ourselves to joining in that cause and by having them join our cause here with RespectAbility. We also do that by building cadres of people in leadership. And if there's a wireless mic, then what I will ask is if I could have that, but if not, what I'll do first is I will describe what I'm to draw on the board. I'm going to draw a circle. And then around that ‑‑ actually, if we could have somebody give me a marker, I will explain further how this works.

What we do is we imagine ourselves building people up in one way or another. I'll explain this as we draw this out here. I'm going to describe this visually as I attempt to diagram it out. Because I want all of you to see how this actually works. So let's say we ‑‑ I wrote a word with the word "you" in the middle. Then I'm drawing a line to the right I'm writing person number one. If we build up one another in a sincere way, and let's say in this case you build up person number one, and that individual thinks well of you because of how they think of you because of how you have genuinely built them up. I'm putting a plus sign by person number one. Then person number one talks to person number two. I'm drawing a line down to person number two. When person number two and person number one interact with one another, then what happens is when you come up in conversation with person number two, then person one says wonderful things about you to person number two about you. Assume for the purposes of this illustration that the second individual has not met you yet. But already that person thinks well of you because of that person knowing or liking person number one, so what happens then is there’s already a predisposition, I'm trying to put a plus sign by person number two. There's a positive disposition there because, before the person even meets you, they already think well of you. Then later when you interact with person number two, I've drawn a line representatively down from the word "you" to person number two, when you then build that person up, then that person recognizes who you are from personal experience, so then I'm doing a plus sign next to person number two, so now, person number two first heard about you, and then you interact with that person at some point then because of how you work to build them up by supporting them, then what happens is now they're opinion of you is solid. And then what happens is person number two interacts with person number three and the process repeats.

So then imagine what happens then next is that over time you build a cadre of people. I'm just writing a circle in the middle and I'm just writing, representative circles out from that. So just imagine that you are at the center of influence and all around you with people that you've built up. You've built these alliances so imagine that in your immediate first degree that there are people who know you, you work with and you join in common cause with. So then what happens then is imagine that among those that you know there, are people amongst themselves whose don't know one another. And let's say for example I've now turned the page, we then have you, and then there's person number 10, that has a need. Let's say you are not directly able to meet that need. But you know that person number 20 can meet that need.

So imagine, so I've drawn out a line diagonal to the left to person number 10 from the word you and diagonally to the right below is person number 20. So now imagine this scenario where person number 10 on the left has a need that you know can be met by person number 20. So then what you then do is you introduce the two of them together, so person number 10 and person number 20 interact with one another. By that point you have served as a facilitator.

Then when person 20 meets the needs of person 1 something magical happens. First of all when you approach person 2 in this illustration, asking them to be of support, you are edifying them by recognizing person number 20's expertise, which is also a sign of respect and loyalty and love and recognizing that they have something to offer someone else. And you also then contribute to person 20 adding to their network by talking to person 10 and then supporting them, which then builds a relationship between the two. In the meantime, I should slow down for the captioner, I'm sorry.

In the meantime, then what happens is, person number 10 has his or her needs met. Then by that point, person number 10 has a positive impression of person 20, person 10 has a new network member, plus there's a new relationship there in the meantime, what you have just done is you have formed a new alliance between two people who did not know one another. In the meantime, when you build this over series of occasions, imagine this continue to cluster and build, and then they each talk and report back to you and tell you how things are going, you work and repeat it again by bringing more clusters together in a broader way.

So the reason why this is important for the context of our gathering today here at RespectAbility is that, when it comes to who we are, and when it comes to what we each have to offer, that we need to keep building these alliances. And as Jennifer mentioned earlier, these can be polarizing times. But what we need to do is, as a disability community, is to build up one another and this is not fluffy stuff, I'll illustrate proof that - I’m giving an appreciated version of a 2‑hour presentation. But what happens is as we engage in this approach, we can build large and very very influential networks. Because when we make sure publicly to praise those around us for the positive work that they do and when we ask others to support them, and they do so with us, we create a broader sense of solidarity and support. And that can only strengthen our movement.

In these difficult times when people are so polarized for various reasons we need to be the beacon that shows the world through our example that we can still build partnerships across various lines. Because as we do that then we will actually be able to strength those alliances. And this very approach that I've shown you and I've significantly abbreviated, actually has resulted in so many things in my life, personally, where I've ended up doing various things in my own career, but I've also been able to be of support to hundreds of organizations and reached literally millions of people by now because of what has happened with our family and with people that I've known across the country we've worked to influence more than 52 million people in terms of them having a positive view about disability and it has been really magnificent. But it's something I wanted to do here because I want to be mindful of time. How much time do we have left, please? I wanted to make sure to be on time. Ten minutes, okay, thank you.

So what we need to each do here is to be reflective, today we're going to be hearing from some absolutely magnificent speakers. The call to action that we each need to do including me is to listen for how we can contribute to the work of what each will be talking about today. And then we need to reach out to them within the next 3 days to follow up with them. Follow up is also critically important. How many of us here, we don't have to acknowledge this out loud, but how many of us here have heard people say to us, yeah, hey, let's do this, let's work together. Then there ends up, not necessarily by intention, but there ends up not being the follow up that we would prefer? We've all experience that to one degree or another. But to the extent that we follow up quickly, we can really continue to build the momentum of further success. So throughout today, as people describe their different experiences and different priorities, we each should listen to what they've got to say, but also to think about how we can offer specifically to be of support, putting our own specific next action steps into place and going to them either for help or asking them to join with us or offering to be of support to them. That is literally how this works.

And when we look at RespectAbility, look at the massive growth of this organization over such a short period of time. It is significantly because of Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi and because of the entire leadership team at RespetAbility, plus our fellows, plus those who have been here before. Because of all these people, when you see the momentum that has been growing here, that is no accident. It is because of activism, it is because of our solid vision of wanting to bring together people from the disability community from all corners and respecting and embracing everybody and recognizing that there's more we can do together than what could possibly be achieved apart. So looking at that as we look ahead to build large successful and influential networks we must always, always remember the fundamental belief that we must each work to strive to build up individuals, not just whole organizations, but individuals. Earlier I talked about person 10 and twenty, imagine that each of those people are leaders of different organizations. Now you will end up forging alliances, not just between two people but in that illustration earlier, between two organizations who have large memberships. So just imagine that rippling out. So if any of you would like to reach out to me personally you can reach out to me at Olliecantos@aol.com, Yes. AOL still exists.

[Laughter]

I’ve had an account there for 24 years. You can also reach, you can follow me on Twitter @Ollie\_Cantos, and we also have YouTube. And I’d also real briefly just love to acknowledge my son Nick who's with us today, an Eagle Scout, one of the first of the three triplet blind Eagle Scouts ever to become Eagle Scouts in the history of Boy Scouts. So I'm real excited he's with us. [Applause] And I wanted to say thank you. I look forward to interacting with all of you throughout the whole day. So I may be stepping in and out and running all over the place. But it's because I want to work directly with you and together we as an organization will continue to build RespectAbility not just as an organization, but we will build RespectAbility in terms of people recognizing that there's fundamental RespectAbility in being a person with a disability. Thank you so very much everybody. I appreciate the opportunity to be here.

[Applause]

Jennifer: We have time for questions, do you want to take some questions?

Ollie: Sure. Sure.

Jennifer: Okay. So Ollie can take questions. There are pieces ‑‑ there are cards on your tables. So if you want to write a question and send it in, you can. Or if you want to raise your hand and ask a question, you can do it that way. Does anybody have a question for Ollie?

Audience Member: I’m curious if you can talk about perhaps your own sort of networking journey when you first got to DC or when you fist started as a young advocate. Because I think there's a lot of value in sort of ‑‑ there's this theory, right, at the same time I think sharing personal experience about how you yourself have grown your own network. I think that would be really interesting.

Ollie: Sure, thank you, Diego, it is really good to see you buddy, I've seen you at different events and you're magnificent at rallying young people with disabilities. I just love you buddy. What ended up happening with me is that I was born two months premature I was blind, and during the early part of my life with no self esteem - what ended up happening, it was because of mentors along the way that enabled things to get better. But what happened was I looked for people who emulated qualities that I wanted to have. And so I interacted with them. I also do visualization everyday where every morning I think about and imagine as if it's a memory, exactly what I wanted. In my case, I wanted to meet President Bush and so I visualized it, I decided on February the fourth of 2004 I ended up meeting him by May the fifth. I told the President when I met him I'm going to work for you someday sir. He said I have a feeling you will. I ended up joining the federal government in 2004 on August the 9th. So this August will be 15 years in government.

[Applause]

So the way that ‑‑ thank you, the way that the network is built is literally person to person, and literally finding things that people need and meeting their needs but not just okay meeting their need but meetings them in a significant way where like wow, i'm really grateful that we got to interact with one another. And then repeating the process, bringing people together, doing it again, but especially absolutely following through on things. Because a lot of people mean well but they don't necessarily follow‑through because they're busy, but it's also a time management issue as well as making sure to follow‑through on the things that we say. The other thing that's important is to imagine what we do and its better to underpromise and over deliver than over promise and under deliver. So whatever we think we can do in our head, we say to those people something that's less so then when we actually achieve what we think in our head we can do, then to them they're like, wow, they - he did more than what he told us he would do. Or she, depending on the circumstance. That really is the secret to doing it. And then when you follow up with people on social media, Facebook Messenger, texting and you send information and resources to people and just repeat it over and over and over. Then what happens is over time there's a whole cadre of people that end up really being supportive. Then there’s a critical mass. Then it grow outs of control and it's unbelievable what can happen next.

Audience Member: My name is Oliver, this is my first time here visiting.

Ollie: Oliver.

Audience Member: My question to you is about the adoption. What motivated you to do the adoption for Leo, Nick and Steven?

Ollie: Oh, you know about them, wow. Thank you, Oliver. Gosh! I actually was approach by a member of my faith community who said that he heard about Leo, Nick and Steven and at the time, they were in really dire circumstances. And so I originally was just going to mentor them. It's weird to say now, but at the time when I introduced myself I was Mr. Ollie to them. And - I just - wow, it's been such a long time ago. And so what ended up happening was we ended up becoming so close. And, what ended up happening was because of our closeness, I just knew that they were my kids. I just knew that they were. And then so… I don't want to cry but oh, gosh. I just love the boys so much. Because the boys have really been so amazing and I'm just really grateful. All of us who have families, we know how much we love our kids. So the way that we talk about RespectAbility here, I'm working hard alongside with you for them and for all of our kids so that way everybody can have a bigger and better future. So I really appreciate the question.

[Applause]

Thank you, Oliver.

Jennifer: I have one other question, Ollie, because you've been all over national media. So can you tell us a little bit about how that happened? Because you and your sons were ABC Men of the Week or people of the week, you've been in Washingtonian, you’ve been in People Magazine, and it really lifted up what people with disabilities can do and it was around your sons becoming Eagle Scouts. But how did that work that you got connected to the media?

Ollie: I love this.

Jennifer: What is that like to be in the media?

Ollie: Thank you, people have asked me privately, "hey dude, who's your publicist?" Because we’ve been in People Magazine, ABC news, CBS, Fox, NBC, all that stuff. The reason why it worked is in the elevator at my building I met somebody named JR Gonzales, I was friends with him, he was the President of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. We were friends for a long time. And at his going away when he went back to Texas, we met someone there who said hi, I have a public access show, and I'm wondering if I could bring your guys on just to talk about your lives. I said, sure. And it was literally just a public access show in Maryland somewhere. So then, Catalina is her name. Somebody saw the public access show and that was National Public Radio. When National Public Radio picked it up, they named us for the week for Story Core and they broadcast it to several million. People Magazine then picked it up. Then USA Today picked it up. Then ABC World News Tonight picked it up. And it’s all because I reached out to somebody in the elevator, at my apartment building, not knowing who the dude was, saying “hi, I’m Ollie, nice to meet you, how can I help.” That's literally how it happened.

[Applause]

Debbie: That reinforces the need for having an elevator pitch ready to go.

[Laughter]

Ollie: Absolutely.

Jennifer: So let me just thank Ollie Cantos for an amazing job and for the leadership that you give for all of us. Thank you so much.

Ollie: Thank you so much.

[Applause]