Nicole: I'm Nicole LeBlanc. I live in Silver Spring with Tia Nelis from TASH. I wear a gazillion hats. I’m also the PAL coordinator for HSRI, national center on advancing person-centered practices. I’m a policy wonk. I'm pleased to moderate this panel called success stories of authentic advocacy.

What do we want? Civil rights! When do we want it? Now! We know that the Disability Rights Movement is at its best when people with disabilities are leaning in at tables among decision-makers and leading in every field. That includes having businesses, nonprofits hire people with disabilities. We are now going meet four remarkable self advocates here today. After they each present, we will engage in a Q and A. Ila Eckhoff of Blackrock, Evelyn Kelly of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, and Laka Negassa of RespectAbility and Matan Koch of RespectAbility. Thank you all for being here with us today.

To get this panel moving, our first panelist is Ila. She's a powerhouse professional and self advocate working for Blackrock as a managing director, which is the world’s largest asset manager with $6.5 trillion in assets under its management. Wow!

[Laughter]

We're so pleased you are here with us today, you are clearly implementing advancing life lessons taught to you as a child, paving the way for others with disabilities. Would you please share your story of self advocacy with us? Let her rip!

Ila: Thanks Nicole. Can you guys hear me? I don't normally need a microphone. Can you hear me now? Okay.

Hi, so my name is Ila Eckhoff I'm a managing director for Blackrock, which as Nicole indicates is the largest asset manager in the world. I've been at Blackrock for 19 years but I've been in financial services for 35. Blackrock is my tenth firm, so it's been an interesting adventure. I actually have cerebral palsy from the hips down. I was born with CP. I came out 2 months early. My mom and - I only had a 50/50 chance of making it. But she said she knew I was going to survive because once they fed me in the nursery I screamed loud enough to get fed first.

[Laughter]

So that was a good sign. My dad told me when I was about five, that, congratulations, I was going to walk in a room, because I walk with a cane, and you kind of can’t miss me. Even though I didn't self disclose until about five or six years ago. That, congratulations, you're going to have to be better, smarter and faster to be thought of as an equal. So, get over it, get on with it, and let’s go. I had 12 operations by the time I was 16. It's been an amazing journey. My mission in doing these kinds of panels, having this kind of dialogue, I can't deal with this microphone. Can you guys hear me all right? Not without the mic, okay. So I'll go back.

[Laughter]

My mission as a self advocate is to teach people with disabilities to advocate for themselves. Right? I had to learn to do this by myself. I had a father who, no matter what obstacle I hit, the question was always the same. How bad do you want it? And how much are you willing to give up to get it? So I didn't walk for two years at one point. I missed 3rd and 4th grade. I had a tutor and I came back to school and I was ahead. Because my mission, as my father told me when I was five, is I had to be better, smarter and faster. So it wasn't enough for me to just do the work. I had to figure out how to do it better. It always took me longer. I always had to wake up earlier. I had to do more work to get to school, to get to work, traveling. So once I started my career, its a little funny - I thought when I went to college that I was going to be a doctor, then I realized organic chemistry and I didn't get along.

[Laughter]

That wasn't the first time I experienced failure. The other thing people need to understand is, I have learned much more from failure than from success. So I embrace failure now, I actually kind of look for it. Because those challenges that I then overcome make me better, stronger, and faster for the next thing. Right? So resilience is something you have to build. It doesn't happen overnight. It's not one incident that teaches you resilience, it's a full life experience. So fast forward, I went to work for Arthur Anderson, they said, "you'll have to travel a lot. Is that a problem?" I said, no, that's not a problem, but if you're going to need me to ride a bicycle we're going to have a problem. Because that's the one thing I can't do. So I went to Blackrock. Two years ago we launched an Ability Network. Why Ability? It's because I'm sick and tired of talking about all the things that people with disabilities can't do. Right. The dialogue needs to change. The language needs to change. It's about what we can do. And we illustrate that by example. We illustrate that by pushing forward.

So I mentor tremendous amount of kids both at my firm and throughout the industry. I am always looking for different opportunities to connect with people so that they understand. We have to tell our story. Right? Until five or six years ago I also sit on the board of Cerebal Palsy Foundation. Until I did that, I didn't self disclose. I used to into job interviews and put the cane under the desk. I would try to get there early enough so I could hide it somewhere and find a chair to sit down so when I did my interview, it wasn't even a discussion. They couldn't see it until I left. Which gave me a opportunity first. Thank God it's not the 60s, 70s, and 80s anymore, and the world has gotten better. The world keeps changing and it keeps getting better but we have to keep pushing forward. You really need to see yourself as you want to be seen. I'm a woman with CP, but I am a strong capable woman who just so happens to have CP. I could care less, right? If anything at this point I’m actually grateful for the CP because its made me who I am. If I didn't have it, I would be somebody else. I potentially would have married somebody else and had a different set of kids.

[Laughter]

I like the ones I have. I'd like to keep them.

[Laughter]

The best advice I could give any parent with a kid with a disability is not allow them to use that as an excuse for anything. We all have things we're good at and things we suck at. I don't care whether you're disabled or not. The thing that the person with disabilities has to do is figure out what they're good at, and what they're not, focus on what they're good at so they can minimize those limitations. We all have that. I don't care whether you're disabled or not. Right? We have to deal with the human element and change the bias and change the dialogue and change the language. And if we can do that, look at what film and television shows like Speechless, and the Good Doctor, all the other things that are out there - that give people with disabilities somebody to look up to, or to say, I can do that. If they can do that, I can do that. Right? If a kid can be in a starring role who can't speak in a wheelchair can do it, I can do it.

[Applause]

Nicole: Well said. Thank you so much for sharing your self advocacy story. Ila. You know, what you're getting out is a lot about dignity of risk, presumed confidence, high expectations. We appreciate the mentoring role you take on with others with disabilities, especially women with disabilities. I also hear you will soon become a member of RespectAbility's Board. Welcome aboard. And I must say, I love your speech and you should run for Congress.

[Laughter]

Next we're going to introduce Evelyn Kelly, our next panelist. Thank you for joining us today Evelyn, you're a venerable trendsetter as a self advocate successful attorney with the U.S. Patent and Trademark office, a former fellow with RespectAbility. Will you please share your story with us? Take it away. Let her rip!

Evelyn: Hi, so my name is Evelyn Kelly I currently work as a trademark attorney at the USPTO. I guess my success story begins with the ADA because I was born the year it was passed. And therefore I was part of a generation that had more resources and protections than any generation prior. And I didn't really need it until I was about 7 when I was diagnosed with sensory neural hearing loss in my right ear and total deafness in my left ear, so I don't hear very well. And when I ask, can you hear? I mean it, because I have that problem. So it was a challenge early on. My parents didn't really know what was happening to me. They just thought I was ignoring them on purpose.

[Laughter]

And I had tinitis, I thought that was a super secret, superhero call to action. That's what 7 year olds think. It's hard to navigate that space. But once I was fitted with hearing aids and FM transmitters in school, it was interesting because I just accepted it. This wasn't anything different. This wasn't anything to be ashamed of. I just got to pass this FM transmitter off when I went from class to class. My classmates accepted it as well. And I just think it speaks to the malleability of children to just take things as they come and move on. So when you speak, how does my disability or my hearing loss affect me? Yeah, it's me. It means kind of where I sit at the table, its the kind of movies I go watch, thank goodness for FCC mandated closed captioning because I learned to read really really quickly, and I consistently laugh before everyone else

[Laughter]

I get the joke that much faster. So I went through school. I learned to read a lot. If I missed anything the teacher said, I would read it. If a teacher is teaching you Tale of Two Cities, you have the book in front of you. There's nothing that she can't tell you that's not in a book or in a synopsis or you can't talk about with your friends or you can't talk about with other students, it's just being creative and finding ways to make sure that you don't miss the information that you need to succeed. And so I did that. I did that a lot. And I got accepted to Stanford University. And I moved 3,000 miles away from my parents, and I really had to be an advocate for myself from then on, because I was out there without their support system. And it was just me. So when I needed something, I had to speak up in class. When I needed closed captioning or real‑time captioning, I had to walk myself to the office and say, hey, I need this. And I needed to not being afraid of being that person who had someone sitting next to them, because I needed to do what I needed to do. And these people couldn't carry me through the rest of my life. I needed to stand up and speak out for myself. So I learned to do that in college. But it wasn't really until I left college that I really became more aware of the disability community. I mean, I volunteered. I taught kids with special needs how to swim, and I raised money for the Make a Wish Foundation but I didn't really understand the impact of what disability means in America, and how multi‑faceted it is and what the range of it is, and what that looks like. Because it's not present. It's not there for everyone to see. It's so personal. It's so private. So when I considered my hearing a personal part of myself, I don't walk up to someone and say hi, I have a hearing loss so you really need to speak up. I wait until that person is talking so low or I was lost in conversation I was like, I don't remember your name, I'm pretty sure I never heard it. I don't know what you do. So all of that is apart of living and learning and growing and learning how to speak up for yourself. And I think my parents did a great job because, similarly, my dad was never the one to say, oh, that's okay. He was like, don't tell me you can't do it. Don't tell me that. Because I could do it! I just didn't want to put in the extra effort that I had to to do it. But thank goodness, once he learned that I actually wasn't ignoring him, he just started speaking louder, he's like, no, don't tell me you can't do it! So now, what I do, and how I consider disability and what it means to be a self advocate, I think it's just being increasingly visible. Because there's someone who's not being visible. And they need you to be there, speaking up for yourself so they know and most likely they're not the only person in the room who needs an accommodation. Everyone needs accommodations, it doesn't matter what you call it. It means taking a week off, if it means getting real‑time captioned telephone - whatever it means, you need to ask for it. Because someone else doesn't have that voice yet. They're still learning. Because America is still learning to give them that voice to show them that that's what they can do. So thank you.

[Applause]

Nicole: Well said. Thank you so much for sharing your story, you're quite an exemplary self advocate and role model. Like me, you gained and honed many skills as a fellow with RespectAbility for which we're most appreciative of, control your own destiny or someone else will.

Now we turn to our next panelist, another fellow RespectAbility Fellow, Laka Negassa. You have quite the self advocacy story to share as one with an acquired disability. We look forward to hearing the experience of your resiliency as you recovered and took charge of your "new normal" in life. Take it away!

Laka: Good afternoon everyone.

Debbie: Good afternoon, Laka.

Laka: My name is Laka Mitiku Negassa and I am a Policy Fellow working under RespectAbility's policy director, Philip Kahn-Pauli, and I'm also a traumatic brain injury. As a result I stutter, so excuse me when I read most of what I want to say, thank you. Let me start by thanking RespectAbility for giving me this opportunity to share my perspective, which I hope will inspire, motivate and encourage people who are in the same shoes that I was in. My newfound journey living as a person with an acquired disability. This journey began in January 2013 when I was hit by a Snow Plow truck while I was a pedestrian waiting to cross the street and then dragged close to 80 feet in Cleveland. The only organ in my body that was functioning at a bare minimum was my heart. All of my other organs were lacerated and bleeding heavily. There were multiple bone fractures as well. I was in a coma for close to 3 weeks and I had to undergo five major surgeries. I pushed through almost three years of physical, occupational and speech therapies. As a result I had to relearn how to walk, write, understand and then process information and then generate easily understood information. I was like a baby growing up and learning new skills. Thanks be to God, I'm in a excellent health condition, all better and I’m getting my master of public health degree at George Washington University, School of Public Health.

[Applause]

My interests in health policy came about as, during my recovery, I was continuously transferred around five different healthcare facilities within one year. This was my first encounter with barriers to healthcare that the many people with disabilities come across unfortunately on a regular basis, especially people of color with disabilities, especially immigrants with disabilities, especially women with disabilities. So put that all together and you've got me. As a person living with an acquired disability, I had to learn everything, from what kind of language to use, to how to get all the required accommodations to live life. My family and I didn't know anyone living with a visible or physical disability close to us. It was a whole new world we had to navigate through.

Lessons learned from this journey: live each and every moment being grateful. Also thanking God that you are alive and are able to make a difference. Don't ask, "why did this happen to me?" Instead, be grateful that you are still here and breathing and then work with your new self. Figure out what areas you need support or extra support with. Also, areas that you excel in. There's no denying there will be challenges dealing with your new self. For the areas you need support with, try to find many resources. Very importantly, make use of all the resources that are at hand. First, I've been blessed with an amazing family who were there through it all. As explained, the accident happened in Cleveland Ohio, my mom and one of my sisters stayed in Cleveland with me for almost one year while I was receiving care. My dad, who at that time was the only source of income for my immigrant family, used to drive almost six‑hours every Friday after work, and had to go back Sunday late afternoon for the entire time. My family's presence and support for me through the painful moments is part of why I'm here sharing my story and experience. Family support is critical.

Also be sure to listen to and make use of all the resources at hand. I had a number of amazing healthcare professionals. If I start naming them and their title, it would take the whole day. But of all of them, I have to talk about Judson Richardson who was and still is an incredible support and just an amazing human being. Judson is a social worker at the national rehabilitation hospital of MedStar Washington hospital center. Because my insurance didn't allow for regular psychologist visits, Judson stepped in while I was gaining physical, occupational and speech therapies. He was the one who encouraged me. He also made me believe in myself and as a result I believed in God even more. He's the one who first made me feel like all my dreams are possible. I shared with him that I want to study health policy, that I was inspired by my journey navigating America's healthcare system which had some very unpleasant moments. Yet, there were other healthcare providers like Judson who had worked very hard to deliver superb care in some facilities. I'm so grateful to him and others like him.

Here at RespectAbility, I have learned so much. It is my first experience working with a disability advocacy organization. I've gained such a valuable experience, such as, I'm learning what an advocacy group needs to do when raising an issue at every governmental level whether it be county, state or federal. I'm learning how to be sensitive to political and ideological differences so they don’t become a roadblock in advancing the issue’s agenda. I'm learning how to raise as issue a group may be facing putting forth policy solutions to the problems or challenges. I'm refining my research skills analyzing the aspects and areas. I'm refining my communication skills. I learning to confidently express my ideas, my story and my perspectives. Speaking here today is a prime example of these opportunities. With thanks to RespectAbility, I especially want to say thank you to Jennifer, Philip and Debbie. So to close, I want to say ‑‑ I hope my story has given you hope and renewed appreciation for life. I am here today sharing my story and life lessons with you because of my belief in God, my devoted family, my strong will, my focus on gratitude, people like Judson at NRH who helped me realize that my dreams can become my reality, and RespectAbility’s belief in me. Thank you very much, and I hope you enjoy the rest of the program. Thank you.

[Applause]

Nicole: Well said. Wow. Thank you so much for sharing your powerful story, Laka. You have travelled a challenging road as a woman of color, an immigrant with an acquired disability. I believe Judson of the national rehabilitation hospital who you mentioned is here with us today.

Debbie: Judson, stand up, please.

Nicole: Thank you for being a role model. Don't be shy!

[Applause]

Lead on! Laka we wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors where you will surely make a difference for the better, like medically under served population designation is one thing we would love to see.

Last but not least, our final panelist is Matan Koch, RespectAbility's special advisor and the second lawyer on this panel. After all, it wouldn't be a DC event if lawyers weren't over represented.

[Laughter]

Matan take it away, lead on!

Matan: Let's see if we can get me, lined up with the mic. How are are we doing? Great.

So it's interesting, I was introduced as a lawyer, I'm also senior advisor at RespectAbility, but, my goal today is not to tell my self advocacy story through my legal career, if people are interested in that you can look it up. You can read about it. You can watch videos on YouTube. We got such a wonderful sense of that already. What I wanted to share was a different self advocacy story in my life, the one that brought me to where I am today. I don't actually work for RespectAbility as a lawyer, I mean, occasionally I pitch in. But mostly I am here helping to boost and build our faith‑based inclusion work, including a Jewish Leadership Program that we are putting together in Los Angeles. And I want to talk a little bit about why, for me, that's the culmination of a different self advocacy experience. So I went to law school because that is what they told young articulate people with significant physical disability to do for a career when you were growing up in the 90s. I've had a decent run of it because of that. But I come from a family of Jewish professionals. My father was a rabbi, my mother a Jewish educator, my sister's a rabbi, most of my friends, oddly enough, are rabbis, or somehow otherwise attached to that world. My undergraduate degree is in theology, because you know, you can get an undergrad degree in just about anything if your plan is to go to law school.

[Laughter]

So I decided to make the most out of what one would do with a Yale education. And so I studied theology. And so for lots of years I was a lawyer. And I did disability policy, but I also always led in my faith community. From the earliest days I was included in Jewish environments when others would not yet have been because of who my family was. Nowadays, Jewish summer camps do so much work for people with disabilities. In the 80s it was unheard of. In the 80s, you know, that wasn't yet something that was done. We were just beginning to pioneer the idea of, you know, segregated camps for kids with disabilities, let alone integrating the fully inclusive ones. But, I came from a prominent camp family. So I wasn't so much a kid in a wheelchair as I was Matan the kid that was going to go to camp. So I went to camp and as a rabbi's kid, I learned all the great religious things that rabbi's kids do. I naturally ascended to, you know, Hillel boards in college and the boards of Jewish nonprofits. And I started to notice that within the Jewish world, and, you know, the broader faith‑based world, we were doing better and better at serving people with disabilities. But there were very few models of folks like me who were folks with disabilities actually serving their religious communities. That was in fact not so much the model. So how much my excitement when over the five years that I decided to be in private practice, the Jewish world suddenly started to get excited about including people with disabilities and I was there to do the work? And that was great. And I started to design materials. But how much more exciting when in January of this year, the phone calls, and it's my old friend Jennifer Lazslo Mizrahi, saying that RespectAbility wants to really take a jump into this space, into really helping bring a leadership pipeline. My individual leader project will be focused in the Jewish community, but certainly we will learn lessons that are applicable to all faith communities. We wanted to really go forward and build that pipeline. So it has been my great pleasure over the last six months to begin laying the groundwork so that, you know, in the near term, there might be a few folks that see me leading a program like this and realize that they can. In the longer term, the first people that come out of these programs will be provided that beacon of example, not just the expertise that shows, yes, people with disabilities have a place in our faith community, but this idea - just like when I was a young professional, people were beginning to warm to the idea of a person with a disability could be my rabbi, sorry my lawyer, I jumped the gun.

[Laughter]

Now they can begin to warm to the idea that they can be my minister, be my rabbi, they can be my deacon, or my reverend or priest. The motion will in fact be that anyone - within the religious community we often talk about a "call", a call to serve. So the notion that I'll hoping will be the ultimate benefit is whether you're called to serve as a layperson, whether you're called to serve in a political capacity, whether you're called to serve as a volunteer or leader in your community, that will spend the next phase of my own self advocacy journey working with RespectAbility helping to find the ways that people will answer that call.

[Applause]

Nicole: Well said Matan. What a powerful story to conclude our panel. You were quite motivational. RespectAbility is very fortunate to have you on its team. Next do we have any questions from the audience, ask away.

Vera: Hi, my name is Vera. I work for the Easterseals disability staffing network. I have a question for the entire panel. One of the themes that I heard a lot that people were addressing were the idea of self determination and focusing more on your abilities and not using disability as an excuse to be able to achieve your goals. But at the same time, we talk a lot about being a self advocate and being able to request the accommodations and the supports that you need in order to be successful. And I know myself as being a person with a disability, as well as the people that I interact with, that we are uncharacteristically resilient and we fight through whatever barriers come our way, but at the same time there are access needs that need to be addressed. So I'm just kind of wondering, and I would love to hear from our panel of self advocates how they reconcile that self determination with the need for accommodation?

Matan: That question troubled me greatly ‑‑ my microphone is not working. That question actually is one that I wrestled a lot with in my life. And until I had the epitome, I'm going to borrow what Ila said so well in her talk, is that we all have things with which we struggle. We all have barriers and needs. Nobody actually gets through life alone and without the help of other people. So the way I look at it is, its not that people with disabilities are particularly needy, or particularly require things in a way that others don't. It's that we all have needs, and part of being a successful adult is the ability to advocate for them in whatever way works for us and ask for those unapologetically.

Debbie: Another question?

Angelica: Hello. I'm Angelica. This question is more towards Laka, but also to the panel. Before I say my question, I just want to tell you Laka, like, I know that our Fellowship cohort isn't end yet, but I just want to say thank you for being my mentor, you're like amazing. And thank you for being my like, work mom.

[Laughter]

Like, you're literally ‑‑ and especially as a strong woman of color, I look up to you. So thank you for sharing your story.

[Applause]

And as such, so my question to you is, how can we craft our stories to empower our communities and how can we lead just like you're doing right now?

Laka: That's a very hard question, but I think you have to start with being real with yourself. That's where it all starts. If you are real then you can inspire your own story. That's my short answer.

Calvin: Hey. Calvin Harris, board member with RespectAbility. I did have a question in regards to - I guess, reframing the question asked earlier about privilege. Like, I know a lot of times with regards to self determination, not everyone can afford tutors, not everyone can afford various access. So in sort of promoting the hard work and determination that you've all just truly gone through to achieve a lot of the things that you've done, and promoting and telling your story, how do you, sort of, navigate between lines of privilege and self determination as discussed?

Ila: I'll go first. I am grateful everyday for what I can do and recognize that I'm incredibly fortunate that my parents made enough money to find me the best surgeons to do whatever they did, even though the surgery they did on me as a kid was experimental, so everything that could have gone wrong went wrong, to the point that I used to dream about hanging my surgeon from the Brooklyn bridge and beating him with a bat.

[Laughter]

That's kind of what helped me sleep at night as weird as that is. But, look, to say I'm grateful is such an understatement. Everyday, I know that if it took five more minutes for my mother to have gotten to the hospital, instead of being able to walk and be ambulatory by myself, not only would I potentially be in a wheelchair, but I might not even be here. My parents told me my own story from a very early age. If it's not a parent, then have it be a mentor, have it be a friend. Have it be somebody - everybody needs somebody to believe in them. And whoever that is, that person has to just push. Because if you don't push, you're never going to know what you're able to do. Surgeons would say, oh, if you don't do this operation you're not going to walk. Okay, so we go do the operation. Oh you're not going the walk for a year. My dad would look at me and say, "what do you say we do it in three months?" I would be black and blue trying to get up and walk in three months, but because he and I made a deal, generally, I was weeble-wobbling my way in three months. Everybody has to pick their own spot. The purpose of these kinds of panels and everything that RespectAbility is trying to do is to highlight the beauty of the human spirit, and the fact that everybody can do things, but you have to be able to see through all the nonsense. And regardless of ‑ you can pass all the laws you want. But there is bias, there is conscious bias, there is unconscious bias. And if people with disabilities don't take ownership of their own future, we're never going to get to where we all need to be.

Debbie: Thank you.

Nicole: Amen.

Debbie: Evelyn, do you want to also answer that?

Evelyn: I think privilege is a loaded world in every case. Both of my parents are self made, they both went to law school while working full‑time jobs. So for four years my dad was going the law school, another four years my mom was going to law school. And so, when I say I'm a self advocate, I'm self advocate because I got their confidence, you know. I've seen people push and pull to both ends of the earth to make it to a ballgame but also study, and also cook, and also getting up for work at 5:00 a.m. the next morning. So I think that kind of belief in seeing someone live that life, you can pull from that. You don't have to directly pull from a monetary source, or someone - a direct example of your exact disability. You can see someone who has aspired to be something, and that will give you the confidence to eventually be the kind of self advocate you need. Self advocate is a misnomer, I got that from someone. I got that from somewhere.

Matan: I just want to add that the other element of recognizing one's extreme privilege, and I also had extreme privilege, is, you sort of have to look at the question once you've made it a bit, and how do I extend those same opportunities and supports to those who did not have the privilege that I did? How can I try to make it so that what I enjoyed because of my privilege is available to those that did not have the privilege that I did to start out with? And I see that as a paramount responsibility of recognizing the privilege that I had.

Debbie: Thank you.

Audience Member: I have a question. Thank you all so much, this panel is great. I wanted to know - you all are talking about self advocacy and being able to - actually standing up and speaking out. One the things that you mentioned earlier was the aspect of sometimes how we would ‑ the word that you used was "self disclose" - you wouldn't self disclose. So what are certain things now - that you all are doing now that you're being way more vocal about it. What are some of those things that you all are doing? How can caretakers and CNAs support this process in that?

Ila: I wear this on my head!

[Laughter]

Nicole: I guess because I'm not exactly super visible with my hearing loss, its one of those things that was extremely personal to me for a while. Mostly because I would have to actually disclose. You can see certain things about me. You can see I'm black woman. You can see certain things about me. But you didn't see that. So I guess, once I understood that it was just as much a part of me as the kind of person I am, and what makes me, then I realized that there was no need to be ashamed. Because I'm not ashamed of the person I am. So why would I be ashamed of part of the person I am.

Ila: I'll just make one other quick comment. So, I helped launch an Ability Network at Blackrock that has 400 people globally, U.S., Europe, Asia PAC. We started a buddy list in the firm, so if you have CP or you want to know something about CP, call Ila Eckhoff. And there's 50 to 100 of us that have put their names on the buddy list. Whatever they want to disclose, that's out there. We now have a Employee Opinion Survey, so we're now looking to get some numbers and metrics around it. And our second year will be September, but according to our HR department, there are 3 times as many people who have disclosed having a disability in the past year. So from when we launched to a year later, it stayed at about 2% and now three times as many people have disclosed in the past year than prior. So, all of this is incremental. But we have to keep plugging a little at a time. And those of us that are out there that feel comfortable have to speak up, to Evelyn's point, for all of those who are not yet comfortable enough to do it.

Candace: I had a question, this is Candace Cable over here. Over here. Thank you all for this panel. Because advocacy is something I think that we talk about a lot. And sometimes it needs to be demystified. I would like to know from each of you just one thing. How do you deal with the emotional and physical labor that it takes to be an advocate - as self care? Like, what kind of self care do you do for yourself so that you can continue on with the work that you do?

Ila: Well, so I actually wrote ‑ I published this on Thrive Global, there was a meditation group within Blackrock, but that meets for like 20 minutes, 3 times a week, and I don't have time for that most of the time. So I wrote my own 1‑minute meditation. What are the five things in life that I'm most grateful for? It's really easy for me. Great kids, great apartment, great job, life is good, and in this moment nothing can hurt me. So when I feel like I'm just going to explode lots of different ways, I close my eye, take a deep breath, I say those five things. In order to get to that point, I put post‑its with five things all over my apartment, all over my decks, all over my office until I got comfortable doing it. But meditation, for me, has been something that is incredibly powerful. And I dare anybody to tell me they don't have one minute to get their act together.

Evelyn: I guess for me, I take joy in the silence sometimes. It takes a lot for me to understand and hear. I do elaborate lip reading. It's kind of like a giant Mad-Lib, where I fit in words that kind of sound with context- it's a lot of work for me sometimes. So sometimes, just being a content consumer is easier, and just taking that time for myself is a break.

Laka: For me, its prayer, and having a silent moment by yourself. Time with myself and prayer.

Matan: So for me, it's a little bit about living in the moment. What do I mean by that? There's always going to be more work to do. There's always going to be the next challenge. Sometimes it's a challenge of advocacy in the professional level, often it's a challenge on the personal level. This week's great PCA team is next week's PCA team that's falling apart. What I've learned to do from a self care perspective is to be able to sit back occasionally, and I find the Jewish Sabbath to be a great tool for this, to say, you know what, but right now things are okay. Right now, in this hour, in this moment, I can pause for a minute and just enjoy my life. What will be will be, and there will be more challenges, and there will be more struggle. Because let's face it, that's life, right. That is what it is to exist. But what I wasn't so good at for the first, what am I, 37 - for the first 31, 32 years or so, was learning to recognize and enjoy those moments when you could actually take a break and be okay.

Nelle: I’m Nelle Richardson. Well, you guys are just absolutely great. I myself have an invisible disability. And it's really challenging sometimes when you are transparent. So my question to - you guys have been absolutely great. So my question to you is, you know, after you have been transparent, and you have been able to open up and so forth, has someone just been so negative that you kind of regretted opening up and being transparent. If so, how did you handle it? What are some of the positive answers you have given to really just motivate yourselves again?

Matan: I grew up in some sense with a very visible disability, I'm a wheelchair user, that's hard to miss when I roll in the room. But otherwise, sort of keeping a lot of the details of my physical reality a secret because they were oh, there we go, because they were ‑‑ might be off putting. Certainly if something came up with my care, I didn't share it. And I I fought for a long time to be comfortable with it. And the process of becoming comfortable were so many people giving me positive narratives. There were advocates, younger than I am, who grew up in a different world and could show us directionally where the attitudes I grew up with were not the right ones. So now when I disclose a disability reality and I get a negative reaction, which is often, you know, not unlike the attitudes that I internalized as a young person at an earlier time, I meditate, but first of all to the person I just say some polite non‑thing, I was in politics and I can answer without answering. But to myself, who was really the person that needs a way to reconcile the ugliness and pain of the reaction. I run through all of the positive tropes that the next generation taught me about how to be comfortable and in touch with who you are, who I am and remind myself that the internalized attitude of the person that made me perhaps not feel so great is no longer mine and I don't have to take it back in.

Nicole: Well said!

Ila: I think it depends on the time and age that you're at, right. So what I would have done in my 20s and 30s would have probably been pretty more aggressive and not as pleasant as what I would do today. Right? So at this point, I'm trying to be very focused in this space and I don't want to take in a bunch of negative nonsense. So if somebody's just being negative and I think they're too ignorant, it's not worth my time, I'll just walk away. I wouldn't even respond, I'll just walk. If I thought the comment that was being made was totally innocent, and maybe they just don't know any better - somebody said to me in the office the other day that I didn't realize that when you go out on maternity leave that that's short‑term disability. So I used to start talks with, congratulations, any women in the room, if you've had a child welcome to the family, that's short‑term disability, right.

[Laughter]

So, that kind of thing is innocent, and easy to fix. But if it's ignorant, I just don't really want that negative energy. For the most part I'll generally walk away.

Evelyn: I guess maybe the best thing about hearing loss is I don't hear a lot of the negative comments.

[Laughter and Applause]

Nicole: Good one!

Evelyn: So it's really easy to let those things roll off my shoulders what you don't know doesn't hurt you. But when people respond with kind of like, oh, what does that mean? Well, its easy enough to explain to them. And I want them to have some understanding. It's more than likely that they've met someone, or they know someone, and it's actually surprising how often it comes up that they know someone else who has hearing loss. And so I know that I'm just educating people, and that's fine.

Nicole: Well. Well said everyone. That concludes our panel.