Vivian: Good morning. I'm Vivian Bass, and it is truly an honor and privilege to serve on this RespectAbility's Board along with Vincenzo Piscopo, here today from Atlanta, Georgia. Vincenzo has worked at the Coca-Cola company for the past 23 years in numerous leadership capacities including finance, IT, and innovation.

He is currently the company's community and stakeholder relations director for which he manages correlations pertaining to disability, veterans and Hispanic organizations as well as the United Way and Hands On Atlanta and also the volunteerism for the entire company.

Vincenzo is the President and founding member of disability ERG for the Coca-Cola company, a corporate thought leader for disability insights which advocates for a winning and inclusive culture. This innovative entity ensures that inclusion is prioritized, that diversity is respected, both inside and outside the company, and that the potential of all employees across all abilities are respected in a mutually beneficial manner.

Additionally, Vincenzo is the founder of Wheels of Happiness Foundation where he shares his vast expertise to help persons with motor disabilities in disadvantaged areas of the world. To date, the Wheels of Happiness Foundation has made a dynamic impact on the lives of hundreds of individuals Uganda, Kenya, Columbia and Venezuela among others. Originally providing basic medical supplies and now also providing wheelchairs, scholarships and financial aid for surgeries and physical therapy.

As Coca-Cola's 2005 slogan said "make it real" Vincenzo is here to make it real with us during his most exciting keynote address entitled "disability, creativity and purpose." Please join me in proudly extending a warm welcome to our most esteemed keynote speaker and my Board colleague, Vincenzo.

[Applause]

Vincenzo: Was she talking about me?

[Laughter]

Welcome everybody. it's a real pleasure for me to be here. Before I start though, there's two things I want to get off my chest. The first one is, I'm Italian, so I was born in Venezuela, my parents are Italian, because of that I have a very strong accent and I speak very fast. So, I will ask everybody to please give a round of applause to our captioner, because I don't know how the heck she's going to do it.

[Laughter]

And second, poor, Jennifer, I know she's trying hard with me but not succeeding. She gave me some hints when you come to Congress and this building you to wear a tie, I forgot last time. This time she did it again very subtly. But I know it was directed to me, guess what? I forgot my tie. I'm allergic to ties. I'm sorry Jennifer.

I have been injured since 2010. So in 2010 I used to be able bodied and one day I woke up to get ready for work, get breakfast for all my kid, I got this devastating pain in my back, herniated disk popped. Pressed on my spinal cord and I became paralyzed.

Since then, I have joined this amazing community of people with disabilities. And it has been a fascinating journey. It has been a fascinating journey that has taught me so many incredible things. I love teaching that I'm very proud to have of course, I wish that those learnings came better in online class more than having a spinal cord injury. But nevertheless, that was a joke by the way.

[Laughter]

But there were learnings. There were a couple of learnings that I want to share with you guys. The first one is that I have met -- those learnings have shaped who I am right now and what I'm doing right now in my personal life, and in my private life or in my business. And the first one is that I have met the most incredible individuals in the community of people with disabilities.

And people that have shown me what the true meaning of resilience is, what the true meaning of perseverance is. I mean, people when they have a goal, they don't stop until they attain it. People that no matter how many times they have been told no by society, because of the stigma, and by the world that is not made for people with disabilities, regardless of that, they fought all of those barriers to attain their goals and to be successful.

And you know, to really be able to live in a world that was not created for us requires a lot of work, a lot of perseverance, a lot of resilience, and also it makes people with disabilities develop -- it actually triggers that creativity muscle. Why? Because we are constantly solving problems. When you're navigating a world that was not meant for you, you are constantly looking for ways around. If I cannot go up there, but I need to go up there, and I will go up there, how many ways can I do it?

And we find a way. We are constantly finding ways to get things accomplished. And what that does is, it actually helps us to develop our creativity muscles. So folks, the folks that I have met are folks that are amazing, that they're brilliance, the perseverance, the resilience, the creativity, the intelligence is just out of this world. I'm so proud of having the opportunity to meet them.

And I'm not talking about people like me. I'm the black dog of the disability world, I'm talking about people like Ollie, and like his kids, Leo, Nick and Steven. I’m talking about people like Janet, like Ila, like Matan, that make me feel so humble, so proud of being a part of this community.

The other thing that disability has taught me is that what it has done is to unleash the power of me, the power of what I can do, and the power of what I'm able to do. Unleash the power of me. I'm very humble, right, I'm shy to an extent. So I don't brag a lot about me. But I'm going to brag. I'm going the brag right now but believe me, not because I'm braggadocious, but, because I'm trying to make a point, right. So, you know, when I got my disability, something happened to me. Something happened that actually forced me to discover what my purpose in life was. And once I discovered that purpose in life, it actually energized me. It energized me in a way that allowed me to do many things that I never thought that I was able to do.

And I'm going to start with a simple thing. I'm playing wheelchair tennis now. It may seem simple for you guys but believe me because it's not. Wheelchair tennis is very difficult because I suck at sports! I've always sucked in sports. Just a quick story. When I was little when I was 10, I'm the only boy of 3, my two sisters and myself. My daddy was so excited when he had his little boy, oh my God - my little boy I'll play soccer with him. He put me in the Italian club in the team. I was playing defense. And every time the ball would come to me I would move

to let it go. Because was so scared of the ball.

[Laughter]

That's the extent of how much I suck in sports. But when I became disabled I said, no, I'm going to play tennis, I'm show l going to show the world that I don't suck that much. The reality is, I still suck in tennis, but I'm playing tennis. And I'm doing well.

You know, I work for Coca-Cola in a very high demanding job. Before my injury, I was traveling around the world. And when I got back after my injury, four months after my injury, I started working. And my manager was super nice. He wasn't asking me to do anything that I was uncomfortable with. But one of my co-workers got to me and she said, hey, I have a problem. I need to go to Dubai, I have a project in Dubai, but unfortunately I'm not going to be able to go. Do you think you can do that project for me? Oh my God. You said what? You said where? Dubai? Yes! I can do that! I will do that! Those were the first words that came out of my mouth. I don't know what I was thinking. But I said yes. And I did it! I went to Dubai four months after my injury, I got on a plane, 15 hours in an airplane. I did it. After I said if can I do Dubai, can I do anything. It actually triggered that my God, the power of the human being, it's amazing.

And we are constantly underestimated and we're constantly under utilized. So after that, I went to Japan, I went to Kenya, I went to China, I went to South America, I haven't stopped traveling every single week I travel. And I accomplish things. I founded the Wheels of Happiness foundation, you know, a foundation that actually helps people around the world to help people with motor disabilities. And I'm impressed of how much we have accomplished there. Are many people that live with disabilities that thank to the Wheels of Happiness foundation today are living life with dignity.

[Applause]

So I'm not doing that to brag, though, believe me. I'll tell you, the point is coming, the punchline is coming, be attentive.

[Laughter]

But this journey has also brought a lot of -- has been also very funny. It has brought a lot of funny experiences to me. And at least I think that they're funny. The first one is, you know, my restaurant stories. You know, I'll give you one that happened last week. Last week my wife and I celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary I took my wife to Chicago to watch Hamilton. Before we went to the play we went out to dinner, and before we got to the place the waitress asked my wife where I needed to be seated. She didn't ask me, she asked my wife, I'm sorry, where do we need to sit him?

And when we were ordering, they were asking me wife, what does he your husband want to eat? That's funny, isn't it? And then you know, last March, I took my family to a vacation and we went to this paradise island in Venezuela, a beautiful island. When we got back here in the states I was on the line of immigration, and the immigration officer asked my wife, what do you do for work? She didn't ask me.

And then she looks at my kids, you guys must be very proud of your mom. Right. And you see where I'm coming with all of this, right? And finally the most funny story of this was in one of my -- stories was one of my business trip to Canada. I was in Canada we had a long day. And I was wearing a suit there. I was wearing a suit and a tie, believe it or not.

[Laughter]

And, so my coworker and I, we went out for dinner. We had this very nice dinner, then after dinner we decided to go back to the hotel. I didn't want to take a taxi, I hate taking taxis, it's a pain in the neck. I said don't worry you go to the hotel I'll roll to my hotel it's only a few blocks. I need to digest that wonderful dinner that we just had. I got to a point, there was a big curb, and remember I suck in sport, so my wheelchair skills are terrible. It was a big curb, I couldn't manage it. There was a couple of ladies coming, I said do you mind giving me a push through the curb so I can get over there. Yeah, yeah, absolutely, very nice ladies. Once they did that, then the ladies asked me, sir, we just had dinner, and we have these leftovers. Would you like to have it?

[Groans]

So, that is the problem with stigmas. And that is the problem with labels. No matter how much the people with disability community has accomplished, can accomplish when given the opportunities, we're still seen as less than others. We're still seen as potential homeless people regardless of everything that we have accomplished. That is why I'm extremely proud of the work that RespectAbility does. That's why when Jennifer asked me to join this organization I said, absolutely. Because stigmas are creating problems for the people with disabilities. What stigmas do is actually stops brilliance to take effect. It stops people that could be Ollie, that could be Matan, that could be Ila, not be Ollie, not be Matan, not be Ila because not all of them are you know, not all of them have been discovered. Right?

So that's a problem with stigma. And that's why we have to fight them. And that is why I'm so proud of RespectAbility because that's what we do. Of course I have to put my ad and use my Coca-Cola hat. I'm also very proud of the Coca-Cola company, besides allowing me to come here and paying for my ticket and all of that.

[Laughter]

But also because as you guys see on your tables, there are some Diet Coke cans that have no labels. And that's part of a campaign you know, take one of those cans home and just save it. Because it's only a limited production. We only produced so many of them. And that's it. You guys are very fortunate to be one of the ones getting those cans. We removed the labels of the Diet Coke can to have a conversation about labels. I want to show you a video. If you can run the first video about this campaign.

[VIDEO]

Thank you. And I tell you the truth, I hate labels. But some labels are, you know, you're proud to have them. And if people with disabilities should deserve a label, it should be Kick Ass -- because people with disability kick ass, many people with disabilities kick ass, and if they don't, it's because they have not been given the opportunity to kick ass, and that's the only label that we deserve.

[Applause]

So we should push the government. We should push corporations. We should work all together to actually help remove those labels. You know, the Coca-Cola company has a rich history of diversity and inclusion. It’s a journey, believe me. And I work for that company. And I'm proud of the work that we do there. But there is still a lot of work to do. And we cannot lower our guard. So I'm constantly in Coca-Cola with my eyes wide open about making sure that we continue and we become loyal to that agenda of diversity and inclusion. All of us have to.

We constantly have to have our guard up. So Coca-Cola, basically what they did with this campaign is set out to create a multi-year purpose-driven platform that celebrates the brand Ethos of people on unapologetically living the lives they choose. This new platform inspired the brand to remove its label from a select run of cans. So you guys have one of that very select number of cans.

And because labels today are tricky as they can mean different things to different people. And there is no one-size-fits-all perspective. There are those who fight for and embrace labels as a means of connectivity, self-expression and even protection.

And there are others who just reject the divisive labels that are imposed upon them by others. While there may not be a universal truth about each label, it's a universal topic that gets everyone thinking and talking. And with more open dialogue and discussion can come better understanding of others.

So that's where we are trying to do with the Unlabeled Campaign to actually open it up for conversations, talk about labels, talk about the labels what we're proud of and making us comfortable talking about the labels so we know what the labels that are causing problems

so that we know what are the labels that we should work to remove.

So before I finish, I want to show the next video.

[VIDEO]

So we partnered with different organizations in the African American community, the LGBT community, the disability community to develop these video, this is a platform that we hope will continue. Coca-Cola has pledged to have this campaign in several parts of the country. It's actually -- we have high profile real estate in New York City talking about this campaign so we can have that conversation and feature those brave people, those brave voices and faces who are living their lives with unbridled confidence. And my pledge is that I will take every opportunity to teach the world that we deserve this world as much as everybody else. That's my pledge.

And my second pledge is that I will peel the label of people to see what is really inside and based on that act, not about the label. So my question to you is, what is your pledge?

Thank you.

[Applause]

So with that, I want to allow you guys to ask any questions.

Audience Member: Can you talk about the -- I'm Gail Brown -- can you talk about the couple of months after your injury. I'd like to hear two things. One is your relationship with the disability community, how you became to think of yourself positively and second your relationship with Coca-Cola, how your return to work went.

Vincenzo: My relationship with the disability community started when I was doing my rehab. One of my doctors was guy that has paraplegia, he's an amazing doctor. And so that's when I started interacting. Obviously when I was at Shepherd, everybody there had a injury and a disability. So I started meeting a lot of amazing people. And I started becoming curious about that. And when I started being out in the community, funny enough, this guy that is -- he run as non-profit that does sports with kids with disabilities he saw me in a concert. And he asked me to be a coach.

[Laughter]

I told him, are you kidding me? But I was, I became a coach for those kids. And it was amazing. Poor kids.

[Laughter]

And then the other thing that happened was that I met a priest that had a disability, he's from Uganda, when he got his injury in Uganda, he didn’t get any rehab. He spent a whole year in bed because they didn't teach him how to manage his bladder, bowels, and all that so he spent a while year in bed. And through the work of some Foundation, he came to Shepherd. And at Shepherd, in three months, they got him up and going. He returned to Uganda, he's serving his community. He made me realize that oh man, a lot of people with disabilities need a little bit of a push, they need opportunities and they can change the world.

And that's how I started my non-profit. That's how I started becoming more of an advocate. Coke was amazing. I have to say. Coke when I came back to Coke, what really helped me at Coke was that they knew me as an able-bodied. And they knew me as a disabled body. But they also realized that what made me an amazing -- a great employee was still intact. So, I mean, so basically what they did, they just gave me all the tools that I needed to strive, and there were not that many things that they needed to do to allow me to strive. Because believe it or not people with disabilities don't need that much. They need the opportunity. And the nice thing with that, that created a lot of awareness in the job, and lead me to this position right now and allowed me to advocate for any community.

[Applause]

Vivian: Vincenzo thank you for your wonderful talk.

Vincenzo: There are a couple more questions can we take them?

Debbie: We're tight on time, one. One question. Sorry.

Vincenzo: Maybe the woman there who's --

Debbie: Vincenzo surely will be available for other people to ask you questions later in the day.

Audience Member: Hi. Hello, my name is Miya Miller. I'm from Able2 in nonprofit, it's in Atlanta, Georgia, I came up yesterday, this is great. So how has been the response in finding particularly people with disabilities at Coke so, originally you spoke about how this was a situation in which you -- you were brought into. This is a disability that you once did not have and now you have it. My question is, how has it been with -- to me -- okay. Let’s put this down and get real.

[Laughter]

So my question is, to me when it comes to people with disabilities with Able2 in nonprofit, we focus on artists with disability. Our biggest issue is finding people who are interested if presenting themselves on stage as performing artists. As you spoke about earlier there's a stigma behind this whole situation and people not necessarily wanting to come forward. With your individual nonprofit, Coke has DisABLE which is a great organization that I've heard about. What has it been in terms of the response of people being able to come forward and speak about disabilities whether visible or invisible?

Vincenzo: So it is -- sorry that's my timer,

[Laughter, timer going off]

We're a little bit off, the two of us. So it's a journey. You know, it's a journey. We're working on that. You know, I still say I we still have a very low self-identification rate. But we have plans for that. As I said before, the community of people with disabilities, and I think that was Jennifer that said it, actually it was Ollie who said it. We have to have ownership, right. So that's why I'm working hard with the president of the disability ERG. So I'm working with the Disability ERG to actually make sure that we elevate that we give more opportunities for people with disabilities to come to Coke, to talk to our employees, the talk to our managers, to our senior leaders to allow -- to bring that awareness of the value that people with disabilities bring.

But it is a journey. And we're not there yet. But I think the first step is to acknowledge it and not lose sight of that as a goal. Because at the end of the day, I'm a stockholder of the Coca-Cola company, and I know the more that we include people with disabilities, and of all abilities, of all minorities, we all win. And I, as a stockholder win as well.

[Applause]

Vivian: Thank you Vincenzo for your wonderfully creative and purposeful keynote and an amazing campaign. I have my Diet Coke right here. It was quite enlightening and a thought-provoking presentation. Let's give Vincenzo one more round of applause.

[Applause]

Thank you.