>> Janet: Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you so much for joining us this afternoon. My name is Janet LaBreck and I serve on the Board of Directors for RespectAbility, which is a nonprofit organization fighting stigmas and advancing opportunity so that people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of community. As the first African-American to serve as the Commissioner for the Rehabilitation Services Administration within the U.S. Department of Education under President Barack Obama, and as a person with 4 out of 6 siblings who are legally blind, I am extremely sensitive to the importance of authentic representation and disability inclusion in the entertainment industry, as well as in our nation's workforce. Previously, I served as a commissioner for the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind and most recently, I co-founded Synergy Consulting Partners.

So thank you, again, for taking the time to join us for this panel discussion. We appreciate your willingness to engage in critical conversation that can lead to inspiring change. Before we actually get started, just a few quick notes regarding communication access. If you would like to view the ASL interpreter in a larger screen, we invite to you pin her video which will spotlight her video throughout this entire panel. In addition, we also have live-captioning available, and that's available in the Zoom app by clicking on the ‘CC’ or via web. My colleague, Lauren, has posted that link in the chat box. We'll also be taking questions from you during the panel, so please feel free to add your questions to the chat box to do so.

Sometimes in life, adversity and barriers become a pathway to opportunity. The protests taking place across America have really illuminated the impact of racism as well as the impact of structural, systematic exclusion. This is important to RespectAbility as it is an opportunity for us to use this moment as individuals and as collective community, to understand the pain and the challenges of Black Americans and work together on fostering an environment of empathy and understanding. RespectAbility is absolutely committed to supporting our partners who are committed to dismantling these systems that are complicit with structural racism and to ensure that every citizen has the opportunity to move the nation forward and live out their true potential. Today's panel offers the opportunity to highlight the importance of authentic representation of marginalized populations on screen: equally important is what people view on screen and how those authentic representations influence how they act in real life. Therefore, this is your opportunity to learn from Black individuals with disabilities who are working to change this perception in the entertainment industry.
We have some amazing, accomplished panelists joining us today, and we’re going to start

with our first panelist who is James Ian. James, you're an actor, singer, songwriter, writer and speaker as well as a two-time Georgetown University alumni, living with two rare diseases -spinal muscular atrophy type 3 and Parsonage-Turner Syndrome. You are a passionate advocate for Black people in the entertainment industry. Did you enter the entertainment industry because you saw this as an avenue for activism, or did you become a disability advocate because you wanted to break into the entertainment industry?

>> James: Well, first of all, thank you for having me, and to answer that question, being an entertainer and a storyteller – which is really what I do - whether that’s through acting, music, writing – that’s always been in my blood. If I'm not telling stories in that way, I don't feel like my true self. I actually started acting when I was around 8 years old. I was on a BET series, I was a regular, I some did commercials. This was actually before I knew I had any disability. And so I was in the entertainment industry from a young age. And so I didn't become an activist with that route, but later on in life, I did realize that the entertainment industry was an avenue for activism - actually when I was in law school and I figured out I could do some good through entertainment, and arriving at that realization required me to go through a lot of life experiences. Not only do I have a disability, I'm a black man in America: I have experienced tons of racism, more than I can remember. I have experienced ableism, you know, just crappy treatment because of my disability and luckily for me, I did go to really good schools for undergrad and law school and in those schools I got to actually study and learn a lot about racism and ableism. And what’s happening now - that's nothing new: this is all systemic racism that was put into place from the first day slaves were brought to America, and so trying to change that and make it equitable for Black people in America, it's a really, really complex task because we have to gut all of those racist systems and that's pretty much every system in America. So, I think about solutions to that constantly. I studied that, and so when I went to law school and I actually went to law school to change those systems: I wanted to fight for civil rights, disability rights, human rights and other social justice issues and I was able to do that. And so, as I was going through my studies, I realized that it was going to take a lot of work to kind of unpack that, and there was such a really complex task and so, practicing law, I knew I would have to figure out a specific practice area and I really couldn't spread myself out and tackle all those issues or go into all those areas, and so it was kind of daunting and I kind of was like, oh, man, I don't even know how I'm going to do this. But luckily, while I was in law school, I was playing a lot of music and I was in a band and the band was doing really well and we were playing a lot of gigs, and I actually had this epiphany - I was playing a show and I actually fell down onstage, because that's what happens with my disability, and I had my bandmates help me up, but when I fell down, the wild people in the crowd and they all went silent and were kind of staring at me. When so I got up, I had the mic in my hands and I told them about my disability and all that stuff, and they like - it was just a very cool, captive audience, and their jaws dropped and I got this huge standing ovation, and I had this light bulb go off and I was like, wow, here's actually how I can reach a large amount of people and talk about these issues and advocate for disability rights, civil rights, all that stuff. And so at that point, I was like, entertainment industry is the way to go. I feel very at home onstage, I connect with people well, and so I was like that’s what I'm supposed to do, I just felt it very, very strongly. And so from there, I was like, yep, this is it. So I don't really need to worry about spreading myself thin. I can tackle these issues and try to make an impact through entertainment.

>> Janet: And who were some of the people who inspired you, both in society in general or possibly were there folks within your school system during your journey, were there people that supported you, that you could look to, that you could talk to?

>> James: Yeah, there were. I actually didn't really have any role models that had disabilities actually, but I had role models that were Black. I mean, I had a law professor and he was probably at the time, mid-30s, really really successful, and I really looked up to him - I loved his teaching style, he had a lot of knowledge, he was just very personable – even in undergrad, I had one of the VPs of in undergrad, he was just a really great friend for me, he had me actually sing at a couple of really big events. His name is Dan Porterfield - really, really great guy. And so he really encouraged me to double down on the music and the entertainment stuff. So, I had that.
When I was in law school, Barack Obama was my man - love him. So, he was also a huge inspiration and like a goal to kind of model yourself after.

>> Janet: What would you like to see in the industry? How do you think that the industry should respond in terms of some of the changes that need to take place? What would you encourage them to do?

>> James: I would say hire more Black actors, for one, more Black writers because, rarely is someone just Black or whatever, or they just have a disability - we’re dynamic, we have lots of things that make us unique and so I think when you start to hire those folks that fall into those groups, then you can tell a wide range of stories because they're going to have other components that make up their personalities and they'll be able to speak to that, so we can get a very wide range of stories because, quite frankly, I'm tired of seeing the same stories, I'm bored with that, and I would love to see that. I want to see people like me on screen - a dude with a disability but I also am ambulatory. I'm a Black dude, like all that stuff - I feel like I'm pretty unique in a lot of ways, and so, to see that - see more Black women on TV, all that good stuff. So, hire the writers, the actors and then also pay them the same as white counterparts and within the industry, executives, studio execs, hire more Black people for those roles and promote them to positions that they deserve and then pay them the same way because it's all about power, really. Black people lack power and that's why we have systemic racism, because we don't create or control systems and racism - that's something that white people have access to. So once you having more Black people in positions of power, we can start to change the game. So we need to do that in the industry as well.

>> Janet: Great points. Thank you so much for sharing that and I commend you for the journey that you've been on as well and thanks for sharing your comments. We'll certainly come back to you as well. So I think at this point, we want to move to our next panelist, Lachi. Hi, Lachi. Good afternoon.

>> Lachi: Good afternoon.

>> Janet: Lachi, you talk oftentimes about being a daughter of immigrant, one who was teased and bullied when you were growing up and how you craved as a young person to have role models like you in the industry. Now you're an award-winning, Grammy-nominated recording artist with releases on Sony and UMG, a voting member of the Recording Academy and a member of the Grammy’s Advocacy Committee. As someone who is legally blind, you found a successful career and a voiceover actress, presenting music or keynotes at festivals and disability awareness across the country. You also are a speaker with RespectAbility's Women’s New York City Speakers Bureau. Can you please share with the audience, your childhood thirst for role models with disabilities, especially girls and women of color in the media, and how you've strived to be a role model yourself?

>> Lachi: Well, thank you so much for that introduction and I'm really glad to be here, so thank you for the invite, RespectAbility.

It's interesting that you say a thirst for role models because it's not that I really had a thirst for role models, it's more like - when I was a young girl, role models that looked like me and had my sort of situation were so few and far between that it didn't even really occur to me to strive to even seek out role models of that nature. When I was really young, I always wanted to write, act, sing and cultivate the talents that I knew I had; however, I was never really able to visualize that and I mean now, today, I'm a writer, I’m a published author, I’m an award-nominated singer, but at that time - there's a book I read called… what was it? “Seven Habits of Highly Successful People,” and the first habit is ‘begin with the end in mind,’ so it's basically, you will succeed if you’re able to visualize what you want. I had no ability to kind visualize myself on screen or to visualize myself in front of crowds and audiences because I didn't even have the wherewithal because there was nothing to see. But things did change - disability did start to get onto the airwaves – sadly not in the way that would’ve been very helpful to someone like me. A lot of the portrayal of persons with disabilities were just, just ways I couldn’t necessarily relate to - portrayed as either weak and need help or “I would rather die than live this way,” or soothesayers. I wish I could tell the future - I would win a lot of lotteries, but I definitely cannot. And so, I feel that - a great film, “Code of the Freaks,” just recently came out - people should check that out, it really gets deep into that.
So, it was tough to seek out role models, to be able to visualize the dream I wanted. I went through a phase of keeping my disability as invisible as I could to focus on struggling as a Black person and a female. And things did start happening for me. I got a lot of no’s: no, no, no, no, no. You talk too white, you are too dark, you're too big, you're too small, you're too this, you’re too that. But I did take the small yeses that I got and began to build and continued to build until I have what I have now. Now that I’m really starting to make a footprint, I'm very excited to be able to, for the past couple of years, really delve back into showcasing my disability and living in it. It's really powerful to be able to live your real self and to showcase who you are so that people don’t’ wonder - people can realize if there's not a whole you, and so to be able to showcase my whole self is very powerful to me. I feel like I shouldn't have have had to work a million times as hard because I didn't have any visualization. And so that's one of the reasons I strive to try to be a role model for others. Looking for someone who is a Black, female, person with a disability that proudly states it and is doing something successful and big and trying to grow and do something more successful and bigger.

>> Janet: Lachi, is there someone in the media or entertainment industry that you consider a role model for yourself or in your journey? Throughout your disability in general?

>> Lachi: One of the - well, I did have some Black female role models when I was growing up, and that was the saving grace - they were not outwardly disabled in any way, but I did look up to Lauryn Hill pretty heavily, and I looked up to Alicia Keys – I, myself, play the keys, so she was a huge influence, and I also mention Lauryn Hill because I was a lyric writer and she was a lyric writer, and she was a brown-skinned girls and so shoutout to my brown-skinned girls - and I really appreciated that, and so I did have some Black female role models, so I can't deny that, but the disability factor was few and far in between.

>> Janet: What do you think the industry can do to help with supporting individuals like yourself who are in the industry or for those individuals who may be joining us today to look into breaking into the entertainment industry - what would you suggest to help that along?
>> Lachi: Well, the main point has already been made - that we definitely need more people of color, people with disabilities, behind the scenes - writing the stories, making the scripts, hiring and firing, being the execs, and not only will they bring more of that diverse element onto their plays or onto shows, but they will generally just bring a diverse element. I mean – we see time after time organizations putting out just statements that are just so not right - and it's very obvious that they did not have someone of color or someone different advising them. And then they wonder what they did wrong. That’s number one. Number two, I think we need to continue to help drop some of these stigmas and one of the things I'm going to focus on is Black women. Black women are seen in one of two ways - and this is just my opinion -either aggressive or sexualized, and I - hey, sometimes I get aggressive and I’ve seen everybody of every Crayola color do the same. Sometimes I like to feel sexy, and I’ve seen everybody of every Crayola box do the same, so I'm not quite sure why black women got that rap, but most of the Black women I know are intelligent and willing to work with you and very proud of themselves and need to have that reinforced in television – need to have that reinforced in music, and in the media - it's not all just about the same two or three stereotypes when it comes to Black women, and everybody is starting to realize and recognize that Black women are the driving force in a lot of these votes. And so if we really want this loud voice to really feel recognized and appreciated, we have to show that recognition and that appreciation. Sorry, I'm getting a little riled up.

[laughter]

>> Janet: No, that's okay. This is your opportunity for your voice to be heard so it’s very much appreciated and I think that even representatives in the audience who is listening this afternoon, these important points and these are opportunities for people to grow and to go back and reflect on the comments that are being made. So we’ll come back to you – I’m sure there’ll be some questions later on in the forum, but I want to move to our next panelist.

I would like to introduce the next panelist, Harold Foxx.

Harold, you’re a theater, film and television actor and comedian who happens to be deaf. You launched "The Harold Foxx Show," an online entertainment brand featuring comedy skits which has gained more than 80,000 followers on various social media platforms. You’re best known for your stand-up comedy - which you’ve performed across the world. More people of color who are deaf have been shot and killed by police due to both systemic racism and lack of communication. Lack of authentic representation of deaf black men in the media contributes to how people of color who are deaf are treated in society. What do you think some of the things are that the industry can do to help with dismantling systemic issues like this?

>> Harold: Well, the funny thing is, that I just actually had a chat with a friend of mine, I was speaking with someone, and we were speaking about the system at-large. And so we, as Black people, have always fought against that - we fought against that to get our rights, for civil rights, for equality, to fight against racism and discrimination and trying to figure out how we can dismantle it. And so dismantling the system has to involve white people involved with us – there has to be a partnership, because the system has been built by white people. So if we partner up with people who are white and we walk hand-in-hand, and we work together with our allies, then perhaps in the future, we will have more of an opportunity for equal rights.

It will become something that isn't just, okay, this is Black over here, this is white over here, but we need that to happen ASAP.

>> Janet: Good point. What would you recommend with regard to helping to reduce some of the stigma, but also the lack of knowledge and perhaps even the lack of comfort with dealing with and communicating with individuals in the Deaf culture? Particularly as it pertains to the entertainment industry.

>> Harold: To be honest, it is going to take everyone providing these equal opportunities for people who have disabilities, for people who are a different skin color. You know, so there's that intersectionality of being Black and being deaf, and so people are even more afraid to encounter that, but you know what? It's time for people, instead of being awkward and uncomfortable, you need to realize that there's no reason for that. We're all human regardless of what the disability is, whatever the race is. If you see me out here, you know what? Black people are working against these systems - join us in our work. There's no reason to be uncomfortable. There's no reason to be afraid. So, for example, in auditions that I go to, most of the actors that I see out there are white. So I’m wondering, why is that happening? Why is it that you go to an audition as a black man and there's white people who are looking at you as if they’re afraid of you, as if they’re uncomfortable, and on top of that to be deaf and see that even more. We have skills. We are skilled people. We are very intelligent. We have so many skills and so many things to bring to the table. It's time to go ahead and do that.

>> Janet: How do you think your comedian style and your presentation to audience using comedy helps to dispel some of those myths? Do you think that it really provides an opportunity to introduce a new level of understanding and comfort to your audience?

>> Harold: That's true. I do quite a bit of stand-up comedy. It's been maybe for about five or six years that I've started building on that platform that I have, and I have a lot more that I have in mind. So far, it's been quite successful. I have my own personal interpreter, a black male interpreter. He's actually a professor at Cal State Northridge, and he understands exactly what it is that I’m saying, where I'm coming from and it's important because he's a Black, deaf male, so we have that same world view that we start with. So I think it's very crucial for people to recognize that, especially for hearing people, hearing Black stand-ups, they can say whatever it is they want to say. So I feel as myself as a Black deaf male, there are no limitations on what I have to say. I'm Black, just like some of these Black hearing comedians are. They say whatever they want to say and I feel that I have the ability to do the same - I can say whatever I want to say. And I notice that there are more open mics and some well-known venues that are out here for performers to get up and actually perform and I notice that people love attending my shows. People love that opportunity. So I had a guy, a booker come up to me and actually say, "Hey, do you mind if you can use your voice on stage? Do you mind speaking for yourself?" and I said, “are you for real? I'm deaf! I have my voice interpreter right here. He will be voicing for me". So the guy who was booking said, “okay, well, how exactly are we gonna it out?” and he just didn't understand how the process went. So, there's going to be someone there to provide the voice interpretation and I'm going to use my natural language of ASL to provide the comedy. So, just bringing that concept to people - I'm not going to be using my voice to speak, that's not what I do. ASL is my primary language. That's the language that I'm comfortable in as a deaf individual. I'm not going to change who I am to kind of fit what you want me to do.

>> Janet: Those are very good points and I think that is also a great teachable moment to help with clarifying the different aspects of Deaf culture in communication so that people can become aware of what those nuances are around communication and again, talking about authentic representation, using ASL is your authentic representation of yourself, so those are really good points as well as very good teachable moments. Thank you so much for sharing your comments and I'm sure there will be some questions later.
We're going to move to our next panelist, who is Diana Elizabeth Jordan. Diana, in addition to being an actress, a director and disability inclusion archivist, you are well known for your one-woman show, diagnosed with cerebral palsy around age two. You were the first actress with a disability to obtain a master's degree in fine arts and acting from California State University, Long Beach. In addition to being very active with disability and the arts organizations, like Das with Disabilities project, Performing Arts Studio West, Media Access Awards and leadership roles and Black-led organizations like Women of Color Unite. Why is it important to have allies in this area of work that you have engaged in?

>> Diana: Thank you all for having me, but like it’s been said before, it was important because it's not a monolithic movement. If you look at any civil rights movement – if you look at the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s, there were white allies who marched along. If you go to the women marches, there were male allies who marched along. There are straight allies that march with their LGBTQ brothers and sisters. So, allies are important because it's not just about us, it's about how we're all working together, and I think allies can be very beneficial in helping to spread the message and share and support us and bring opportunities. So I think allies are essential in any movement and a dismantling of the stigmas, whether it's based on disability, based on race, based on sex, and the allies who are supporting us are equally a beneficial part of that movement.

>> Janet: Very good point, and I think that we see that represented in some of the demonstrations that we've been seeing up to now, that it isn't just one group, that these issues are important as a society and that there are many different cultural groups that agree and that support the issue, I think across all communities and I think that's really important. Can you talk, Diana, for a moment also about your personal experience and your journey? Who are some of people that you have looked to that you are inspired by that really helped you, number one, to become comfortable with your own disability, but number two, to really be moving forward and not just sit within yourself as an individual, but to take the issues that impact the disability community further by becoming an advocate and being involved with these other organizations?

>> Diana: It's been a really interesting journey. I’ve always wanted to be an actor, I never really wanted to be anything else. And my biggest role model was my aunt Rhoda who passed away before I was born, but I used to hear stories about her and what she had to go through as a young African-American actress coming up before me - she died tragically very young, but I would hear stories from my grandmother, my aunt, my dad. I think what motivated me to be an activist is, I learned I had to be - because when I started, there were all these attitudinal barriers that I had to face - when I started my career in Chicago I would hear, “you’re really good but we don’t know how to cast you,” and I’d be like, “well just cast me.” It was because of my determination to play roles with my disability was incidental to the - I had to say, “I play many roles in my real life, r-e-a-l, my real life, and I'm a daughter, I’m a friend, I'm a coworker,” and I want to have those opportunities to play many roles and I have, I have been very lucky with my r-e-e-l life. I’ve been a homeless woman. I played a fortune teller. I played a woman who got to look out the window at Shemar Moore all day which was very fun, on S.W.A.T., but a lot of those roles I played were not disability specific, and that's important for me, too, that we, as storytellers with disabilities, not only celebrate diversity but we're telling stories of humanity. I have been equally impacted by the tragic death of George Floyd. It has nothing to do with the fact that I live with cerebral palsy, it has to do with the fact that I saw this horrific incident on TV and it played out in the media and that isn't necessarily related to my disability, it's related to my humanity, our humanity and my lived experience. But it's equally important when we talk about disability and the way that different people advocate to celebrate the diversity that exists within our intersectional community - we are the largest community that intersects with every other community and every other marginalized community, so when I work at Performing Arts Studio West, we have actors who have Down Syndrome, actors on the spectrum, actors with cerebral palsy, so I think sometimes Hollywood would say that somebody in a wheelchair, somebody who is deaf, or somebody who has Down Syndrome and that's true, those disabilities do exist, but there's so much diversity within our community, within the deaf community, within the disability community, and I want to see more diversity of disability in terms of disability, age, not all of us are 29 in our age,

[laughter]

and cultural identity, so that all communities are represented, and we truly are representative of the global American Dream. People say don’t think outside the box – it’s not thinking outside the box, it’s realizing how much diversity exists within a really big box.

>> Janet: Well, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts about that. Congratulations on the success that you've actually achieved throughout your journey and thank you so much also for being a committed advocate and somebody who I think, individuals who may be listening today to this platform, I think will find you as a positive role model for them. Thank you for joining us.

>> Diana: Well, thank you so much for having me. I'm so happy to be here.

>> Janet: Great. We're going to move to our next panelist, which is Natasha Ofili. Natasha, you debuted in two TV series last year, both currently streaming on Netflix as “The Politician,” “Principal,” and Amazon Prime as a deaf teacher and in addition, you're a playwright, and you said 2020 is a year of continuing to be brave and expand your growth as an actress. Your co-panelists have discussed the importance of entertainment industry, roles and influencing societal norms as well as how important allies can be. What are some of the immediate actions from your perspective that the industry can take to help facilitate that process?

>> Natasha: Well, hello everyone. I'm very happy to be here. Thank you for having me. I can go ahead with a list, an enumerous list of things that I can say, different calls for action, but I will give you just three for now. The first would be for - typically on screen, you see a person with a disability, maybe a deaf person that has a role – there will be one character, one deaf person here and one deaf person there. There are people who can have multiple disabilities themselves or you can have multiple people who are deaf in that particular role, so instead of having one character or a friend who is deaf or a family member who is deaf or a sibling, why don't you show the story of that deaf person? That person should be representative of our entire community as well as other people with different types of disabilities. So instead of just having one deaf person with one interpreter or a hearing person who just happens to know sign language, why don't we change the narrative of that, and we include the stories of people in films who have multiple disabilities or a group of people with disabilities.

Second to that, I am a dark-skinned female, and I notice that there is not enough representation of people who look like me on screen. And so it's crucial for us to have that representation of a Black, deaf, brown-skinned youth because you've got Black, deaf, brown-skinned youth watching TV at home and they don't see themselves represented at all. There are people who - we want to be an inspiration to people who are at home. We want to become a motivation for other people out there who look like us, so they don't feel so left out. That's very important - I think that's key, to have a representation of people who have dark skin on the television set. So there are actors who might be light-skinned or who might be racially ambiguous, so to speak, but it's important to include people specifically who have dark skin. And third, I think it's important to have those resources; for people like myself, for people who are working on set with a disability, it's important to have resources there on set so that you are able to work with us. Ask us in advance, so you can make things easier for us once we do arrive, we do show up on set to film. For example, there's not one way to work with every person who has a disability. So what is the easiest thing for you to do, is to ask. So as I was working for example on "The Politician," that was such an amazing experience to work on that set. They did ask me to not use my voice but to use sign until it was time to cut, and so people were a little bit unsure - she talks, she uses her voice but she's deaf, how does that work? So they were unsure, and after a few days of that, they did become accustomed to that to know, that okay, she is a deaf actress and she does have an interpreter here, she may or may not be using her voice, and so with that particular role on "The Politician," my character was one - so the character, the Ben Platt character in one of these scenes, I was walking behind him - I was walking in front of him and he was walking up behind me. So I couldn't hear the fact obviously that he's walking behind me. So what they decided to do, was to have someone walk towards me to let me know that, okay this is my cue right here, and they had a flashlight that they were able to use to let me know they were rolling. See how simple that is? It was an amazing accommodation that needed to be made that provided me what I needed to be able to do my job. So when you’re working with someone who is deaf or has a disability, provide those resources and if you are not sure how to provide those resources and what those are, then you can go ahead and ask the actor, ask the person with a disability. So, I guess those are my three pretty quick calls to action for people who are in the entertainment industry.

>> Janet: Thank you so much. Those are incredibly important points and I think that one of the things that I would like to highlight that you said, which I think is incredibly important, is the fact that the assumption is that sometimes accommodations are going to be costly or that the industry may not have any idea as to where those resources might come from, and I just want to mention that for those representatives in the industry that there are multiple resources available and certainly RespectAbility's work in Hollywood is absolutely one of those places and having these relationships and having these partnerships is really critical and beneficial to you specifically to be able to access information and resources, and that helps to reduce some of that certainly myths and certainly reducing stigmas but also being able to be a partner and bringing the opportunity to expose you to some very incredibly talented individuals as you see represented on this panel today so that I encourage you to take advantage of the opportunity to access some of these resources and don't be afraid to reach out and ask questions. As far as I'm concerned, no question is dumb. You should not feel that way. This is a learning opportunity but it's also an opportunity for you to think very strategically and innovatively about how you can be inclusive and source some talent that you may not have previously considered, which can certainly make a difference both in your programming but also in your audience. You're going to be able to gain audience and I think that there is certainly a market of individuals with disabilities who would love to be a part of this industry, who would love to participate, who want to make a difference and who want to do quality work, and value the role that the entertainment industry has to play in the disability community around inclusion. So I think that your remarks, Natasha, are very important and poignant regarding the way the industry can certainly engage. Thank you so much for your comments and congratulations on your career as well and we do wish you the best of luck, and I think there’ll be some questions following at this point as well. So, what I would like to do is to invite you all to ask questions of any of the panelists, and we're going to ask that you put your questions in the Q&A box on this platform. For our friends on Facebook, your comments are being moderated and questions will be shared with us on Zoom as well. So I believe Tatiana is going to relay some of the questions. So we are ready to entertain some of your questions of our panelists.

>> Tatiana: Yes, I am here. So our first question is, someone says, “do you think COVID-19 has made changes harder or easier?” And I guess that's across the board for whoever wants to answer.

>> Diana: Well, I mean, I think it's challenging because everyone has production staff and some other challenges especially for actors who have disabilities is some of those where there may be more underlying conditions that make it more difficult for someone to go outside, if they need to stay inside for isolation, so I think it will remain to be seen right now how it's going to pan out as we start to open the industry back up. I think that the challenges – especially if it's more challenging for you to be out because nobody can be out and then people with more underlying health conditions have more to consider.

>> Tatiana: Thank you. So another is, “Hello and thank you for using your voice today to speak this urgent matter. Watching the news, I have seen commentators mention the intersectionality of many diverse subgroups, i.e. the trans-community, LGBTQIA, et cetera and how their double-minority status puts them at higher risk for police brutality and violence. However, continually, disability is left out of the conversation altogether. Throughout all communities, black, white, LGBTQIA, et cetera, people think all diverse groups are aware of each other and thus stick together. What do you think it is going to take for disability issues to be included in the conversation, and ow do we put the disability back into the diversity?” It's a good question.

>> Janet: Excellent, excellent question.

>> Lachi: I would like to say something but I want to keep it short because I would love for the other panelists to tackle this as well. But I think first and foremost, it's such an important observation. I speak with a lot of different groups - different groups on women inclusion, different groups on minority inclusion, and nobody - when I bring up disability inclusion, there's an awkward silence, even among a different minority, marginalized group - I'll bring up disability inclusion and they'll all sort of pearl clutch at just the thought of having to talk about it. I believe one of the ways to help get that conversation going more is, obviously, to throw more of this in the media. To throw more of, hey, you are kind of like me - how do I say this? You portray disability in media in a way where people can relate to that person. So they can say, oh, wow - she got her heart broken just like I get my heart broken. He got a big fat attitude just like, my neighbor got a big, fat attitude. The more that disability is portrayed in the media as something relatable to non-disabled folk, the more that stigma will break and the easier -

[ phone ringing ]

I'm sorry about that – and the easier it will be for those other marginalized groups to start recognizing that they should include disability as a marginalized group with on the rise. But I really welcome others to answer that because I would love to hear more answers to that myself.

>> Tatiana: Anybody else has any responses to that question?

>> Diana: I just think this is a great opportunity also where our allies can help be part of the voice, and we have some wonderful allies out there - we have Women of Color Unite and Cheryl Radford who, Tatiana, you and I work with - I think it's really important to be allies and to the person who asked that question, when you recognize you are not being included, say something. If you see on a website, the group talks about everybody but disability, right? I did that yesterday - I wrote a letter, I notice that there was everything but disability, so I sent an email and said hey, did you realize you are not including disability? I think it's important because sometimes they don't think it's a conscious thought, so we need to bring the awareness and sometimes there have been conversations with our white allies about racism and we need to have conversations with non-disabled people and those organizations to say, please don't forget about us, please include us. So you may have to write an email and make a phone call and hey, and you left out 25% of the population, so use your voice - use our voices.

>> Tatiana: Thank you, Diana. Another question is, “what kinds of measures have been taken so far to make sure auditions and working on sets are accessible to disabled people and what still needs to be done better?” Does anybody have a response for that?

>> James: Yeah. I’ll say for the physical access, I think sometimes casting is not aware of the need or whenever they pick the location for the audition, there's a disconnect between casting and the people showing up, it's not accessible – that’s happened to me a couple of times where I got to a place and, like I said, I'm ambulatory but I do use wheelchair sometimes, and stairs are terrible for me, and so I’ve gotten to places where the role call is for a wheelchair or whatever it might be and there’s like, three flights of steps and it wasn't - it's not done intentionally but I can't even go to this audition. So, just better communication I think, and preparation in advance - can't go wrong with that. I think, just being really aware of what everyone's situation is and making that adjustment.

>> Tatiana: I would like to piggyback off of that, but do the adjustment with intention, because a lot of times if, say a casting office isn't accessible, they'll have you do a self-tape, but that self-tape may not do you justice, so that is another thing they’ll say, oh, “well, we'll have them do a self-tape” but it doesn't give the same respect as the non-disabled person when they go on an audition because they've gotten to be right in front of you. That was my only thing that I wanted to piggyback off of that. Anybody else? Okay. Go ahead.

>> Natasha: Natasha here. I did wanted to add that, it's probably pretty much - not the same problem as someone in a wheelchair but similar to needing to hire a certified or a qualified ASL interpreter. Because sometimes you have an interpreter show up and they're not the greatest. So when you're auditioning, they end up becoming your voice. I think for us, for casting directors, they do need to realize that having a qualified ASL interpreter on set for that audition as we're trying to give our stories, as we’re doing our monologue or whatever it may be, that the casting directors, sometimes they ignore the process between the deaf actor and the interpreter. So that's really key to have a qualified interpreter and to provide for that and having the casting director realize that there are resources, there are interpreting agencies,

the agencies are able to provide an interpreter list and so then the deaf client can pick out who they would prefer to have in that casting situation.

>> Tatiana: Thank you. This next question is actually specifically to Harold. And they said, “Harold, you mentioned how important it was for your ASL interpreter to be a Black, deaf man.” And then they said, “as a white person, what is the best way that they can be an ally without overstepping or taking role that should be done by a person of color or person with a disability or et cetera?”

>> Harold: Being involved in this industry as a performer and comedian, I have noticed that, especially here in Southern California, it is quite difficult to find a person of color to be my interpreter. It's not easy. And so I lived in Washington DC for 17 years and there, it was chockfull of Black and POC interpreters. Now, moving here, it's much harder to find one. It’s taken me a while but fortunately, I have found a Black male interpreter to voice for me, to be placed with me for my performances. Sometimes, Ihave to settle for someone who’s white. So as long as we have an understanding of my style, as long as - unless that person is a white comedian themselves voicing for me, sometimes they're able to understand my comedic timing, much more better and so in that situation, it's not as important for them to be Black, but as long as you're able to understand my comedic timing, and so you'll have white people come up in the audience and they say, “hey, you know what, I want to be an ally. I want to support you. What are your preferences? I want to make sure that I'm doing what I need to do as someone who is interpreting for you.” So I will be able to provide them with some notes to take so that we can establish an agreement and an understanding prior to a performance and then we're able to work together then in that situation. I don't like it when somebody is like,
hey, I'm going to come up and be an ally and do this, that, and the other.” You’re taking over in that situation. You know? Allow me to train you. Especially as it relates to improv and this is -Rawlings – this is a specific improv group that I'm involved in. So I have worked with there and I’m able to have some things established. So we still have issues as it relates to ASL interpreters, hiring interpreters. I do know the budget sometimes is minimal and they're not able to afford some of the top interpreters, I do understand that. But hiring someone or even have someone come in in a volunteer situation, means that they're probably in training and so as I get up there and I'm using the language fluently, they're not able to understand what I'm saying. They go, “can you slow down? Can you repeat that?” And it interrupts the flow of my show and it's not professional at that point and it just - there's a disconnect. So that's a major issue, to keep in mind - that I can't work with someone who’s in training or still trying to develop their skills. I want someone who is established, who has worked in the entertainment industry, who’s worked with comedians and that is able to keep one me as I go along and to not interrupt my flow, because it's frustrating to look at an interpreter and repeat myself and turn back to my audience and get back into the flow of things. That is not a good thing at all.

>> Tatiana: Thank you. And I just have one thing I wanted to add to that question, that she talked about certain roles and I didn't know if you meant from interpreter perspective or roles in film and media and so I will add just a tidbit with that, a short, little thing. Think about Scarlett Johansson - she was asked to play a role to play a trans person, and she did not accept the role. So just think about it in terms of that, if you are talking about taking roles that are made for people with disabilities or a person of color, think about it in that way, too. So if that's the question you were looking for. If someone does offer you a role to play a disability, think about offering that up to someone - that's the way a strong ally should be. So I’ll just add that point to that.

>> Diana: May I piggyback on that real quickly, please?

>> Tatiana: Uh huh.

>> Diana: My friend Christine Brown said this about disability and deafness, “disability and deafness are lived experiences, not a trained skill.” People will say, “well, I did all my research.” It's like saying I did this research on what it's like to be Black - no one ever says that. So if we can think about disability like any other cultural experience, a lived experience, and not a trained skill. I love Christine who said that and I love to say that because I think that's such a beautiful way to say that.

>> Tatiana: Thank you, Diana. So this question is for James. “You often bring up the subject of inclusion when you are performing live. How is it usually received by your audiences?”

>> James: It's always received well, to be honest. I’ve never had audience-vibe issue or anything like that. I mean, I’ve definitely encountered jerks on an individual level and stuff - I have a couple stories about that, but like I said, a lot of times, people don't even think of this - I even have friends that sometimes forget that I have a disability because that's not their lived experience. I just found that hammering on that and making that awareness is really, really crucial but when I do bring it up, it's always very well received. I think a lot of times just it's not in people's minds because they don't live that way. And so it's really, really great – I’ve had fantastic conversations and I've been able to get the wheels turning and you know, some folks' heads about how to change things and make those accommodations, make it accessible and do better.

>> Tatiana: Thank you. So this is a question for everyone so maybe we can go around really, really quick, if you have anything to add to this. Someone, Ilana, via Facebook and she asks, “do you have any book or movie recommendations?”

>> Lachi: I'm going to go ahead and reiterate "Code of the Freaks." It really delves deep into the portrayal of disability in media and film. It doesn't really delve too far into music, but it does go into acting, TV, film. It talks about the roles of executives and writers, and it talks about the history of disability from the '30s ‘til today, and it's more of a documentary-style film, and it's spoken from the perspective of actors and writers in the disability community. So you get to have a really close-up look of how a lot of the prominent people in the disability community in terms of acting really view the way Hollywood has been portraying them. It's a great film. Again, it's called, "Code of the Freaks," it aired in the Reel Abilities Film Fstival. You should be able to find it online anywhere, I think.

>> Tatiana: Anybody else have any other recommendations?

>> Diana: I would like to mention “CinemAbility” by Jane Gold - that's a documentary and just great film just about disability history and the disability civil rights movement and the crip camp - not about entertainment but it's such a powerful movie on disability civil rights and I think that's an important part of what we're seeing. So that “CinemAbility” by Jane Gold and “Crip Camp” which was produced by the Obamas. And Janet LaBreck.
>> Tatiana: Thank you.

>> Lachi: Can I actually say one more? And this is really weird.

>> Tatiana: Go ahead.

>> Lachi: If you - what is it called? I know this is going to sound ridiculous, but "drunken history"…
>> Tatiana: “Drunk History.”

>> Diana: Yeah!

>> Lachi: “Drunk History!” I believe it's season five, episode five, but don’t quote me on that, just Google it.

>> Tatiana: Yeah. “Section 504” is what the episode…

>> Lachi: "Section 504" is the name of the episode and it's so powerful. It's hilarious so it's easy to follow. It's only about ten minutes and it keeps your attention span. I knew everything already before I watched it, and I still teared up. It's really good and it's very succinct. I think everybody should watch that.

>> Tatiana: And it used real actors with real disabilities in it, too.

[laughter]

>> Lachi: It did! That was the highlight.

>> Natasha: This is natasha here. I, not too long ago, watched "Crip Camp.” I really, really enjoyed watching that film. It was just amazing to me. It showed protest related - in the 1960s, late 1960s - related to people with disabilities, regarding the ADA law and so I would encourage everyone to watch that documentary. It was phenomenal.

>> Harold: I agree with that, says Harold.

>> James: Oh, I was gonna say really quickly, piggyback off "Crip Camp," love it, Judy Heumann is my spirit animal. Check that out.

[laughter]

>> Diana: I think she's everybody's.

[laughter]

>>James: A series that I love is the “Wu Tang Saga” – I love that series, but I think it's Raquan's younger brothers, they're wheelchair users and that was authentic casting from what I’m aware of. And so I love Wu Tang and hip-hop and all that stuff, but the casting was authentic and it’s really good storylines and I love the brothers.

>> Tatiana: Yeah. Some other good films I would recommend to see is "Peanut Butter Falcon" which has done really well, that had a person with Down Syndrome as the lead and then also "Give Me Liberty" where Willow Spencer played the lead. Those are some good films with good, authentic representation of disability.

>> Diana: Oh, and there's "Wakefield" which is about Brian - he was on - oh, gosh, "Wakefield," Brian Cranston and one of our actors, Isaac Levya, and there's another gentleman, the name is escaping me now but it has Allan Cummings and also features Isaac Levya - I can't think of the name of the film, the name of the film is escaping me right now, but I will put it in the chat. But that’s another great film.

>> Tatiana: Okay. So we're down to two more questions, and we're going to go around and everyone can answer really quick. So what are your biggest dreams for yourself and for other artists with disabilities? So we'll go around and everybody can say that.
[pause]
Not all at once.

[laughter]

>> James: I was going to let someone else go first.

>> Diana: Me too.

>> Natasha: I'll start.

>> Tatiana: Your biggest dreams for you and for the community.

>> Natasha: Okay. So as far as my biggest dreams, actually, gonna to change that for reality – it’s gonna become reality. I 100% want to continue to be successful in this industry, in the entertainment industry. I do want to break barriers for my Black deaf brothers and sisters, for the youth, for adults. I want them to be able to have an opportunity to live their lives and know that they can achieve whatever they want, they can dream whatever they want. And so I'm gonna continue to write scripts, I'm going to continue to act, I'm going to grow and evolve and become the best version of myself as an actress because I can, and I'm just here - I want to lead, I want to lead the people. So that's my ultimate dream. That's my reality, I should say. Harold is commenting.

>> Harold: So really for myself as far as goals are concerned, I want to continue to be persistent, I don't want to give up. So I am in the process of writing two plays, I'm involved in a playwright workshop, and so I’ve already have written a short film and so my vision for myself includes, instead of just sitting and waiting for someone to, “hey, come get in this role, come audition for this,” I want to be someone who is creating opportunities and not waiting for them to show up at my door. So I want to be able to give back to the community and have young people who are deaf or have disabilities, who are Black be able to make opportunities for themselves.

>> Diana: Yeah. I mean, I would love to book a series, be a series regular and work consistently in film and theater and television representing older, maturer, disabled Black women on television and film and all those mediums, but my dream is - I can do that through my company, Dreaming Big on a Swing Films, but there is so much content right now - I think I read somewhere there's, between streaming and television shows and cable and newer platforms, there are, I believe, 3,000 shows, I believe that's the number. So there's no reason why all of us can't be working right now. Plus, people who are listening, so continuing work with people with disabilities through continuing to teach at Performing Arts Studio West, through my advocacy with Women of Color Unite to achieve this - because I want that fresh representation, I want to make sure it's not just about me, but it's about really having diverse representation of disabilities on our platforms. And I can't do that by myself and I don't want to do that by myself. I want to be one of a huge community, not the only one, but one of many actors with disabilities who are working consistently in film, television and media projects, so it's about opening doors for those who are coming behind me, but still making sure that there are opportunities for disability to be seen for its fullest, diverse, multicultural, multi-intersectional beauty.

>> Tatiana: Thank you. Anybody else really quick? Or did everybody say?

>> Lachi: Well, I guess my dream, which - well, I guess what I'm working toward is, I suppose to become really a household name as a recording artist, but not just as a recording artist who is Black and female but as a recording artist and vocalist who is Black, female, and blind.

That's what I would love to be, a household name known as so that, other people feeling awkward or weird or scared and just feeling outcast in school or whatnot and coming up, can look to me as a role model, but so that people who don't have disabilities and who are not Black can also look to my story for inspiration. But even further than that, to take this message global, because there are different ways that disability and blackness are seen globally, and some of them are a little more progressive than America, some of them are a little more regressive than America, and t would be great to be able to start to showcase to the world a very positive message of blackness and disability through my art, through my music through my recording art.

>> James: Yeah, for me, I want to actually piggyback off what Lachi and Natasha said earlier. So my dream for the whole community is to have people with disabilities be leading, principal actors, leads in series, movies - Lachi talked about how we have a disability, we're portrayed so poorly in the media - we have been, so a lot of my friends think, because of what they see in the media, they think that they're not sexually desirable, they think they can't date, so dating and all that stuff - I get asked about that constantly, that’s like the thing that comes up. And so a huge thing for me is to have a person with a disability, to have a person who’s Black be a lead in a series or a movie or a principal and be sexually desirable and be able to date and all that stuff and have those same portrayals as anyone else, because I’ve never ever seen that and in my reality, I hope this doesn't sound arrogant or anything like that, but I’ve never had issues with dating or any of that stuff.

>> Lachi: Okay, okay.

[laughter]

>> James: It's such a critical piece to life that everyone talks about it to me, and even my friends with disabilities like, “do you have problems dating and stuff?” and I'm like “no.” My friends who are non-disabled, they see that and so I want to show that, that's a big thing because I think once we do that, that's such a big piece, once we cross that boundary, I think that's gonna be a really big change and I think things are goinna shift once you start seeing people with disabilities as sexual, desirable objects and all that stuff.

[laughter]

>> Tatiana: Yes! Okay, did everybody answer? Did everybody answer? Did I miss anybody? Okay. Last question - and this is the opportunity to do your shameless plug. Someone says, “what are some good places to get in touch with black disabled actors to cast them in film?” So, this is a chance -shoutout where they can find you, social media, shout out your representation, let them know where they can find you.

>> Lachi: I will go first because I am the most shameless.

[laughter]

You can find me at lachimusic, that’s L-A-C-H-I music, lachimusic.com, lawchmusic this and lawchmusic that, Twitter, Instagram, whatever. My representation is Big Management, that’s B-I-G M-G-M-T. I'm a recording artist, I’m a composer, I’m an actress and I’m a writer. I'm great at hanging out and being your friend. So find me and I would be very honored to work with you, and this also extends to everyone watching this and other people on this panel.

>> Tatiana: Natasha.

>> Natasha: Yes. I do want to add Lachi on my social media.

[laughter]

But you can find me on Instagram. You can find me on Instagram.

[laughter]

Anyway, sorry about that. You can find me on Instagram and Twitter @natasha, underscore, and then my last name O-F-I-L-I (@natahsa\_ofili). I also do have a website which is natashaofili.com, and I am represented by KMR Talent. So there you go! Please find me. You can find my work. I am an actress, I am a writer, and I’m all of that. So there you go. That's my story. That's my life.

>> Tatiana: James?

>> James: Yeah. I have the same agent as Natasha, so KMR Talent for that. I think some resources are RespectAbility, in a broad sense. There's a Facebook group called Reel Actors, real, trained actors with disabilities, you can go there. In terms of social, I'm on Instagram and Twitter as @jamesianmusic. For print stuff and modeling, ZBD Management for that, and then -so jamesianmusic for my handles, and then lastly I have a song out on Spottify and Apple Music, all the platforms called, "Make a Stand" and I released it for Black History Month. It's about all the racism that Black people have faced throughout the centuries and it's about combatting that, and so that's currently on those platforms, so I think it's a good time to check that out if you want to do that, it's there, because it was written with that in mind.

>> Harold: Okay, well, you can find me online at www.haroldfoxx, with two xs, .com. You can hit me up on Instagram and Twitter @iamharoldfoxx. Again, xx - two xs - people look for me all the time and they miss out because they don't have the two xs on the end of my name – two xs, f-o-x-x. I am also represented by KMR Talent, to piggyback what everyone else said, and I am an actor, I am a writer, I am a comedian. So hit me up. I'm here.

>> Tatiana: Diana.

>> Diana: Yes. Hi. You can find me at my website, which is my full name, dianaeliabethjordan.com. There's also a link to my Edutainment production company there, so www.dianaelizabethjordan.com. My social media handles on Instagram and Twitter are fromtheheartdej, so @fromtheheartdej. To learn more about the wonderful talent at Performing Arts Studio West go to www.pastudiowest.com. I'm also represented there and by City Talent Management. Again, that's dianaelizabethjordan.com. My handles are fromtheheartdej, and that's on Instagram and Twitter, and to learn more about Performing Arts Studio West, go to www.pastudiowest.com. I would love to - thank you so much for having me.

>> Tatiana: Thank you. Janet, we are done with all the questions.

You can close us out.

>> Janet: Thank you so much, and again, I want to thank everyone for joining us. I think everyone can agree that after listening to our panelists today that they are not only fun, but they have a great sense of humor. They are extremely talented and very passionate about this topic, but also willing to help, willing to advocate and most importantly willing to be a part of the fabric of our communities that we all live in. I also want to thank the entertainment industry - the conversations and the comments that you heard today as well as the questions that were asked of our panelists are really an important starting point. I want to certainly offer RespectAbility.org as an opportunity to continue these dialogues and to look to RespectAbility, their Los Angeles project, for support as well as information and resource and I think that this conversation is not just for today, I think we need to continue this dialogue. I think that there are many, many areas of opportunity here to help each other grow, but most importantly, too, to inspire those individuals with and without disabilities, those individuals who are Black or white, or whatever cultural background that you're from, to really have conversations with others and to believe in the concept of diversity and inclusion, and that these are our way of sharing information and encouraging you as listeners and participants in today's event to reach out and ask for that support, ask the questions and look for those partners that are going to help to keep the industry relevant, but also innovative and being creative about your strategies for marketing to the disability community. I want to thank everyone for joining us today and thank you so much for your commitment and your interest in talking with the disability community today. Thank you so much and that concludes our program for today.