>> Christina Lisk: Let's begin with an amazing introduction for an amazing person. If there's anyone who epitomizes the Justin W. Chappell Memorial award, it's Roy Payan. Living a triple life as a RespectAbility Apprentice, student, and community advocate, Roy showcases what can happen when opportunity and strength collide. Roy could have easily given up when he learned academic accommodations would not be met in time for him to finish his education. Instead he seized the chance for campus betterment when the chair of the mathematics department stated, "you're welcome to sue us." Seeing his quest through to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, Roy won his case with a ruling for all colleges to make their materials accessible. Upon facing a culture of ableist bias, Roy exemplified the steadfastness and tact necessary to initiate changes that will benefit every person with a disability, from California to New York. Thank you Roy, for all you've done to protect our rights under the America with Disabilities Act, and for joining me now for this conversation. Let me begin by asking how you're doing at this time. You feeling ready for this?

>> Roy Payan: [laughs] Yeah, yes I am -- I'm a little embarrassed because I'm usually not one to do very well in the spotlight but I'm doing well, thank you. And wow, that was quite an introduction. I hope I live up to it.

>> Christina Lisk: You've already lived up to it tenfold and then some, and there's nothing to be embarrassed about with the spotlight when you've earned it, again, tenfold and then some.

>> Roy Payan: Thank you.

>> Christina Lisk: During your apprenticeship at RespectAbility, you were selected to join the Fox Fellowship for blind and low vision individuals. What have you learned as a Fox Fellow, and how do you plan to use your experience for furthering disability equity?

>> Roy Payan: Well, you know, having been chosen to do an Apprenticeship with RespectAbility was a high honor in and of itself. But then to be further chosen to participate with the Fox Family Foundation, I mean, it was such an honor and I'm so so excited to be working with them. I saw it as a challenge, and so I've risen up to it. And it was quite an honor to work with -- Akira Nakano and the rest of the board and tell them, you know, the story and the struggle that we as a community have been undergoing. And so we've -- been working on -- putting together an event for -- the visually impaired community and -- to reach out to different persons with disabilities to -- acknowledge vision health, and -- vision awareness -- for a healthy future. I know that too many people in the BIPOC community don't get the attention or don't get the vision screening that they need, so we've been working on putting this event. And so I'm learning how to organize, how to -- network, how to reach out to all my contacts, how to begin structuring the event so that way we can have a successful event. But I'm also learning how to organize different groups and -- accommodate all the different disabilities that we have to accommodate, plus how to find funding for this. So it's been quite an experience and I think it's something that -- I'll be able to use in future employment, so that way I can organize different events for -- our community and -- raise awareness for -- not only for vision -- visual impairment, but all disabilities.

>> Christina Lisk: Excellent, sounds like you've got a great plan to further the cause from multiple angles.

>> Roy Payan: Yes [crosstalk] it's a very exciting time for us.

>> Christina Lisk: And it sounds like -- it sounds like not only do you have great versatility, but you're also setting up a good model for people with disabilities at all ages, which leads me to my next question. What do you think people who become disabled later in life should understand about life with a disability?

>> Roy Payan: You know, I'm glad you asked that question, because having gone through this experience, I have to admit that in the beginning it was -- it was a very lonely time for me. And -- I didn't know where to turn to. And so as I began to -- go through my own experience, it was important -- it was important for me to align myself and join up with other persons with disabilities. That's why joining -- an organization like RespectAbility has been such -- an advantageous event for me, because I was able to surround myself by people who are positive, who are energetic, who who are supportive of me, but also -- who also have disabilities and nothing stops them. So my biggest -- my biggest support has come from other people with disabilities, because I take a lot of my energy, and a lot of my -- ability to do things from them. I -- garner off their energy and I think to myself, "wow, if they can do that, I can do it, so let me go out and do something!" So I think it's important for a person with -- with a disability who acquires a disability -- as an adult that life doesn't stop at -- your disability. You can still have a rich, rewarding life. And it's up to us to demonstrate to them that, look, you don't have to sit at home and feel sorry for yourself. You don't have to sit home in the dark. Don't -- allow yourself to live the -- image that people think of us. People think that as a person with disability we just sit at home and watch TV and do nothing else, and that's not us at all. We have the the ability to live a full, rich life. And I think we have to start demonstrating to others it's possible. You -- can still have a rich, rewarding life. Start getting out and doing things. Get some exercise, walk around the block, get to know other people, join different sports teams. There's -- I recently joined a blind baseball team, which is really exciting. And then I -- after I lost my sight, I wanted to continue to do my exercise, so I joined a rock climbing class, and I do rock climbing at least once a week. I like horseback riding, I like to go bike riding and hiking. So I think it's important for -- us to continue doing anything we want and it's up to us to set our own limits. Don't let anybody else limit us. If you want -- if you're into writing, if you're into reading, if you're into recording music, or or doing things, then do that. Do whatever excites you to have a full life -- to fulfill your life.

>> Christina Lisk: It sounds like you gave the best advice anybody could hear. I don't think anybody could have said it better, even in an advice column!

>> Roy Payan: [laughs] Thanks.

>> Christina Lisk: Perhaps we need to have a show just for you, Roy. You've already got an award and set great precedents in court, maybe it's time for you to set great precedents on TV or YouTube too.

>> Roy Payan: [laughs] I can only hope.

>> Christina Lisk: [laughs] And one thing that we both know is crucial with disability, particularly with changing images, is care for one's mental health. As we both know, creating change and fighting systematic ableism really can put one's health in the gutter if you don't take care of yourself. What kept you strong even in your lowest moments, and what type of self-care would you suggest for disabled youth looking to create positive change?

>> Roy Payan: That's -- a good question, and -- I'm a big practitioner of self-care. My undergrad was in rehab services, in which I learned all the characteristics, traits, and mannerisms of a person with a disability. So one of the first things I learned was the practice of self-care by practicing five minutes of quiet meditation every morning. All you have to do is sit in the -- on your bed, you know, for five minutes, or -- in the middle of living room, the middle of your bedroom, and for at least five minutes, practice some quiet meditation. Get your thoughts together, get -- let the energy of the atmosphere embrace your body and fulfill you, because -- you need to do this every morning. It's -- what keeps you sane. Especially in a world where we're barraged constantly with negative thoughts and negative energies, it's important for us to self-center ourselves. And then sometimes during the week, sometimes during the day, make some time for exercise. Like I said, I like to go rock climbing, I like to to do different types of workouts, but even if you -- if it's just going out and walking around the block, walk around the block and meet people. Do something, but get some exercise. Exercise is -- one of the best things to build up endorphins -- and other happy chemicals in your body, so that way, you can continue to strive for -- higher achievements.

>> Christina Lisk: Thank you. I think that exercise is one of the things that is not only incredibly underrated, but it's been so easy for other people who aren't disabled to misappropriate the idea, to say exercise will cure all your problems. To hear it from a community member how much exercise matters, it gives a great example of how something that has become misappropriated can be reclaimed for ourselves, how we can make it into anything we want to do with it.

>> Roy Payan: Right, yeah. And like I said, you know -- it's funny because like I said -- I do like hiking, I do like bike riding, and I do like rock climbing, and even horseback riding. And I get approached by a lot of people who are also visually impaired, and they say "you go horseback riding?" Yes I do. And they're like, "really, isn't it scary? Aren't you scared?" It's like, no it's a horse. It's not -- gonna shoot you, it's just a horse. [Christina and Roy laugh] And you know, again, with rock climbing, find a rock climbing gym that's going to help you -- that's got an adaptive class that's going to help you, and you can achieve pretty much anything you want. If you're interested in hiking, find a hiking club that's -- blind or that's disabled that'll take you. I know here in Los Angeles, there's different organizations, the Triumph organization who helps people that are wheelchair users to to get on and -- participate in basketball and other -- sporting events. And again, it's all centered around exercise. Exercise is the key to -- keeping us sane and keeping us grounded. And -- it gives you the chance to network with other people who are like-minded and who are in the same situation -- and to build positive relationships.

>> Christina Lisk: Now the networking element of sports, that is something so many young disabled individuals need to know about too. Networking in athletics is one of the most powerful things.

>> Roy Payan: It is. I agree with that 100%.

>> Christina Lisk: And speaking of networking, which is critical to leadership and effective change, it's clear that you've been a great support in both regards to the younger apprentices at RespectAbility. How do you see yourself mentoring disabled youth and supporting the next generation's involvement in public policy going forward, and what advice do you have for younger people who face ableism and inaccessibility?

>> Roy Payan: Ooh. The first thing I would say is learn to self-advocate. There's -- no better advocate than you yourself. You know what you need, you know what what you require. Ask for it, demand it, because they're not going to give it to you unless you demand it. A lot of ableist people just don't see the need to give you anything or the need to make things accessible for you, so you have to demand it. You have to stand up and say look, I count just as much as you do. This is what I need. This is what I want. And advocate for yourself, and learn to -- align yourself with -- other members within your community who also are advocates, and together you'll build a stronger bond and you'll -- have a louder voice, a greater voice. And the more that you advocate for yourself, whether on your own or as a group, the more they're going to hear you. I think it's very important for us to -- begin to articulate our needs and to make our voices heard. Without that, they're not going to listen to us. I'm hoping that because of my experience with RespectAbility and with the Fox Family Foundation, I'm hoping to join an agency that will allow me to -- do community outreach and advocacy to students with disabilities -- to teach them how to advocate for themselves. But not only that, but to also teach them about the laws that protect them, and how they can -- continue to protect themselves -- and to educate the public on what's -- expected of -- the public and what's expected of ourselves. And hopefully at some point I hope to to return to RespectAbility to to maybe teach or -- help in teaching advocacy to -- some of the apprentices, even though I think RespectAbility is already doing a great job of it themselves already.

>> Christina Lisk: You've got a very unique angle on things, though, having been there, done that in the courts, and gone through the arguments and seen America pre-ADA and post-ADA. You're in a very powerful position to give examples to younger Apprentices that not every person might be able to give.

>> Roy Payan: That's true, and you know, I've been lucky that -- I was able to -- learn -- a lot of the -- laws and policies that affect and impact us, and that's -- that's very important, that's why I'm saying it's -- important to align yourself with people who -- are familiar with some of these issues and -- who -- where you can garner information, say you know what, I'm -- experiencing the same thing, and then begin to ameliorate those conditions by -- working towards -- coming up with solutions. It's incumbent on us to begin to attenuate all the negative practice that are imposed on us as a person with disability, and I think that there's -- nothing more inimical to -- a person's life as a disabled person than -- a good -- than the barriers on education. I think we have to begin to -- realize our only -- way to aspiring life is to get our education. I think too many institutions, they put barriers on us and -- block us from getting those -- accomplishments, and they have to understand, we are just like anybody else. We want the -- freedom to be able to -- be independent, just like anyone else, to be able to -- enjoy the freedoms and afford the the life we want, just like anyone else. We're no different. Just give us the education, allow us to get the education we need to be able to achieve that, just like anyone else.

>> Christina Lisk: Not only that too, but a lot of people don't consider that when you deny a disabled individual an education and the same opportunities, you are denying the whole public a chance to get a unique perspective, and a chance to have more -- riches at the table. Be it from your heart, your mind, your soul, every disabled person has something to give. And when you create a barrier to inaccessibility, you're taking away from the whole world, not just from the one disabled person alone.

>> Roy Payan: That's exactly -- you hit it right on the nail. I'm of the belief that when you -- remove the barriers for a person with a disability to -- attain their education, you've given them the ability to now become a role model for other persons with disabilities to say, look, if I can do it, you can do it. You have the -- ability to -- gain an independence, and a life like anyone else. So I'm of the belief that if you give a person an education, they can attain a job, so they can afford to get their own apartment, their own house, give them the freedom to -- do the things that they do and contribute back to -- society. How much richer would we be as a community if this was -- the -- usual thing instead of -- something, you know, unusual. I don't think that it's become common enough for us, so -- I think the public has to know we're just as -- what's the word -- as capable as anybody else. You just have to accept us, you just have to allow us.

>> Christina Lisk: Exactly. We need more disabled role models in the world, more people breaking barriers. We need more people like you!

>> Roy Payan: [laughs] Thank you! Thank you very much! [laughs]