>> Graciano Petersen: Good day everyone! We're so excited to have you here with us at our first fireside chat -- in a series of chats that we'll be having -- today. And so I just wanted to welcome you. I'm Graciano Petersen. I am the Senior Director for Talent, Culture, and Leadership Development here at RespectAbility. I use the he series of pronouns. And today I am wearing a blue blazer with a black plaid shirt underneath. I'm wearing black rimmed glasses. And I'm a black man with a curly fro. So it's very nice to be here with you all. And if I could have this slide shared, I can share a little bit more with you about our accessibility features for today's meeting. So our accessibility notes include that you can turn on our captions using the CC button in Zoom. And we can also pin the interpreter to ensure they are visible throughout the presentation. To view live transcripts in a separate window, please use the link that is in the chat box. And please put questions for our speakers in the Q&A box. This webinar is being recorded, and so after open captions are added, you will find it at RespectAbility.org/Ten -- as a t-e-n. And the link is also available in the chat box as well. So like I said before, I'm here to welcome you to this wonderful series that we have. But don't forget to check out the other events that we have coming up as well. We'll be talking about advancing opportunities on Wednesday, April 19th, with a virtual networking session to follow the following Wednesday, April 26th. We'll be talking about changing attitudes in the fireside chat on Wednesday May 17th, with a virtual networking event to follow the following Wednesday, May 24th. And we'll also be talking about developing leaders in a fireside chat on Wednesday, June 21st, the networking event to happen the following Wednesday, June 28th. All of these events can be found at RespectAbility.org/Ten. Today, I'm so excited to have our amazing and talented Board Chair, as well as our current CEO, to have a discussion with you all about where we are as an organization, and how we're moving through our DEIA initiatives together. And so I want to introduce you to both of these wonderful people. So first I'll start with our board chair Ollie Cantos. And so Ollie comes to us as the Chairman of RespectAbility's Board of Directors. Cantos has been active in the civil rights arena since 1990. He is Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights at the U.S Department of Education, attorney mentor for the American Bar Association Commission on Disability Rights, and member of the U.S Coast Guard auxiliary. Ollie has worked for the Disability Rights Legal Center, the American Association of People with Disabilities, the U.S. Department of Justice, and at the White House under President George W. Bush. Prior leadership posts include Vice Chair of the President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities, Vice president of the Virginia Organization of Parents of Blind Children, Legal Officer for the Coast Guard Auxiliary, Vice President of the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, Chairman of the Board for Scholarships for Eagles, President of the California Association of Blind Students, and the National Association of Blind Students, and member of the Boards of Directors of the ENDependence Center of Northern Virginia, the Blind -- Blind Children Center, Community Lodgings, the California Association to Promote the Use of Braille, the National Federation of the Blind of California, Loyola Marymount University Alumni Association, and Loyola Law School Alumni Association. But Ollie is most grateful for his adoption of three blind triplet boys: Leo, Nick, and Steven. Thank you so much for joining us today, Ollie.

>> Ollie Cantos: Thank you for having me!

>> Graciano Petersen: And also next to Ollie, we have Ariel Simms, the President and Chief Executive Officer of RespectAbility. Alright. Ariel is a queer and multiply disabled social justice advocate, leader, and educator. Ariel has worked to promote equity, justice, and meaningful inclusion of marginalized communities throughout their career. A lifelong member of the disability community, Ariel grew into their first disabilities in childhood, while also supporting disabled family members. Ariel started their professional career in the disability field as a mental health counselor in the state of Michigan. Since then, Ariel has worked on disability advocacy in the United States and internationally in a variety of areas, including supporting decision-making legal capacity, healthcare, access to justice, education, employment, and self-advocacy. Prior to joining RespectAbility, Ariel led the Arc of the United States' access equity and inclusion work and chapter growth and affiliate relations, bringing on new and supporting existing chapters of the Arc and nonprofit association members across the country. In addition to their role at RespectAbility, Ariel is a scholar in residence with the philosophy and religion department of American University, where Ariel teaches human rights and disability -- and disability law and ethics. Ariel has -- also co-chairs the Board of Directors for the Disability Rights Bar Association, and Ariel holds a Juris Doctorate from -- from Harvard Law School. Thank you so much for joining us as well, Ariel.

>> Ariel Simms: Thank you Graciano and thank you so much for that incredible introduction, and reminding all of -- today about what is coming up in this series. So excited to be with everyone on this webinar, and to share this space with you, and to share the space, of course, with my wonderful partner in leadership, Ollie Cantos. So here's how the session is going to work today. Ollie and I are going to have a bit of a chat to start things off, so we can share a little bit more about what we've been thinking about in terms of RespectAbility's first 10 years, and what's coming up for us in the next decade, and how our commitment to diversity equity inclusion and accessibility, or DEIA, really helps us shape that vision for the future. And then we're gonna turn it over to the audience, and take some questions live from folks, and answer what you want to know about what comes next for RespectAbility. So again, thank you so much for being here. We are so glad you're here, and so excited for this conversation today. So my -- I get to go first, I'm really lucky I get to go first. And I get to ask Ollie, what brought you to RespectAbility and serving on the Board of Directors?

>> Ollie Cantos: Well I came to RespectAbility because of prior leadership, who had told me about the organization. And at that time, I was already involved with the disability rights movement for roughly more than 25 years. And because of my efforts at the local, state, and national levels, I had come to know various leaders of RespectAbility, and actually have known a few of them for a number of years. And so when they told me about getting involved here, I was just really excited, because I was looking to be involved in an organization that is cutting edge, that brings people together, and that has a real go-getter intense approach to building the disability rights movement even bigger, and doing it at an intersectional level, as well as covering different types of disabilities and people across the lifespan. So when I learned about the opportunity to be involved just to -- just to help whatever I could, I just jumped at the chance. I normally don't say yes to most board position invitations, because of other things that I'm doing. But when I was afforded with a chance to get involved here, I was just super super excited about all of it. And so when I think about -- that, Ariel, it makes me think about you, with -- when you became President and CEO here. And I'm just wondering -- just out of curiosity for folks here, what got you excited yourself about getting involved with RespectAbility?

>> Ariel Simms: Thanks Ollie. And just thank you so much for sharing what brought you to the organization, and what excites you about the work that the organization is doing. You know, something you said really resonated with me, and that was bringing people together. I really think that is such an incredible power of RespectAbility. You know, we are a national disability-led cross-disability organization, but at our heart, we try to bring people together, and we try to bring people together within an incredibly diverse disability community. So I would have to echo you and say that that was one of the things that certainly excited me about joining the organization as its next leader. So that just really stood out. You know, I was also really excited by the work of the organization. I mean it's -- so rare to see an organization working in so many spaces, and in so many spaces that have such an impact on how people -- society -- really views and understands disability. The fact that RespectAbility is working on authentic representation in Hollywood, you know, in front of and behind the camera, and having an impact, that it's supporting the growth of emerging disabled leaders and really setting them up for success and in the future of our movements, the fact that we're doing policy work and really making lasting change, and that we're supporting faith communities in their inclusion work -- I think just knowing the core pillars of RespectAbility's work was was such an incredible part of the reason that I wanted to take on this opportunity. And I'd say the last thing that was really something that was exciting, but also really impressed me, was that RespectAbility as an organization is really recommitting itself to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, and that's something that's so deeply needed across the entire disability advocacy community. We have to really be grounding our work in DEIA principles, and DEIA is a core tenant for RespectAbility. And I think it's more than that. You know, in the 10 plus months I've been on the job, I'd really say it's a shared value of our team, and the organization. And like many organizations, you know, perhaps we've not always lived our values in the past. And so we want to learn from those experiences and really grow for the future. But we are really excited, and I'm really excited about that growth that we're going to have for DEIA. And there's lots more to come, I think, on this particular topic. But in the meantime, I just wanted to invite anyone to reach out to me personally to learn more about our renewed commitment to DEIA, the work that we're doing inside and out within the organization, or to share an experience that you have with our organization. We are absolutely committed to learning from our past as we do better in this work moving forward.

>> Ollie Cantos: I love that. And especially the -- great thing about you as a leader, and I've said this to you a trillion times privately, but I also wanted to say it here -- that your being our President and CEO is just such -- it's such a blessing to us, because we here at RespectAbility continually seek to bring people together from every part of our community -- not only with regard to disability, but also when when looking at across the political -- spectrum, as well as people who have multiple identities, and I know we're going to be talking about that later, too. But the thing is, what I love about our partnership with you and me is that we just really have that mutual commitment to leading this organization to whole -- entirely new levels. And -- I just -- I'm so appreciative to you for all that you continue to contribute to us.

>> Ariel Simms: Well, thank you Ollie. I'm so grateful for the partnership, and I know we've deeply share this commitment and we're -- I think, you know, so excited for really what's to come for RespectAbility, and what's already changed. Now of course, 2023 is an exciting year for RespectAbility anyways. It marks the 10-year anniversary of the organization's founding, which is just incredible. So I have to know, Ollie, looking back on the first decade of RespectAbility's work and advocacy, you know, what is something that you're most proud of? If you could pick one thing.

>> Ollie Cantos: I have to pick just one? [laughs]

>> Ariel Simms: Okay, maybe two.

>> Ollie Cantos: I feel like I want to exercise chairman's prerogative. [laughter] But well, there's so many things that I really really love about what has happened over the past 10 years. You mentioned earlier our work in Hollywood. So frequently in the broader world, there are there are myths and misconceptions about people with all types of disabilities. And in the past, historically, people with disabilities -- were seen in less than a positive light in order to advance a storyline or wherever. But -- through the work at -- particularly under the leadership of Lauren Appelbaum, it's just been incredible, the way that we have been able to change attitudes by the millions, because -- of the hundreds of projects that we've been involved with, with television and movies, and how -- how -- folks from within the studio system have really embraced our efforts to build greater inclusion. It's leading to all sorts of employment opportunities for people with all types of disabilities to be -- involved in Hollywood, both in front of and behind the camera. And the thing is that it's leading to major paradigm shifts, where where we are seen in the light of who we are more broadly, beyond just disability itself, or beyond any type of -- typecasting. But that actually also ties into other -- something else I'm really proud of with us, which is our leadership development efforts. We have literally by now -- through the cohorts that have happened year after year after year -- hundreds of rising up and coming disability rights leaders, who've taken places -- their places at the White House, at different federal agencies, at state and local government, as well as in the nonprofit sector, and also the private sector. So what we have done at RespectAbility is we have built a leadership factory, and that is a big doggone deal. I'm super excited about that. Because the fact is that we as a movement are only as strong as our weakest link. And when it comes to what we do for our community, by strengthening everyone who -- with whom we meet, by finding ways to give them opportunities to serve in leadership, by having a direct personal impact in working on public policy, and communications, and Hollywood, and further relationship cultivation, and fundraising, and all sorts of things -- we here get to be a wonderful training ground for our folks. And the thing is, we originally weren't in a position to pay everybody the way we are now. But because of how we have had -- and keep building on the commitment that we as people with disabilities need to have the same kind of quality opportunities like everybody else, it's incredible when thinking about the folks who have come through here, who are now alumni of ours, who continue to network with one another, who stay in touch with us, and then it creates an awesome feedback loop which I just love, because then it enables people to get further involved, and then they bring other people. There -- there are instance after instance in which some of the cohort members who are more recent were referred to us or learned about us from prior cohort members. That says a lot about our program, because when we build the way we do, by giving people direct opportunities to be involved, it isn't just theoretical. They get to just roll up their sleeves to get to work and and it's really absolutely phenomenally fantastic, because when combining that with the speakers bureau, and other things that we do here with faith inclusion -- which is another area that our -- fellows -- Apprentices have focused on, we just are all over the place. And then when combining that with public policy, it's just super phenomenal. And that actually -- just even thinking about that, Ariel, I'm wondering what are your thoughts about -- just in light of everything, where are we headed as an organization? What do you -- what do you envision to happen over the next 10 years, as you make your mark here with us?

>> Ariel Simms: Oh, well thanks for that question Ollie. I mean, you know, I'm so glad that you didn't limit yourself to just, like, one thing from the past decade.

>> Ollie Cantos: Sorry, I couldn't do it! I couldn't do it!

>> Ariel Simms: So much good work happening across all of our -- really, our core programmatic and advocacy areas, and so I just so appreciate what you kind of brought to light from our -- past. You know, I think as we look towards the next 10 years, it's about really growing that impact and having a deeper impact and advancing the disability movement together -- in collaboration with so many others who have been working in this space -- and doing this work for a long time, really standing on the shoulders of our ancestors, and really continuing to support, I think, those emerging leaders in the space, to make sure that we're not just advancing the movement ourselves, but we are preparing future leaders of this movement to take on those opportunities, and really step into those leadership roles. And I think we really are -- we have such a unique position as a cross-disability organization. A lot of the organizations out there in the space, maybe, focus on one particular type of disability, or particular part of the community. And I think something that's so beautiful about RespectAbility is that we have a power to be a convener and a collaborator within the movement. We have the power to bring people together and leverage our own lived experience. You know, our staff is majority disabled, and so is our Board of Directors. And so we get to bring our own lived experience into the work that we do every day. And I think that just gives us a sense of how we can continue to do this work in the broader community as well. You know, when it comes to our specific program areas, and the advocacy that we're doing every day, you know, when it comes to policy, we really built our foundation on employment -- making sure that we're taking down barriers that keep people with disabilities from getting into the workforce. So in the next decade, we're going to continue to do that! Dismantle those barriers, dismantle the stigmas that are keeping people with disabilities from living the lives of their choosing, including the choice to work, and make sure that people have access to those opportunities and services and supports that make coming into the workforce possible for so many. You know, when it comes to authentic representation, we have been making, you know, a huge splash within Hollywood around authentic representation, and that is shifting the needle overall about how people are thinking and perceiving and wondering about disability. And we're really expanding that work now into the news media space, making sure that journalists and -- reporters are also being authentic in the way that they're sharing disabled stories, and that we have disabled folks who are the ones getting to tell our stories. I think that's what comes next in entertainment. You know, I've already mentioned the disabled leaders and the work we're doing there. I think that just continues to expand, and my hope is that we can get other disability organizations to join us, and really being very intentional with building that pipeline of leaders -- disabled leaders who are going to move on and take on leadership roles in all parts of our society, not just in disability advocacy, but across the board and influence every part of society. And you know, we really did something exciting last year with our expansion from our Jewish inclusion work into multi-faith inclusion. I think that work has been incredibly exciting and has so much potential to continue growing as we reach across faith communities and find new ways to partner and advance disability inclusion together. And honestly, we're a national organization now, but I think we can take our impact global, honestly. And I think that's something that could also be really exciting about our future.

>> Ollie Cantos: Oh I love that! I just love that Ariel, and especially when all of us here -- we get to we get to build on the legacy that has -- of leaders who come before us, like the late Judy Heumann. I mean, she was a mentor to so many of us and as have been so many others. And the fact is that our movement keeps growing and expanding, which is the best. I just get so excited about that, because the opportunities that exist now did not exist when we were younger. And then for our forebearers, they actually were successful because of things that had happened before them. And so for anybody listening to this, they might be thinking "gosh, well how can I get involved with all the work of RespectAbility, how do I know where to start?" And the fun and and incredible reality is that there is a place in the disability rights movement for everyone! For people with disabilities, for allies, for people who join alongside us, for others with whom we join in solidarity -- there's a lot of allyship going on here. And the thing is, it's in our DNA. We love this, we live this, and what's really exciting about all of this is that, when thinking about how the complexity of our work continues to grow, so does the need for us to find more individuals to be up and coming leaders, and for more seasoned leaders to look at us as employers of choice, because we -- as we keep expanding, we already had a strategic plan, we already have slots -- and a whole vision of filling out the organization with 67 positions. I mean, there's a lot that we've envisioned. Our Board of Directors, along with the staff and volunteers and other supporters in the community, we really came together to build a vision to enable all of us to be successful together. And the fact is that no matter what we envision, it just can't happen without our friends in the community stepping forward, and stepping into their power to make a difference by our being together. And that's the thing that we love. We keep building, not just for the sake of inclusion, but for -- but actually for the bigger reality that when we incorporate diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility as a matter of course, and not as a side separate thing that is a part in a different category somewhere else, but it is literally in everything we do. That is by design and by intention. That's why I love our staff, I love our apprentices, as well as our Board of Directors and Board of Advisors. And so just in thinking about that, Ariel, in looking -- looking ahead, what do you envision for us as far as the things that you -- if you could just have a magic wand and you could just wave it or you could just envision -- what it is, I think that people would love to hear your vision of what's to come in an even deeper way.

>> Ariel Simms: Oh absolutely. And gosh, so much of what you said was resonating with me, Ollie, too, you know, creating room for everyone in the movement. You know, you raise such an important point that disability impacts every single issue out there. Any advocacy consideration, any area of life, there's a disability component to it. And I think that's something that the disability community has been working for so long to raise awareness about that -- that we're here, that disability matters, and then it's part of everything that we -- that people, I should say, care about. And I love that this idea of bringing people into our movement, and I think it also works the other way, that we as advocates can be allies to other movements, other groups working to really ensure that everyone can be fully included, fully valued, fully respected for exactly who they are. And we know that disability is such an intersectional identity that it often coincides with so many other identities, whether that be identities as a person of color, as somebody who is queer, LGBTQIA+, as somebody who perhaps is new to the United States, right? So many different identities out there, and the reality is disability intersects with all of them. So I think part of the vision moving forward is that we are leaning into the intersectional nature of disability as an identity, and trying to represent that, you know, disability certainly means different things to those of us who are disabled across the community, but one of the things it often means is that it's part of who we are. It's part of our experience. It's part of what we can bring to the table. And you mentioned our incredible team. I think our team every day brings that experience into the work that they do, and I think we can continue to really lean into, really, our commitment to diversity equity inclusion and accessibility as we move into our future of expanding the work we're doing on policy, of continuing to support emerging leaders, continuing to grow our faith inclusion efforts, and certainly trying to address the continued stigmas and myths about disability out there that really impact so much of our day-to-day lives. You know, I think that, you know, going even further with that, I think we're also really wanting to lean into "nothing about us without us." You know, this was a mantra developed by those with disabilities to tell people without disabilities that hey, when you're making decisions that impact disabled lives, we need to be at those decision-making tables, and not just at the table, at the head of the table. We get to call the shots! We get to take the leadership roles on the issues that impact our lives! And I think that's something that again, as a disability-led organization, is a tremendous power and a privilege of being here part of this team at RespectAbility. So I think continuing to leverage that, our own lived experience, but continuing to highlight the lived experience across the disability community, and particularly those who have overlapping identities that may experience more marginalization or discrimination because of the other identities that they bring into their own lived experience. And I think it also means that we live our commitment inside and out as an organization. So really modeling the changes that we want to see in the world. You know, we've talked about that we want a world where people with disabilities are fully included, they're valued, they're respected, they are leaders. And I think that is what we're trying to do as an organization working from the inside out, in addition to the work we're making -- or the impact outside of the organization. So I'm really excited in particular about some of the things that we're doing internally to really advance our work. So I think that comes into all of the vision pieces that we've been talking about, but you know, let me bring it back to you, Ollie. What do you -- what do you think? How else do we build that into our vision as we move forward?

>> Ollie Cantos: Well here's the thing that I love to say, that we are a political sleeping giant waiting to be awakened. We really are. One of the big untapped strategies that we can continue to build is that we need to recognize that people come from every political perspective, from liberal to conservative or whatever you want to label it. Republican, Democrat, Independent, natural law party, whatever. Whatever it is. But what we say to everybody is that whatever our -- political affiliations are, what we share is this philosophy that disability is not a tragedy! I'll say that a trillion times. It is not a tragedy to have a disability of whatever sort. When we step into our true power, that is -- that also means being proud of every part of who we are. It is not something that we look at as -- as a type of situation where -- oh my gosh, I have a disability, I can't live a full life. No! We say without apology that we as people with disabilities, as -- as disabled people, we are great the way we are! And that's important. And the reason why I mention that is because sometimes there might be folks who -- somehow in the broader world who think that when we have a disability, that somehow we're limited in ability to do things, or if we do things in a different way, it somehow means that we can't do things as well. Not true! And I say that with excitement and enthusiasm, because the fact is that when we recognize people for all of who they are, including all of what they believe, and when we do it in an environment in which we embrace disability -- as being a source of pride for us, and when we see that we actually do have high expectations and we are intent on making sure to open every door of opportunity possible, including blowing the doors off their hinges! [Ariel laughs] We get to be the ones! And that's what's so amazing about this, Ariel! I mean, imagine. We get to lead a cross disability national nonpartisan organization who loves people from every background, who recognizes that in spite of whatever else -- whatever differences we have, we embrace those differences, and we love one another for it. And here's the thing that's important about this, Ariel. When we recognize that and when we utilize it to its full power, then imagine. Let's just talk at the federal level for a moment. If we have a Democrat in the white house or a Republican in the white house, if we have people who are part of RespectAbility and the broader disability rights movement who are Republicans with disabilities, we have folks who are ready to really champion us. We have Democrats -- a Democrat in the white house, then we have Democrats who are ready to champion us. And so when we have that kind of approach, and at the same time we have a literal love and mutual respect and admiration for one another, that is where we really can rock. And I mean that because when we think about it, we're all different, but we embrace those differences, because those differences are what make us strong. Because when we bounce ideas off of one another, when we create synergy by bringing different perspectives together, then just imagine what happens when that occurs. It isn't just inclusion for inclusion's sake, like some may think. It is actually where diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility are actually the -- outgrowth of our commitment to our each being the best that we can be, by ensuring that everyone is included at the table, and that we lead in this, and actually even building from nothing without us -- nothing about us without us, I actually would venture to amend that by saying "nothing without us." Period! Everything in life, every aspect of disability, everything outside the disability world -- when we have our members and our folks who are affiliated with us and our allies, when we -- have everybody thrive to be the best that they can be in whatever, then they thrive in business, they thrive in the nonprofit world, including in nonprofit organizations that have nothing to do with disability, when they thrive in government jobs at the local, state, and federal level, just imagine what happens when we embrace that, when we celebrate that, and when we say to our fellow allies, as well as our -- as those who are with us that we care about you. That's not a Kumbaya thing when we say that we care about you. This movement is built on love. It's built on love for one another, it's built on the commitment to care about one another, and to embrace people for their differences and similarities as they embrace us for ours. It's authenticity at its highest form, and that's what we're building here at RespectAbility. That's why I'm just -- it's literally, with all of the organizations that I've been on the board of in my life -- in my lifetime by now, being here and -- being a part of RespectAbility has been, and continues to be the honor of my life. I have other roles besides. I mean, in my case, besides being a federal official also for more than 18 years, I'm also an elected official here in California now. And so when I talk politics, I'm not talking about that within, like, a partisan context, I'm talking about that we are -- we have the ability to build political power here, by making sure to pave the way for our own members of the disability community to be elected to public office, to be appointed to public office, to serve in the nonprofit world, to serve in -- in the private sector. Because when we do that, we all rise. All of us rise for that. And that's actually why -- that kind of leads to the next spot, Ariel, is that you've talked about diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, but looking just in addition to that, how do you do you see all of us coming together within the context of this vision, this -- this vision that you and I share, and that all of our colleagues share. And how do you see this moving ahead, specifically as we embrace diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, and how we bring everybody together to achieve the broader aims of the movement?

>> Ariel Simms: Well yeah, such an important question and you know, I think something that you said, the power that comes with working together is key. That we can work together not only in an incredibly diverse disability community, but that we can work across different communities, communities that have common goals, that share challenges, that identifies from the same needs that we've identified as a disabled community. I think, you know, it's so important to leverage that power of our own community, of working within the community, but also working alongside so many other communities out there that are facing similar challenges, and trying to get to the same place. You said "nothing about us without us," that we need to change the narrative to "nothing without us," so I think that's an incredible way to summarize what we're trying to do, that we're trying to make sure that disabled identity, other identities, are always part and parcel of the conversations of what we do, that it matters who we are, and that people constantly underestimate us, right? But you know, that's not -- called for, right? We are our own people, we bring our own strengths, and we show up in ways that are authentically us, and that that's exactly who we are and who we get to be. And so I just love so much of what you were saying about "nothing without us" instead of "nothing about us without us." So you know, I really think it also starts with the next generation of leaders too. We're obviously doing work in this current time in space, and we have such a privilege to be able to be in this movement and making these strides. But we're also preparing that next generation and supporting their leadership, and you know, it just occurred to me, we're actually recruiting for a new cohort of fellows right this moment. I think I saw our newsletter go out just a few days ago, so I wanted to make sure to flag for the -- audience, you know, if you're not already signed up for our newsletter or following RespectAbility on social media, we want to make sure that you're following us, and keeping up with our latest news and what's coming up next, and helping us really shape this reality of "nothing without us." So we'll drop that link in the chat of where you can sign up for newsletters and follow us on various social media channels, but please join us in this movement, and really help us take this -- movement forward.

>> Ollie Cantos: And -- with that, real quick, I wanted to add before I forget our philosophy when it comes to collaboration. And I know, Ariel, we've talked about this and I'd love to hear your thoughts about this as well. When it comes to collaboration -- and I'm going to be direct about this, because of just what I've seen from, you know, the past just in working this field for more than 30 years, is that we have got to go get beyond the silos. We really do. Because there are folks who work in the physical disability space, psychiatric disability, mental health disability, learning disability, intellectual disability. There are folks who have these various systems who are working with one -- within themselves, but when it comes to breaking down those silos, that's what we're all about. And as an example of that, we put out a book on economic empowerment of people with disabilities, and we made sure as a team that it was the most comprehensive single stop, one stop shop resource of its kind that we could find anywhere. That's because we have looked. And because of that, what we have done in that book -- and we'll ask Eric to put that in the chat, which is "www.respectability.org/" and then the rest is hyphenated "people-with-disabilities-at-work," when people go through that resource book, which is online on purpose, so that way we can update things as needed in order to keep information current. We promote the work of hundreds of other organizations! I'll repeat that again, because it's worth repeating. We promote the work of hundreds of other organizations! We did that intentionally, because we know philosophically that in terms of synergy, there's more than -- more that we can do together than apart. We know we hear that but sometimes, let's be honest -- in the world of disability or anything, sometimes there could be turf issues or whatever. We don't feel that way. What we want to do is we want to embrace whatever other folks are working on. We want to support them. There will be times when other national organizations will be the lead, and we will be -- more than happy to be a backup, and just to support them. There'll be time -- there will be times that we have our things that other organizations support us. But that's what -- we mean about synergy, where we each have our own areas of expertise and our own areas of strength. And by joining forces that way, and being involved that way, and promoting each other's events and programs and activities, then holy cats. Nothing can stop us! Nothing will! And so wanted to just ask you, Ariel, just share your thoughts about just the philosophy of synergy.

>> Ariel Simms: Oh, absolutely. I think holy cats sums it up, Ollie! [laughter] That's tremendous power within our movement if we come together, if we support one another, if we, you know, agree for some folks to take lead on some things, and others to come together in -- mutual collaboration, really I think the possibilities are infinite. And I've seen this incredible power within the disability community, you know, I've seen it at the community level when we're talking about independent activists and advocates, so it's not even just organizations. It's how we as a disabled community come together who are doing this work and leading into these spaces. And it's -- it's incredible and I'm so grateful for all the advocates, the activists, the organizations that have come before us, for the work that folks are doing now that we get to build on and leverage in the future. And I'm incredibly grateful for the disability movement yet to come. I think that's probably the most exciting part of all of this is knowing that, you know, it will continue. There are leaders today who are making changes, and there are going to be leaders of tomorrow who are making even more changes, and I think that is just -- really will be the legacy of the disability community, and the way we've been able to leverage this. So such exciting things. Now I know we want to get to some questions from our audience. You know, we could -- I know we could talk for hours, but I think we'll have to [laughs] we'll have to press pause and make sure we can get some Q&A from the audience. So for those who are listening, you can submit your questions through the Q&A function on Zoom. You just type your questions there and they'll pop up. And certainly as those questions come in, I'll direct some your way, Ollie. But I -- you know, I think one question that we've already gotten so far is a really good question, which is, you know, how is RespectAbility celebrating its first 10 years of an -- as an organization. So maybe I can start, Ollie, and then you can chime in. Well one of the ways we're celebrating our 10 years is this virtual event series. So really kicking things off by sharing more about what we do as an organization, but also putting out the ways that we can collaborate on how we're developing leaders, you know, advancing opportunities, and changing attitudes. So we're really excited for the rest of the virtual series to come, and of course, we have the privilege of launching the virtual series during today's fireside chat. And this summer, we are going to come together as a team -- board, staff, advisors, partners, etcetera -- to celebrate in person in Los Angeles at this incredible 10-year anniversary bash, we'll call it [laughs] to really, you know, reflect on all of the growth of the organization over those first 10 years, and to really celebrate and -- get excited about the next decade. So Ollie, are you planning to join us in L.A.?

>> Ollie Cantos: Yes. I think I'll have to go a grand total of 36 miles. [Laughter]

>> Ariel Simms: So what are you most looking forward to in our celebration events, Ollie?

>> Ollie Cantos: Well to be very transparent, I just miss hugging our friends. It's been so long since since seeing everybody, but it's also just spending time building -- and that's what would be wonderful, if all of you who are on here, spread the word about this, be with us -- come to be with us here in California, it's gonna -- it's going to be really exciting as we build, as we reconnect with one another in the physical sense, because we miss each other. The pandemic has really pulled us apart in the physical sense, but absence makes the heart grow fonder, right? So if we get to all come together here, we get to build new networking relationships, we get to strengthen the old ones. But the thing that's also exciting in thinking about -- our celebration is that somewhere out there -- and this is the truth -- somewhere out there among somebody, one or more than one person who's watching or listening to this webinar, or watching the -- reading the transcript, somebody knows somebody who is the next great disability rights leader out there. They're out there. They are out there! Because think about all of you who are involved now. Somebody found you. Somebody found us. So we get to do more searching to find the next ones. Today I actually am doing this Zoom webinar from Telesis Academy in West Covina, California, and I've been meeting with a whole bunch of kids today. And in preparation for this I couldn't help but think, wow, maybe they're the next one. They're the next one. He's the next one. She's the next one. They're the next one. Whoever! There are leaders out there who don't even realize we exist yet as a movement. There are people who are still struggling with wondering what -- this disability, what disability is about, because some people acquire disability later in life, and even those of us who have disabilities, if it becomes more severe, like what happened with me when I got hit by a car, I had to go through an adjustment period. But no matter what, whether a disability is acquired or if we've had it later in life, the exciting thing when we get to celebrate together coming up, Ariel, is we get to bring everyone together. We get to bring people together, not only to celebrate but also especially to plan and to do, to actually get more work done. And so I'm just really eager for us to come together this summer for, really, what promises to be a phenomenal time.

>> Ariel Simms: Oh, absolutely, yeah. And we're all about work and making an impact, but we are also about fun, and it's gonna be a very fun event. We've got some more great questions coming in. This next one's for you, Ollie, from Rich in Wyoming. Rich asks, "I wanted to get your input on how disability advocates can better get buy-in from the business community to hire more people with disabilities?"

>> Ollie Cantos: I love that! Thank you so much Rich for the -- the great question. In the traditional past, whenever it comes to employment of people with disabilities, all too frequently the tone was "please give them a chance," you know, "it's really going to make you feel great," that kind of thing. But what has happened, gratefully over time, is an evolution of that philosophy -- by saying hey, you know what, you have an -- we say to the businesses -- there is an untapped pool of talent, ability, skill, energy, enthusiasm, knowledge that's right here. You're going to save -- you're going to have a higher retention rate, you're going to have loyal employees, and on top of that, when you have loyal employees and when you celebrate and embrace disability, your profitability goes up! There are studies that prove this! There's a disability -- equity index -- and there are other measures that prove from a business case that when people with disabilities are brought on board, as interns, as employees, as leaders within the companies, the companies just do better. They do better, they make more money. They also make a bigger difference and they make more money. That's important for businesses to know. So in other words, whenever we all go out and we promote internship and job opportunities for people with disabilities, it needs to be from a posturing of saying, you know what, it's a good investment. It's just a good investment. It's not a matter of charity, it's not a matter of inspiration in the old sense of, oh just, oh gosh, they're so inspiring. Nothing like that. It's more a matter of hey, you know what, we as people with disabilities, we're good! We are really good. And when you put our people in those positions, and when they receive the supports -- the way everyone should, whether they have a disability or not -- they will thrive, and they'll make your company look good, and your company will make more money. When we talk about that, and when we do it in terms of ROI, return on investment, and when we show them that, that's the key. And then as we prepare people with disabilities to take those jobs with that way of thinking, of saying you know what, I'm here to work hard, and darn it, I'm going to give it all I've got because that's what -- what I have an ability to do, and I want to reach my greatest potential. If everybody in the -- community feels that way and pushes for that, and then they're given opportunities because of partnerships with different organizations that help facilitate employment, then wow -- imagine the millions and billions of dollars that we will make as a community, more -- as people with disabilities. It's just going to be amazing.

>> Ariel Simms: Oh, absolutely. And you know, here at RespectAbility, we have such a wide array of consulting and training services available to the employer community. So if you know an employer that is looking to advance disability inclusion, and create a more inclusive culture in the workplace, and bring on this incredible talent with -- folks with disabilities, you know, please reach out to our training and consulting bureau. We do work in the entertainment space, but we work with employers in every sphere. And we'd love to work with you, so please, don't hesitate to refer people our way. We've got so much I think we can offer, in addition to the resources that Ollie mentioned earlier. All right we've got some -- another great question here in the Q&A. This one is from Tom. "What do you think our biggest roadblocks to inclusion of our disabled poor or those incarcerated in institutions and under guardianship? How do we remedy this, and what RespectAbility programs do you see in the future to help remedy this?" So I think I can get us started, Ollie, and I'd love to have you chime in before we have to turn over to Graciano to close us out. But you know, this is such an important question. And for those of us who are disabled and not institutionalized, we have such an incredible privilege to not be in those places, right, to not be in the carceral systems, whether that be in the civil -- the civil side of things under guardianship, or in the criminal legal system, and in prisons or jails. And I think absolutely, the things that we have been talking about also impact these particular communities. You know, when it comes to trying to get out -- make sure disabled people are free and out of these places, I think there's a lot we can do from a policy standpoint to really make a difference. You know, one of the big policy issues that's been out there for a long time and that many people have worked on is trying to move the needle on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, or the CRPD. And the fact that we're a signatory, but we haven't ratified it, which would make probably a big difference in the way that the U.S. treats individuals with disabilities internally. So I think that's an incredible opportunity that we need to embrace. I think we also have to continue to support those who are coming out of Institutions, who are coming out of carceral facilities, and make sure that they have the same access to education, employment, and leadership opportunities, because that experience and their perspective absolutely matters. So I do see this coming up in our policy work, I see this coming up in the work that we do to support emerging leaders, honestly, and of course, you know, I think it also -- comes up in the way that we think about authentic representation. These stories, these perspectives, these lived experiences absolutely matter, and they also have to be a part of the conversation and be represented. So Ollie, what about you?

>> Ollie Cantos: I'll see if I can make this fast, because I see that we're running out of time. So I'll speak a little bit faster, because there's a lot to say about this. We need to stop the school to prison pipeline, where people with disabilities are subjected to higher degrees of discipline, which leaves them more to entering the criminal justice system, as opposed to alternative approaches that actually could assist them from not becoming part of the criminal justice system. Once they're in the criminal justice system, there's a Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act, or CRIPA, that really has to be addressed as well. But the -- stereotypes there, even when it comes to criminal justice, where there are literally situations where people have -- there was one case I know of where there was someone who was deaf who was trying to sign to the police officer. They took it as a sign of aggression and then -- they arrested the person. And then -- I mean that's awful stuff. And then -- when it comes to people who are in prison and in other institutions, there's this -- these stereotypes, like, somehow our folks are somehow more defective and are not in a position to return to society -- to the same degree. And -- we've got to really look at those those situations more closely, without jumping to conclusions based on the presence of whatever type of disability. Of course, case by case is important, but the fact is that there are still prevailing myths and misconceptions about people who are institutionalized. And plus, there's a lot of people in institutions who are eager to get out -- and that's why we need to really focus on the Olmstead decision, and focusing on making sure that people can live in the community with family and friends, as opposed to institutional settings, because when we have that in the community as well, and when we have allies that really build in advocating for that, that's how we can really facilitate a lot of change. So back to you with that, Ariel.

>> Ariel Simms: Oh, thank you so much Ollie. Really really important stuff. So I say that we've got three minutes left. There are more questions in the chat. I'm so sorry we couldn't get to everything today, but you can email myself and Ollie. I'm gonna ask our colleagues to drop those email addresses in the chat box, so please don't hesitate to reach out to us if we didn't get to your question today. We are so grateful that you were here to join us and be part of the conversation. And with that, I'm going to turn it over to Graciano to close us out.

>> Graciano Petersen: Thank you all so much for that wonderful conversation today. I feel so bad having to call it to a close, but it is that time. We are quickly approaching three o'clock. But as everyone has heard today, we are at -- we've had an incredible decade of success in fighting for people with disabilities. And all of the accomplishments and activities have been powered by generous support from the public. And there are so many things left to accomplish to fully eliminate harmful stigmas and create more opportunity for people with disabilities. So we need your continued support to ensure success in the next decade. So please do consider donating in honor of this milestone to help us make a bigger impact in the decade to come. Your donations help us support people with disabilities so they can fully participate and contribute to all aspects of their community. so please visit RespectAbility.org/Donate/Anniversary-Fund to join the movement. And please check us out, check out our upcoming events as well. As you know, it is a series of events that we have, so please make sure to go ahead and get the rest of the series. Mark it on your calendars now, and join us for further conversations. Clearly they're really robust, we have a lot of engagement, and we want to make sure that you all are here to hear more about what's happening next. So we hope to see you next on April 19th, and join us for the whole series in its entirety.

>> Ollie Cantos: And in the words of Justin Dart, we love you, lead on!

>> Graciano Petersen: Alright, thanks so much everyone.

>> Ariel Simms: Thank you all, have a great rest of your day!