>> Ariel Simms: Hello everyone, and welcome to RespectAbility’s inaugural National Disability Employment Awareness Month, or NDEAM, Summit. My name is Ariel Simms and I’m the President and Chief Executive Officer of RespectAbility. My pronouns are they/them or she/hers. I am a white nonbinary individual. I’m wearing a dark jacket and a multi-colored shirt and glasses, and I have red, shoulder-length hair. We are so pleased to have you with us and hope you find our presentations informative and helpful for your career journey. As an organization led by people with disabilities, here at RespectAbility we believe it’s important to recognize the contributions of individuals with disabilities in the workforce, and help make positive contributions. Our summit focuses on the larger theme of advancing access and equity. You will have ample opportunities to interact ask questions and participate. At the end of the sessions today, we invite you to join us for some networking time. And we’re so grateful to you for being part of this event.

Now before we get too far into our event, I do want to take a moment and acknowledge the recent loss of one of our incredible team members here at RespectAbility, Ben Spangenberg, who passed away in late September. He was the Senior Manager of our National Leadership Program, and his passing has been a tremendous loss for our team and the larger disability community. We extend our condolences to his family and friends in this difficult time. We also pledge to honor his legacy by continuing to work with the same dedication and commitment that he exemplified every day. To honor Ben, please join me in a brief moment of silence. Thank you for joining us in that moment of silence. Please enjoy the summit today. Live captioning and American Sign Language interpretation will be provided throughout the event, and the summit will also be recorded and freely available after the live sessions. And now, I’d like to welcome Shelly Christensen and Reverend Ben Bond to start our first session, “Putting Your Network To Work.”

>> Shelly Christensen: Thank you Ariel. And yes -- and thank you for that moment to remember Ben, to honor Ben's work. I would like to introduce my colleague, the other half of the Faith Inclusion and Belonging Department, Ben Bond. And Ben will be moderating today's panel. Hi Ben!

>> Ben Bond: Hello Shelly, thank you! Yes, as Shelly mentioned, I'll be the moderator for this panel. I want to give us some time to do some some brief introductions. I'll go first to kind of model what we hope, but go ahead and we can share our names, job title and Department, visual descriptions, pronouns, and the first fun question: what is your networking superpower, as this is a panel on professional networking. So my name is Ben Bond. I am the Faith Inclusion and Belonging Associate here at RespectAbility. My pronouns are he and they. And my visual description is I am a white genderqueer person that is masculine presenting, with a large brown and red beard with glasses, brown hair, and a blue shirt, along with my RespectAbility 10th anniversary celebration background. And my networking superpower is I really love connecting other people and seeing their places of convergence, and being able to bridge -- different people together so that they can do mutually beneficial work, and helping each person have the -- like you know, introducing a little bit about each person that I'm connecting to each other. And I'll pass it on to Shelly, my other half of the department, and we can go around to our other panelists as well.

>> Shelly Christensen: Thanks Ben, hi everyone. I'm Shelly Christensen and I'm the Senior Director of Faith Inclusion and Belonging here at RespectAbility. I am a white woman with midlength shoulder length brown curly hair and wearing blue glasses -- big blue glasses and red lipstick, and a gold sweater. Behind me is the logo for RespectAbility's 10th anniversary. My networking superpower is that I am fearless at reaching out to people and connecting people, like Ben. Connection is what it's all about. And I don't look at networking as it's just something you do. It is a way to bring people together around some point of interest. I'm gonna go to Lawon next. Hi Lawon!

>> Lawon Exum: Hello everyone, my name is Lawon Exum. I am the Entertainment and News Media Director for RespectAbility. I am a black male with black curly hair, a little dust gray hair on the face. I have a pink and green multicolor shirt, and in my background is the 10th anniversary of RespectAbility. And I have to say my networking superpower -- because I work in the entertainment industry and I've been in the entertainment industry for over 30 years -- I would have to say I just love talking to people, so it's easy for me to -- I don't look at networking as networking to try to see what someone can do for me, or what people can do for somebody else that I might know. It's just a fact of just communicating with them and being able to see what they do and then building that relationship as the conversation continues on, and by receiving their their business card or receiving an email to continue the conversation. But I have to admit that my networking is probably my fashion, because every time I go to a different event or even when I network, I try to put on socks that can start a conversation. So for me it's a conversation piece. So once they might compliment my socks, then that's when the networking begins for me. And so I will pass it onto Vanni now.

>> Vanni Le: Great, thanks Lawon, I'm Vanni Le, pronouns she/hers. I'm our Senior Manager of Entertainment Partnerships. I'm a Vietnamese American woman with long black straight hair. I'm wearing a headset, and I have on a shirt that is orange, pink, and magenta. And my background is a gray background with our RespectAbility tenth anniversary logo. I would say that my networking superpower is that I, really very similar to what Lawon said and also what Shelly said too, is that when I meet someone I am completely unmasked. I treat everyone the same way. I like to see networking not as something that I can do for someone else or what they can do for me, but really just making a friend who may or may not work in the same field as me, and may eventually have some kind of professional alignment. And that's all that is.

>> Ben Bond: Thanks everybody for sharing who you are. You're all fantastic co-workers and I'm excited to pick your brain today. I think I'd start off just by asking what are some, you know, practical strategies or even soft skill strategies you use when approaching networking in your field? That can include, like, informational interviews or attending conferences. I think a lot of us -- are hungry to know more about what strategies you've used and continue to use, and yeah, I'd love to hear more about that.

>> Lawon Exum: I can start off the conversation. I think that because I started out my career when I was younger in customer service, so I take those traits that were instilled in me in -- for training of how to get customers or just -- to conversate with people. So I always think when I go to an event or go try to network, I always go in -- try to talk to at least two people that you probably haven't seen before at an event, or you may want to be intrigued what they do or what they may know about. So I always go into an event trying to conversate with two people, and then from there it just goes to numerous other people. So that's kind of my strategy when I think of networking, and going to, like, an an event or going to a place where, you know, I want to talk about what I do or even meet people that may be able to extensify what I do as well, so.

>> Vanni Le: I'll go next. So similar in line to seeing networking as just making friends, I think that a lot of times, especially for early career folks, there's a lot of pressure to either network with people who are in a higher position, an executive, someone who's more senior who may have hiring power. But sometimes that's really intimidating. You don't know really how to approach it. At least in my experience, the best networking that I've had is networking with my own peers, which is so important because these are folks that will grow with you. So my biggest recommendation is to take advantage of, if you're ever in -- if you're currently in school, a fellowship, some kind of program, is to really get connected to those folks, because you never know where they'll end up, the people that they'll know, and I think when you're in a close cohort like that, it's naturally a lot easier to create those conversations and get to know them and really foster those really valuable connections as well.

>> Shelly Christensen: I want to add some words of wisdom from my grandfather Max, of blessed memory. He used to say "to be known, you have to be shown." It means if you're present, just don't be afraid to speak up. Don't be afraid to just connect. I'm a very shy person at heart, I guess I used to be in a previous life. But I would think, "why would anybody want to talk to me?" You know, I'm just, you know, here, but I haven't done anything worthwhile. Well that's -- that kind of self-talk is self-defeating, and so I would just literally tell myself "there's somebody interesting." "They look interesting." Or "that person, oh, they wrote a book," or, "they're well known and darn it, they need to know about me, and I need to know about them." And so I think that that's -- I think it's really easy to just kind of want to melt into the background in any kind of networking situation. Find a person -- one person -- all it takes is one person to connect with, and from there it just sort of links to other opportunities and other people.

>> Lawon Exum: To piggy back on that -- it's right -- I believe that you're right. It's easy to fall into the background and just say, you know, I'm not -- able to be able to talk to this person. But again, I go back to -- find, just like you said, somebody wrote a book. Let me introduce myself just to -- "thank you for that book" or "thank you for what you said in that book" or -- just a conversation -- a piece just to introduce yourself. And I think it just authentically starts building relationships with other people, because once you start talking to them, then all of a sudden they might say, "well let me introduce you to this person." And that's when I believe when the networking starts. It's just that one initial conversation that will start to grow your networking for whatever you're networking for.

>> Ben Bond: Thanks y'all. No, I really -- I resonate with a lot of those responses I really appreciate your perspective, Vanni, of connecting with those in your peer group. I think that often networking can get really focused on kind of catching the big fish, so to speak. And the reality is, as everyone shared, that it is really focused on connecting with people across professional fields and levels, and that's where the most success can be had. Yeah, so I think the other question I was curious about, what kind of stories of success have y'all had in the ways in which networking has helped you in your job searches? As everybody here is either mid to late level professional, love to hear those stories.

>> Shelly Christensen: I think for me, networking has really been the backbone of my career. I was late coming into the field of Faith inclusion and disability -- when I say late I wasn't -- I was doing other things, but I just -- I was just talking to friends who happen to work at an agency who happen to have this job and, through getting to know me, they were like, this is your job. And that really is how I started my very first job in this field. And from there I just -- every time I talked to somebody, every time I connected to somebody, whether it was in the agency or the community or eventually on a national level, I looked at those things as relationships -- not things -- I looked at people as people I wanted to connect with and build a relationship with. And that really has been substantial. I have learned to -- without sounding, you know, like, "oh look at me." "Oh look at me" is not a thing when you have something to share. And so I really brought that up. And in conversations, other people shared what they had to share. And eventually, those started leading to jobs, to consultations, to this entirely robust career that I started building 22 years ago, and in fact -- that's how I learned about the job at RespectAbility. And so I think every single job I've had in this field has started with relationships that I've -- that I've had, and made. [crosstalk] [laughter]

>> Lawon Exum: I have to admit, I mean, being in the industry and entertainment, it's all about relationships. And I will have to say every job that I received was built on relationships from networking. And it's even started out from being in a classroom in college in school. And I was always told, you know, network with someone in your class, because you never know, that person next to you might be your boss. And I think that is so true. And just because of me networking all throughout my career, I have gotten jobs because of relationships that I've built through jobs that I've had and through jobs that I've been trying to get, and it'd just start out from just building relationships, just talking with people, just talking to my peers as Vanni said -- I mean talking to my peers that I would intern with. And that led to a position. And then from then on, you know, they're working somewhere else and then they talk to someone that may know me, and it -- I mean, the relationships that I built throughout my career has really really helped me build my network. So I would have to say that networking and just starting out just by talking to your inner peers, that really got me to where I'm at today, my relationship building with networking.

>> Vanni Le: Lawon, I am so glad that you actually started us off, because the story I was going to share is actually about you. So Lawon was actually hired about -- I want to say seven months ago now. So while I was part of the hiring process and Lawon actually went to the same grad school as me -- different times, we didn't overlap, but as I was looking at his LinkedIn, I saw that he was actually connected to a really good friend of mine who did overlap with him. So I reached out to her. I asked, "hey, do you know this person named Lawon? I think you're connected to him." And she said "yes," like, "I was a classmate of his, I've been in several classes, I have nothing but good things to say about him." And that is a big part of how he got the job because, in going back to what you said, networking with your peers, your school, you never know where they're going to end up or who's going to know who in this industry. But it actually helped so much and it was really reassuring to get that -- to have someone who I was personally close with vouch for someone who is now part of my professional life.

>> Ben Bond: That is incredible, that is exactly what I was hoping y'all would be able to share. I also want to acknowledge that networking can be kind of -- especially for those of us who are on the neurodivergent, you know, spectrum, it can be a very confusing, you know, not super clear experience that has a lot of -- a lot of unspoken rules or expectations. And I want to really give us a chance to kind of outline -- you know, we've talked a little bit about the successes. What are some failures or -- don't know if failures is the word, but the mistakes that folks can make in their networking journey -- that maybe that you have made that you've learned from that can be helpful for folks -- who want to do their -- do networking well, especially for those of us who are neurodivergent and have more kind of clear guidelines on what not to do, because that can be just as helpful as knowing. what to do. So I wanted to offer that question up for everybody.

>> Lawon Exum: I -- to be honest with you, I don't think there are any rule -- I really don't feel like there -- I think we get so caught up that we think there are rules to network. What rules? You're just communicating with people. You're just having a conversation with somebody, and all of a sudden they're becoming in your circle of a network. So I -- I have to be honest with you, I don't feel like I go by rules. I go by the way that I have to communicate with people due to, you know, my disability or what have you. So I just feel there are no rules. Whatever makes you comfortable to network with a certain individual, again, and it depends on what space as well that you're in. Like, again, I'm on the entertainment side. So I only can speak from from the entertainment side. And I know I'm very open and very -- as soon as you meet me, I'm -- I'mma go by what my grandmother would tell me: first impression is the best impression. What you see is what you get. When some -- someone shows you who they are the first time, believe them. So I feel like I have two seconds to show you who Lawon is, and I hope that you get what I want you to get from them two seconds, because I know I'mma leave -- I hope I leave a lasting impression so we can continue to communicate. So I don't know if I was off on the answer, but I just feel like there are no rules. Like, I just feel like what makes me comfortable -- I just jumping in. I'm like, you have two seconds to know who Lawon is. I'm going give you a show for two seconds, and I hope you get done and you applaud after that show after I'm conversating with you. That's how I go into it. [laughing] That's just me.

>> Vanni Le: I'd love to add on to that too. I think -- a lot of the networking rules that are often shared with us are very much things that might work for someone who's neurotypical, but for someone who's neurodivergent, it can be offputting and really confusing of how to navigate that. I think one thing to always emphasize is authenticity -- do what feels right to you. That's also why I always -- I keep going back to this -- is treat networking like making friends, right? I think something that I was taught in networking that I no longer follow is, like, if there is -- best practice is to reach out to so and so person every month, and keep that repeated communication. But if that's something that's exhausting or tiring or feels wrong or you feel like you're bothering them and it doesn't feel right to you, then it's okay. It's the same way I'm sure all of us -- we have friendships that have varying cadences -- people that we text every week, people that we haven't talked to in years. But then when you catch up, it's like no time has passed. And so I think if you treat networking in that same way and be authentic to the communication style that works best for you, that authenticity and that enthusiasm will naturally shine through, and that's when you'll do your best networking.

>> Shelly Christensen: 100%. I remember I was part of a Leadership Institute and one of the people that was in charge of it was really well known in the disability field. And I was so intimidated by this man, I would be, you know, like, I'm not even going to go sit at the table with him, or if he'd come sit at a table I was with I'd be, like, clamming up. Why? I was afraid he wouldn't like me. I was afraid I wouldn't make a good impression. And some of this has to do with my neurodiversity, certainly, and being able to kind of read the room, read the faces and, you know, that kind of thing. And I really felt -- I was so disappointed in myself for just not being genuine and authentic. And so I left the institute -- I mean we were done. And probably maybe four years later I ran into this person at an event, it was a great place to network, a big convening. And we just sat and talked. And you know, call it networking if you will. What it led to was he and I working together to co-found -- another Leadership Institute and to work together. And to -- he's one of my most favorite supporters. He's also a mentor. And it all -- eventually it -- I kind of grew up and understood more about why I admired him so much. And it was -- but it was a -- mistake, if you want to call it that. I don't think it was a mistake, it was a learning experience. And so I really, when I feel intimidated and believe me I feel intimidated sometimes to talk to someone, I just think to myself, you know what? I got -- my own street cred here. I'm just [laughs] it's self talk, it's mindset. I got something here, I want to share it with them, I want to share it with the world. So that was my lesson -- one of the biggest lessons I think.

>> Ben Bond: Thank you all, that's so excellent. We have a Q&A question in the chat along those lines from Rebecca Woolfe: what is a good way to balance talking about yourself and asking information about other people while networking?

>> Lawon Exum: I'll --

>> Vanni Le: You go first.

>> Lawon Exum: Okay, I mean I will start off by saying -- I mean I guess to make you feel kind of like you don't feel like you're talking about yourself, I would just think of it as going into the approach like, again, I'm gonna have to jump on Vanni's bandwagon. Treat it as like you're building a friend, like you're -- talking to a friend, like you're -- someone you're just getting ready to meet. Of course you're going to talk about yourself as well, but you're going to also give them time to talk about themselves as well, so it don't feel like you are -- talking and glorifying yourself and making yourself put on a pedestal. I say go into it like -- how -- this is how I'm communicating with this person and I'm going hear what they have to say about themselves as well so I think it'll even out how you may think of going into a networking situations thinking like I'm just talking about myself and they don't want to hear about that. So that's how I would answer that question.

>> Vanni Le: I think finding commonalities is very helpful too. If you start off with asking a specific question about someone, and if there's something that really resonates with you about what they said, that's a good transition after they're done to say, hey, I really resonate with that and then share a little bit more about your own personal experience about why you resonate with that. It'll also help personalize it and then also they'll remember you as something that they had something in common with too, so --

>> Shelly Christensen: Right, Vanni, we are on the same wavelength. Oh yes -- I was gonna go of course! I think one thing to remember and to really -- tell yourself is that you are one of two people in a dialogue in a conversation. And it's not, okay, this person will get, hmm, 30 seconds, then I have to answer back. One of the greatest -- I don't know, sayings, I guess, is listen to hear, not listen to respond. We do that all the time. And I think this is -- networking is such a fertile ground to just listen. Listen to learn more about someone. Find those common interests -- they're there -- if you're calling somebody who you've never talked to before and -- they don't know you, just -- tell them why you're calling and -- I thought you might be interested in, or I want to tell you about something that. And just then -- they might say I'm not interested, and that's okay, because they -- at least you've made that connection, and that can open another door for next time. So I think that that's really key. And another thing I want to say about networking -- where do you find networks? And one, of course being in the faith inclusion and belonging world, we're very much tuned into where people can network -- for employment. And it is, I think, if you belong to a faith community or a -- community center, whatever that is where you find community, remember too that there are people there who are members, who are part of an organization, who belong there, also may be hiring managers, HR people, may own their own businesses. They may know somebody who knows somebody. And that is, I think, the -- just so powerful. So networks aren't just in a Zoom room or at a conference or any place like that. They're in the community. And I think we really advocate for looking -- to build a network within a faith community if you're a member, or if you belong to a faith-based organization. So that's untapped territory.

>> Ben Bond: Thank you all, that was excellent responses to that question. Kind of in alignment with some of our -- the questions popping up in our Q&A, I think this would be a good opportunity to ask what advice would you all have for disabled professionals hoping to find employment in the disability advocacy field, as we're all in. And you can talk to specifically the entertainment or faith departments respectively, or the field as a whole. I think it'd be really helpful to learn more what your advice would be.

>> Lawon Exum: My advice would be to be authentically yourself. I can't stress that enough. I was in a situation when I was working earlier in my career, and because I wasn't honest with my disability, I brought it to my manager. And when I brought it to my manager, they were very receptive, because they didn't know. They didn't know any information to give me or what -- any information to help me. And so when I just was my authentic self, and was honest with who I was, I started to get help. And that promoted other people that worked in my industry to get help as well. So that opened doors for a lot of people with disabilities that may have had a disability that was working with me -- I opened that door because of me just being my authentic self and communicating -- again, a form of networking. I just really truly feel that when you are who you say you are, believe it. I know it's hard -- trust me. It's been times in my career I didn't believe in who I was. But I say that to say that communication, and getting to know the other person who may be in the same situation that you may be in, and just having an open dialogue and being your authentic self, which is -- it's hard, but I feel like just being your authentic self will help you.

>> Vanni Le: I think we're all reading each other's minds right now, because I was definitely going to say authenticity too, especially the piece of your question, Ben, about getting into disability advocacy, right, is that the best disability advocates are those with that lived experience -- nothing about us without us. And so, if you're authentic to your lived experience, you advocate for your own needs, what you're doing is not only setting yourself up for success, but setting a precedent for others to come after you too. This goes for just all of your lived experiences, as well more than just disability. Like, something that I was told when negotiating salaries, for example, is encouraging as a woman to always do that. And to say when I negotiate for my salary, I'm not just doing it for myself I'm doing it for -- [audio issues] Am I back? I think I glitched a little bit.

>> Ben Bond: You're good you were just talking about how as a woman negotiating salary, you were doing it for the women that come after you?

>> Vanni Le: Yes, and yeah, so just emphasizing again, being your authentic self and advocating for your own needs which will then in turn advocate for others too.

>> Shelly Christensen: That's the goal, right, is to unify for change. But that said, the goal is also to find a job, and a job that -- where you feel good about yourself, where you're seen, where you're acknowledged, where you're part of an organization where you know you're contributing, where your contributions are valued. It's part of the Diversity Equity Inclusion Accessibility movement, very much so. And -- but I think essentially, it's belong. And belonging is unique to each and every person. What does that mean to belong? And just want to just reflect back for a minute too -- we're not, like, segments, like, I have a degree in journalism. Over here, I volunteered at a -- parent advocacy center. Isn't true, actually. I live with a disability. I've tried to get jobs and no one will hire me. Step back for a minute and think this: someone will hire you. Someone is there to hire you. And the thing is -- it's like, you get -- you may get a lot of no, no, no, no, no, until you get a yes. And you'll know that it was worth it. So what I would -- say is to -- look at the whole package of who you are, and this goes back to authenticity and -- so forth, but all those components of your life. So if you're -- if you volunteered, that's really -- that's something that's valued. If you -- have degrees in certain things, think about going back to school. Did you -- write about a topic, did you -- research a topic? That becomes part of your package too. So think broadly because -- things that you've done are valuable. Also think about your gifts and strengths, and what -- you consider to be your gifts and strengths to an organization. It's really a mindset shift, and there are also -- I know LinkedIn learning has classes on networking, and other platforms do also. So I hope that helps, I do.

>> Ben Bond: Great advice, thanks y'all. Another question we have from the chat, similar to kind of the question around best practices with networking and good guidelines. We have someone asking about -- they're starting out in the industry and kind of the questions around -- how often would you recommend -- reaching out and networking. Like, what percentage of your time should be dedicated to that to be successful, and how should it be, like, woven into your schedule as a professional starting off in the industry?

>> Lawon Exum: I can start that. I -- again, I think in our mindset, we think there's -- that's a rule. I don't -- feel like -- I mean, when you're starting off, I mean, because life happens. You may not talk to that person or email that person for a month or two, but just starting out the conversation -- I mean starting out the email or however you're networking with them -- from the time that you did reach out to them before, I feel there there should be no time restraints, because I just feel like life happens. You might not talk to that person that you networked with for months. And it's like, again, like, forming a friendship. There's some friends that I contact every day. There's some people that I contact every week, or there's some people I contact every six months. So I would put that in the prioritize -- as far as -- how often do you want to -- be in contact contact with them? I would give it -- how you would try to build a friendship. That's how I would go about it. Like, again, I know life happens, so.

>> Vanni Le: From that question too, I suspect that this is someone who is a writer, right? And so I would say that, again, do what works best for you, but also at the same time encourage you to -- I don't know what your personal definition of networking is, but encourage you to expand that, right? So basically anything that is not just sitting down and doing your work, but rather just connecting and talking to people, I think, is networking. Attending this panel, in my opinion, is networking. You're learning about it, you're learning about the four of us, you're -- if you're staying the whole day for the summit, you'll learn about and network with other folks at RespectAbility and within this community, right? So kind of expanding that definition, it doesn't have to be anything as strict or as formal as, oh my gosh, I have to sit down and I have to cold email 10 people a week or anything like that, right? But rather, just spending that time to develop connections. But do it in a way that feels authentic to you, and not forced.

>> Ben Bond: Thank you all. So one of the comments put in the Q&A is "as a disabled person I often worry about gigs where I'll earn too much money and be at risk of having to make the terrible decision: choose between losing SSI benefits or having to say yes to gigs." And -- I don't know if anyone on this panel has experiences in that space, but potentially a question that could come from that is how, as disabled people, and -- how do we in our networking experiences talk about our needs as disabled folks and accommodations that we may require and -- maybe talking a little bit more -- Vanni talked about being a representative for the community and helping set kind of a standard of those who come after us. I was just wondering if y'all would be able to touch on that a bit.

>> Shelly Christensen: What I think -- the question refers to the caps that people on Social Security, SSDI can earn. And although there are hopefully changes in the regulations for that in the legislation coming up soon, it still doesn't mediate the issue of earning too much money and losing benefits that people rely on, that are critical to health and well-being. So I -- I also struggle myself with this in the sense of -- people might -- somebody might say, oh, we have this opportunity here, but can you just volunteer your time? So in other words, looking at a disabled person, and in totally ableist thinking, well we'll just throw this person a bone, we know they're really good. So I mean, I struggle with that, because -- people have amazing gifts and strengths for sure. So -- it's like how do you navigate the -- being able to earn a living wage, kind of this happened to one of my family members, and it turned out they lost their entitlements, they lost their health insurance, but they were -- working and they were able to get health insurance at that job. So -- and again, this person also earned more money than was allowed. So -- it's a balance. It really is -- and it requires I think -- talking to someone, talking to more than one person to help figure out for yourself, what's going to work for you, and -- there's -- it's hard to give a clear-cut answer on this, so just know that it's a process and that -- right now, the climate doesn't support full-time employment and maintaining important critical benefits -- what can you do to really get out into the world and share what you have, your gifts and your strengths, and making decisions based on that? Not to minimize the struggle, because it's very real.

>> Ben Bond: And one of our Q&A folks did bring up one of the things that is an option in some states, which are ABLE accounts that allow folks to save and make money without losing benefits. We're very much in support of advocacy and policy around those, and just wanted to offer that as one of the options that can help certain disabled folks in different states. Yeah, also Lawon and Vanni, if you had more to add to that, feel free. I think it kind of -- one of the themes that's going -- coming about in this Q&A is -- how do we network in a way that upholds our dignity. A lot of disabled folks are reached out to to do that kind of volunteer work. I know definitely in the industry, exposure is what people often want to, like, pay you in so to speak. And how do we approach networking in a way where we -- what signs do you look for that folks you're connecting with actually are invested in you, and not just your identity and how do you -- ensure that the connections you make aren't -- conflicting with your own values, if that makes sense?

>> Lawon Exum: Oh I -- with that one, again, being your authentic self. I mean, like, conversating with people, especially in this industry -- I'm only talking again from our entertainment industry -- I feel like you know when someone is -- just really just using you, if that makes any sense. I mean, I guess maybe it might be because I've been -- on this journey for so long, but I always feel like in the conversation, within at least five minutes, you know when someone is really real or not, you just do. I mean just communicating with -- I mean, and just communicating with them. Even though it might be the first time you communicate with them, I just have always going into a conversation -- when you show me who you are the first time, I'm going to believe you, and that's just the way I've always been. I mean, I'd be like, okay, this person really just wants to use me or just wants to take advantage of me because of -- a disability that I may have or what have you. So I just -- it's just always about how a person presents themself. I just always am a true believer in when people present themselves the first -- first impression is the best impression for me. You don't get a second -- I mean, you get second chance of course, but by that second conversation, you probably know well this person is this way, and this person is not that way. Again, like building a friendship, how you build your friends. So that's --

>> Vanni Le: I think the best advice I can give when approaching cold outreaches or kind of talking to someone setting boundaries and things like that is -- and this applies for anyone from an underrepresented identity -- is to not be afraid to say no. I think that we're often encouraged to do things that we may not be fully comfortable with. It puts us in a position where we're not necessarily valued or or paid what we know is our worth and things like that. But the scarcity mindset comes in, right? But ultimately, your time and your energy -- especially for neurodivergent people, is better spent doing things that you're passionate about. Also, saying no is actually, I feel like a really good filter for when you can tell if someone is invested in you or not. If someone is really invested in helping you and supporting you, let's say they present some kind of opportunity to you and you say "no thank you, I don't think it's a fit for me, I actually want XYZ," someone who is really invested in your success is going to help course correct that. Keep that in mind and then continue the conversation, rather than treating that no as, like, the end all be all, I can't help them. So as long as you're staying open-minded to opportunities that are out there, right, as long as you're managing and handling that in a respectful way, people will want to support you. And I think it's a good filter for figuring out who is invested in your success, so.

>> Lawon Exum: Oh! Just to piggyback what you said -- setting boundaries. Set boundaries for yourself. That's the key thing -- I'm glad you said that. Set boundaries. It's like setting a fence around yourself, and you want people to welcome into your -- home, you want them to welcome into your -- friendship. So you have to set boundaries.

>> Shelly Christensen: I agree, and you can be the one to set the boundaries, not other people setting the boundaries for you. And I think balancing a relationship about -- and expressing, you know, when you're -- meeting someone for the first time, maybe you are -- doing a cold reach, that's fine. Maybe you -- why are you calling, why are you reaching out to that person? Is there another person who you know who might connect you? And that might make it a little more comfortable when -- you contact somebody and say "so and so gave me your information or suggested I call you." And then just be, as we said throughout all of this, be genuine, be authentic in yourself, and know -- that what you bring to the table is really really important. It's valued. If you talk to somebody and you don't feel valued, you don't feel -- you feel like they're just kind of patting you on the head, or just kind of, oh yeah, I guess, shoot me your resume. Don't waste your time on people who are not genuine back with you. I think one of the questions was -- how do you know if somebody just wants to use you for -- because you have a disability, or just want to -- are being patronizing because you have a disability, or they -- I think that the first -- round of conversation, if somebody zeros in on, oh, what happened to you, or some manifestation of -- wanting to talk about your disability, you might want to back-burner that person for a while and spend your energy on somebody who wants to be in this conversation or dialogue with you.

>> Ben Bond: Thank you all. That's really thoughtful responses. With our last couple minutes, I think we got time for this last question in the chat. This person's living in a different place from where they would need to be for -- networking in their field. I'm sure folks who live in LA in the industry know what that's like. How do you network with people in a place where you don't live where the industry might be located? AKA DC or LA or New York, all those major hubs? As a remote organization we know this well. [laughter]

>> Lawon Exum: LinkedIn. I network through LinkedIn. I look at my contacts and I look at -- someone might be in that area and I -- that's how I begin my networking, especially in this day and age now. So I start with my LinkedIn, and I put in the city -- I put in the city of whatever person or whatever organization I may want to be networking with, and then I start from there.

>> Shelly Christensen: Hmm, agreed, LinkedIn certainly. I'm just thinking in terms of Washington DC, in terms of policy, that kind of thing, reach out to your local, reach out to your national representatives, your senators, your representative, I know that's a general generic answer, but they're there to -- support the citizens of their state, of their district. And it's just might be -- a solution or another way to start building your network.

>> Vanni Le: I'd love to add on to what Lawon said about LinkedIn too. LinkedIn has a lot of really great functionalities and features, and you can filter people. Let's say there's a DC-based company that you're interested in working for. You can actually look at the -- on LinkedIn -- everyone that works there, and you can even filter by what location they're based out of, right? So let's say there is a single person at that company that works out of a different location or a different state that isn't the home base of DC, right? You can always cold outreach them, and going back to what I said about finding commonality, saying I'd love to understand how you're working at a DC based company while being remote, and I think at -- with the pandemic, a lot of people are more open and more accessible. I know us at RespectAbility understand the barriers in access to being based in larger metropolitan areas, which is why things like our Summit are virtual, so then that way people can attend and find those opportunities. And so I encourage you to continue coming to summits like this, events like this, finding things on LinkedIn and all the digital things.

>> Ben Bond: And on that note, a very organic plug, we will be having a networking session today that we'd be very happy for you all to join to continue this work from across the country. And I will pass it to Shelly to introduce the next session. And I believe Lauren will send out information about the networking, if that has not already been sent out for that session. Thank you so much for your time today, everyone.

>> Shelly Christensen: Thanks everyone, thank you Vanni, Lawon, and Ben, and for everyone being here with us today. And just so appreciate and understand the key -- the importance of networking, and now you do as well.