

You First Podcast - Your Voice, Your Vote!

Episode 5: Running for Office with a Disability

Maddie Crowley: You're listening to "You First", the Disability Rights Florida podcast. On this episode of "Your Voice, Your Vote", let's learn about the experience of running for office with a disability.

[background music]

Maddie: Hey, there. I'm Maddie.

Keith Casebonne: I'm Keith.

Maddie: We're the hosts of You First.

On the previous episode of You First, in our series called Your Voice, Your Vote we talked with researchers and elections scholars Doug Cruz and Lisa Scherr about the disability vote and EAC, Elections Assistance Commission Chairman Tom Hicks about elections accessibility efforts.

Keith: On today's episode, we are really excited to have guests Sarah Blahovec, Olivia Babis, Karolyn Campbell, and Sabrina Cohen. These four individuals have run for office as folks with disabilities, advocated for inclusive campaign strategies, and educated potential disabled candidates about how to effectively run for office.

Maddie: It was a great conversation and really does illuminate barriers to civic engagement and political disabled representation that you might not realize as being barriers. Without further ado, please enjoy "Episode Five -- Running for Office with a Disability."

Keith: Hey, everyone. Thank you so much for being here today. We really appreciate being able to get all of you scheduled together at the same time here. Let's just go around the panel and do some introductions. Tell us a little about yourself. Karolyn, let's start with you.

Karolyn Campbell: Hello. My name is Supervisor Karolyn Campbell. I am originally from a very tiny island of Grenada in the Caribbean. I immigrated here to the US. I am legally blind. I have lightish long hair. I am petite. I consider myself to be a servant leader.

I also volunteer for a lot of different organizations in addition to being a supervisor of Orange Soil and Water Conservation District, which is my elected position under the state of Florida. It's with the the Department of Agriculture.

I also am with the League of Women Voters, the National Federation of the Blind of Central Florida. I am a federal employee. I work for the government and first blind elected official in Florida.

I think that's all the stuff about me for right now. Thank you.

Keith: Great. Thanks so much. Sarah, let's do you next.

Sarah Blahovec: Hi. My name is Sarah Blahovec. I am a disabled advocate, political consultant who has worked on civic engagement for people with disabilities.

I just finished up six years at the National Council on Independent Living, where I was the voting rights and civic engagement director and created the first-ever campaign training program for people with disabilities called Elevate Campaign Training for People with Disabilities.

I also have worked at the Democratic National Committee, with different disability rights organizations, and am continuing to work on civic participation for people with disabilities, which I think is very important.

I'm very excited to be here today.

Keith: Great. Thanks so much. Sabrina?

Sabrina Cohen: Hi, everybody. My name is Sabrina Cohen. I was in a car accident when I was 14 years old, then became a quadriplegic and confined to a wheelchair since then.

My path of advocacy began when i was 15 years old. I've spoken to over 40,000 students in my community about reckless driving and safety issues and life with paralysis. From that sprung my passion to do more in this space of advocacy and education.

In 2006, I started the Sabrina Cohen Foundation with a tight focus on advancing stem cell research and regenerative medicine. I traveled all over the country speaking to scientists and patient advocates about the importance of moving research forward to help treat various types of disabilities.

In 2012, my foundation expanded to quality of life initiatives. I created a first of a kind in the country beach access program to help people with all types of disabilities, from visually impaired to physical conditions to access the ocean.

I helped create the first ADA accessible park and playground in Miami Beach. I also sat on the disability access committee for Miami Beach for the last decade, working with hotels and restaurants on access.

Today, I'm proud to say that I am running for Miami Beach Civic Commissioner for city government. That will be my first position.

Everything I do is focused around education and providing the best quality of life for people either after an injury or dealing with some sort of disability.

Keith: Thanks, Sabrina. Last but not least, Olivia.

Olivia Babis: Hi. I'm Olivia Babis. I'm actually the senior public policy analyst at Disability Rights Florida. I've been at Disability Rights Florida for about three and a half years.

Prior to that, I worked at the Center for Independent Living, so from Sarah's universe, where I was the peer mentor in Sarasota for that Center for Independent Living for about two and a half

years. I was on the Citizens With Disabilities Advisory Board for the City of Sarasota, and I have worked on a number of campaigns, and I've done policy and issue advocacy work for about a decade. In 2018, I ran for Florida State Senate.

Keith: Thanks, Olivia, and thanks for everyone for being here today. Let's dig in. What are the barriers that exist when running for office as a person with a disability, and how did you overcome these barriers to have a successful campaign?

Karolyn: Some of the barriers existed, like a driver's license versus an ID. A lot of people were not familiar with an ID when you don't drive. Whether it's websites, Facebook, even entering a lot of city and county buildings, they are used to driver's license.

When you take out your ID, they don't know what to do with it, and have to input your information manually or want you to use some other means, etc., which it makes it very challenging to be in those environments, when a driver's license, they are able to scan it and not have a problem.

By overcoming, it's just basically letting them know that this is something that they need to work toward, and that's what they are doing. The other aspect is, when I ran for office initially, it was during -- well, we still are in the pandemic, but it was during -- the pandemic's, it was a more heightened phase of the pandemic.

Everything was on Zoom, which was actually quite good for myself, since I am legally blind, don't drive. It was great being able to interact with people via Zoom and online platforms. Pretty much most of us were stuck in our house, anyway, so it was a great opportunity to be able to use those types and learn those types of platforms.

I think we all pretty much learned those types of things very well. The other aspect is, with a lot of the volunteer opportunities that I do -- lake cleanups, etc. -- a lot of it is bringing friends along, because there's a lot of things that I might not be able to see in doing that work.

However, I still am able to do it, and by bringing other people with me, it allows me to have other volunteers, so that's actually a good thing.

Sabrina: I have found -- so now, I'm running, so this is my first political campaign to become commissioner -- I'm giggling, but it really is the biggest I've had so far, is getting my fingerprints. When you're a quadriplegic, and you can't extend your hand open, and they need it an exact way, it's actually quite complicated.

I'd say that's probably the biggest challenge I've had. Then, of course, there's a grueling schedule. You have to be in so many different places all the time. I think the energy is there, the excitement is there, and you want to be everywhere, but sometimes I think we just need to have a really good balance, and pause when we need to, so we don't overexert.

Even though we have all different types of disabilities, we want to play like everybody else. Maybe sometimes, we have to slow it down a minute. I think that's OK. What you come to realize is everybody wants to help. They're so good and supportive, and that's where you really have to learn how to delegate and hand work over to your volunteers and your campaign team.

That's probably what I'm learning, to pace myself and delegate.

Olivia: I don't know that I self-identified in the introduction, but I am a congenital amputee, so I was actually born without arms. You think fingerprinting is hard as a quadriplegic, try it when you don't actually have fingers. There have been some very fun instances there where I've had to go to background checks, and I don't have fingers for them to print, and they don't know what to do with me.

I've literally broke voc rehab one time with this problem that no one had ever contemplated before. What do you with fingerprints for people that don't have fingers? They had no idea. There was no policy in-place. Definitely, that is a challenge.

For me, it was a lot of architectural barriers. I am a part-time [indecipherable 9:52] chair user, and people would hold fundraisers in buildings like condos. The elevator down the street would close at six o'clock. There were stairs up to security to get them to open the elevator.

I was locked outside one time. I was getting ready to leave, and somebody else came up that was going to the fundraiser...

She managed to go in and tell the security guard, "Hey, I'm going to use the elevator." I got in and was explaining to the security guard why this was a problem, and we got in this circular argument of, "You just come inside."

"Well, I can't, because I need the elevator to get inside. How do I get your attention? Am I supposed to throw rocks at the glass door and hope that you notice me down here?" He was not getting it.

Canvassing was hard. A lot of people have steps up to their front door. I would bring what I called my canvas buddies with me. Sometimes, I'm stuck in the driveway, waving at people, and then they're going up to the door and knocking on the door.

A lot of areas in Florida [inaudible 10:54] book, "Where the Sidewalk Ends," was written about Florida, because our sidewalks end in the middle of the street for no apparent reason. Boom, the sidewalk is gone.

You got these streets [indecipherable 11:06] sidewalks, and so you're like, "Do I hope I don't tip over into the ditch, because I'm at an angle on the side of the road, or do I risk my life with cars in the road and do my little chant of, 'Please don't get hit by a car. Please don't get hit by a car,' as I'm going down the street knocking on doors?"

A lot of those are architectural barriers [indecipherable 11:27} an impediment to running. We had to get creative on some solutions for those.

Sarah: I'm unique in this call as I haven't run for office, and it's not in the plans for me at this point, but I've worked on the issues around running for office, and researching them, and talking to a lot of candidates.

It's challenging when you're trying to create a program to help people with disabilities run for office because the challenges vary from person to person within even the same disability, but

especially outside of that and looking at the spectrum of the different types of disabilities that people have.

I've heard everything from deaf folks who were not given accommodations to participate in forums run by their local parties to the challenges with canvassing whenever you have a physical disability to how do you deal with a campaign schedule whenever you have a chronic illness or chronic pain that makes it challenging to stick to those schedules?

One challenge that we uncovered at the National Council on Independent Living was around running for office if you're receiving federal disability benefits like Social Security and Medicaid.

I had countless people come to me over the past several years saying, "Could I run for office if I am receiving Social Security or Medicaid?" It's usually people who are running for a local office that has a low salary or no salary. It's very different than holding a job.

The Social Security Administration had no information about this, so I asked them about it. Unfortunately, they view campaigning as possibly a sign of medical improvement. It's done on a case-by-case basis, of course. It's related to how you've been evaluated to have a disability.

Unfortunately, there have been candidates who have run for elected office who've lost their benefits, disabled people who have lost their benefits. Also, there's questions of whether it could be seen as substantial gainful activity. That's something they mentioned as well.

The good news is that there's now federal legislation that has been introduced by Senator Bob Casey from Pennsylvania. It is Senate Bill 4597, which would exempt campaign work from being seen as substantial gainful activity or sign of medical improvement.

It basically wouldn't factor into that evaluation. Whether or not it will pass the Senate with how gridlocked the Senate is is certainly a concern. There are issues beyond that as well. Will these same issues that legislation looks at candidates, will it still impact people who win their elected office and are elected officials?

What do you do about the fact that Social Security has an asset cap of 2,000 per person and 3,000 per couple whenever there are a lot of elected office have low salaries that are not something you can live on? You can't forfeit them.

You can't say, "I'm not going to accept this." I've never seen anyone be able to do that. It could result in a loss of benefits. We need to see legislation. There's bipartisan legislation from the senators from Ohio as well.

This SSI Savings Penalty Elimination Act that would increase that cap to 10,000 per individual and 20,000 per couple. That's also legislation we need to look towards to address these issues.

Keith: Those are some issues I would never have even considered, so it's fascinating information. What advice would you have for those with disabilities who are considering running for office?

How may that advice even differ, depending on that individual's needs or whether the disability is visible or invisible, for example? What would you advise people to do?

Sabrina: I would say go for it if that's what you're passionate about. I imagine many of us were longtime advocates before we got into political office, and our world revolves around disability.

What I've learned in a quick amount of time, because mine is a short campaign, is that the disability almost becomes in the background. What I'm noticing is supporters and friends. It's the strength and the courage to run for office that then takes over.

Accessibility and advocacy becomes one issue of hundreds. What I've learned is some of my opponents have tried to position me as a disability advocate and it's all that I know. The truth is every skill and every value and moral way of living my life to help people can be easily translated into other issues in government.

I think they see that as a strong talking point on reason why they then come over to my side or want to support me. Everybody, listen, I would think it would be untrue if we said there's no insecurities.

What I'm noticing is you need to ask for what you need and hold strong to that, and people will accommodate you, including the government will do whatever you need.

We need to educate people and we need to get out there in order to make this the norm, not the exception.

Karolyn: I would tend to agree. I think that if somebody is interested, absolutely, move forward and go for it.

It's definitely beneficial to have somewhat of a pathway, in that you maybe shadow somebody, you volunteer with an organization, or you volunteer with somebody who is maybe doing something that you're looking to do so that you're able to have a built-in advocate when you start that process.

There are some nuances to the process. The reality is it's a good process to go through, and those of us that have a disability, as was mentioned, even though we may, whether it's visible or invisible, even though it may look as if that we are advocates primarily for a disability, we are advocates for a lot of things.

We have a disability on top of all of the other things that everybody else does. We are all mothers and daughters, and we have families and have family issues that we're dealing with. All of the things that everybody is also dealing with, and then on top of that, we also have the challenges built in with our disability and having to navigate the world on a daily basis.

I think that actually makes us stronger and, as Sabrina mentioned, more people see that as they see what you're doing. They see that you have the zest to even go for it because it does take some challenges to overcome to be able to go for it.

I think that's important that people see that and have that representation, be able to see that these things are possible, and basically just move forward, and take that shot, and see what happens.

It's very rewarding. The way I like to tell people is no matter what you're doing, even if it doesn't go the way that you wanted it to go, there's a wonderful learning opportunity that will happen.

Olivia: What was interesting for me was it was almost like a catch-22. It was almost like I had to prove myself as a person before I could be taken seriously as a candidate, but then, at the same time, my opponent knew that this was an area where he couldn't tread on. Unless I went negative in my campaign, he's going to look really bad attacking a disabled woman that he's running against.

In a way, I think it gave me a buffer that a lot of candidates don't have in that personal attack would seem like a really bad well. He could make it. I never went negative, so I got to control the messaging for my campaign.

We started out with...I ran as a Democrat which, of course, is a reflection on Disability Rights Florida C-3 where I worked. When I ran, my opponent was promoting himself as this really stern conservative. By the we got to the end of the campaign we were joking that, hey, his website's starting to look a lot like yours. His messaging is starting to echo it.

We were finding sentences that were taken from the verbatim from things that we had produced for the campaign. We started calling him Babis-like. Then, in debate, it was really [indecipherable 20:12] . They asked, "Is there anything you wanted to add?"

My summary was, "We're basically the same person. I'm already an incumbent so you should vote for me."

He was just messaging. He didn't know where to go with that and not being able to go negative. I think that really threw him off because he's been in some really negative races before and knew how to take that approach to it. That was an approach that he could take and that I did not crack open that door for him, I think, made campaigning against me really difficult.

I was in the top district. My opponent, like I said, was incumbent, and so I ended up losing my race. I actually did better than other former Democrat that ran for that seat in that area. I got 44 percent of the vote or something around there.

Which, for a first-time candidate, and I was also running in a special election in the middle of a general election, so I didn't get the benefit of either. Special election, most of the time, all the attention's on the race. Nobody else is running.

That was happening in the general election, but because it was the special election, I didn't have the same timeframe. I was really running a general election campaign on half the timeframe that most people have to get their campaign up and going.

To have surged from way behind in this race that nobody was following, that suddenly, my opponent had to show up for debates, because we were polling within the margin of error. Even though he was out-fundraising me by 10-to-1, I guess the messaging just resonated with people.

Like Sabrina was talking and Karolyn touched on it a little bit, I didn't run necessarily on a disability platform, and I didn't even want to do disability issue as this separate thing. I tied

disability into all the other issues. When we're talking about healthcare, how does this affect racial minorities? How does it affect the disability population?

That just became part of my messaging, really to try to mainstream disability issues as just a mainstream issue, the same that we talk about race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and all the other marginalized communities that we talk about.

We incorporate them into this messaging. There are obviously certain issues that are separate, that various communities don't deal with specifically. As a White woman, I've never experienced racism. I've witnessed it, but I have never experienced that.

There's always going to be this special little area, but I really try to incorporate disability into my entire platform, so I wasn't pigeonholed as [indecipherable 22:43] disability advocate. I really drew on my campaign experience, and issue advocacy work and policy work that I had done to show that, yes, I'm a disability advocate, but obviously, I also know what I'm talking about.

I have worked in this field for 10 years. I worked on other campaigns. I've really built up, I think, a good background and almost like a wall where that really couldn't be questioned.

Sarah: I would say, going off all of that, whenever it comes to getting disabled people to run for office, it really starts locally. I think I've heard that here where a lot of disabled people are already engaged in their local community, whether that's through advocacy or just going about your day. Unfortunately, we have to do it in such a way that...

The community and society isn't built for us, so we're used to solving problems. That makes us really great at solving problems in elected office as well. It gives us some natural leadership qualities there. Certainly, looking for first-time candidates, look at local office.

I've had many people come to me who have been like, I want to want run for Congress or one of those higher-level positions, but really, the amount of impact that local government has on our lives is underestimated. It's underestimated by us when we're looking at these positions and when we see how much attention Congress gets in the news.

It's also underestimated unfortunately by voters, which is why we have to do so much work to encourage people to get out to vote whenever there are local and statewide elections. I live in Virginia. We have an election every year. Our off-year elections are where we have a lot of the local candidates in all of our statewide ones.

Really get involved at the local level, and that doesn't have to be running for office as a start. You can get involved in a campaign, you can get involved with a community board, a commission, or some sort of civic activity. There are even appointed positions in local government as well.

Looking at the ways that you're able to participate there even if you don't want to run for office yet, it's a great way to get some experience and figure out if it's something you want to do. Yeah, I would think that would be my advice, is figuring out what you can do locally to start.

If you do have aspirations for state office or federal-level offices, that's also a great way to just start building rapport within the community, building your brand as a candidate, and bowling a track record as well. Definitely, I would say start local.

Keith: Are there any accommodations or accessibility needs that any of you have found to be important to your success that you may want to suggest to other folks interested in running for office?

Sabrina: I think Olivia referenced some buildings no being accessible. What I've done is, I have a team of canvassers that are out now. I haven't started my personal door-knocking yet, but I have a team doing it, and I will engage in that. I went ahead and I always carry a portable ramp with me in my vehicle.

I just swapped the cheap one out for a good durable one, so that way, should I need to get somewhere, I have something more reliable to count on. I would think that's going to be the only physical barrier as of now because I know I'm not going to get into people's homes. That's not our job anyways, to get into their home.

When there's meet and greets and [inaudible 26:20] hosting an event, what I'm doing is, I'm just having them take a picture of the home so I could assess it. If we can just overcome it with an easy pop-up a ramp and get in, no problem, we do it. If not, I've noticed that people are very accommodating and they'll go wherever I can be.

Sarah: In my situation, some of the challenges has been, as was mentioned, just plain old transportation, getting to and from the various events when you don't drive. A lot of them, because I have a full-time job, I have no problem taking time off work to do the events, but it's the getting to and from because everybody else is working.

Then paratransit is a challenge because, depending upon the building that you're going to, where are you dropped off, and where they're going to pick you up. The driver that drops you off isn't the same driver who picks you up. They don't know where you're going. A lot of times I'm going to places that I've never been before. That's always interesting.

If I can bring volunteers, somebody with me, that's great, but then it means that I'm not very independent as well. It's a little bit of both. The other aspects is, it's very difficult when everybody's wearing name tags. I can't read any of the name tags. Again, I try to have somebody with me in my ear, this person is coming near me, or this name of person and whatever, so that I can greet them.

Part of this when you're running for office, is to look competent before you are. As Olivia was saying, you need to be taken seriously.

Part of it, when you're blind or when you have a disability, people already have their preconceived notions. It's getting over that and getting people to see that you are able to find workarounds and find ways to be able to do the same thing, just differently. It's those types of things.

Listening to people's voices and, "Hey, I remember you from blah, blah, blah," and trying to write down and remember where you met that other person or other individuals that are also campaigning, etc.

Not being able to see a lot of these things is definitely a challenge, but there are definitely ways to overcome all of this and move forward. Even other people that they're handing out literature and so on, making sure that I, too, am doing that.

Again, that's where volunteers and people who are helping out the campaign is absolutely vital. We're all leaning on our volunteers and glad that they're there to help us out. That's absolutely important.

That's why it's helpful for people to understand that when anybody runs for office, no matter their situation, with or without a disability, volunteers are key. That's a great place, as was mentioned, to start locally, where people can learn the process from people who are going through the process.

You can help somebody through it, and then the next time, maybe it can be you.

Olivia: One of the things is that a lot of accommodations need to start becoming best practices. I recognize I forgot to do that. Karolyn did. I apologize, I forgot to do my description when we were doing introductions.

I am a White woman wearing glasses with clear mug frames and [indecipherable 29:49] wearing a black shirt, and my home office is in my background. Little things like that, making them habitual. We shouldn't just be providing accommodations because I have a candidate need them.

There may be people that want to attend events that the various parties are hosting, or candidates are hosting. They play the blame game a lot with each other when there's an inaccessible event.

First, you want to try to blame the candidate that organized it. "They didn't send the advance team. It was the state party. No, it was the national party that did that." They spend so much time pointing fingers, but not solving the problem.

There's so many issues that could be so easily addressed, which is why best practices with saying, "This is Olivia, and here's my image description, and identifying myself when I'm speaking." Making sure that there is audio equipment, that people aren't shouting. There may be people in the audience that are hard of hearing.

It's always best practice to have that [indecipherable 30:48] and making sure that the space is accessible, not just, like I said, for me as a candidate, but maybe there are other people with wheelchairs that would attend that event who have other mobility problems that can't navigate stairs.

A lot of that can be addressed by making some of this best practice, that we do this habitually for all campaign events. That moved over a lot of the access viewers that we should run into, and then accommodation doesn't seem like such a big deal anymore, because we're already providing it, a lot of it at the beginning.

People aren't having to ask for those accommodations, or they would be very specific ones. At least now, we're meeting the needs of generic disabled person that we think of when we're talking about ADA guidelines and those types of things.

80, 90 percent of the time, that skin will be adequate to most people.

Sabrina: I would also say best practices are important. I also forgot [laughs] my image description. White woman with short, brown hair that is somewhat curly. I wear glasses. I'm sitting in my chair next to a window, so half of my face is ghostly white right now.

I've been working for several years, not just on creating a campaign training that is accessible and inclusive of people with disabilities, because we didn't have that. We need to have the entire environment become more accessible. That's campaigns, it's other campaign training programs, too.

There shouldn't be a disability program over here and we're not included in the rest of the spaces, especially when there are so many different ones that work for different political parties, or different aspects of identity, or different levels of running for office, or even ones that help people become campaign staff versus candidates.

We need to work on making those programs accessible. It's frustrating to see, because even basic information that's shared about voting is still so inaccessible, whether that's the government websites at the local level not following the guidelines and the laws that they're supposed to make their information accessible.

That's other organizations that are doing voting outreach and voting rights work not putting alternative texts on their graphics whenever they share about, "Call the Election Protection coalition if you are having problems with voting."

Oftentimes, things like that are not even accessible. They're not doing the very basic things that take a little bit of practice and don't even take any money. A lot of people, whenever they hear accommodations, they think, "That's going to be expensive," which it's not.

It depends on the accommodation, but there are so many things that we could be doing that cost no money. It is a little bit frustrating because the overall environment makes it such a challenge for disabled people to be candidates, to be supporters, to be volunteers, to be voters and get accurate information.

It shouldn't just be the disability community putting it out there, "Please include us." It should be a value of candidates and campaigns to say, "Hey, disabled people are 20 percent of the population. We need to make sure that we include them."

Also, you don't want to isolate voters. You don't want to ostracize them by not having accessible information. If your form is inaccessible for donating, you're not going to get that donation. It's a two-way street there.

It's not just make things accessible so we can participate, because you want to win votes, you want to win supporters. If it's not accessible, then how are we going to be able to support you?

Are we going to want to support someone who is not making strides for accessibility or even basic accommodations?

I would say that we need to work as a society to make civic information more accessible and implement those best practices. There are resources out there now to do that. I wrote a guide at the National Council on Independent Living on that.

Also, there's a guide that came out this year from Detroit Disability Power that's available at inclusivecampaigns.org. It is a guide for both first-time candidates with disabilities on accessibility and navigating a campaign.

Also, for campaigns and other organizations to make their information, to make their events, their communications even, every part of it accessible and inclusive.

One other thing I would want to mention as well is in terms of accessibility for candidates, and then elected officials with disabilities, I had mentioned legislation on the Social Security issue, but also, Senator Casey put forward a bill, Senate Bill 4595, which is the AID Local Government Leadership Act.

Which would create a fund for low-income and more rural communities to accommodate disabled elected officials in local office, because these issues don't end with the campaign. Our very halls of government have access barriers that continue to be challenges. Sometimes, communities don't have the resources they need to be able to make those changes, or they need assistance with doing that.

Legislation that would set up an accessibility or accommodations fund for local governments would help to overcome those barriers, and would make it so that maybe disabled candidates who win elected office don't have to spend so much time fighting for their own accommodations and can focus on the work that they were elected to do.

Keith: Sarah, you mentioned the training materials. Can you talk a little bit more about those materials you developed and how folks interested in running for office can access that and other resources? How can we get more of these programs available for people with disabilities?

Sarah: At the National Council on Independent Living, I created the first and currently only campaign training program that is focused on disabled people. I mean that not just in terms of making it accessible so that people don't have to fight for accommodations just to get in the door at campaign trainings, but in terms of what content is taught and who is teaching it.

We ran it in 2019 and 2021. The recordings are available online at the National Council on Independent Living's website at ncil.org/elevate. It's focused on first-time candidates running for local office. We have screen reader-accessible materials.

We have a lot of disabled folks who are speakers and trainers, ASL, CART captioning for all of these webinars. It's available for free for replay. We also have other resources on that website as well, a link to our guide for campaigns and other organizations on accessibility of those campaigns.

Teaching you everything from the disability community is to include language to event accessibility. We also have a page on there about other campaign training programs. We put a list of some of the big ones that are at the national level.

There are a lot. There are a ton of campaign training programs out there, even at the state and local level. This is some of the major ones that are out there, as well as books that are out there as well, where you can learn about running for office.

Although I'm no longer at the National Council on Independent Living, I am putting together plans -- I can't really share yet, but plans -- to continue and expand this work outside of NCIL, continuing the work with other campaign training programs on accessibility, on partnering with them on content that is directed towards disabled people who want to run for office.

Hopefully, continuing to build a campaign training program and additional resources for people with disabilities. In terms of working with these other programs, showing up, and I know that there are disabled people in their audiences.

I've been to campaign training programs virtually and in-person, and disabled people have come up afterward and said, "It was great to hear this," and talked about their challenges with running for office. Working to be more visible in those spaces, and it shouldn't just be up to disabled people, again, to do this.

That we reach out and ask them about accommodations, making sure that they have just a way to request accommodations, even. Whether that is getting captioning for webinars, ASL interpreting, anything else you may need to be able to participate in those.

Anyone can ask about the accommodations process, and anyone should ask about that. Just, "Hey, is there a way to request access?" Reaching out and letting them know about the materials that are out there. I mentioned both the NICL guide, which is on that website, and the inclusive campaigns guide.

Letting them know that these resources are there, and they could learn a lot about including people with disabilities in what they can do, and demystifying the concept of accessibility, which can be intimidating for people who aren't familiar with it or are thinking of it only from a financial perspective or the amount of time that they have to be able to implement accessibility.

Letting them know that there's a lot of things that you can be doing and that you should be doing to make this space more welcoming. Of course, going back to disabled people are such a significant portion of the population, if you exclude us, you're leaving out many great candidates and great people who should be participating.

Anyone can become disabled at any time. Make your stuff accessible, because you may need it someday as well.

Keith: Yeah, that's great. We'll make sure to have links in the show notes to those resources that you mentioned, so listeners can access them easily. How can candidates with disabilities avoid their disability potentially overshadowing the other reasons they're running? We've touched on this a little bit. Although, alternatively, should they?

Olivia: I'll jump in first here. This is Olivia. I embrace my disability. I have to, it is very visible when you see me. There is no hiding it. I always try to talk about the elephant in the room, and then we're going to put it away. Yes, that is part of who I am. I am disability, I am disabled. Whichever way you want to phrase that, I don't care. That's not all of who I am.

Let's just talk about that, just answer questions or concerns that you have about what you think I can and can't do. Then, let's pack it up and put it away. We're not going to fixate on that. I'm not going to walk you through step-by-step of how my day works, and how I do this and how I do that.

That's not the point. The point is that, yes, I'm the first person in my family to go to college. I paid for it myself in student loans. Nobody helped me. I'm employed independently. I drive. Married now, I've been with my partner for eight years. There's other aspects to my life besides that.

I've clearly built a decent life for myself. I've built a career for myself. That's the parts that should be important to people and that people should be interested in.

My disability, just because I am out front and center, I'm not hiding in the shadows. That's taught me to be outspoken, and to become [indecipherable 42:28] and to speak up when I see something that's unjust or unfair. I would think that would be the type of people others would want to represent them and to be in elected office.

Really, yes, embracing that as my identity and focusing messaging around that as to how that makes me relatable to other people, but a good portion of the Florida legislature are millionaires. How are you going to relate to someone that makes as much in one year as you do in a month? How do you relate to that person?

You don't understand what \$60 for an Uber means to someone that makes only \$12,000 a year. I've been in that situation. I know what that's like. I can relate to that situation. I think that makes me a more relatable person.

It's just making sure to tie that message in, to get it to people that, yes, you may not understand my life specifically, but the things that I can do run parallel to a lot of the situations that a lot of people struggle with -- financial issues due to medical problems, or having to see doctors often.

What does insurance pay for and what do you have to pay out-of-pocket? When you're counting coins to go to the grocery store because you've got another week left before you get paid, then shooting your [indecipherable 43:49]. Those are situations that I've been in and that a lot of people with disabilities are in. I think that makes us more relatable with people to address these problems.

We understand the systemic issues built into these problems and how they need to be changed, how some of them are very antiquated. They were created in the 1950s when the vast majority of people with disabilities were in institutional care and didn't work.

Things have changed since then, but our programs for people with disabilities haven't. I think that needs to be reflected in policy. The people that really can really relate to that are the people that

have been there and done that -- not someone making a million dollars or more a year that hasn't because they're able, and they're not going to have to worry about working until they die, not because they want to, but out of necessity.

That person's not going to relate to that. I think making that relatability point is really crucial, particularly with working with other marginalized communities that exist at the intersection of disability.

Karolyn: I totally agree. I think that it's basically like the color of your hair. Your disability is a part of you, but it's not all of you. Yes, it impacts daily living skills. It may impact some of your other things that you do in life, but as Olivia and as our other panel members have mentioned, it's just another attribute.

It's a good thing to bring it up, or if somebody asks about it, you deal with it to answer the questions. Then, you move on to everything else because we have so much more that we bring to the table and so much more ways that we can help others.

When something like that, when your disability is embraced, whether it's visible or invisible, in my case, with my vision, even though you can see my eyes and you can see that my eyes don't work like everybody's eyes, a lot of times, people don't know what that means.

When I wear my glasses or when I use my cane, it's a lot more obvious. The point being is that it's one of those things that when we're showing the other things that we're able to do, and our other accomplishments, and being able to be as agile as we are in the disability community.

That in itself helps to overpower everything else, because even though the disability may seem like an initial focus point, it soon becomes overshadowed by, "Oh, and you did all these other things, too."

I think that eventually, or pretty soon after, that disability aspect becomes less of a focus and less of a point and everything else. As was mentioned, the plus side is we've heard it all. We've been called everything under the sun.

We are the marginalized community. We are the people that nobody wants to be like one day. Being blind is one of the things that most people, they would rather have other things happen to them than lose their vision.

When you are that person that they fear this disability happening to them, it's great to be able to show them that, "Hey, you can have whatever disability that you may fear and you can still be a very positive person in the community.

"You can get a lot done. You can be a champion for the disabled and also for marginalized communities," and as was mentioned, "the intersections between the two, because there's a lot of them."

We are the population that has had to live on not a whole lot and have dealt with negative resources or dealt with so many different things. Our ability to problem solve, our ability to be agile is absolutely amazing, because we have to do it every hour of every day and we have to overcome all the time.

By being able to do that, we're better-equipped in a lot of aspects to be servant leaders, because we have been in those situations and people have looked down on us.

We have a better situation to be good listeners, to be able to help others going through various things, and without having to say very much, just by being an example, by being a representative of somebody who has challenges and did it anyway.

Those are absolutely wonderful things to be sharing so that the community at large, individuals with disabilities, children can see that no matter what the situation is, you can move forward and you can do the thing that maybe somebody did not think you could do.

Sabrina: This is, Sabrina, perhaps people look down on us also if we're coming in with insecurities and lack of confidence. It's extremely important that we stuck to the table, no pun intended, with this confidence and vulnerability. Vulnerability is a beautiful thing.

To one of your points earlier, Karolyn, talking about when you want to come into a room confident, and you could do this alone, but sometimes we need help. The journey of confidence is continuous. We're always growing and transforming.

What I'm seeing in this campaign trail and in my journey is that it's a constant works in progress. We have to be comfortable in our skin. The more comfortable we're in our skin, the more people around us are comfortable.

One instance was a couple weeks ago, I had my kickoff campaign event, and the one thing we forgot was the handheld microphone. There I was, knowing I could attempt to hold this microphone, but it's uncomfortable. It might fall. What do I do?

A county commissioner that attended the event offered to hold the mic for me. All of a sudden, holding a microphone became an important part of this evening when it shouldn't have.

I let her hold the mic, and at the end of the night, people found that to be such a loving, warm part of the evening, where somebody stepped in to help me. Somebody said, "This is what this is all about, we help one another."

Being vulnerable and OK in our skin, it has to start with us, because nobody else can if we're not. We're at the forefront for a reason. We have to be as confident and vulnerable as possible at the same time, and allowing that help, and then others, they'll respect us.

It's like you demand respect when you believe in yourself. That's important when running. Then, all the other issues will fall into place, because everybody knows we're not just a disability, but we got to break the ice.

There's a lot of ways to do it and make people comfortable, because part of that is education. It's all education, actually. It's all education.

Keith: One last question for you all. What would you each say to someone outside of the disability community who may be hesitant to vote for a candidate with a disability?

Karolyn: I would want to find out more information on why they're saying that. Is it something related to their disability? Digging into that and having an honest conversation with them to try to shift their perspective and address any prejudice that they have.

In a way, that's a delicate thing, too, because people can tend to be defensive, especially whenever you're talking about prejudice, and might dig their heels in, so to speak, whenever you challenge them on something that is maybe an inaccuracy around disability or any other aspect of identity.

Digging into the reasoning there and reinforcing that disabled people are great leaders, and that a disability doesn't mean that you can't serve, or trying to figure out, what specific thing are they concerned about?

Are they concerned that someone won't be able to fulfill the duties? Are they concerned, of course, there's prejudice around thinking that disabled people aren't capable intellectually?

Getting into that as well, looking at the different stereotypes of disability, whether it's cognitive, physical, developmental disabilities. That would be my approach to it is reinforcing that disabled people, we have been leaders.

Look at how many disabled people have run for office who have been advocates. You can bring up real-world examples here, probably from almost every type of disability and say, "These people have done great things for their communities. They've been great servant leaders."

Trying to dig down into the hesitance there, the ableism, and trying to change attitudes.

Sarah: The last thing that I want to do is to have to defend myself and my community that I so love and advocate for. What's important is to, again, just be yourself. It's an education tool. Express how all the challenges that you've had to face in your life, how we've turned them into opportunities, and how we really are problem-solvers. We're faced with a lot of barriers, and we have to be quick and figure out solutions.

It's that same turning challenges into opportunities, problem-solving, and being passionate about causes that you'll bring to the table on all the other issues. I think that's the best we can do, just let them know that's what we stand for. Those are the unique skills that we have, actually.

How many times have we heard people tell us, "If this ever happened to me, I couldn't live"? We did. We didn't only survive, but we're thriving. Those are unique qualifications that we have and we bring to the table.

I'd rather focus on that than having to ever defend myself as being good enough. I don't want to stand for that.

Sabrina: I actually ran into that at a campaign event. We were actually at a debate for the local candidates running for a state legislative office. I had a woman come up to me after the debate and just, "I admire everything you're doing," blah, blah, blah.

Then she went over to my opponent, and I personally am not deaf, not that there's anything wrong with being deaf. It was like she thought, when she walked away from me, I couldn't hear her anymore or something. I don't know, but I can overhear the entire conversation.

She walked over to my opponent and was like, "I really admire what she's doing, but of course, I'm going to vote for you." Like Sarah was saying, it really depends on the circumstances surrounding it. I think that was an individual that was probably going to vote for that person, anyway.

That was what excuse she made for herself to deal with that, what she was doing, the right thing, that I couldn't do that. I think people like that, you're probably never going to convince. It's really choose your battles, and just identifying, "OK, is this an education moment? Is this someone that that's just their mentality, and I'm going to get through to this person?"

There are people like that, and that is fine. We're all different, come from different backgrounds, and that affects who we are, our beliefs, and our values. For some people, you're just not going to impress, you're not going to get along with. Not everybody's going to like you, and that is fine.

I think that was just one of those situations. If it's a situation where I can provide education, and it's just that people have misconceptions about disabilities or what people with disabilities can do, then let's talk about it. Let's address that issue.

It really just, as they were saying, depends on the circumstances of that situation, whether that's worth our time and energy to address. Is it someone just being discriminatory, or is it someone that we want to take the time to sit down with that could be a valuable supporter, if they are provided the right education?

Karolyn: I definitely agree with the aspect of picking your battles, understanding a little bit about why the person might feel that. If we have the opportunity to speak to them, being able to listen to their concerns, being able to understand if their mind is made up, or if this is a teachable moment. It makes a difference.

The other aspect, my way of looking at it is to say, "Hey, absolutely, you can vote for whoever you want to for, but just, if I win, you'll be my constituent, and I would be happy to help you if you have something in this arena that you have concerns about."

In my case, when that did happen, and I won my race, it was great to be able to have some of those same constituents actually contact me and be able to help them or connect them to the right people, etc. Even if they may not be interested in voting for you initially, we all have to remember that all of this is representation.

To help change that narrative, and to basically get people to understand and to normalize disabilities, so that they might be thinking a particular way today, but that doesn't mean that they couldn't change their mind tomorrow when they see that, "Oh, you can do something to help me."

Or whatever myth you might be able to dispel. A lot of times, that happens with your own actions. Unfortunately, that's a real thing, and people are going to vote for whoever they choose

to vote for. There is only so much that we can do, but the reality is there's still going to be people that are...

Once we win our race, or once we decide to possibly go for another race, these are still our constituents. We still need to make sure that we are working with the community, and again, being the aspect of every day is an interview, and every day, we're working to help others out.

I think the more people see that, the more they will be willing to move closer to where you stand, and more willing to vote for you, and possibly willing to vote for other people with disabilities, realizing, if that person did these things, wow, I wonder what this other person can do, etc.

It may not benefit me personally, but maybe it benefits somebody else. It's all carrying ourselves with that confidence and being able to work with people. Whatever arrows they throw at us, do our usual, have our usual ability to be agile, to be able to problem-solve, and to show others that, no matter what, we can still be confident and we can still be competent. We can definitely get the job done.

Olivia: I just want to jump back in. This is Olivia. Just along the lines of what Karolyn was saying that you don't know who you might be having an impact on, I was actually at a campaign event. I think it was one of the debates or candidate meet-and-greets. It's all a blur at this point. It was four-and-a-half years ago.

At one of the events, I had a woman talked to me afterwards. She had been newly diagnosed with MS and had to quit her job because of the fatigue she was experiencing and went on Medicaid.

She came up to me afterwards. She said, "I haven't told any of my friends about my diagnosis," because she was worried about how they're going to view her and the stigma associated with disability. She was embarrassed that she was on Medicaid.

She came up and she was like, "I wanted to thank you for talking about the systemic issues in these programs and how they keep people trapped in poverty."

She was in the unfortunate situation where she had to choose between staying at work, or getting her healthcare needs met, and losing Medicaid. She couldn't do both. The income limits would have been exceeded with her part-time job.

She couldn't maintain that, so it was important for her to have someone out there addressing that, and how this harms people with disabilities, and really just confirming the fact that a lot of people with disabilities do want to work. They want to be involved.

It's not their disability that prohibits that. It is our society, and the way a lot of these programs are structured, and the societal barriers that we've put up for people with disabilities, and not the disability itself that hinders us.

She was so grateful to have me speak to those issues. She said, "That really gave me the confidence to finally talk to my friends about what I've been going through." She had been bottling this in for months, that she was dealing with this all by herself because she was so afraid of the stigma associated with disability and these programs.

I may have had one lady that wasn't going to vote for me no matter what, but the impact that I had on that woman, that gave her the confidence to then build her own support system and to self-identify as a person with a disability, and to realize that there's no shame in that. She was talking with someone else.

I was putting my face out there, literally my face was out there. People were wearing my face, which is the weirdest thing ever is people wearing your face on buttons.

I was out there. I was doing it. I had done all these things, having lived my lifetime with disability. It gave her some comfort to know that a lot of people have that internalized ableism when we talk about disability in society. Then, suddenly, they're faced with it and it's overwhelming.

They've internalized all this messaging that disability is bad, and you're dependent, you're shameful, and you can't do all of these things and have quality of life, and that's not possible.

She was seeing evidence to the contrary. That shattered that for her a little bit and gave her the confidence to say, "Yes, I am a person with a disability and that is OK."

If my campaign succeeded in anything, just having that impact, having impacted that one person to that degree was the most significant thing that I could have done whether I won or lost my race. It meant something to somebody else.

That was really the important part of starting to make disability a mainstream issue and fighting back against some of this rhetoric where we see candidates, and we see this particularly at the presidential level, hurdle disability terms at each other like they're slurs and that makes them unfit to hold office.

That's not true. If anything, a lot of times, disability gives you strength, and leadership skills, and other abilities, creativity, and the ability to think outside of the box, that make you strong leaders. Starting to turn that messaging on its head and change the dynamic in those conversations is really critical.

It's so important that, win or lose, we have people with disabilities getting out there.

Not being ashamed to admit that, yes, I'm a person with a disability, but I'm applying to you for this job because I know I can do it, and having people respond to that. I think that gradually will hopefully chip away at some of those attitudes and breakdown some of the ceilings that people with disability still face with representation in government.

Karolyn: I think, Olivia, whether we like it or not, there's an element of inspiration that we give to people. Even if we don't want to, there's no way around it. People are inspired, and I think they feel hopeful just by comparing their life to ours at times. I think that's something that could be harnessed in a beautiful way to just be authentic and share our story, and people will feel that strength.

Sabrina: I would absolutely tend to agree. I think that we never know who is paying attention to us. I remember seeing Olivia on stage when she came to Access the Future event, it was the

anniversary of ADA. Seeing her on stage with a few other different individuals, it was absolutely amazing to like, hey, cool. It helped me to be like, what is my excuse? I don't have any.

The bottom line is we never know who we're impacting. We never know what we may be doing down the line. Even if somebody might not be strong with us right now, that doesn't mean that we have not impacted somebody else, or we haven't inspired somebody else, as was mentioned.

I think that the more that we are there that we represent, the more that we show each other, the more that we show others in our local community, the more that we show others in higher government, that there's so much that we can do, and we need to be included with all decisions that are being made. That I think is very important.

When we're part of the conversation and when you're at the table, you get to be part of that figuring out what happens. I always like to tell people, you're either creating the menu or you're on the menu. I'd rather be creating the menu and making sure that people with disabilities and people in marginalized communities are thought of and thought of in a positive way.

Keith: Sarah, Olivia, Sabrina, Karolyn, thank you all so much for being a part of this discussion. We really appreciate you all taking the time to share your thoughts and experiences with us.

Thank you, Karolyn Campbell, Sabrina Cohen, Sarah Blahovec, and Olivia Babis, for being on today's episode, and for sharing their experiences and knowledge with us. We hope you could learn something from their stories and encourage you to share what you learned about inclusive campaigning and civic practices with others.

Maddie: Join us next Thursday, October 27th for the final episode of "Your Voice, Your Vote," where we will talk about accessible in-person voting right before the election.

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