

HASAN TAYEM

CLAUDIO BERTHER

HUMOR — SQUEAKY WHEEL

CROSSWORD PUZZLE

EVENTS/CONF

ABILITY

Voter Fraud?

Proven **or** 'Disproven'
Ken Block interview

Coast to Coast Attempt

50_{cc} / 50
hours 

Long Haul Paul Fighting MS

 Dr. Buzby
*Tip to Tale
Animal Wellness*

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As usual things have been crazy around here for the last month or so! I had planned on surprising my mom for a late birthday present by meeting my parents and brother in Nashville for the Supercross race. My dad and brother



Bambi

knew I was going to meet them, but my mom had no clue! I was getting myself and my dog, Bambi (an Australian Shepherd) ready to go to make the trip. Bambi was acting very funny and I thought she was just being stubborn and didn't want to travel. I

was almost ready to go and then she just kind of fell over in the kitchen. I brought her to an emergency vet hospital and they couldn't figure out what was wrong with her. We were there for 7 hours! They really couldn't figure out what was wrong and they just gave me a bunch of medicine and said it was her back and she would be ok when the medicine kicked in. I decided to continue on with my plans to meet my family and bring Bambi. That night at the hotel I noticed she couldn't turn to her right side and seemed to have trouble walking. In the hotel she walked right into her food and water bowl and knocked everything down, which is not like her at all!

I talked to my dad and told him to explain the situation to my mom because I was very upset and just wanted to take care of Bambi and not worry about surprising her. I did some internet research and I was thinking there was a good chance it was a stroke or, possibly worse, a brain tumor! In Nashville we made Bambi as comfortable as possible and my mom and I brought her to another

emergency vet. We were there for quite some time and explained what had happened to Bambi. They thought there was a good chance she had a stroke since she couldn't turn right and was walking in circles. The Neu-



rologist wouldn't be in until Monday so we had to bring her back Sunday to stay the night to see the Neurologist on Monday morning. Bambi had an MRI done and it was definitely a stroke on her left side, which was actually the best outcome! There is nothing you can do for dogs that have strokes you just have to keep them happy and try and exercise them.

I am happy to say that Bambi is back to almost 100 percent! I was so scared when all of this happened but I am thrilled now that she is on the healthy road to recovery!

Next week I am headed to Washougal Washington for a photoshoot with Yamaha I will let you know how everything goes! ■ **ABILITY**

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Those Special Ed Students Are Smarter Than You Think and Uh-Oh Now They're Unionizing

At Baytown Middle School, Mrs. Bunson's eighth-grade special education class may seem like your typical short bus full of Pokemon Go addicts and Taylor Swift stans, but no, they're built different. While their parents hoped that with the proper education these children would learn to become bright and successful students, this ragtag group of 13-year-old misfits has surpassed even those expectations.

"You might want to see me get an A on my economics quiz. But me? I want to restructure the entire education department's budget from the ground up," said chatty tween Rachel Gold. "For too long our only goal has been to reach the bar that others have set for us. It's time to set our own bar, and my bar is one that serves cocktails for any dietary restriction and pays its staff a living wage

PLUS vacation time PLUS a generous maternity leave policy."

When asked what radicalized her seemingly harmless students, Mrs. Brunson had no shortage of theories. "These kids, they see things. They see their friend Trevor get denied a new wheelchair because his Medicaid expired. They see me flirting with the creepy gym teacher so he'll keep driving me to work until I can afford to get my car back from the shop. They see ... like, the news. They know when shit's up." ■ **ABILITY**



by Steven Verdile

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A 50/50 chance sounds much better when you are at the roulette table than it does when you are on the operating table. Should you carry an umbrella when there is a 50% chance of rain?

When I first started using motorcycles to raise awareness and funds for Multiple Sclerosis 12 years ago, I realized I had to come up with crazy ideas to get people interested and willing to open their wallets. Just because I am out trying to document a million miles riding for MS is not enough of an incentive to get people to donate to the charity I work with.

In 2012, I set my first world record by becoming the first rider to ride 1000 miles in under 24 hours while also switching motorcycles 100 times. That first silly world record raised \$6,000.

In 2014, I rode a scooter from Boston to Chicago dressed in a powder blue tuxedo. That 1000 miles in under 24 hours was not a record, but certainly got a lot of looks and donations to the charity.

In 2016, I set my second world record, raising \$6000 for charity and earning a



place for my bike in the famous Barber Motorsports Museum. I am the only rider to document riding a motorcycle 28 hours all on the same day. I started on November 6th and finished on November 6th. By riding each across all three time zones on the day we set the clocks back an hour, I was able to ride 28 hours and 2000 miles all on one day.

In 2018, I raised \$28,000 by riding a motorcycle non-stop on a dyno (treadmill for motorized vehicles) live on social media, telethon style.

In 2021, I built a loud obnoxious uncomfortable chopper and set my fourth world record by being the first

rider to document the coast to coast in under 50 hours on a custom chopper. I did it the long way, 2900 miles in 46 hours to raise over \$20,000 for the charity.

It isn't easy trying to come up with harder and harder fundraisers that are crazy enough to get people interested, and better yet, to get people to donate. I have been tossing around a few ideas since my last successful ride and two weeks ago I decided on one of them.

The Iron Butt Association is the organization that certifies all sorts of rides worldwide. They created the 50CC Quest which is documenting a ride from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean (or vice-versa) in under 50

hours. The '50' in 50CC stands for the 50 hours. The 'CC' in 50CC stands for Coast to Coast. However, when anyone mentions the 50CC ride, people often think the ride is on a 50 cubic centimeter (50cc) minibike or scooter.

Everyone knows attempting a coast to coast ride on a little scooter would be absurd, and certainly impossible to accomplish in under 50 hours!

Well..... not exactly everyone.....

I am officially announcing right here on Ability Magazine that my next insane and goofy world record attempt fundraiser will simply be called the **50/50**.

That is, coast to coast in under 50 hours on a 50cc motorcycle. 50cc/50hrs — 50cc is slightly bigger than the motor in your weed whacker. It is 3 cubic inches. Before you start shaking your head and calling me an idiot, hear me out! I found out that Yamaha made a 50cc 2-stroke motorcycle 30 years ago that was full size, liquid cooled, had a six speed transmission and was known to top out at about 50mph. The bike was only imported in the US as a dirt bike and for just two years, but in places like Portugal, it was imported for many years. There was even a racing street version overseas. With a little tuning and some magical parts, some claimed it could go even faster.

The shortest route coast to coast in the states is from Jacksonville Beach in Florida to Dog Beach in San Diego, California. The route is 2400 miles on Interstate 10. If you divide the miles by 50 hours, you realize one has to average 48 miles per hour to complete the challenge.

Now, on a modern street bike, just by flowing at the posted speed limit, a rider can finish the ride with plenty of fuel and rest breaks and even include a full 8 hours of sleep.

However, in order for me to set a new world record for smallest bike to finish the 50CC, my 1988 Yamaha DT50 has to be fast enough to be safe in traffic and fast enough so I can stop for gas and hopefully an hour or two of rest. The faster we can get the bike travel (without blowing up), the more time I have for stops. I have recruited a bunch of mechanics and mad scientists who are building me a 50cc motor that hopefully will reach speeds of 60-65mph!

We have lots of work ahead, the bike I found and bought was in great shape but still had the original tires on it! The 6 volt electrical system will not be safe for highway driving at night, so I am converting it to 12 volt so I can use modern lighting. Extra fuel, a better suspension and bigger mirrors will all help for the ride as well.

I met Ricky Kunha through Youtube and as a kid in Portugal he became an expert on these small 2-stroke Yamaha's. Now as an engine builder and tech for the largest motorsport dealer in New Jersey, he has a machine shop and the skills to build really fast motorcycles. He is doing all the engine building work before we send the parts to a company in California. Josh from CryoHeat quickly volunteered their services to Cryo treat the engine parts which will make them 30% stronger after a deep freeze. Faster, stronger, lighter, what could possibly go wrong?

I don't have a date yet for the ride attempt, as I will need to make several runs to test the engine at a variety of altitudes and speeds. Please watch my social media channels for updates as this attempt progresses.

I'm confident we will get the bike to go fast enough, but will it hold up for 50 hours at 11,000 rpm? I am removing all unnecessary weight and slimming down the bike's width to be more aerodynamic, but will I be able to lose my beer belly so I can carry 10 pounds of extra fuel and oil?

Having a progressive disease like MS that can rob me of my mobility at any time has given me opportunities to take risks and attempt crazy challenges that I might otherwise pass on. I am excited and thankful for the help I have received with this ride, and I know my friends and followers will support yet another one of my idiotic fundraiser ideas.

Yes, this world record attempt is a long shot, but by calling it the 50/50, clearly the odds of making it are in my favor! ■ **ABILITY**





Dr. Julie Buzby

Veterinarian and Mental Health Advocate

If you have researched mobility products for an aging K-9 companion, you may have come across Dr. Julie Buzby's name. What you may not know, is that outside of founding ToeGrips, Dr. Buzby is a staunch advocate for mental health support and awareness within the veterinary professionals community.

With a suicide rate 3.5 times higher than the general population, veterinary professionals have been battling a mental health pandemic within their profession that has flown under the radar for years. *ABILITY Magazine's* Jennifer Woodall sat down with Dr. Buzby in a virtual interview to discuss the potential causes for the increase suicide rates, experiencing loss, breaking down mental health stigmas and how to come together as a self-supporting community.

Jennifer Woodall: How are you today?





Dr. Julie Buzby: Hi, I'm great. How are you?

Woodall: Good. Thank you. So, my brother actually works as an advisor at a private college, and part of his position in his job is to prep people for graduate school. He was saying, surprisingly, that veterinary school is extremely competitive. The requirements for the program are even more strenuous than medical school, and he was a little surprised by that. Is that something that you have found to be synonymous with the schooling programs for veterinary in medicine?

Buzby: Yes. And I think it really comes down to supply and demand. I applied for veterinary school in 1990. No, that's not true, because I went to college in 1990. So it would have been 1993, maybe, and there were only 20 some veterinary schools in the US. Now, there are over 30, and we have US students who go internationally as well into the Caribbean to try to increase their chance of getting in. I think that's the main issue. There's a lot more medical schools in the US than veterinary schools. So that's one issue, just a supply and demand to get a position in those schools, and the class sizes tend to be small. The other issue is this change in the dynamic of

the workforce. Many schools have over 80% females coming into the incoming class. So that's another interesting change in what we're seeing for the profession and the future of the profession.

Woodall: Yeah, absolutely. I think the statistic that I read was 70% of the veterinarians are women. So, yeah, that is interesting. Have you seen or are you aware of any connections between the reported level of depression in veterinary students versus practicing veterinarians? Do you see a discrepancy in those numbers?

Buzby: So to be quite honest, I don't feel equipped to speak about that. I'm not sure what the number... I haven't personally looked at data for students only. I do care very much about the data for veterinarians, and particularly female veterinarians, because that's the circle in which I run. I spend a lot of time socially online with colleagues and different Facebook groups and community groups. There's one statistic out there that says female veterinarians are 3.5 times more likely to take their life by suicide than the general population. I really got a deeper understanding on this recently. Every year, Merck and the AVMA (American Veterinary Medical Association) I think, work together to put out data. NPR has recently been talking about this. People Magazine recently did—when I say recently, in the past couple of years—highlighting veterinary mental health. It's coming to light for those of us who are in the profession. It's something we think about a lot because in these online groups, it's not uncommon for there to be posts about a colleague who we've lost. There's been weeks where we've lost two colleagues in the same week to suicide.

And it just rips your heart out because you feel this attachment, right? As veterinarians, we're in this circle together, whether I knew them or not, where our lives are parallel enough that it just really hurts. My heart—all of our hearts—go out to the clients and staff and certainly their family who are affected. My son, this past spring, for his AP research class had to pick a topic to do research on and present it. The topic he chose was specific to veterinary mental health, and the angle was how debt, student loans and debt affect mental health. He put out a survey and had I think just a couple shy of 400 veterinarians take that survey. I read through the data because a lot of it was like you could type in the answer question, so really good for hearing people's hearts as they typed out the things that are causing mental health issues and stress. Student loans was way more significant than I expected in the way that they described it.

I've always seen student loans listed as a risk factor for veterinary mental health in the list of eight things that cause depression and put veterinary mental health at risk. I've always seen it in the list, but I've never seen it isolated and discussed. Because that's an issue that's also very much on the mind, I'm sure, of veterinary students who are racking up that debt, I'm sure there's parallels there. And it was eye-opening for me.

Woodall: Yeah, that's definitely an aspect that I hadn't considered before, but once you say it, it makes so much sense. A lot of school loans, the prospect of paying them off can be very bleak sometimes, so that makes sense that it could be a contributing factor.

Do you have any personal opinions on why you think there's a disparity between the rate of suicide with women and men within the veterinary medicine field?

Buzby: Well, I don't know if the percentage takes into account that there's just more women. I don't know if that's factored in or not. I think it's truly just a number that's higher in women. Veterinary medicine tends to attract Type A perfectionists who are very hard on themselves. We don't need anybody—I'm sure this is true for most humans, but I can certainly speak to our profession—we don't need anybody bashing us on social media, telling us what a horrible job that we did, although in absolutely almost all cases, it's not true. We're doing our best. I always say animals are living systems, they're not mufflers, and so we can't guarantee that it's going to work perfectly every time. These are living systems that it doesn't always go the way that we want it, even despite our absolute best efforts. But we're very hard on ourselves. There's a meme going around in veterinary medicine that says: "I wake up at 3:00 AM and think about your pet and I don't charge you any extra for that." That's the gist of the meme. It's so true. When I owned my veterinary hospital, we were in a rural area, and so I couldn't just easily send patients off for overnight emergency care because we were in a really rural area.

I would literally just sleep on the floor of the hospital next to a patient who might need a higher level of care. I'm not saying that to draw attention to myself and my dedication, that is the level of commitment that we have as a whole. I've been a vet for 27 years, and the people that I've worked with in all different situations as an emergency vet, as an associate, as a practice owner, this is the conscientiousness and the degree of extreme commitment that the profession exemplifies. So, you take that and you multiply that over many years and many, many situations, and then you add to it for females also feeling the pressures of being responsible for family life and kids and success at home. It just adds up to be a lot of pressures that I think people try to be perfect in, and that's too much for humanity to bear. I was at a veterinary conference years ago where a speaker who had struggled with depression and suicidal tendencies spoke, and she was a veterinary technician, and she did such an amazing job. It was really my first deep dive into this aspect of our profession.

She said, "People don't die by suicide because they want to die. They die by suicide because they want to escape just pain, just immeasurable immense pain that they feel like there's no other way out from." I'm not saying that men don't feel pain, but I think women just internalize



Veterinary Encouragement Conference

that maybe differently and just process it differently. That aspect of perfectionism and just trying to be all things to all people, professionally and personally, and wear all the hats and find the work-life balance. I think it just is too much. Like I said, too much for a human.

There's all this discussion about your superpowers and you're a superstar, and you're a superhero. I know those are all said as compliments—and certainly well-deserved compliments, I'm sure, when they're said—but I really feel like I'm going to—in my own circle of influence, even my family—I'm just going to take it a step back and say, I think it's enough to be human. I think if you can be human and with that, forgive people, forgive yourself, fail and forgive yourself and understand that's a part the journey and be civil to those around you, just the aspects of just being human. I think that's enough. Maybe we should just take it a step back and work on allowing ourselves to be human and not striving to be superhuman.

Woodall:

Yeah, absolutely. Also, I think, too, when you get the label of being a superhero or superhuman, even if it comes from a source of good intention, you get put on this pedestal, and the pressures that come with that get

magnified to uphold these expectations. So, yeah, I definitely like that. Let's just be human. I like that thought process for sure.

I was reading a couple of statistics, and one of them was coming from the National Library of Medicine, talking about the differences of rate of suicide in different professions, and talking about how the veterinary profession is close to twice that of the dental profession, twice that of the medical profession, and 3.5 times the rate of the general population. I know we mentioned some of the risk factors briefly. Can you go into a little bit more detail of why you think that is? What risk factors are there that caused that increased number?

Buzby: Right. So, I'll just touch briefly on debt since we've already said it. It's very hard to get an eight-year degree without going into debt, there's very few people that are going to accomplish that. In my son's survey, there were people that had funding from an outside source, typically a family member or inheritance or something, but what I didn't realize was there was a large number of people in the survey, I want to say a quarter to a third, who were going to take 25 or more years to pay off their debt. That was mind-blowing to me. They described it as a chain around their neck,

something that they constantly thought about, something that they constantly felt guilty about because they were either working all the time to pay it off and not with their kids, or they didn't really have money to do things that they wanted to do with their family, like vacations, et cetera. I think it's not just the burden of "I got to pay this off", but it's also how that debt affects the way you live and even contributes to guilt—mom guilt—specifically.

There's this term, compassion fatigue, which I think is a little bit of a misnomer. I don't think veterinarians get fatigued to being compassionate. I think truly, back to the human aspect, I think we often work a lot of hours. A lot of hours and fatigue itself takes a toll on mental health. I just know that when I'm fatigued, I don't cope as well. I've also heard a lot of people say, "Oh, I could never euthanize an animal, that's got to be the worst part of your job." I think I speak for our profession when I say that's not the worst part of our job. It's actually a privilege and an honor to be there with people during that time, giving that animal a peaceful painless transition and giving the people peace of mind and really scripting 'the good death' if you will. That's a really beautiful place to be, and we're honored to be there. What's hard is that we often go from that appointment to the next appointment, which is the 10-week-old puppy who's there for his puppy shots, and we don't have time to grieve and process that. Because I can't, I've said this before, but I can't break down and start crying in the exam room with the people as much as my heart is breaking.

For a lot of us in this profession, we've been with that puppy their whole lives, and now they're 16, and it's time to say goodbye, and those people and that pet is just as much a part of family as theirs. I won't say just as much, but we truly love these pets. So, I can't start weeping with the people in the room because I've got to hit the vein, and in order to make this perfectly smooth, I can't be blinded by my own tears. Then you come out of that room and then you go to the next appointment. It's just all part of the flow, which you need to hold space for in your heart, but there's not time in a busy appointment schedule. I don't know that other professions deal with that whiplash. Certainly, during COVID, we did curbside appointments for the most part because most states were requiring that. We were considered essential but there was a lack of contact. During that time, a lot of people got pets, as you probably know. Then there was this whole thing of, "Is there a shortage of veterinarians?" We saw veterinary emergency hospitals who didn't have enough staff to care for the pets. Veterinary hospitals were maxed out caring for their own clients, and now what do you do with new clients who obviously need to be seen? We care just as much about those animals, but logistically, how do you make all this work? One of the joys of being a veterinarian is that every day is different—that's great—but one of the hardships of veterinary medicine is

that every day is different and very fast paced and a lot of whiplash.

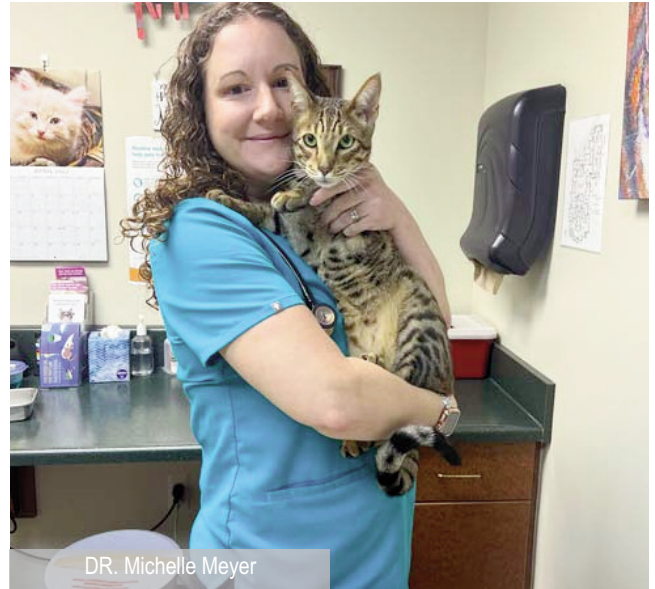
I think there are certainly other medical professions that deal with that, but maybe not to the extreme we do. If you think about most MDs, if you're a dermatologist, you're seeing dermatology cases, and there's not really emergencies. If you're a cardiologist, you're focused on your thing. Most veterinarians—we do have specialists, thank heavens, and they're brilliant and save a lot of lives—but most veterinarians are general practitioners. So, one appointment can be a puppy, the next appointment is euthanasia, the next appointment can be a hit by car where every second counts, and the next appointment can be a dog with an ear infection and multiply that the course of the day, so the days can be really intense. Veterinary medicine is changing to respect boundaries and to understand that we have to prioritize the health of the veterinarians and their staff just as much, but for all the years that I was in practice, it was normal that you're never going to get out the door on time, you're never going to have a lunch break—that was just what was expected. That is shifting, but that's an important shift to happen for veterinary mental health. Again, back to humanity. We're not robots. You can't just go 24/7 and not take a break.

Then there's, sadly, the issue of social media, the Keyboard Cowboy, the Yelp Review. There are very hurtful things said in veterinary medicine. Most always, I will say the cases that I know about, most always unjustified. Certainly, mistakes can be made, but for the most part in the situations I've seen blow up on social media, it's because of a person who's grieving and chooses to take it out in this way on a person. Maybe there was not the best communication, possibly, and the person didn't really understand that animals aren't mufflers, and this isn't a guarantee, but I personally know of veterinarians who've been driven out of the field by a mob of people who can't express their own anger, and then rally other people on social media to get involved and create a lynch mob. I do know of cases of veterinary suicide where this was a contributing factor, so that's another big one. Even the American Veterinary Medical Association has a cyberbullying department. That's crazy that the AVMA needs a cyberbullying department. So that's another real issue.

Woodall: It sounds like there's a lot of repressing of your emotions throughout the day. That's what it sounds like when you're describing having to go from a puppy to a euthanasia to a medical emergency, and having to have this even tone of demeanor across it. It sounds like there's a lot of repressing of these really intense emotions which I can totally see how that can contribute to depression. Do you have any ritual self-care that you do when you get home or a way that you process through having to tamp down how you feel throughout your work day?



Dr. Liz Neveau



DR. Michelle Meyer



Dr. Whitney Brown



Dr. Hillary McManama

Buzby: It's a great question, and I've never thought about it as repressing emotion. It seems so obvious when you say it. I think we just call it being professional. I mean, we have to be professional. To answer your question, I think you have to find a coping mechanism. For me personally, I just love God, and he is my source of strength, so I am always praying in the background of my head. Even in euthanasias, I will ask the client, "Do you mind if I pray with you?" and for me, that brings me a lot of peace. I hope for them as well. I've never had anybody say no in all the years. So that's my source of strength and encouragement. Always there, always steady.

I can't speak for other people, but I agree with you that we have to find a way to process that, and maybe that's really the bottom line of what's missing. There is an organization that started within the past couple of years called the Veterinary Hope Foundation. They do small group sessions with people that are like-minded in the

profession. I think they try to put the practice owners with the practice owners and people in common life circles together, and they just talk through things, which I think has been really helpful. I just finished hosting the third annual Veterinary Encouragement Conference. During COVID, I just thought, "We've got to get together. Isolation is a big issue for all of us right now, but for our profession with everything else going on with mental health, what if we got together in person?" The goal was really encouragement and community—and we have to get a certain number of continuing education hours every year to keep our degree—let's meld the two, but put more emphasis on support and community. We just did our third annual one, and the Veterinary Hope Foundation was there doing 20 minutes sessions with a licensed social worker who has an emphasis in the veterinary profession. Her sessions filled up so quickly, and I think she dealt with a lot of really heavy stuff just in these little 20 minutes sessions. I guess my point is there is a need for—we would call it a pop-off valve, a piece of

the anesthesia machine that has to be able to open to allow everything to properly circulate and not explode the lungs—I think veterinary medicine needs to do a better job of finding the pop-off valve.

Woodall: Sort of touching on how you mentioned isolation a little bit. I was reading a study from Bartram and Baldwin that suggests that professional isolation is one of the potential contributing factors to increased suicide rates among veterinarians. Can you tell me a little bit about the aspects of the job that tend to be isolating? What that looks like?

Buzby: I will say that I've seen an improvement in this over the course of my career, which makes me really happy. When I graduated from vet school, I thought of myself inappropriately as competing against all the other veterinarians. I mean, I wouldn't have been able to consciously verbalize or explain this, but you get out there, and especially because I open my own practice, I'm a competitor. I mean, of course, I wish my colleagues well, but somewhere deep inside of me was this idea of I want to be great and I want to be the best, and that means I have to be better than other people, so that in and of itself, I think, is isolating that mindset. I have seen a shift, and certainly I've been blessed to be a part of it. I certainly feel it at my soul, but I think I've seen a shift in our profession where we realize that veterinary medicine is not an individual sport. It's a team sport. I don't mean that only within a hospital itself, I mean collectively, we're a team sport. I've heard this said at conferences, but I know it to be true, no one's going to come from the outside and rescue us from our mental health crisis. The government's not going to fix this. The NIH (National Institutes of Health) is not going to fix this. We're going to have to fix this ourselves, and I think we recognize that. I think it just brings more camaraderie and compassion and empathy as we practice. I actually feel much less isolated than I did initially when I first got out of school and then opened my own practice. I was a solo practitioner and that's super isolating since I was working by myself. I think this is a good place for social media. Social media can be dangerous, or at least any tool, I think, can have the potential for harm, but a good thing about social media is I think it's been used to bring veterinarians together. Back to your question as to why the profession is isolating. What comes to mind, again, is who is in the profession. It's these type A perfectionists that hold themselves to such a high standard and beat themselves up so relentlessly for the slightest thing that doesn't go perfectly, that I think we just isolate ourselves by our own perceptions.

Woodall: Yeah, that makes sense. Absolutely. Especially when we're talking about even from the get when you're going into veterinary school, it's immediately competitive. So it does make sense because you're just thrown into the fire from the beginning competition-wise. It puts you in that mindset before you even graduate.

Buzby: And we talked about how hard it is to get in, so you've already competed hard to get there. And, yeah, your mindset doesn't instantly change. You're still striving.

Woodall: Yeah, absolutely. It's something to prove for sure. I couldn't find any information about this, so I was just curious if you had any professional insight on it. Do you see any difference between the mental health and quality of life situation between rural vets or city vets? Do you see any differences there related to suicide rates and mental health?

Buzby: I don't know. There is an organization called Not One More Vet that specifically exists to prevent veterinarians taking their life by suicide. In my son's research paper, I think he found that over the past 40 to 45 years or something, 400 veterinarians have lost their life to suicide. I would say that quality of life is going to make a difference. So, I think there's so many factors. Is that city vet, \$300,000 in debt, working all the time, feeling the pressures? I think city practice may be expected to be less James Harriet, for lack of a better word, than country practice, so maybe the pace and the expectations are different. Not that the reality of saving animals' lives isn't the same in both, but yeah, I wouldn't be able to answer that question. I think it all comes down to quality of life.

Woodall: No, that makes sense, like an individual case-by-case situation. What we see time and time again, when we talk to really anybody about mental health in what they're doing, regardless of what sector it's in, we see that there's so much stigma against mental health still. Do you feel like stigma against mental health issues plays a role in veterinary professionals seeking treatment or not?

Buzby: For sure, and I feel like I'm a broken record, but I think it goes back to that perfectionist type A personality. You can't show weakness. You have to be perfect. So to say, "I'm struggling", we just don't say it. That's just not in our DNA. I think it's something that there are a lot of people and organizations working to break that down and say, "No, it's okay. It's okay to be human. It's okay to struggle, and we want to come alongside you and help you in those times." In my conference, the Veterinary Encouragement Conference, what I say at the beginning of every conference is, "If you need help, if you are hurting, if you are not in a good place, I beg of you to be vulnerable, to be honest, and to reach forward, to reach out to those of us who are. If you're in a good place and you're stable and you're strong, then you need to be—we need to be—reaching back for those people who are reaching forward." And you know what? I we're constantly switching position, right? I mean, there's days where I'm reaching forward—maybe even changes hour by hour—and times when I have it in me to reach back. I want to help others. And it's a dynamic relationship.



Dr. Cindy Barnes at a vaccine clinic in South Africa organized by the nonprofit Community Vet Clinic.

Woodall: When you were mentioning your conference before with the Veterinary Hope Foundation bringing the social worker there and the general consensus that veterinarian professionals need to initiate the change towards a more supportive mental health structure themselves, what do you feel needs to be in place to promote mental health awareness and support within the veterinary community? What do you think needs to happen to see a change?

Buzby: One of the things that breaks my heart, and really haunts me is when you see a veterinarian who's taken their life, almost always there's a post about it on social media. Here's this picture, here's this veterinarian, here's their story. They always look amazing. They're kneeling down, they've got six puppies on their lap, they're laughing hysterically with their team surrounding them. They

never look like hurting, and that's that thing that bothers me. To your point before about the stigma of mental health, we're really good at putting on masks. In veterinary medicine, cats are known to not show pain. They won't show pain. They'll mask pain, and they just won't show weakness. Veterinary medicine is filled with a bunch of cats that are not going to show weakness. They are going to mask it. I think the more we can break down stigma and the more resources we can provide, especially from within because there's this empathy that we have having lived this life together, I think the better off we'll be and the more of a place we'll create for people to be honest and open. Now we're talking about it, so we've moved from never talking about it to now it's out there. In the profession, I think everybody's well aware of it now. I still think the general public doesn't really know, so I appreciate what you're doing because



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even though there has been some limited discussion here and there, if it comes up when I'm talking to a relative or if I'm in a place where for some reason this comes up as a discussion, 9 times out of 10, that person who's not related to the veterinary field is shocked and that says, "I had no idea." So, I still think people don't know. Awareness is important. The root thing is making it okay to not be okay and then finding ways for us to support those people who are reaching out for help. But step one is just making it okay for them to reach out and not be blacklisted, and for us to realize that it's not a weakness, it's being human, and it's to be expected—it's not a failure.

Woodall: Yeah, absolutely. One of the parts of breaking down stigma that I think is really important is to be able to break it down within the professional sector, not just general population, but in the workplace. A lot of times, especially when you're a doctor, a veterinarian in a position of authority is not really the right word, but it's the best one I can come up with right now—you're always expected to maintain a certain decorum. Then when you start talking freely about mental health, a lot of people can be like, "Oh, well, can you even do your job at this point?" And that's such an unfair connection to make. I would love to see some way to break those walls down and make it a more comfortable space to realize, yeah, you can definitely have mental health issues and still be so great at your job. Those things aren't the same.

Buzby: Right. That's a great point. It's a great point.

Woodall: Is there anything else you would like to talk about that we haven't covered yet today?

Buzby: I really want the world to know that veterinarians are heroes, and they care so deeply. They care so deeply for their patients and their clients. There's been all kinds of stuff that goes around online like veterinarians are in it for the money. That's absolutely not true. There's shockingly little money in veterinary medicine. I'm sure the corporations that own some of these hospitals, that's not true for, but in 27 years, I cannot think of a veterinarian that I met that I was like, "Man, there's a bad apple who is just in it. I don't know how he got into this profession." They're in it because this is a calling, really, and there's so much goodness. I would love for people to just know that and give their veterinarian just space to not be perfect and show appreciation when it's appropriate. And like I said, I think that's true for probably all of us, not just the veterinary profession.

Woodall: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today, have a good day.

Buzby: Thank you so much. Take care. ■ **ABILITY**

toegrip.com

Voter

Proven or

Fraud?

‘Disproven’

interview with Ken Block

Donald Trump’s Deep Dive Investigator, Ken Block’s, Findings of Voter Fraud in 2020

Ken Block is no stranger to processing large data sets. Coming from a computer engineering background, Block runs a software engineering business that has tackled large scale projects like building the first debit card system for food stamps, known as SNAP across various states. Block’s creation of the Moderate Party of Rhode Island in 2009 marked the beginning of his dive in to politics and voter data, making him an ideal candidate to investigate potential voter fraud.

In 2020, Block was approached by one of the Trump campaign’s top attorneys to investigate voter fraud allegations, a process that would give him unprecedented access to presidential election voter data. *ABILITY Magazine*’s Chet Cooper met with Block to discuss the investigation results, how our current voting system deals with accessibility, and ways it needs to improve.



Chet Cooper: Can you give us a little background; how would you describe yourself?

Ken Block: I am an expert in what's called relational databases. I'm a computer engineer. I have a software engineering business. We have done really large projects over the years, including the Texas food stamp program, the debit card. We built the first debit card system in the country for food stamps, now called SNAP, for the state of Texas. We did the same thing for Illinois, California, and the government of Puerto Rico. That's what I come from. I found my way to politics in 2008–2009, when I got really discouraged by what the two parties were delivering in terms of choices for president and the basic dysfunction that I saw in Congress and I figured that there was a better way to do it. That's how I got in to trying to create the Moderate Party, and after that (laughs), once we created the party—which required collecting 35,000 signatures—no easy thing in a small state like Rhode Island—the only way to keep the party alive once we'd created it was that somebody had to run for governor and win 5% of the vote in 2010. That person ended up being me, because no good deed goes unpunished, I guess. (laughs) So, I ran for governor. I found that I was pretty good at all of the different skills required to run for a state-level office like that. I enjoyed the debates thoroughly and I was intellectually fully engaged on all cylinders as we did it, with a lot of encouragement from others. After I closed down the new political party in 2012, I was asked to run again in

2014. I did so, and in Rhode Island, it's one of the bluest states in the country, and we have what I like to call a very machine-oriented and -driven Democratic party. It's one of these situations where you don't really break your way into the party. You have to pay your dues, come up through the ranks, blah-blah-blah. And more importantly, I'm a reformer at heart, and there was really no way to bring the reforms that I thought the state needed from within the Democratic party. For a lot of reasons that was going to fail.

The only other option available to me was the Republican party. As a business owner, I'm pretty fiscally conservative, but in every other metric I'm about, again, as middle-of-the-road as you can imagine. I declared my candidacy as a Republican. I had a primary in 2014. I lost my statewide race by 3,000 votes, and voter fraud was not to blame.

Cooper: There were just those 3,000 people to blame.

Block: (laughs) Right! So that's my mix of high-tech and politics.

Cooper: How did you get involved with the research on voter fraud?

Block: The day after the 2020 election, I was contacted by one of the Trump campaign's top attorneys, who

asked me very directly if I would help them look for voter fraud. I don't know how they found their way to me, but I saw it as a unique opportunity to conduct some data-driven research on a national election—something that I'm pretty sure nobody had ever really been provided the opportunity to do before. I knew that the campaign would make all the finances available to me that were necessary to do the work, and I also knew that they would be able to collect the data that I needed to look at. And because of that combination of unique point-in-time things available to me, I decided that I would take a look at it.

I told the lawyer I reported to—his name is Alex Cannon—I told him that I would do the work but I would not custom-deliver any results, that what I would find, if there was voter fraud, I would find it document it, and we would successfully defend those findings in court, but if I didn't find it, it wasn't there, and they would have to deal with it. His response to that was, "That's perfect. We want you to do your due diligence." Probably the most amazing thing I'll say to you today is the fact that there were in fact some attorneys for the Trump campaign who did their professional due diligence and were doing the right thing in terms of assessing whether or not voter fraud was there. They were interested in operating within the proper level framework, if you will, to get in and contest an election. They weren't going to bring a false claim forward, they only wanted to bring forward a claim that actually existed.

Cooper: Why did they reach out to you?

Block: My company developed an expertise in looking at voter data, and I have a personal knowledge of a full decade of looking at the data from just about all the states. There are eight states that won't make their data available to anyone, so I haven't looked at those eight states, but outside of that, I've looked at every state's voter data. I've done some very interesting things with voter data over the years. That expertise was probably known to the campaign. I don't know exactly how they found their way to me, and I really didn't have any time to explore that question in the month of November of 2020.

Cooper: What have you done with data analysis connecting to voters?

Block: What would be a surprise to a great many people is that prior to 2008 most states did not have a single computerized database that contained all of their voter data. That only came about because of the Help America Vote Act, which passed in 2002. When I started looking at voter data in 2014-2015, there really hadn't been anyone exploring these data sets and looking at them. I was exploring it. I used voter data as a tool to help train people who worked for me. Over the years we did things like assessing the quality of the data. Did states have what I called "clean data" or "dirty data"? Did they

have valid dates of birth for people? These were the early questions. We then tried to determine if we could see if somebody was registered to vote in two different states and solved the problem of: can you uniquely identify somebody just based on name and data of birth and address? There's a lot behind these simple statements that I'm making to you, and because we specialize in data, we did a really good job of looking at it. We were able to show with great certainty in the 2016 election that about 9,000 people had voted twice. This is across 24 states. So, while 9,000 sounds huge at first, it's not huge when you consider that there were 24 states involved in this analysis. Nine thousand people across 24 states voted in two different states in the same election, with a couple of thousand of those votes being cast in Florida. And it makes sense. We know that people have second homes in Florida and also some other place. Because there was really no infrastructure anywhere in the country to look for this and prevent it, people were doing it and there was not a lot of consequence to it.

That was some of the work that we had done. We also have developed a very high-confidence way to identify whether registered voters are deceased, and we've used that expertise to help some states clean up their voter rolls. It was that sort of thing. It's not my primary business line at all, it's just something that started more or less as a training tool and has blossomed into an interesting side gig, if you will.

Cooper: What do you know about voting rights for people with disabilities in different states?

Block: I know a fair amount about mail ballots and how different states have remarkably different rules and regulations regarding who can make use of mail ballots and how those mail ballots can be delivered to election officials. It's all over the map. Alabama has the least friendly mail ballot regulations in the country. It's very, very difficult to vote by mail in Alabama. Few people are legally able to use mail ballots, and delivering their mail ballots has to be essentially a direct relative or specifically a caregiver. It runs the gamut to many states that only conduct their elections by mail, big states. It's all over the map. Mail ballots have their own inherent security problems. It's just the nature of the beast. We should solve those. It gets back to the national identifiers we were talking about at length earlier.

Mail ballots aren't going to go away, and we should strengthen them and get their integrity as strong as we can, and we should encourage people to securely use mail ballots in the future. It's a very convenient way to vote, and not requiring people to show up to cast a vote on election day in person is a reasonable thing to do. We do it okay right now, but we can do it a lot better.

Cooper: You said mailing is a reasonable accommodation for individuals with disabilities. Do you know any-



Ken Block running for Governor

thing about the voting machines and accessibility not only the machines but accessibility to those voting locations?

Block: Right. To answer your question, I'm going to ask you a question. Do you know how many voting jurisdictions there are in the country, with a jurisdiction being individually responsible for acquiring its own voting gear?

Cooper: 10,468. No, I have no idea.

Block: (laughs) That's actually not a bad guess! It's over 5,000. And in states like Nevada with 17 counties and New York State with 62 counties, I believe, a lot of those counties in those two states have different computer systems, different voting machines, different governmental bodies responsible for the conduct of their elections. It's almost impossible to talk with any degree of authority about how specific election jurisdictions handle accessibility, because it's so dramatically different and so much different gear is in use all over the place. I can't really speak to it on a general basis. Some states are way better at it than others. We still see lawsuits today over governmental buildings that really aren't accessible to folks who have mobility challenges.

Even today we have that problem, so we have a long way to go to solve accessibility issues across the board and across the range of challenges. There's a lot more work to do there.

Cooper: We were talking about machines, the Dominion voting machine. Were you part of looking into that as well?

Block: No. Everything I did had a foundation in data that I could look at. The Dominion claims were strictly hearsay, and what I mean by hearsay is, "He said, she said," not a shred of evidence that any court in the country would allow as admissible. So no, I didn't have anything to do with it. Had they brought it to me, I would have declined to even look at it because what could I do? It's somebody making a claim out of thin air without a shred of proof behind it. But how do you disprove something that's fabricated wholly out of thin air. There wasn't the time to do that, and all those claims failed in the court system, like they should have, and as a result of those claims, there are have been some pretty severe consequences paid by those who brought those claims in the first place.

Cooper: How do states deal with having data of people's

names, addresses, birth dates? How do they deal with privacy?

Block: First of all, there is no consistency between states for how they deal with it, which is a huge problem across the board. When it comes to voting, the states are given great latitude in terms of what they do and how they do it, and as a result, there are some pretty crazy differences between states. Did you know that there is one state that does not register its voters?

Cooper: Yes, State of Confusion?

Block: (laughs) Pretty much, or you can also call it Nebraska.

Cooper: (laughs) That's interesting.

Block: Another inconsistent way that states do things manifests itself is the following scenario: imagine that I voted three weeks early by mail in an election and then I had the misfortune of dying before election day. Do you believe that my vote counts or doesn't count?

Cooper: Oh, interesting. I'm dying to know!

(laughter)

Block: Well, the answer is, it depends.

Cooper: It depends on which state you're in?

Block: Yup.

Cooper: Nebraska!

Block: (laughs) Who knows in Nebraska? In Michigan it doesn't count, and in 2020 they disallowed 3,500 votes like the one I just described to you. In about a third of the states the vote does not count by law, and in another third of the states the vote counts by law, and in the last third of the states there is no law that addresses that situation, so it's a mess. There are a lot of scenarios like that, where the differences in how states do things yield some very surprising and unfair differences. When it comes to the voters' experience, when voting in congressional or presidential elections, the same set of circumstances should yield the same result everywhere. But that's not the way our system works.

Cooper: The idea between the powers between state and federal. There's no federal mandate to—

Block: Well, there is. The Constitution says that the states are responsible for elections, but that Congress can pass law that sets guidelines for elections as Congress desires. And Congress has passed laws in the past. We have the National Voting Rights Act and the Help America Vote Act, and these bills absolutely impact the conduct of elections across the country. The challenge is

that really we only have a decade more or less of what I would consider the modern era of elections, where everybody was fully computerized and we could begin diving into issues like this. We really should have more federal guidelines to eradicate some of the bigger unfair occurrences that we have in the conduct of our elections, but Congress can't agree on a lunch order right now. How do you ever get them to pass a law like this?

Cooper: I've always wondered how things keep moving toward making it easier, like filing and paying IRS taxes online, seeing your health records online with patients and your medical team. Why we can't create a national online voting system?

Block: It's very interesting you say that. My book is broken into three parts. The first part deals with my experience working for the Trump campaign and all of the voter fraud that we didn't find. The middle part of the book talks about the specific reasons, confirmable by data, for why Trump actually lost. The last part of the book are recommendations for ways that we can improve our elections. Your idea, I'll paraphrase here, of a federalized voter registration is spot-on. I think that's the way we should go. I'd even go one step further. We've only had voter registration since the 1950s. The Constitution doesn't say anything about the need to register to vote. If you're a citizen and the age of 18—and when I say “citizen,” I mean natural-born or naturalized, that's the requirement for citizenry—if you're a U.S. citizen and you're 18 years of age, you have the right to vote.

I believe that we should confer an automatic voter registration to every natural-born and naturalized citizen as they become citizens, meaning at birth or when they're naturalized, and remove this whole idea of requiring registration. The reason we have really weird voting data and why the situation with all those duplicate votes that I described to you in 2016 happens is because the states have their own voter registration systems, and they don't interact with other states to make sure that their registered voters aren't also registered somewhere else. By federalizing it, you can remove a lot of slop that exists because of this situation that I just described to you. By the way, it can't be the Social Security number, because as you may or not be aware, Social Security numbers are no longer confidential.

Cooper: Actually, when I was thinking that, I was thinking that you'd have to have multiple fields that you'd fill out, Social Security just being one of them.

Block: Yeah, but we're corrupting the use of the Social Security number. It's not a national identifier, although we use it like a national identifier. It's supposed to be the identifier for our financial lives, but it's been collected by dentists and hospitals and doctors' offices. It's been lost in data breaches big and small all over the place. And now, without any exaggeration, if you gave



Ken Block running for RI Governor

me five minutes, I could find your Social Security number.

Cooper: What time do you have now? (laughs)

Block: (laughs) It's not secure. It's no longer confidential, and we've seen all of the unemployment insurance fraud that we experienced during COVID, and there were hundreds of billions of dollars of unemployment insurance fraud. That fraud was only made possible because everybody's Social Security numbers were known by the bad guys.

Cooper: So, the identity would be something else? Fingerprints, eye scanning, DNA?

Block: What's interesting is that the U.S. is the only First World country that does not have a national identifier. Everybody else, every European country, they have a national identifier, and a lot of those are biometric in nature. You talked about privacy concerns, and as we kicked off the conversation that we're having right now, it's really not possible to replace Social Security numbers that are no longer confidential, or have automatic voter registration like I am suggesting that we should do, without the creation of some national identifiers, and these should be biometric in nature. It's worked in a great many other places. It should work here. And there's really no other way to resolve some of these problems without moving in that direction.

Cooper: This is a new topic for me, but if you're saying that there are countries that are using some form of biometrics—maybe DNA, fingerprints, eye scans, something they're already doing—then we can analyze those countries and find the pros and cons of a national identifier?

Block: Yes. And we need a couple of new identifiers, a voting identifier, a replacement for Social Security number identifier, and maybe there needs to be a medical identifier. We're looking at at least two, maybe three, to help us out. And I toss these off like they're easy to do. They're not. It will be very expensive and time-consuming to replace Social Security numbers. It touches so

many databases in the private, public, and governmental sectors. It's a big deal to make that change, to even create a new system, to have a federalized voter registration. They are easy concepts to put your head around, but very complicated and difficult to build.

Cooper: My brain is already thinking about the huge benefits, but also the huge issues around Big Brother having all this data.

Block: Here's what I'll say about Big Brother. Big Brother's already there, and it's not big government.

Cooper: Oh, when I said that, I wasn't only concerned with government, but the data getting hacked.

Block: Yeah. Google knows a horrifying amount about you. My entry to the national media happened just over a year ago, when the Washington Post received a leak out of Jack Smith's grand jury investigation in DC that my company and myself specifically had received a subpoena in that legal matter. I was in Virginia at a business meeting when my cell phone rang with a number from the Washington Post. I picked it up and there was a reporter there, and the first thing I asked him was, "How did you get my cell phone number?" He said, "I'm actually looking at Lexis/Nexis right now, and here's your number and here's your wife's cell phone number." And I went, "Yeah, that's right."

Information you would think is semi-private really isn't. We've lost just about every shred—and I'm just being realistic here, not fatalistic—we have lost any shred of privacy when it comes to data, I would say 15 years ago. It's very unlikely that we get it back. To spin back to your question about names, addresses, and dates of birth, those really aren't confidential, and in fact, the National Voting Rights Act pretty much mandates that that information needs to be provided by the states to anyone who wants to doublecheck that the states are doing what they're supposed to do correctly. There's a legal requirement to provide that data, and honestly, because Social Security numbers are—in my words—blown, they're no longer confidential. The other stuff really doesn't matter. Date of birth, address, that sort of thing. Anybody over the age of 50 has received what was, like it was for me, an unwelcomed mailing from AARP welcoming me to the old persons' club. (laughs) They know your date of birth. They even got my date of birth right and wished me a happy birthday. There are so many places where our privacy became not private so long ago. Maybe it's taken some people longer than others to accept this fate that we're at, but we don't have the confidentiality that we might think we have.

Cooper: You feel it's okay to have a society that's more open because it's already there?

Block: Well, (laughs) the toothpaste is out of the tube. We can't stuff it back.

Cooper: What about changing your name instead of Block to Ken Open?

(laughter)

Block: What was really interesting with the opportunity that I was given by the Trump campaign—and I use that word on purpose—I was protected from all political pressure while I did this work. The Oval Office did not know my identity while I was being asked to conduct this work, and that was a decision that Alex Cannon made. It was a very important decision, because nobody can lean on me demanding an outcome, and you know that would have happened had my identity been known. This allowed me to conduct my work in an unbiased way. If it was there, it was there, and if it wasn't there, it wasn't there. We not only looked for voter fraud through the data mining my company did, the day after we signed the contract, Alex started sending me claims of voter fraud that other people had made. Some of those claims came from names that are familiar to an awful lot of people in this country: John Eastman, Sydney Powell, Cleta Mitchell. I didn't see anything directly from Rudy Giuliani, but had he sent in something that came in through the formal campaign apparatus, it would have eventually come to my attention. We were able to determine in all of these cases, for more than 15 different claims, that they were false. Every one of them.

Where Alex started off the whole thing asking me for every one of the claims he sent me, "Tell me whether this one's correct or not." by the end he was saying, "Tell me why this one is wrong." The claims, some of them, were very academic in nature. There were Ph.D.s who were proposing complicated formula that they claimed proved that voter fraud happened, and I was able to show that that was false. My favorite story of all, and this just speaks to the mania that we were surrounded by in the month of November of 2020, the very last claim that Alex sent to me was a claim out of Wisconsin that nearly three-quarters of a million people voted twice in the Wisconsin presidential election.

This claim materialized from a group of self-described "volunteers" who made a really critical error. They didn't understand the data they were looking at and because of that error, they made a math calculation that left them almost three-quarters of a million votes short of the number of votes that were cast. They leapt to the conclusion that fraud had to be the problem. They got their findings, and they never once questioned their result. They never once said, "Geez, can this possibly be right?" Instead, they were excited. "Hey, this is the smoking gun. We can prove Trump's right." They took their results, got them to someone who played golf who brought the findings to the manager of a Trump golf course, who brought the findings to Eric Trump, who brought the findings to the Oval Office, who sent them to Alex Cannon, who gave them to me and said, "Tell

me why this is wrong." And it took me about a half an hour to show him why that was wrong.

This is what was happening in that period of time. People were, and still have, largely disassociated from reality when it comes to conversations about whether or not there's voter fraud. There's a lot of misinformation, but the important thing about voter fraud or fraud of any kind, obviously, is honestly that it's identifiable and it's quantifiable and it's verifiable. And if you can't do those three things with a claim of fraud, it's not a valid claim of fraud.

Cooper: Are you concerned about people that might think you were bought off or you are trying to put false information out there?

Block: I will say that I have some extremely close friends whom I cannot have any conversation with at all about the issues that I cover in the book, because they take their news from conservative media and they believe it. These are some of the smartest people I personally know, and they are convinced that there has to be voter fraud and that the work I did had to have been wrong, that I wasn't qualified—these are people I'm friends with—that I wasn't qualified to do the work, that I must have had an agenda. All of the things that I would expect to hear from somebody who was firmly brainwashed into believing that there was a lot of voter fraud, but not something I ever expected to hear from someone I count as a close personal friend. But the reality is that that's where this conversation resides.

It's unfortunate that we can't have a rational conversation about it. Worse is that we're going to have to deal with it again because former president Trump has made no secret that he's going to scream fraud if he loses again.

Cooper: If you were to go back in time when they first contacted you, would you do anything differently?

Block: I wouldn't, because especially knowing what has transpired, I would absolutely do it again. I'm not sure anybody else whom they would have contacted to do the work would have done so in a straight-up honest way. Beyond that, it is no exaggeration that this represented a fantastically unique opportunity to conduct an audit of a national election with essentially unlimited resources. Those things are there for sure, and for those reasons I would do it again.

What's really interesting for me, anyway, as a data person, is why Trump lost, because you really only have to look at the swing states. The reason for his loss is very clear to me, looking at the data. It turns out it was also very clear to Trump's own pollster, and it was very clear to Georgia secretary of state Raffensperger, who wrote the forward for my book. The reason that Trump lost—cutting out all of the analysis, which is interesting to me

and everything else—but the bottom line is that I’m able to show through data that Trump lost the moderate Republicans. He denigrated them as RINOs, he made it very clear to them that he didn’t want their support, and he lost their support.

I can show you in the reddest counties of the reddest states in the country, Trump did less well in 2020 than he did in 2016. The explanation for that is the moderate Republicans. It’s about 2.5% across the country. That’s his underperformance. That’s my proof. Secretary of State Raffensperger only looked to Georgia, but he was able to bring forward 30,000 voters who participated in the presidential primary in 2020 who did not vote in the general election. Those 30,000 Republican votes were lost to Trump. Those were also moderate Republicans.

Cooper: How do you know if they’re moderate or not?

Block: I was able to determine that they were moderates based on the percentage and where that likely percentage overlaid with moderates in terms of their makeup of the party as opposed to MAGA as opposed to other flavors of Republicanism. I’ll tell you what Trump’s pollster said, and that ties this whole thing together. Raffensperger also found another 30,000 votes in the general election where the voters left the presidential selection blank but they voted for down-ticket Republicans, which is also moderate Republicans unhappy with Trump, unable to vote for Biden, who didn’t vote at all. That same scenario, with those two flavors of presidential primary not voting in the general and leaving the presidential selection blank while voting for down-ticket Republicans, happened in Arizona. That’s 60,000 votes that Trump lost in Georgia as quantified by Secretary of State Raffensperger, he lost Georgia by fewer than 12,000 votes.

In the middle part of my book, I wanted to really dive in and see if I could explain why Trump lost the election. Could I, using data, come up with a proof for why Trump lost? And there are two different reasons that Trump lost the election. In Arizona, Georgia, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, the Libertarian candidate for president, her name was Jo Jorgensen, won as many votes, if not many times more votes in those states than the number of votes that Trump lost by in that election. And so, in the case of Georgia, Jo Jorgensen won about 50,000 votes and Trump lost by race by 12,000 votes. Libertarians lean more conservative than they do labor. The same thing in Pennsylvania, same thing in Arizona, same thing in Wisconsin. That’s one clear-cut, rational explanation for why Trump lost.

A more important point that explains Trump loss is that he made very clear his disdain for moderate Republicans. He called them RINOs, he made it very clear he didn’t want their support. He denigrated them frequently. They didn’t vote for him, and the evidence for that shows up in a couple of different ways. What I’m about

to describe to you again holds true for Georgia, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. What happened was that across the country, when you look at how Trump did as a percentage of the vote in 2020 relative to how he did in 2016, on a national level Trump did 2.3% less well as a percentage of the vote than he did in 2016. That decline in performance translates to statewide results even in the reddest states. While Trump won the reddest of the red states in ’16 and ’20, he didn’t do it by as much in ’20 as he did in 2016. When you look now at the red counties in Georgia—Georgia has 167 counties—144 of them are red, meaning Trump won them in ’16 and he also won them on ’20. On average, Trump did about 2.4% less well in Georgia’s red counties in 2020 than he did in 2016. Those were the RINOs. Those were the RINOs who abandoned him. Across Georgia’s red counties, Trump lost 100,000 votes based on his 2.4% decrease in performance in 2020 versus 2016.

Georgia secretary of state Raffensperger also determined that the RINOs cost the election, but he—Raffensperger wrote the forward for my book—came at this differently. He was able to show that there were about 30,000 Republican presidential primary voters in 2020 who did not participate in the general election. Those are presidential votes that should have gone to the Republican candidate for president—at the time president Trump—but no vote was cast by these people. Those were very likely RINOs who couldn’t bring themselves to vote for Biden, but also couldn’t bring themselves to vote for Trump. Raffensperger also found another 30,000 voters who voted for down-ticket Republicans in the 2020 presidential race in November but left the presidential selection blank. That’s 30,000 votes lost to president Trump again, again very likely RINOs.

The last piece of information that ties all of this together and beyond a shadow of a doubt proves it is Trump’s own pollster, a guy named Tony Fabrizio, who, I just want to—with full disclosure state—that Fabrizio polled my race for governor in Rhode Island in 2014. We really do live in a small, small world. I just need to say that up front. I haven’t spoken to Tony since 2016, so I haven’t spoken to him since president Trump started using him as his pollster. But what Fabrizio did in November of 2020, during an election day, they exit-pollled 30,000 voters in the swing states. 30,000 voters were interviewed by employees of Fabrizio, and they asked these voters as they left the voting place, “Who did you vote for? Why did you vote this way? Blah-blah-blah-blah-blah.” And he collated that data and he published that data in a report that was supposed to have been obviously secret for the campaign. That report was leaked and it’s available on the Politico.com website. I found the report, and what Fabrizio said in that report was that one out of six voters that they interviewed had voted for Trump in 2016 and voted against Trump in 2020. One out of six.

Another one out of six voters that they interviewed were



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brand-new voters who had never voted before but had been motivated to vote against Trump largely because of how Trump handled COVID, if you can believe that. Remember, COVID was a hot topic at the time then, and all of this happened before January 6th. So, Fabrizio called it “leakage,” where Republican support that he should have had disappeared. I call it “bleeding support,” support that he had in 2016 disappeared in 2020. And honestly, he still has that problem today.

In Pennsylvania, they just had their most recent presidential primary, and Nikki Haley took 25% of the Republican vote, and she suspended her campaign months ago. Those voters who were voting for Nikki Haley, aren’t happy with president Trump, and they’re making that unhappiness known with their protest vote for a candidate who has withdrawn (laughs) from the campaign. So, unless former president Trump figures out how to handle his RINO problem, it’s not solved, and it’s going to be a big challenge for him in 2024.

Cooper: Will you have to testify?

Block: I consider myself a professional receiver of subpoenas.

Cooper: (laughs)

Block: I was subpoenaed first by Jack Smith. That subpoena was delivered with a phone call to my office line

from the FBI. I was served on the phone for that. That was about a month to a month and a half before the Washington Post broke the story that I had received that phone call. A few weeks after the Washington Post story broke, I got a knock on the door and I was served a subpoena by Ruby Freeman’s legal team. She had sued Rudy Giuliani for defamation. They had read the article in the Washington Post and figured, “Well, if he can help Jack Smith, maybe he can help us.” Turned out I really didn’t have anything related to Rudy Giuliani. I never talked to him. I never saw any of his claims, but I did receive the subpoena from them.

Then I got a call on my cell phone, again wondering how that happened, but this time it was a prosecutor on Fani Willis’s legal team in Fulton County, Georgia. So yeah, I’ve had my share of subpoenas. Who knows if these cases will ever proceed to trial at this point. If they do, it’s probably not directly necessary for me to go testify because I’m what’s called a “fact witness.” My emails and communications with the Trump campaign are what the prosecutors in both of those cases were interested in: the fact that I told them very clearly over and over and over again that there was no voter fraud. There was not enough voter fraud to matter. I want to be clear about that. We did find some voter fraud; people take two bites of the apple sometimes if they think they can get away with it.

We found a handful of people who managed to vote

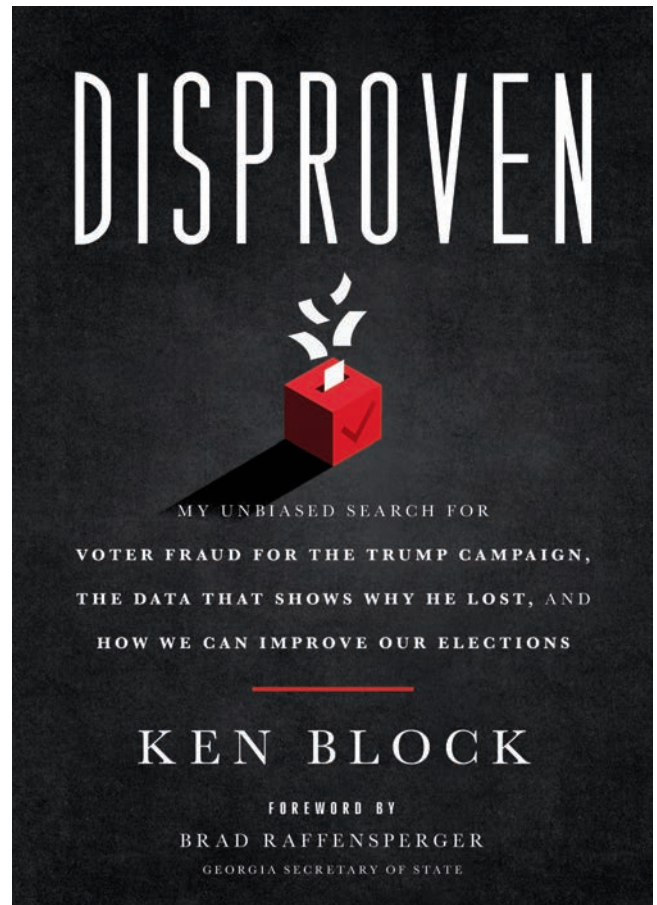


while they were deceased. It happens. And some of the people we found were prosecuted for voter fraud. But none of it was enough to have changed the results in any election. Might some prosecutor choose to put me on the stand because there would be some drama in having me be on there? I guess so. But it shouldn't be specifically necessary because my communications tell the whole story.

Cooper: Thank you. I remembered one of the questions I had when you were talking about some of your friends. Do you think they'll buy your book?

Block: I don't think so. Look, this actually brings up one of the most frustrating things I've been dealing with since the book was published, and that is how no conservative media anywhere has touched this story or will talk to me. It manifests itself in the most extreme in the form of a website called TheFederalist.com. It's a conservative website. They try to be highbrow, thought-provoking, that kind of thing, and they published a hit piece review of my book by somebody out of Georgia whom I didn't recognize, and I became aware of it and I contacted him and said, "Will you accept rebuttal?" and they said, "Send it along, we'll take a look." We wrote a very careful rebuttal that nobody could take a beef with, and submitted it, and they refused to publish it.

So, we have tried to get opinion pieces published in some conservative newspapers that were flatly rejected



but happily picked up by non-conservative newspapers. It is just the nature of how our media have become partisan in nature and it's a gigantic challenge. For those who consume conservative media, most of those folks have no idea I exist, no idea that I was hired to do this work for the Trump campaign, no idea that after all that time, energy and money was spent, we didn't find enough evidence of voter fraud to matter. The only thing they're hearing is that voter fraud is everywhere. That's what conservative media is broadcasting to them. Liberal media doesn't necessarily want to talk about some of the changes that really should be made to make our elections more secure. That's not a narrative they think should be talked about. They don't even like talking about the fact that we found some voter fraud.

This is harmful. I think that the only way we move past where we are as a country is if people are receiving the facts necessary to make reasonable decisions, and right now, the way our media is working, nobody is really getting all the facts they need to make these decisions the right way.

Cooper: Yes. We're all living it right now. I keep thinking of history and how in the Civil War, brother against brother, or Germany, how they convinced a whole country that they were the victims and that they needed to do what they did, and yet we have, as you were just saying, how divided the media is—the propaganda machines, and the media outlets on both sides driven by financial

gains—which is led by, if it bleeds, it leads. Is there anything that you can think of if you had that ability to do something?

Block: It really is a very, very difficult problem that we've become so hyperpartisan with the media that we consume. I think it's one of the biggest problems that we face as a country, honestly, and I don't have the slightest idea what we can do to fix it.

Cooper: This has been great. Can you think of something else you might want to add?

Block: We talked about one way we can make our elections better, which is a federalized voter registration. We should make illegal the practice of gerrymandering. Eighty percent of our congressional seats are not competitive, and a large reason for that uncompetitiveness is gerrymandering. Gerrymandering is when partisan elected officials control the design of the maps for which voters are in which district. It's well documented over the years that Republicans and Democrats both do it if they have the power, and they purposely design election jurisdictions that guarantee a partisan win. How can we have any kind of pride in our democracy when partisan actors can that easily manipulate the results of our elections? It's terrible. It should be outlawed. The problem is, we need a highly partisan Congress to pass the law that outlaws it. But that's a huge reform. We should absolutely do that.

There are a lot of other things that we should do in terms of making things better. States maintain their voter registration systems in a silo. Rhode Island doesn't know often its voters move to another state. The federal government should put together the computer system necessary to identify that problem and help states clean up their voter rolls. New York State has a terrible data problem. So does New Jersey. In the state of New Jersey (laughs), and this is kind of incredible, the state of New Jersey has 25,000 registered voters with a year of birth of 1800.

Cooper: (laughs) Sorry! That should win Florida!

Block: It's amusing, except that in 2020, 8,000 of those voters cast votes.

Cooper: That's where I thought you were going. I made the joke of Florida because it's the retirement state.

Block: That's not voter fraud. That's sloppy, sloppy, sloppy data. The state should be compelled to clean this stuff up. New York State has a similar problem but the scale isn't as bad. They have thousands instead of tens of thousands of 1800 voters, and hundreds of them voted as opposed to thousands. But New York State has a bigger problem, and that is that the only way in our country to—with certainty—know when someone has passed away is to know that person's

Social Security number, because when somebody passes away, the Social Security Administration is made aware of it. They maintain a list of everybody who has passed away. We even have a federal law as of 2004 that says that when states register new voters, they're supposed to make sure they collect Social Security numbers from those voters specifically for this reason, so that the state can maintain its data when the time comes to do so.

Well, New York State has a dramatic problem. They have 3 million registered voters on their rolls who don't have Social Security numbers registered, and two million of those voters cast votes in 2020. The other million who didn't vote have been registered for at least 20 years and haven't cast a vote for at least 20 years. Those voters have likely long ago moved away or passed away. This describes something called "voter bloat." That term describes a voter roll with a whole bunch of voters who should have been removed long ago, but for whatever reason haven't.

New York State should be given special help because of the size and scale of their problem to federal assistance to help clean up their voter rolls. Because you have to be able to identify your voters. The second biggest reason there were so many false claims of voter fraud in 2020—the first one was that these people who were doing these amateur analytics didn't understand what they were doing and didn't understand what they were looking at—but there was another class of error that was committed, and that was people who looked at data in two different states and saw someone with the same name and the same date of birth and said, "That's got to be the same person." It turns out that that analysis is wrong 90% of the time, and it's one of the big reasons that when you're in a larger hospital, they ask you for your Social Security number because on any given day in a big hospital, you can have two people with the exact same name and the exact same date of birth.

Cooper: I did not know that.

Block: It's not a very well-known fact, but it's right there in the book. (laughs)

Cooper: And you might not want that procedure that the other person gets.

Block: Right, absolutely. So, there are a whole bunch of things that deserve to be addressed and fixed, but we do need a functional Congress to make any of that stuff happen.

Cooper: It was great talking to you.

Block: Thank you, it was a really great interview, I appreciate it. ■ ABILITY



kevin NEALON

A Hike Best Taken

Long before Michael Che and Colin Hanks, Kevin Nealon sat at the “Weekend Update” desk of Saturday Night Live (SNL). Multiple replacements (joints) later and at the age of 70, Nealon isn’t sitting or slowing down. He’s hiking. You can find him on YouTube doing just that, while talking to celebrities. When he’s not hiking, Nealon is standing up on the road, entertaining the masses with his “constant tour.”

ABILITY’s Chet Cooper met with Nealon to talk about his health challenges as well as his long-term relationship with comedy, writing and acting. Nealon spoke about the birth of “Hiking with Kevin,” his life experience on tour and how he’s doing what makes him happy.

Chet Cooper: You interviewed Ray Romano, and he brought out that he had anxiety disorder. I had interviewed him, and he never brought that up.

Kevin Nealon: I don’t even remember that.

Cooper: You do such a nice job; it becomes so personalized. I’ve been thinking about creating a similar show, but instead of hiking in the beautiful outdoors it would be ‘Scuba diving with Chet’.

Nealon: (laughs) That would be funny. There would be a problem with the sound.

Cooper: Do you know what the magazine’s about and why we’re here?

Nealon: Yeah, I think I was on the cover of one once.

Cooper: I didn’t know that.

(laughter)

Cooper: How are things going with your A-fib [atrial fibrillation].

Nealon: Things are going great with the A-fib. I had it for maybe 12 years and it became more persistent. The doctor told me it would get to a point where I would have to do something about it. That’s called an ablation. That’s what I had done, and I haven’t had a problem with it since. An ablation is where they go in through your groin, like a robotic thing, and through your neck, and they solder around that electrical situation in your heart. They put dots all the way around that electrical portion of your heart, like a corral and it keeps it in there so it doesn’t come outside.

Cooper: Do you have a device...

Nealon: No, I don’t have a mechanism. They went in to do the surgery or whatever they call it, the procedure with a wire and they would solder, do a little burn, around this whole area that was affected.



Cooper: I was at the Cleveland Clinic watching with some physicians and psychiatrists around deep brain simulation, and they had a patient in another room. They had already mapped the brain and placed the probe. They said, “Lift your glass.” And his hand was shaking violently. They turned on the device and asked him to lift the glass. The shaking and tremors stopped.

Nealon: Wow, that’s amazing!

Cooper: All that electrical.

Nealon: Is he cured from that now?

Cooper: Oh, he died on the operating table.

Nealon: Oh, he did?

Cooper: Sorry, no I’m kidding. How did you come up with “Hiking with Kevin”

Nealon: Matthew Modine is a friend of mine. I hadn’t seen him for a while—from “Full Metal Jacket” and “Stranger Things” now—And I said, “Matt, you want to go for a hike in the canyon?” And he said, “Sure.” So, we’re hiking and it’s a really steep incline, and we’re so out of breath and we’re talking, and it’s like you can’t finish a sentence. It’s very broken up. And I said, “This would be funny if this was like an interview show.” [mimics speaking while hardly able to breathe] So, I posted that on Twitter, two-minute interstitials, you know? And I put two or three of those up, and people really liked them. And Matt said to me, “You should do a weekly show, a ‘Hiking with Kevin’ kind of a thing.”

An A-fib is caused by the electrical circuits in your heart. They’re misfiring somehow. So, the doctor finds out where that area is and looks on the screen and goes in up your arteries or whatever it is to get there, and there’s a little burn, burn, burn, all around that area so it won’t be able to go outside of there.

Cooper: So, it neutralizes whatever is not working properly?

Nealon: Yeah. Keeps it confined so it doesn’t get out.

Cooper: Can you imagine who figured that one out?

Nealon: It’s amazing how technology and advances in medical issues have progressed so quickly. And all the advances they’re finding for all other kinds of diseases, too, that we’re not even hearing about now, but they’re on the edge of discovering things. It’s exciting.

Cooper: I think I stumbled on YouTube of you doing this because of something—you know, the algorithms that follows you once you look at something. I think from that you appeared a few times with Conan, and then your name started popping up. Do you still produce the show?

Nealon: Yes

Cooper: The feeds I saw were four to six years ago. That’s why I didn’t know if you had done any newer ones. I looked at your website, but it was there?

Nealon: Because I’m mostly promoting my stand-up tour on that website. That’s a good point. I should have it redone and updated a little bit.

Cooper: It would increase your audience.



Nealon: Yeah, I'm in the process now of taking it out and trying to get it sold to the platform. And then maybe increase it, do international hikes.

Cooper: And when you expand, you might not be able to do them all yourself. You could say, "And co-hosting is Chet."

Nealon: (laughs) Good idea, yeah!

Cooper: You could do co-hosting.

Nealon: I was going to do one—I still might do it. — where I'm hiking with somebody and Conan comes down the other way interviewing somebody else. (laughs)

Cooper: (laughs) Nice.

Nealon: He takes my guests, I take his! That's a good idea. I do need to expand my website and then maybe do some merchandise, too, for the hike.

Cooper: Merch is always good. Maybe contract a third-party to do it for you because, as busy as it is, especially if you're still producing and editing.

Nealon: Yeah, yeah, that takes a long time.

Cooper: What software are you using?

Nealon: I use Premier Pro. Adobe. Do you do that?

Cooper: Yes, we have some video interviews.

Nealon: Can I ask what is your disability?

Cooper: I have a couple I've acquired and a couple I was born with, ADHD and Dyslexia.

Nealon: How does ADHD manifest itself? My wife keeps accusing me of having ADD or ADHD.

Cooper: You guys make jokes on your hike with Conan. He is answering a question, and you call out squirrel or something. Going off-topic. Very creative minds tend to go off tangent.

Nealon: Oh, I see what you're saying, where I keep changing the topic.

Cooper: (laughs) Yeah.

Nealon: I learned that from Howard Stern. He would ask a lot of rapid-fire questions of people. And then he would hit on one. That's based on that.

Cooper: The methodology...

Nealon: But the ADHD thing, how does that—

Cooper: It might manifest with problem paying attention, short attention span, maybe difficulty focusing...

Nealon: So as long as you're able to focus, you don't have it? Because I can sit down and paint for, like, two hours.

Cooper: I've interviewed people who had a severe



involuntary movements, but when they paint their spasms or tourette tics stop. I mention that because there maybe something about truly engaging in something one loves doing then your “squirrel” distraction stops and you can be focused.

Nealon: I know. On the way down here, I was listening to an Audible book in my car, and I had to rewind it four or five times because my mind just wandered off. I wasn’t listening to it.

Cooper: I’m sorry, what were you just saying?

Nealon: (laughs)

Cooper: Growing up, my biggest challenge with dyslexia was trying to get good grades in all classes. Different teaching styles and subjects it was difficult.

Nealon: You get good grades studying backward countries.

Cooper: (laughs) Nice!

Nealon: Do you know who else has dyslexia is Joe McHale, the actor. Do you know him?

Cooper: Yes. What was the last thing he was in?

Nealon: I think it was “The Great Indoors.”

Cooper: With your traveling schedule, have you looked into doing shooting “Hiking” in other states?

Nealon: Yeah, in fact, I often bring my camera and stuff with me in case I run into somebody. When I go to New York I might run into a celebrity. Or I’ll just bring it to get B-roll, like flying a drone.

Cooper: What kind of drone are you using?

Nealon: It’s a Mavic drone and then a DJI drone, a smaller one.

Cooper: I’ve got a mini-drone, but I haven’t learned to fly it without worrying it will fly away or run into something. It does have obstacle avoidance.

Nealon: The newer ones have that. I have that and the mini-four EGI. I’ve crashed, like, five drones. I was able to repair them, but you know, you take your eye off of them for a minute and either the wind takes them or it’s not on the right setting.

Cooper: Mine has about 30 mile wind resistance.

Nealon: Wow! What do you use it for?

Cooper: Taking baths. I haven’t filmed with it yet.

Nealon: Oh! (laughs)

Cooper: I'm still practicing on it. I surf with a friend and as we're getting older we'd like to capture some footage before it's too late—

Nealon: How old are you now?

Cooper: How old do you think I am?

Nealon: Forty?

Cooper: We'll leave it at that. (laughs) What did you do prior to SNL?

Nealon: Stand-up is all I ever really wanted to do. Now I've done commercials here and there and some guest spots on TV shows.

I had the A-fib, I've had four joints replaced from arthritis.

Cooper: Which ones?

Nealon: Both my knees and a hip and a shoulder.

Cooper: How long did it take you to recover?

Nealon: The hip was easy. That was the easiest one. And then the shoulder was a little more difficult. But the knees are the hard one. This one I had about a year and a half ago and this one about six months ago. It's still painful going up stairs.

Cooper: But you were hiking in between both of those?

Nealon: I can get back there for three months. But it's got to be a little flatter. The inclines have gone down each year.

Cooper: You could always hike downhill.

Nealon: (laughs) Actually, it's harder to hike downhill with bad knees. But I remember when I had the surgery, I would see other people hiking and get really envious of getting out there, you know, people running, jogging. So, I had that done. I think those are my only disabilities, just the sore joints and the A-fib, which could always come back, but it hasn't yet.

Cooper: When did you first start stand-up?

Nealon: That's all I really wanted to do, stand-up. I still watch it on TV all the time. I like telling jokes. I came out to Los Angeles to do stand-up, and all the other stuff was secondary. I started getting a commercial or two here and there or a guest spot on a show. Somebody said once, "I know you like to do stand-up, but are you taking any acting classes?" I said, "No, not really." He said, "Well, you should be because, one day, some casting agent will come into the show room and see you perform and want you to come in and do a cold reading,

audition." I said, "That makes sense." So, I started taking some acting classes around LA for a couple years, started getting auditions and started getting more and more stuff. I started doing "The Tonight Show" and Letterman, all those talk shows, doing stand-up.

And then "Saturday Night Live" came along; all of a sudden I had to change gears. I'm not thinking about jokes any more; I'm thinking about characters and writing sketches. But I never stopped doing stand-up. I would always continue to do it through the breaks and the hiatuses and in between different shows I was on. It's really, really what I wanted. And here I am, 70, still doing stand-up.

Cooper: Were you considered the jokesters in school?

Nealon: You know what happened? I love memorizing jokes in the back pages of the newspaper. They'd have my favorite jokes from whoever were the contemporary comedians back then. I'd memorize a couple of those and I'd go to a party and personalize them, like it had happened to me in real life. I'd say, "Did you hear about that guy who stole a fire truck downtown?" And people would go, "Are you serious?" And I'd say, "Yeah, yesterday, he stole a fire truck." "Did they get him?" "Yeah, some guy stole a cop car and pulled him over and got him." (laughter) That kind of stuff. I would tell those jokes.

At school I was a little more shy. I was a little more comfortable with my friends in the neighborhood, but at school I was a little shy. I wasn't like the class clown or anything. In college I became more and more interested in stand-up. A friend of mine once said, "You should try those comedy clubs in New York." I was telling all those jokes." And I thought, first of all, I've got to write my own material.

So, I would go in and look at those clubs and I'd be really intimidated. They were New York kind of clubs, tight, the comics were real brash and edgy. I thought, "I don't think I could do this here." So, I decided that in California people seemed more laid-back. I came out here and it was the perfect home for me.

Cooper: And along the way, did you make a lot of friends who are still friends today?

Nealon: Comics, you mean? Oh, yeah. I started in the late '70s, so I've known everyone, from Robin Williams to Jay Leno to guys who aren't around any more. Gary Shandling was a good friend of mine, Bob Saget, Richard Louis. It's kind of odd losing these people along the way. Everybody our age, or my age, you lose people. That's part of life.

Cooper: Bob Saget was friends with Regina Hall and we had a fun interview. Pretty nice person.



Dana Carvey and Kevin Nealon in SNL's "Pumpin' Up" with Hans & Franz

Nealon: As far as losing people along the way, it makes you appreciate people more because you never know if they'll be around the next day.

Cooper: Yeah. Robin Williams, I talked to him a couple of times because he was friends with Christopher Reeve.

Nealon: Yeah, they were roommates.

Cooper: Right. He wanted to wait and be interviewed after he produced the movie about the life of John Callahan. If you aren't aware of his cartoon style the jokes are a little dark. One scene shows two cowboys ready to have a gun fight in the main street. A voice shouts out "Don't be a fool Billy" and looking at the two cowboys you notice Billy is without arms. Robin always supported Christopher Reeve's journey.

Nealon: So many people who have gone by the wayside over the years. And I remember jokes from comics a long time ago. I used to be in the clubs all the time, and there wasn't such a proliferation of comics as there are now, there are thousands of comics. Before it was more of a novelty profession. I knew every comic, I knew their jokes, I knew when they would swallow before they would say a punchline. Those are the people who hit you harder when they pass, as opposed to now, there are so many comics, good ones, too. I'll see someone I never heard of before, and they're great. It's because I'm not in the clubs every night any more. When I went to do SNL, like I said, I never stopped doing stand-up, but I wasn't living at the clubs like I used to.

The funny thing is, comedy was so fertile in the '80s, when you would work at a club from Tuesday through Sunday, every night. Now, it's just basically Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, or Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, three nights. But you would run into the other comics at the hub airports, like St. Louis or Salt Lake City. They were coming from one club; you're going to another one. It was pretty cool. Now I don't think I would recognize half of the comics who were walking through a club or an airport.

Cooper: How did you get casted on SNL?

Nealon: Some people are hired as cast members. I was hired as a writer the first year and a feature player, which meant they would give me seven on-air shows. But I got on every show. The next year Lorne Michaels offered me that I could either be a regular cast member or I could continue to be a writer and a feature player. So of course I took the cast member, but we all continue to write on that show. We all wrote, whether we were recognized or paid as a writer or not. You have to give yourself as many opportunities as possible. That's what I did there.

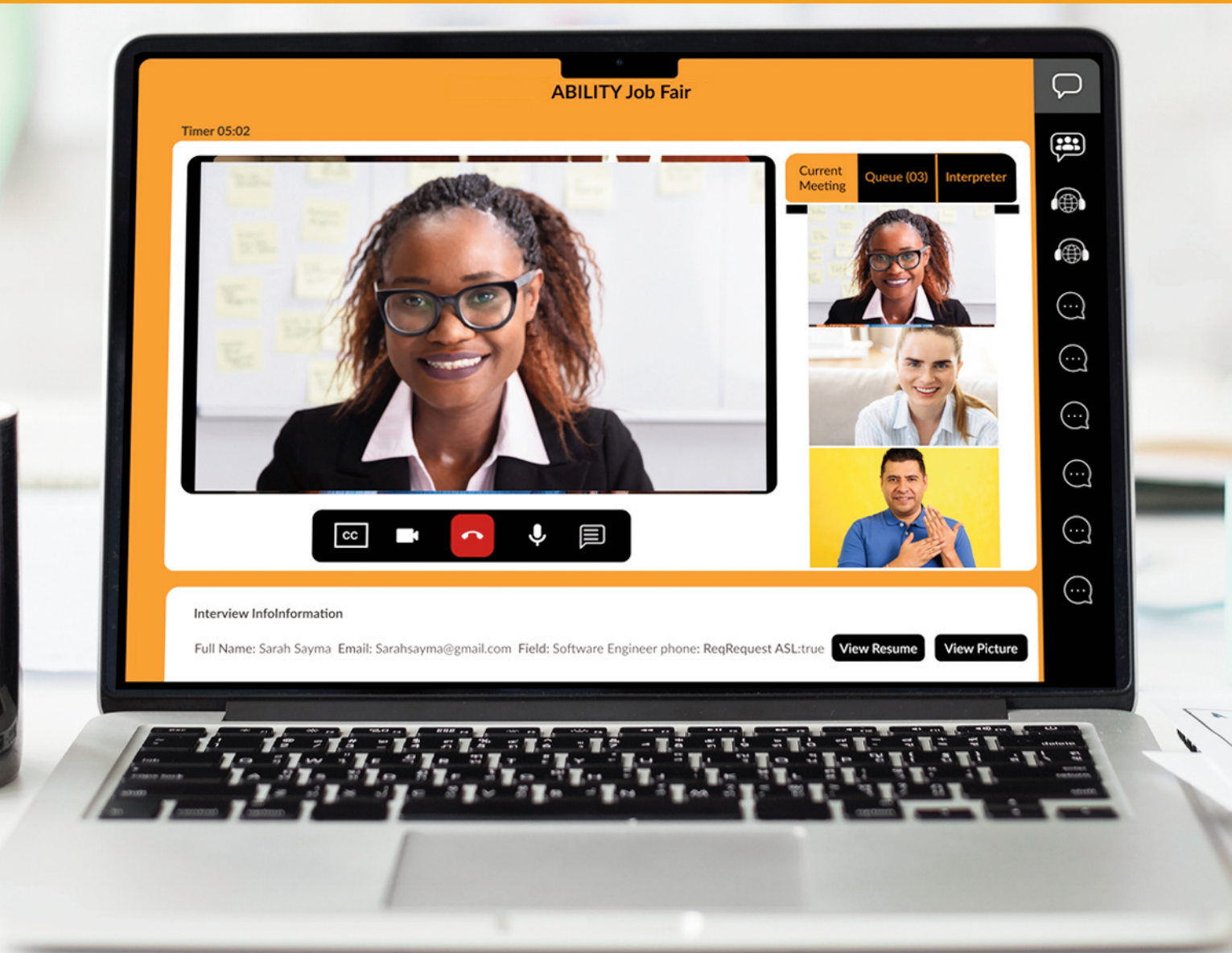
And I had to learn how to do sketches and create characters. I'm just a stand-up. I wasn't thinking along those lines. I was thinking along the lines of setting up a punchline. And now all of a sudden, I have to come up with characters and a sketch idea.

Cooper: It worked.

Nealon: Yeah, I was a quick learner. I had to adapt. It



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was a great experience, nine years.

Cooper: What was your degree?

Nealon: B.S. in marketing.

Cooper: Which you're not doing with your show that well. We'll get to that. Do you prepare the intros or do you just go right into it?

Nealon: No, the intro I don't really prepare. Maybe when I'm driving over there, I think of something, but it's really more spontaneous. What's going on, what I'm feeling right now. Is it raining?

Cooper: You have great openings, funny and informative, it sounds organic.

Nealon: That's the other thing about those hikes. It's so disarming for the guest because you're out in nature, you're hiking, there's no audience, no lights or big mics. They're a lot more forthcoming and revealing about more personal issues. I always give them the opportunity to tell me if they don't want me to leave something in there. So, that's one of the great things about that hike. And it's a lot of work because I hike for maybe an hour, and hour and a half with them, and I only use maybe 15 or 20 minutes. But on some I do have two- or three-partners, which I have in the bank. I bank those.

Cooper: You're still doing it?

Nealon: Yeah. I want to get somebody else to edit for me because that takes the longest time, but half of the comedy is coming from how you edit.

Cooper: There is so much young talent in your backyard, including USC and UCLA film students.

Nealon: Yeah, there are a lot of them out there. Sometimes I think perhaps a more seasoned person is better with the comedic timing and would maybe know my style better, but I guess it could be anybody really. It just depends on their background and their sensibilities.

Cooper: I think it would save you time — what is it you want to do when you grow up?

Nealon: (laughs) I'm doing it now. That's why I'm so happy in life. I'm doing everything I wanted to do. Although when I turned 60, I decided that the things I had been talking about for so long, I would start doing them. So, I started painting, caricatures, I started taking Spanish, I've been taking Spanish for three years now. I started learning how to play the piano.

Cooper: Wow, that all takes a lot of time!

Nealon: That's the hard part. I'm not good at all. I've played the guitar since I was 10, and the banjo. But the



Kevin Nealon's painting of Christopher Walken

piano is a much easier instrument because you can see all the keys laid out C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. And on the guitar, I never looked at it that way. I knew scale patterns on the guitar, but I didn't see the way the chords were formed, the notes. I like it in that respect. I don't play a lot now because I'm doing so many other things. I'm painting. I have a book out called "I Exaggerate My Brushes with Fame." It's a bunch of caricatures I drew of celebrities and anecdotes with it.

Cooper: Some great pieces, however they're not on your website? (finger wagging)

Nealon: It's not on the website, but it's on my Instagram. (laughter) You're right. Thanks for putting that fire under me. I've got to do something about that.

Cooper: Use your degree in marketing — tell us about your stand-up tour.

Nealon: (laughs) People can check out the tour on my website, KevinNealon.com. They can see where I'll be, in their hometown or whatever. I don't really have a



Kevin Nealon's painting of Tilda Swinton

tour name because it's a constant tour.

Cooper: That's the name!

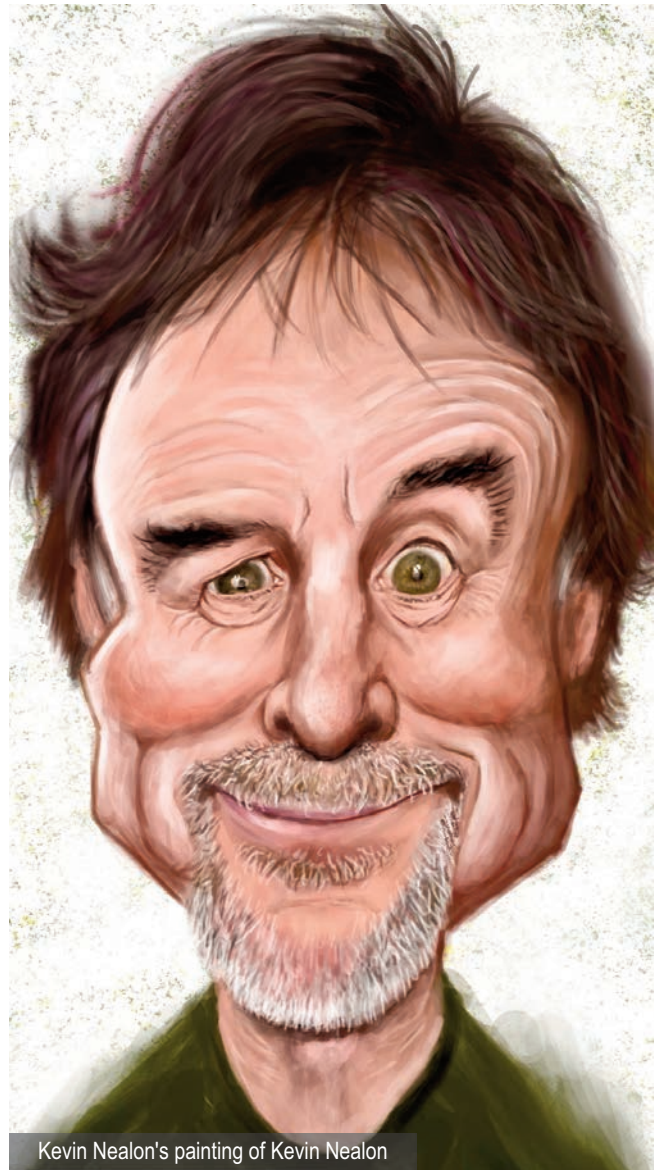
Nealon: Constant Tour! It's just fun to do. I've been doing it for so long.

Cooper: Do you go to the same venues?

Nealon: A lot of the same ones, and sometimes not. I have agents who get offers in and come to me and they try to route them sometimes so they're in the same general area.

Cooper: Some comedians love the road.

Nealon: Yeah, it's strenuous sometimes. It's a lot of work. I'd rather be home sometimes. But it always is fun to be out there. I like to stay engaged, too. As I'm getting older, I don't want to be just sitting at home watching news or hanging out with a couple of old



Kevin Nealon's painting of Kevin Nealon

friends. I like to get out in the comic clubs in LA and find out what's going on, be around younger people, engage with them, see where they're coming from. I think that keeps you young, too, more stimulated.

Cooper: Do you see the audiences as people who know you, or do you see newer audiences that maybe aren't aware of your background?

Nealon: I think the younger people aren't aware of a lot of the shows I guess like "Weeds." That was before they were born. Sounds weird saying that. But then the older people are kind of—They know what they're coming to see. And some people have never seen me before. I was telling somebody, sometimes I get on stage and I get depressed because it's all old people, and then I realize, "Wait a minute, I'm older than they are!" (laughter)

Cooper: I know, looking into the mirror and thinking who's this? Is the road exhausting?

Nealon: Oh, yeah, yeah. It's not exactly the same because I'm not out hitting the clubs or the bars after my stand-up or getting in at 2 in the morning, and hungover the next morning. Now it's much more doable. I get to come to nice hotels, or towns, meet new people, see different audiences. It's interesting. I'll be standing up there thinking, "I've never met these people in my life. I never knew they even existed." And now I'm seeing them, and they've had their whole life, all of their laughs, all their crying, all their bowel movements, (laughter) and that's kind of a special experience for me.

Cooper: That's a great way to think about people, places and life's journey.

Nealon: But I do like people. That's the bottom line. I have a certain, I don't know, a certain compassion for people. I like to see people laughing. I like to see people happy.

And the "Hiking" show or YouTube? That's what I love doing. I'll never retire. I'm fortunate to be able to be living in my passion. I'm not one of these people who says, "Oh, man, I really want to do this," and then they never do it, and they have a boring job.

Cooper: It's rewarding in making people laugh. Probably every time I'm in an elevator, I think of something to engage with people as they have their heads down feeling awkward being in a closed room with strangers.

Nealon: You're a good elevator act? (laughter)

Cooper: A new show! And I love it when I'm in another country and I don't know the language and I can still make them laugh.

Nealon: That's a real skill right there. I like to make people laugh. Working in a store or whatever, servers,

Cooper: When people are stressed, get them to have a happy moment.

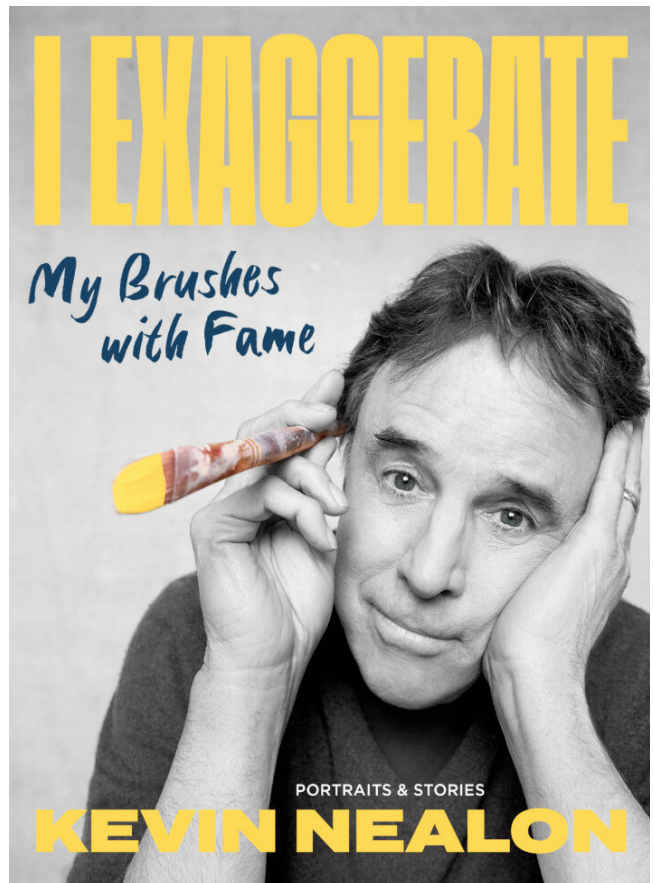
Nealon: It's a lot easier to get someone like that to laugh, somebody who's down about something because comedy works better with tragedy. It's a release.

Nealon: You know who you remind me of a lot? Dick Cavett.

Cooper: When I was in high school, a teacher gave me an A, I didn't think I earned it but she said I reminded her of Dick Cavett — and she loved him. I should have thanked him.

Nealon: No way, really? Not physically, just the style of interview and conversation. It's very thoughtful and gentle.

Cooper: FU.



Nealon: And he would say that too.

(laughter)

Cooper: Do you think there's an intrinsic darkness to comedians. I know many that are at least very introverted, shy, but great writers.

Nealon: That's not rare. There are a lot of comics who are kind of dark and who like to crawl into a cubbyhole after they get off the stage. I was very fortunate because I grew up in a great family, great parents. There wasn't really anything I didn't need or want.

Cooper: Where was this?

Nealon: Connecticut.

Cooper: What did they do?

Nealon: My father's an aeronautical engineer and my mother was a homemaker, housewife and was around that the whole time. My comedy doesn't come from the darkness, it comes from my imagination.

Cooper: What else can we say before we wrap up?

Nealon: My father used to say this to us a lot when we were leaving to go somewhere: "Go have fun." ■ ABILITY

kevinnealon.com





JENNI—JUULIA

Wallinheimo-Heimonen

ART AS ACTIVISM

Known as the Olympics of the Art World, the Venice Biennale is an international contemporary art exhibition held bi-annually in Venice, Italy. Celebrating its 60th iteration this year with the theme *Foreigners Everywhere*, The Venice Biennale hosts a select few artists from 86 nations to showcase their creations on a prominent world stage. The high-profile nature of this event may seem intimidating to some, but to others, like artist Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen, it presents an incredible opportunity to draw attention to important pressing social issues in the hopes of creating a chain event of awareness and change.



Will you Marry me, Space, 2022-2023

ABILITY Magazine's Chet Cooper and Jennifer Woodall met with artist Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen in a virtual interview to discuss what it means to navigate social systems as a woman with a disability, creating art as a catalyst for change and being invited to participate in one of the most prominent art events in the world.

Jennifer Woodall: Hello, hello! How are you?

Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen: Good. I'm just getting the right webcam. Is it this one? Yes! (laughs) Hello, so nice to meet you!

Woodall: Nice to meet you as well. How is everything over there? It's nighttime over where you're at, right? Almost 7 p.m.?

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: Yeah, it's actually—there was a little change, so I'm right now in a hotel room still in Venice, because there was a little polishing last-minute touch-up, so I'm leaving tomorrow morning. Still here, but it's going really good. It's like 99.99% ready. (laughs)

Woodall: That's awesome. And an extra night in Venice, come on! Who doesn't want to stay in Venice a little extra? (laughs)

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: (laughs) Yeah, yeah, it's been really an experience. Still unbelievable. A city of bridges and stairs and lots of challenges to do practical things. But I think it's so much fun. It's a so rebellious city. I really respect its attitude here.

Woodall: That's great! You're one of three Finnish artists representing Finland at the Venice Biennale art exhibit, right?

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: Yes. We have a collaborated exhibition; we call it *The Pleasures We Choose*. We are three artists, but also, our amazing curators, Jussi Koitel and Yvonne Billimore, we have worked together a lot, discussed about the topics, and then we even have an architectural intervention, also related to access issues. We are three artists but also three very important persons supporting us and working together.

Woodall: Tell me about how you all got involved with the Venice Biennale? Were you invited? Did you have to apply to that? What was that process like?

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: Actually, honestly, I don't know why it's me, but I'm not sure if you're aware that there was of course a little criticism for our selection in *Hyperallergic* magazine? This time the Frame Contemporary Arts Finland decided to use invitations, so Jussi Koitel and Yvonne Billimore selected three artists. I think in the background is their many-years-long program *Rehearsing Hospitalities*, where they were trying to look for artists in marginals, like they were doing a lot of collaborations with artists with disabilities, deaf

artists, artists with neurodiverse issues, but also all kind of minorities like LGBTQIA, the Sami and people of color, and I think this has affected that there are now three artists who, I mean, we all share this little problematic relationship with this world that is not perfectly designed for our needs. So, I think that why we three are having things in common and still very separate problems, but we need to sometimes do a bit more to survive, and then for us it's really, it's hard for us to divide our lives and bodies from the art we make, so we're also all art activists, somehow, (laughs) in different ways, but still.

Woodall: Can you tell me about the work for the exhibition and what the piece is about and what it's like? I know you mentioned it's called *The Pleasures We Choose*. Can you tell me what it looks like visually and the artistic decisions that you all made about that?

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: My work consists of three different elements. We have made—there's a short film, a two-screen film, and then there is a textile installation and a kinetic sculpture. I'm more like a storyteller, it's hard to tell you how they look. I know I should be able to do that. But they are all inspired by hate speech towards people with disabilities in Finland. They are inspired by this survey that our Ministry of Justice has repeated from 2015-17. I think the next one was in 2019. Hate speech is a huge problem in Finland, they wanted to know how it's affecting Sami people, Roma people, people of color, LGBTQIA, and us, and there is one very big difference between the disability community and other minorities, because for us, the most common place to face hate speech is actually the social and healthcare, which doesn't surprise the disabled community, but it's something that they're not talking about at all.

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: In the first survey, it was almost 50% of hate speech that we face that comes from the social and healthcare workers, and then I wanted to bring this up because then if such an opportunity for a disability artist, I was thinking first, what is the most important thing? It would be the social model. But if the gatekeepers, the medical world, doesn't even understand that they, in a gatekeeper position, have such a negative attitude towards us, I have to first point up this hate speech issue.

All these pieces I have been making are very playful, very shiny and glittering and fun, but the title is, *How Great Is Your Darkness*. I mean the question of knowledge, if you don't even know that you don't know how deep in this darkness you actually are when you don't even see your own darkness. The biggest challenge for me was to—this is a very international exhibition, so I was trying to, for example, in the video, use bodies and pantomime to express the hate speech in a way that everybody can read its negative attitude. There is actually even no words, there is no sound, there's just an



Am I Your Inspiration, Really, 2021

audio description. Many of those elements that I'm using in the film I have embroidered and used them also in this textile installation and the kinetic sculpture also.

I'm so deep in my work, so I'm just sitting and embroidering and it's really hard for me to go to the details. But there's a lot of beads, a lot of glitter, because I want to have a huge contrast with the darkness and then the happiness. That's been my practice for 20 years, because disability art has such a negative feeling in people's minds, so I'm kind of tricking people to come a bit closer, and I hope they don't even realize in the beginning that they're actually watching a very serious art work, because the first impression is hopefully humorous and fun. The point is that maybe you know who we are laughing at and we're laughing at these practices that sometimes healthcare makes things more difficult for us, where they could make our lives easier. But there's a lot of protocol, a lot of things that have to be done in a certain way that makes it even less accessible for us than it should be.

Woodall: Absolutely. I think too that it will be interesting to see, because it's so easy to be drawn to release shiny things and really pretty things, so it'll be interesting to see people get drawn in by those aspects of it and then realize the deeper meaning behind the artwork. It's almost revealing what the artwork is about itself, where you're in the thick of this darkness and you don't even know you're in there, and then hopefully all of a sudden, they'll be like, "Wait a minute, am I in this, too?" That'll be interesting, to see how it's interacted with. That'll be cool.

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: Finnish people say what we think, but I can honestly say that I am right now in the stage where I have this fear that as a disabled woman, talking about the problematic attitudes of people who have so much more power than I do, that there is of course a huge risk that they will not be angry at me, but more like explain me away, saying, "Oh, we're sorry for your negative experiences, and we hope to do better next time," which means "end of discussion." That's why I didn't want to go to the words, so that their attention doesn't go to who said what and when to whom, but more like, what makes a person snap in the situation where you're alone with a patient who needs more time in communication, dressing up, who may be asking things that other patients don't ask that you should give some positive, special treatment, and you just get upset. I'm more interested in this psychological question of what is going on, and then the second very important thing for me is that when I was talking with other women with disabilities about this, the problem is that authorities don't recognize the hate speech towards us. If they don't recognize it, our hands are kind of tied for what we can do to change things.

For example, in many countries, if you threaten with violence or if you say to someone, "I want to kill you or

hurt you or make you suffer," it's a crime. It's a very black level hate speech. But if you say to someone that "It would have been better if you had died in that accident," or "Your mother should have aborted you," many authorities don't even see that's hate speech. Of course, women with disabilities especially don't usually report these, we just share them in our peer groups. We go through the experience on our own. But they also shape our thoughts about ourselves, the value, everything that if you get used to this feeling, they can say anything to us, you accept this kind of behavior more and more, and I don't want anyone to get use to this kind of way to talk.

I've been thinking about the moment, if a friend with cerebral palsy, if you go to the police and say, "The nurse told me that if I'm not staying still in this mammography machine, she's gonna make sure it will hurt." It's hate speech. But I'm sure that the police would say, "Yes, that was not nicely said, but go home." (laughs) "We can't do anything about it." Then, accidentally in '21, when I was already processing this hate speech on a bigger level, there was also I think that Harvard University published a study about American physicians attitudes against patients with disabilities. That is also a lot about the same issues. There are even really funny things, like, most of the surgeons, for example, think that if a wheelchair user gets breast cancer, they always want to have everything removed because "Women with disabilities don't care about their appearance." (laughs) I used to be a chair of a women's working group in the Finnish Association of People with Mobility Disabilities, years ago, but I think we definitely, all our members, we've cared a lot (laughs), we even invited fashion students and people checking what colors match us. It was a little bit challenging, because some of us wanted to show our disabilities and some wanted to know how to hide a curved back. But anyway, we all definitely—I think sometimes maybe we care a bit more because it's so strongly linked to how we are met in public situations. But there are these attitudes, and I think it's not a taboo because there are a little of studies and surveys, but still, nothing is happening. They don't do anything. And now I'm going to Venice and I'm here, but I'm taking this topic up and I don't know what's going to happen. Maybe nothing. Maybe it's big for me, but still, I wanted to bring it to light. I hope it's not offensive. (laughs)

Woodall: I'm also a disabled artist. As a disabled artist, my thought process is, even if it is offensive—like, I hope it does offend somebody sometimes.

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: (laughs)

Woodall: I know that's not how everybody views it, but sometimes that's what needs to happen to make people take a step back, take a moment and really connect with what's happening. Navigating the health industry as a woman anyway, and then a woman with a disability can



Group image of actors getting ready to film "How Great is Your darkness"

be a total nightmare. It's so much mental effort to try to advocate for yourself and to convince somebody that you have this thing that you need help with. The Venice Biennale is such a huge stage to bring this to, it's so exciting! It's awesome, and I feel like just that alone is acknowledging the situation. Hopefully there's some traction to that, that some change can come from that. That would be amazing!

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: I really hope that there will be real, honest discussion. I'm very solution-oriented. I would like to hear what the physicians think about what they could do. I am quite openly blaming that they are so ableist that they are teaching it. I'm always thinking about the young girls and women, there are so many situations where if they just changed their way to work, the social model would spread much, much more easily in Finland. For example, I think still that physicians can say to girls, "You should maybe choose a profession where you don't have to walk long distances or maybe something you can do with computers," and I'm like, come on, they should say something like, "When you go to working life, there will be a lot of obstacles but we can teach you how to fight them." They still think that everything is coming from our bodies without even thinking that they are actually very ableist and they're spreading this 30-year-old, old-fashioned medical view still, in 2024, and I wish this would stop. I was in Canada, in North America, there disability is taken more seriously there than in Finland or there's more punishment if you break the rules, but in Finland, things that have nothing to do with medicine, like if you need a big

screen to read books, you have to go to the doctor, who then has to write you a paper that you really need this big screen. They have to write a paper if you need access to your sauna or your balcony, things that. They are privileged people who don't understand that this balcony can be the only place where you get fresh air, and if they say that it's not necessary for you, they can block your independence and block your life in such dramatic ways, without knowing that, without ever thinking that. They can sometimes cause a lot of harm.

This doesn't mean that I'm against medicine in the big picture. I think it's perfectly okay if they can improve some impairments so that your real life quality gets better. That's okay. But a lot of these procedures cause more pain and suffering and hospital days than actually make your life better. So, this balance is challenging, but they are throwing away the Finnish healthcare system—our new government—so let's see if in the future nobody gets healthcare! (laughs) They want now the "American way," insurance for everyone. (laughs)

Woodall: (laughs) I'm sorry!

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: No, no, it's not yours, but it's such a big difference. We had such a wonderful government—the previous one—with Sanna Marin, young woman leading the country, and everything was going better. Now we have the opposite, like it always happens, that the old men activated and now we are going back to the 1960s. (laughs) But I'm going too far.

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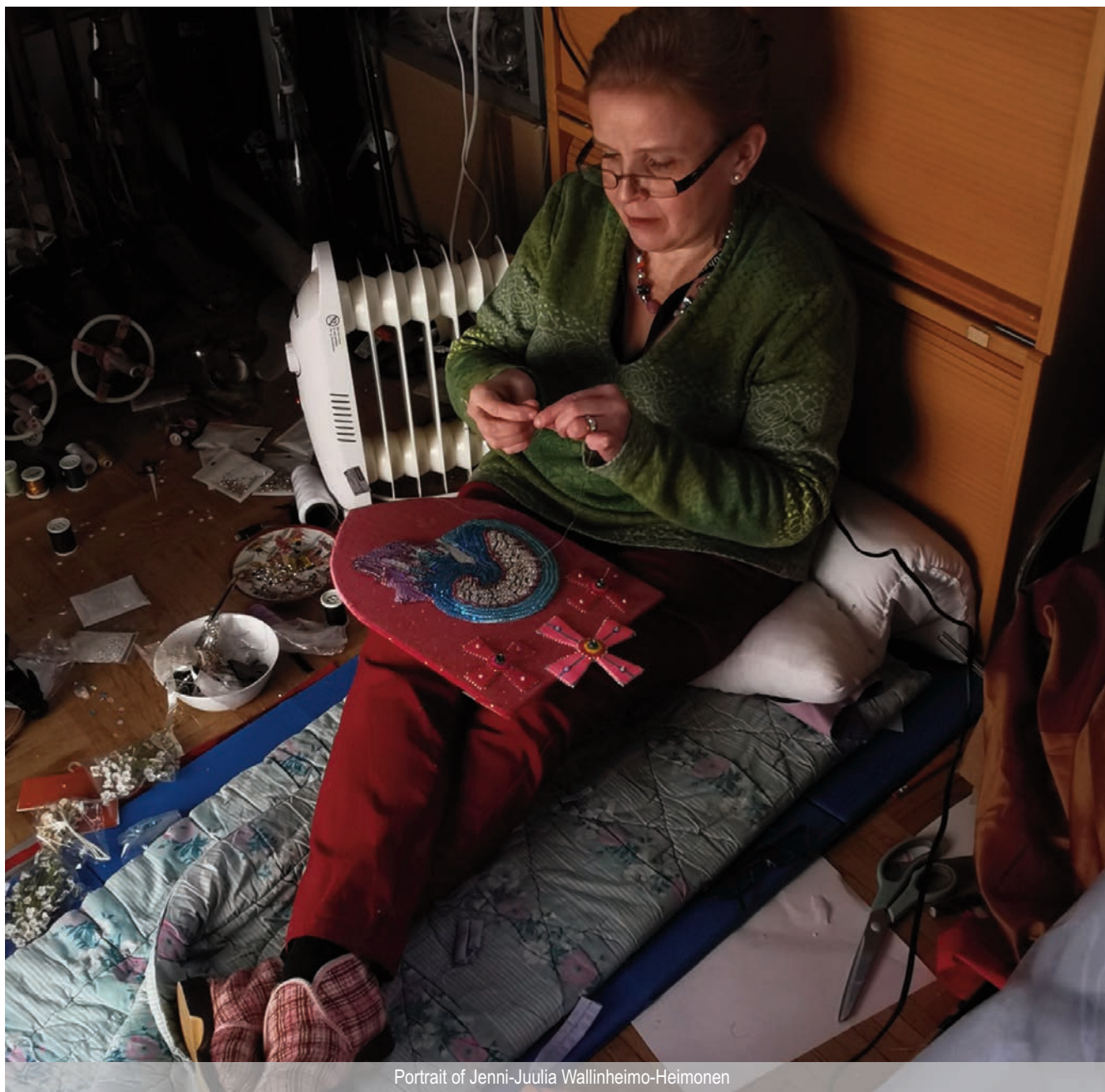
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Portrait of Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen

Woodall: (laughs) That's all right. Go too far. It's fine. I totally understand and absolute resonate with that, which is why I'm excited to see this piece. Also, something that was interesting to me, in some of the past pieces that you've done, like *Am I Your Inspiration Really?* and *Will you Marry me Space*—which, I love them both, they're great—you mentioned the idea of “discrimination framed as kindness.” Can you go deeper into what you mean by that?

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: It's an English translation by a friend. I think I have invented this new word in the Finnish disability vocabulary. “Discrimination framed as kindness” (says it in Finnish), I mean those situations where you don't get honest response from other people. For example, a young journalist, a wheelchair user, they are not giving her opportunities to go to interview peo-

ple because they think it's too challenging for her to go to meet people. They don't even ask, but they think that they are acting kindly, but they are actually discriminating you and treating you differently because they want to make things smooth and they don't want to have a conflict and they don't want to really ask and even think that maybe you want to do things. And then as an artist, it's a very real thing in criticism, for example. It's really hard to get a real criticism when you do disability arts because people just come to you and they are in tears and they think it's so sweet that you're doing these things, but you never know for sure whether this is just a small-talk blur and they want to be nice to you.

Also, I think it's the situations where I or my friends behave badly, if a disabled person walks in the street blaming people, yelling bad stuff, people just pass by

because they think that maybe it has something to do with a disability, and they don't tell you, "Hey, behave! That's not okay!" I started using this term to point out these situations. The older I get, the more I understand that it's really painful. I don't want to be paranoid, but there are more and more situations where all this non-verbal language, you see that the person is just wanting to be—I mean, Finland is not a country of small talk. In this we have a very different culture—but a person comes very nicely to have a chat with you but you read between the lines that this is just actually this kind of childish attitude, that they underestimate me as an almost 50-year-old woman. I would really appreciate more very straight feedback.

Woodall: It's kind of like being treated like you're made out of glass, right? They want to be so delicate and precious. I get that. I totally understand. I really liked that "discrimination framed as kindness." When I read it in the art description, it stuck out to me. I wanted to talk to you about your artist process. Can you tell me what you go through from idea to final piece and how you work?

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: I'm now in the stage, I'm in Venice, so I think I'm going to reveal the crazy process. The big artists give you a beautiful description of their process, but the real truth is that I am talking with my—I have worked with men with disabilities, but just a little bit, mostly women—we just have our everyday chats or I read their social media and their experiences, and then there are things that really hit me. "Oh, there's a wonderful story, could we somehow work on this?" Because I always need the story first or the survey first or some very important topic, and then my background is in textile arts, but I can change the media depending on what I'm going to say. So, sometimes I'm learning new things. If I want to work with wood, if that fits better, then I just order a book and start working with wood, which is a lot of fun and a lot of learning, but it's also sometimes problematic, because then when you do it for the first time, it cannot be as good as those who have used the same materials for years and years. The textile of course is something is following me all the time. In the beginning, when I was collecting these stories, it was more like I was asking women and telling their stories with my mouth in the exhibition space. But when the cameras got better in phones, I started filming their stories. I wasn't supposed to make films, but it was really fun to show people the video of the person telling the story together with the artwork, so then it doesn't have to be me always repeating someone else's experiences. Nowadays it's very common that I combine a simply made—I think sometimes "short film" is too big a word, because I'm not a film director, but I love making these crazy films. Nowadays everybody who has a phone can be a filmmaker.

The elements and things that happen in a film I bring to installations or sculptures or some kind of artistic work. It sounds prettier than it really is. I have a studio space

that is full of boxes of fabric that people have donated to me. I go to flea markets, I try to use—because as textile artists, we should not increase the number of textiles to the world—so I'm using a lot of recycled things and beads. The truth is that I am sitting or crawling or lying on the floor. It's better for me to work on the floor than in front of a table, so I just have these fabrics and scissors and needles and everything around me, and for the first time, for Venice, why try to show that this is prettier than it really is? I'm the messy old woman on the floor with my materials around, and of course I get up when I need to take some coffee or something, but I'm mostly going on my knees to the next place, and if my back hurts, I'm lying on pillows. When we talk about embodiment, and the difficulty of separating life and art, that is my pleasure also. I'm enjoying it. I have tried working in front of a table, but it doesn't work. It's a lot of lonely work, and I have eBooks on all the time, so I read almost a book per day when I'm sewing or stitching. Not of course if I'm writing things down or filming. I have my hearing books, and I forget my body that is just going and doing. Now that all in Venice. I don't know. It's definitely not this kind of white beautiful artist where I'm sitting in front of a desk and having visitors, having a nice couch, blah-blah-blah. It's just like yarn's coming out of my clothing. (laughs)

Woodall: Art born from chaos is some of my favorite. I don't know if you've experienced this, but the art world can be surprisingly prejudiced to navigate. From the outside when you're looking in, you think "they're artists, they must be open-minded" and then when you navigate it, especially as a woman with a disability, it can be incredibly prejudiced. There's an attitude that things need to be highbrow. But to me, give me all the art, give me the chaos. I'm a chaotic creator, too. I've got stuff everywhere. That's the type of energy I like. I appreciate that process. (laughs)

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: That's why I think our process has been so amazing. I'm so grateful for our two curators. I'm the messy person crawling there, and then Pia Lindman who had the mercury poisoning and it's about toxic things and her relationship with her surrounding that can make her ill. She's interested in all kinds of healing processes. Her art is that she's having a healing session with people and what comes out of that, how it resonates. She brings that to her art.

Vidha Saumya is also working on this, so for her, it's about a nation-state thing. She came from India to work and live in Finland. She's questioning gender issues overall, intimacy things, these things. I think there's a lot of practices that don't match—just like you said, there's an artist's profile that you should be processing. That's why I also think that when I said in the beginning that there was a little criticism to select these kind of not so—well, Pia is very well-known. She has had in New York, MOMA, MIT, and blah-blah-blah. But for example, me, I'm very not-known in Finland, so I think that



Gunilla Sjövall, Founder Dance Ability Finland her middle finger opposing hate speech by social & health care workers. Image by: Rasoul Khorram.

if we always have these open calls and if we think that that's the fair way, only the artist who can work for free or who can read Finnish, Swedish, or English, there are so many artists who don't even hear about these open calls, who don't have resources to make their sketches for weeks for this call. I think it's very important that there are those good people, like our curators, who want to themselves go to look for something different. That's why this has been such an amazing process. It's also very encouraging, that my strange process, I'm not well-known but I can go to Venice if these people trust me. We can create something amazing together. I'm so grateful! I don't know what's going to happen. I'm overwhelmed. I'm too excited, nervous, but happy. I'm super happy. We'll see what happens. (laughs)

Woodall: It's an amazing opportunity. I'm excited for you. I'm excited to see what the work looks like, to see how people feel about it, too. What an incredible stage to have it on as well. They call it the Olympics of the art world.

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: I have heard that, and that's why I am surprised, I was so surprised to get this opportunity. Sometimes life surprises you. I don't know what—I don't think I have done anything, it just dropped from the sky. Just out of nowhere. I was always dreaming of getting—I don't have a gallery, there are no curators running after me, but I have been very active in the disability arts field, in Europe, because I'm following what's happening in the UK. I've been working with Shape Arts. I was at CoMotion in Canada. I have been

in exhibitions in Switzerland. They were all disability-related, there are lots of good artists, but the audience is not the same as here in Venice. Their audience was really interested in disability arts, but I don't think there's so much like these gatekeepers who could open galleries and help us to join the mainstream. This is maybe something I have to process now because I want to have it all. I think it's very important for my own community to still participate in all these strange, small disability-related things where we can come together and be super-active and have very strong messages, but of course there is part of me who would like to say that it would be nice to have the structures that are in the mainstream, that there are curators, there are people putting lights and people carrying your stuff, because often when I'm working much alone, it's just me and my husband and my relatives who are carrying stuff, installing things, driving around, doing this voluntarily to make this possible—which I'm so grateful for that—but it would be nice to try when there is a little bit more outside help. It's just the practicality is—sometimes I'm proud, I know how to do it by myself—but the older I get, it would be nice to get some more physical help.

Woodall: Absolutely. It would be really great to see something like that in play, some sort of environment where it is a collective, a combination of everybody working together, disabled and non-disabled people, to help make art and shows more accessible. That would be great. Are you funded to create your piece for this upcoming exhibition? Does the Venice Biennale fund? How does that work?

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: The Biennale is not funding. All the countries that have a pavilion have their own funding. Finland is a small country, so I don't know how it works, but I have heard rumors that last year the U.S. had, like, \$6 million. (laughs) I'm laughing because we are getting a commission for creating new work, and when it's Venice, of course it was easy to apply for the artist funding for the last 16-month period that I have been working, so that has been really, really wonderful. The Kone Foundation gave me full funding for 20 months so I could work on this, and then we get a commission. (laughs) I'm poor, and I'm staying poor, but I get to do these things. I'm in a hotel here and we get paid for travel and hotels and all this. I'm not poor in the sense that other disabled artists are in Finland. I get food for my kids and they get to go do their hobbies, but art is never a good business. Or I don't know, maybe in some part of the world, but not in Finland. (laughs)

Woodall: It's not over here, either. You know the phrase "starving artist"? It's interesting, and I don't know how you feel about it, but as an artist, I don't have a choice. I have to create. A lot of times people are like, "Why would you choose this career path?" I didn't choose this. I have to do this. I don't have a choice. I have to make art. I don't know if you feel the same way.

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: I totally feel it, and earlier, when there were gaps between fundings, it was really nice that I got a job at the Threshold Association, which is a human rights organization for people with disabilities. It was run by a most famous Kalle Könkkölä, who was even in the UN negotiation with all these things, like the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, all this. It was really good working there because he was all the time respecting the role of disability arts together with advocacy. He kind of could read me that even I was doing some brochures and planning some campaigns, he still knew that there was this artistic part of me. Like most artists, sometimes you have to do other things to be able to do you art. This is something that I kind of regret, but there is part of me that is actually interested in medicine and that, and I have been joking about why I didn't go to medical school first and specialize in, for example, those who have the hardest time to find doctors in Finland, like people with intellectual disabilities. Something like this, and then I could do that for three days a week, and I could have an amazing studio if I could work as a doctor for a few days a week. I never did it, and I'm too old, and I won't do it any more, but for the young people, it would be good to have something that you can survive on that doesn't take too much from your body so that you don't have the energy for the arts. I didn't plan well, but I'm so old! (laughs)

Woodall: I don't know, you could still become a doctor.

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: I could, but if I have to choose going back to physics and mathematics, it's just this

thing that I think my experience in disability politics could make me—because that kind of doctor is writing those certificates that this person needs access to the balcony, so I would love to be the one doing this, but on the other hand, I have had this idea of, why don't we have committees of disabled people who could get paid, they don't even have to be social workers, but a disabled committee, and then if you need something, because Finland mobility is all free, access renovations in your house are free if you pass first the process. Why put this weight on doctors, because there could be a good group of disabled people who could also know how to do this cheap, what is a good company to renovate your things, what is a good brand of the wheelchair? They could read the applications and then say yes or no. I think it doesn't happen in any country because they think that they need the medical knowledge. I don't know, I'm not a social worker, maybe you need some knowledge that this committee idea doesn't have, but I still would like to test it.

Woodall: In ABILITY Corps, which is a nonprofit organization connected with ABILITY Magazine, we do housing where we team up with Habitat for Humanity to build houses for people with disabilities. There's also another organization that's doing that in Africa that we interviewed for the magazine as well. I think they're trying to do a movement towards that, which is really cool to see.

A lot of your art, from what I was looking at, seems like preference and installation pieces. Do you sell any of your artwork?

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: I would be happy to sell everything if someone wants to buy, but the problem is, as you see, *Would You Marry Me Space?* is like, that is now in the Helsinki Arts Museum, they bought it. But I every month pay more and more for storage. (laughs) I'm not talking about big money, but I just had to change my nine square meters of storage to 30 square meters because of the crates I had in Canada, I had an exhibition at Harbourfront Centre, so they came back and I didn't have a place for them (laughs) so I would be happy to sell. When they are textile arts, they are very fragile things, so I think they are more like museum pieces. Of course you can buy a carousel for your living room if you want to have a wheelchair carousel, but I don't know many people who have such a residence for such a big thing.

My husband always says, "Why don't you make stamps that would be easy to carry and ship all around?" Maybe it's also because of my body and I'm so short and I'm breaking easily, it's kind of challenging myself. Maybe I'm getting some crazy feelings from this moment, like, I'm going through this hard metal and okay, it's not well done like a professional welding person would have done, but I managed to do it somehow. I just want to try what my body can do. But always, if anyone wants to



Artists of the Pavilion of Finland in the 2024 Venice Biennale; Vidha Saumya (left), Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen and Pia Lindman

buy anything, I'm always selling! I would like to highlight the Wynn Newhouse. I just heard in March that I'm one of the six winners of the Wynn Newhouse Award in the States. I'm so grateful for this title. When they asked for my portfolio, I wasn't aware that someone had done a selection of 15 people, and they asked for my portfolio, and then I got this happy news. I'm very grateful for the foundation. They know what disability art is. That means that those people who are deep in disability art saw something in the work. In Finland disabled artists, maybe we are 10 or 15 active artists. Our community is really small. Of course there are some new young people all the time, but we are always in the same festivals together. The same artists, same actors, same writers, always working together. It's a very small circle here.

Woodall: That makes it seem like a tight-knit community, though. When you get to know somebody so well, when it's in a smaller area, I think collaborating on pieces flows a little bit easier as well. I prefer the smaller groups. It's more like an intimate creative space.

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: I love literature, so recently I have been very inspired and also we wrote to the Venice publication. We have a super poet, a disabled poet,

Sanni Purhonen, she just received—they are now translating in the states her poems for a U.S. audience. It's happening right now. I don't know when it's coming out. She has inspired me so much. I see her poems as pictures and she's almost doing half of the work when she puts her work out, she words it so beautifully that I see these strange images and stories coming. This kind of collaboration is really lovely, when everybody knows each other so well.

Woodall: I'll look her up, I love poetry. I like reading poetry from all over the world because the cultural influences are so different. Right now, I'm reading a book of Korean poems. I would love to read something from Finland, at least the English versions.

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: They are coming soon. There is someone living in the U.S. who also knows enough Finnish to help and they are working together on the translation. It's going to be super because she published first with a very small publishing company and finally for the third book she got a big publishing company in Finland, and now, suddenly—poetry is such a small field in literature, and now you get translated into English from Finnish! It's like a Venice Biennale!

Woodall: I definitely am looking forward to reading

them. Is there anything we haven't covered yet that you would like to talk about?

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: I am jumping from one topic to another. Our sweet curators gave me advice to remember that the exhibition is not all about disability arts, that I'm just one of three. There are other conflicts with bodies. I just wanted to say that it doesn't all come down to disability questions. (laughs)

Woodall: Are you all collaborating together on a cohesive piece?

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: We have done our individual pieces, but we have spent a lot of time discussing about privilege and bodies. In my case, "toxicity" is a bit too strong of a word, but the challenges with the environment. That has inspired us a lot, like each other. For example, with Pia Lindman, I'm talking about the power of medicine and she's working with healing, but more like natural healing and subsensorial healing. It's really interesting that probably many disabled people don't even want to think about healing, because healing is like, "Come on, I'm okay like this, don't try to heal me." Then we still have lots of deep discussions about how differently we can understand healing, like in her process it's so different from classical medicine healing and thoughts and also how gender and disability are also strongly connected. I'm talking about women, but overall, earlier I often talked about women with disabilities who are kind of a-gender, because in Finland, many people don't even see us as women, we're just the disabled. They see young boys and disabled men, but women are just lonely creatures living in their home with our families and kids and all that. This has been like a collaborative process, but of course we all build our own pieces that are now beautifully installed a little bit mixed to their own—to the space.

Chet Cooper: You had mentioned that after the exhibit you were hoping that the discussion would continue, not just having a one-off, but how do we do something that manifests some kind of not just awareness but actual change in the medical field? Do you have any thoughts on what could be, would be the best-case scenario of the work starting a new movement?

Jenni-Juulia: I'm personally thinking very locally. I have been visiting the school for teaching nurses or there have been situations where I have been as a patient role, where the young doctors can ask questions. I'm hoping that maybe this raises questions so that I could get some invitations to give a short presentation about this project to people who are working in medicine. The best way so far with my artworks has been that I make a 10-15 minute presentation when there are seminars and conferences in Finland, I ask them, "Do you want something funny for your coffee break? I can come to give you a 10-15 minute presentation, show some images and bring a topic in a nice way." Those have been a very

easy way to get the theme. I have received a lot of good feedback from that, because many conferences have their real speakers and their own program going, but they are very open to short things to lighten the atmosphere a little bit, something funny and light. Then of course, I don't know about the medical field interviews, because the power difference is so strong that I'm not sure if I'm able to convince doctors that they should turn their biological thinking more towards the social model. I hope they would, but that can be a bit harder. I think it's easier to touch people's hearts, for example, by showing a glimpse of a film during a coffee break in some events.

Cooper: I think that's a wonderful idea. I'm glad that you're doing that. My quick background: I was pre-med, and the medical school nearby started a curriculum for medical students dealing with disabilities. They understood early on that they needed to change attitudes, to bring awareness. My peers—doctors—are pretty linear in our thoughts—in the way we think. You study the sciences. It's structured but willing to learn, but not necessarily abstract thoughts, not like a Ph.D. An MD is oftentimes more, study, put your head in the books and study, study, study. That's why you always hear about this bedside manner. It's novel when a doctor has good bedside manner, because they're more about just the science structure of the human being.

I think that push to try to get into medical school or nursing school, to have curriculum built into every school in the world, not just in your country or our country, that's been a struggle. I've seen the people who have put the curriculums together, and it's difficult to do it. But I think getting there and then even if you get into college, that whole idea of mainstreaming these concepts, what is ableism and how to get that message across. That's great that you're doing that. I love the idea of mixing humor and short pieces of content to start that awareness building. It's very cool.

Chet Cooper: I know you've been with us here for quite a while. We'll let you get going.

Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen: Thank you both so much. This was a wonderful evening, afternoon, whatever.

Jenny Woodall: I really appreciate your time today. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk about your art and the process and the upcoming exhibition. I really appreciate all of your insight.

Wallinheimo-Heimonen: Thank you so much that you are interested in this, you're a big magazine. This means a lot to me to be able to talk with you. I'm looking forward to your writing. ■ **ABILITY**

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Interview with Claudio

Claudio Berther is an in-house lawyer with expertise on the intersection of technology and Swiss, European, and American privacy law. He's also a wheelchair user with cerebral palsy, and to his knowledge, the first Swiss national with a disability to become a Fulbright scholar. From 2005 to 2012, he studied public law at the University of Zurich, earning a Bachelor's and a Master's. During this time, he spent a year abroad at the University of Georgia, Athens, where he got his first taste of American culture. In 2019, he returned to the US, this time on a Fulbright scholarship, and earned his LLM from the University of California, Berkeley, the birthplace of the American disability rights movement. He weathered California's notorious wildfires and smog, as well as the advent of COVID-19, challenges which, he says, have only made him stronger. Since 2021, Claudio has served as a board member on the global, virtual chapter of the Fulbright Association, Fulbrighters with Disability, helping scholars with disabilities navigate cultural norms and academic institutions. It was my pleasure to interview my fellow Fulbrighter and friend for *ABILITY Magazine*.

Itto: Good morning, Claudio! Thanks for agreeing to sit for this interview.

Claudio: I can only sit for interviews. I'm in a wheelchair!

Itto Outini: Right, of course! [laughter] Can you start by telling us a bit about yourself? Where are you from?

Claudio Berther: Sure. I'm from Switzerland. I grew up in the mountains, in a very small village called Danis, where everybody knows everybody. As a kid, I was known as "the one with the disability."

Itto: Were you born with a disability?

Claudio: Yes, I was born too early, with a lack of oxygen. As a consequence, I have cerebral palsy, which makes me use a wheelchair. I have a Swiss-Trac™ motor that connects to my wheelchair and pulls me. It's very strong. When I don't need it—for example, when I'm in someplace narrow, like an elevator—I can just detach it, and then I have a regular, manual wheelchair. It's great. It gets me everywhere.

Itto: You've traveled a lot, haven't you?

Claudio: Yes, all over Europe, Africa, and both coasts in America. I love traveling, meeting interesting people, learning new cultures, just basically being an adventurous person despite my cerebral palsy and my wheelchair.

Itto: What's traveling like for you, as a wheelchair user?





Claudio Berther

Claudio: There will always be unforeseen challenges. But that's something everyone experiences. It's actually helped me a lot, personally and professionally, because I know not everything goes according to plan, and that fosters a certain mindset of not giving up when you're facing adverse situations. I think that's a very useful skill, especially today, in our ever-changing world, and it's one that all disabled people have to some degree. That's something I hope more employers will see and start appreciating in the future.

Itto: Exactly. I feel the same.

Claudio: As for traveling, one thing I've learned is to take all your paperwork with you, and take extra time, and be ready for surprises. If you do those three things, then traveling gets a lot easier. Not completely hassle-free, but easier, and definitely worthwhile.

Itto: You came from a small Swiss village, and you ended up at Berkley?

Claudio: Yes! Well, first to Zurich, then to Berkley. At the University of Zurich, that was the first time I wasn't singled out as "the one with the disability." There was more support, more recognition. Zurich is the largest city in Switzerland. The head of the Counseling Center for Studies and Disability, Olga Meler-Popa, was very

supportive. She helped make the transition to Zurich much smoother.

Itto: And what did you study?

Claudio: Law. With a concentration in public and international law in Zurich, and privacy and technology law in California. That's one reason I was glad to go to Berkley, because California's at the forefront of technological development.

Itto: Can you tell our readers a little bit more about the Fulbright Scholarship? What is it? A scholarship for persons with disabilities.

Claudio: Not for persons with disabilities specifically, no. Basically, it's a scholarship given by the US Department of State, either to US citizens or to international students and scholars. It was founded 75 years ago, right after World War II. The idea was to foster cultural exchange between the US and other parts of the world. They like applicants who have interesting stories and can show they have the ambition to take what they learn abroad and implement it back in their home countries. When you finish a Fulbright, you're required to go back to your country and work there for a certain number of years. How many depends on the country and the program. That's what I'm doing now: applying my law and

technology training at a scale-up here in Switzerland.

Itto: Which scale-up?

Claudio: It's called Yokoy (www.yokoi.ai). We do AI-based spend management. It's already an international company, with offices in Zurich, Vienna, Munich, Amsterdam and soon in the US, too. In July of 2021, we had 30 employees. Now it's around 100, and they've raised \$26,000,000 in Series A. I think the Fulbright really helped with that, changing the scope of my work, expanding it geographically, but also content-wise and in terms of professional connections. It's an amazing network of people all over the world. As a lawyer, for example, with an international company, it's great to know lawyers in all different countries. If I need to know about the law somewhere, I can easily find someone to ask. International employers like to see the Fulbright on your CV. It helps that way. And it helps establish mutual respect. For example, once, I was negotiating with a counter party, and all of a sudden, he sent me a connection request on LinkedIn. And I was wondering, "Why is he doing this when we're negotiating?" And then I saw that he was a Fulbrighter and even had the same professors in Berkeley as I did. Even though he was more senior than me, it helped with the negotiations, just knowing we had this experience in common.

Itto: Did you feel supported as a person with a disability? Were your Fulbright advisors trained to help persons with disabilities?

Claudio: As far as I know, Fulbright advisors don't get that training. So, that part was a little tricky. There are some other Fulbrighters with disabilities out there, but I think none from Switzerland, so there was no one I could talk to about disability and accessibility issues with first-hand experience while I was applying, no "unofficial channels" where I could ask frank questions, for example, about how to get around, how to find housing, what disability-related resources are available.

Itto: Why do you think that is?

Claudio: There are lots of challenges. Lots of other things that have to work for somebody with a disability to go to a foreign country, study at a different university and succeed. I don't mean just academics; I'm talking about all kinds of things: logistics, transportation, personal care. Of course, as I said, there are some Fulbrighters with disabilities, as you know —

Itto: Yes! I'm a Fulbrighter, too, and I'm totally blind!

Claudio: And we've worked together on the Fulbrighters with Disabilities chapter.

Itto: The virtual chapter. Which we started this year.

Claudio: At this point, I think, it's still the only resource

for scholars with disabilities through the Fulbright Association.

Itto: What other resources were available to you? Did you receive support before you boarded the plane to California, or did you have to learn to adapt as you went along?

Claudio: We had some pre-departure meetings at the US embassy, where general things were discussed. I was able to raise some disability-related questions. I also did a one-week orientation in New Jersey. They hosted it there so we could see different parts of the country. We got exposed to lots of on-the-ground technicalities, plus more general cultural knowledge. That was called the Fulbright Gateway orientation. I definitely recommend it to any grantee. Some of the people I met in New Jersey ended up in Berkeley, too. It's always good to have some contacts on the ground when you arrive, to help you navigate everything.

Itto: How did you learn about the Fulbright?

Claudio: I had a good friend who told me I should apply for the Fulbright when I asked about studying in the US again. My first reaction was, "Well, I don't know...it's too prestigious..." but she said, "Why not try? What do you have to lose?" That was two or three years ago. I didn't apply right away, but after some time, my situation changed, and I thought, "Now would be a good time to try," so I tried. And after a rigorous process, I got it.

Itto: Congratulations!

Claudio: Thank you! My advisor was helping me find the right place to study, because of course there's a lot of universities in the US, and they send us all over. I asked my advisor if it would be realistic for me to apply to Berkeley, and his reaction was, "They may just love your story out West. I would not discourage you to try." For me, that was like, "Okay, this person sees so many applicants, and if he tells me, 'I would not discourage you to try,' then it's definitely worth trying." And I tried. And I got it, again.

Itto: What made you want to go to UC Berkeley?

Claudio: When I was doing disability advocacy, I visited a conference at the National University of Ireland in Galway, where they showed a movie about the Americans with Disabilities Act. I learned that Berkeley and the Bay Area played a big role in that movement. It was basically the birthplace. And, of course, I knew about Silicon Valley and technology, too, so I got really interested in going. I couldn't afford UC Berkeley, but then, when I got the Fulbright, that was a significant contribution. They also helped with admissions. Berkeley's very prestigious, but when you're applying to a university, if you're a Fulbrighter, they're the ones who send your

application. There were maybe 6,000 applicants the year I applied, but I stood out and was competitive because of the Fulbright and my combination of interests and experience in disability advocacy and technology.

Itto: How did Berkley being the birthplace of the American disability rights movement impact your experience? How would you compare it to when you studied in Athens, Georgia?

Claudio: Generally, in my experience, the US is pretty friendly for persons with disabilities. I got that even in Athens. I always knew that public places should have ramps, they should have elevators, they should be accessible. If I have to go to the toilet, there should be a toilet that's wheelchair-accessible. I didn't have to ask. Private businesses don't have that requirement, but just knowing those things are taken care of in public places makes life a lot easier. But there are some additional things in Berkley. One thing I found really amazing was a company called Easy Does It. They offer three main services: personal care, transportation for wheelchair users, and a wheelchair repair shop, all in one. Basically, there were some people with disabilities sitting around together in 1994, saying, "What do we need to function in our daily lives?" And they figured out three things: "I need to get dressed, I need to go to places, and if my wheelchair breaks down, I need to fix it." So they started a company that offers those services. I was really impressed! I thought, "We should have this everywhere!" I ended up using their personal care service because of the pandemic. It's an emergency service, not for everyday use, but with Corona breaking out all of a sudden—

Itto: Right! You were there when the pandemic started!

Claudio: Yes. The whole fall semester was smoke and wildfires, which caused power outages, and the spring was Covid. It was an interesting year to go on the Fulbright! I had a personal care attendant, but when Covid started, they didn't feel comfortable coming to the international house with 600 people. But Easy Does It understood the situation, and they made sure I got through the final weeks of the semester.

Itto: And now you've graduated?

Claudio: Yes. We're all still waiting on our graduation ceremony. Berkley promised they would do one for us once the pandemic's over. Everybody was expecting it would happen this year, but, you know...these days, nobody really knows.

Itto: I hope you guys get to celebrate your accomplishments soon. How else has the pandemic affected you, as a person with a disability? How are you dealing with the isolation?

Claudio: I have regular Zoom calls to catch up with

classmates from Berkley. We got really connected with each other, especially us Fulbrighters, because we were going through all this together. I think the pandemic and everything actually made me a stronger person. It gave me self-confidence to deal with challenging situations. Now, if I'm facing a difficult situation, I can just think back to all the difficult situations I've already overcome, and learn from them, and tell myself, "I'll overcome this one, too."

Itto: So, now you're an international lawyer, and an international advocate for persons with disabilities, and you help support new scholars with disabilities, especially new Fulbrighters. What advice do you have for new scholars with disabilities?

Claudio: The same thing I tell everyone: if there's something you want, just go for it. Just try. Even if you don't know what will happen.

Itto: That's so important. For us, especially!

Claudio: Exactly. We never know what's going to work, so we have to try everything. We can't afford to say from the beginning, "This won't work." If you're an academic with a disability and you're interested in the Fulbright, don't be shy. Just try. If you have a disability and an academic career in your country, that's already an interesting story. The Fulbright might be interested. You just need a strong personality and to be open to adventures and things not going according to plan. And you have to be willing to ask for help. In my experience, most people want to help. They just don't know how until you tell them. So, you have to ask.

Itto: Speaking of asking, you mentor scholars with disabilities, right?

Claudio: I told the Fulbright Commission in Switzerland, and also UC Berkley, if you have any prospective students or grantees with disabilities who want to talk to someone, I'm more than happy to chat with them. I was contacted by UC Berkley about two weeks ago because they have a new student with a disability who was just admitted and wanted to talk about the practical matters, like, how do you get around, how do you organize this and that. I know what it's like to start an adventure like this, and having some of those details cleared out of the way beforehand makes it easier.

Itto: How can readers reach you if they want to talk about those issues and those opportunities?

Claudio: The best would be through the chapter, Fulbrighters with Disabilities.

Itto: Thank you so much, Claudio. We're so happy to have you with us today. Again, thank you for your time. We look forward to sharing your story.

Claudio: Of course! Thank you. ■ ABILITY



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Interview with Hasan TAYEM

Hasan Tayem's technophilia started at an early age. Born blind, he's been using computers since childhood and has long been enamored with assistive technology. His love of sports and advocacy took root later, in college at the University of Jordan, Amman. The fourth pillar of his passions emerged then, too, as he studied the Italian language, and blossomed in 2021, when the Italian government awarded him a scholarship to study human rights and multilevel governance at the University of Padova.

Itto Outini: Hasan! How are you doing? Can you introduce yourself, please?

Hasan Tayem: Good, good! Introduce myself...okay. I'm Hasan. I'm 24. I'm doing a Master's in Italy. I did a bachelor's in English and Italian back in Jordan. Coming here to Italy has been my long-term dream.

Itto: Congratulations! Why Italy?

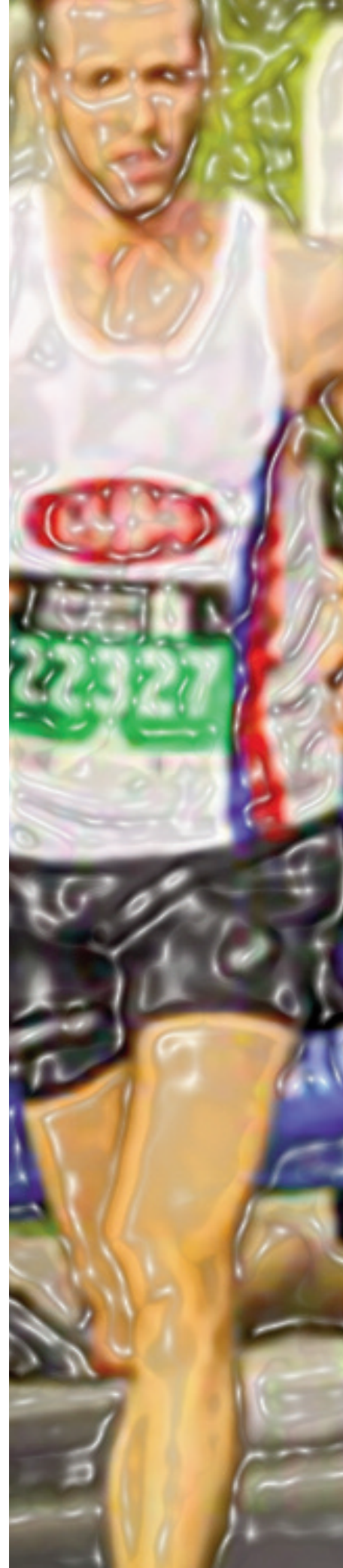
Hasan: I love the language and the culture. Also, I love to travel. I always travel for my running competitions.

Itto: How did you get into running?

Hasan: I got into sports in high school and took it up to the professional level at the university. I've participated in competitions across Jordan, the Middle East, Europe and Asia. We're talking about five-, 10-, 22-kilometer runs. Also, I did 42 kilometers, a full marathon, three years ago in Lebanon.

Itto: And your disability?

Hasan: Oh, right! I forgot about that one! I was born totally blind. I can see light, but not objects. Not things.





Itto: I'm also blind, and I used to love running, just not at the professional level. Can you describe what it's like, competing as a blind runner?

Hasan: As you may know, we run with guides. Sometimes we hold hands, sometimes we have a piece of rope, a cable or something connecting us, so we don't lose each other. The guide should be stronger, somehow, in case we need a push, physically or psychologically.

Itto: That one's very important! Once, in Morocco, I was running in a race, and my guide wasn't strong, and I wanted to win, so I bit him.

Hasan: You bit him?

Itto: I bit him! And he let go, and I just went all around running! I nearly died! I ran into traffic! [laughter]

Hasan: Did you win the race, then?

Itto: No, no, it was the last time for me to run. After that I was banned. [laughter]

Hasan: For me, I've never done that.

Itto: That's good. You wouldn't have been able to compete in all those competitions. Can you tell us more about that?

Hasan: Since 2016, I won first place in the Amman Marathon and the Red Sea Marathon, Visually Impaired Category, I've won the Beirut Marathon twice and I've won medals in Asia, two in Malaysia, and then more recently in Turkey and Italy.

Itto: Then it's good you like to travel.

Hasan: Traveling is part of my journey. I love to visit new countries, meet new people, learn new languages. Every country I've visited, I've enjoyed.

Itto: Which place has been your favorite, so far?

Hasan: I would say, Malaysia. The first time I went, I was only 18. I stayed for a month. The second time, I went for running camp and stayed a month and a half. That taught me a lot about independence. I traveled all around the country that summer. That made me comfortable living on my own, away from home and my family and friends and people I'd always known.

Itto: What's your favorite part of travel?

Hasan: For me, it's all about the language and the culture. When you travel, you run into new ways of doing things, even new ways of thinking. In the beginning, it might be a little bit hard, but the more time you spend with the people, the more involved you get, the more you start to understand. Wherever I go, I always try to get involved, to make some positive impact and

exchange some culture. In Malaysia, for example, I participated in a volunteer group at a blind school. I helped them organize activities.

Itto: What's your process for learning new languages?

Hasan: It's interesting. Speaking different languages makes my brain work in different ways. For example, when I speak Arabic, I have a different way of dealing with things. It's automatically implemented in my mind. When I speak Italian, it's totally different. When I speak English, it's totally different again. It's like forcing your brain to multitask, which is great because that's how life is. There's always more than one thing going on. You need a lot of different strategies and tools.

Itto: And it helps with learning culture.

Hasan: Of course! The language and the culture go together. You can't learn one without the other; it wouldn't make sense. You won't be able to deal with real people. For example, I recently started learning German, and to communicate with Germans, you don't just have to know the language; you must understand that German people are strict on time. They have strict social rules. If you don't know that, you'll end up in bad situations.

Itto: Do you think there's a connection between disability and travel and multilingualism? I'm thinking of blindness, especially.

Hasan: Yes, I know what you mean. If you're blind and you decide to travel alone in some new country where your language isn't spoken, without learning theirs, you're going to end up...I don't even know where! [laughs] You must be able to ask for help, ask for directions, communicate with people. I think it forces us to learn. English, especially, because it's the lingua franca—if you're blind and don't know English, I really recommend you learn. I encourage everyone who's reading... but I suppose this will be written in English.

Itto: Yes, but our readers might know someone.

Hasan: Exactly. If you know someone who doesn't speak English, especially if they're blind and they want to travel and be independent, English is a must. You should encourage them, to learn and to travel. But know it's not just getting on a plane and going someplace. You must face a lot of things. You must get lost. You must miss trains. You must have fun!

Itto: How about the challenges you face professionally, as a blind international runner?

Hasan: The big one's the same challenge everyone faces money. Getting sponsored is hard.

Itto: How do you overcome that?



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Hasan: You must surround yourself with good people. That's really, really important. The people around you give you the support--financially, sometimes, but more importantly, psychologically. Some people give you encouragement, some give you strategies to move yourself forward when you're stuck or lost.

Itto: Speaking of the people around you, how do you feel about this issue of disability and assimilation versus...I mean, in some places, they want to throw everyone together, disabled and non-disabled, and in others, they want to keep people separate and give each person what they think they need. Which do you think is better? How is it done in Jordan?

Hasan: It depends on the disability. For deaf and blind, they don't really mix them; they each have their own schools. Mental disabilities, it's the same. For wheelchair users, they mix them with the general population. If you ask me, I think mixing is better. I don't really think there should be something called "disabled" or "non-disabled" at all.

Itto: Labeling accomplishes nothing.

Hasan: It's just a way to organize the world. This just came to my mind, and I wanted to say it: we all have differences, we all have things we do and things we

can't do, so why call some of us "disabled"? The problem I've seen in Jordan--and I believe it's happening all across the Arab world--is people putting labels on things they don't understand, trying to help when they don't really have the experience or the knowledge.

Itto: It's the same all over the world. Just different degrees.

Hasan: Exactly. For example, recently, the government tried to build a safe pathway for the visually impaired on campus at the University of Jordan. The idea was for blind people to get around campus on their own, without someone guiding them. They put in maybe 1,500 meters of bright yellow tile. The project cost a lot of money, but in the end, we're not using this lane. It has bumps, it has stairways, people put trash cans in the way...it's not even for the totally blind. We wasted our effort and money for nothing because they just asked people who don't have experience.

Itto: How do you think we can start making change? In Jordan, in the Middle East, and all across the world?

Hasan: This might sound simple, but it starts with the family. Parents should first educate themselves and then their children. They should learn there's no difference between you, as a child, and this blind person walking

on the street, or studying in your school. That would push this generation, the educated generation, to know how to deal with people with disabilities in the future.

Itto: What about for parents of children with disabilities?

Hasan: It's the same. Also, don't try to hide your children. Don't ever try to hide your children. If you're afraid because of shame, or because your kid might face discrimination--if you hide your children, you're the one who's making the discrimination. You're the one destroying your son's or daughter's future.

Itto: I agree.

Hasan: I always tell people, for example, if their child is blind, and they don't want to let him cross the road, I tell them, "No." I tell them, "If you're afraid, you're the one making your child afraid. You should give him the courage to go." That's how I was raised. I was always playing, going around, falling down and splitting my face, and it was fine! No one ever told me, "You're blind, so you should be afraid." If someone said this to me, it would've given me a very bad impression of my life and my family.

Itto: How are these attitudes affecting people with disabilities in Jordan, and across the Arab world?

Hasan: I can only speak for Jordan. In Jordan, something like 11 to 15 percent of the population have disabilities. That's a little over 1,000,000 people. Only 16 percent are employed, and only 10 percent of people in the workforce have disabilities. Those are the official statistics, but then, some people, maybe they don't want to say, maybe they're hiding their disabled children, so I'm sure it's actually more.

Itto: And what about employment? Education?

Hasan: Officially, it's something like 80 percent are not economically active. They're classified as "inactive persons." They don't go to work; they don't go to school--nothing. They just sit in their homes. Imagine!

Itto: That's only the official statistic, again.

Hasan: Exactly. It's probably more. Also, the data from 2014, 2015, so it's hard to say how it is now, after the pandemic and everything.

Itto: What about representation? How are the media representing people with disabilities in Jordan?

Hasan: So, there are some media representations, but the way they deal with disability...it's like, they don't talk about inclusion. They don't talk about the law. It's more like, you know, "This is halal, this is haram, this person's blind, so he's going to heaven, we'll just let him go and talk and do whatever he wants, but not give any

opportunities to anyone." I propose the media should talk more about things like the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), universal design, employment, meeting people's accessibility needs.

Itto: And why--

Hasan: Also--sorry, this just came to my mind--but it's not just a media problem. It's a problem some disabled people are creating, giving the media this reputation. Sometimes people go on the radio saying, "I'm poor, I'm blind, I cannot find a job" --well, I'm sorry, but it's not because you're blind! People who are blind can work. People who are not disabled can be inactive economically, too. Stop giving people this impression. I just...I don't know. I get upset when people give this reputation.

Itto: You said you're a human rights advocate. What kind of advocacy?

Hasan: I started at the university in Jordan, telling students and professors how to deal with people with disabilities. I would tell them it's not about this disability, that disability; it's about how different people live. Maybe this person's short and this other one's tall, this one's white and this one's brown--the real difference is in how we deal with life, which choices we make, which decisions.

Itto: Then you moved on to working with the government and nonprofit organizations?

Hasan: I started encouraging governments and NGOs to just apply our laws. Jordan ratified the CRPD in 2007. Since then, we've passed some new domestic laws, set up workplace quotas, even taken international loans. But unfortunately, most haven't really been implemented. I started volunteering with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2019, leading the inclusive strategy for the youth sector. That was a great opportunity. I got exposed to different strategies and opinions, let me see how things are dealt with at a higher level.

Itto: What were you doing with UNICEF?

Hasan: My job was to design and implement strategies for the youth sector, with a focus on acceptance and inclusion. I also helped the Office of Human Resources make the volunteer program more accessible for people with disabilities. The youth program in Jordan was built on volunteering, but I faced some difficulties, when I was applying, with their online portal. Since I'm an accessibility specialist, I helped make their website accessible. Now anyone can join.

Itto: What's the hardest project you've worked on?

Hasan: I would say, working with refugees with disabilities. UNICEF deals with refugee camps, and they have



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lots of people with disabilities, including children. One of the hardest points I remember, actually, was trying to convince the refugees with disabilities to participate in UNICEF's programs.

Itto: Does Jordan have a program for young refugees with disabilities? Or for refugees with disabilities in general?

Hasan: Not for people with disabilities specifically, but now that it's accessible, anyone can join their team. I've trained people working with them, managers and supervisors, and also people in the youth centers in the camps. Recently, I've been hearing from my former colleagues, and they say the program's running smoothly. As I said, I'm in favor of mixing.

Itto: What another advocacy do you do? As an accessibility specialist, for example?

Hasan: I love technology. I've been encouraged with it since I was young. Nowadays, with so many resources online, the world's transformed. It gives us opportunities. A few years ago, I started contacting companies and offering my business strategies, things I learned from getting sponsored as a runner, and since then I've worked with a bunch of companies that provide software and hardware for blind people, helping with their products and their Middle East business and marketing strategies. I do technical translation, too, usually English

to Arabic, for apps and websites designed for the blind, so people in the Middle East can use them. I've worked with Cash Reader, which is a mobile app that lets blind people recognize currencies. I've also worked with Clew and some other apps. If I list them all, we're not going to finish, so—

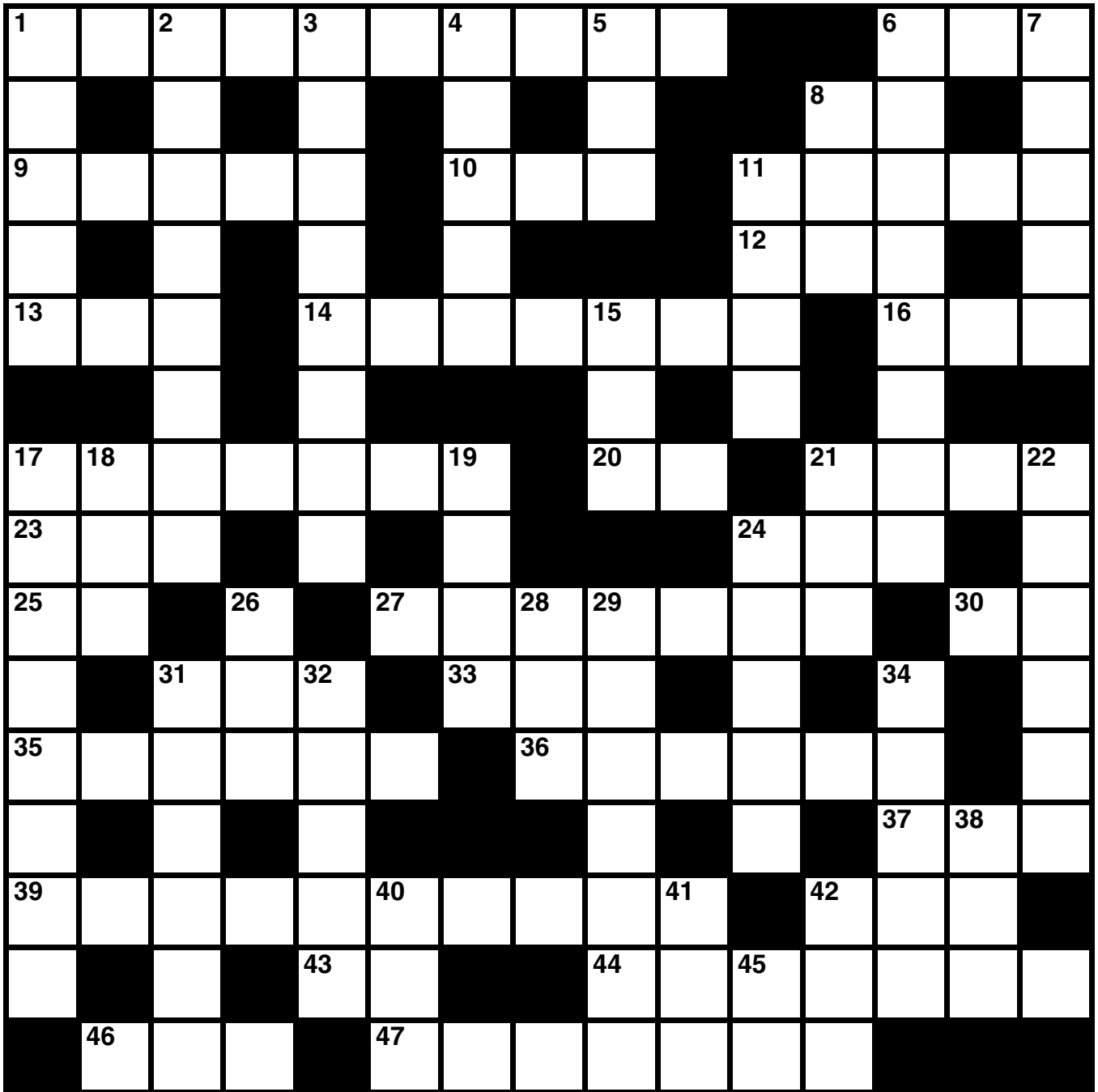
Itto: [laughter] I understand! Speaking of which, we need to wrap things up. Is there anything else you'd like to share? Maybe, since you're in Italy now, you could share what it means to have dreams and accomplish them.

Hasan: Sure. If you have a dream, my advice is to work hard, have patience and don't give up. If you try something and it doesn't work, try something else. If that doesn't work, try something else. Keep searching. Connections are really, really important, so surround yourself with encouraging people. Everyone needs support, and that only comes from the people around you. Ask for help, use your connections, and no matter what happens, just keep going.

Itto: Thank you, Hasan. I couldn't agree more.

Hasan: Thank you. ■ **ABILITY**

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ACROSS

1. Autistic actress who starred in "As We See It" - 3 words
6. Floor cover
8. "____, the people.."
9. Bono and Enya's nationality
10. Buddhist branch
11. Actress, songwriter, disability activist, singer "Lift Me Up"
12. Singer Yoko
13. Color
14. Hardship
16. ____ for victory
17. Kidney-shaped nuts
20. Morning time, abbr.
21. Operatic melody
23. "Take your pick"
24. Family girl, for short
25. Wall ____
27. "Blue Blood" actress who recently appeared in "Daruma" with two authentically disabled actors, ____ Hawk
30. Promotion piece
31. Museum contents
33. Relaxation center
35. Actress with Down Syndrome, her role on "Glee", ____ Potter
36. Celebrity chef, Jamie ____ with dyslexia and campaigned for healthy foods for school kids
37. Nutritionist's figure, abbr.
39. First actress who used a wheelchair to appear on a Broadway stage, 2 words
42. "____ Light Up My Life"
43. Compass point. abbr.
44. St. Louis's arch, symbolically
46. Band equipment
47. Deaf actor who created a Na'vi sign language for "Avatar: The Way of Water" - 2 words

DOWN

1. Owner of a motorsports company in Riverside who continues to help orphan kids despite battling Parkinsons, Malcolm ____
2. President Theodore Roosevelt had this illness
3. Triumph for a pitcher, 2 words
4. Italian fast food
5. Very long time period
6. Gets better
7. Lead the way
8. Pale
11. Wheelchair user and disability advocate on her "Sitting Pretty" YouTube channel, ____ Spencer
15. Cry of discovery
17. Celebrity make-up artist: "You cannot wait around for things to get better to make your dreams happen. ..." Ernesto ____
18. Picnic troublemaker
19. Teachers' fill-ins, briefly
21. Feel under the weather
22. Blind singing great, ____ Bocelli
24. Strainer
26. Make a mistake
28. N.Y.S.E. debut, abbr.
29. Musical interpreter for blind people, Amber ____
31. Temple Grandin is a famous activist for people with this developmental disorder
32. Sends a message, in a way
34. Cupid's weapon
38. "Break my Heart" singer, ____ Lipa
40. Button on a remote, abbr.
41. Campaigned
42. "Let's do it!"
45. "Lawrence of Arabia" writer's initials

answers on page 76

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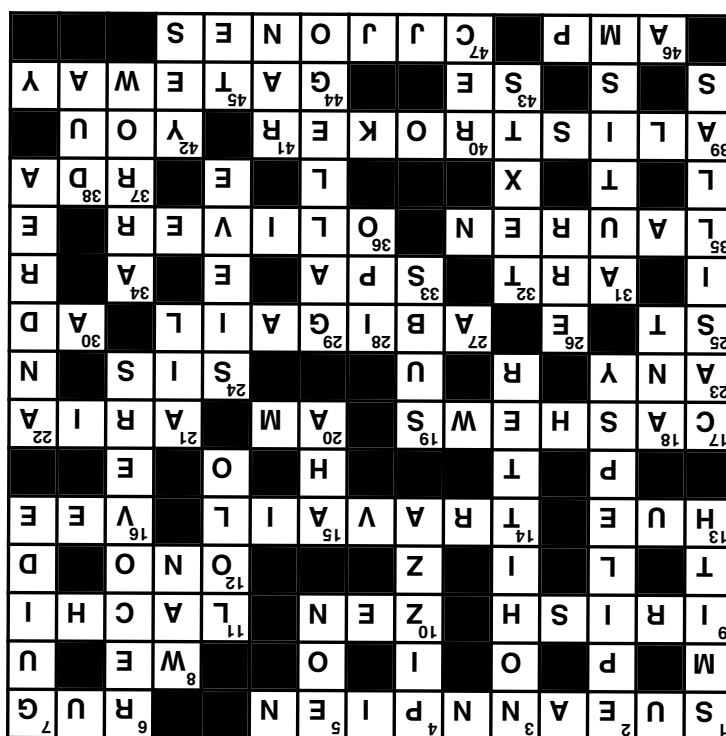
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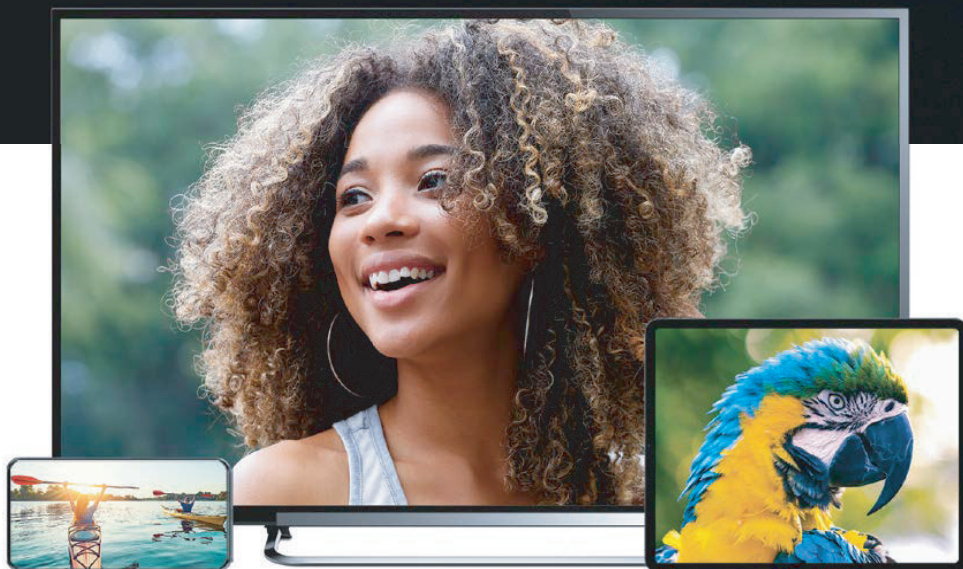
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Who we are:

Wells Fargo & Company is a diversified, community-based financial services company with \$1.9 trillion in assets. Wells Fargo's vision is to satisfy our customers' financial needs and help them succeed financially. News, insights, and perspectives from Wells Fargo are also available at [Wells Fargo Stories](https://stories.wf.com) (<https://stories.wf.com>).

Key Facts

70M Customers

26.7M Mobile Banking mobile active users

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\$161.8B Market value of stock*

*Based on sales, profits, assets, and market value as of March 31, 2021.

Diversity and inclusion

At Wells Fargo, we believe that diversity and inclusion is key to being one of the world's great companies. We strive to build and sustain a diverse and inclusive culture for all Wells Fargo team members – one where they feel valued and respected for who they are as well as for the skills and experiences they bring to our company.

What other people are saying about us:

- **DiversityInc** magazine has ranked Wells Fargo No. 7 on the list of the 2021 Top Companies for People with Disabilities. **DiversityInc** also ranked Wells Fargo No. 25 on the Top 50 Companies for Diversity, No. 17 on the list of Top Companies for Employee Resource Groups, and named among the Top Companies for LGBT employees.
- For the tenth consecutive year, readers of **CAREERS & the disABLED** magazine recognized Wells Fargo as one of 2021's Top 50 Employers of people with disabilities.
- **Equal Opportunity** magazine ranks Wells Fargo No. 15 on the 30th Annual Top 50 Employers 2021 list.

Accommodations and accessibility assistance for team members and job seekers:
wellsfargojobs.com/accessibility

Accessibility at Wells Fargo: wellsfargo.com/about/diversity/accessibility

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Wells Fargo helps strengthen communities through:

Diversity & Inclusion:

Ensure all people feel respected and have equal access to resources and opportunities to succeed.

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