CARNEGIE MELLON - PDF LONG HAUL PAUL WRITER'S CAFÉ SQUEAKY WHEEL CROSSWORD PUZZLE MARKETPLACE

ABILITY



ADA - 36

Americans with Disabilities Act

The Disabled Workforce

RACHEL Shaw

Mandy Horvath

Naked • Peaks • Towers

Interviews with Fiadhnait Canning, Luca Malocco Mulville for *GRACE*

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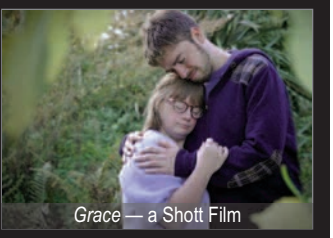




From Kilimanjaro to Naked and Afraid: Mandy Horvath



The Dot Experience



Grace — a Shott Film



ADA 36th Anniversary

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MANAGING EDITOR
Gillian Friedman, MD

MANAGING HEALTH EDITOR
E. Thomas Chappell, MD

HUMOR WRITERS
The Squeaky Wheel
Steven Verdile

EDITORS
Olivia Austin
Gina Healy
Pamela K. Johnson
Lia Martirosyan
Josh Pate, PhD
Maya Sabatello, PhD, JD
Karina Ulrike Sturm
Isabella Wisinger
Jennifer Woodall

HEALTH EDITOR
Larry Goldstein, MD

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS
Ashley Fiolek
Eileen Grubba
Geri Jewell
Regina Hall
Myles Mellor (Crossword Puzzle)
Itto Outini
Paul Pelland (Long Haul Paul)
Edward Timke, PhD

WEB EDITORS
Marge Plasmier
Tanya Thomas
Bob Williams (Interactive Puzzle)

MULTI-MEDIA
Jenny Woodall

GRAPHIC ART / ILLUSTRATION
Katsumi Fukuda
Scott Johnson

PHOTOGRAPHY
Paul Pelland
Nancy Villere
Aly Whitman

TRANSCRIPTIONIST
Sandy Grabowski

TRANSLATOR
Jing Hu
Emily Deng

MARKETING/PROMOTIONS
SOCIAL MEDIA
Lia Martirosyan
Tamay Shannon

ABILITYJOBS.COM
Lori Daly
Vicky Dupree
Marge Plasmier
Megan A. Granata
Casey Mims
Jenny Woodall

EDITORIAL
editorial@abilitymagazine.com

PUBLISHER / EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Chet Cooper

The views expressed in this issue may not be those of *ABILITY Magazine*

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the SQUEAKY WHEEL



Deaf Audience Can Tell Movie Captioner Has Creative Writing Degree



LOS ANGELES — At last night's screening of the movie "Seven Hours," the entirely deaf audience walked out confused — not by the plot of the film, but by the captions, which were clearly written by someone with a creative writing degree.

The job of the movie captioner is to transcribe the dialogue and sound effects of a film for a deaf audience. For "Seven Hours," however, it soon became clear that the captioner wanted to put their MFA to good use. Audience member Darla Keene found many of the captions to be troubling.

"Before the title card even came up, I knew something was off. The production company logos were popping up. The captions said the score was [pensive string quartet, adagio, reminds me of winter.] We hadn't even seen the first scene in the movie yet. Honestly, the captions made 'Seven Hours' feel more like eight or nine hours."

Reports from other audience members were similar. One industry viewer who wished to remain anonymous said some of the captions were poetic, even historical:

"From context clues, I could tell the movie was a dramedy about a father-son road trip where they reconciled their differences. Yet in the scene when their car broke down, the sound effect caption was [floral car exhaust port trumpet, reminiscent of the Romantic Era.] It completely undercut the comedy of the exhaust port being stuffed with cheese. It was like the captioner had a thesaurus and student loan debt to justify. Then some birds flew by for half a second and the captions said [Hark! Meadowlarks! Hear thy bark!] Like, what?"

The climax of the movie generated similar confusion. A mysterious figure from the father and son's past shows up at their hotel room. From the camera work, it's clear that the audience is not supposed to know who this person is. The captions, however, gave it away immediately:

[The on-the-run mother and wife who we believed passed into the afterlife twenty years ago ethereally materializes at the hotel room vestibule, ready to make amends. We will learn about her tragic encounter with drugs in two scenes.] What was supposed to be a tease for a third act twist ended up being an opportunity for the captioner to spoil the turn and smugly include the words "ethereally" and "vestibule".

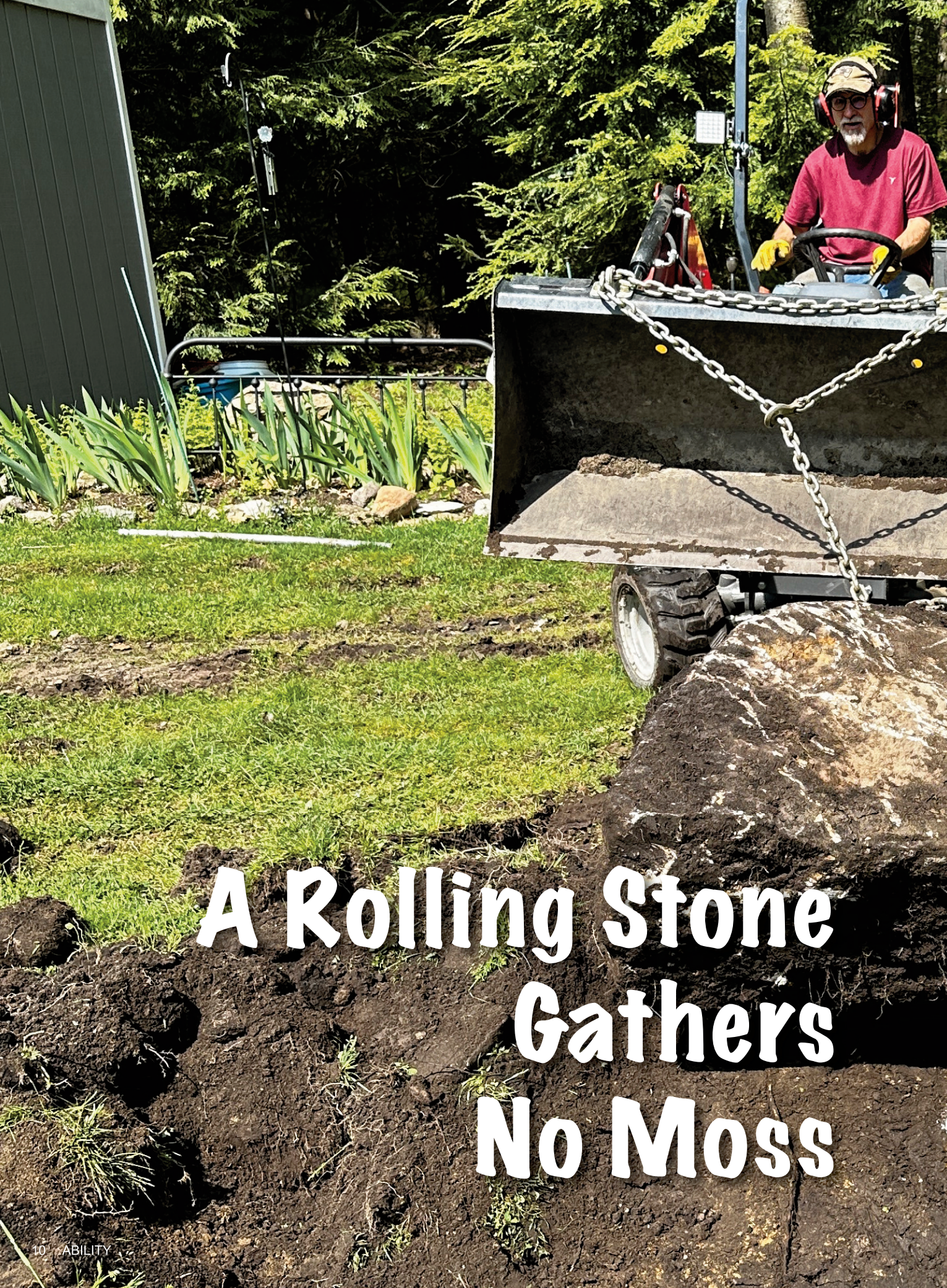
Even the final moments of the movie were miscaptioned. Much of the audience could clearly see via lipreading that father and son's last lines were "I love you". Yet what showed up on screen was a link to an unemployed writer's Substack.

One audience member seemed to enjoy it, however. Wearing head to toe tweed, Pernissus Chance pontificated: "As an English major myself (with a minor in Poetic Babulation,) I found this film quite delightful. I was worried at first, but the breadth of vocabulary and the philosophical captions that were presented provoked my soul. Does anyone have the link to his Substack handy?" ■ ABILITY

by Max Kerwien



Founder Steven Verdile
the-squeaky-wheel.com



A Rolling Stone Gathers No Moss



21 years ago, I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. At the time, I was a divorced Dad, raising two boys on my own while running a small retail business. I had already sold my motorcycles and had decided my passion for riding and competing in long distance rallies would have to wait until my boys were grown up and on their own. I was dating Elin, and had just proposed to her when I got the devastating diagnosis.

I had been dealing with weakness in my hands and arms, loss of dexterity, and a variety of memory issues. My brain's hard drive was still intact, but my ram memory was slowed and unreliable. I got confused easily and had extreme fatigue daily. All of my symptoms got worse when I was warm or overheated.

In addition to the symptoms, I was experiencing from the disease, I was constantly being called into court by my ex-wife who believed the system had wrongly taken away the children from her. The stress of a combative relationship and an endless litigious battle made my disease worse, and I did fear my diagnosis would be weaponized against me. Three years after our divorce, my Ex had lost physical custody. Her behavior got worse and she then lost legal custody, then visitations and eventually her intensifying defiant behavior even lost supervised visitations.

Parental alienation is a devastating tactic and unfortunately, after 43 court hearings, her abusive behavior



This is new — ShortHaulPaul.

never changed and the court eventually issued her a no-contact order with her children. Not the relief I had ever wanted or hoped for, but it was the only choice the court had left after her continued refusal to follow simple orders and her destructive abusive behavior.

As you can imagine, getting through what became a ten-year ordeal after my divorce and dealing my MS diagnosis needed some heavy-duty support and an outlet to help me heal in between legal episodes. Getting married to Elin, gave me not only someone to share the rest of my life with, but a best friend who would be their daily to help me through false accusations, gut-wrenching legal hurdles and life altering decisions I had to make about the welfare of my children. My friends and family supported me through the ordeal as well and finding an attorney who understood my struggle just to be a dad to my children was crucial to my survival.

To escape from the brutal daily drama and with the fear of what my disease progression would do to my future, I began riding motorcycles again. I didn't travel far, but I tried to get on the bike as often as I could to clear my head and balance my anger and my thoughts. An hour here, and hour there was all I could get, but it was just enough. As it did when I was suffering through the brutal year before leaving my first marriage, riding motorcycles helped me find the strength and willpower to continue on.

I call it Motomedicine, and it is indeed a real therapy.

Today, the children are grown, and it has been fifteen years since my last appearance in a courtroom. (Except for those pesky speeding tickets!) Fourteen years ago, I began this adventure to ride a million miles for Multiple Sclerosis. It has been an incredible ride, traveling 700,000 miles across the country reaching out to others, all while still appreciating the level of therapy I still receive each and every mile I travel. Riding is part of my treatment for slowing the progression and depression of living with a chronic disease and every time I climb aboard my motorcycle, it still brings me peace.

As my riding is supported by corporate sponsors and my Patreon members, I now spend most of my riding traveling to events where I present seminars or share my inspiration to others living with challenges in their life. When I am not traveling the country, I try to find projects around the house to keep me occupied and to keep our property in good repair. I was home most of April and May and eight weeks without my Motomedicine proved to be challenging and expensive!

I decided to tackle a landscaping issue we have had since buying this house in 2007. Forty years ago, most builders would bury all the stumps they pulled when clearing the lot somewhere in the back of the property. As the stumps rot, they create cavities and the ground above starts to sink. Sink holes from stump dumps are a

real issue in this part of the country. My stump dump was about twenty feet by thirty feet and every year would sink a bit deeper. It became our favorite place to dump our brush and leaves each autumn, mainly because they would sink, somewhat decompose, and the pile never grew taller! The area grew wider swallowing more and more of the back yard and it was time to fix it the proper way.

After getting a few high quotes to dig up the stumps, truck them away, fill the area with dirt and then grass, I decided I would enlist the help of my oldest brother David and more importantly, his little tractor! I had two giant truck loads of gravel and loam delivered and with the promise of beer and good food, my brother showed up with his machine. Spring was the only time I can do manual labor outdoors, as the heat of the summer wreaks havoc on my MS symptoms.

We worked for four days, digging, pulling up giant logs and stumps. Many had not rotted away as expected because they were below the water table which we found rather quickly. If you dig 2 feet down anywhere in my back yard, you hit water. After debating creating a fish pond or small lake, we refilled the giant swimming pool sized abyss with gravel, packed it down and repeated until the tractor's tires no longer sank. The top was layered with loam and eventually grass seed. With the stump dump area under control, we took on some of the rocks protruding through the grass in the yard. The stones I would hit with the lawnmower every week in the summer turned out to be giant boulders left by the glaciers a million years ago. We worked hard. The tractor couldn't lift the rocks, but we were able to roll or drag them to their final resting place at the edge of my property. So many boulders tuned to icebergs that I had to order another 24 tons of dirt. The last triaxle truck got stuck in the yard creating even more work, and another $200 of grass seed was ordered.

I kept telling my brother that we had to finish up by Wednesday as my first trip in months started in just a couple days and then I would be traveling almost three weeks each month all the way until November. (Just saying this out loud gave me goosebumps!) I did not want to leave this big project unfinished. We raked the last bit of topsoil over the new grass seed and gave it a good soaking with the hose. I thanked my brother and helped him load the tractor on his trailer. Tired, dirty and sore in places I don't reminder belonging to me, we hosed off the dirt for the last time and then I prepared a meal of blackened salmon and we had a few beers. Dave left early the next day for northern Vermont and I was finally able to begin preparing for my trip.

After two long months of being home, tired, physically beat up and financially broke from my yard project, I was certainly ready for another dose of Motomedicine.



Paul and wife, Elin. Or Mrs. LondHaulPaul

A rolling stone gathers no moss, and stumps under water will never rot. ■ ABILITY

Catch up with Longhaulpaul at the these national motorcycle events in 2026.

Americade Rally
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Yamaha Tenere Owner's Rally
Dirt Daze
Wailin Wayne Weekend
Barber Museum Vintage Festival
Biketoberfest
TouraTexas Rally





The Dot Experience

Redefining Global Museum Inclusivity

The American Printing House for the Blind (APH) is preparing to open the doors to The Dot Experience, a facility spanning approximately 28,000 to 30,000 square feet designed to be the world's most inclusive museum. Located at the APH headquarters in Louisville, Kentucky, the initiative marks a significant expansion of the organization's mission, which has served the educational needs of blind and low-vision children since 1885. Jo Haas, the Chief Operating Officer of APH, and Cynthia Torp, the CEO of the design and build firm Solid Light, Inc., are spearheading the project to create a public space that serves as a catalyst for conversations regarding disability, barriers and human-centric storytelling.


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Exhibit gallery view for The Dot Experience

Origin and Inclusive Philosophy

The project originated from a convergence of physical plant needs and a conversation with the American Foun dation for the Blind regarding the stewardship of the Helen Keller Archives. This led to an envisioned model of inclusivity that avoids "othering" visitors. Haas noted that the team started to imagine what the world's most inclusive museum might look like while upholding a company mantra to "welcome everyone".
Haas described the fundamental questions that drove the project's inception: "You know, if we took that idea of making the world a better place for everyone and creating a welcoming museum environment in the spirit of the company, our company sort of mantra of welcome everyone... What would that model museum of inclusivity look like? What would it feel like and how would it work?". Rather than treating accessibility as a secondary feature, the facility is designed from floor to ceiling with the goal of fostering independent, autonomous experiences.

Torp emphasized the rigorous nature of the design process, stating that for far too long, public venues have just done the minimum. "We have also challenged ourselves the whole time to test all our assumptions," Torp said. The design team utilized an inclusive prototyping group to ensure the museum's solutions, including tactile experiences, soundscapes and multisensory exhibits, to communicate effectively to the broadest possible audience. Torp explained that the goal is to provide a "really great example to the world of how to change people's perspectives about blindness and empower individual action toward a world that welcomes everyone".

Exploring the Galleries

The Dot Experience is organized into three primary galleries that explore human identity, history and technological progress. The first gallery, titled "Who We Are," focuses on "individual stories and celebrating individuals who are blind or low vision and their achievements in the world". Narratives are delivered through anchor media pods designed for physical comfort, light levels and acoustic clarity.

Haas explained that these stories provide a "full, well-rounded 360° view of individuals," noting that "we're not shying away from talking about struggles, which we know exist, biases, barriers, all of those things". The selection process for these narratives was highly intentional. "So, the thing that we've attempted to do in the selection of these first-person stories was identify people of all kinds of cross-sections," Haas said, noting they looked beyond gender to include diverse jobs, ages and various ways individuals came to their blindness. Featured individuals include Chris Downey, whose story is featured in a media pod regarding living and working. "Chris Downey is an architect. He went into surgery for a brain tumor as an adult and woke up with no sight," Haas said.

The second gallery houses the Helen Keller Archives, which includes her personal correspondence, scrapbooks and travel artifacts. To ensure these items are accessible, the museum uses tactile replicas mounted in the same orientation as the original objects. Haas described the use of "materiality swatches" developed by the prototyping team to offer the "real material" of an object, such as a

wooden walking stick with inlaid mother of pearl, ensuring visitors understand the textures without information overload.

The third gallery, known as the "Breakthrough Gallery," focuses on innovations that ensure everyone can live equitably. This area features hands-on experience with educational tools APH provides to students across the country. It includes collaborations with the LEGO Foundation for building with Braille Legos and a Microsoft gaming area for inclusive gaming experiences. Visitors can also explore tactile packaging innovations, such as shampoo bottles developed by Procter & Gamble.

Designing for Every Body and Mind

While the museum has a specific focus on blindness and low vision, its commitment to inclusivity encompasses a vast range of human diversity, including neurodiversity and mobility. Haas noted that the design team considered a variety of body types, including individuals of larger or shorter stature. For those with mobility issues, the museum provides a higher standard of access than traditional requirements. "If you're in a wheelchair often, it's called accessible even if you have to come up to it from the side. And in our case, we have ensured equal front access to everything," Haas said.

The facility also addresses neurodiversity by managing cognitive load through intentional design. This includes the provision of a quiet room and careful attention to light levels, sound and the minimization of sound bleed. Haas explained that even Braille served as a "limiter" to prevent overwhelming visitors with too much text, helping to manage cognitive load for all guests.
This inclusive philosophy extends to the retail space, where the team is working to create "the world's most inclusive retail experience". This involves reimagining how items are priced, labeled and organized. Haas noted that the goal is to ensure "everybody knows where everything is and everybody can get access to it," preventing the frustration of searching through unorganized inventory.

Authentic Engagement vs. Fear-Based Simulation

A core philosophy of the museum is the rejection of "blindness simulations" or blindfolds, which Haas noted can inadvertently introduce fear. Haas explained, "we've very intentionally not done that because most of the individuals who we have talked to about that very question really don't want to introduce any more fear into the concept of being blind". She elaborated that for many sighted individuals, blindness is one of the disabilities they fear most, and the museum seeks to avoid reinforcing that perspective.

Instead, the museum fosters understanding through direct engagement with tools and environments. Visitors can explore a cane navigation interactive to "understand how someone who is blind may be using their sense of touch, their sense of sound," touch a piano played by Stevie Wonder and use various magnifier technologies. By experiencing the world as these individuals do—focusing on commonalities and specific ways of interpreting the environment—the museum aims to create a sense of common humanity.

Multiple Layers of Accessibility

To achieve this level of autonomy, the museum relies on a series of overlapping accessibility systems that ensure information is never limited to a single sense. For example, every object that must remain behind glass is accompanied by a tactile replica, meaning nothing is off-limits to the sense of touch. Orientation areas allow visitors to familiarize themselves with the specialized flooring used for navigation and the universal keypad system that operates every multimedia piece throughout the galleries.

Furthering this multisensory approach, every written word in the building includes a Braille companion, and all text is available through text-to-speech technology. Visual elements are not overlooked; every image and artifact is paired with a visual description. Haas emphasized that the ultimate goal is to "welcome everyone into the space in a way that doesn't force someone to rely on somebody else to interpret their experience, but where they can have their own autonomous, independent experience".

A Vision for the Future

The Dot Experience is scheduled to open on October 30, 2026. It joins a roster of prominent Louisville attractions and is expected to draw regional, national and international tourists. Beyond serving as a destination, the project aims to provide a blueprint for other institutions to follow. Haas reflected on the personal impact of the project, noting, "I can tell you today that I truly did not think about inclusion and access in anywhere close to as comprehensive a way as I do now".

By combining inclusive multimedia systems with intentional community consultation, APH and Solid Light hope to spark a sea change in how public spaces accommodate and celebrate the diversity of the human experience. Haas noted that many visitors, after learning about the project, realize "I never really thought about that," highlighting the museum's role in challenging unconscious biases. Torp concluded that this has been "by far the most impactful project that I've worked on with my team," and the team remains dedicated to creating future visitor experiences that "work very hard to accomplish this idea of welcoming everyone". ■ ABILITY

by Gina Velasquez

thedotexperience.org

36 Years of the ADA



Celebrating the Americans with Disabilities Act and its Informational Network





President George H. W. Bush signs into law the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990



A staff member from a regional ADA Center at a community event

A Comprehensive Disability Rights Law

On July 26, 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became law, representing a consequential improvement in civil rights for people with disabilities. The law prohibits discrimination based on disability and guarantees people with disabilities equal opportunity to participate in society.

The ADA also affirmed a national expectation that people with disabilities be able to participate fully in their communities, pursue employment, access public services, patronize businesses, travel, communicate, and live independently.

As we acknowledge the ADA's 36th Anniversary this July, we see its impact in most settings across America. The accessible restroom in a public building, the sign language interpreter at a concert, the reasonable accommodation that allows a qualified employee to keep working, or the flexible testing policy needed by a college student are part of our country thanks to the ADA.
The ADA's influence is so embedded in daily life that many people rarely stop to notice its impact. In some ways, that is the goal. When the ADA is followed, it allows people with disabilities to conduct their lives with the same level of independence as anyone else.

However, to follow the ADA, you have to understand the ADA and its requirements. The ADA's promise has always been dependent on education, research, and practical guidance. That is where the ADA National Network comes in.

The ADA National Network

Created in 1991, the ADA National Network serves as a bridge between the ADA's regulations and the day-to-day decisions made by employers, businesses, schools, governments, transportation providers, architects, community organizations, and people with disabilities, among others. Through ten regional ADA Centers and a knowledge translation center, the Network provides the nation's premier information, guidance, training, and technical assistance to people and organizations navigating their rights and responsibilities under the ADA.

The ADA is broad, and is descriptive, not prescriptive, by design. This means that concepts around the ADA's application are often abstract. to the ADA applies on a case-by-case basis to account for the impact of disability on each person's life or taking into account the on-the-ground realities of each situation. In practice, the way the ADA works in everyday life can vary, depending on a variety of factors. This leads to many questions from people with disabilities and business owners, HR staff, government workers: What are my rights? What are my responsibilities? How can I best implement the law, or what are my options for enforcement?
The ADA National Network's staff includes subject matter experts with decades of combined experience advising the public about the law. These professionals provide

comprehensive answers to the public's questions through a nationwide information hotline (1-800-949-4232), email, social media, in-person consultation, and more. When providing technical assistance, our ADA Specialists often draw on their own lived experience with disability, in addition to their formal training as lawyers, educators, vocational rehabilitation counselors, social scientists, instructional designers, technologists, and more.

Working collaboratively, the ADA Centers of the ADA National Network develop guidance on common ADA topics such as service animals, accessible parking, healthcare accessibility, and so on. Each regional center conducts research on ADA implementation and barriers to implementation, leading to helpful evidence-based information shared with the public. Regions deliver customized training and outreach at local, state, or regional level, tailored to meet the needs of specific audience. That regional presence is one of the ADA National Network's greatest strengths. Locally relevant guidance is needed for communities that differ widely in their geography, resources, and infrastructure. Although the ADA is a national law, its implementation happens locally, in town halls, interviews, medical offices, campuses, board rooms, and beyond. The individual support the ADA National Network provides helps people understand how the law applies to their specific situation and helps them find solutions.

The ADA's Digital Frontier

The next frontier of ADA implementation is increasingly digital. Government services, employment applications, healthcare portals, education platforms, public meetings, emergency broadcasts, and civic participation commonly take place in digital spaces. When those digital spaces are inaccessible, it creates a barrier for a person with a disability as significant as a staircase without a ramp. Navigating digital barriers can cost a person time, privacy, independence, and opportunities.

Digital accessibility is the modern equivalent of the wheelchair ramp. It determines whether people can get where they need to go. The Department of Justice's new rule for digital accessibility makes that reality clear. State and local governments must ensure that web content and mobile apps meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Level AA, with the deadline now extended to April 26, 2027, for public entities with populations of 50,000 or more, and April 26, 2028, for smaller entities and special district governments.

These new enforceable digital standards give entities a practical framework to follow so that people with disabilities can meaningfully access the web. Education and technical assistance from the ADA National Network is an important support for cities as they address this new ADA requirement.



The ADA's Anniversary

As the ADA reaches another anniversary, we are reminded that disability rights are human rights, and that accessibility benefits everyone. Disability is a normal part of the human condition. Some people are born with disabilities. Others acquire them through illness, injury, or aging.

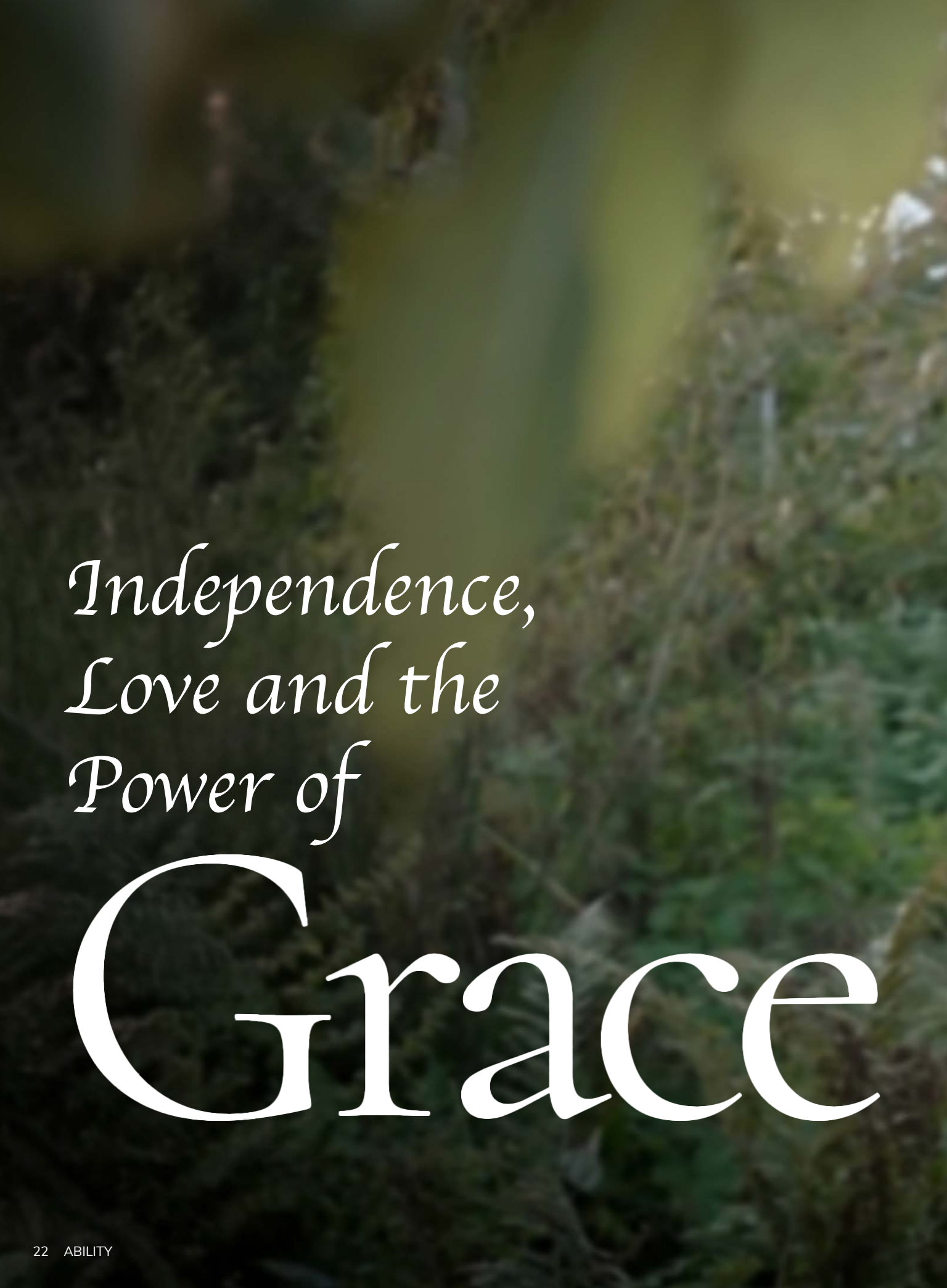
The ADA exists to make sure that everyone, regardless of how they came to experience disability, can maintain independence and economic self-sufficiency with relative ease. The daily practice of implementing the ADA is no small feat and requires support. The ADA National Network is uniquely positioned to help communities understand their ADA rights and responsibilities and offer guidance on practical implementation. People with disabilities can rely on the Network for advice on how to access and enforce their rights.

Thirty-six years after its signing, the ADA still calls the nation toward a simple and powerful standard: Equal opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for people with disabilities. ■ ABILITY

by Emily Shuman, Director of the Rocky Mountain ADA Center

This July, celebrate the ADA with us!
Visit our national event calendar to identify opportunities to celebrate the ADA. You can also find your regional ADA Center to see what ADA Anniversary events are being held in your community.

Do you have an ADA question?
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Independence, Love and the Power of Grace





The award-winning short film, *Grace*, is a coming-of-age drama about the pursuit of independence and the complexities of young love. The film, starring Fiadhnait Canning and Luca Malocco Mulville, captures the delicate balance of navigating the need for autonomy while managing the expectations of those around them. Following its recent success at the RTS (Royal Television Society) Awards, *Grace* has garnered acclaim for its authentic portrayal of characters with intellectual disabilities, offering a perspective that is thought-provoking and emotionally relatable.

ABILITY Magazine's Olivia Austin met via Zoom with the two lead actors and Luca's father, Tony Mulville, to go behind the scenes of the production of *Grace*. The group explored the actors' preparation process, technical challenges and the importance of self-advocacy.

Fiadhnait and Luca provided an intimate look at the dedication required to bring this story to life, while sharing how they managed the similarities and stark differences between their characters' journeys and their own lives.

Olivia Austin: In the film *Grace*, you both had this beautiful dynamic on screen. Did you do a lot of work ahead of time for that?

Luca Malocco Mulville: Well, we did a lot of rehearsals, and a lot of role plays. We had an intimacy coordinator on set to help us feel at ease. The first day when we were filming, it was absolutely so funny because it was the 10th take, and the blinds kept falling down.

Fiadhnait Canning: It's like there was a ghost in the room or something.

Luca: I was scratching my plays, and then Anna looks at me and goes, "Luca, can you please stop? This isn't a horror film."

Olivia: (laughs) So, it sounds like you had a really comfortable environment.

Tony Mulville: I think overall there was a lot of great support within the production team to make Fiadhnait and Luca very comfortable because there were some difficult scenes, obviously. They never wanted them to do a scene that they weren't comfortable with or put them out of their comfort zone. So, they did a lot of work around making sure that Fiadhnait and Luca were comfortable doing each scene.

Luca: Well, Fiadhnait was very lucky because as soon as we finished at the kissing scene, we were absolutely so tired and then somehow my elbow slipped and hit a glass of wine and the glass just barely missed Fiadhnait by that much and I was like, "Sorry!"

Olivia: What kept you motivated through the moments of being tired and the parts of the story that felt especially moving and emotionally heavy to perform?

Luca: When we were waiting to be called in the waiting room, sometimes I might go for a sleep. I actually found a beanbag one day and it took my mom ages to find me. We had like a few snacks. Sometimes, if I was nervous before a shoot, I would go outside for a bit of fresh air.

Olivia: Did you know each other at all before? How was the casting process?

Fiadhnait: Well, we did know each other really, really well. We were in this group together a long, long time ago. We hadn't seen each other since then, and we were there in the casting room and we had to do a double take when we saw each other. I hadn't seen Luca in I don't know how long, until we did the auditioning and the work ourselves and all that. That is one of the reasons why we feel comfortable with one another because we knew each other.

Luca: A few weeks ago, *Grace* won an award.

Olivia: Best film?

Luca: Yeah, for a short film at the RTS (Royal Television Society) Awards. It's like the Oscars and the BAFTAs. It was an amazing night.



Fiadhnait Canning and Luca Malocco Mulville in the film *Grace*

Olivia: Congratulations. What was your favorite part about shooting this film and the process?

Luca: Well, for me, I just liked the whole journey and I liked getting up early and kind of going "Yay, I'm making a movie." And when I would get home, just feeling really proud. For the train scene, we actually went to a place in Ireland called Galway. So, we filmed the whole morning going down to Galway. It was quite funny when we got off the train because we only just got to Galway just to turn around and we were like, "Is this it? Is this Galway?"

Fiadhnait: They just said "Okay, now back on." We're like, "Wait, what? We don't get to have a little scene?"

Olivia: Had you been there before?

Luca: I was there once. There was a nightclub kind of festival for people with intellectual disabilities. I was there for my birthday.

Olivia: How long did the film take to shoot?

Luca: It took about nine days to shoot.

Olivia: Only nine?

Luca: Yeah, we started filming on the 29th of October, and we had a day off because the Dublin Marathon was on. We had couches and we would have lovely food like breakfast rolls.

Tony: Nine days doesn't seem a long time, I suppose, but there was so much planning beforehand. Obviously, it's expensive to make these movies, and they had to take the rehearsals as well. So, there was a lot of planning before they even started to make it.

Olivia: What are your plans coming up? Do you have projects lined up after this?

Luca: Well, I'm going to the Fastnet Film Festival in Cork, and *Grace* is going to be shown in that. It's a 4-hour drive, but I'll probably listen to music. And then, on the way down, I'll watch *Grace*.

Fiadhnait: And see your name on the credits!

Olivia: How does it feel when you go back and watch the film?

Fiadhnait: I say incredible because you see your name up there, It was a good feeling. You're making people proud and making yourself proud by looking at it. We can say we did that. And that's the most awesome feeling.

Olivia: You're telling a story that many people don't get to hear.



Fiadhnait Canningin the film *Grace*

Luca: When I look back on the film, sometimes I kind of go, "Did this actually really happen?" We watched it in my training center–It's a center where you would go in for the day and do courses–and was very funny because sometimes I'm known as Tommy in my center. When I come in the morning, my friends will be like, "'Morning Tommy," "Excuse me, Tommy." And then I'm like, "All right."

We have a relationship class, and we actually watched it and we paused scenes and looked at me and Fiadhnait's facial expressions. In the scene where Grace asked Tommy, "Are you a man or a mouse?" and then Tommy says, "I'm a man." Inside, Tommy is like, "What have I done? Why is Grace against me?"

Olivia: I see you had to do a lot of inner character work. What is this training program?

Luca: It's called St. Michael's House. There's a lot of like training centers around there, there's schools, and it's for people with intellectual disabilities. It's pretty fun.

Tony: It's one of the largest clinical services in Ireland, and they provide whole body and support services clinical medical training. So, Luca attends one of the training centers based in Dublin. They provide almost like a wraparound group of services. They also have schools for the younger children. And then as you move through into adulthood, they morph and merge into more adult services. So, Luca would attend St. Michael's House. From there, Luca attends what we call a hub center. Then Luca would work two days a week out in the community, but he will also check in with the hub as well.

Olivia: I wasn't sure if you were referring to an acting-specific training work.

Tony: No, it's all kinds of training and very much geared towards independent living and the next— ironing, cleaning, washing. Doesn't always work though. (laughs)

Olivia: What projects have you done before that prepared you for *Grace*?

Luca: Well, I was in the Blue Diamond Drama Academy. Which was a drama program for people with intellectual disabilities. That's how I got into acting. Also, when I was younger, I did a lot of shows. I did "*Oliver"* in school, which we did in our local theater. And our first night was a little bit of a disaster because the bench fell on stage. Then, in my school we did "*The Wizard of Oz*." Also, at the Blue Diamond, we did "*A Midsummer Night's Dream,"* the Shakespeare play, and I played Lysander. We also did "*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*." I played Christopher, which is probably the hardest character because Christopher has autism, so I had to play someone who was autistic and thought, "This is so hard," but I still managed.

Olivia: I can see how that would really prepare you for the role of Tommy. It's so emotionally demanding, right?

Luca: Yeah, and during COVID we had written a play about COVID called "*A Stranger's Time*." I don't know if you know "*Doctor Who*," but in the play, we had Doctor Who as a character, which was me, and then we had another character which we made up called Professor Wasp. There was a very funny line in the play. I was trying to be very serious and the main character's mom rang the hospital and was like, "Oh, um, I'm sorry, who am I speaking to?" And then I'm like, "Doctor Who." And she's like, "Dr. What?" (laughs)

Olivia: So, you've done a lot of acting before this. What about you Fiadhnait?

Fiadhnait: Well, this is actually my first acting role, believe it or not. I am with the Morgan agency, and I don't get roles that come in very often, but of course I audition for them. I was in a cooking show a while back, and it turned out to be somewhat of a documentary food thing, and it's really good.



Anna Rodgers creator of short film *Grace*

Olivia: So, there's a little bit of a cooking theme at one point in *Grace* too, right?

Fiadhnait: Yeah, it's kind of funny.

Luca: That was kind of fun because I think you were cutting carrots, and I was just washing the potatoes, but there was one bit which we had to leave out due to time where my character Tommy would look at the cooker at the chicken and then he was like, "Oh, it's done." But then Grace would be like, "No, Tommy, just put it back in."

Fiadhnait: It's like, "It's done." "No, it's not. Look at the pink."

Luca: After the first scene, Fiadhnait's character says "I'm making chicken for Tommy." Margaret, one of the support workers in Grace's house, just turns around, and is like, "Oh, we'll be lucky if he cooks through." And Tommy is kind of looking at Margaret like, "Really, Margaret?"

Olivia: What were your favorite parts of the film?

Luca: I liked every scene, but the scene that I probably found the most tiring was when we were shooting the hotel scene because of the amount of times going up and down those stairs The stairs were creaky and they're also very steep, so you would have to be like really, really quiet.

Fiadhnait: We had to be soft with our feet, but also, we had to get to our marks faster so no sound would be made. Since the floorboards were creaky, we had to keep doing it multiple times. Once we got to our spots, we had to be rooted to the ground like a tree so we didn't make any sound on the floor.

Olivia: That sounds exhausting.

Fiadhnait: Even for your legs because you have to stay stiff because you don't want to make any more sounds. We all want to get through the scene as perfectly and great as we can, but the creakiness really was a small obstacle at that point. We got through eventually.

Olivia: Did it take a lot longer than expected?

Fiadhnait: Definitely.

Luca: And especially when we're filming on the bus because a bus is so rocky.

Fiadhnait: It was cold on the bus too; they didn't have the heater.

Luca: And the train was roasting. I had a shirt and a hoodie on, and I had to leave it on for the scene for continuity. Or when we were outside for the garden scene we were freezing. I had these hand warmers in my costume jacket. But probably the hardest scenes were when we had to laugh in character. I would read on the script where it said 'collapse in laughter' and I would do that, but then we would have to do that scene again.



Fiadhnait Canning and Luca Malocco Mulville in the film *Grace*

Fiadhnait: But with different lenses every time. Like you get the widescreen and the full and everything else. Every time we stopped, I asked "Did I do something wrong?" and they were like "No, it's a technical thing." It was kind of a breath of relief, but not really because we're trying to do this scene. But also each time that happened, you know it's a technical thing. You had to do that a few times.

Olivia: What did making this film mean to each of you?

Luca: Well, for me, it was quite emotional and also quite moving. My character Tommy found it hard to stand up for himself, and sometimes in real life, even I find it hard to stand up for myself. Sometimes I'm afraid of saying no. So, when I played Tommy, I thought, "Okay, this is like me."

Olivia: It really resonated with you, it sounds like.

Luca: Yeah, and it was very tiring, but it was fun though.

Olivia: What about you, Fiadhnait?

Fiadhnait: Well, the short film that we did is really emotional, but I do say it's also thought-provoking for some because everybody has sides and reasons for being on either side of the whole thing surrounding Grace–that's my character I played–And it turned out that all she wanted is to be her own individual, being in a relationship and having that space in the whole thing and enjoying it. So, it's mainly like her trying to get her greater independence, but it does involve people around her.

Olivia: How did it feel to portray this character who strives for her independence?

Fiadhnait: I do think it was a bit emotional for her because it's not hard for me to get independence, but for Grace, she has to do something to prove herself. She's a learner by her voice, so she's learning to attempt to grow. So, it's a growth development that you see in her. And well, growing up is difficult for anyone, but for her, it's her journey.

I'm quite independent-minded myself. So, I know what I want. I know what I'm looking for. If I'm doing something, I'm doing it. But with Grace, the way I resonated with her is that she takes it delicately as she can with everybody else around her, but part of her says, "Why am I being so delicate with everybody? Like, it should be like my decision."

And it turns out it does affect everybody around her, but all she wanted is to get the last word. With me, I have great independence. I go to work. I take busses and there was just no fear at all. With Grace, she's learning, but like it shouldn't stop her from trying new things. She has the feel of an "Okay, if you guys are not going to do it, I'm doing it myself." kind of thing. So, she has a chip on her shoulder.

Olivia: You mentioned this was an emotional role for you; can you talk about that?

Fiadhnait: Well, it really is because the most emotional part is her and her mother. And of course, her and Tommy. You see the emotional part there. It's a lot of growing up on her side. Growing up at any age, it's hard enough already. So, for Grace, you see how she's trying to grow. She's not being pulled back too heavily, but she has it in the back of her mind there are people around her, but she's not really having that stop her. ■ ABILITY

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Millicent Simmonds





Screen, Stage and Sign

Millicent Simmonds was propelled into the global spotlight by her cinematic debut in "Wonderstruck," which led to roles in the "A Quiet Place" franchise, a Broadway performance in "Gray House," and her recent film, "Pretty Lethal." Born and raised in Utah, Simmonds' journey into the arts began in a small drama department at her school for the Deaf, where a middle school stage production sparked a lifelong passion for acting. Today, she is shifting the entertainment landscape toward more authentic representation. Beyond her technical skill in horror and drama, Simmonds is a dedicated advocate for the Deaf community. From collaborating on accessible "Millie" face masks during the pandemic to designing jewelry that supports families learning American Sign Language (ASL), Simmonds is a testament to the idea that deafness is a unique and powerful cultural identity.

In a personal and expansive conversation, *ABILITY Magazine's* Jennifer Woodall, Marge Plasmier, and Chet Cooper sat down with Simmonds via video conference to discuss her life experiences and rapidly evolving career. They explored her diverse acting roles, including the unique physical challenges of performing ballet for her film "Pretty Lethal." Joining the conversation was Simmonds' mother, Emily Simmonds, who served as the ASL interpreter for the session and provided a poignant perspective on the vital importance of family support and language access. The group delved into Simmonds' formative years and the complexities of navigating a hearing-centric industry, while also illuminating the ongoing dialogue surrounding cochlear implants within the Deaf community. Throughout the exchange, Simmonds highlighted her agency in making her own life decisions and how her journey has felt like one of destiny.

Woodall: Can you tell us about your childhood and what got you interested in acting?

Simmonds: So, I was born and raised in Utah, around Salt Lake City. I was kind of a tomboy, played soccer, went to a Deaf school. Around second or third grade, I joined the drama department, and the teacher kind of pulled me in to play Puck in "A Midsummer Night's Dream." They asked me to join. I thought, "Yeah, sure, it would be fun." I fell in love with it, everything theater. Every year I would join the high school and junior high plays till 7th grade. I loved acting with the other kids. It was just a cool experience for me. My first movie, "Wonderstruck," was when it changed for me. I wanted to do this for a living, to see all of the work that went behind the scenes and the crew and just seeing people appreciate my performance. That's the moment I will never forget.

Woodall: I really liked the way "Wonderstruck" showed these two parallel paths on these different timelines and Rose's path, the transition from the silent film era into the talkies.

Simmonds: It's funny because I was in 4th or 5th grade, just really small Deaf school. In my library, I saw the book "Wonderstruck." So, I read the book first, and I remember feeling, oh my gosh, there's a Deaf character. This is a Deaf kid, and that's not something you see. And I remember talking about it with the other kids. So, when the audition came, I was like, no way, this is the same, the movie and the book. When I read the script, it was just so ironic to me and just this kind of felt kismet in time.

Woodall: I noticed a lot of your roles are in the horror and thriller genre. Is that genre like a comfort zone for you?

Simmonds: Yes, I grew up loving horror movies. I would always watch scary movies. Maybe I was a little younger, but they didn't really scare me because I think the sound effects—It didn't affect me as much. So when I would watch it with like my brothers or other kids and they were scared, I'd be like, "Scaredy cat." But I would always read the darker things, and then the transition to horror movies. It's tricky because it's not scary, you know, on set. So, what you're acting with is like a cardboard cutout of the monster or something like that. So it's harder to act. But when you're working with a good team and good actors, you definitely feel that intensity.

Woodall: In "A Quiet Place" 1 and 2, there was a lot of focus on your character's deafness and it was really integral to the plot of the movie. How did you feel about your character's deafness within that world particularly?

Simmonds: I think "A Quiet Place" did a really wonderful job highlighting the Deaf community where we actually use our deafness, the implant, as a power to kind of save everybody. I don't think we've seen that, you know, often. I thought it was so important too, and I felt proud and honored to be able to highlight that. And the Deaf community, I think overall, had a positive reaction to it. I remember having this specific conversation with John (Krasinski), and the two of us were really kind of going in depth. How did you feel being a Deaf child in a hearing family?

But, you know, when the mother dies in the movie and she blames herself because of her deafness and she didn't fit in that family as well, to have that feeling. A lot of that was real life, too, for me and in the Deaf Community. But they switched it to be a positive thing and to know that ASL and the language was a benefit to this family. It was inspiring. Sorry, that was a long answer.

Woodall: I understand that John particularly took care to make sure that you felt accommodated on the set of "A Quiet Place" 1 and 2. Is that a common experience for you across productions, or does accommodation sort of change depending on production?

Simmonds: I think it's a tough answer. It's not perfect,



Millicent Simmonds in *Wonderstruck*

you know, for a Deaf person. Not everybody understands. What we need, immediately, and not everybody has the compassion or empathy. I hear this question a lot, "Does she really need an interpreter? Can't she lip read?" Yes, I do. That's how I communicate. If you want access to me, I do need an interpreter. So, it's not perfect. It's definitely improving and there's progress. That's what we want to see. And recently in the industry, I feel like people are more understanding, more willing to accommodate, but it's not perfect either. So it is a tough question. It's a good question.

Plasmier: Did you find yourself needing to advocate for yourself during the filming?

Simmonds: Yeah, definitely. When interpreter is offset and someone comes to me or, you know, giving me last-minute direction or something like that, I don't feel safe doing stunts, or I didn't understand the situation clearly. Definitely, I would have to say something and stop and go, "I don't understand this." "I don't feel safe. Can we go through this again?" Or demanding an interpreter or a DASL, a Director of ASL. They would say, "Hey, can't you just teach this hearing actor sign?" And me saying, "That's not my job. It's not the same idea. You know, I'm here to do my job, to act." I need someone here that's more educated in the culture and more in the language to be here to teach my co-star the language. So, it is tricky, definitely. Did that answer your question?

Plasmier: Yes, absolutely. What was their response?

Simmonds: It's different. I've had backlash. I've had some people immediately accept it and go, "Yes, okay. We understand, thank you for educating us." So, it really depends on the person and depends on the situation. But I've had both.

Woodall: Recently you were in the movie "Pretty Lethal" with Uma Thurman and a whole cast of girls. Can you talk about the experience of making that movie?

Simmonds: Yes. I never danced before. I was a tomboy. I grew up playing soccer. Was never in that world. So that was really tough. That was a unique challenge for me to start ballet. But they brought us in early to do kind of like a boot camp with all of the girls together.

It was fun. It's bloody, it's fighting, it's right down my alley. So, the girls worked so hard. We were very motivated and Uma was amazing, very serious, very focused, but also very warm, but kind of took us all in. Like, we went out one night just to a restaurant with all of us girls and just had like a girls' night. It was really fun. So it's a beautiful place, the city. It's highly recommended.

Woodall: It was a very girl power movie. A lot of strong female characters in there, and it did look like a lot of fun to make.

Simmonds: Yes, it was definitely tough, you know, but so fun, so satisfying and so fun to have, you know, girls your age. We did have both ballet doubles and stunt dou-



Millicent Simmonds with the facemask she designed

bles, so it was heavy female on this set. But also to have a female director and writer, it was—yeah! I loved it. It couldn't be any better.

Woodall: That's great. From clips of the press tour with the cast, you were all signing with each other. And feedback from the Deaf community, there were really excited that your cast was signing.

Simmonds: They were so cute. They were just really excited to pick it up and they picked up so fast. Every day when we were not filming, Maddie would always come up to me and go, "Okay, test me, test me." We would do that every day. So, signing each other in secret. You know, gossip or… it was just really fun. So, I really appreciated that, like the effort.

Woodall: Can you talk about your experience with your Broadway show "Gray House"?

Simmonds: I did that in 2023. A funny fact. "Pretty Lethal" was supposed to film in 2023, and then I got the offer for "Gray House." So, I had both kind of at the same time, so I didn't know which one to do. And I see this tarot card reader. So, I didn't know what to do and he basically told me the movie would be delayed. Definitely, do this "Gray House". It'll be like one of the best experiences you've ever had. The story is really unique. I loved it. I hadn't been on the stage for very long time. So, it was amazing to kind of reminisce and go back to my roots, you know. The director was incredible. Joe (Mantello) was incredible. The writer was incredible. It was a dream cast, truly. Very cool.

Woodall: Do you approach your roles for the stage and your roles for the screen differently?

Simmonds: I don't think so. Both are the same process. Well, no. Stage, you have more rehearsal, you have more time to really go into the character development of it all. And you go through the play over and over and over again, right? You dissect it, every scene, what makes sense, what doesn't. You just have more time. With film, you have to change quick. You don't always film the scenes in sequence. On stage, you feel more in control of your character. On film, it feels more up to the director, to the producers and their vision, you know? So, it is a little bit different.

Woodall: I know you're really passionate about activism for the Deaf Community as well. Can you tell me about some of the things that you've participated in with that?

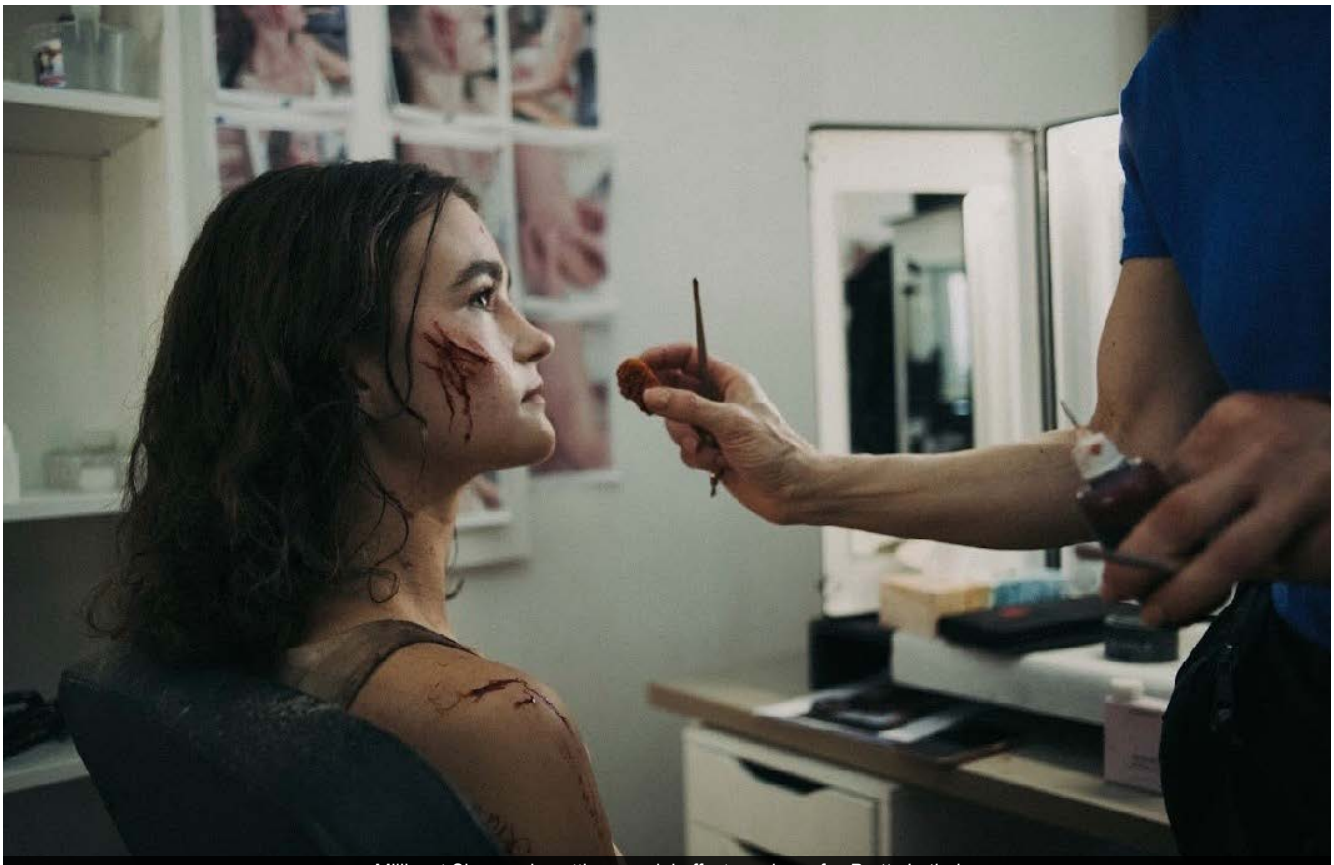
Simmonds: Yes, I was raised in the Deaf community and went to school with—Deaf is obviously a big part of my identity. I'm very proud of my language, of my culture. I never really saw my language on screen. So, after "Wonderstruck" came out, kids would come to me and say, "That was the first time I saw my language on screen." And it really kind of impacted me. Oh my gosh, I have a responsibility here. Things are changing. I wish I had this as a kid. I feel a responsibility. I feel more inspired and more motivated to be visible, to go to schools and give speeches and meet more Deaf people. And I think it's really important to continue to do that. I hope it's not just me, and we're popping up everywhere in the industry. So there's not one way to be deaf, and I hope there's more diversity in just even that, like our community.

Woodall: One thing I found really interesting was the collaboration you did to make the lip reading face masks.

Simmonds: That was really cool. So that was during COVID, obviously, because masks cover your mouth and it really limited access to the Deaf community. It was really tough. You know, hospitals. And even to communicate, there was that barrier. Even I was stuck because I depend a lot on lip reading myself. I remember thinking, how can we make this easier? How can we improve this? I remember reaching out to this company the Ravi Nova, and we collaborated—and I was painting at the time—So, pitched this idea of a Millie mask. And we donated all of the profits to the Deaf Community and gave away a lot of these hearing masks and took them to Deaf schools and hospitals and things like that. So very cool.

Woodall: I read about the Millie ASL Mama necklace collaboration you did with Cut and Clarity.

Simmonds: I think that was 2021, 2022. So, this company Cut and Clarity contacted me, She's based in New York and wanted to come up with a piece of jewelry to help the Deaf community. So, my mom and I are big supporters of this Sky High organization in Utah. When hearing families find out that they have a Deaf child, this organization offers to



Millicent Simmonds getting special effects makeup for *Pretty Lethal*

come into their home, teach the whole family sign, about the community, the culture, things like that.

So, we wanted to come up with a piece of jewelry that we could make—not the normal kind of ASL "I love you," —My first sign was "mom," and I started signing that at, like, 6 months. And so that was the design that I came up with. All of the proceeds went to the Sky High Institute that provides this service for families here in Utah.

Woodall: Do you have any future collaborations planned that are kind of in the activism space currently?

Simmonds: Currently, not at the moment, but I'm always open to it. You know, I'm always open to collaborate with different people. I've been working recently, a lot, on different projects, but I'm always open to collaborating.

Woodall: I saw you have an upcoming horror movie. Are you working on that?

Simmonds: So, right now, that has been delayed to the fall. We're still looking for the rest of the cast, but I'm really excited for that one. It's definitely heavy. It's more dystopian, dark. I don't want to say anymore. I don't want to get in trouble, but it's a little bit different. I'm so excited for that one. Yeah, very creepy.

Woodall: I'm looking forward to it. I always like a good horror movie.

Simmonds: I hope you'll like it.

Woodall: Yes, I'm sure I will.

Plasmier: I saw in your latest movie, you had the hearing aid. Do you have cochlear implants?

Simmonds: I do. I have one.

Plasmier: Do you use that? Is it part of your daily life?

Simmonds: Yes, when I was born, my mom decided she wanted to give me the option, I guess. So, when I didn't want to use it, I was never forced by her to wear it. So, it was always just an option growing up. I feel very lucky to have it. I was not a fan of it when I was younger. I never really wore it, but it kind of changed slowly when I began acting, actually, and started becoming more involved with the hearing world, started listening to music. I love to watch TV with it and hear my family. You know, and my friends' voices.

So, I think the older I got, the more I wanted to communicate with people without an interpreter if I needed to. If I had an emergency or anything—It's always a good backup for me. So, I choose. I can speak a lot with my implant. I do use it every day. But if I wanted to, I could



Millicent Simmonds in makeup for *A Quiet Place*

go without it for days, like on airplanes, right? There's a baby crying. I love to not use it. So, I sleep very well at night.

Plasmier: At what point in your career, or in your life did you start using the cochlear more?

Simmonds: I think it was right after "Wonderstruck." I really started using it more often because growing up, I went to a Deaf school. There was no reason for me to wear it at school. And my family signed at home, so I never needed it. But yeah, when I started working more and around more of the hearing community and with people, I wanted to communicate directly.

I love interpreters, and interpreters are amazing. And they really help, but I wanted to have that personal connection with people without always having to use an interpreter. So, that's when I started using it more, right?

Plasmier: So when you're working in your different movies, do the cast and the crew around you understand that you have a cochlear implant, but you still want an interpreter?

Simmonds: Yes. Most of the time they accept it. Most people accept it really well. Every movie we would have Deaf meetings or Deaf classes on how to engage with a Deaf person. Don't grab them, don't tap when you want to get their attention. Don't wave in their face. Don't look at the interpreter when the Deaf person is talking, look at the Deaf person, you know. So, just how everything works, just an introduction to Deaf people and how to communicate with them. And I've found that the cast and crew always want to pick up a little bit of sign too.

Plasmier: So did you find yourself teaching them?

Simmonds: Yeah, always. Every day. They're always, "Hey, how do you sign action? How do you sign cut? How do you sign food break?" All of the just small dialog signs that they would pick up. Uh, and then we would always have inside jokes, you know, with the crew.

Plasmier: So also like the etiquette of how to speak to you, did you have to teach them that, to like look you in the face when they're talking to you?

Simmonds: Yes, me and the interpreter and Dazzle, the director of ASL. It's a team effort. It's not just me. Yeah, right.

Plasmier: Just as an aside—I know you're really into activism, and you're so good with the community, building people up and being genuinely supportive. We want to share your story with the magazine, of course, but we also have a community of actors with disabilities. I'm not sure if you've heard of abilityE.com—abilityEntertainment

Simmonds: I haven't, I don't think I've heard of them. I'm not familiar.

Plasmier: It's basically a resource for performers with disabilities that casting directors can come to and find authentic talent, actors, etc.

Cooper: This is the first major talent database for performers with disabilities and part of our nonprofit, ABILITY Corps. And so it came about because of Netflix coming to us, asking for some help with authentic casting of a young girl that authentically used a wheelchair for the series "The Healing Powers of Dude." What Marge meant is that we'd love to talk about ways we might work together to promote more actors with disabilities or deafness, in whatever way feels comfortable for you.

The other thing that ABILITY Corps is doing is the first online career fair for job seekers with disabilities. And this is the first and only career fair that's accessible with face-to-face video. It provides live sign language interpreters with a click of a button. It's the only online career fair that has anything like that.

On another note, I had a question about Heather Whitestone. She was Miss America.

Simmonds: Yeah, I'm familiar. I've heard the name.



The Millie ASL Mama Charm

Cooper: We were in Alabama, working with Habitat for Humanity, and happened to meet Heather at a talk she was giving. She was pretty much beaten up by the Deaf community because she spoke in public.
Are you familiar with some of the history of the Deaf Community and cochlear implants and the frustrations that within the community itself, and really strong opinions of the way things should happen. Have you had any pushback with having cochlear?

Simmonds: Definitely. I'm very, very familiar with it. I was born in a hearing family, so that was not the best look for me going into a Deaf school or in the Deaf community. But yes, Deaf people, even like strong Deaf people in the community, have said things about my implant. So I'm very familiar with that. It is definitely a thing, and it's something we have to work on. It's the crab theory. It's just where you have crabs going up the bucket and people pulling them down. I feel like that's very prevalent and very common in the Deaf community. So I'm very aware of it and want to highlight that.

And like I said, you know, there's not one way to be Deaf, and I would like to highlight that as well. So, whether you have hearing aids, whether you grew up oral or signing, there are so many different ways. And it's impossible to have one way. And you can't have one person representing the whole Deaf community. That's why I'm very supportive and vocal on that, is to educate both the Deaf and the hearing communities on that.

Cooper: I've been around the Deaf community for many years and did some work over at Gallaudet University. And, and just—and Noah I. King Jordan, you know, that history of Gallaudet. So it's, it's a struggle. You wish everyone could work together

But I'm glad to hear what you're doing and what you're saying. Marge, do you want to share your experience about how you came into the Deaf community? You want to share that?

Plasmier: My experience? Oh, I have Cochlear as well.

Simmonds: I didn't know that.

Plasmier: Yes, I'm watching captions as well, right? I lost my hearing later in life. It's genetic—My family, my dad, my brother, my sister. I came to ABILITY because I couldn't find employment, and I was looking. It was hard because I didn't know sign language. It was difficult because when you lose your hearing later in life, you try to fake it. So, you fake it for so long and then everything falls apart. But then I came to ABILITY and my hearing just fell off the cliff, and I was using hearing aids that didn't work. Then I got cochlear implants. With Obamacare, I was able to afford cochlear implants. Now, I can hear. I mean, it's, of course, not perfect. I use the captions a lot.

Hearing music was just unbelievable. That's got to be great for you to be able to hear music. I had to read captions with the Cochlear when I first got it turned on. I had to acclimate my brain to the sound.

How did you transition to using Cochlear? I'm really curious about that as being not hearing before. You didn't have anything to base it on. I'm just curious how your brain was able to accommodate that or make the connections.

Simmonds: Wow, that's such a good question. I really don't even know how to explain right now. I don't know how good my hearing is because I don't have anything to compare it to. I was never really hearing. I don't remember hearing, so I will never know. I think it's good enough for me to—I can hear my interpreter speaking right now. I can hear all of you, but I can't identify the voice or who or where it's coming from. Yeah, that's tough for me, the direction. I think it definitely took me years But, right now, I can understand maybe 40-50% of what people are saying. But it also depends on the situation. If it's deep, if it's medical, if it's psychology, I'm out.

If it's small talk, simple, I can. But with TV, no, it's not good for me. I can hear sound, it's like hearing a foreign language on the radio or TV. You can hear, you can turn it up, you can turn it down, you can hear it, but you can't understand. You can't break it down, if that makes sense.

Plasmier: Oh yes.

Simmonds: Um, what about you? I'm just curious about—Tell me more about how your transition—How did you transition that?

Plasmier: Well, I got two (implants) at the same time—



Millicent Simmonds in *A Quiet Place*

which they don't recommend. So, I went from hearing just a tiny, tiny bit from one ear to nothing for a month. And then when it turned on, I could hear voices and everything sounded electronic. So. I had something. I remembered what the sound of things sounded like, but everything sounded like a banjo, the instrument. Voices sounded like banjos. It was twangy. I was fine with that, but my brain started making the connections. I started training myself by reading captions of videos, or I was practicing and practicing and making sure I had the captions going on. So, it just took a lot of time. The music, I pretended I could hear. I heard the noise and I wanted to hear the music, so I would listen to familiar music. But, you know, the song would change and I didn't realize it was a different song. So, it was just a retraining and it slowly, very slowly. Everything started to reconnect. It's not perfect, so I don't hear some sounds and music, but I can hear enough, like the beat.

When you were dancing with the ballet in "Pretty Lethal," how much could you hear? I was curious. Did you have anything that was vibrating on you? Or how were you able to do that?

Simmonds: Same with music. I can't identify what's playing, you know, what instrument. Drums, I can follow the beat. But in ballet, there's not a beat. It's classical music, so there's nothing to keep time. It's flowy, right? So, I can't identify anything.

Nothing. So, I think, it was taking a lot of my body memory, the movements and following the other girls and training your body to move. I couldn't depend on my hearing at all. I had to trust myself with it to go with the flow and kind of watch them. I didn't have the vibration. That didn't help me much because I'm not good with rhythm anyway in the first place. But I completely get what you're saying. It's so interesting.

Plasmier: So did you have to use internal timing, like you knew the flow of your movements were, so, like muscle memory maybe?

Simmonds: Yes, exactly.

Plasmier: That's amazing.

Simmonds: It was tough. I don't know why I signed up for it, but it was worth it. Obviously, it was good, it was fun. But I remember asking so many questions of my dance teacher, how do these dancers follow along to this music? And then realizing they can't disconnect, or they don't disconnect the dance with the music. I don't know how to explain it. Blew my mind. And I was like, "Oh, I need to start all over again and separate the music to the dancing." It was so complex, but we did it. I'm here. I don't know how, but we did it.

Plasmier: Wow. Thank you for sharing that. So everything was one fluid movement for you. You kept moving and moving, so you had to memorize it. And then no

cues outside of you. People hear the music and that is their cue to flow with the music, but you just had your own flow going.

Simmonds: Exactly.

Plasmier: Very cool.

Simmonds: Yes, in the movie it shows Maddie counting 6, 7, 8 in ASL, and that's when I knew to start dancing and moving. And then from there, I definitely had a lot of help with the cast kind of cueing me. When to stop, when to start, you know. But a lot of good support. It was definitely not me, and I had good people behind me.

Plasmier: That's really awesome. I'm glad we went there. Thanks, Chet, for bringing that up.

Cooper: And the interpreter, do you work with her often?

Emily Simmonds: I am Millie's mom, so yes, I work with her.

Plasmier: Hi, Millie's mom.

Simmonds: Hello.

Cooper: That's wonderful.

Woodall: Millie, your mom was the one that learned ASL first, right? And taught the rest of your family?

Simmonds: Yes. 90% of Deaf kids are born to hearing parents. 94% of those don't sign. So, I was very, very lucky to be in the 6%. My mom was motivated to learn sign and was willing to educate herself. And doctors and her own family told her not to sign—that it would slow me down, my education. I'd be limited. But she decided to reach out to the Deaf community here in Utah and ask their experience, and they all said to sign. So, she did. She gave me the option to sign, to speak or whatever I wanted to do. What was important to her was that we had communication and that we had a relationship with no barriers.

She can talk more. (To mom) If you want?

Emily Simmonds: I really want it to be about Millie and your experience. I mean, she really explained it perfectly. In my experience, I grew up with a Deaf aunt that didn't have language, that didn't have the access. So, when I found out Millie was deaf, I felt like I had the advantage of knowing that and "Oh, okay, I do not want my daughter to have the same experience that my aunt did with her family." I felt like that was an advantage to me. So, it really wasn't a question.

I immediately wanted to learn sign and it was not an option for her family to not learn it. We were all going to be able to communicate with this kid. And it was a



Millicent Simmonds

no-brainer for me that ASL was 100% guaranteed. Speech, there was a risk, right? Because you don't know, right? If the implant dies, if she loses it, if she doesn't want to wear it, we have this 100% backup guarantee that we can communicate with her in her native language and in the language that makes sense to her. That to me was—I could go on for days about parents that don't, but why would you not want to communicate and give your child access to their language? It just seemed like a no-brainer to me, and I'm so glad we did it.

And I think every single parent that has a Deaf child should. And I hope parents that see Millie on screen that have a Deaf kid go "Oh, you know, I can sign. And there is nothing wrong and she's not limited and she's brilliant and well-spoken and confident. I want that." So, there we go.

Plasmier: It's an important message for parents.

Simmonds: Definitely. It is. I think so.

Woodall: I'm surprised to hear such a large percentage of parents don't learn ASL. That sounds like such an isolating experience for their children.

Simmonds: It's such a problem in the Deaf community. I remember growing up in my Deaf school, and I remember seeing kids that didn't want to go home because they didn't have access. They didn't have communication at home. They wanted to stay at school. And I remember that really hitting me, going, "Oh my gosh!" not being able to relate. It was crazy. So definitely, it's so important but not to educate just the Deaf Community, but also the hearing community that ASL is a real language. It has history, it has culture, it has community. We need to break through this limited mindset that the hearing community has by doctors, by the government, by audiologists. So, it's a serious problem.

Woodall: You were saying that some people were telling your mom not to learn sign. What's the reasoning behind that?

Simmonds: I think parents want their kids to be the same. I think they don't want their kids to stand out in what they perceive as a negative way. I think that's part of it. I think ASL is different from English.

Emily Simmonds: So, what the reasoning I was told, when I found out she was deaf, was that it would limit her, that she would become lazy and that she should learn how to speak. That was the priority. That was the impression I was given, that speaking was a priority, that this is a hearing world. You're limiting her if she signs.

And all of the evidence, all of the facts that I found, the exact opposite was true. The kids that were exposed to ASL in the beginning actually learned, picked up speech quicker because they had a visual representation. If they had a cat, a picture of a cat, and then they had the sign of a cat, and then they heard cat. They had all of these tools that were supporting. So, for me, I felt like, what is wrong with giving her one more tool? And, you know, she speaks a lot at home. She doesn't speak a lot in public, and that is her prerogative. That's her choice. She can speak and a lot of people really understand her.

But again, it's what her comfort level is. And that's what I wanted to lead with is I wanted to give her every tool in the toolbox to become successful, but also do what she was comfortable with. I knew that ASL would give us that communication and that relationship, that she would be able to communicate with us at home. Giving her the implant, I thought, you know, that is such a hard decision to make for a child at 18 months going, "oh my gosh!" And I get the Deaf Community's real pushback on it, saying you are putting your kid through this invasive surgery without their consent. And I wrestled with that. That was so heart-wrenching for me. But at the same time, I thought, when she's 16 and comes to me and says, "There was a surgery that could have helped me and you decided not to, why?" That would have been harder for me to deal with than her coming to me at 16 going, "Hey, I've got this implant. I don't want to use it. I just want to be deaf." I was still giving her the choice because she still has the choice.
She can take it off and she is deaf. She's off. But when she wants to hear and when she wants to enjoy music and when she's on set and she wants to hear what's going on, she has that choice.

Plasmier: Right.

Emily Simmonds: Not to say we didn't have really hard conversations, especially when she was younger, 8, 9, when she was in Deaf school and the other kids were calling her robot and making fun of her. She came to me and said, "I want this out." Like, "Why did you do this?" And so, we've had a lot of like "come to Jesus" conversations and me explaining this is why I did it.

And again, I think her world has really opened up, and especially with acting. Neither one of us could have foreseen that. I think, looking back now, she uses it way more. But the key is that it was her choice and that it was her decision to go, "Ooh, I want to start using this more." and I want to start communicating with people directly.

So, that was a really long answer for why they told me not to. That was the general consensus, and it still is in the medical community and not in the Deaf community. Outside of the Deaf community, they're getting rid of it in schools and we're losing our funding and Deaf schools are becoming a thing of the past, especially under this administration.

We have to fight back and we have to show more that it's normal. Like in "A Quiet Place," this whole family learned to sign. And I honestly think that was the first time we saw that on film is that a hearing family all learned to sign for a Deaf kid. And to me, that was the biggest movement in this film was like, "Oh my gosh, they've all survived because they were able to communicate this way." What an awesome thing to show.

Woodall: It's really interesting to hear your experience and to see the parallels in "Wonderstruck" with Rose's father bringing in the teacher who wants to force Rose to speak and not sign. It makes sense why you resonated with that story from your personal experiences.

Did you have anything that you wanted to add that we haven't covered today?

Simmonds: I think we covered a lot. Thank you for asking such great questions, and I really appreciate it. And I had fun. I haven't had this depth of conversation in a while, or people that could relate to my situation this much. So, thank you, Marge, for sharing your story and your experience. It's really interesting to hear different people's experiences. ■ ABILITY

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RACHEL SHAW

Getting to Yes in Workplace Accessibility

Employees with disabilities have the right to request reasonable accommodations to perform their jobs. With the recent rise of Long COVID—a series of symptoms that remain after recovering—requests to work from home have surged, often clashing with mandatory return-to-office policies. When employers and employees disagree on these accommodations, the results are often costly litigation, lost productivity and high stress for both parties. Rachel Shaw, president of Shaw HR Consulting and Rachel Shaw, Inc., specializes in resolving these high-stakes workplace conflicts.

ABILITY Magazine's Marge Plasmier and Chet Cooper spoke with Shaw via Zoom to discuss her approach to helping employers make workplaces more accessible. Starting her career shortly after the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed, Shaw has spent decades developing a trademarked protocol to guide an interactive, data-based process that helps employers and employees work together to find functional solutions. She also touched on how her process helps both employers and employees move past emotional reactions to find effective, inclusive outcomes for the workforce.
Marge Plasmier: Tell us a little bit about your background.

Rachel Shaw: Sure. I'm an HR consultant. I have been doing HR since 1996. In 1999, I was hired at a school district to implement their Americans with Disabilities Act program. I did that until 2004 when I broke out and started consulting with another company.

Then in 2011, I started my own company, Shaw HR Consulting, and we focus only on disability compliance. It's a super niche market, but my passion is to create accessible workplaces. I specifically support employers and employees with disabilities to figure out how to implement compliant disability programs.

So, that's really all I do. My bachelor's degree from Brown University is in history. I think I thought it was. I didn't plan on going into this, but kind of naturally got into HR early in my career. Although the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990, in the late '90s, this was still very new. Employers were still figuring it out. It wasn't working very well.

California was just on the brink of modifying their disability law, the Fair Employment and Housing Act, which passed in 2000. So, there's a lot going on, and we were really learning. It gave an opportunity for someone like me to figure out how to add process as a practitioner as opposed to just legal guidance. I'm not an attorney. A lot of legal guidance is out there but not a lot of practical application guidance.

That's what I did. I created a trademark protocol that is used nationally to help employers navigate and comply with their obligations, but with compassion and thoughtfulness. I support them to find more inclusive spaces for people with physical, mental and emotional disabilities.

Chet Cooper: You mentioned school. Is that where you started to see some disparity or some problems around disabilities? Was that the trigger that said there's an area that needs some looking into?

Shaw: I think it was just the time in the late '90s because the ADA had been in place for nine years at that point. We were starting to see a lot of litigation in both the public and private sector. I think the reason that I got this opportunity— I was 24 years old. No one should have given me this responsibility—But the unique thing about public sector, cities, counties and school districts, is that they often will give someone who is untested an opportunity if they're willing.

So, I think that it just gave me an opportunity to get in there and really fix a problem and create programming that didn't exist. I think that there are issues with disability compliance. There are issues with lack of accessibility and lack of inclusion in every workforce. But we see more litigation in public sector and unionized environments. So, there is a reason why a lot of unionized environments, whether they're public sector or private sector, focus more. They care about their culture, but they also are trying to mitigate the legal pitfalls when they don't have compliant programs.

We also saw a lot of that with post-COVID return to work. Return to work is impacting litigation rates in every industry. We definitely are seeing greater issues coming out of public agencies where there's unions and there's more of an understanding of individual rights for workplace protections.

Cooper: Is Long COVID now considered a disability?

Shaw: It is generally considered a disability or what Long COVID produces is clearly disabilities. Long COVID, you're probably not old enough to remember this, but I do. But fibromyalgia—If you've ever heard of



Rachel Shaw Training staff engagement

fibromyalgia, it's sort of in the '80s and '90s. Fibromyalgia is a lot like Long COVID where it's hard to pin down. People are very fatigued. It impacts thinking, physical abilities and stamina.

With fibromyalgia back in the '80s and '90s, a lot of workplaces thought it was not real. It was made up or it was psychosomatic. We're having some of those issues with Long COVID where some employers feel like Long COVID is the same issue when their employees are having it. It's very hard to diagnose and there's not really anything that proves it.

There are all these different things happening, like fatigue, brain fog, stamina issues and physical atrophy. There are all these issues that if someone had a bad case of COVID, doctors are saying is likely related. So, it's hard because it is considered, but how it affects the person is what usually guides to the disability.

So, yes, in every state, if someone approaches their employer regarding Long COVID or a disability that's impacting them, a performance issue, a leave issue or a remote work issue, employers are having to engage with them in the interactive. But one of the struggles is, I think, a lot of employers feel like Long COVID is maybe either not legitimate or not all cases are legitimate. That makes the person that is struggling with this difficult diagnosis feel often very alone and very unsupported.

Cooper: What is happening now with the request to stay remote or be remote in the workforce?

Shaw: So, I'm sure it doesn't surprise you that the reason we're seeing 40% to 50% increases in disability claims nationally, not just in the states that touch an ocean, but nationally. A big driver of that is remote work is accommodation requests. Because an employer can decide how they want work done, they can decide they want everyone in the office from 8 to 5 or they can decide they want hybrid.

Employers get to decide how the work is performed. Sometimes that's driven by clients. You can't have remote workers if you're a barista. When an employer has made a decision about how they want the work performed, whether they want it in person, hybrid, an office culture or a cubicle culture, an employer can dictate that.
But where they lose power over dictating that is when someone has a qualified disability, a disability that entitles them to accommodation. So, what happens is that, let's say, you tell a whole work group everyone's returning to the office full-time or hybrid. There are some employees who don't want to return to office.

Some of them just quit because they can and they have talent, they have a big bank account or they're close to retirement. There's a group that have disabilities, legiti-

mate disabilities, that are much easier managed. Their life is better, their health is better and their longevity is increased if they work remotely or have more of a hybrid.

Then there's, probably in most work groups, a group of people who don't want to come back to the office. They don't want to quit. They may not have the ability to find equal employment or equal pay somewhere else. Maybe they're asking for a disability accommodation and maybe they don't need it. There's always been that. There's always been employees asking for stuff they don't need, disabled or not.

One of the struggles employers have is you have 100 employees saying they medically can't return to the office. In that 100, if you're going to say yes to everyone, you're done. But if an employer doesn't want to say yes to everyone who asks, they have to engage with each of those people to determine if you really have a covered disability. Is it temporary or permanent? Can you do your whole job remotely? If yes, is there an alternative? If not, you got to let them work remotely.

That is the disability interactive process obligation for employers in the United States. It is time-consuming and it can be very frustrating. Some employers think that people are asking to work remotely medically but they actually don't medically need to work remotely. They're asking for it because they believe it'll give them leverage or power against the employer's decision of how they want the work performed.

I don't know that that's true in every workplace, but we work in a lot of workplaces where there is a subgroup of people who can work in person, but they don't want to. So, they're going to try to use a law or a right. What that does sometimes is cause people who legitimately need that to look like they're also maybe not in need. That's where we see a lot of conflict and a lot of litigation.

Cooper: You mentioned earlier you have kind of a format of giving some advice to employers about how to deal with this?

Shaw: So, we train employers on what is basically a trademark process. We consider it when they are triggered. Under the law, there are three ways an employer gets triggered: request, perception or knowledge of disability. When that happens, we train on two key conversations, four pieces of paper and one meeting.

We use a hallway protocol or a hallway visual. The idea that when someone triggers you under the ADA or your respective state law, like the Fair Employment and Housing Act (of California) or the Massachusetts general law, the employer has to have an intro conversation to understand the request. They have to give employees a similar process. The decision might not be the same, but employers have to give employees a similar process to evaluate the request if they're not going to say yes to everyone.

So, we train on a hallway protocol. You get triggered and you have a foyer conversation. Are we in the right spot? After you determine yes, we've been triggered, whether we believe them or not or whether we think there's an alternative accommodation we prefer, we're going to get into the disability interactive process. This is a legal obligation.

It's a four-step or four-door process. Those steps are to gather very clear data. One of the things that happens is, oftentimes, you don't have really good data and that allows employers to make assumptions. That can be disproven in litigation. It also allows employers to make things up. Let's say somebody has a work-from-home request. Why? An employer might think it's because they live two hours away or it's because they have a 1-year-old child. The employer can make a lot up about why that's being asked for.

So, you have to talk to the employee. Then you get to ask the healthcare provider or their doctor why they need to work remote. That's an accommodation. Why? What's the restrictions and what's the limitations that makes their body medically better or medically only able to do this work remotely? The employer has the right to get that data, but they have to ask for it. So, we teach employers how to get the good data.

The other three steps are to communicate the data that you receive, research accommodations, find yeses, meet with the employee and then implement. That protocol allows employers to take what is often emotional, sometimes difficult and complex. These are high-stakes issues for employees with disabilities and high-stakes issues for employers.

It allows them to remove some of the emotion and get into a four-step process that guides them through making a decision based on data. It allows us to best protect our organizations from letting things like bias, preference or perceived value of an employee seep into our decision-making, which always gets us in trouble.

Cooper: Is there any problem with HIPAA when you're asking about medical issues?

Shaw: Great question. No, because under federal and state disability laws, employers are allowed to ask for what's considered reasonable medical documentation confirming they have a covered disability and clarifying their functional limitations and duration. We're not allowed to ask what diagnosis they have or what specific medication they are on. That's considered PHI, or protected health information, and that's what an employer is not allowed to receive and doctors are not allowed to give to us.

At what I call door number one, or step number one, we give clients sample questionnaires that are already compliant. We're very clear that we're not asking. We don't need to know if they have lupus. We need to understand what it is their body can't do, like lifting, pushing, carrying, exposure or sunlight. So, we ask very targeted questions. It's very clear that we're trying to understand what it is that the body or mind cannot do or needs to be supported to do differently.

That allows the employer and the employee to then have an interactive discussion. Okay, you're indicating you want to work remotely. That is not a preference that we have perhaps as an employer. So, we want to support you alternatively. Here's what we can do to make sure that you don't violate any of these restrictions.

A great example is about mobility. I have four clients right now where, from the time you park in the parking structure and you get to the front door, it's like half a mile. Those employees have mobility issues and they cannot walk more than five minutes. Those employers got the doctor to clarify the work from home is because they cannot be on their feet standing or walking more than five minutes at a time.

So, the employer purchased these four people scooters so they can go from the parking structure where they store them and they're plugged in overnight. They can then drive that scooter into the office and use it in the office or not. They found a way to mitigate and to implement an alternative. But there's no HIPAA because we're not asking why they can't walk for five minutes. That would be a violation of medical privacy.

Cooper: That's a great example.

Shaw: So, what I will tell you is the problem with that option. I can solve almost everything with an alternative accommodation to remote work. If an employee does not want that alternative accommodation, there's conflict and there are issues. Very rarely when we offer someone an alternative to fully remote work are they happy.

But that's what the law allows. If an employer doesn't care and they're fine with remote work, then I tell them to approve everybody. You don't need to hire me and you don't need your HR team to be engaged. But when employers care deeply about having people on site partially, then finding alternatives usually exists. We just have to get to the what their body or their mind can't do. Almost every time we can find an alternative.

Cooper: And what are the rights? Are the rights different per state about firing people for not following what the company rules are? Like everybody has to come back to work.

Shaw: So, they're pretty much the same nationally for disability. If you're disabled, there are differences in terms of "right to work" states for just general things. Let's say, for example, I want all reporters to work in office every single day and you're not disabled. You're like "I don't want to do it." If you say no, then an employer has rights to decide they are firing you. Once you say "I'm disabled and I can't do it.", everyone's pretty much covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Now, there are states, mostly states that border an ocean, that have higher obligations. But generally, it's the same. If an employee is asking for an accommodation, they have a medical need and there is no alternative like no scooter option, the employer cannot fire them if they can do their entire job remotely.

The employer has to accommodate them. They're not allowed to say this is our preference, it's better for our culture or it's better for collaboration. They can't have a reason like that. There has to be a part of your job that you can't do. If you are meeting clients who walk in the front door for four hours a day and you're walking them to conference rooms, you can't do that if you're home. That would be a reason for the employer to say they wouldn't be terminated for violating a return-to-work policy, but the employer would say we can't keep you in your job because you can't do your full job remotely and we can't find an alternative to keep you in the office. So, we're going to look and see if there's a vacant non-promotional alternative job that could let you work remotely. If not, they would be medically separated or medically retired if they're one of the few companies that still have pensions.

That's the process. But if it's not a disability-related matter, employers get to make decisions about how they want work to be performed. If it's not a protected reason that the person can't do it, the employer gets to say, then, you don't get to work for me anymore. That's why we're seeing employees raise their hands. Many of them because they need it and some of them maybe because they don't.

It stops the employer's unilateral power to define how work is performed when someone has a protected class like religion or disability. That's where the employee takes some of that power back. The employer has to then bend and consider if they can let them fully work remote if there's not an alternative and they have medical need and they can do their job.

Cooper: Yeah, and therein lies the issue. How do you medically identify Long COVID?

Shaw: What I would say is Long COVID is hard. An employee can say I worked in person before because I didn't have Long COVID and now I have Long COVID and that's why I need to stay home. I've worked with companies where they have about 100,000 employees who have asked for remote work and there are very few that are Long COVID.



Rachel Shaw explains longterm accommodations

What we're getting that's even more frustrating is someone's had a condition their whole life. They had the same condition in 2019 and they never asked to work remote and they never had accommodations. Then they were sent home for a year or two or three. They work from home and then they got called back and now they're saying this disability I've had for 25 years means I need to work remote.

Employers are losing their minds. So, here's what I say to employers. Is there fraud in your workplace? Maybe. There's fraud in everything. But here's what you have to understand. Before COVID in a lot of workplaces, it didn't even occur to people that they could work remotely. The technology wasn't there and we didn't have different platforms that made it easier. Everything was so different.

Someone might have had a disability where they dragged themselves to work every day. When they got to Friday at 5 o'clock and they got on their public transit to go home, they slept all weekend to survive and get up Monday morning to have a job and have medical care. When they went home for three years, they told me, "Rachel, I have never in my life thought I would make it to 65, let alone would I retire, let alone would I be able to go out on the weekend and have a life. My whole life changed when I wasn't dragging myself to work every day physically."

So, I remind clients that just because someone didn't ask for something before COVID, it's because they hadn't lived the experience. For some chronic medical conditions that you can't see, people will only ask for accommodations when they either absolutely have to or when they realize their life could be substantially better. So, there is a portion of the workplace that is absolutely benefiting a disabled part of your workforce that didn't ask for this before because they didn't know it was available.

You have to keep that in your brain and in your heart because if not, what employers get is really cranky. Everyone's lying and no one wants to come back. They're taking away my power as an employer to dictate how the work is done. There are absolutely people in every workplace I've worked in that are exaggerating their need or lying.

But is that one or two people or is that the whole group? That's where employers have to say they're not psychic. So, that's where you have to stop feeling and you have to get into process. Whether you adopt my four-step pro-

cess or you create one of your own, you have to get out of the feeling because feeling is going to get you in trouble.

Feeling causes us to treat people differently. You have to get into process. You've got to figure out how to get out of your feeling mind and into your data mind. I don't care what industry you're in. I've talked to people making $10 million a year who are just as emotional and they're about to make an emotional decision.

I have to stop them. I have to say you have to calm down. You don't want to get a $10 million lawsuit and you also don't want to impact your culture. There are people that need this and you need to go through the process. There are people you're going to find out that there are alternatives. You're going to get them a wheelchair, a closer parking space or their own office so they don't get exposed to other people who are sick.

You're going to find all these great ways to support people, whether they like it or not. Then you're going to find some people who are misusing and abusing the system and you'll deal with it. I have a client who's fired some people because they found that they fabricated medicals or went to an inappropriate provider. Within that process, you'll find out.

I had a client who had 1,000 requests for remote work. If I had managed 1,000 requests for them, they would have spent a lot of money. I said we're going to take the oldest requests first and we're going to start working through them. By the time we got through the first five requests where we said we need your doctor to give us functional limitations, we went from 1,000 requests to 150 requests in two weeks. I healed 850 people right now. Some of those people realized it wasn't worth the effort.

Within that 150 people, there were about 80 people who absolutely needed this and they got it. They medically needed it. Then there were people that we found a lot of alternatives for that didn't like it and there are a lot of people that opted out. So, process is so important because not only does it treat people similarly, but process also ensures that people think twice about if they really need it. That's important because you don't want to be managing 1,000 people if you don't have 1,000 people who need it.

But you have to be consistent. This is why employers are getting sued and they're losing because they're treating people differently. They do not have a process and they treat every request for accommodation like they're shocked that it's happening instead of it's a cost of doing business. Every employer is going to have accommodation requests and it doesn't matter what it is. It's the same process where you gather data and you seek out yeses.

Your whole focus is how to support them to keep working for you, not to fire them because you're mad that they filed an accommodation request. It's all about intent and it's using that data to guide decision-making every single time, whether they are your best or your worst employee. That is hard for employers.

Plasmier: So, do you find that the employers that you work with for the most part are prepared to receive the accommodation request? It seems like something some companies would be familiar with already.

Shaw: I find that most companies are unprepared because they don't have standard process. They know how to manage leave request and they know how to manage family medical leave. But I find that most employers do not have a standard process. So, they either decentralize and let supervisors get involved, which is never a good idea. Supervisors are really good at what they supervise, but they're not really good at consistent, legal, compliant programming.

In my trainings, I give away my process. I say here, here are the four steps and here are the sample documents. Use it. Oftentimes—and part of it is these issues are very scary—A lot of times I find employers will bring in attorneys, which are great in terms of analyzing legal analysis and risk, but they're not process-focused.

The solution isn't getting smarter. The solution is using a very systematic program or process to gather data so the answer is clear to both parties. The biggest issue that I find in HR is we were trained by the person before us and that person may or may not be the best person to be training us.

So, a lot of our business is training because very good people who care deeply about doing the work well are very poorly trained in this. You've been to trainings or conferences and most of them are awful. So, part of what we do is really try to figure out how to get people to learn and to be trained, which is why we have a certification program.

We have onsite training because you have to train people and they're not trained. They don't know how to do it and they don't have programming. They're trying to make it logical. You can't think your way out of this and no one's smart enough. It's so individual that you have to get to the data point. How you get data, that's how you start figuring out what you can actually accommodate and not.

Plasmier: So, you bring the programs within these companies. Do you work on those case-by-case, for example the 150-people?

Shaw: We have two companies. One of our companies, Shaw HR Consulting, clients will bring to us individual, very difficult cases. So, we will actually help them do the hallway or do the protocol on individual cases. That's one part.

99% of the work I do is I go into organizations, I audit their current programs and I implement fixes where they need it or sometimes complete overhauls. I work with their team. When you have a smaller company, it probably makes sense to outsource 5 to 20 files a year. But when I'm working with my big Fortune 100, you need me to get in there and help build the programming, which is easy, but then helping the team build capacity. It's the repetition and it's the comfort of knowing that they're learning these tools and they're practicing these four steps. I build these teams and then I go away. We do spot training or they'll come out. We could have never foreseen 2026 in 2019. The stuff that employers are dealing with, the volume of requests, the volume of leave, the remote work requests and the wonky requests for accommodation, we could have never envisioned this before COVID.

Rachel Shaw Inc. is just me working with—I take on anywhere from 4 to 10 projects a year where I help big, large companies do this right. They might have 1,000 disability accommodation files they're managing and they need to figure out how to do that themselves. Your internal HR teams have to know how to do this stuff.

Plasmier: Do they use other resources for those accommodations like JAN, Job Accommodation Network?

Shaw: They do. I think JAN is actually the most helpful for someone who has a disability trying to figure out how to ask for what they need. The problem with the Job Accommodation Network is that, first of all, it's mostly listed by disability name. If we're doing it right in HR, I don't know your disability name.

Also, there's a million and a half ways to accommodate someone. I have someone with diabetes right now and they have asked to work fully remote because they said it's easier if they have their medication in their refrigerator at home instead of in the office. Well, sure, that's definitely a possibility. But isn't another possibility that you bring in a lunch bag with an ice block or you have a refrigerator in your office?

So, that's one of the struggles employers have. Employers have preferences and remote work is a good example. Employers who care about hybrid or in-person work care deeply about it. They're allowed to. But when you get an employee asking to work remotely, they have passion behind why they want that.

The employer really needs to understand what are the physical limitations. You're never going to convince that employee who wants remote work that I need you in the office. So, you're going to have to show them "I can accommodate you differently and I know you don't want it." If you want to decline the accommodation I'm offering you, then you're going to quit or we will not accommodate you. You're going to have to really fight for understanding the limits, otherwise it's just super risky.

Plasmier: You said that the employee is asking for a reasonable accommodation, they don't disclose their disability.

Shaw: Correct. They're never required to and they shouldn't. Employers aren't allowed to ask.

Plasmier: Right, but do the employees share?

Shaw: What I find is employees will often do that. Especially when they have invisible disabilities you cannot see, they want you to believe them. What an employer needs to do is they have to redact the medical if it says the disability. They have to tell the employee please don't share that with me. I want to understand functional limitations, work restrictions or leave.

Employers often want to know what's wrong with you because they think that if they understood the disability name, it would be easier. That's not this process. This process says you don't. Because all of us could have lupus or any disability name and it's going to affect every single person differently. Our age, underlying medical conditions and access to medical care.

Then there's just personality. I had a guy who got a paper cut and he wanted to take 12 weeks off. I had a gal that was going through chemotherapy and she's working every single day. People are different. So, what employers need to understand is that you don't want to know the diagnosis name. It doesn't help you and it can actually make your brain do bad things.

You need to protect your organization because your brain is going to want to take shortcuts. In no state is an employer allowed to ask for diagnosis, condition or treatment. We don't need it and we need to protect our organizations from knowing it.

Plasmier: So, the employers redact it?

Shaw: And if a doctor provides it, it's technically a HIPAA violation on the doctor. The doctor's not allowed to share that. We should be redacting it because it's technically not information we're allowed to have. If we don't redact it and we use it out loud, we then have violated medical privacy rights. So, we have to be careful. It's pretty rare that an employee sues their employer for disclosing a disability unless they don't get hired because of it. But what employers need to protect themselves from is our brains. Our brains want to take shortcuts. If someone has Long COVID and I think Long COVID is fake, I'm going to be like, "Oh, here we go again." We have to protect ourselves from what even the most trained HR person and our supervisors want to do when they hear a disability. I have clients who will say to me that their mom was diagnosed with schizophrenia and


Rachel Shaw

they cannot do this file because they cannot treat this person just as a medical condition. They'll outsource that because they're aware of it.
So, that's why employers don't want a diagnosis. Supervisors don't want it because they'll use it inappropriately sometimes, and that'll get us in trouble. I always tell women don't ever walk in an interview and say you're pregnant or trying to get pregnant. You'll never get hired. There's just things you shouldn't say because people can't help but use that information against you or inappropriately using it to be a mother or a father to someone. None of that's good for a workplace.
Plasmier: Makes a lot of sense. Chet?

Cooper: Yeah, but you do talk about who you voted for, right?

Shaw: (laughs) Right, exactly, and what religion I am or am not. Yeah.

Plasmier: So, you said that disability claims are up 40 to 50%?

Shaw: So, the numbers for 2025 say that filings for disability discrimination are up 40 to 50%. It's at 46%. That's just employees who are suing through the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission process because they believe they've been discriminated against based on their disability status.

A lot of that is remote work stuff. In California, those numbers are even higher. We're also seeing those numbers higher in states where they've had return to work. You have white-collar office workers where return-to-work is more arbitrary. Some people are going through the EEOC and they're also doing civil claims. In places like California, they want to go right to a lawsuit because they feel like there's money in it. Or they feel like they had to leave a job because they didn't get the flexibility that they needed medically.

Plasmier: Do you have any idea what the outcome of those claims?

Shaw: There are a lot of filings. So, we're seeing a mix. In the middle of the country, we're seeing a lot of the circuit courts. As long as the employer did a process and they can identify that the person couldn't do their full job, we're seeing some good results for employers. But it's expensive and time-consuming.

In the more liberal states, we're seeing straight to litigation and we're seeing a lot of negative judgments against employers. Especially where employers want to be very aggressive, but their closets aren't clean. They want to be aggressive, for example "we know Chet's a liar and he's bad. So, we're denying him, but Marge we said yes to because we believe her and she's valuable." That discrepancy always comes up.

Cooper: Not sure I liked the example (laughter). It seems like you're kind of an arbitrator in a sense because your different clients are opposed to each other. You have clients that are employees that are feeling discriminated against and then you have employers that feel like people are trying to abuse the jobs. Do you ever find yourself in a strange position to where you have both employee and employer coming to you?

Shaw: Yes. So, when employers hire me, you hire me to keep you safe, not to like me. You hire me to keep you safe, not to give you the answer you want. Companies want that. Ultimately, they need to keep their shareholders happy and they want to keep their culture intact.
So, a lot of times it's talking an employer through and reminding them when there are higher stakes or more emotional issues. For employees, I'm never going to convince an employee. We always say that accommodation requests are like peach pies. Imagine a doctor writing that Rachel needs a peach pie, a corner office and work from home. Any solution is an accommodation. That's a peach pie.

The law says employers shouldn't be getting peach pies from doctors. They should be getting ingredients, like peaches, flour, butter and sugar. So, the goal is an employee walks in and says I need a peach pie. That's the only thing that will fit and will work. They're coming in positional because they know their disability or they know what they want.

Through process, we need ingredients. We're going to look at those ingredients and maybe the outcome will be a peach pie, but maybe the outcome will be peach focaccia or peach pasta. In my interactive process hallway protocol, it's the idea that I have imperfect humans who I have to walk through.

Employees may never have heard of the ADA before. They don't understand that the employer has a right to implement alternative effective accommodations or that they have the right to challenge a medical if they think that it may not be appropriate. So, I have to help educate and inform. I have to remind that employee that we're going to find out how to support you there. But it may not be the peach pie you asked for.

I always say at my consulting business, we always think of ourselves as the big sister. We're going to tell you what you need to hear and we're going to be honest and fully transparent. Is it always perfect? No, because some people thought they were hiring me to help them fire people. They become very aware very quickly that that's not what I do. So, we part ways.

I have employees that come in and it doesn't matter what. If they don't get their peach pie, they're suing their employer. This whole process is about protecting everyone in that process. If you do it right, it's going to be much less painful.

Cooper: So, the employee typically won't have money to pay for consulting. How do you deal with that difference between the two clients that you have?

Shaw: So, we never bill. Our clients are always both. They're our dual client because our real job is compliance with these disability laws. Who pays us is often the employer or it's the insurance company, or it could be one of the attorneys. But the obligation to engage in the interactive process is the employer's obligation. So, typically, the employer is ultimately paying for it.
Cooper: So, an employee doesn't come to you per se?

Shaw: Yes. Now we do some mediation work, but rarely. If the employee comes to us, usually it's either through their union or their union gets us brought in. Sometimes we've done free work with people because they've done a Google search. You're right, they can't afford us. If they need support and there's not a conflict, we will help them.

But usually, the employer will then pay because it's in their best interest. You don't sue the employee. The employee sues the employer if they don't do it well. My job is to keep an employer from being sued because we create understanding through data and process. Understanding is what never happens when an employer walks in with the power. They don't use a process to gather data. Data lowers the power differential because then we're using information as opposed to "I interpret work from home to be not legitimate." An employer has all this power and that power is more equitable when they bring in data. They're lowering the risk and the impact on their culture, their reputation and their goodwill when they have a bad outcome.

Plasmier: It makes a lot of sense for the employers to have a system in place that is based on factual information.

Shaw: I think what you guys get really well is that you've got to want to find a yes. You've got to want to figure out how do I keep this person working? How do I find a way to solve the disability issue so that they're still working for us, maybe in a different way.
I think what happens so often is employers. These are sometimes already difficult situations and difficult relationships. You really have to protect your organization from making that bad decision. Part of that data gathering is medical and part of it's knowing what's out there. There's a lot of yeses. There's a lot of technology, like a foot mouse. It's so simple and yet it mitigates so many issues.

There's the mouthguard mouse called the Augmental. It's the idea that you've got a mouthguard and it is your entire mouth mouse. You click with head movements and your tongue. You don't need hands anymore to do a computer. So, there's so many great yeses out there, but you got to want to find one.

Cooper: What was that called?

Shaw: It's called a Augmental MouthPad. I found it because I had a client who couldn't use a foot mouse and she was about to be fired because her hands have so low usage. The problem is voice-to-text software doesn't work with the technology her company uses.

I found this company and they mostly do this for people who can't even move their necks. It's a mouthguard and you wear it. If you can move your head, that's how it moves it and you can click in and out. It allows people to use all this super proprietary software that you usually can't use voice-to-text on.

Cooper: We did a story on this years ago. I love the fact that you seem to be compassionate on both sides.
Shaw: I think what's so important is how little time I spend on what used to be such a big issue, like accessibility, wheelchair ramps, vision impairments and hearing impairment accommodations. When I get something about accessibility, there's so much out there.

I had a client in an old building. They can't retrofit it and they can't put an elevator in. This woman had MS and couldn't walk anymore. She had to work on the second floor because the first floor was like the jail of the county. They were able to look at ways where she had two wheelchairs and she used this little stair lift to get her

upstairs. There's always a solution and not expensive. I always say it's budget dust. Whatever you're worrying about it costing $10,000, that's budget dust for you. Accommodations are usually so cheap. They're under $300, typically, and most of my accommodations are free. This is just cheap stuff that keeps someone working for 10 or 20 years.

That's where I talk to employers about how you kind of want to find a yes. If you're going into this wanting to make a supervisor happy about giving them a no, then you're going to find the no. You've got to want to find a yes regardless of if that person deserves it or not. That's a mindset.

I need to change hearts and minds and how you approach the work. If it's a no, it's a no. I've fired a lot of people who have disabilities. The difference is they get it and you treat them with dignity. We help them transition or move on. Not everyone gets a yes, especially in physical demanding jobs.

Cooper: I love the problem-solving that's in your psyche.

Shaw: I love what I do because all I'm trying to do is to create more space for people who typically are not given space. In my next five years we're going to be talking so much about neurodiversity. I'm so excited about it. We're getting these kids that are now grown-ups in a workplace that have significant neurodiversity or autistic spectrum disorders and employers don't know how to deal with it. We're going to help these employers become more inclusive workplaces. I feel super lucky to do it.

Plasmier: I'm curious about the accommodations. Are you seeing a lot of neurodivergent people here or is that kind of on the horizon for you?

Shaw: We're starting to see enough cases where every employer is having a couple. Some people say it's the TikTok generation where you're diagnosing yourself on TikTok. There are some adult diagnoses happening because there's less stigma.

What I'm seeing is this new generation entering into the workplace. We're seeing folks that have some significant communication and thinking differences. We've seen this forever with physical differences, but we're starting to see it with thinking differences. I think in 10 years, autism will be discussed very differently.

It's such a wide spectrum. For many people with autism, it's a superpower. These are highly intelligent people who may have thinking and communication differences and they are hugely conflicting with the workplace. Standard norms like talking over the water cooler are for some folks not there and it's causing a lot of conflict.

Neurotypical people expect the neurodiverse people to change for them. I love that I'm going to get in there and say we're all going to change. We're going to learn how to communicate differently. We're going to learn how to accept different types of communication and thinking because at the end of the day they're doing their job. But it's early days. What we need is more people who can go into a workplace as coaches and really teach neurotypical people. When I get employees who have had children, it's much easier for them to realize they are not going to take this personal and they're going to be more open. But we're in super early days, so it's going to be a little bit painful for a while.

It's kind of like ASL interpreters. 20 years ago, I used to have to fight with employers over ASL interpreters. Now they call me and I'm like you're getting it; we're done. It used to be such a fight. Nobody wanted to pay for that. We're in that early stage now where a lot of employers don't feel that they have to accommodate for some of those more significant learning and thinking.

Cooper: Have you heard the term, if you know one person with autism, you know one person with autism?

Shaw: Yeah, exactly.

Cooper: So, that's going to be the challenge. I like the idea of having a different company that has autism training. It's just I just can see it just being really hard.
Shaw: If the person's doing a great job and not having any issues, there's nothing we're going to do. But I also think it's about volume. When I get a call from a client who has a new employee who's autistic and there are issues, it's usually the first person that's been in the workplace.

Imagine if 20% of your workforce is people that are on the spectrum. Employees are going to have more experience and it will change the communication culture. I think it will be easier, but it's always when they first start. Part of it is just that it's new and there's not experience.

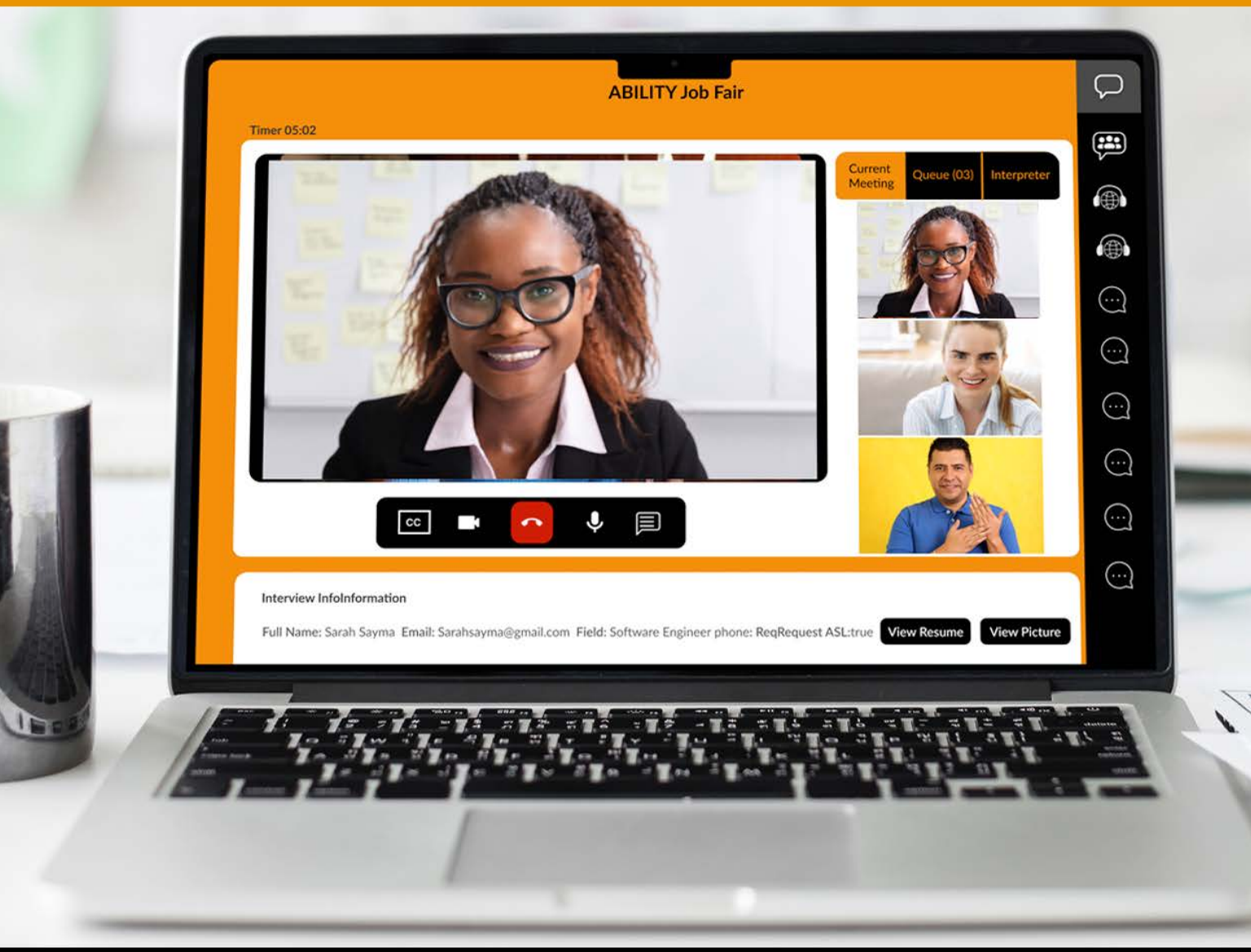
A neurotypical person may not have had any experience other than watching a Netflix show about neurodiversity. After you've had coworkers that maybe have learning differences, I think the neurotypical people will do a better job because we do this in the workplace anyways. You have an employee who's super sensitive. If I sit in her office and say what the hell, she'll cry and she'll want to quit because she'll be so upset.

I have other employees where if I'm not like look, this is what happened, they won't get it. We already do that for people. We manage them differently and we communicate with them differently. We have employees that are super sensitive or a little arrogant. But we don't extend that same willingness to flex always. ■ ABILITY

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On the Ascent and Unafraid

In a world where survival television often focuses on spectacle, Mandy Horvath continues to redefine what endurance, resilience and purpose can look like. A bilateral amputee, mountaineer, public speaker and recent participant on the television series *Naked and Afraid* Horvath has built a reputation not simply through physical feats, but through the deeply personal meaning behind them. From crawling to the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro to sharing her story of survival after a traumatic incident that changed the course of her life, Horvath approaches every challenge with a mixture of grit, vulnerability and determination that resonates far beyond the climbing community.

Soon after Horvath became the first known woman to crawl the stairwell of Seattle's iconic Space Needle, *ABILITY Magazine's* Chet Cooper spoke with her via video conference. Horvath reflected on her recent climb and her motivation of honoring a dear celebrity friend as well as a fundraiser for Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center and the American Brain Tumor Association. Horvath also described her experience surviving 21 days in the Belizean jungle on *Naked and Afraid* her complicated relationship with prosthetics, her growing work in film and writing and the life-changing events that ultimately pushed her toward mountaineering. She spoke candidly about pain, perseverance and finding purpose through impossible situations—whether crawling up mountains, facing cameras in vulnerable moments, or continuing to push herself toward the next challenge waiting on the horizon.





Mandy Horvath, her fiance Joshua Stigall and teammate Tyler Dean Milligan

Chet Cooper: You just attempted a record climb on May 8th, 2026. Can you talk about that?

Mandy Horvath: I am currently in Seattle, Washington, and yesterday I became the first woman known to crawl the stairwell of the iconic Space Needle here.

Cooper: How do you feel right now?

Horvath: I'm tired. Yeah, I'm tired. I was feeling it yesterday. My arms feel like noodles this morning.

Cooper: Did you do certain exercises to prepare for lifting yourself so many times?

Horvath: No, I did not prep for this climb in a traditional way that I usually do. Usually, for climbing, I get to about 70 pounds. However, I'm training for a potential opportunity on *Naked and Afraid* so I need to be at a higher weight to prepare for starvation.

Cooper: Tell me about the first time you were on *Naked and Afraid*.

Horvath: Oh yeah, that experience was crazy. Three years in the making. Sean Foley, the executive producer, got me on the show, and they put me in the Belizean jungle with Johnny Yates, who is an Army veteran. I survived 21 days *Naked and Afraid* in the Belizean jungle.

Cooper: What was your thought process of wanting to be on the show?

Horvath: Formally, I'm a mountaineer. I climb mountains and monuments for charity and conservation and I have climbed the world's tallest freestanding mountain, Mount Kilimanjaro. Everest is not on the card for me. I don't think it's morally or ethically responsible to climb over dead bodies and trash to get to a summit. *Naked and Afraid is* known as The Everest of Survival Challenges, so I took it on instead.

Cooper: Did you know the habitat they were going to put you in?

Horvath: No, I did not know. I got a short amount of time knowing where I was going. That way I could research flora and get an idea of plant and animal issues that I was going to encounter close to the ground.

Cooper: So, because of *Naked and Afraid* you've got some experience with people filming you while you're doing things for a period of time.

Horvath: Yeah, very comfortable around the cameras these days.

Cooper: Was that always the case, or did you kind of learn to ignore them?

Horvath: I don't think that I'll ever get used to hearing myself back in the recordings and stuff like that. I don't know why, but I hate the way I sound, and I'm always thinking of things that I could have said a little differently. But, you know, through the years I have definitely become more accustomed to being on camera, and especially through *Naked and Afraid* Because they have cameras on you 24/7 as you experience one of life's most humbling experiences, you learn to make fun of yourself.

Cooper: What happens when you're needing to go to the restroom?

Horvath: I mean, they have video of me using the restroom too. There's not really a whole lot you can do to get away from the cameras unless you go out of the camp zone, which isn't technically so safe for me. So, it's a weird experience, but the crew is respectful and the network is wonderful to work with. Their goal isn't to film and edit you relieving yourself in the show.

Cooper: I can't get my head around that. I think of myself in that environment, and I would be so uncomfortable. Are there people actually near you managing the cameras? How does that all work behind the scenes?

Horvath: Well, you don't really think about being naked out there. You have other things to worry about, but I had the fortunate opportunity of having a great partner and he helped me get through the challenge. Meeting him for the first time naked out in the jungle was certainly an awkward situation, but we made it work and I'm so grateful for him.

Cooper: You're trying to do the show again, do you know what type of environment they're going to place you in this time?

Horvath: No, and I don't know that I'll be getting a call. All of us *Naked and Afraid* participants train throughout the year and we are ready to go because they can call us and be like, "Hey, can you go out in a week to XYZ?" It's more of a just being prepared for the call.

Cooper: So, everyone that's been there all agrees to accept the call?

Horvath: Most participants, yes.

Cooper: Do you think that was the most challenging thing that you've done compared to the mountain climbing? How would you rate it?

Horvath: I'm not sure. You know, Mount Kilimanjaro was very difficult as well. It was like a 50-mile climb. I had an extraordinary team accompany me; and it's just a different kind of hard. I wouldn't say that it's harder by any means, but I'm grateful for that because I don't feel like I would have been as successful on *Naked and Afraid* as I was without having first the experience of climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.

Cooper: What is on your bucket list?

Horvath: I have a lot of things on my bucket list, but what I do requires a lot of time, coordination, and funding. And I don't yet have that.
Cooper: I know that you've done a lot of these activities for other nonprofits or charities and you're raising money for their efforts, but you haven't done that with yourself yet. Have you set up a nonprofit or anything like that?

Horvath: No, I have not set up a nonprofit. I would like to, but it just hasn't happened yet. It's certainly in the cards for the future.

Cooper: Can you share a little bit about what you experienced when you were 21?

Horvath: I went out to a little bar with people I thought I could trust and had 2 beers and 2 shots throughout the course of the evening. I stepped outside to smoke because that's what I did at the time— and the world went black. It's suspected now that I was incapacitated by a date rape drug or knocked unconscious and left on train tracks to die. There's a whole documentary about it now titled *The Ascent*. It is a two-part documentary where they accompanied me on my climb of Mount Kilimanjaro and really became investigators in the true crime side of things to get me answers.

Cooper: Did the answers come out in the documentary?

Horvath: Yes. I'm not allowed to say a whole lot of what happens in the documentary, but they were able to uncover quite a bit. It's very validating to watch the documentary. It's horrifying.



Mandy Horvath

Before I ever started climbing, I was still in a hospital bed in 2015, and I was healing. I first saw Kyle Maynard, a quad amputee who crawled up Kilimanjaro, and I sent him a message back in 2015 before I ever moved to Colorado, before I ever started climbing mountains. I just congratulated him on becoming the first amputee to crawl up Mount Kilimanjaro. And then years later, I became the first female.

Cooper: What does your daily life look like?

Horvath: My daily life is kind of complicated. I climb mountains and monuments for charity and conservation in my free time–what little free time I do have–But I'm also a public speaker and I train year-round for opportunities like *Naked and Afraid* I don't have like a traditional 9 to 5, but I do social media content across platforms. I stay very busy.

Cooper: You are a writer as well, correct?

Horvath: Yeah, I graduated last year with a Bachelor's in English and a minor in anthropology, and I am writing a memoir. It's a collection of letters that will tell my story.

Cooper: Do you have prosthetics?

Horvath: I do have prosthetics, but I don't wear them a whole lot because it's difficult for me as a female. My weight fluctuates quite a bit. I have polycystic ovarian syndrome, and so I can fluctuate like up to 20 pounds in a



Horvath uses her sewing machine in her bedroom to tailor her gear for Kilimanjaro

month, so it makes prosthetic fittings really difficult for me. They're good for flat ground, but considering I don't have knees, it's a whole different ball game.

Cooper: I also saw that you are an actress. Was this pre or post limb loss? Or both?

Horvath: This was after limb loss. I got connected with an opportunity to film an indie film, *You Are Here* with the Dylan Brody Project, and then I've done a couple other little things here and there, but for the 2021 climb of Mount Kilimanjaro, I had a documentary crew following me around for a long while.

Cooper: Do you know who Robert David Hall is?

Horvath: I do not.

Cooper: He was the first dual amputee to actually get a serious television role. He was the coroner for *CSI*. He would have a cane, but people didn't know that he was using prosthetics as a dual amputee. He broke the barrier and led the way. I'm bringing that up just because of your background in acting. Are you thinking about taking on more roles?

Horvath: My manager is actually putting feelers out there to get me on more projects. I'm also thinking about starting up a podcast. There's a lot of stuff going on in the production realm for me. It's all a work in progress for sure.

Cooper: So, right now you're in Seattle because of the Space Needle climb?

Horvath: I'm in Seattle for the climb and for the Seattle International Film Festival, where *The Ascent*, the documentary detailing my limb loss and my climb of Mount Kilimanjaro, will be screening today and tomorrow. I get to see it in IMAX today.

Cooper: Did you know that those two events would coincide?

Horvath: No, actually. I've seen pictures of the Space Needle ever since I was a little girl, but I've never been to Seattle before. So, I was curious. I was like, "Has anybody crawled the stairwell of the Space Needle?" I searched it on Google and it came back with, "No, nobody has crawled the stairwell of the Space Needle, but Mandy Horvath has done X, Y, and Z." So, I took a screenshot of that and I sent it to my team and I was like, "What do you guys think about me trying to get permission to climb the Space Needle?" And they were totally on board. Seattle International Film Festival has been wonderful to collaborate with in coordination of everything.

Cooper: Oh, that worked out really well. Is there anything else you want to share?

Horvath: I'm training for the potential opportunity to do *40 Days for Foley*. Sean Foley was the former executive producer of *Naked and Afraid* and he was a dear friend of mine who passed to brain cancer. That's part of the reason why I climbed the Space Needle. I climbed the Space Needle for the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center and the American Brain Tumor Association yesterday in his memory. I've also worked with Operation Ward 57, the Battle Buddy Foundation, Cars for Heroes, and most recently I worked with Wildly Kind organization in Portland. I was blessed to provide a lunch on behalf of Wildly Kind to a random stranger. That's what they do is just random acts of kindness out in our communities. I love their cause. ■ ABILITY

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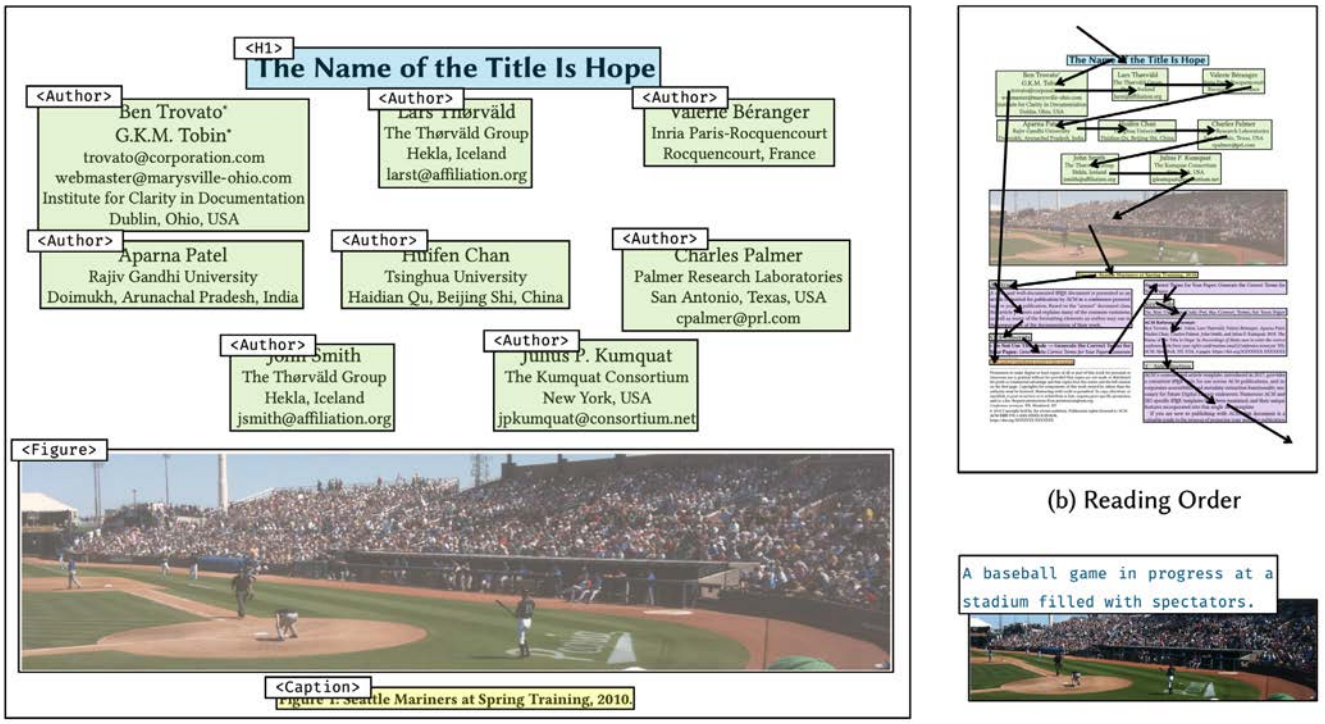
CMU Researchers Peya Mowar sits at a computer speaking with Jeff Bigham (right) and Aaron Steinfield (behind) about their work on iTag PDF



iTagPDF

Making STEM Research Accessible to All

For millions of people who are blind or have low vision, the Portable Document Format (PDF) is often not readable. The PDF is a digital document widely used in healthcare, government, business and education. It was developed by Adobe in the early 1990s because there was no universal way to read digital documents across different computers and programs without the document being distorted or looking broken. Adobe packed all the fonts, images, colors and more into one document "package" that only needed a free Acrobat Reader program to view. The original PDF was not readable by people who used screen reader assistive technology programs. So, in the early 2000s, Adobe expanded the capability of PDFs so that they could be made accessible and readable by people who are blind or have low vision. However, this new accessible PDF was rare since the new format required additional skills and additional formatting work. The lack of accessible PDFs has continued to present time, with the vast majority not being accessible—up to 95% as reported in Allyant's recent PDF benchmark report.



Graphic from the iTagPDF paper

While the PDF has become a global standard for sharing documents, it frequently serves as a digital dead end for those relying on screen-reading technology. Without proper internal formatting, the PDF cannot communicate with a screen reader about the different elements of the document. To be read by a screen reader, a PDF needs coded elements called tags to alert the reader of important information like headings, lists, charts, tables, and images. Without these tags also known as "semantic information," a PDF is essentially a flat image and is unreadable by a screen reader program.

The impact is particularly heightened in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. In these disciplines, researchers predominantly use a typesetting system called LaTeX to produce complex layouts when publishing their research. "It is very hard to get an accessible PDF from a LaTeX authoring tool," explained Aaron Steinfeld, a research professor at the Robotics Institute in the Carnegie Mellon School of Computer Science. Steinfeld noted that most STEM publications are done in LaTeX, yet "it does not preserve those (tags) when it exports it to PDF and so you get a PDF with no tags. And that's, as you can imagine, very painful".

The Architecture of the iTagPDF Solution

To bridge this gap, Peya Mowar, a PhD student at the Carnegie Mellon Robotics Institute, developed iTagPDF, an application designed to automate the tagging process for LaTeX-generated documents. Mowar, who previously worked at Microsoft Research India on making print newspapers accessible to people with visual impairments, recognized that the information needed for accessibility already exists within the author's original code.

"Authors are essentially required to write the syntax in a way that all of those semantics are already asked by the author when they are creating their PDFs. But all that structure is lost when the PDF is rendered in a visual format," Mowar stated. The iTagPDF application works by requiring a user to upload both the final PDF and the original LaTeX source files. It then uses generative artificial intelligence (AI), through its use of OpenAI, to re-insert the missing semantic information into the document.

Unlike traditional auto-tagging tools which rely primarily on the visual appearance of a page to guess its structure, iTagPDF uses the source code's information as a reference for whatever it is labeling or tagging. "We are using a combination of both the visual and the semantics part," Mowar noted. "We can identify things like tables and figures using the visual understanding that these models have and then we can add on to those semantics using the source document which the authors write".

Redefining Accuracy through AI

The move toward an AI-driven solution was born out of necessity. Steinfeld and his colleague Jeff Bigham had spent over a decade attempting to work with the LaTeX community to build accessibility



Peya Mowar

directly into the software engine, but they found little traction with the program's creators. (LaTex is open source software and not owned by a single company.) As a result, they shifted their focus to repairing the document after its creation. "Jeff and his team have tried a few different things over the years but it has always been very painful and not particularly effective," Steinfeld explained. "Peya had the clever idea to try and use AI to solve this problem".

Evaluations suggest that Mowar's approach significantly outperforms existing industry standards. In an assessment of 40 research papers, the iTagPDF system produced higher accuracy than Adobe Acrobat's automated features. Mowar noted that the system "is also easier to use in the sense that you do not have to make a lot of manual corrections". Steinfeld added that "the system outperforms some of these human authors" who are often required to tag documents manually for academic conferences.

While iTagPDF is currently in a beta phase and optimized only for LaTeX, the underlying principles could eventually be applied to other authoring tools. Steinfeld emphasized, "The key part is it has to be a tool where people are applying that semantic information instead of just formatting text with bold and font size." Steinfeld provided the example of a Microsoft Word document, "You may have interacted with people who generate Word documents, and, instead of applying the Heading Style 1 for Heading 1, they just bolded and increased the font. So, you don't know that that's Heading Level 1. If you're blind and you're accessing the Word document, you don't know that's Heading Level 1 because they didn't use the style to mark it that way."

Although the iTagPDF system has been successful, using AI to make "flat" PDFs accessible without original source files remains a significant hurdle. While researchers are pushing toward more automated solutions, the current technology still relies heavily on the presence of underlying code to ensure 100% accuracy. To answer the question whether AI could currently transform a document with no source data into an accessible format, Mowar commented, "I think we are not there yet, but we are working towards [that]".

Aaron Steinfeld further explained that without the source documents to provide semantic labels, the AI must guess the author's intent based solely on visual cues, which is prone to error. While Steinfeld noted that a fully autonomous remediation of flat files is "theoretically possible," both researchers agree that the field is still in the process of gathering the massive datasets required to train models for that level of inference. Mowar explained, "The next steps for iTagPDF could also be to collect this huge corpus of both the source documents and the visual rendered PDFs and train systems on a combination but then run inference on just the PDF. So, we could get to a point where the model could start learning from prior semantics of the papers which are published prior and then applying those for inference purposes."

Opening to the World of STEM

The broader impact of this technology extends beyond convenience. For many students and professionals with disabilities, the lack of accessible academic materials has long been a barrier to entry in scientific fields. Steinfeld observed that colleagues who are blind or have low vision frequently have to request alternative copies of things or request help converting documents.

"There has been an under representation of people with disabilities in these fields," Steinfeld said. "Some of this is also the lack of access to the articles and the academic knowledge because the PDFs are not accessible". He believes that Mowar's work "has the potential to improve access in these STEM fields for people who are blind".

By automating the remediation of scholarly articles, iTagPDF aims to create a future where information is universal. As the system moves toward wider deployment, it offers a glimpse into a world where technology no longer creates barriers but actively dismantles them. ■ ABILITY

Resources:

Carnegie Mellon University: Rethinking PDF Accessibility
ACM Digital Library: iTagPDF Research Paper



Pitching an Adaptive Softball Game from the Stands

I'm squished on orange plastic bleachers. Grandparents are on one side of me, two of my sons on the other. My husband is wandering the gym with his camera. The lens is at least a foot long. He is seeking out the best angle. My knees keep hitting the back of the spectator in front of me. I am getting the same treatment from behind. It's all unintentional. There's not enough room. We all want to be there. We tolerate the occasional knee.

Today is an away game. Adapted softball. I played softball briefly in my youth, but this is played indoors with a whiffle ball and bat. And all of the players have an intellectual disability.

We are losing 0-11. I watch my son, Aaron, step up to the plate. He waves to the crowd. He winks at his deaf and hard of hearing teacher in the stands. She smiles back at him. I grin. The umpire helps Aaron adjust his stance. "Shoulder!" I hear my husband yell. We worked for an hour last weekend trying to get Aaron to pull the bat behind his right shoulder. He is stubborn. He plays his own game.

I watch as he taps the tip of the bat onto home plate, just like the pros do it. Tears threaten behind my eyes. The other team has a tough pitcher. His pitches are a little high and Aaron swings at everything. Despite our coaching.

I inadvertently slide forward and my knees hit someone's dad. "Sorry!" I say. He waves it off. I crane my neck to watch my boy. Eyes puddling. Fists clenched. I'd like to cross and uncross my legs but there is no room.
Aaron swings at the first pitch, as he does, and misses, as he sometimes does. He looks at the crowd with a smile. He shakes his hips to loosen up. A little dance. He taps home plate again.

"Let's go Aaron!" I hear from the crowd. It's from someone I don't know. I smile. I fight back the tears. The bleachers are packed.

He swings again. This pitch is low, but Aaron connects. The ball sails behind the catcher and bounces off the gymnasium wall. Foul ball. The catcher pulls the facemask off of his tiny frame so he can find the ball. It rolled under the bleachers and is retrieved by a parent. The umpire helps the catcher tighten the facemask.

The smell of popcorn fills the gym. Tennis shoes squeak on the wood floor. I debate whether I should try and take another photo or just let my eyes do the watching. I leave my phone in my purse.

The umpire signals ready to the pitcher who draws back his arm, pendulums it forward and releases the ball to Aaron. This is the third pitch. Aaron will certainly swing at it again.

He does. The ball lands in the catcher's hand. The bat sliced through the air, missing the ball. The umpire tenderly announces strike three and the coaches signal for Aaron to return to the dugout. He does as he's told, relying on the coaches to guide him through the innings. Aaron walks back to his chair, smiling, looking for approval from the crowd who provide it with claps and smiles. He struts a bit. He sits down with his team.

My tear finally drops. I wipe it away quickly for fear it will be misread by others. My boy did it. He stood up, in front of a crowd, and faced that pitcher. He showed courage. He navigated and participated in a game which at times is confusing and sometimes tricky. He holds his head high. He fist bumps his teammates. He dances when he catches a fly, shocked at the ball that lands squarely in his hands.
I watch an entire team of kids like him. And equally unlike him. They are all different, but they are full of generosity, patience and understanding. They are proud. And I couldn't be prouder.

by Marisa L. Arlt

Marisa Arlt has a degree in journalism and design from the University of Minnesota. She lives in Falcon Heights, MN with her husband and three sons where she writes, throws pottery and enjoys time outside.



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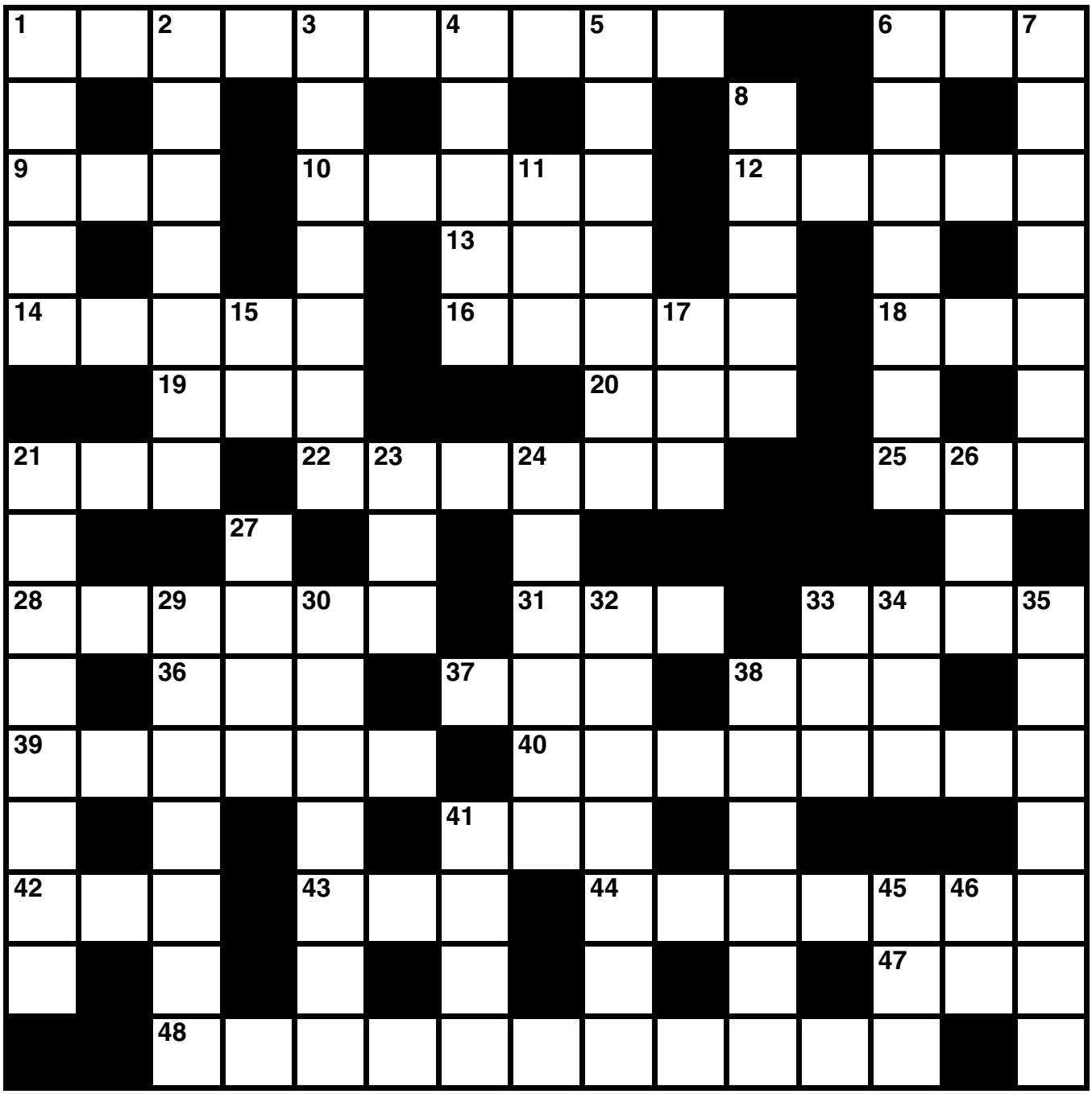
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Crossword Puzzle

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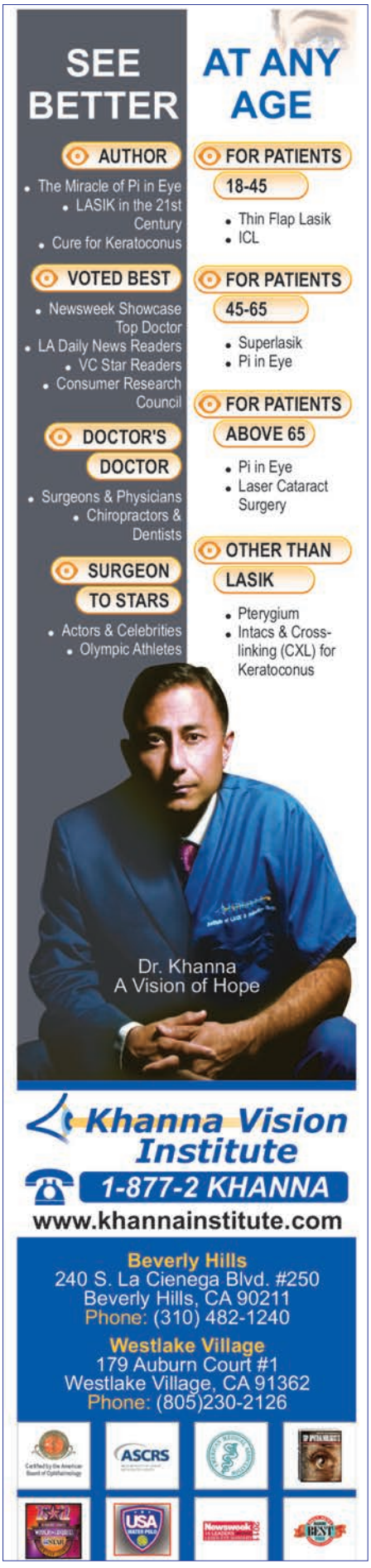
1. Basketball program in Haiti to help kids, 2 words
6. "Best of You" singers, ____ Fighters
9. ___& Perrins sauce
10. Coin toss call
12. After losing his leg in a 2018 motorcycle accident, he was crowned the World's Strongest Disabled Man in April 2026, _____ Endersby
13. Grain used in porridge
14. Nationally recognized stand-up comedian who lives with cerebral palsy, Tina _____
16. Stretched out
18. Period in history
19. Zero
20. Somewhat civilized race
21. Fuel efficiency measure, abbr.
22. Motorcross rider and stunt actor who is culturally deaf- she tells her ongoing story regularly in ABILITY, ____ Fiolek
25. ____ a good example.
28. Bold and adventurous
31. Act passed to protect rights of people with disabilities
33. Long Haul ___: he continues his marathon motorcycle journey, despite setbacks, to help people with MS
36. Exist
37. Lyric poem of praise
38. One of a 100 in DC
39. Actor training for the 2028 Paralympics, Vedanten _____
40. Dominican-American former star pitcher for the Boston Red Sox, Pedro _____
41. Band who sang, "I Have the Love" Simply ____
42. ___ and flow
43. Ohio State, informally
44. Enduring strength and energy for keeping on keeping on
47. Road cover material
48. Affectionate and kind

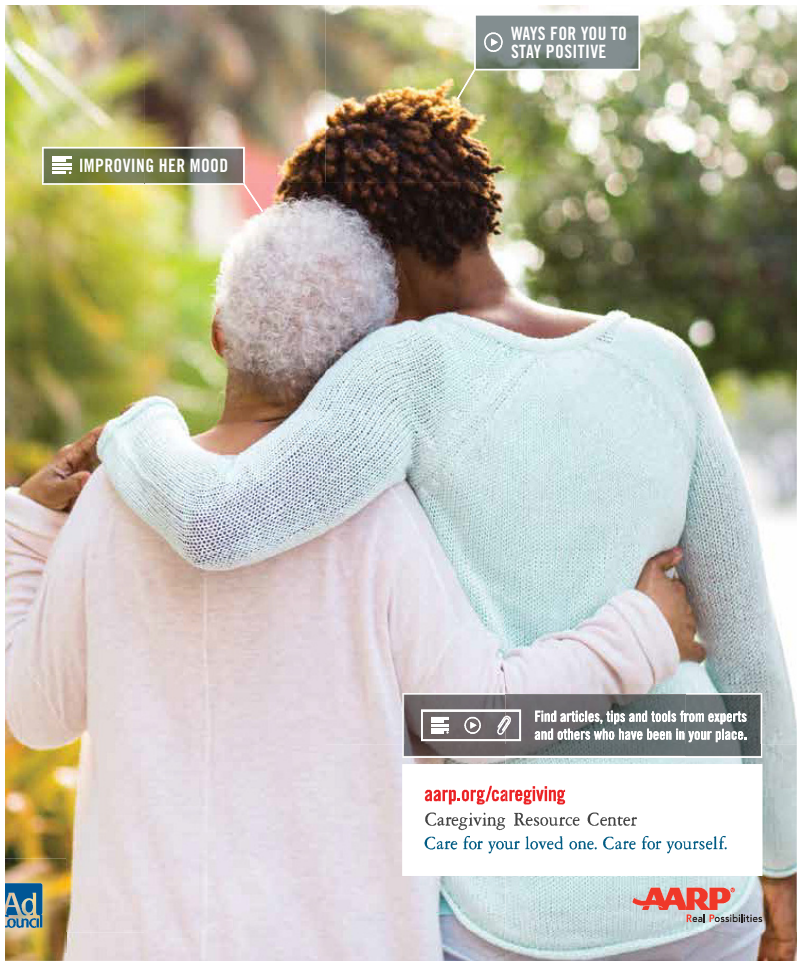
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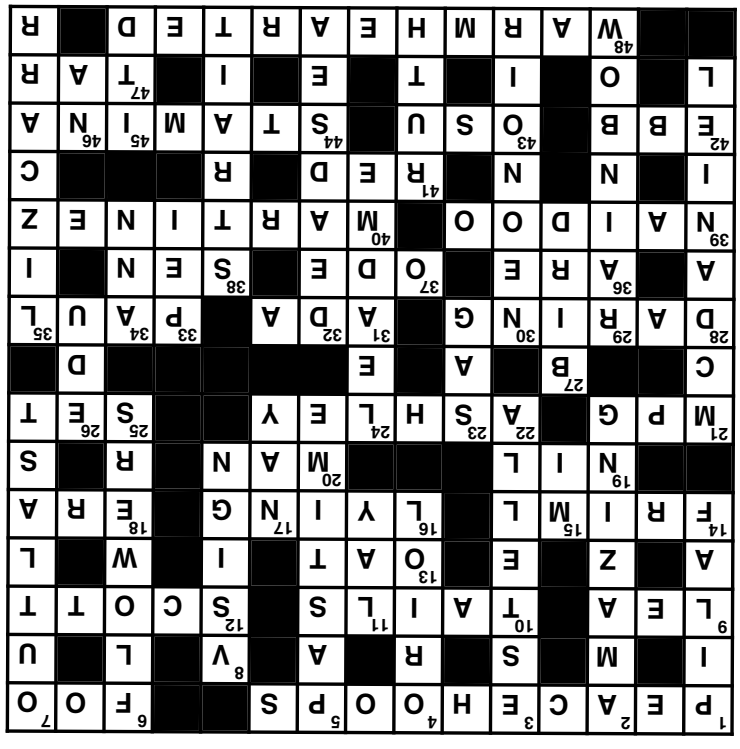
1. Dish with seasoned rice
2. Good description for the lives of Stephen Hawking, Frida Kahlo, Harriet Tubman and Kadeena Cox
3. She ski jumps for the US National Ski Jumping Team despite hearing loss from a young age, _____ Hassrick
4. Supervisor of the Haiti's basketball program for kids, Gérald ____ , Jr
5. Leisure activity like chess
6. Director of the Caribbean movie "The Bluff" which involves the freeing of a disabled boy, Frank _____
7. Endure longer than
8. Gesture of peace, 2 words
11. Place down gently
15. Detroit's state, abbr.
17. Negative vote
21. Retired DOD contractor of twenty seven years and star of "96 Pounds of Dynamite" who has made an active and creative life despite being in a wheelchair, Chad _____
23. Droop
24. Starting words in several gospel songs, 2 words
26. Academic website ending
27. Eagle or robin
29. "Somewhere Over the ___" song
30. Dark, modern crime film genre, 2 words
32. Very salty water body
33. Canadian province initials
34. Massachusetts' Cape ___
35. Disabled actress who played in the BBC crime thriller series "Silent Witness:", 2 words
38. Country singer who sang "I Cross My Heart" George _____
41. Disabled actress who was born with spina bifida who starred in "Don't Take My Baby," ____ Madeley
45. __ be nice if ...
46. Not applicable, abbr.

answers on page 68

Crossword Puzzle







Crossword Puzzle

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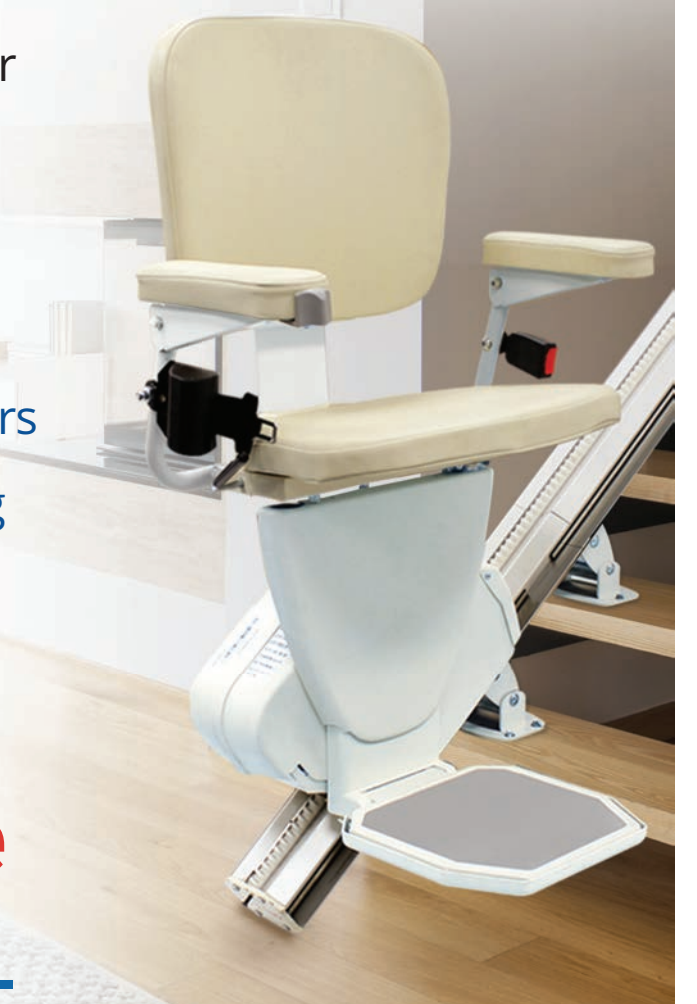
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Who we are:

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 and perspectives from Wells Fargo are also available at Wells Fargo Stories (https://stories.wf.com).

Key Facts

70M Customers

26.7M Mobile Banking mobile active users

1 in 3 Households

32.9M Wellsfargo.com digital (online and mobile) active customers

$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.



Wells Fargo helps strengthen communities through:

Diversity & Inclusion:
Ensure all people feel respected and have equal access to resources and opportunities to succeed.

Economic Empowerment:
Strengthen financial self-sufficiency and economic opportunities in underserved communities.

Sustainability:
Accelerate a just transition to a low-carbon economy.

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

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

Relevant military experience is considered for veterans and transitioning service men and women.
All qualified applicants will receive consideration for employment without regard to race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability, or status as a protected veteran.
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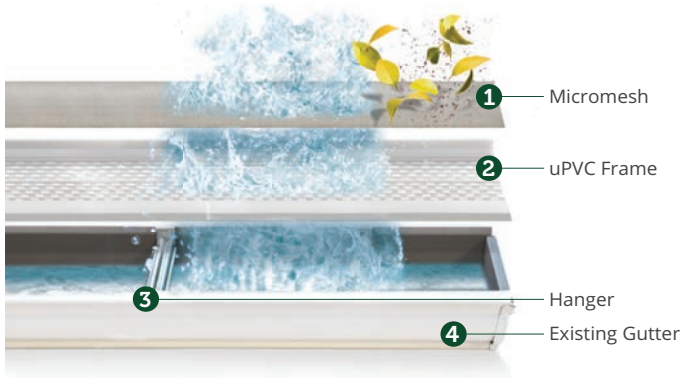
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