Emily: Welcome to the Disability & Philanthropy Forum's, Journey to Inclusion Learning series. My name is Emily Harris. I use she/her pronouns and I'm proud to be part of the disability community. I am the executive director of the Disability and Philanthropy Forum and I come to you from the Unseated Land of the Council of Three Fires, the Odawa, Ojibwe and Potawatomi Nations, now known as Chicago. My access needs are met today with live captioning. As part of our commitment to accessibility, our speakers and I will each provide a short audio description. I'm a white woman with dark, curly hair, wearing a brightly colored top with images of buildings on it. Behind me is a screen made of rectangles of blonde wood and white paper. A few housekeeping items for today's learning session. The recording of today's session will focus on the speakers and the moderator. There may be one or two moments when we show gallery view.

Feel free to leave your camera off if you have any concerns. You'll receive a link to the recorded parts of the session in approximately 10 days. We have live captioning today. There are two ways to access these captions. Use the CC button at the bottom of your screen and choose subtitles or full transcript which will pop up as a box on your screen within Zoom. If you prefer to access the captions in a separate window, a link to an external captioner is now in the chat. During the first portion of our program today, we will be spotlighting our speakers and you will be muted. After about 35 minutes of moderated discussion there will be a Q and A session. You can place questions in the chat or come off camera and unmute and our moderator and speakers will address as many questions as we can.

We will use the chat throughout this session to share links to information, and you can use it too to post questions at any time. You can also send questions to communications@disabilityphilanthropy.org. This session is scheduled for 90 minutes, but we understand that some people have a hard stop after 60 minutes and we'll conclude the formal program by then. We will pause at 12:58 PM Eastern for a moment with a few announcements and then continue an optional conversation from one to 1:30 for those who can stay. This will be your time to interact with the panelists, and we invite you to go off mute and share your questions verbally or in the chat if you prefer. The program will wrap up no later than 1:30 Eastern Time. Before I introduce our moderator, I want to highlight a few principles. First, disability is a natural part of the human experience and there are more than 60 million of us in the US alone.

Disabilities can be apparent or non-apparent, lifelong or acquired. And disability identity is only one part of each person's identity. We represent all aspects of diversity. Second, like other forms of oppression, the barriers to full participation in our society are socially constructed and can be dismantled if we are intentional. Finally, we recognize the founding disability rights and justice principle, "Nothing about us without us." Today you'll hear from disabled leaders who have experience with accessible technology. Without further ado, I'm thrilled to introduce our moderator today, my colleague Gail Fuller, who is the Disability & Philanthropy Forum’s Program and Communications Director and truly a joy to work with. Her bio is in the chat as are all of our speakers. Again, feel free to use the chat anytime during the discussion to post your questions and we will hold them for you for a Q and A period at the end. Gail, you're on.

Gail: Thank you, Emily and the admiration is equal. I work with a really great team. As Emily said, I am Gail Fuller. I use she/her pronouns and I am coming to you from the land of the Seminoles. I live in Florida, and I am wearing a white shirt, long sleeve shirt with a black pattern. I have on my pink glasses, and I actually put a little lip gloss on. It's probably the third time in the last two and a half years. And my hair is in a short bob. I have been looking forward to this conversation. I am pleased to welcome Meryl Evans and Tolu Adegbite. And I'm going to ask them rather than, we're not going to read their bios, excuse me, or in the chat, and I'm going to have them do a self-introduction. Because we want to then move on so we have as much time, maybe even a little bit more than 35 minutes, to get through the panel discussion and the Q and A. So Meryl, why don't we start with you.

Meryl: Thank you Gail, and thank you for having me. This is Meryl speaking My pronouns are she/her. And the most noticeable thing about me is I have brown curly hair, about shoulder length, and I am a native Texan from Plano, Texas. And I'm wearing a progress over perfection shirt, with the accessibility icon in the O. The shirt is black. I'm self-employed at meryl.net where I am a professional speaker, trainer, and accessibility marketing consultant who is a certified professional in accessibility or competency or CPACC for short. I was born hearing free, but in medical terms, profoundly deaf. It came with this accent. I grew up learning how to speak and lip read. Many people assume I know sign language, I don't. It's not a good thing or a bad thing, it just is. It's what works for me.

Gail: Tolu.

Tolu: Awesome. I'll jump in next. Thanks, Gail. Hi, my name is Tolu. I am a product designer living in Toronto. My pronouns are she/her. I am a Black woman with shoulder length, curly dark hair and I am on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississauga of the Credit, the Chippawa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. And this land is now the home of many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Metis people. During the day I do product design work, I'm also an accessibility specialist and a huge fan of inclusive design. I am an immigrant to the country of Canada, which is something that really profoundly influences my outlook on both my work in design, but also my work in the field of accessibility. Super excited to be here with you all today.

Gail: Thank you. Let's jump right into it. I would love to hear from you guys, your personal stories of how you became interested in accessible technology. Meryl, I've had a chance to listen to your most recent TEDx. And Tolu I've read all of your blogs, and so, I'm just happy for everyone else to get to know you guys too. Who wants to go first? Meryl, I'm going to pick you to go first.

Meryl: Thank you, Gail. This is Meryl. So the biggest challenge mapping that is communication, and communication is what unites them. It's what bring people together. It's what makes the world turn because that's how we learn from each other. And it doesn't take much for me to feel excluded from conversation. People constantly all my life ask me, “You wanna get on a call?” That simple sentence can be stressful for people like me because phone calls don't come easy, even with technology. And then another thing is, I have filled out many, many forms as we all do in life. Health forms, driver's license forms, travel forms, all that fun stuff. And there's always the required contact field, of course, right? And that contact field, it's always the phone number. I can't add anything like text only or anything like that. And my poor spouse gets to be the lucky recipient of phone calls because I would often put my spouse's phone number into the field because people were calling me and I'm just sitting there staring at my phone. I can't pick you up, I can't hear you.

And of course I have depended on caption since 1983. And I educate people on why quality caption matters. I love to travel, and I don't mind traveling around except for one thing, not every hotel room has a visible fire alarm, and this is scary. Because I've been in both a house fire and a carbon monoxide incident that happened at a hotel when I was a teenager. Anyway, I received an invitation to speak at a conference on accessibility. It was there that I felt like I have found my place. While I've known about digital accessibility for a long time, it wasn't until that conference I dug in to educate anyone who would listen on the value of accessibility and equal access.

Gail: Thank you. Tolu.

Tolu: Absolutely. Thank you so much for that story, that's amazing. I think for me it's a really long story, I guess, about my interest in accessibility and my own personal relationship with it. But I'll say that when a lot of people are young, they try to find a way of moving through the world, something they're good at, some they like to do. For a lot of people that might be sports, that might be playing video games. For me it was reading. And growing up as a Black woman who has disabilities, reading was something that I found a lot of refuge in. But reading books, I so rarely, I guess, resonated with characters who looked like me, who had similar experiences to me. I mention this really often these days because it's something I reflect on now, but the first time I read a book with a Black main character, I was in middle school, I think I was in grade eight, which is a really jarring experience.

Up until then I just assumed that people just didn't write books about Black people. I actually thought that people only wrote books about white people, and that really makes me think now about what inclusion means to people and about the importance of representation. So as with a lot of fields that are dominated by white folks, we tend to only hear one kind of story. And I think the same thing tends to happen in the world of accessibility where we have so many people who are from one background, we miss out on the stories of people who are from different backgrounds or who might have intersecting identities. Disabilities affect people differently. A woman might have a very different experience with a disability than a man. And in that same vein, a Black woman is going to have a very different experience with a disability than a white man might.

And so I think when it comes to conversations like this, I want to be someone that brings up the fact that intersecting identities have very different experiences. So I think that's something that I try to bring to conversations and remind us all that our perspectives differ. And that just because one thing works for one group of people and is helpful for them, it does not mean it's helpful for other groups of people. And just to remember the spirit of what we're doing here, primarily I consider myself a human rights activist. and so advocating for access for people with disabilities just makes sense. Advocating for equal treatment for people of different races just makes sense. And I think if someone works in the field of accessibility, we all need to be able to grapple with the fact that there are people with intersecting identities. And that's what's really important to me and what really drives me, I think.

Gail: Thanks. Tolu, I want to follow up. You've mentioned before that the work with the accessible technology and making sure that's inclusive, you've said before that it's a social and racial justice issue. And I think that even in telling your story, you were moving toward that. Can you explain to people, because I want to make sure as we're talking today that people understand that this is not a siloed issue. So when we start to talk about accessible technology, so I'd love for you just to elaborate a little bit more on how this is a justice issue.

Tolu: Absolutely. So primarily I think when it comes to access for people with disabilities, we're talking about a human rights issue. Every single person deserves to have access to your website, to the ability to order pizza through your app, we all deserve that. But I think further we need to consider that accessibility has so many facets to it. Disability affects people in so many different ways. And I think there's this tendency to see issues as one sided or only including certain groups of people. But with every single issue under the sun, the intersections of someone's identity is going to affect how they experience that issue. So really I want to drive home the fact that accessibility has multiple facets. If you are creating a solution and only considering one group of people with disabilities but not considering intersections like race, like gender, like sexual identity, you are not considering the full spectrum of your users, and you are still being ableist.

Ableism, again, has intersections with racial identity, with gender identity. One thing that I think of really often. I was flying through an airport the other day and the airport has lots of these things that work with you waving your hand in front of them. So you have your soap dispenser, you have your dryer, you have your tissue paper dispenser. And in one way you might see this as universal design, it's more accessible, I don't have to press something, I don't have to touch something in order to get this dispensed. But as someone with darker skin, I very often encounter the issue where the dispenser just will not work for me. I stick my hand in front of it and just doesn't register that someone's there. So in one way this tool is really helpful as a universal design tool because it prevents you from having to touch something.

But on the other hand, the people who designed it didn't consider the full intersection of experiences because I as a Black person can't always use these things because the sensors don't pick up dark skin very well. So I'll have instances where someone with lighter skin will have to come along and actually put their hand in front of a soap dispenser so I can use it, which is pretty ridiculous in 2022. So I would just encourage us to think about intersection of experiences, but at the same time, one person is not always capable of seeing all these intersections, right? Which is why representation is important, which is why you need people with different disabilities on your team, which is why you need to get people of different races on your team to see these issues.

Gail: Thank you. Speaking of, I'm a person who needs closed captions. I do not have a hearing impairment, but I have a neurological issue, and for me to keep with the conversation, captions help me. And so Meryl, I want you to talk about the curb cut effect, because I think a lot of times people think that what we're talking about is for someone else who needs it, and perhaps they don't realize how it benefits everyone. So I'm going to turn it to you.

Meryl: Thank you. And I enjoy what you just said, Tolu. I learned a lot from you myself, so thank you for sharing your experience. So, the curb cut effect is so powerful, it kind of goes hand in hand with universal design, but you have to consider everything, not just disability, but race in other intersectional differences. So, think about a time you arrived at a street corner, and you pushed the button so you can get the signal when it’s safe to cross the street. Have you ever noticed the ramp on these street corners? I bet you've used them a lot. How about when you go traveling with luggage? A lot of us have suitcases with wheels, and it's so easy to pull’em. And then maybe when you go shopping, you use a shopping cart, or a parent or a family member might have a stroller.

Those ramps are wonderful for those strollers as well. You wouldn't want to push a child down a step, that doesn't feel very safe, does it? So the curb cuts were originally designed for people in wheelchairs so they could safely cross the street. Nobody wants to go down a step when they use the wheel. Yet so many people have benefited from ramps, and the same goes for elevators. So one of the best examples of curb cut accessibility, as Gail mentioned and shared her experience, are captions. Every single day people tell me they use captions, and they are not deaf or hard of hearing. In fact, 80% of the people who use captions are not deaf or hard of hearing. Building products, processes, and experiences with accessibility in mind will ensure you have the greatest reach possible. So I can't tell you how many times people have said, "I don't have people with disabilities in my audience."

But the reality, the data shows, that's not the case. One in five people have a disability. And as Gail mentioned earlier on, some of them are non-apparent. I have three children with ADHD, and they're all affected very differently. So not your stereo... a lot of people think ADHD means hyper. It's become a stereotype and is a ableist thing. In reality, out of those three, only one has that hyper side effect of his ADHD. And then another one of those kids has a mood disorder on top of his ADHD. So that's an example of how intersectionality comes to play. Because he has these two things, it changes his experiences very drastically. Now we're white, so we don't run into the issues of will we get the soap dispensers work, or face recognition to work, so we don't have that. But people who are deaf like me but also have colored skin have additional challenges more than I do, and we need to respect those differences.

Gail: Thank you. Before we move into some specifics and some key points that you want to get across to the audience, what message would you have for philanthropy when it comes to inclusion and accessible technology? And I'd like to try to ask this question in the beginning for those who aren't able to stay to the very end. So Tolu, Meryl, whichever one of you guys want to go up first, please do so.

Tolu: That's a really good question. I've been thinking about this one a lot. I think there's a laundry list, there's so many things to consider. But I'd say first and foremost the most important thing to remember is that one person's experiences don't represent everyone's experiences. So recognizing that disabilities look different in different people and that different people have different needs is so important. Having multiple ways to do the same thing makes things so much more accessible, so much easier to do. Meryl said something on Twitter the other day about forms, and you referenced it a bit here about having forms, when they're asking for a phone number to let someone enter a phone number that might be for having conversations verbally, and a phone number that might be for text messages and things like that. Little details like that go such a long way to make sure that things are available to different people. So I would just really try to emphasize that. That different people have different needs and that we don't always know what everyone needs, which is why it's important to have that inclusion aspect to hear from different people with different disabilities and access needs, so we're able to accommodate as many people as possible.

Meryl: Thank you, Tolu, thank you for saying that. This is Meryl. So I want to emphasize and tell people when you've met one deaf person, you've met one deaf person. So if a company decides that they want me to test out their product, and if they only rely on my feedback, the product's going to be in trouble, it's not going to work, it's not going to succeed, because I cannot represent the entire category of deaf people. We have so many different experiences. Some people are born deaf, some are not. Some wear hearing devices, some don't. Some of them read lips, some don't. We’re, it's a spectrum. So of course we don't expect you to try to make every combination possible. That's why you try to get a handful. Usually, I've learned about five to seven people tend to do a pretty good job as long as it's diverse. And then to be a truly inclusive organization requires thinking about people with disabilities, and accessibility. Too often organizations bring in people with disabilities, but they don't provide the support they need to thrive in a role. As stated before, everyone needs accessible technology that includes organizations, their employees, their volunteers, and the people they serve. Accessible technology is just as critical as privacy and security. When people feel supported and included in your organization, they'll share your passion for the mission.

Gail: Thank you. And Meryl, I'm going to stick with you on this next question. A lot of times the big question is where to start? People hear equity, they hear the words inclusion, they hear the words disability, and it’s just like, they're not sure what to do. And I'd love to hear from you, what advice do you have for those who are listening now, on where do you start, how do you start when you're talking about accessible technology?

Meryl: So my advice is, this is Meryl, don't worry about getting everything perfect. The key is to start and make progress every day. That's why I spread the message of progress over perfection. Start small. Maybe you start by making your most important form accessible. For a lot of organizations it's the donation form. It also helps to find an executive to be an accessibility champion and hold an organization wide accessibility and disability awareness training. Accessibility is everyone's responsibility. The training will help them get started and know what role they play in accessibility. Just yesterday I got a new iPhone, a much-needed upgrade because the new iOS16 comes with captions. My old phone was not going to get iOS16, so I knew I had to get the new phone. And what I really liked about Apple with those captions and the setting it says Beta, Beta, B-E-T-A.

So I really appreciated they were thinking progress over perfection. I'm glad they released the captioning now rather than wait ‘til they perfected it. So, it's not perfect, and I was on my first FaceTime call with my mom in many months, and I was shocked to see the captions were built in. I didn't have to use the phone's auto caption, and it was working great at first, and then it stopped working. But because Apple makes it very clear it's beta, you don't get upset. So, the more you educate people, the better you'll be off because they will be more understanding if they know it's a work in progress.

Gail: Thank you. Tolu, given your impressive background, I'd love for you to talk about the intersection of accessibility and design because I think sometime people who are... they lose, they don't think the two necessarily go together, and I'd love to hear your take on that intersection.

Tolu: Absolutely. I think as a designer, as designers, there's so much power to influence what people's experiences are. And like you said, I think sometimes people don't think that designers have that much power in the process, that maybe developers have more influence on how accessible a website is for example. But if something isn't designed with accessibility in mind by the time development rolls around, it's probably too late to make any real significant, impactful changes. At that point you're probably just retrofitting and making the best of the situation. But I think when it comes to design, we have so much influence over how people experience things. One thing that comes to mind for example is alternative text attributes. So that's descriptions that are read out by assistive technology for pictures. So of course developers are the people who implement these code tags when you're actually coding the website, but designers are the people who are choosing the pictures probably. And so, they're probably the people who are, who should be describing what the images have in them.

The intersection I think here between race, design, accessibility when it comes to this particular thing is, what those descriptions actually have in them. So one example I like to think of is, for example, during the Civil Rights Movement, during desegregation, you have Ruby Bridges, this Black girl, who's the first Black girl to attend a white school to desegregate it. And if you have a picture with alternative texts and you just describe her walking into the school as, girl walking into school, you're not really capturing the fact that this is a Black girl walking through a crowd of white people into an all-white school with people yelling at her and heckling her because they don't want her to desegregate the school.

Things like that paint the picture of intersectionality so well for me. Where the fact that you need to describe what's happening in the image for alternative text for people using assistive technology, you should describe the race of the person in the image because it's so relevant contextually to this particular image, but also it features inclusion. We need to really think about who we're featuring and the images that we have on websites. I know that was a long example, but there are so many ways in which design influences intersectionality and accessibility, so many things to consider. And just to reference what Meryl was talking about, progress over perfection. There are a lot of things to consider and it can feel overwhelming at times, but just putting in the effort to really try to start is so important. You don't need to be perfect right away, but just really think about why this is important, and just get started. Start with changing one image's alternative text attribute, or add a caption if you can't do that, or do a verbal description if you can't do that. But just starting is so, so important, and I'd really encourage people to really embrace progress over perfection. Just taking that first step makes such a huge difference.

Gail: Thank you. Last year at the Disability & Philanthropy Forum, we were looking at a project management tool, and we were looking for something that was accessible and clearly had placed a disability lens into that work. And we didn't find anything that was perfect. We found something that could work at this moment, and also that the company has made a pledge to disability inclusion. But what's the lift that everyone has to take to figure out how is something accessible? Is it something they should do on their own? Should they hire a disability consultant? I'd love to, if you have any thoughts on that because I think sometime that's the fear that people have, it's I'm trying to create a website, but it's not accessible. For us it was a project management system that we wanted to make sure it was accessible. Any advice you would give on how they go about making sure that the work and the things that they're doing are accessible, from a technology standpoint? And that was a lot in one question.

Meryl: Yes, I'm trying to form my thoughts here. So, a good place to start is with your own people. Sometimes we forget we have people in our own organization who may have a disability and can provide input. And, I was doing some research before a panel about grantmaking software, because I was curious about the level of accessibility. And it's not a software that a lot of people use, like documents and spreadsheets. We all use that, but not everybody uses grantmaking software. So, I did a little research, and I found one organization, a foundation, and I loved what they did. They wrote a post, a blog post, explaining they know they had lot of work to do to make the grantmaking system and related processes accessible for everyone including people with disabilities, people without internet access, and non-English speakers.

So at the starting point, they advised grant seekers to let their contacts know if they need help or accommodations, to provide a list of examples such as providing and accepting proposals and report forms in alternative formats. Adding support for translation services for proposal help and to provide additional times or financial resources for organizations for people who need accommodations. The foundation also has an accessibility statement on their website with contact information. An accessibility statement simply says what you are doing and working towards in regards to accessibility, and it should have at least two contacts, ways to contact them. Now, when you have people contact you about accessibility, they should be treated differently than any other tech support or customer support, because accessibility is a priority, because it's a barrier if somebody can't get to your content. Customer support is a different path. So this is a great way to get started in creating accessible processes and getting accessible products. Also, work with your vendors and explain the value of accessibility benefiting everyone.

Gail: I love the example that you gave was from a grantmaking side as someone who spent half their career in philanthropy. We all know that one of the most frustrating thing is the grant application process, both for the foundation staff, but more importantly for the grantees who are trying to receive a grant, so thank you for that. I also want to look at... Tolu, did you have anything you wanted to add on to that from a grantmaking standpoint? If not I have another question for you.

Tolu: I would agree with everything Meryl said. I love, I love when companies, groups give the ability for someone to say when they have accessibility needs. So instead of having a form that doesn't address that, or a form that simply says, "Do you have accessibility needs, yes or no?" Having a space that lets people list the accessibility accommodations that they need makes such a huge difference. But also even just having a place on your website where people can go to let you know when they need something in a different format, I think that makes a huge difference. I also am a big fan of asking organizations, “What is your accessibility strategy?” or, “What do you do to improve your accessibility?” And accessibility doesn't happen by accident. So if an organization doesn't address that at all, or they don't really have a response to that, you can almost always, well, you can safely assume that their software is not accessible. It just, it doesn't happen by accident. So I think intentionally talking to vendors and asking them what they do to make their things accessible helps a lot as well.

Gail: Thank you. I want to look internally. We've been speaking a lot about external. But in the workplace itself, because when you were talking, Tolu, about asking for any type of request, accommodations that people need, what should philanthropy be doing for their staff? Meryl, as you've noted, not everyone's comfortable disclosing their disability. I was a person who for years did not, and when I did it was not a good experience, and now I'm back again. And so what would you tell... workplace technology, what should they be looking at? Just as you would speak to people internally, what should they be listening for within their own organization to make sure that they are using accessible technology?

Meryl: This is Meryl. A very important question because a lot of times organizations are thinking about their customers, their end users, and they forget about their own staff and volunteers who may need accessibility. So, it really takes a cultural change for people to want to speak up. They don't know if they're in a safe place. A lot of us with disabilities know how to self-advocate, no question. I can self-advocate. If I'm going to meet with somebody on a video call, I'll say, “Will you make sure the captions are turned on in your settings, please?” That kind of thing, simple, easy. But if you are somebody who is interviewing for a job with a company, you might be afraid to ask that because it's hard enough to get a job when you have a disability or any other intersectionality is happening, that you are afraid to bring it up, and you try to get by without it because you don't want to be seen as incapable or less than.

But the opposite is true. Because we are so used to being excluded and treated differently, it turns into... it gives us the ability to be creative because we've had to look for creative work arounds and solutions. So when you have people with disabilities on your team, they're gonna to bring another level of thought that you're not going to get from anyone who doesn't have a disability. So, culture training first. And that begins with having an executive champion. And your website and everything that's public facing about your organization should have some references of accessibility, disability, and so on. I want to comment on Tolu talking about images. And I agree, we need to think more diversity in imagery. But a lot of companies start obsessing about having people with disabilities in those images. But the thing is, most disabilities are not apparent. For example, I'm standing right here. You can't... besides my accent of course, you can't tell I'm deaf. I was born this way, I am profoundly deaf, so I am disabled.

So a picture of me, the company could put a picture of me and do the right thing, but the audience is not going to know I have a disability. So there are too many disabilities that are not apparent, and too often people think... and not often mobility with the wheelchairs. And too often people assume someone who's blind is gonna wear sunglasses, have a white cane, or a service animal or a mix. But I have met people who are blind that don't have any of those, so you just never know. Anyway, so cultural training, executive support, and what would be really powerful is the executive has a disability. And a lot of them do, they don't, they just don’t share it. If they would share their stories, that would be a wonderful first step in getting buy-in and getting people to realize we are in a safe space to share everything we are and who we are.

Gail: Thank you. We're going to go ahead and move into the Q and A session. Once again, you can send your questions via the chat and you can also, if you want to, we can bring you off mic. We will definitely be off mic for the next session. So let me start with the first question here. This person would love to learn more about making a website accessible. So what does it mean for a website to be accessible? Tolu, do you want to take this question?

Tolu: Yeah, absolutely. So is this the first question in the chat?

Gail: This is the first one that people wrote in. So I am looking both at the chat and then people who have emailed questions are going into a Q and A doc.

Tolu: Awesome. So I think there are a lot of different ways to make a website accessible. What I would start with is the web content accessibility guidelines, WCAG, starting with their single A and double A criteria, and just checking against what your website has on that list is immensely helpful. Most laws, when it comes to accessibility compliance, are based on that. But beyond laws, it's just a really helpful guideline to make things as accessible to as many people as possible. But I think beyond that, making sure that you are testing with people with disabilities is really helpful. During research phases, people will try to speak to as many different kinds of users as possible. But I think the same principle should apply when it comes to testing a site, having as many different people testing it as possible, and also a way for people to submit, as Meryl said, their needs when it comes to accessibility. It's really rare, difficult, maybe even impossible to get it right the first time, but being open to feedback and hearing what people actually need is huge, I think.

Meryl: I'd like to add on to Tolu. This is Meryl. So yes, I always ask them, that's what I tell a lot of people. A great place to start is to ask, always ask. So, if you have a form, don't worry about, you know, offering captioning, sign language interpreters, just ask. That way you've got it covered; somebody can share what they need. And I just saw a question from Ann Wicks, that I would love to answer, and it talked about bold, italics, or caps, and that is very important. It seems like such a detail, but so many... I can't tell you how many websites I see with a lot of bold, a lot of italics. The whole page is centered, all the text is all centered. These are our problems. It's okay to use bold, italics when there's a word or two, or a few words, not a whole paragraph or a whole page because there are people with reading disabilities, and other disabilities, and even no disabilities who have a hard time reading a whole page of italics, and all caps, and centered text. The problem with centered text, even if it's a headline, if it goes more than two lines, it adds friction to the reading experience because the starting point changes and it's unpredictable.

There's just something about the way we read, humans read that affects the experience. So as someone who depends on captions, I have learned a lot about the problems with bold, italics, and all caps. All caps is a problem because when we capitalize everything it's just a block, there are no shapes. So when we use mid case, there are different shapes. So take a look, if you put your name in capital letters and in lower case you can see there's a difference in the shape of the outline of the names.

Gail: Thank you. And Kevin Lewin has raised his hand. So Kevin, if you want to come off mic, Kathleen, you can ask your question.

Kevin: Thank you very much, Gail. Can everybody hear me okay? Good. Okay. My name is Kevin Lewin, I'm here representing the Craig H. Nielsen Foundation. I am a white, middle-aged man with a gray goatee beard and dark hair and glasses. My pronouns are he/him. And I'm coming new today from unceded Chumash Lands in Southern California. My question really is to Tolu about the language of alt text, because we live in a very sensitive time. I'm currently going through our website and adding alt text to images, and I'm nervous about just calling someone dark haired woman, or African American woman, or Black woman because I don't know what the language is that those people would prefer. Is there a best way around this other than trying to seek out the people that are in your images and ask them what they would like you to write? That's my question. I'm now coming offline and off mute.

Tolu: Thank you for that question. That's a really great question and something that comes up really often. I like to think of it again as progress over perfection. I think taking a stab at it and just doing it and making sure that things are just more descriptive and include context is always appreciated. I had the opportunity to speak with some folks from California Council of the Blind a couple of months ago, and everyone is different, everyone wants something different. So it's going to be really difficult to make sure that everyone's happy. But we could all agree that we appreciate it when people put effort into making sure that they included the context. Because someone, if you over describe something, someone can come away and be like, “Oh, I don't need that,” and think of it in other terms. But if you don't describe something, or you under describe, that person doesn't have the full context or a full view into what's actually happening.

So I would say yes, in a perfect world we'd have folks in pictures describing themselves so we could share. But when that's not possible, I would really encourage us to think of how we'd describe something to a friend. If I have a picture of someone who's racially ambiguous and they're light skinned, I might just describe them as a light skinned person. It depends how much information is available to you in the context. But I really like to think of it as describing a picture to a friend. For example, super well known actor like Will Smith. I know that Will Smith describes himself as a Black man. So in alt text I'm going to write, Will Smith, a Black man in XYZ movie. But if I'm not sure who the person is or how they identify, I might just describe them as a light-skinned or a dark-skinned person with short or long curly hair.

It depends a lot on context, but again, progress over perfection. If someone is in that image and they really disagree with how you've described them and you weren't able to reach out to them, I personally would reach out and correct that person. So, progress over perfection, making it so that people have a form where they can be, I need a more detailed description of that thing and let you know would also be super helpful. But I think it's great that you're thinking about it, and I think you're doing the right thing by just getting started and just taking that first step.

Meryl: I'm wann add on to Tolu, so yes, I agree with that. And I have met people who identify as Latin, who are Hispanic, and you wouldn't know it from a picture. So, when I manage to meet up, and I always get the photos of the speaker, and I ask the speaker how they would like to be identified. I had one speaker who was Asian, but I did not know the person's background if they were Vietnamese, or Laotian, or Thailand, I didn't know where they were from. So I said, "How would you like to be identified?" And they really appreciated it. The reason progress over perfection works so well is because it means we are open to learning; we are open to trying to do better. But sometimes we take two steps back and one step forward. Progress is not always a straight line. Sometimes it can be a squiggly line. So, when we're understanding and educating, it helps us to keep our minds open. For example, in the United States, a lot of us who are deaf and hard of hearing say that we say deaf and hard of hearing. Hearing impaired is kind of less favored. However, I have met people in the US and beyond who prefer hearing impaired. So when I refer to them I'd say hearing impaired. So, we just need to be a little kinder and flexible, and that would go a long way.

Gail: Thank you. Actually, following on that, Risa Prezzano talked about how it's okay to be imperfect. And so her question for you guys are, how do you create more time for introductions, or convince people how important it is to understand that accessibility and inclusion is much larger than a clear functional fix? That's another great question.

Tolu: Yeah, that's a really great question. And I love this question because accessibility goes beyond compliance. It's beyond just fulfilling a set of laws. I think the best way to do this is just to create a sense of empathy. Ideally people aren't being inclusive or doing accessibility work because it's the law. It really is again a human rights issue. It's about making sure that everyone has equal access to things. So I think it's a cultural shift, if you're within a company or an organization, it's a cultural shift to make sure you're discussing inclusion needs, to make sure that at the beginning of a meeting you give context as to the meeting. You have the speakers introduce themselves, you have people who want to describe their appearance. I think it's a cultural shift, and encouraging folks plays a big part, but at the end of the day, not everyone is always going to buy in and that sucks. But as accessibility advocates, as people who find it important, I think we can be the people leading the charge on that, and making sure that we do it. Even if no one else in the room does it, if you do it, you're part of that cultural change, I think.

Meryl: I want to add on to Tolu. This is Meryl. So I have been asking my friends who are blind with low vision, “Do you like self-description?” And a friend of mine who is blind and has a lot of followers talked about how he went to a conference for the blind, and how he appreciated nobody was giving self-descriptions. So not everybody loves self-descriptions. So what I do is I follow the lead based on what I'm hearing or I ask whoever's behind it if I can. Sometimes you don't know. So what I do, is if you didn't know notice, I didn't just describe my physical appearance, I also mentioned something you can't see about me. Such as, I am a native Texan from Plano, Texas, and that I'm deaf, but that was going to come up anyway. So, I try to mix it up and keep it short and sweet.

Tolu: One last thing to add to that. Meryl, you made a really good point. Some people enjoy things like physical descriptions, some people really dislike them. And the interesting thing about them is that it depends. So, me as a Black woman, I find it important to mention that because, as someone who is speaking about intersectionality and the experience of Black women, I don't think it would be my place to talk about that if I wasn't a Black woman. So I think contextually it's important to give that information. On the flip side of things, yeah, it's important to me, so I describe that, and I think it's important to what I'm saying. But on the flip side, I'd like us to really consider, if we over describe, there's the option of kind of leave, the person leaving that on the table and ignoring it. But if we under describe, they have no choice, they don't have the additional context.

It's a tricky thing, but I'd like us to think of things that we do for accommodation. Just because some screen reader users find certain things helpful and some don't, we don't stop doing it because some screen reader users don't find it helpful. We do it and then people can take or leave it or we have other accommodations. For accessibility, just by the very nature, some of the things that we do are going to be helpful for some people and unhelpful for others. But I personally like to err on the side of being over abundant in description and access and letting people take and leave as they might like to. Other folks will disagree or will have different opinions, but that's the beauty of the diversity here. People disagree and people have different opinions, and that's my opinion I guess.

Meryl: I want to add on to that. This is Meryl speaking. So, I can't tell you, I really went into a problem of, of language, use of language. So I learned from somebody that, “listen,” you should not say the word, “listen” because of deaf people. And I'm like, I use it all the time. I say “hear” or “heard” all the time, and sometimes people, it's literal, but it's also not literal. So that's why I say progress over perfection to be more forgiving. And, I once had somebody correct me when I said a word or something, I don't remember what it was, and I said, “But that's what the person prefers.” I'm respecting their preference. And, at the beginning I forgot to mention that I usually say, “I have pale skin,” because I am pale as a ghost. And, but I made up for it later, I brought it up later. So I try to interject things that help people understand, be more informed about my background.

Gail: Thank you Meryl and thank you Tolu. We're going to be continuing with the office hours, but I wanted to turn it back to Emily Harris as we transition into the office hours.

Emily: Thank you, Gail and thank you everyone. This has been an incredibly riveting conversation, and I hope everyone can stay. But we do know that some of you need to leave. So please help us learn from your experiences if you do need to leave by taking a few minutes to fill out our survey, that will pop up after you leave. And Anjali will also be placing that survey link in the chat. Your feedback will inform our future learning series. Stay tuned for information on our 2023 series. As a reminder, our free Disability & Philanthropy Forum membership is open to anyone working in philanthropy. So please invite your colleagues to join and receive invitations to more sessions like this at disabilityphilanthropy.org. And, if your foundation is serious about its journey to inclusion, we hope that you will encourage your leadership to join 69 other foundations and philanthropy serving organizations who've committed to taking action by signing our Disability Inclusion Pledge. Accessible technology is a piece of that pledge.

You can find out again at disabilityphilanthropy.org. If you're a member of the Forum, you also will be receiving notices about our upcoming meeting of Celebrating Disability Across Philanthropy, CDAP for short, which is a cross philanthropy employee resource group. This is a group for employees working in philanthropy who either self-identify as disabled or want to champion disability inclusion in our sector. We have a meeting coming up on October 7th. We hope you'll join and or stay tuned for invitations in 2023. Thank you. And now back to Gail, Tolu, and Meryl. We'll go to gallery view and would love for you to join in our discussion. Thank you, Kevin, for modeling that by unmuting yourself and/or continue to add questions to the very active chat.

Gail: Thank you Emily and Gail Goldfinger had to leave, but I promised her that I would make sure that her question was answered. So let me read exactly what she wrote. Looking for guidance or resources available for accessible technology, both hardware and software. I'm trying to learn more about resources for our employees. I know this is a broad topic, but any guidance would be appreciated.

Tolu: I can jump in here. I think it's super important and awesome that you are thinking about internal access needs. Like we talked about earlier, it's very common for companies to look at externally and look at customers but not really consider internal accessibility. Something that I think is really helpful is having a specific form for people to request access needs or accommodations, and make it really easy for them to request and give feedback about how accessible things are. I think when people have the opportunity, they're generally really great at calling out accessibility issues that they see. So I think just being open, and letting people comment on when something's working and when it's not, and what they need is really helpful. But also making sure to specifically ask vendors providing software what they do to make sure things are accessible. Things might not be a hundred percent accessible at first, but if the vendor has no plans to make things accessible, then they're probably not the right vendor to help on that accessibility mission.

Meryl: This is Meryl. So, Tolu mentioned earlier that I wanted to add on, that sometimes you run into what Christopher Patinoe and I call, a Schrodinger’s alley cat. So if you know what Schrodinger’s means, if you do this, could this be happening too? So in terms of accessibility, somebody could need a light background, a light screen, where somebody else needs a dark screen. So their needs clash. Thankfully both websites and apps can be trained to be darker or lighter. So we can't do that for everything. So that's why I never say anything to be 100% accessible because there's always someone where the accessibility is being met for someone and it won't be for someone else. I know a hard of hearing person who prefers transcripts, I prefer captions. So we have different needs. Thankfully YouTube has both, so if you have caption video, YouTube automatically creates transcripts. I wish all video platforms could do that.

Gail: Thank you. Just to remind people, you can come off mic and video if you want, but I do want to scroll back up because there were a couple more questions that we did not get to. And so I want to make sure that when people do listen to this that they have an opportunity to see that their question was answered. So Patricia, what are valid sources of data about accessible technology and its impacts, and what are the pros and cons of accessible, assistive technology versus universal design? And I'm actually going to just put this down so you can see it as the most recent question too, so you don't have to scroll. There you go.

Tolu: I can jump in. So, if I'm understanding the first question correctly, what are the valid sources of data about assistive technology and its impacts? I'm not exactly sure about the impacts part, but we know that assistive technology gives folks with a variety of disabilities and experiences of the world a way to access things. So screen readers might be used by people who are blind, or they might be used by people who have cognitive disabilities, or they might be used by someone who has eye allergies and doesn't want to read that day. There are so many different kinds of people who are using assistive technology, and I think it's really helpful to not pigeonhole assistive technology users and kind of, like, pin them to a certain kind of disability. As Meryl mentioned earlier, there are deaf people who might want transcripts, there are deaf people who might want captions.

There are blind people who use canes, there are blind people who don't. So, I, I think we, all we need to know is that assistive technology helps people have access, and it's helpful to not pigeonhole those people into using certain technology. Pros and cons of assistive technology versus universal design. So, I believe that accessible design or accessible technology in general is a subset of universal design, right? Universal design is for everyone, accessible technology is for people who have disabilities and access needs. I wouldn't go so far as to say there are pros and cons. I'd say they're different schools of thought meant for different things. Universal design is great for giving access to as many people as possible, but when you're doing that, as Meryl's example earlier, sometimes universal design, like a light background, doesn't work for everyone. Some people need a darker background. So, like, thinking of things through the lens of accessibility and disability makes it clear that we need to accommodate people who have different needs, not necessarily have one solution for everyone or for the majority, that's not always going to work. Hopefully that's helpful.

Meryl: This is Meryl. So, one of my favorite examples of universal design that works for everyone. As far as I know, I have yet to see anyone not be able to use it, and that's the sliding doors when you go to a grocery store or your favorite shopping store, they slide, they open all the way, they're very tall. So that the tallest person in the world will not have to duck. And you could be on a wheelchair, you could be holding a baby, you could be doing any... it doesn't matter because the doors will open for you. I don't know if they open up for animals if they don't have a person with them. That would be interesting to see. But that's what I love about that example, is I have yet to see it fail anyone.

Gail: Thank you. I want to do another call, if anyone has a question you can either come off mic and ask it or to put it in the chat. And then also thank you, Anjali. She's helping me keep track to make sure I haven't missed a question in the chat. If we don't have any more questions, this webinar was recorded, and if you want to go back to refer to it, we hope you will share it with your colleagues. And I want to actually turn it back to Meryl and Tolu for any last thoughts or advice before we close.

Tolu: I just want to say thank you so much for having us. This was a great discussion and thank you to everyone here for coming in with such an open mind. I think a lot of times what we've really been talking about is not one solution fits all, and there are different approaches and schools of thought. So it was great to be in an open-minded environment to talk about these things. I really enjoyed this conversation, so thank you.

Meryl: This is Meryl. I echo what Tolu said. I really appreciate the conversation, that we were open about it. And I want to remind everyone, accessibility has a curb cut effect. You're expanding your reach when you weave accessibility throughout your organization and culture. And when accessibility is always part of your process, not an afterthought, it will be much easier and cheaper. As Tolu mentioned, if you've already bought the product, it’s too late. I'd like to tell the story of how my son and his friend made some cupcakes, and they tasted it, and they were awful. They were missing one teaspoon of an ingredient, one small ingredient. It was salt. Now, you can't sprinkle salt on the cupcakes, because the only bite that's going to get the salt is the very top. So it was not uniformly spread out through the cupcake. So the only way to fix it is to start over. That means you have to buy all the ingredients again. But if they had remembered that and went through the process and checked that they had everything at the beginning, then they wouldn't have run into this problem. And progress over perfection. Don't worry about getting it perfect.

Gail: Thank you, Meryl. And I would just add just one other thing. We've been talking a lot about what foundations can do internally, and I hope that philanthropy also thinks about areas when it comes to accessible technology that they can fund. And my last piece of advice, whenever in doubt, hire a disability consultant to guide you through the process. And at that we will close. Thank you guys again for being part of this session. Meryl and Tolu, I think you are just absolutely incredible, so thank you again for saying yes.