

NARRATOR:

The Disability & Philanthropy Forum presents Azeema Akram, Administrative Law Judge at the Illinois Human Rights Commission.

AZEEMA AKRAM:

The first thing that I want to say, it should be always the baseline, is that self-disclosure should always be a choice. Even though I'm encouraging you to self-disclose. Self-disclosure will reveal the disabled leaders that you already have in the philanthropy space and invoke increased representation for others such as the person who's interested in going into law school. The first deaf attorney I met was in my first year of law school. Her name is Rachel Arfa, she's the commissioner for the Mayor's Office of People with Disabilities in Chicago. And that was the first time I had ever met anyone with a disability in law school. But there are a lot of people with disabilities in law school, various types of disabilities. I would love to talk more offline about the law school question because every school is different, but they have to accommodate you.

And I will tell you that my personal statement when I applied to law school talked about my experience advocating for myself growing up, and how I thought that would make me a good lawyer. I thought I wanted to do disability related law at that time. So I disclosed during admissions in my personal statement. On the job, I will disclose when it becomes an issue. So my interview for this job that I'm in now was during COVID, during the middle of it. So it was virtual. And I didn't need as many accommodations because of the type of hearing that I have. And I had headphones and captions and all of that.

But in person, sometimes I will mention to people that I may ask them to repeat themselves, and it's not because I'm not listening to them, it's because I couldn't hear them. And I'm just wanting to make sure that I hear every word that they have to say in order to accurately respond. So those are my personal experiences with self-disclosure. Sometimes when I'm out and about in places of public accommodation, I don't mention anything at all. So it always depends. And I think that self-disclosure would absolutely lead to a more inclusive workplace culture, just our culture in general. Because the statistics that we've talked about are so much higher than we think they are with respect to how many people have disabilities. So as I mentioned before, ultimately all of us would benefit from changes made for people with disabilities who self-disclose.

So some more examples from my personal experience, if I am conducting a trial, and I try to get everyone mic-ed up. If I have issues, I can plug in headphones. I work with my court reporters. Microphones and captioning, if virtual. And a lot of these accommodations that I need, other attorneys have come up to me. Some of them are losing their hearing due to age, and they've talked to me privately afterward, and said, "Everything that you did helped me out so much more. And I had never really had to ask for these things before because I didn't know how. So

the fact that you just did it made me feel more open about telling you that I am sharing your experience." So you just never know.

We talk about some of the examples like ramps, and how that would not only help people who use wheelchairs, but people who have strollers or other various mobility aids. And another thing I want to mention about self-disclosure is it will force us to think more about, not just about accommodating, but actually having what they call a universal design. So making sure that everybody would have access to the same thing, rather than just having to find accommodations for people with disabilities to join those that don't necessarily. So those are some of the thoughts that I have about how it would reduce stigma and it should always be your choice.

NARRATOR:

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