SANDY HO:

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the Disability & Philanthropy Forum's Disability Equity Series. My name is Sandy Ho and I'm the executive director. I use she/her pronouns. And I am coming to you today from the unceded land of the Massachusett and Wampanoag people, also now known as Massachusetts. Just a few items before we get into our conversation.

As part of our commitment to accessibility, our panelists and I will each provide an audio description of ourselves. I'm an Asian-American disabled woman with short, dark, wavy hair. I'm wearing a green sweater with a black, white and gray pattern around the collar. And my Zoom background is blurred.

My access needs today are met because we do have a captioning that's provided through the screen text link. We are troubleshooting some of the caption access on Zoom. For today, all of our moderators and panelists will be on camera, but as our audience and participants, you all will be muted. This webinar is being recorded and so everybody will receive a link to the recording in a few weeks.

Although we are going to be using chat periodically from our team to drop links to share with you throughout the conversation, it will not be available for our folks to communicate out. So we highly recommend and encourage you to please use the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen to share any questions during the session.

And we'll do our best to incorporate those during the panel discussion. If that is not accessible to you, please feel free to send your Q&A over to Communications@DisabilityPhilanthropy.org. All right. So we do have a poll question to set the context for our conversation today. The poll question is, who was the Black disabled woman activist and civil rights leader who said, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired"?

So if you'll take a few seconds to put in your answer into the poll. So to moderate our panel, I'm delighted to introduce Patrick Cokley, senior program officer, of the Equity and Social Justice Partnership at Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. And Patrick is joined by civil rights attorney, Britney Wilson, and wellness curator, Mel Brown.

You can learn more about them in their bios that are being dropped into the chat. All right. Take it away, Patrick.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Hey, wonderful. Thank you so much, Sandy, and I'm super pleased to be joining everyone, and for the Disability & Philanthropy Forum to be hosting this wonderful conversation. My name is Patrick Cokley, my pronouns are he/him/his. I'm a fair-skinned– if I say fair-skinned, it gives away that I'm Southern. A light-skinned Black male, wearing dark glasses and a black and white sweater with a blurred background.

And my luxurious locks are pulled back behind my head today. My pronouns are he/him/his, and I am speaking to you today from unceded Lenni-Lenape land in Montclair, New Jersey. And it's

such a pleasure to be here with all of you today. I've actually very much been looking forward to this conversation for a couple of reasons. First, it's always key for us to share with each other.

And the real connection and the importance of talking about Black disability identity, is something that's really important to me, as when I grew up, I didn't really always feel like there was always good examples and good conversations. But secondly, as we're in a period of contention, this connection that we're having with each other today is important, because resistance is also about building community.

It's about existing in positive places, and I feel like especially with the panelists that we have joining us today, that there's going to be some real positive energy and positive outcomes to this discussion. So I'm pleased to have all of you with me enjoying that. So I hope that all of you join me in welcoming Mel Brown, a researcher, social scientist and founder of Deep Space Mind.

And I'm also pleased for our panelist, Britney Wilson, fellow Bison, which I'm also excited about, and director of Civil Rights and the Civil Rights and Disability Justice at NYU Law. Now, rather than read their bios, I think we can refer everyone to the chat and I'm just going to get started. Mel, we're going to start with you followed by Britney just for a quick introduction.

And then we can get into our conversation, which I know we're all excited to get moving. So Mel, go ahead.

MEL BROWN:

Hi, I'm Mel Brown. I am a Black femme, I have dark brown hair that is twisted and pulled back. I have on some silver earrings that dangle, and I am currently wearing a Deep Space Mind 215 printed, graphic T-shirt.

And my work is typically in the Lenapehoking territory, also known as Philadelphia. It's good to be here. I'm a social worker with lived experience in mental health institutionalization.

And my work intersects community mental health and an art practice, so it's good to be here. Thanks for having me, Patrick.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Oh, pleasure. All right. Britney, you are up next.

BRITNEY WILSON:

Hi, everyone, I'm Britney Wilson. I'm a Black disabled woman. My pronouns are she/her. I'm a dark-skinned Black woman with glasses. My hair is twisted and pulled back in a ponytail. I have on a black and gray printed blouse.

And I'm in my office at New York Law School where I direct the Civil Rights and Disability Justice Clinic. Clinics are many law offices inside of law schools where law students learn to be lawyers by working with attorneys on cases.

So I get to be both a civil rights attorney and a teacher at the same time, and I'm happy to be here.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Awesome. We are so happy to have you. So just for the three of us to dig in right away. Oftentimes, we get to these places and we like to couch our leadership, our engagement as something almost very textual. Like, "This is what happened, and it was all a plan from story A to story B."

Meanwhile, our lives tend to be a little bit more complicated and engaging with more twists and turns. So just as a first start off, we all share the identity of being Black people and having disability as part of our core identities. Tell us a little bit about, Mel and Britney, how has your personal story shaped how you navigate this world that we're in?

For me, it's been about where I can live, where I can go to work, how I take my kids to and from school. How has your personal story shaped the way that you navigate the world?

BRITNEY WILSON:

Sure. Should I kick it off?

PATRICK COKLEY:

Go ahead and kick us off.

BRITNEY WILSON:

I will say that I often say that my job as an attorney, it was not a career choice for me, that I am a civil rights attorney, I went to law school. Because I'm a Black disabled woman and I grew up having people fight for me, I wouldn't be here had they not fought for me, and I had to learn, I had to fight for myself.

And I had to learn to fight for myself, and I wanted to learn how to do that more formally. If I were not born in this body, there's tons of books I would have written by now. I'm still going to write those books, but I'm an artist at heart, I would have been like a basketball commentator or something. I'm an artist, so it fundamentally shapes the way that I navigate the world.

I think there are also certain privileges I've been able to achieve by virtue of education and over time. But I think also still, my identities as a Black disabled woman shape how I'm able to even take advantage of those opportunities. It still shapes where I live, what I can do, where I can go.

And how I navigate the world in so many different ways, that I don't think necessarily play out for people, even that might have been able to achieve some of the things that I've achieved in their lifetime.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Yeah. Mel, what about you?

MEL BROWN:

Yeah. Britney, thank you so much for bringing up your privileges. As someone who is disabled, I think that for me, it's like how I come to this work and understanding myself in context of my community and just who I am, and what got me here, is understanding that I have an invisible illness.

So being able to lead with having direct lived experience in a mental health institution and being institutionalized is something that I lead with. Because it has greatly shaped, informed my point of view through my experiences, through systems, navigating parenthood.

Also, being a person who's expressive and feels like that type of being able to reach very deeply within that expression is a privilege. And I've been able to really sit with that and have had the honor to share that experience and find more language about that.

Yeah. I think that that's how I come to the work and how that's affected my work, is by leading with thinking about how to be authentic and put down the professionalization.

PATRICK COKLEY:

That's super important. I think one of the interesting things, especially when you think of Black identity. And I'll say for me, having the benefit where my grandfather was an HBCU grad and my dad was an activist as well. So when I think about Black identity and policy changes, I think about in that context, the civil rights movement and the structures that were put in place, grassroots organizing.

But then as I've gotten into my own disability identity, I realized that I also use that as a bit of a lens to either help me understand next steps that I should be taking. And at times it's been good because I have a context outside of disability that I can use. But also at times, I'd say that there's lessons that I feel like we've gained inside the Black community that I don't always see reflected in the disability space.

And it can make that navigation a little bit more difficult. So I'm curious especially, and I'm going to lean to Britney first before we go back to Mel. I'm curious, Britney, with your experiences, especially on where we're at at civil rights. How are you seeing the impacts play out, not just for the disability community, but specifically for Black folks with disabilities right now in this moment?

BRITNEY WILSON:

I think this moment is particularly interesting, because I think most of us Black disabled advocates have always been advocating against and critiquing the siloed nature of social justice spaces, the "civil rights, racial justice space," and the seemingly separate disability rights space.

And I think advocates acknowledge that the two communities are interrelated and that sometimes our interests align. But I think overall, we don't generally do disability work from a starting point of racial justice advocacy. And understanding how disability and race, not just as

identities, but as social constructs that shape how people navigate the world, relate to one another.

But we're in a moment where all of our rights are under attack. And I think ironically, that's going to force us to think about the way we do this work differently and approach it differently, because we're seeing attacks on Title VI. And maybe if you're in a disability space, you don't typically think about that because that's a racial justice statute, Title VI Act of 1964.

But it was also the precursor to Section 504, so now when you see that law being attacked, you're worrying about what that means for disability laws. So I think that ironically, as we're all under attack, it's going to force us to come together in ways that we typically haven't. But I hope I'm correct about that, but we'll see.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed. Is that the only ways that we've seen racial justice and disability rights show up? I know we have things like the Brown decision.

Are there other examples that we should be looking to or thinking about, as we're thinking about that intersection of racial justice and disability rights?

BRITNEY WILSON:

Yeah. I think we all know that disability is impacted by every single aspect of social justice. So in this moment when we're talking about we're seeing immigration issues happen, and that is an issue that affects people with disabilities, whether we're talking about it or not.

Healthcare, of course, the economic policies that are happening are going to have a disproportionate impact on disabled people of color. So every single thing that's happening in this moment, is going to impact people across racial justice lines and disability justice lines as well.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed, indeed. It also makes me think of when we've talked about movement spaces, and Black spaces and disability spaces, oftentimes we come to these things, to these movements as a function of trauma. We're involved because something terrible happened to us or our family, and we say we want to make a change for how things are going on in our country.

Coming to something because of trauma, has a real impact then on personal mental health. So Mel, I'm curious with your experience, what's also going on as it relates to impacts on mental wellness and support? Are either of our communities doing it right, or doing things that are worthwhile to keep us ready for the fight ahead?

MEL BROWN:

Absolutely. So first of all, I think Black people have always been dynamic in ways that we express and how we come together. The ways that we are innovative, pull on our histories

collectively, our family and familiar histories, but also based off of location. So that within itself is absolutely yes to your question.

And to go back to about how the system is affecting, especially when it comes to policy, is like I think for us right now, there's been a significant misunderstanding of invisible illness and specifically mental illness. It seems like that comes up again when folks are in crisis mode.

And I think that's something that DSM 215 specifically is working on, is how to mitigate having to involve carceral systems when there is a crisis. How do we talk about these things? How do we have a shared language about it, and how do we elevate people who have lived experience? And their stories, how do we talk about that?

How do we incorporate it with our approach? And that being the possibility for harm reduction, and also thinking about it as an intervention for communities that can be very specific. So to answer your question, I think that there's on-the-ground work around this, that has a lot to do with destigmatizing mental health, for sure.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed. And Mel, I'm so glad you mentioned Deep Space Mind 215 for a couple of reasons. I think one of the things we know from the mental health space, is people who are often in mental health crisis believe that there is nothing to be done. Whereas there's tools and resources, it's the reason why it's so important for us to talk about it.

And I think the work that you're doing is awesome, because it also approaches that in the same way for a Black and disabled community, saying, "No, there's stuff we can do. We don't have to shoulder this by ourselves." Can you say a little bit more about some of the steps that you're using to either resist the stigma, dismantle them?

And change the way that not only do we perceive mental health in the Black community, but how we perceive mental health for Black disabled community as well?

MEL BROWN:

Yeah. Stepping away from thinking about professionalization and institutions being the acme of who gets to decide what mental wellness looks like. So as I mentioned, I'm thinking about how to come together. One thing that I think is happening within communities, is thinking about how to create safe spaces for community members to have hard conversations and build relationships.

And one thing that we've been doing is piloting that in green spaces. So community gardens and thinking about because of, again, of how mental health is, within Philadelphia specifically, I can just say that it's one of the many prongs of crises that are happening within our communities. And another thing that is really difficult is thinking about how housing intersects with mental health.

So creating these third spaces for community members to come in and get to know each other, because we're constantly being shuffled around the city, is important. And along with it being

intergenerational and going back to the idea of how do we have shared experience? And also leaning on the experiences of elders and what is an elder?

And even repairing some relationships with elders that have been ruptured, because of the gap of generations and how things are perceived or viewed. So having that third space has been vital to the work that we're doing currently in Philadelphia.

PATRICK COKLEY:

That's so awesome. I find myself also thinking about the impacts on the community. What it means when, like you were saying, if you repair relationships with elders, that's not just your family.

That's everyone they interact with, and that has the capacity to change the way that we live together. Does that also continue to push into broader mental health and well-being, or is it just like ripples in a pond? Does that work?

MEL BROWN:

Yeah. I think that what's happening is that when people show up as themselves, and we think about being peers, being community members, having stake in each other and building capacity within each other, it feels like it's not necessarily as heavy of a lift. And it's not necessarily, it doesn't feel like it's work.

It's not about the outcomes being about measurement and tools, rather than just authentic ways of sharing space. So getting folks into plant seeds and learn about the ecosystem, and the environment and the history of the land that's there, and how it's generational and it has a history that is multigenerational.

Even admits people moving from space and parts of the city to different parts of the city. I think that folks are coming together and talking about recipes, and talking about family history and thinking about what does it mean to preserve one's history and archival? And images and how to create images, and new memories and archive that?

So I think that those are some of the ways, outside of just thinking about more of a talk therapy or again, like a clinical practice of talking through the problem, and being engaged in having to constantly interrogate the problem. Thinking of other ways, other modalities to cope, and to be together and build relationship.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Oh my gosh. It's so important, especially because in a lot of BIPOC spaces and queer spaces, the capacity for revolution or for change doesn't just come from a podium or from policy. These are conversations that we have in our family kitchens around campfires. And those are the spaces, I think, that are often the engine for our creation.

But it can also make it difficult, I've found in even my own advocacy, where the place where I get power is not always the same place where the forward motion is happening. So if I'm in my

mom's kitchen and all of my family is talking about what we have to do for our people, I don't always have that in the disability spaces we're creating policy.

So it leads me to a question that I've always been curious about, and Britney, I'm going to throw it to you for this one. What are the obstacles to bring together racial justice and disability justice in a civil rights piece? Because we know it's more than just this cultural thing, but there's something going on that's keeping us from making a valid connection. What do you think it is?

BRITNEY WILSON:

I think that there are lots of factors. That's a huge question, but I think that there's this stigma or this rumor at least, that disability is a form of stigma, a societal stigma. And that when you have one form of societal stigma like race or a non-white race rather, that taking on another one like disability is something you don't want to have to navigate.

And scholars like Sami Schalk and her book, Black Disability Politics, have started to debunk this. Actually no, it's a lot more nuanced than that, and Black people have always advocated for people with disabilities. And I'm actually working on an article right now about, it's called The Disability History of Brown versus the Board of Education, where I talk about two cases.

One called Miller versus the DC Board of Education, which is a case in which five Black deaf students and their families sued Gallaudet University two years before Brown for the right to be educated at Gallaudet, which at the time only educated white deaf students. And also another case, Brown versus the Board of Education is actually made up of five companion cases.

So the Delaware companion case within Brown, one of the plaintiffs in that case had a heart condition, which is not part of the broader story within Brown that's often told. So her mother actually wanted to file the lawsuit, wanted her to be a plaintiff in the lawsuit to attend the integrated school, not just because she wanted her to go to school with white people.

Because it was actually dangerous to her health for her to have to travel across town to the white school. So this was significant to me, because it showed that Black disabled people were part and parcel of the road leading up to Brown and in Brown itself. And actually I found out that the attorney in the Miller case, the case suing Gallaudet, was actually the attorney in the DC companion case in Brown.

So that to me showed that it was intentional that there was this cadre of Black attorneys that were thinking about disability as also part of what needed to be included in education. But yet when you hear the story of disability in education, it usually starts with these cases, Park and Mills. Where after Brown, disability is something that people were told to be thinking about.

After Brown, where mostly white disability rights attorneys said, "Hey, we've given Black people rights. What about disabled people?" As though race and disability are mutually exclusive.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Right.

BRITNEY WILSON:

So my uncovering this history was really significant for me as a Black disabled person and as a scholar, because I was like, "Wait a minute, Black attorneys were advocating for Black disabled students, and that's not the story we tell ourselves."

So I think about how might that shape the way we do work currently, if we debunk this myth that people who do "civil rights, racial justice work" can't be concerned with or don't want to be concerned with disability?

And we started thinking about race and disability as issues that not only overlap in terms of identity, but that one impacts the other. Whereas you fight desegregation not just because you want to go to school with white people, but because segregation has disabling effects, right?

PATRICK COKLEY:

Right.

BRITNEY WILSON:

That's thinking about disability in a racial justice lens, and so I think that's part of the problem in terms of why the work is so siloed.

It's the narrative, it's the stories we tell ourselves, and so that's one way that I hope to address it.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed. And it's interesting how dangerous of a precedent it ends up setting, because then what it does is it makes it so that our broader disability community feels that they are let off the hook for not engaging with Black, Brown, Indigenous, queer folks because they can say, "We've had a stigma that's separated from us."

And yet, that's also not true because you can't go to any Black, Brown function, I can't go to my family functions, without throwing a rock and hitting somebody with a disability. We're always there and present. It has always been there and present, but somehow, like you said, this narrative has been created that insinuates that we are not a part of it. That we've never considered it.

Whereas like many things, we've always been there and present from the beginning. It raises some interesting questions then, because it then becomes necessary for folks like us on this panel, folks like our colleagues who've been really carrying the banner for Black disabled spaces, to also have to really be even more visible. Sometimes, I think more than we want to be.

So it makes me then wonder, "What else can we do not only to spread this advocacy, but how do we do it while also protecting ourselves?" Because when you put yourself forward, it can be scary and challenging. I don't always wake up wanting to be the all in all for every Black

disabled person, or be the Black person for the disability community or be the disabled person for the Black community. It's not easy. How do y'all take care of yourselves?

MEL BROWN:

Yeah. I think that taking care of myself has a lot to do with restoring my capacity to do the work. And to go back on, Patrick, your question, and Britney, your answer around that's one of the oldest tricks in the book, is this idea that Black folks are monolithic. And that we only have this very narrow way of being and way of even just being.

Yeah, a way of being and a way of being subjugated as well. It's like if we can just stick to this one box, then that is easy, it's easier to be subjugated. So I think once we come out and we think about how dynamic we are, again, being in space, having thought partnership, being in community space with other people, it brings about the possibility for there to be exchange.

And that also means an exchange in capacity of like, "I need people to pour into me. I need to understand what care it is that I need. And in order for me to do that, it's important for me to reconnect with my environment, with my surroundings." So I think that that's why being in that garden space, having this place to self-regulate and reconnect with my environment is something that's really important.

And I'm seeing that it has a heavy influence, and it has the ability to really restore folks in ways.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed. Like we said, disability isn't new to our community. And your work especially, making better connections for mental health and support of Black folks in general.

Have you seen resources, tools, cultural actions that work for us that have been missing, or have been pushed out of that broader mental health conversation?

MEL BROWN:

Yeah. How we have approached DSM 215, how we've approached even talking about this, is through the lens of Afrofuturism. So thinking about creativity and having the space to practice creativity, and thinking about futures and what that looks like, it's been very important. Because I think that if we can't see ourselves in the future, then what is it, what can we create?

So I think that that in itself also is an opportunity for there to be an exchange and thinking about what the possibilities are. And I think that that also in a lot of ways, thinking about how it intersects with policy. It's like those spaces like policy is about being creative and approaching a problem with creativity, and how to formalize it as a structure that everyone can use.

So how it can be universalized. Yeah. I think that that approach, thinking about the future, thinking about ourselves, reconnecting with one another, building relationships and expression, it's just how Black folks are. That's just integral to who we are.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed. And I think it's interesting the way that we hold and share the knowledge sometimes that works specifically for us. Britney, I was thinking that there's many a Black comedian that has talked about the elder in the community that tells a young person not to do this.

"Don't do that, that'll get you three to five. Don't do that. They'll say that you're guilty on this case." Are we seeing that same knowledge around Black disability experience living in our communities?

Is it growing as there's more of us our age starting to talk more about Black disability identity and knowledge?

BRITNEY WILSON:

I think yes. I think that the advocates are out there. I don't know how many. There's still not the number that I feel like I need. I feel like I need an elder like, "Wait a minute, where?"

So I think that the advocates are coming, and they're coming up after me and it's great to see. And there have always been elders in the community doing this work and lifting people up, but I still feel like we're greatly outnumbered.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed, indeed. And as I mentioned in the chat, it's oftentimes you feel like you need an adult in the room. And I think we have a very interesting opportunity where we get to develop some of that knowledge and do the things that we've been talking about. Reminding folks that it's not new, and yet we should be more willing and open to share and talk it through.

But also, just also being really open about all the implications that that will have. It's also interesting that when we talk about doing something like that, we're talking equally about gaining power, but also being vulnerable at the same time, which seems to be really much a mainstay for Black disability advocacy.

One of the things that we're seeing now, is philanthropy is starting to take a much larger role in this discussion. We're being hosted by the Disability & Philanthropy Forum. I get to be part of the tip of the spear for disability and philanthropy working at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

We have to really acknowledge that 30 years ago, 50 years ago, the way that philanthropy dealt with disability, was not the way that we're doing it now. It was very much charity or medical model. And now we're at a place where we're starting to not only see people with disabilities lead or be a part of these missions to support disabled communities.

But we're even seeing folks like Sandy Ho or Rebecca Cokley, or myself at Robert Wood Johnson be involved in these staffs, and be a part of the discussion about what disability support should look like from the foundation community. With that, I'm curious from the both of you, considering that again, not only of disabled communities, but also Black communities have not always been in the best place.

What do you think the responsibility is for philanthropy? What do we need to be doing to really make positive impacts in the disability space, that is inclusive of the Black cultural issues that even disability hasn't totally addressed yet?

BRITNEY WILSON:

I think that it's great to see philanthropy finally paying attention to communities like disability and disabled communities of color. I also think that we need to make sure that the resources actually get in the hands of impacted individuals and communities.

I know from personal experience, that institutions and the way things are set up, it often complicates maybe the angle that you're trying to achieve. There's often bureaucracy and red tape, and things like that have doubled the adverse impact on marginalized communities.

So if we could figure out a way to get resources to the actual individuals and communities that are going to need them, I think that that's going to be huge. Especially in this moment where like, "Do we have a government? What's the government doing?"

It's going to be especially important that people actually get the resources to take care of themselves and their needs.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed. Mel, what do you think? What should we do?

MEL BROWN:

You know me, I feel like I've probably said community 15, 20 times already within the past half hour. But one thing I think is also important is in philanthropy, I think that there is this barrier. There's a guard in thinking about engagement and on the ground, and the elbow to elbow.

So it's really about being intentional and building those relationships and listening. I think that when you have communities that are really wanting to build sustainability and focusing on it locally. Because like I was saying earlier about in Philadelphia, it feels like each neighborhood has its own thing, its own history, its own issues, its own people, its own landscape.

So although it does feel like it would take a lot more work to be engaged directly, I think that when it's about authenticity, that there is a possibility for that engagement without it feeling like surveillance. And that means bringing yourself, and so for me, again, thinking about hierarchy and how to enter in this space.

With the background of professionalization but also institutionalization, it's like I lead with a certain level of intimacy, vulnerability and deep engagement. And the only way I can do that is through listening and being authentic to my experience. I think philanthropy can take a few notes around that.

Yeah. Just give people directly, direct the funds to the people who are doing the work, and getting away from the feeling like the need for there to be measurables. But then that takes a lot of trust building, and I understand how difficult that can be.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed. And Mel, you've leaned into something that we've even heard from partners in philanthropy who say, "We want to be engaged, we want to have more knowledge, we want our grantees to be the diversity of the country." And yet there's often a fear, because our organizations that might have Black disability identity are not large.

They're tiny organizations and folks say, "Well, it's risky to fund something that small." It's like, "But they have the expertise that we need." So it begs a very interesting question of how do we get them to say, "Hey, these things that you say that are important, inclusion and access and getting the knowledge directly from the people, will also come with a little bit of risk"?

Or how do we communicate that that risk is not as big of a deal as you might think it is? And I'm not quite sure always how we get to do that or how we can communicate that effectively. There's also an opportunity too for how do we make sure that our colleagues with that knowledge base know how to engage and work with philanthropy as well?

And I think there's a real good chance for us to get out there. Last question for both of you. One of the exciting things about this conversation is that we each come from different perspectives. Like you said, none of us are monolithic, and so what are your last thoughts? If you could wave your wand, if we could use some root magic if we're not going to wave a wand that our people use?

And this is my people in South Carolina, they're root magic people. If we could do anything that would change the relationship between how either Black disability identity is discussed, or the knowledge that we would want everyone to have, what would be that thing that you would magically bring to bear? And Britney, I'm going to lean to you first. Give us some Black girl magic to change the world.

BRITNEY WILSON:

Oh wow, that's a lot of pressure. I feel like you got to listen to people, listen to Black disabled people. This panel being called Black Disabled Leadership, I feel like it's so fitting, because maybe perhaps I'm someone people might think of as a Black disabled leader, although I don't know how I feel about that title.

But I can tell you from personal experience, even with every credential or experience or accolades, so on and so forth, the fights that I have to have to be listened to, to be taken seriously, and I see it happen to so many other people. People like to put us in figurehead positions like representation.

"Look, look, we gave you a title, we're letting you do this thing." But when I'm actually like, "Okay, but here's what we need to do and here's how we should do it," it's like a battle. So you

can't have leadership without true empowerment and that is what I would suggest. Because otherwise, we're just talking about tokens and figureheads, and I think that that is the real barrier that we have to overcome.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Yeah, indeed, indeed. Well said. Go ahead, Mel.

MEL BROWN:

Yeah. I think that, Britney, when you're talking about empowerment, I think one thing that is important when it comes to empowerment and doing that work, is to take a step back individually and address shame. And like some of these, I feel like even addressing the shame of how people perceive disabilities, especially as Black folks with these multipronged identities.

It's like addressing the shame, holding the shame, processing the shame, and also recognizing that you're not alone. And the more that we talk about it, the less that we feel alone and ashamed. And I think, yeah, the courage part is about how do we have pride about ourselves outside of just the accolades? Because they're great, but I also am a person.

And how do we humanize, keep our humanity intact when we're doing this work? I think that that's one of the hardest things as a social worker, who's seen as the person with the answers to these hard questions of like, "I'm also a person." So being very clear and real about my capacity.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed. In listening to you, I'm also reminded of the positive lessons that I've taken on my journey of accepting my own Black disability identity, because it's not something that happened overnight. And realizing that not only have I been able to be present, but that there have been folks with my experience that have been present at all of the greatest things that have happened to our communities.

In multiple communities, not even just the Black spaces, and that's exciting to realize. It's like we're not talking about something that makes us into a cartoon or a caricature, like you said, Mel. We're talking about something that fully endorses our humanity, which is so important when we start talking about this conversation of what it means to be Black and disabled.

Now, so that I don't just have my own personal conversation this entire time, which I would totally love to do, Gail has actually opened Q&A up. So for anyone who has questions, I know that you can put it in the chat and Gail will make sure that they get to us.

Our first one is already in and it says, "As an advocate, I want to support incarcerated and institutionalized, disabled people. What are some of the most impactful ways that I can contribute to the fight for their freedom and their dignity?"

BRITNEY WILSON:

I don't even know that I feel most qualified to answer this, because I feel like people with experience in the carceral system are the people who are best suited to answer that. But I think there are great organizations that do work on behalf of incarcerated people with disabilities.

I'm thinking about HEARD, first and foremost, so I would start there. But I'm also thinking about just organizations that donate books to incarcerated individuals, and have volunteer programs where they go into prisons and teach and do art programs with incarcerated individuals.

Not just what you might think of as legal advocacy or grassroots organizing in that way, but ways that actually build with and work with incarcerated people with disabilities in other ways. But I guess that's a place to start.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed, indeed. Mel, any thoughts?

MEL BROWN:

I would second that. I think that if folks want to think about advocacy through the lens of allyship.

Yeah, plug into folks who have lived experience of these experiences of institutionalization and disability. And then I was just going to say, Britney, yeah, listening.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed, indeed. To that end, I would also say we have to be careful that we don't fall for that narrative that suggests that anyone in the carceral system is undeserving of care, undeserving of resource. And undeserving of the tools that would basically allow them to effectively rejoin and be reintegrated back into society.

That discussion of lack of deservedness is the path towards dehumanizing those individuals. And oftentimes, because being incarcerated also can be the cause of disability, we're again continuing to not only dehumanize, but just not give people with disabilities the tools they need to be successful.

So HEARD's main campaign about video conferencing and access for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, it always runs into this idea of like, "Well, if you did a crime, then you deserve what you get." No one deserves to be tortured by the state. No one deserves to have their humanity questioned, and we have to really take a hard stance on that.

And I think as Black people especially, it's part of our responsibility to remind everyone that it's when you insinuate that someone isn't human because they're incarcerated, these are mistakes that we've made as a country before. Another question, which is super exciting, I'm so glad they're rolling in.

It says, "Would anyone want to express thoughts on whether or not the concept of Black excellence may be ableist and a hindrance in creating a more inclusive civil and social rights

movement?" I'll tell you what, I want to give the two of you a little opportunity to think. I'll jump in on this one first because it's exciting.

I'm not sure that it's necessarily the concept of Black excellence that is a hindrance or is necessarily the fault of ableism. I think what the issue there is that Black excellence also comes from a place where if Black people are not seen as good enough, then only those of us who are super exceptional are then able to participate.

So because of that, what it does is it buffs out every other part of your identity that you have. And this isn't conjecture, this is me as the Howard graduate who got his scholarship and almost failed out of Howard, because I did not have the access needs to not fail my math class when I couldn't see my boards.

Because I was not trained or supported or told that it was okay to go get accommodations. So the solution is not necessarily that we get rid of Black excellence, but the solution is we have to start talking about the many faces of excellence. And understanding that even as Black people, all of our identities, including our disabilities come to bear.

But I will also say, I love this question because this is a thinking question, it's not totally clear. Britney, Mel, what do y'all think? Britney, you're unmuted so I'm going to go to you.

BRITNEY WILSON:

Yeah. My answer is it depends on how you define excellence, right?

PATRICK COKLEY:

Right.

BRITNEY WILSON:

Because if you're thinking of excellence, I think we often frame excellence as productivity. What can you do? What have you produced? All these things.

PATRICK COKLEY:

We're not cogs in a machine for utility, Britney?

BRITNEY WILSON:

Right. And that, of course, is going to lend itself to ableism, because that is what ableism is rooted in. Also, even the notion of having to be excellent, whatever that means, this standard is usually generated in response to racism.

It's like, "Oh, there's this thing that I'm trying to prove that I'm not, and so I'm going to prove you wrong." So I think that can be a problematic aspect of Black excellence if you're defining it in terms of societal standards, or need to prove your worth to someone.

But if excellent to you means you ate X amount of cookies today, then be Black and excellent. Excellence is whatever you want it to be. I think the problem is when we root it in societal standards and norms.

MEL BROWN:

Yeah. I feel like this is one of those questions that I get excited about as well, because it really for real pushes the narrative around just who we are as Black people, and how language has been weaponized against us.

The myth of meritocracy is one of the oldest tricks in the book of like, "The only way that we can be seen as human or as valuable is how much we produce." This is how we enter into subjugation and how our labor is used, and how it is abused and taken to uphold the status quo.

So I think that once folks start talking about Black excellence, I tend to get very prickly about it because I think that it directly is very ableist in the ways that it's been used as a tool to push ableism within our conversations within Black spaces. That to me feels very, very apparent.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed. And I think it's a reminder too, why the concept of the anti-capitalist politic is one of the core values of disability justice, and that's not just hating on capitalism.

It means we are not cogs in a machine to be used. We're individuals with experiences and loves, and cares and justice, and that's how we should be perceived. Not whether or not I hold my pencil the same way as everybody else. So yes, yes, I'm all about-

BRITNEY WILSON:

Presentation about philanthropy, we should say that philanthropy also has to take on that perspective as well.

MEL BROWN:

Okay.

BRITNEY WILSON:

And disability justice, I'm going back to the question on incarceration, disability justice is also abolitionists.

So that's another way to support incarcerated people with disabilities. There are a lot of great organizations that do abolition-based work.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed. All right. These questions are going to keep rolling in, and Mel and Britney, keep answering what you want and leading us closer to the truth.

What from your personal experiences has been most impactful in feeling supported in the work environment? And what are the nuances of supporting Black women around mental health in the workplace?

MEL BROWN:

Yeah. I think one thing that I have had to understand is what my work was as a Black femme. I feel like this also is a great segue into the conversation around being a token, around the conversation of being perceived as the strong one. And how that also is ableist language of I think that when I'm in environments, be it work, my community.

If I am seen as a person who deserves wholeness, and that is the approach to how people engage with me, and it not being about perfection, but me being humanized, then I am in spaces where I can have safety. And I think that one of the hardest parts about being in capitalism, especially as it is imploding around us, is just the culture around labor and the culture around work.

It is very, very difficult. It has been very historically harmful, yet in some spaces very rewarding. And I think people can also have their roses in ways that they've pushed against certain cultures and environments. Yeah. I think that that's been very difficult just in my own personal journey. Even in the work that I do today, it has been hard, so yeah.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed. All right. Oh, I'm sorry, Britney. Did you have a response for that?

BRITNEY WILSON:

No, I didn't know if you wanted me to or not.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Well, I have one last question for both of you. It's not going to be quick, but I'm going to take a little bit of prerogative too, because this question in some ways is also for me. The question initially says, "Can you talk about the leadership of Black women in moving intersectionality forward in the racial and disability justice context, and integrating feminist and anti-sexist lens?"

And this seems especially important to our current context where white male supremacy seems to be running our world. I'm going to spin this question a little bit, and acknowledge that Black women have especially been the standard-bearers as it relates in racial and disability justice and in parts of our movement. So I'm going to spin it and say, "What can I do, especially as a Black man, to be better supportive?"

And how does that bleed over into the work that we've been talking about for disability justice?

MEL BROWN:

Britney, I feel like you had touched on being seen and not heard, and I think that that's one of the things is like, "Yeah, deep listening. Deep listening and enablement." Some people, I know I need to be hyped up a lot to get through, so it's just like that's a part of care.

But also thinking about how we've talked about carceral systems and one of the things that upholds carceral systems is this idea of punition, of if you do it wrong, if you get it wrong, then you're wrong. And then that says something about who you are.

So it's I think that if we can reevaluate how we measure success and thinking about how failure are opportunities to learn things, I think that some of the pressure can be taken off. Also, there can be some mutual holding and uplifting and hyping up. I think that that's really important.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed. Britney, close us out.

BRITNEY WILSON:

Yeah, I think I would echo that. I think that unfortunately, Black men and Black women are often pitted against one another. And we're in this moment, especially where there's a lot of like, "Oh, Black women are the most educated group of people."

And we're still hearing narratives about Black men "lagging behind" or not achieving in air quotes at the same rate. And that has led to a lot of, I think, animosity rooted in a lot of the systems that we're critiquing today.

And I think if we can figure out a way to hype each other up, like you're saying, Mel, and support one another actively and not fall into that cycle. That's what's going to be important for our liberation collectively.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Oh my gosh. In case y'all didn't know, Britney Wilson is associate professor of law and director of Civil Rights and Disability Justice Clinic at New York Law School.

Mel Brown is a social scientist and researcher located in Philly, and co-founder of Deep Space Mind 215. It has been a pleasure to have this conversation with the both of you, and I can't wait for the work ahead. Olivia, I'm going to pass it back to you.

Olivia Williams:

Thank you so much, Patrick, Mel, Britney, this has been so fantastic. As a person who's gotten to listen in on it, it's just been a privilege and an honor to have you all here sharing your thoughts today, and very personally impactful for me. I want to also thank all of our attendees for being here with us and also for your patience as we worked through some of our technical difficulties.

Following the close of this session, you will receive a short survey and please help us learn from your experience by taking a few minutes to fill it out. And a link is also available in the chat. And

we hope that you will join us for our next webinar taking place on October 9th, on disability justice and immigration. And I've just dropped the link for that in the chat as well.

Until then, please keep up with us on our website, via our newsletter, across social media platforms. We may also be adding additional, responsive programming throughout the year, and so we encourage you to keep up with us as we make sure to respond to the changing landscape that we're all experiencing.

But until then, I'll let you all get back to your day. Thank you so much for joining us. And again, thank you so much, Patrick, Britney, and Mel.

MEL BROWN:

Yeah, thank you. It was a pleasure, y'all.

BRITNEY WILSON:

Likewise, thank you for having me.

PATRICK COKLEY:

Indeed, this was great. Thank you so much.

BRITNEY WILSON:

All right.

MEL BROWN:

Bye.