

Transcript of the 2019 Equality and Diversity Lecture – ‘In conversation with Haben Girma’

Chair: Professor Anne Davies, Dean of the Faculty of Law

Interviewer: Rahul Bajaj, Co-Chair of DisCam (Oxford Student Union’s Disabilities Campaign)

Interviewee: Haben Girma

Professor Anne Davies: Good evening everyone, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the Faculty’s second Annual Equality Lecture which is co-organised this year by DisCam and The Law Society and generously sponsored by Blackstone Chambers.

The aim of the lecture is to give us an opportunity to learn from someone who has expertise and experience in equality issues. Tonight is our privilege to learn from Haben Girma, a leading disability and equality advocate who is going to be in conversation with our very own Rahul Bajaj, the co-chair of DisCam.

Haben has recently published her autobiography which I really recommend to you, it’s a great read. I was really struck by this quote “People with disabilities are successful when we develop alternative techniques and our community chooses inclusion” and I’m excited to learn more about how can we choose inclusion to the discussion tonight.

At the end of the conversation there’s going to be a Q&A session so please think up some good questions. If you are able to, we are going to invite you down to the front to use Haben’s keyboard to ask your question and if that’s not possible for you we have some helpers who will bring it to you or otherwise make it possible to ask your question. So I’m going to hand over now to our speakers.

Rahul Bajaj: Professor Davies, members of the faculty, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for that introduction Professor Davies, it is a real honour to be given the opportunity to interact with Haben today.

I first contacted Haben in October 2013. At that time she had just graduated from Harvard Law School and I was a second year law student in my hometown of Nagpur, in the centre part of India. ‘People like you make the world a truly better place to live in’, I had said to her then. In February 2013 Justice Clarence Thomas who sat in the U.S. Supreme Court visited Harvard Law School, where Haben was studying at the time. The Law School Dean, Martha Minow, asked Clarence Thomas to identify his personal heroes. After naming his grandparents and one of his former Law clerks, Thomas named Haben. ‘I truly admire that kind of courage and that kind of goodness in a person’ he had said then. Just like Thomas, for as long as I have known her, Haben has been one of my heroes too, and I have kept up with her progress, looked up to her and try to embody the type of courage and goodness that she possesses. And yet, as I’m sure Haben will agree, in 2019 we all need to do much more to ensure that stories such as hers cease to be remarkable and that one does not have to exhibit that kind of courage and great that she has far too often been compelled to display in order to succeed. It is my honest hope that our conversation here today will help shine a spotlight on what each of us in this room can do help make that a reality.

With that I will like to invite Haben to share with us my first question, the nature of her disability and the coping strategy that she adopts in broad and general terms to deal with the challenges that her disability presents.

Haben Girma: Thank you Rahul, I’m thrilled to be here. So we are starting with defining disability because a lot of people have questions and when the question of disability is stuck in your mind you have trouble concentrating on the other things, like law, so we will discuss disability first so that all

the questions are cleared up. I'm deafblind, deafblindness is a spectrum of vision and hearing loss, some deafblind people use sign language, visual sign language or tactile sign language, where they put the hand on top of the other hand and feel the signs. Other deafblind people use print on palm, where they write letters on the palm and they can feel what's being written, lots of different communication skills. Most people around me do not know sign language and do not know braille and I felt incredibly isolated, missing out on so much visual and audio inspiration. Within my family, my parents do not know sign language and do not know braille so I kept asking myself growing up 'how can I get access to more information, what can I do?' and I asked myself 'what are my strengths' and one of my strengths is my sense of touch. I've been reading braille since about 1st grade and in 2010 a new braille device came out. It had Bluetooth support and that sparked the idea that maybe I can connect a braille computer and keyboard. Many people around me knew how to type, especially millennials. (Audience laughs). So I learned to hand the people the keyboard and explain I'm deafblind but if you type what you are saying I'll be able to the words, and that has dramatically increased my access to information. It suddenly became easier to talk with people in all kinds of environments. So this is what I use for communication, I have a typist in the front who is typing what Rahul's says and I'm able to read it. He will also type audience's feedback so if people smile, laugh, fall asleep..., (audience laughs), he is watching you. So there's a lot to communication solutions. I've built up some, disability drives innovation. I faced the challenge and it has inspired me to come up with a new solution, this is not unique, people with disabilities have been doing this throughout history, we come up with solutions. Sign language is a form of innovation. Deaf people all over the world faced the challenge not being able to hear spoken language and they solved that challenge by creating a visual language. Each language is unique, the dominant here is British sign language, in France it's French sign language, in the Unites States they have a completely different language called American sign language. (Audience giggles.) So these are solutions, disability drives innovation, our dominant culture says 'poor things, they can't do this, they can't do that' but we actually come up with a lot of solutions and have a lot of talent so we need to change the dominant narrative so that our culture and our laws and the people enforcing the laws respect people with disabilities as talented and contributing members of society.

Rahul Bajaj: Thanks for that, really powerful set of comments Haben. My second question to you is, I have a bunch of questions now about your book having it read closely in preparing for this interview. In the second chapter of your book you talk about an experience that you had at the Bret Harte Middle School involving one of your teachers, Mr. Smith, can you share that story with us?

Haben Girma: Yes, absolutely. So in my book, it's called 'Haben: the deafblind woman who conquered Harvard Law', in chapter 2 of that book there's a story of when I was 12 years old an instructor told me I was failing a class. That shocked me 'cause I do all my assignments. Whenever the assigned homework that I knew about I did the work and we discovered that the Professor was writing on the board and wasn't seeing it or they were announcing homework from the back of the room and I couldn't hear it. The environment was designed for a very specific type of student, students who could hear, who could see, who could move around freely, who spoke English, so the environment was built for only a specific type of student, and any student who was different had to carry the extra burden of being their own instructor, and advocate and student. And I realised that at age 12, and I basically had a choice to fail school or become my own advocate and I started advocating. It's not fair to put this extra burden on kids with disabilities or kids who fit into other minority groups. It should be the universities' responsibility, the schools', the society's responsibility to give each child the opportunity of an education but I, I was forced to advocate, so every day at the end of the class I had to check in "Did I miss anything, please tell me all the assignments", which is actually hard for a student because students don't want homework.

(Audience laughs)

Rahul Bajaj: Yeah, yeah. I found it quite powerful that you say in the book, and I quote “It’s a sighted, hearing classroom, in a sighted, hearing school, in a sighted hearing society. They place the burden on me to step out of my world and reach into theirs” so I was just wondering, I guess part of it it’s answered from what you’ve just said, but if you would like to expand on what it is to your diagnosis that result in our society being set up in a way that compels us as disabled people to, as you put it, step out of our world and reach into theirs.

Haben Girma: If the professor saw me as a full person with talents and with disabilities, the professor would have made sure that I had access to the assignments, rather than just announcing it from the back of the room. They could have told me of the assignments, come over to me, give me a copy of the assignment in braille. I had lots of ways to access information, I’ve been reading braille since first grade so the instructors knew they could give me access to braille, but a lot of instructors, a lot of people in our society treat everyone just like themselves but not everyone is just like you.

Rahul Bajaj: Yeah.

Haben Girma: This is a very diverse community and instead of treating everyone just like ourselves we should provide information in multiple formats, in multiple languages so it’s accessible to the largest number of people, and it’s particularly important in education ‘cause kids are vulnerable and we need to give them the opportunity to grow and become successful adults.

Rahul Bajaj: Okay, my next question is about the story that you share in chapter four. You were involved in organising a wedding with some of your distant family members and you talk about how you experienced an aching sense of loneliness during that process. Can you share that story with our audience?

Haben Girma: My parents had very high expectations for me. They insisted that I can do everything non-disabled kids can do. I tried to tell them “I’m blind, I can’t do dishes” (audience laughs), they wouldn’t believe me so I had to do chores and I had to do all the other things non-disabled kids do. That’s great that they have high expectations, but on the other hand I had unique struggles and they were not experiencing my struggles with me, and that felt very isolated.

Rahul Bajaj: Yeah.

Haben Girma: My parents knew they should learn braille and sign language but never got around to it, and I know this happens in other families too, where the parent doesn’t take the time to learn sign language or if the child is using a wheelchair the parent never learns how wheelchairs work, what access is like for a wheelchair user so it’s really important in families to combat that isolation and the way to do it is to connect at the disability level, learn the skills alongside the child so you are in it together rather than leaving the child to struggle on their own.

Rahul Bajaj: Yeah, and it also struck me how that experience contrasted with the last scene of the book where you talk about you being at the White House, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and you were at this reception where people around you were talking and having a good time but on that occasion you decided to work on the inhibition that you were facing and struck up a conversation with them. So I was just wondering if you could reflect on how those two experiences differ from each other from the standpoint of engaging with others as a disabled person. And then more broadly on what have these experiences taught you about how we as disabled people can engage more constructively with the challenges that we face?

Haben Girma: Absolutely, so in 2015 I had the honour of meeting President Barack Obama, they were celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act at the White House.

Rahul Bajaj: I am jealous!

(Audience and Haben laugh)

Haben Girma: I'm sorry you are jealous but he has more time now so maybe... (inaudible as audience erupts into laughter). So they were celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act and advocates from all over the United States got together to celebrate that act. I'm called 'generation ADA' because I grew up with the opportunities created by the ADA, I've had more access compared to many of the people that came before me and laws can really change a community. And generation ADA in the U.S. really highlights that because we have so many more students with disabilities being firsts in different fields, I was the first deafblind student at Harvard Law School because Harvard finally removed enough barriers to make it possible. Helen Keller was a phenomenal deafblind woman, brilliant, hardworking. She wanted to go to Harvard but Harvard wouldn't admit her; back then Harvard only admitted men. Helen's disability didn't hold her back, her gender didn't hold her back, it was the community at Harvard that practiced exclusion of all women. Over time that community changed and opened its doors to women, people of colour, and people with disabilities so a lot has changed over the years but we are not done creating access, there's still more work to do so in 2015 advocates gathered to celebrate the work that had already been done and to acknowledge the future work that still needed to be done. And before I met President Obama I met with his advisor, Valerie Jarrett, and I asked her "Can President Obama type?" (audience chuckles) 'cause I had the keyboard and this braille system and I've met so many people who say 'Oh no that's weird, I'm not going to type to you, that's too different' and I wasn't sure how he would react and Valerie Jarrett, his advisor, told me "Yes, he can". (Audience laughs)

And so we talked and I got in line to meet President Obama and long in line Vice President Joe Biden came over and my assistant gave him the keyboard and Joe Biden started to type a message. He didn't type 'Hi', he didn't type 'Nice to meet you', he typed "I love you" (Audience laughs).

Rahul Bajaj: Why am I not surprised?

Haben Girma: I was flustered and I didn't know exactly what to say... (Audience laughs). Then I finally met President Obama, we handed him the keyboard and I said "I had a wonderful conversation with Valerie Jarrett and we are wondering if you can type as fast as she can" (audience laughs). He said "Oh no, she types much faster", and at that point I wanted to assure him, I didn't want him to be uncomfortable so I told him 'My dad types with two fingers' (audience laughs), and he said "I do too" (audience laughs again). So he was laughing, the whole room was laughing, it's really important to have a sense of humour. Humour dispels a lot of the disability awkwardness. When we meet someone who is different from us sometimes we don't know what to say so we feel awkward but laughter can help relax one and you can start asking the questions that resolve many of the issues. President Obama has a fantastic sense of humour, and was respectful and kind and warm and advocated for the disability community, we need more advocates. Rahul, I'm glad you are working as an advocate.

Rahul Bajaj: Thank you, I am humbled that you consider me in the same league as... (inaudible due to loud audience laughter). Moving on, so you are talking in chapter seven in the book about a situation where you wanted to go to Mali to build a school and the discussion that you had with your parents about that. Would you mind sharing that story with us?

Haben Girma: One day, in high school, in 10th grade, I went to my parents and said “There’s this fantastic organisation that helps build schools in developing countries and I want to help build a school in Mali, West Africa. Can I go?” And they said no. I explained to them the whole programme would be paid for, it’s free, they wouldn’t have to do anything. All they had to do was sign the permission form. They said no. And I tried to engage them “What are your concerns?” They said “How are you going to build a school when you can’t see? If there’s a snake on the ground you are not going to see it, then what?” And they are right, if there was a snake on the ground I wouldn’t see it, I’m very honest about the fact that I’m blind, and I’m not going to lie about my disabilities but I don’t want fear to guide my whole life. Yes, there are snakes in Africa but there are also snakes in California.

Rahul Bajaj: Yes...

Haben Girma: I can’t refuse to leave my home just because of the fear of snakes.

Rahul Bajaj: Yeah...

Haben Girma: So I told my parents “I don’t want fear to lead my life, I’m going to let courage lead my life.” And they still said no (audience laughs). Parents do this, they are protective, it comes from a place of love but they also don’t entirely trust, society doesn’t entirely trust disabled people to know our skills and abilities, and I recognised that so I asked myself what can I do to persuade them, if they don’t trust me to recognise my abilities who would they trust? I brought in the Programme Manager and she talked with them over lunch and they asked her “How is she going to build a school when she can’t see?” and the Programme Manager told them “I don’t entirely know but she’ll find a way, she’ll make it work. The sighted American students also don’t know how to build a school (audience laughs) they’ll figure it out together”. And finally at that point my parents agreed to sign the form I went to Mali, helped build the school, physically building the school so shovelling, building bricks, digging the latrines, and when I came back to California my parents felt a little more confident about my abilities, but just a little. (Audience laughs).

Rahul Bajaj: That chapter in particular really resonated very strongly with me. So much so that it almost made me cry because it kind of reminded me of the arguments that I’ve had with my family about these kinds of issues over the years, and recently when I was going to London to stay there alone for a fellowship I had a similar argument with my father when I tried to reason with him and then I told him I would be able to stay on my own, I lived in Oxford for the year, I could manage and I put forward a set of rational arguments and he was like “You have truly become a lawyer now”. (Audience laughs)

So my next question is somewhat linked to what you’ve just said and I find it quite powerful. You say in the book that your gratitude for your parents coexists with a persistent pounding to go. You write and I quote “Go! Because dancing fills me with joy, unlike sitting safely on the sidelines. Go! Even if it means nights of crying myself to sleep. Go! Because the story of my family compels me to reach for the grand unknown in all its hopeful glory. My parents will understand in the end.” So I’m just wondering if you can reflect on how we can disentangle the love that others have for us with a desire to exercise control over us, which can often be claustrophobic?

Haben Girma: It is really hard because it’s an emotional argument, it’s not a logical argument and I told my parents about an independence training centre where blind people can build up confidence skills and my plan, I explained to my parents, is after high school I would go to the training centre and I would learn all the blindness skills: how to cope without sight, how to use computers, how to cross streets without sight. And after mastering all those skills then for the rest of my life, college, law school, I wouldn’t have to worry ‘how does a blind person do this, how does a blind person do that?’.

My parents wanted me to stay home, they would have preferred to chaperone me everywhere, to do my laundry, to do the cooking for me. It comes out of love, it comes out of wanting to protect, because they know it's a dangerous world with snakes (audience chuckles), but I insisted, I advocated and I think a lot of disabled people make for great lawyers because we practiced advocacy in our homes and that self-advocacy can translate into powerful community advocacy.

Rahul Bajaj: Right. My next question to you is again, based on something that you say in the book which I found quite powerful and that I would like to put that to you. You say: "Ableism runs so deep in our society that most ableists do not recognise their actions as ableism. They coat it in sweetness, and then expect applause for their good deeds. Any attempts to explain the ableism get brushed aside as angry, insensitive and ungrateful". Can you expand on what you mean by this?

Haben Girma: Ableism is the idea that people with disabilities are inferior to the non-disabled. We are not inferior, but that's the message society gives out and sometimes we accidentally internalise those messages. Disabled people also sometimes internalise those messages. It's so widespread that when we point it out, when we call it out people think "Oh, you are just being mean. I was just being nice, I was trying to help, just trying to do a good deed." It's very difficult to point it out to someone "You are doing something ableist" and my first year in university I was partnered with a roommate who shared many of my characteristics, she loved of travelling, she loved dancing, she loved chocolate so we thought we were going to get along and our very first evening together she said "We are gonna go on a walking trail and I don't think you should come with us because it's not safe" and I told her "I'll be fine, I use a white cane and the white cane will tell me when there are rocks or stairs". And she says "Oh no, it's really slippery, it's not safe. I really think you should stay here." I again explained that the cane will alert me to any dangers and I would be fine. She refused to listen. And that was devastating 'cause we go to university thinking that's where we are going to meet our lifelong friends, and if even this person, who shared so many characteristics with me, is ableist, how will I ever make friends in university? It was really, really frustrating and difficult even just to explain that refusing to accept that people with disabilities have talents, the ability to walk, at least for people whose physicality is not impaired was frustrating. So I had to regroup and build up strategies for forming connections, "How do I make people feel comfortable, how do I help people recognise that I am talented?" I have disabilities and I also have talents. I eventually did find those people who were able to connect and recognise that humans are complex, everyone has challenges and strengths, some are more visible than others but we all have challenges and strengths.

Rahul Bajaj: Yeah.

Haben Girma: And it's up to all of us to build a community that's inclusive and celebrates all the different ways we are human.

Rahul Bajaj: Mhm, thanks for that. A very powerful comment. My next question to you about the second year of your undergraduate education in Lewis & Clark college, after which you decided to go to Alaska in search of a summer. Can you share the experience of trying to find a job in Alaska that summer?

Haben Girma: So in college I wanted to get a summer job, loads of college students get summer jobs so why not me? And a friend of mine told me "I know a place where you are bound to get hired for a job, Alaska". (Audience laughs). So I said okay, we went to Alaska and he was right, there were lots of summer jobs in Alaska. In Juneau there's a large tourism industry, people come to see the whales, the icebergs, the eagles and they do have lots of job openings. I went online, applied to the jobs, they would see my application and call me in for an interview. That's when they realised I had disabilities

and they'd come up with all kinds of excuses 'Sorry, we are looking for a different fit. Sorry, we just filled that position.'" I was applying to all kinds of jobs: washing dishes, folding laundry in hotels, tactile activities. Unfortunately my parents had made me do chores at home so I had to learn all this too (audience laughs) yet the employer still thought that I couldn't do this tasks, even though they were tactile. I was told all my life 'Work hard and you'll be successful'. I gradually did top of my class in high school, I had excellent grades in University. My resume was impressive, I kept getting called in for interviews but no matter how hard I worked I still faced ableism, the assumption that I was incompetent. And 70% of the of the blind community is unemployed, many of us are talented, have college degrees, masters degrees but employers assume that we can't do the job and that's not fair, and society loses out on talented individuals. I eventually got an employer to believe in me and she hired me to manage the front desk of a small gym in Alaska. My responsibilities included managing the cash register, taking care of the machines, one day a woman came in and she said "A treadmill is not working", I followed her to the treadmill, I hit the 'On' button (audience laughs) and nothing happened. I tried the other buttons on the machine, nothing happened. So I put down my cane and I felt the machine from top to bottom. On the bottom there was a switch, I flipped the switch and the machine went live and the lady told me "Oh my goodness, I didn't see that switch!" (audience laughs). I told her I didn't see it either (audience laughs harder). People with disabilities have talents, non-visual techniques sometimes beat visual techniques. We need employers to recognise we are talented too.

Rahul Bajaj: Yeah, and I find it quite powerful that you say how people equate a disability with incompetence, intellectual challenge and an inability to contribute with alternative techniques. My next question to you is about something that Laura Wolk recently said. Laura is blind herself, she's working for American Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas this year. She's also a postal friend and really an incredible human being. Wolk was responding to the claim that someone made to her that people with disabilities should 'just learn to deal' with the fact that others don't know about their disability and that's attributable to the fact that others have not had as much experience with the disabled and hence they must learn to put up with it. And I would just like to quote to you what she says: "The fact that you went 40 years without ever meeting a blind person is not a sign of our rarity, it's a sign of how excluded we have been from society. And I am still bearing the brunt of that exclusion. How often have you submitted a journal article for consideration, faced a rejection but been told nonetheless that it was inspiring that "someone like you" managed to get an education? Can you grasp how frustrating and unacceptable it is, that centuries of sequestering and discrimination has led to a state of affairs in which a woman can bust her butt to be at the top of her profession, and yet the average every day guy, the kind who has to make hiring decisions or to decide whether or not he wants to have a friend or a wife, looks at her and thinks "Oh wow, she has a bank account and can use the internet." So my question to you is, in 2019 to what extent can ignorance or lack of awareness be a valid basis on which to treat the disabled unfairly?

Haben Girma: So Laura's response is excellent. Society should learn about all the different ways we are human. Disability is the largest community group, there are over a billion people with disabilities. Our bodies change as we age and we deserve dignity and access at every stage in our lives, so it's really not this 'other' community, disability touches all of our lives, most of us will be disabled at some point in our lives. We currently have a culture with ageism where older people are not as respected and that needs to change. We should have dignity and respect at every stage, we should have access and inclusion for everyone regardless of whether they are older or younger, disabled or non-disabled and that's the community's responsibility to ensure that all spaces and programmes are fully accessible to all people.

Rahul Bajaj: Yeah, but just to kind of press on that a little, my question was what about ignorance, to what extent do you think people can say “Oh, I don’t know really anyone disabled hence I’m sorry that I’m behaving with you this way, I’m just unfamiliar with you”. Do you think they should be able to get away with it by saying that?

Haben Girma: I don’t know about this country but in the U.S. ignorance is no excuse for the law.

(Audience laughs)

Rahul Bajaj: Yes! Yes indeed.

Haben Girma: So my answer is no. You can’t say “Oh, I didn’t know, I didn’t research that.” Especially for institutions, you have a responsibility to do research and do the work to ensure access. You have also to ensure access before disabled people arrive so you can’t say “I’m not making my programme accessible because we don’t have any disabled people applying.” If there are no disabled people applying it’s a sign there’s a barrier, it’s a sign you need to start removing those barriers so disabled people can participate.

Rahul Bajaj: Right, right. My next question to you is, you write in the book about a negative experience that you had at Harvard Law School, where you went to study law. You were at this networking event where a potential employer came up to you and said how inspiring it was to see you and to have that conversation with you. What in your opinion is the problem with the able-bodied regarding the disabled as ‘inspiring’?

Haben Girma: I was at a networking event at Harvard Law School and we had potential employers, recruiters from law firms at the event meeting with students. I was at a table, I had the keyboard, the braille computer and my interpreter asked someone to come over. And I explained “I am deafblind, if you type I’ll be able to read it”. And he says “Oh, no no no, listen, you are very beautiful, I’m enjoying watching.” And I tried to explain “I can’t hear what you are saying but if you type it I’ll be able to read and we can have a conversation.” And he says to my interpreter “She is really inspiring, it was really good to meet you too.” And he leaves. When people are uncomfortable with disability they often revert to the word ‘inspiring’ and they use it as a euphemism for pity, for discomfort, for not knowing what to do.

Rahul Bajaj: Yeah.

Haben Girma: It’s a euphemism. There are also situations where someone is genuinely inspired, and I like when people use the word to describe an action they want to take. ‘I’m inspired to make my website accessible, I’m inspired to increase hiring of people with disabilities.’ That’s a positive way. But that recruiter was using it as a way of ‘I don’t want to engage with this person, I’m trying to be polite about it, but I don’t want to engage with this person’, and that’s not helpful.

Rahul Bajaj: Right, right. It’s a way to alienate and undermise someone and put them on a pedestal. And people with disabilities are put on a pedestal only by those who are not suffocated by its own claustrophobia, as a friend once said to me, which I think it was quite powerful.

The next question that I have for you is about so, you went to Lewis & Clark College for your undergraduate education, as I mentioned a few minutes earlier. You write in the book about how you were really struck by the fact that your friends Justin and Gordon would come up to you in the cafeteria and ask you to sit with them during lunchtime and you say, and I quote “Having people ask me to sit with them feels strange and wonderful, like a desert-dweller finding a reliable source of water.” So I was wondering if you can comment on other ways in which non-disabled people can be

more thoughtful and inclusive in their everyday lives towards people with disabilities when they come in contact.

Haben Girma: To create a fully inclusive society we need to ensure that all people have the potential to form friendships and relationships. For all humans those social connections are really critical to mental wellbeing and happiness. So we need to create spaces where this is possible and as a deafblind person when I walk into a room I can't see where people are, and that could be a barrier but there are also ways to remove those barriers. And my friends are the people that come over and say "We are sitting over here, come join us." That's beautiful, I love that. In grade school kids would not do that but in university I found people who would do that and that made life so much better to actually have friends in school. Everyone needs friends, social connections are critical to success and it's another thing to think about when we are creating an accessible and inclusive community.

Rahul Bajaj: Right. So, my next question, and I'm switching gears a little, I'm going to a point after you finished studying law at Harvard Law School and you were involved in working as a disability rights advocate as a Skadden fellow. You were involved in a legal battle against online library Scribd to make their platform accessible to persons with disabilities, to disabled people and you were able to attain that legal victory. In the book you comment on how accessibility is important not just because it's legally mandated but also because it makes good business sense. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Haben Girma: Yes, absolutely. So people with disabilities are the largest minority group, over a billion people, if you can reach that market that's a lot of revenue, a lot of money, so it's smart business sense to increase your audience size, your customer base; and if you invest in accessibility you'll get more customers: the disabled, their family members, their schools, their friends, because all those communities need to advance their accessible technology or accessible buildings. The other thing to keep in mind is that when you invest in accessible design you also benefit non-disabled people, we call this the 'Curb-Cut Effect'. It was started in California, the city of Berkeley installed curb-cuts. Curb-cuts are the ramps at the end of the sidewalks, ramps help wheelchair users on and off the sidewalk. After Berkeley installed curb-cuts parents with strollers loved the curb-cuts 'cause it made it easier to get on and off the sidewalk when you are pushing a stroller. Travellers with luggage started using them, kids with skate boards loved them. The whole community started using the curb-cuts. We see this with other accessibility features. If you put captions on videos it helps deaf people access the audio content of the videos, but it also helps hearing people. Sometimes people are situationally disabled, maybe the room is too noisy to hear the video, maybe someone is in a situation where they don't want someone to know they are watching a video so they keep the audio quiet (audience giggles). Captions help in all kinds of situations. Facebook did a study and found that videos with captions reached a larger market, viewed times increased by about 12% so it benefits the whole community, we call this the curb-cut effect, so it's smart business to invest in accessibility. Also in the United States and in the UK organisations are prohibited from discriminating against people with disabilities. I worked on a case where a digital website and app was inaccessible to blind readers. We sued the library Scribd to make their website and app accessible. They tried to say that the Americans with Disabilities Act did not apply to online businesses. I disagreed, my team disagreed and I wrote a brief arguing that the ADA applied to websites and apps and the judge in that case agreed with us and held that digital business must comply with the ADA. After that the library Scribd agreed to work with the National Federation of the Blind to make their library accessible. That was an amazing victory. Litigation is expensive and time consuming. It's much much easier for organisations to invest in accessibility than to have to deal with me.

(Audience laughs)

Rahul Bajaj: Right. How are we doing in terms of time? I still have a bunch of questions but I realise that we want to open it up to the audience also. (Inaudible as someone speaks to Rahul without a mike).

Alright, so my next question is about something that you shared in the third chapter of the book, about the commonalities that you shared with your parents. And you say that they found their way through injustice too. Can you just reflect on what those commonalities were that you shared with them?

Haben Girma: My parents are from Eritrea and Ethiopia. They grew up during the war. Ethiopia wanted control of Eritrea and Eritrea wanted independence. And I was born in Western California but I grew up hearing the stories of my parents, of the war and the injustices, and how my mum had to walk for three weeks from Eritrea to Sudan, walking only at night to try to reach freedom. And she was in Sudan for ten months and a refugee organisation helped her come to the United States. I grew up with those stories. There is always a way through the unknown, you may not know all the solutions and answers but if you keep trying, if you keep pursuing justice, you'll get closer to it. My parents are not deafblind so they had different experiences from me but their stories still moved me to keep seeking, to keep trying until I had better access.

Rahul Bajaj: And then more generally, how according to you can the able-bodied and the disabled seek unity in the struggles, seek to find common ground and solidarity, and develop a sense of positive consciousness based on the struggles and challenges that unite them?

Haben Girma: My strongest advice is to break down the division, disabled and non-disabled, because our bodies are constantly changing. This is actually a very fluid dynamic, anyone can be disabled at any time so think of access for you. All the work you do to make a community more inclusive benefits you, it may be for your immediate family members, friends, your future self. Accessibility touches all of our lives and benefits everyone.

Rahul Bajaj: Right. My next question is again about an experience that you had at Lewis & Clark College in terms of accessing the cafeteria menu there in an accessible and timely form and they gave you a lot of grief in terms of enabling you to do that. Can you share that story with our audience?

Haben Girma: I LOVE that story, here we go! (Audience laughs).

(Now Haben's guide dog gets up - he was lying by her feet- and Haben pets him and says to him "Sorry, that was misleading.")

Haben Girma: So I went to school at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. It's in the northwest of the United States. It's a very rainy region, but not as rainy as here. (Audience laughs.) And at that school they celebrated their pioneers, everything in the school was called 'pioneers'. Their football team 'The Pioneers', the newspaper 'The Pioneer Law', the bus 'The Pioneer Express'. So I thought maybe this would be a place that would celebrate difference and allow me to chart my own path through the unknown. The University did a great job of proving me by books in braille, the exams were in braille, they even worked with the Outdoor Club to ensure I had access to rock climbing and kayaking. There was just one problem, the cafeteria was a place for students to eat, relax and hang out between classes. It was in a large room and when you entered along three of the walls were panoramic windows showcasing Portland's rain and along the fourth wall were food stations. Sighted students would walk in, browse the print menu and then go to their station of choice. I couldn't read the menu because it was only in print. So I went to the manager and explained "I can't access the print menu, can you provide menus in braille or post them online or email them to me? I have assisted technology that allows me to do email and website." The manager said "We are very busy, we have over a thousand students, we don't have time to do special things for students with special needs."

Just to be clear, eating is not a special need. (Audience laughs.) Everyone needs to eat. There's this myth that there are two kinds of people, independent and dependent, but that's not true, we are all interdependent. A lot of you like drinking coffee, I bet very few of you grow your coffee beans. You depend on other people to grow your food or make your computers, and that's ok as long as you are honest about the fact that we are all interdependent. The manager didn't understand this. As a vegetarian it was really frustrating to not know where the vegetarian options were. There were about six different stations, I would go to one at random, get food, find a table, try the food and discover an unpleasant surprise. (Audience chuckles). It was very frustrating. I told myself "At least you have food, lots of people around the world struggle for food." Who was I to complain? My mother when she was my age was a refugee in Sudan, at least I was getting an education, who was I to complain? Sometimes we engage in the 'Oppression Olympics', we compare struggles, we point at someone and say "Theirs is worse so I'm going to stop complaining." That kind of thinking accommodates broken institutions, it allows problems to persist. I did research, talked to advocates and then I went back to the manager explaining "The Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits discrimination against students with disabilities and if you don't provide access to the menus I'm going to take legal action." (Audience laughs). Very 'American', right? (Audience laughs again). I had no idea how to do that legal action, I was 19, I couldn't afford a lawyer. Now I know there are non-profit legal centres that help students with disabilities but back then I didn't know that. All I knew is that I had to try, I had to do something. The next day the manager apologised and promised to make the menus accessible. They started emailing the menus to me, life became delicious. (Audience giggles). The next year a new blind student came to the college, he had immediate access to the menus, and that taught me when I advocate I help everyone who comes after me. There are many small barriers in our communities, affecting single women, people of colour, people with disabilities. We can't let those small barriers persist because they add up over time. If you take the time to address a small barrier you build up the skills to tackle a larger obstacle and that's when I realised I wanted to tackle the larger obstacles and be an advocate for people with disabilities. And I went to Harvard Law School, graduated in 2013 and now work as an advocate and attorney.

Rahul Bajaj: Right. You also say about that incident in the book that sort of response that you got from them essentially boiled down to this right, they are saying "Go away, stop complaining and be appreciative of what you already have." And in light of the fact that they had made sure that the academic content that you needed would be accessible to you, so I was just wondering what you thought about that response and then to what extent in your opinion can being accessible in one domain absolve people and institutions of the obligation to be accessible in other domains. As in to what extent can they say "Look how much I've done for you, you should be happy with it rather than asking for more"

Haben Girma: So, under the ADA, entities whose resources are too small and their accommodation is too expensive, they are forgiven. In this situation though, the college had the resources, I was paying to eat at the cafeteria. The accommodation I asked for cost nothing, the menus were already in computers, they were just printing it out to post it on the walls so all they had to do was copy and paste into the email. So it did not cost them anything to make the emails accessible so to make the menus accessible. Most accommodations don't cost anything. Some accommodations do cost something but for the vast majority of disability accommodations it's very easy to do but organisations assume that it can't be done, they assume that person can't do the job, and that's one of the biggest barriers we have to address, ableism, the assumption that people with disabilities can't do a job.

Rahul Bajaj: Right. My question most presently I was saying that so sometimes there is this belief right, that you know, "Look how much we have done for you already" so I guess you are answering the

fundamental question of why people don't provide access at all but some time it is denied on this very basis, your know? "Look how much we are looking after you, look", you know?. Even in the context of friendships this argument sometime gets me red look how nice this person is, being a friend with you so then why do you expect them to be more inclusive, so what's kind of the best response to that kind of thinking?

Haben Girma: It's shocking and disgusting that people would compare and contrast kindness, like having kindness as brownie points. You should just be a good person, why do you need to quantify that?

Rahul Bajaj: Ok, right. So my next questions is so last year, the Indian Supreme Court ruled in January that it was alright for there to be a rule to the effect that someone with 40 to 50% sight loss cannot be a judge on the theory that some amount of sight and hearing is necessary to discharge the responsibilities of a judicial officer. Now, I discussed this ruling with former South African Constitutional Court judge Zak Yacoob who is himself blind and served on the Constitutional Court there from 1998 until 2013. And he said that he did not expect things to change any time soon. I was wondering if you share a similar scepticism about the ability of people and institutions to change?

Haben Girma: So that ruling is based on the assumption that you can see the soul of the person in their eyes and that assumption is not true. Malcolm Gladwell wrote a recent book and has a whole section, the book is called 'Talking to Strangers', and there's a whole section on how emotions and facial expressions are not universal. A facial expression for one person may mean something entirely different for another person and they should not base justice on facial expressions or how people look. In fact I think our courts would be much better if you removed all the visual elements. And Richard Susskind just wrote a book called 'Online Courts and the Future of Justice' and he argues that one way to increase justice to people is to take our courts online and create a system where people can submit briefs online and make it more accessible and remove all the visual biases that our current system has.

Rahul Bajaj: Right. So to that extent then would it be fair for me to say that you are much more optimistic about what we can do to change institutions that look at things in such a myopic, short-sighted narrow-minded way.

Haben Girma: I am optimistic. I do think we can change systems even systems where there are such low expectations. Education can help teach people, like these books 'Talking to Strangers' or 'Online Courts and the Future of Justice' or my book 'Haben, the deafblind woman who conquered Harvard Law'.

Rahul Bajaj: Subtle! (Audience laughs).

Now Rahul introduces Q&A time takes place. The transcript for the Q&A session is not available.

Rahul Bajaj: I would now like to invite Yee Kwan Law, the president of the Oxford Law Society, to give the vote of thanks for today.

Yee Kwan Law: Hi everyone. So thank you for joining us on this wintery cold evening. I'm sure all of the content mentioned has been very insightful and has offered a lot of food for thought and I would like to thank Haben again for writing all of her insights, and I would also like to thank the Faculty of

Law for providing such a wonderful venue and the Disability Campaign for organising such a wonderful event and thank you all once again. (Audience claps).