

Haben Girma at William & Mary: 2020 McSwain-Walker Lecture
“How Disability Drives Innovation: An Intersectional and Global Perspective”
September 21, 2020
Transcript

STEPHEN HANSON: It is a wonderful honor today to introduce our speaker for this year's McSwain-Walker Lecture. I am Stephen Hanson, the Vice Provost for International Affairs and Director of the [Reves Center for International Studies at William & Mary](#). I am going to give a little bit of a preliminary set of introductory points and then hand things over to our distinguished guest.

First, I would like to thank the sponsors of this event. In addition to the Reves Center we are proud to partner with the William & Mary Law School Center for Comparative Legal Studies and Post Conflict Peacebuilding, led by the excellent Christie Warren. Also, William & Mary's Office of Compliance & Equity. Carla Costello has been a wonderful supporter of this event. I want to thank in advance our great staff at the Reves Center: Kate Hoving, who was done so much to put this together, Diane Alleman, Tyler Lawrence and everyone else on the team.

I would also like to thank June McSwain, our alumna and supporter, who has made this series possible. The McSwain-Walker Lecture series brings renowned scholars, artists, analysts and other notable public speakers to William & Mary to speak on topics related to how other cultures and countries interact with the United States and how the United States interacts with them. Previous speakers in this series include, for example, last year Her Excellency Karin Olofsdotter, the current Ambassador of Sweden to the United States. And in its first year, the McSwain-Walker Lecture was given by Harriet Mayor Fulbright. It gives you a sense of the level of distinguished speakers we have been fortunate to have, and none more so than today's fantastic speaker, Haben Girma.

The first Deafblind person to graduate from Harvard Law School, Haben advocates for equal opportunities for people with disabilities. President Barack Obama named her a White House Champion of Change, and she received the Helen Keller Achievement award and a spot on the Forbes “30 Under 30” list. President Bill Clinton, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Chancellor Angela Merkel have all honored her. Haben believes disability is an opportunity for innovation and travels the world teaching the benefits of choosing inclusion. She is also the author of the highly acclaimed book, *Haben The Deafblind Woman Who Conquered Harvard Law*, a testament to Haben's determination to resist isolation and find the keys to connection. And I might add that Haben is a global figure. Her memoir was recently translated into Korean. She was one of three disability rights activists who were recently asked by [The New York Times to reflect on the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act](#), which we celebrate this year.

Just a few housekeeping notes before I turn it over to Haben. First, a reminder that today's lecture is being live captioned. If you do have a question, we would like you to submit it in the chat function of Zoom. I will ask as many of these questions as we can in the time that we have. A final note, we are recording today's lecture. We will email the link when it is ready. Without further ado, please join me with a warm William & Mary welcome.

HABEN GIRMA: Thank you. Hello, everyone. My name is Haben Girma. As you heard, I am Deafblind. It is a spectrum of vision and hearing loss. Deafblind people sometimes voice, sometimes sign, tactile sign, type. It is really important that we expand all the different ways people access information and communicate, which is one of the reasons why we are having captions for this talk, because it helps more people access the content. There are visual captions and braille captions, which are happening on my end. I will hold up the braille computer I am using. There are dots on the bottom. I run my fingers over the dots. As Steve was talking, Gordon on my end was typing what Steve was saying; I was reading it on the braille computer. In about 15 minutes, we are going to do the first of two Q&As, and Steve will read out questions and comments from the chat feed. You can send in your questions or comments. We will get to it in about 15 minutes or so.

People often ask me, “If you’re deaf, how are you speaking?” Deafness is a spectrum, and as I mentioned, there are lots of different kinds of hearing loss. My hearing loss is mostly in the low frequencies, so I learned to speak at a higher register. In some sexist communities, people, especially women, with high frequency voices are not respected. That is not right. We need to create communities where all voices are valued, regardless of whether someone has a high frequency or a low-frequency voice, whether they have an accent, whether they sign or type. All voices should be respected.

My name Haben comes from a small African country, Eritrea. Ethiopia is to the south and to the north is the Red Sea. My mother grew up in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, when there was a war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. When there is war there is a lot of fear and violence and uncertainty. Schools were places where lucky students could come together and learn stories from around the world. Stories are powerful. Stories influence the organizations we design, the products we build, and the futures we imagine for ourselves. My mom, Saba, heard stories that America is the land of opportunity. America is the land of civil rights. The stories inspired her to take the dangerous journey, walking from Eritrea to Sudan. It took about three weeks to do that walk. She was a refugee for about ten months in Sudan, and a refugee organization through the Catholic Church helped her come to the United States.

Several years later, older, wiser, my mother realized it is not geography that creates justice; it is people who create justice. Communities create justice. All of us face the choice to tolerate oppression or advocate for justice. As the daughter of refugees, a Black woman, disabled, lots of stories say my life doesn't matter. I choose to resist those stories. I have to define for myself what it means to be a Black woman, what it means to be disabled, what it means to be American. When I was growing up, my parents heard stories from the Ethiopian and Eritrean communities. Poor thing, she will never grow up and get a job. She will never go to school. We had to resist those stories and define for ourselves. The dominant narrative is that disability is a burden on society, and consequently there is a lot of shame and a lot of people feel compelled to hide their disabilities.

I choose to define disability as an opportunity for innovation. If you can't do something one way, it is an opportunity to come up with a new alternative way to do it. Alternative ways of accessing things are equal to mainstream ways of doing things. I will give you some examples.

You saw I'm reading with braille. I can't read with my eyes, but I can read with my fingers, and disabled people all over the world have come up with unique solutions because disability is an opportunity for innovation. For examples, let's see the first video. [video of Girma with Mexican students starts] I am

sharing a video that is actually from Mexico, before the pandemic, when I would travel to meet with students all over the world. I traveled to ITSON - Instituto Tecnológico de Sonora, and I met with the Deaf community there. There was a young Deaf man who also knew American Sign Language. He and I are signing through American Sign Language. It is a rich community; each Deaf community has their own sign language. In Mexico, there is a different sign language. In the U.S., the dominant one is American Sign Language. In France, it's French Sign Language, and across the pond in the UK, they have a completely different language. It makes no sense to me. They call it British Sign Language. Deaf communities are innovative, if you can't hear spoken language, it can create a visual language, and that is what Deaf communities, Deaf people have done. Deafblind people are also innovative. There is tactile sign language. In the video, I am feeling through my hands. The man I am signing with is sighted so when I signed to him I signed it visually. But when I am listening to him, I try to hold my hands over his hands to feel the signs. Deafblind blind people all over the world do different temporal sign languages depending on the local sign language. Lots of innovation all over the world.

I will give another example. Next video. In this video, I am salsa dancing. I miss salsa dancing and other dances so much during the pandemic. I haven't gone dancing since February. Dancing and especially partner dances are ways to express joy, to build communities, and get exercise. When I was growing up, I was taken out of physical education courses because instructors assumed I wouldn't be able to participate. Then one summer, in middle school, I went to a camp for the blind. It was up in Napa, California. Some people go to Napa for wine but I go there for camping. And at this camp, they had a blind dance instructor, and she taught me there are many different ways to connect through dance. Deaf people who can see can see the other dancers. And see their feet. Blind people can hear the music and respond and engage to the music. As a Deafblind dancer, I couldn't hear the beat of the music or see the other dancers but I could feel the beat through the hands and shoulders of the people I am dancing with. I have danced all over the world -- Mexico, Spain, India, Dubai. Many of the people I dance with do not speak English, but we can still communicate and understand each other through the shared language of salsa.

Haptics is the communication of information through touch. As a blind person who chose to explore this, I have developed a strong tactile intelligence. I am really excited for more developments at the intersection of technology and haptics. And if we increase the diversity in our schools and our workplaces, we could have more people with tactile intelligence, which could help spark more innovation with touch-based communication and technologies. And I think during the pandemic, we have become even more aware of how important touch plays in our lives.

There have been many barriers throughout my life and I have been successful when people have chosen to do the work of removing barriers. These people – these barrier-removing people -- have made a huge difference, and one of my favorites was a high school teacher. She approached me one day and asked, "Do you want to try surfing?" And I thought to myself, how would a blind person even surf? But I told her, "Yes, let's give it a try!" She introduced me to an organization called Ride A Wave, based in Santa Cruz, and they did tandem surfing. We have a video with tandem surfing. Tandem is a large board, and I am surfing with a water guide on the back of the board, and I am near the front of the board. In the water, the guide helps steer around other surfaces and avoid sharks. That is a joke; there weren't sharks in that ocean, not at that part anyway.

I really love the experience of feeling the vibrations through my feet through the surfboard. Feeling the sun, the ocean, the wind. Tandem is when you do things with other people; tandem surfing is beautiful. But I wondered, where are my limits exactly? Could I surf on my own? What would that look like? How would that work? So, I started asking surf schools, "Can I go surfing, and can I take lessons?" And they told me, "We have never heard of a Deafblind surfer." Then, I found a surf school that said, "We have never heard of a Deafblind surfer, and let's try it. Let's find a way!" So we had a lesson. In this video, I am surfing on my own surfboard. And that gave me the opportunity to practice standing up and riding the wave on my own. And beside me is an instructor on his own surfboard. And because he is nearby, he could help steer around any potential sharks. So that was in Santa Cruz. Since then, I have gone surfing in Hawaii and other places in California.

So many people associate disability with barriers. It's really an opportunity to come up with new ways of doing things. The instructors I worked with had to take the time to think about how to teach surfing through tactile communication. How do you know when to stand? How to balance? All of those things in a nonvisual way. And the surfing instructor can do this. A math professor can do this. A music instructor, a science instructor... every program at the school can be made accessible. It is really about taking the time to be thoughtful and creative and come up with solutions.

Before I talk about my time at Harvard Law School, I want to pause and check in. Steve, how is everyone doing? Do we have any questions?

HANSON: I have questions already. Let me give you the first one, and it is not a shock to hear this one, people are wondering how the pandemic has affected communities with disabilities around the world. And in particular, you have been talking about the importance of touch. In this pandemic, we are told not to do it. I'm wondering, what is your reaction to getting through this pandemic given the importance of touch?

GIRMA: There is a lot of stigma around disabled people who rely on touch. For example, I have heard of blind people facing increased isolation because there is a lot of misinformation about the behavior of how it spreads and fears about people who already faced layers, layers of stigma. And my advice is to spread accurate, correct information and help people know what are the correct ways to stay safe. For example, when blind people need to touch and access something, you can be mindful to wash hands before and after the interaction. For example, with tactile sign language. For Deafblind people who need to be able to touch just to have conversations, and communicate, being mindful to use hand sanitizer or wash your hands before and after each conversation. Wear a face mask. So rather than saying, 'it is impossible, we can't do this,' and allowing stigmas to grow, pause and think about what are the things you actually can do. And come up with safe solutions for making sure people have access, including people who need touch-based access.

HANSON: Thank you. That is excellent advice. There is another question, which has to do with how disabilities are seen around the world. It is now the 30th anniversary of the ADA, and so people wonder, do you see changes in the relationship of different country leaders to their own population of disabilities? Is the ADA still pushing change on a global level? What are your impressions of the global context?

GIRMA: So, there is more information now and partly due to technology, more information about disability advocacy and civil rights spreading around the world. Communities are asking ourselves, “Do we have to put up with oppression? How do we advocate for justice? How do we remove these barriers?” Communities that don't have civil rights systems, or specifically disability rights systems, are thinking about creating new laws. For example, I traveled to Singapore last year, and I met with the disability community there. They don't have an equivalent to the ADA, but they are thinking about advocating for such a law, so that disabled Singaporeans and disabled people who travel to Singapore can have access. Each community has something they do really well, and something that they struggle with. In Singapore, they didn't have a law for Disability Rights, but they had one of the most accessible transit systems. Much more accessible, compared to New York City, or the San Francisco Metro system. Each community has something to teach the United States and disability advocates.

HANSON: Maybe one last question for this round. Then we will go back to the talk. We have a question from someone who wants to know –

GIRMA: Go for it! --

HANSON: OK! Did you ever confront a gatekeeper in your career, someone who had access to things you wanted, was not supportive? How did you go about confronting that person? It is a tough question. How do you fight those kinds of people successfully?

GIRMA: (Laughs) That is an excellent question. I am going to continue with my presentation. You will soon hear the perfect answer to that question. So back to the presentation. Talking about gatekeepers and barriers.

I went to college at Lewis and Clark in Portland, Oregon. Lewis and Clark made all my textbooks in braille, so I had access to all my coursework. They worked with the Outdoor Club so I could participate in rock climbing and kayaking.

There was just one barrier. At the cafeteria, there was a wall where they posted the menu. Sighted students could walk in, browse the menu, and go to their station of choice. I couldn't read the menu. I can read, but it needs to be in braille or in an accessible computer format. So when I went to the manager and asked him to provide the menus in braille or post them online or email it to me -- I have assistive technology that allows me to use email and accessible websites -- the manager said, "We are very busy. We have over 1,000 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. Everyone needs to eat. There is an assumption that there are two kinds of people. Disabled and nondisabled. Independent and dependent. But everyone has a time in their life when they depend on other people. A lot of you like drinking coffee. Very few of you grow your own coffee beans. We depend on other people to help us with our food and computers. Everyone has situational times when they depend on other people. And that is OK. As long as we are honest about the fact that we are all interdependent. The manager did not understand this.

I was a vegetarian back then. It was really hard to eat vegetarian when I didn't have access to food information. There were about six different stations. I would go to a station at random, wait in line for

20 minutes, get food, find a table, try the food, and discover an unpleasant surprise. It was really frustrating. I told myself, maybe I should just be grateful. At least I 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. Who was I to complain? Maybe this was just preparation for life as a disabled person. Maybe I should just get used to inferior services. I talked to friends. They reminded me it is my choice.

It is our choice to accept unfairness or advocate for justice. I did research and went back to the cafeteria manager and explained the Americans with Disabilities Act prevents discrimination against students with disabilities. "If you don't provide access to the menu, I will take legal action."

I had no idea how I would do that. I was just 19. I couldn't afford a lawyer. Now I know there are nonprofit legal centers that support students with disabilities, but back then I didn't know that. All I knew was I had to try. I had to do something. The next day the manager apologized and promised to make the menus accessible. They started emailing the menus. I could use my accessible computer to read them and then go to my station of choice. I had a white cane and I had the orientation skills to navigate the cafeteria on my own. So if I read the menu and it says 'station for cheese tortellini,' then I have the ability to use my white cane, navigate over to station four, get my food, find the table and eat a delicious, delicious meal. When the barrier was finally removed, life became delicious. The next year a new blind student came to the college. He had immediate access to the menus. That taught me that when I advocate it helps all the students who come after me.

There are many barriers in our communities. Barriers impacting women, disabled people, people of color. If we do the work of removing a small barrier, we build up the skills to master the larger obstacles. This experience inspired me to go to law school.

I was Harvard Law's first Deafblind student. Harvard told me, "You know, we've never had a Deafblind student before." I told them, "I have never been to Harvard Law School before." We didn't know what all the challenges would be, or what all the solutions would become, but we engaged in an interactive process for each assignment, for each barrier, for each internship. I graduated, and we have a photo from graduation. Dean Minow is handing me my diploma. The Dean and I are wearing academic regalia, and my guide dog is wearing a fancy fur coat.

What I did is called image description. Image description provides access for blind individuals. When you post photos online, on social media, add image descriptions, so that blind individuals can participate in these conversations. When you are posting on Twitter, there is a feature that allows you to add image descriptions so it doesn't impact your character count. Lots of conversations are happening online right now. So please do add image descriptions. And for videos, add captions.

Back to Harvard. Harvard was not always inclusive. Helen Keller, who was born in 1880, really wanted to go to Harvard, but 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 excluded all women. Over time, that community changed and opened its doors to women. And also people of color and people with disabilities. People sometimes say to me, "You overcame your disabilities to graduate from Harvard Law School. I did not overcome my disabilities. I am still disabled. I am still Deafblind. It was Harvard that overcame some of its ableism.

Ableism is the assumption that disabled people are inferior. We need to do the work of removing ableism from our schools and communities so that disabled people have equal opportunities. Many of you know about sexism and racism. Ableism is another word you should know about. Discrimination against disabled people is widespread and hidden. Very few people know about it. We need to help people identify it and do the work of removing it. Sometimes when you ask someone to remove a barrier, they come up with ridiculous reasons not to do it. I am going to share some arguments you can use to convince these people to choose inclusion. Next slide.

On-screen are some arguments you can use. I am going to go through it. The first one is reach. You reach more people when you choose inclusion. There are over a billion disabled people around the world. In the U.S., over 61 million Americans with disabilities. So when you choose inclusion, you reach more students, their families, professors. More talented people are able to join your team if you remove barriers. For digital content, you increase content discoverability when it is accessible. I will give some examples. When you add image descriptions to digital content and captions and transcripts to videos, you increase the text associated with your content, which means better Search Engine Optimization. More people will find your content, whether disabled or nondisabled.

This is also known as the curb cut effect. The curb cut effect came out of the city of Berkeley. Berkeley was one of the first places to add curb cuts. Those are the small ramps at the end of the sidewalk, going from the sidewalk to the street. It allowed wheelchair users to navigate the city of Berkeley independently. Once the city installed these curb cuts, then parents pushing strollers started using them. Travelers with luggage started using them. Kids with skateboards love them. When you add a disability accessibility feature to a community, it usually benefits the entire community, and nondisabled people find new ways and benefits for the accessibility feature. We see this happening all the time -- the curb cut effect -- and that happens with digital content, too.

Captions benefit Deaf people and also hearing people in many situations, such as when audio isn't working or someone is battling Zoom fatigue, and it helps process information when you can see the words and hear the words. The curb cut effect.

The third argument you can use is that disability drives innovation. There are many stories throughout our history of disabilities sparking new technology. Many of these stories are hidden. We need to get the word out there, so people know that disability drives innovation. Here is an example. One of the fathers of the internet is Vint Cerf who is Deaf, hard of hearing. Before the internet existed as we know it today, Deaf people struggled to communicate long distance. We didn't have access to telephones. Vint Cerf developed one of the earliest email protocols so that through email Deaf people could communicate without straining to hear over the phone. Guess who else likes using email? Hearing people. Lots of hearing people use email. If you design for a disability challenge, you can end up building the next big thing like email.

Again, that is just one of many different examples. I will offer one more example. We will go further back in history to 1808. There were two friends in Italy. One sighted and one blind. These two friends wanted to send letters to each other. This was back before email and before braille. If a blind person wanted to write a letter, they had to dictate it and someone would write it down for them. These two friends couldn't do that. These letters had to stay secret. They were love letters. They used this as a

design challenge: “How can we create a way to write that doesn't require sight?” They built one of the earliest working typewriters. Through a typewriter you can memorize the layout of the keys and type through touch. Nowadays some of the fastest typists are touch typists. Lots of people write letters through keyboards. Disability drives innovation. Love also drives innovation.

So if you encounter someone who doesn't think accessibility matters, you can share these arguments. Tell them they will reach more people. Over a billion people around the world with disabilities. They will increase content discoverability and drive innovation. If the stubborn, difficult person is still not convinced, tell them about legal requirements. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that places of public accommodation in schools and digital services like virtual businesses, for example, must make their services accessible and are prohibited from discrimination against people with disabilities. Litigation is expensive and time-consuming. It is much, much easier to choose inclusion rather than dealing with lawyers.

I've talked quite a bit about digital accessibility. I am going to share a short video that shows what that looks like. When I am using my phone I use voiceover, voiceover can speak out loud and send information to the digital real display.

[Video begins]

VOICEOVER (as Girma selects different options on her iPhone): Checking for news... National Geographic ... world's largest rodents escape from the Toronto Zoo.

GIRMA (on video): I'm using the advanced forward button. If I wanted to use hand gestures on the iPhone, I could flick with one finger. To open, I can double tap anywhere on the screen.

VOICEOVER (as Girma scrolls over phone): Text size, the caption, title. Word-- after escaping the Toronto Zoo, they've evaded capture... published June... Most of us want to avoid rodents of unusual size...

[View shifts to incoming message with emojis]

VOICEOVER: Pot of food, fish cake with swirl design.

GIRMA (on video): My friend's at the door so I'm going to let him know.

VOICEOVER (on video): Close button, reply button. Message notification. Hang in there, I am almost done with this demo. Send button. Speak back.

GIRMA (on video): Voiceover has allowed me to access more information news, mail, and messages and it is also a way for me to know when friends are at the door.

[Video ends]

GIRMA: Welcome back! The voice in the video is the screen reader. And that is on multiple different platforms. Windows, Android... There are guidelines for how to make websites and apps accessible. For websites it's the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. For apps, Android Accessibility Guidelines or iOS Accessibility Guidelines. So encourage tech developers and your computer science departments to teach the accessibility guidelines. Some people think, “Oh, we'll just create a second website for

disabled people or a separate app for disabled people.” Separate is never equal. You might start off with good intentions, but down the line, the app for disabled people gets fewer updates and fewer resources. And that is not fair. What we want is one website, one app, one school that is accessible to everyone.

Other accessibility features to keep in mind include captioning. Make sure videos have captions. Support for assistive devices like the braille computer that I used. This is just one of a hundred different braille computers. Some are smaller; some are larger. These are some of the things that exist. Keep innovating.

Schools are fantastic places for students and professors to come up with new ideas to share information. As you develop new things, don't make assumptions about what disabled people can and cannot do. Design for everything to be inclusive.

Several years ago, I went to China for the first time. It was a long flight to Beijing. When I arrived, I went straight to my hotel room to take a nap. But then I discovered something strange. I picked it up and was holding it in my hand, trying to figure out what it was. It almost felt like a piece of fruit. I was really curious to figure out what it was, but not curious enough to bite into an unknown object. So instead, I took a picture with my phone and texted it to a friend asking, “What is this? Is it safe to eat?” Next slide. (photo of dragon fruit) It was dragon fruit, and I learned I like dragon fruit. Now there are some people who would think, “Don't bother making a camera app accessible; blind people would never take photos.”

Don't make assumptions. Design for every aspect of the school to be fully accessible. The lighting program, the theatre program, outdoor activities, should be as accessible as possible. And if you don't know how, that is okay. When I went to Harvard Law School, they had no idea how to support a Deafblind student. Engage in an interactive process. Be creative. Be innovative, and you will come up with solutions.

We have a photo with President Obama. He is standing on the other side of the table from me typing on a keyboard and I am reading my braille computer. And behind us, Valerie Jarrett and Vice President Joe Biden are watching. This is from the 25th anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act. I met President Obama at the White House, and he usually communicates by voice. I explained that I access information best through braille. He graciously switched from voicing to typing so I could access his words.

Inclusion is a choice. When you choose inclusion, you role model it for everyone around you. Our bodies are always changing, you deserve dignity and access at every stage in our lives. I wrote a book called *The Deafblind Woman who Conquered Harvard Law* to remind people I did not conquer my disability; I am still Deafblind and disabled. It was ableism at Harvard that I had to conquer and overcome. I hope more people learn this word ableism, and can join me in the movement by removing barriers and making our communities more inclusive around the world.

And I'm going to open it up and check in with Steve. Let's hear from student questions.

HANSON: Fantastic. We've got quite a number of questions. We have a question from someone who wonders how bar exams are doing in accommodating people with disabilities. Is that something that goes pretty well these days or are there problems?

GIRMA: Great question. I took the bar exam in 2013 . Several years before that, an applicant to law school sued the bar examiners because of barriers for blind students. Due to that litigation and that case, many barriers were removed. Not all of them, but many barriers were removed. By the time it was my turn to take the bar exam, I asked, “Can I get the exam in braille?” And they said yes. They had learned their lesson. But there are still more barriers that need to be removed in the bar exam. And right now, because of the pandemic, so many disabled law students have been struggling, that is another thing to keep in mind.

HANSON: Another question, which has a legal element, comes from a listener who asks, “How do you handle disclosure of disabilities in job applications? There seems to be a danger if you disclose early maybe someone would actually not promote you for the job, but if you don't disclose, and that comes up later in the process, kind of in-person interview, what is your advice?”

GIRMA: Personal choice. I have been on both sides of that. When I started, back in college, my resume did not say that I was disabled. But there were lots of disability references. For example, I said I was a braille tutor. And I was not getting much feedback. Then I revised my resume, and I changed braille tutor to reading tutor. Which is really the same job; braille is reading and writing. And I got more requests for interviews, and then they would meet me at the interview and realize I was disabled and come up with all kinds of excuses why the job was no longer available. It was incredibly frustrating. Employment discrimination is a huge problem. There are lots of incredibly talented disabled people who have so much to offer. All of these organizations that are just being discriminated against and the organizations are losing out on talented people. My advice is to do what works best for you. Ultimately, you want an employer who will respect you and be inclusive. I think the most common strategy I have seen is to minimize disclosing until the interview and then at the interview, you could answer and explain as much or as little as you want. And that helps address stereotypes and situations where employers might be too afraid to ask beforehand but can in your presence or on the call, might be able to get that question answered. That is probably one of the most common strategies I have seen.

HANSON: Thank you. We have time for two more questions.

GIRMA: Yes! Go for it!

HANSON: Great! I know we are a little over time. One group of questions comes from several people. It has to do with the latest technologies to create accessibility for people with disabilities. We have a question about conferences. People feel they don't know how to plan a conference in a way that would feel welcoming for people with disabilities. Also, one person is curious if you know this app called Be My Eyes, and what you think of it. And finally, one person is interested in children and if there are good technologies for education and young children who may be Deaf.

GIRMA: (Laughs) So many great questions! The app called Be My Eyes is a free service where people can volunteer to describe photos and videos for blind individuals. So a blind person is at home and wants to figure out what they received in the mail. They can take a picture of it or do a video chat with a volunteer, who would read it and describe it for them. That is the Be My Eyes app. It is all over the world. People who are in areas that have limited data service, unfortunately don't have full access to it. I am hopeful internet service and cellular service will increase around the world so that more disabled

people can gain access to these free tools like Be My Eyes. Similar for Deafblind technology and all disabled technology, the tools exist, but they are difficult to gain access to and a lot of developing countries don't have the money or infrastructure. We need to help spread access to these services and also increase research to make services accessible. Computer braille is really expensive right now. You want scientists to devote time and resources to creating new affordable computer braille. That is the Holy Grail. That would increase access to literacy for blind people in many developing countries.

HANSON: The very last question, so we don't hold you, is from a listener from Eritrea. She is wondering if you have some comments on the situation in that country today and any particular experiences you would like to convey.

GIRMA: Eritrea... Eritrean culture and community and food are a big part of my life. I really don't like cooking. But during the pandemic, like many people, I have spent more time in the kitchen than I usually do. I have been working on some Eritrean dishes, which are incredibly delicious. There are disability advocates in Eritrea, but due to limited tech and infrastructure it is hard to get tools, tech and information to the disability community there. I continue to work with advocates to try to increase opportunities.

Great questions. This was really wonderful to be able to talk with the William & Mary community. I am hopeful one day I can visit in person.

HANSON: I know I speak for everyone in saying we would love to have you come to Williamsburg whenever this pandemic is over. And much of the chat when people were having a chance to ask questions was just filled with gratitude to you. So many people were writing how much they appreciate all of your time with us, your advice your insights, and it really touched a lot of people, including me.

So thank you for me as well, and everyone, I know, will join me with a huge round of applause. It's virtual in the chat.

GIRMA: (laughs) Thank you, everyone. I appreciate that. I hope you enjoy the rest of your day.