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Disability, Diversity and Intersectionality
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Why Words Matter: Addressing Microaggressions to Create a Welcoming Environment
Presenters: Stan Holbrook, Brooke Curtis

STAN HOLBROOK: We're going to move right into our microaggression presentation. I want to remind everyone that we are here because we are all learning. None of us are perfect and we're all learning and sharing together, so we can do a better job in serving everyone. That's the purpose.

And when you think of intersectionality at the root, it always leads back to disability. It leads back to disability with race, disability with gender, disability with sexual orientation. So, we're all here because we are organizations that work with people with disabilities. And, as we go through microaggressions, we will see how micro-aggressive behavior touches and impacts all of us. So, I hope we have a time of sharing, a time of being real, and let's understand each other today, and not get upset and emotional, but try to learn. As we move forward. As yesterday I heard, everybody wants to be better. Everyone wants to do the right thing, so that's why we're here.

And so, why do words matter? Why do words matter? And we're going to switch up our presentation, because we want to get a little interaction going. So, Brooke, I'm going to let you take us from there.

BROOKE CURTIS: Okay, so Stan and I have had the opportunity to do this presentation a few times, and really, what makes it great is y'all. And it really is ‑‑ the purpose is to really get you involved, and get ‑‑ and to learn from your experiences, okay? So, we're going to start today. Everyone's at a table, so I want you to think of a word you've been called that you didn't like, or that offended you. Okay?

Also, think about how it made you feel, and if you have multiple examples, that's great, too. But definitely start thinking about that. And then start sharing it with your tablemates and we'll come around and ask for volunteers, okay?

STAN HOLBROOK: Okay, okay, I can sense by the quietness at a lot of tables that we're finished. So, I want to hear some of these examples of words that people called you, you know. That you didn't like, or they offended you and how you felt. I'm going to ask Robin, number one, can we hear from you?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm from Athens, but I grew up in Atlanta. So, I went to school at Oglethorpe University, which is right down Peachtree, in the late 70’s. I was in an English class and I'm in the only black person in there. We talked about James Baldwin's books. And a student turned around and said, how does it feel to live in the ghetto? I have no idea. I told him; all I know if what I see on Good Times. I mean, I don't know, but you just assume because I'm Black I live in the ghetto? Really? It made me feel kind of strange.

STAN HOLBROOK: Thank you. Who else wants to share?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: This is James. The craziest thing with me is I ride the MARTA bus, the City bus, and the craziest thing they'll say that wheelchair user, or that "you people." And if you see me with my name tag on, you could say: Or James in a wheelchair? But, no, they say: That wheelchair user, or "you people."

STAN HOLBROOK: Thank you. Who else?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My name is Bridgette Suttle. I am a prosthetic wearer, and I had a doctor -- the medical term for my residual limb is called a stump -- and he called me a "stumper." And I thought that was pretty awful for someone in the medical profession, and that's something that has ‑‑ that stuck with me because I just couldn't believe that that was the term that he chose to use. And he said it to someone else, and they looked at me and I know they both considered me to be a "stumper," and I thought that was terrible.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My name is Pam Williamson, and I have multiple hidden disabilities, and as a result, I have an accommodation that allows me to telework on days when I am unable to drive because of those hidden disabilities. And colleagues that don't understand what is going on have told me I'm a hypochondriac and you're really not that sick. You don't look that sick. And I'm like you don't know what it takes for me to get out of bed to go to my sofa to work from home that day, and it really, those kinds of comments bother me when people make them from an uneducated standpoint and don't want to be educated.

STAN HOLBROOK: Right. Thank you. Who else?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm Niusha, and the question actually, you can understand from my accent I'm not born here. And people when they see me ask me: Where are you from? I said okay, I'm for from example Gainesville, Florida. No, originally. Where were you born?

I said okay, I'm born in Iran.

Oh, Iran. Are you terrorist?

I said I don't know. I can't say that. Maybe. But I shouldn't ‑‑ .

[ Laughter ]

I have a lot of friends now, because the first time they met me, but after a while, they ask me, all the Iranians look like you? I said yeah, we are people. That is politics and government. Yeah, this is the thing all the time that I am faced with.

STAN HOLBROOK: Thank you.

REYMA MCCOY MCDEID: So, my comment is a challenge to everybody here. When you get a second, Google "angry woman," and what you see will come up are a lot of news articles about women accompanied by pictures of White women by and large who are fed up and are running the for office or at women's marches with their pink pussy hats on and are just being celebrated for taking action and using their anger in a positive way.

Then Google "angry Black woman." Nothing like that's going to show up. What you're going to see are a lot of really unflattering pictures of Black women grimacing and articles that portray Black women in a very pathological manner. And then Google angry Latina and what you'll see are a lot of pictures of hyper-sexualized, curvaceous Latina women and jokes about these women. And so, I think that that's something for everybody to think about especially those of us who are constantly called "angry women," typically those of us who are Black women. The question begs is: Which women get permission to be angry? And which ones do not?

I don't like being called "angry," by the way.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I had a family member tell me something once and it stuck to my core so deeply. You have three strikes against you. You're blind, you're Black, and you're a woman.

And it just ‑‑ it deepened me to the core but over time, I flipped the script on them, and I've used my blindness as my strength, and my womanness as a strength, and coming to the conference now, I'm using my Blackness or my Jamaicanness as a strength.

STAN HOLBROOK: Thank you for that.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, it's Anita again. I have an interesting word that kind of ticks me off but gets used quite often against me: Articulate. Oh, you're so articulate for a Black woman.

Oh! You're articulate for someone disabled. Oh, you're so articulate. I get it over and over again and it just really, really ticks me off.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Before I came to Independent Living, I was a business Manager in Seattle at the VA Hospital out there and I was the youngest one and I was a woman, and we'd be sitting in meetings and I worked in a predominantly male field, and people would be yelling at you. And so, I would raise my voice and say: You can't speak to me like that, and I would convey whatever I had to convey. Then my boss would pull me aside and be like: You can't act like that. You're a woman.

And I'm like, they were sitting there screaming at me. And they're like: It doesn't matter, you're a woman. You have to be better than all of them.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi. My name is Rhonda White, and I volunteer at the disABILITY LINK Center in Tucker, Georgia, and I also have the disability of epilepsy. My family members, because of my disability, epilepsy, say I do not have the skills and knowledge to live a life. They say that I'm a crazy anxiety person, which is not true. My mind is very strong and intelligent. So, I am not going to go on others' negative talk to me anymore.

[ Applause ]

STAN HOLBROOK: Any more?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I think this is a difficult topic because even within our own group this happens.

And I have an example of this. I was at a meeting of all the Centers in my state and we were having a discussion about some lobbyist and how we were going to move forward in the next year, and I had disagreed with some of the other Center Directors. And one of the Center Directors looked at me and said: Don't you have a nail appointment or something to go to?

So, it's always very concerning to me that sometimes when people feel threatened or questioned, that they will go to something that quickly, instead of work through a problem.

STAN HOLBROOK: Okay, thank you for sharing. What I've heard is microaggressive behavior is an equal opportunity. Everybody in some way or another has experienced it. I'm going to let Brooke take over right now as we move forward in our presentation.

BROOKE CURTIS: Thanks, everyone, for sharing your experiences, and we want to at first define what a microaggression is. So, they're subtle verbal and nonverbal slight and insults based on gender, ethnic and other stereotypes. And so, sometimes they're a little confusing at first when they happen, because sometimes they can come off like a compliment, like the "you're so articulate." So, you start thinking about that, and what was said, and you start processing, like, did they really mean that? What did they mean?

But really, they communicate hostile, derogatory or negative viewpoints and they can be intentional or unintentional and so again, this is something that's really hard to determine, the intent behind the comment. Usually you kind of look at your relationship with that person to kind of determine whether or not it was intentional.

And then micro, so micro applies to the subtlety, not the impact. Microaggressions are often called "death by a thousand cuts," because they're these statements and they're small but they do over time have a great impact on the individual.

So microaggressions go beyond race and touches on all marginalized populations including race, gender/gender preference, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability status, labor roles and social class, and age. And then we have a quote here, it says ‑‑

Racial, gender and sexual orientation microaggressions are active manifestations and/or reflections of our world views of inclusion/exclusion, superiority/inferiority, normality/abnormality, and desirability/undesirability. So often these statements show case our implicit bias.

STAN HOLBROOK: Just some terminology, and we don't want to a flood you with this but it's very important that you look at racism as a system of power, a system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based upon social interpretation on how someone looks. We call that race.

It unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities, while unfairly giving advantage to other individuals and communities. All of us can be victims of racism.

Privilege. We talked about privilege a little bit yet. Privilege gives advantage and favors and benefits to members of dominant groups at the expense of members of target groups. People in dominant groups often believe they have earned the privileges that they enjoy, or that everyone could have access to these privileges, if only they worked real hard to earn them. And I know you've heard that.

"You're not working hard enough. You gotta go get it."

Unfortunately, the system sets up barriers for us to obtain even opportunity, let alone to realize dream. But today, we want to recognize this, and I do say that within our hearts, within our minds, as we break down barriers, we can reach the goals that we need to reach but it's not going to happen in a day. It's not going to happen. This battle that we're talking about has been going on for hundreds of years. But right now, we're taking the time to move forward, as a group, to break down the disadvantage, to provide opportunity to all.

Next slide, please. Internalized racism. And this is accepted by all those really are stigmatized by the negative messages about their own abilities. Now, I heard a lot of negative messages in here, and the more we hear them, the more we can internalize them, and when we internalize things like that, we become it. We become it. We can pass the other one.

Intersectionality. Interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, gender, and disability, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. And we talked about that. Keri went through a wonderful presentation yesterday on intersectionality. And how being part of multiple marginalized groups altogether, you know, systematically puts you at a disadvantage.

It also can influence the frequency of microaggressions.

There needs to be a realization that good intentions are simply not enough. Now, we said that yesterday. It's not enough. It's time for what? Action. Action.

Good intentions is not enough. And maybe sometimes the microaggressive message, maybe the intention is good. But it just comes off wrong, because it's not what you say. It's how people perceive what you say. How I perceive a content that Anita gave me, you're so articulate. I'm going to take that negatively whether I'm articulate or not, because why do I need you to tell me that?

AUDIENCE: Right.

STAN HOLBROOK: Why? I don't need you to tell me that. You're telling me that maybe to say something good, or maybe you're jabbing me. If I take it as a jab, there's something that happens in the relationship, and there's something that goes on inside me. So, we're going to talk about this, about how we feel when we hear those. How you guys felt. I heard how you guys felt when certain things were said to you. And you don't know the meaning. So, a lot of times we take it negatively, and maybe because it is, or maybe it isn't.

So, we can move on. Oh.

[ Laughter ]

I was going to say: Take it away, Brooke.

[ Laughter ]

I'm dating myself here, but there was a time whenever I showed up, Board meetings, different Committees and everything, I was the only African American. And guess why everybody thought I was there? Because of affirmative action. Affirmative action.

Oh, we had to have one. We had to have one. Even at NCIL, I was on the Board, and somebody said ‑‑ and I wasn't diversity chair. I was a member at large ‑‑ somebody said: Oh, you're on the NCIL Board? You must be the diversity chair. I'm like...

Let me tell you about that NCIL experience. The day I ran, there was a bunch of people running. Maureen might remember this. This is years ago.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you, Stan.

[ Laughter ]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: An ageism comment.

STAN HOLBROOK: Hey, hey, that wasn't a microaggressive comment. But I had my own ‑‑ I didn't want to run. My ED wanted me to run. We went up, there was a bunch of us. We had speeches. I finished my speech. Went to my seat. Some lady ran to me and said: Hey, that was a real good speech, but you'll never get on the Board.

You won't get on the Board, because they have their people. You won't get on the Board. Maybe you should join a Committee. This is what I heard. I never shared with you. Maybe you should join a Committee.

Well, I guess she was wrong, because not only me, there was another lady that wasn't supposed to get on ‑‑ that's what I heard. We got on the Board of directors, but just the fact that this girl ran from one side of the room to me, I'm like, what does she want?

To tell me that that was a real good speech, but you'll never get on the Board. That took me aback. 16 years later, I left the Board. So, I felt it in many ways. It didn't matter what my education was. I happened to be the only African American on a lot of Committees, a lot of things, that everybody assumed that I was there by proxy. I was there because we needed one.

And what that did for me? It didn't bring out rage. It brought out a different rage. It brought out: Let me show why I'm here. And not talk the talk, but just make sure I state things that make sense, that show my intelligence, and don't let anybody's comment stop me from doing what I have to do. But it was an experience, that was my experience. The affirmative action experience.

I had a friend that got into Harvard. They were assumed that ‑‑ and they had the top SATs, all that other stuff. It was assumed that they got in and knocked somebody out because they were Black. This person was super‑smart, and they graduated and they're making millions somewhere.

So, I just want to say: There is that experience, as an African American. That could have been the experience. As a person with a disability, there's other experiences. You're limited by what people see: That chair, while your mind is strong, but people go on what they see and what they think. It's a lack of education. It's a lack of education. So, we'll tell you how to deal with it but my thing to you is prove them wrong. Prove them wrong.

BROOKE CURTIS: All right. I'm going to talk a little bit about my experience. This is a picture, it's not with random people. This is my mom and my sister. My sister and I had run the half marathon, in Houston, and we are a multicultural family. I am half White/half Black, however I identify as Black, and my sister is half Asian and half White, but if you ask her how she identifies, she'll say, I am half Chinese, I'm half White, but I'm 100% Texan.

[ Laughter ]

So, we grew up in this very diverse family. It really confused a lot of people. My mom would frequently get applauded for adopting us.

And she was like: No, no, no, let me explain. These are my children. I had them. And so, we also grew up in Houston, which is very diverse, and so growing up, we got to experience a lot of different cultures and we were always pushed by my mom to explore.

And so, when it came time to go to college, I decided for some random reason to go to school in rural Indiana.

[ Laughter ]

Where I was at a predominantly White school, oftentimes one of the few minority students in the classroom. Especially being in the sciences. And so, when it came for Lab time, you know, some of you have been in labs where you have to partner up, and I would often feel like I had to vouch for myself in labs.

And I remember a story where we were in this lab, we were selecting partners, and it was just down to myself and one other person so I'm like: Okay, you don't have a choice. I don't have a choice. And she turned to one of my friends and she says: Does Brooke do work? I was like wow, seriously?

But moving forward from that, I continued to experience these microaggressions and I think really at the time in college is when I started to experience them heavily, but also I think I was just more aware at the time. It wasn't that they weren't going on before.

But now in ‑‑ not now, but in the professional setting, I also got to experience them, which is ‑‑ it's interesting, because you have to go to work, you have to see these individuals. Not now. Where I work is great, of course.

But I remember when I had my first job out of college, I had got asked by our CEO to go to an event that was a luncheon, and so I was like: Okay, great. And then I had a woman from our team come in, and she goes: I'm sorry, I just don't understand why they asked you to go. And so, it's those comments like that, that, I mean, they just really stick with you.

And I think, though, that, you know, at that time I just really didn't know how to handle and how to appropriately address it, but comments like that, I feel like they made me really just want to prove why I belong in these certain rooms and in these certain settings.

And so here are some examples of microaggressions. We have: You are so articulate, the one that Anita shared. And so really it conveys that it's unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent.

Other one: When I look at you, I don't see color. Denies a person of their racial and ethnic experience. Oh, we have a question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So, this is a genuine question. So far through the last day and a half, I have heard that because I'm White, I'm privileged. And I actually say some of these things because I feel like I have to defend being White, especially when I lived in Seattle, just for being White, I was a bigot, for no other reason than being White.

And I am not discounting anything that anybody's ever gone through in their life. I grew up in the military, where we didn't experience racism. I had people of all colors, all backgrounds, growing up. That's what I saw. I was raised that color ‑‑ I'm not saying that it doesn't matter to the person that they are, or it takes away from who they are, but as a White person, when I'm constantly being told that I have privilege because of the color of my skin or people insinuating that I'm racist just because I'm White or because I'm a bigot, I'm really curious on how when I'm in a constant state of feeling like I have to defend being White, when I have, you know, a history like everybody else. White did not stop me from getting assaulted. It did not stop me from having two head injuries. It did not stop me from having to bust my butt, work 12‑hour days, 7 years straight, to, you know... So, I'm sorry, but it is really frustrating and hard to sit through something and constantly hear that I have White privilege and feel like I have to defend being White. So I'm really curious on what it is that we're supposed to say and what we're supposed to do, when I came here to learn about being inclusive and how do I reach and break down barriers with people in my community and not be judged based on the color of my skin?

STAN HOLBROOK: What's your name?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Mandy.

STAN HOLBROOK: Mandy? Thank you, Mandy. Number one, this is not meant to be personal to anybody. I don't know your background. I don't know anybody's background. When I mention White privilege, when that's mentioned, that's a fact that's been over hundreds of years, but I'm not pointing Mandy out. Mandy, you said right here about how you were bashed as a woman, you know. You've said other things that you felt microaggressive behavior. This is not to talk about any one person, and I'm sorry that it's hitting you this way because we're not here to bash, we're here to learn where we come from and move forward.

It's not to bash you or anybody in this room. It's not to bash you. But there is a fact that there are people that are advantaged and people that are disadvantaged. And people that are disabled are disadvantaged, regardless of color. They're more disadvantaged if they have color and other things going on.

What we're trying to do – all we’re trying to do and not trying to bash anybody, because I can't say anybody in this room personally did anything to anyone. From a ‑‑ speaking from history, speaking from microaggressive behavior that gets people actually ticked off sometimes, there are certain things that come up and it doesn't have to be White all the time. You know, racial and ethnic, there's lots of races, lots of ethnicities. There's people with sexual orientation that are White or Black that get bashed all the time. So, we're not trying to make this a Black and White thing, and I'm very sorry if that's what you think. That's not it. That's not it.

We're trying to take this point and move forward together, to make the system better for all. So, I don't mean to point out anybody in here and say anybody in here is privileged or racist or bigoted. We're talking about systemically what goes on, and how we break the barriers of the system and move forward as a group and that's all of us, and that's inclusive of everybody in this room.

So, I apologize if it was taken ‑‑ you felt this way, because how you feel, and how you perceive things, is exactly what we're talking about from a microaggressive behavior. Some things can be taken in a certain way because that's the way I got them, and then I'm going to react that way, so no way is this to be something like that, no way.

We apologize. And we value your input and we value you putting that on the table. Thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Absolutely. My name is Chasidy. So listening to your story it just goes to show you that we all have personal histories, right, when it comes to microaggressions and discrimination and a lot of different things. So when someone comes to you and they tell you that you have White privilege, it opens up the conversation, because you have to ‑‑ I know how emotional driven it can be to get told that question.

Because it triggers something in us, and that's just natural, because we live in this world, right? So, we have a lot of triggers, so what we have to start doing is pause, and not so much focus so much on what they're saying, but ask the question: Why are they saying this? And then open up that conversation: Well, we can talk about that. Let's talk about it. Let's not have an angry conversation about it. Let's have a real open dialogue, because that's where the conversation starts and that's why we're here. We're here to talk about how to start those conversations, and come with an open mind, and so ‑‑ and it's hard to do that. That's a learning area that I believe that I can speak for myself, that that's something I had to learn over time.

And coming from a social work perspective, because my background is social work, I know everyone has personal histories, and they come in with that. They bring that into whatever space they come into, so I don't take it too personal when someone comes at me with different things, especially that articulate thing. I've heard that my whole life, my whole life. But we have a lot of growing to do.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So, I guess I just wanted to say though as a fellow White person, one thing I wish in these conversations is that White people don't feel the need to defend ourselves. I think of course, it's true that we all have our own experiences of hardship and discrimination, but I think in these conversations, we don't allow people of color in the room's experiences to come out enough, and it is a very natural reaction I think to get defensive. The book that Darrell pointed out yesterday, White Fragility, I think is a good book for the White folks in this room that are feeling this way to read to maybe understand. And what Stan and Brooke are pointing out is: It's not a perception that White privilege exists. It's a very well‑documented fact. So I just hope we can remember this in the conversation, understand that we all have natural reactions to this kind of information, and try to push past it and have this be a learning experience, which I know is what everybody's trying to do. I just wanted to offer that perspective.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So, Hi, everyone. This is Asha. I think something about privilege or how I like to look at it is, is power, is that if you ‑‑ you may not notice that you have it because it's something that can oftentimes be invisible. So for me, yes, I deal with ‑‑ and just because you have ‑‑ sorry, just because you have power or privilege in one area doesn't mean that you have it in another. So, yes, I experience discrimination for being Black, and for being a woman, for being a lesbian, but I don't experience it in some areas. For example, I was born into a middle‑class family and so maybe it's not something that I can ‑‑ it's not that ‑‑ so that's an area where I have power or privilege, so when I was going to, say, college and applying, I think: Well, I have all these challenges. I have to go to all these extracurricular activities, I had to work really hard to make these grades and it was difficult because I didn't have accommodations, so I worked really hard to get accepted into college. But something I need to think about is I was able to do extracurricular activities because my parents had enough money so I didn't have to work. And that's something where I have privilege. So, when someone points that out to me, that’s something I have to acknowledge. The reason I was able to do a lot of the things and be able to go to college is because my family had ‑‑ I mean, my family had the resources to let me do the things that helped me get accepted.

So just because you have power in one area does not mean that you ‑‑ in another area you will be experiencing discrimination.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So, I had a question that I wanted to ask, and I think that this is the appropriate time. When we defined racism, we defined it as structural and as a system of power. And privilege works in the same way. It's structural.

And something that you said was that we can all be victims of racism, and please excuse my ignorance and someone correct me if I'm wrong, but because it's structural, I believe this to be incorrect. I think that we can all be victims of prejudice based on race, but that's not the same as racism because it's structural, and I don't want to discount your experience, because it sounds like people looked at the color of your skin and assumed that because White people are in a position of power in this country, assumed that you're a bigot and that's unfair, and that is racial discrimination but it isn't the same as racism.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So my background is in sociology, and at one point in my life I exclusively, painstakingly wrote about this. It's really interesting. I agree with everything the folks have said and I agree that people have very real experiences with being called racist, because it comes from a place of pain, and it comes from a very real place of experience, I think, number one.

But also, kind of going along with the last comment, I think we have to keep in mind the systemic nature of all of this, because as long as individually we are talking about who is and who isn't racist for what they have or have not done, we are not talking about how the system of racism is used as a tool of separation, to exclude everybody. I live in an area ‑‑ I do political work and I live in an area where there is a very small White poor segment in the area where I've lived. And they go to ‑‑ if anybody is offended ‑‑ I guess I won't cuss. They go to crap schools. They have the same crap access to social services. They experience all of the same structural disadvantages of the majority Black population in that area because of social class. Not racism.

As a matter of fact, it's really interesting to watch that dynamic of these young people in high school, because often when they try to heighten racism to make themselves feel better, because frankly that's all they've got because they're poor, the more privileged White students throw them down a peg with something that looks very much like racial superiority, but social class will jab it in the heart too, right? So, I think we have to understand that there is a structure that is keeping this conversation on an interpersonal level only, and never on a systemic level.

So, as a group, we strike a blow at the root. Individually, all of this stuff has to be rectified because it's about how lives have been absolutely destroyed because of racism, literally, not just people dying, right? But I mean, goodness, whole towns burned to the ground. I don't have go through all that, right. But absolutely destroyed because of individual acts of racism backed up by systemic allowances, the law. So, I think we do have to work through these interpersonal things. We have to.

But if we're only going in an endless circle of interpersonal, and never connecting it to systemic and who is benefiting us, who is benefiting from the endless cycle of interpersonal, we're not going to go anywhere. We're not going to advance. We're not going to defeat racism.

And one last quick thing: I myself had an experience in this arena where I was told that in a situation having to do with racism in my area had, quote, unquote, been handled.

And that's all I'll say about that interaction. There's more to say but that's all I'm gonna say about that interaction. It led to some other stuff, but, you know, there we go.

SUSAN DOOHA: Hi. I want to agree that racism is structural. It's about redlining in communities. It's about segregation of schools. It's about access to housing that is not substandard. It is about disparities, inequalities in health care. It's about inequalities in access to transportation. And we see this in data. It is really provable that these structural inequalities exist and were put in place and continue to be put in place, and that we need to understand them in order to be able to address them.

For me, doing work like this requires sort of a constant willingness to be self‑examining. Not because I am doing things that are intentionally bigoted, but because I, like everyone in this culture, adopts thinking about norms, just assuming certain norms, and the norms are based on White middle‑class experience. And I have to unpack what I'm thinking and challenge myself about what I'm thinking.

I know, for example, that my co‑worker can't flag down a cab in New York City. I know that when I get stopped by the police, I'm going to smile at them, and they're going to let me go. And I know that's not the experience of my neighbors. I know if I show up at my door without my keys, without my ID, just having walked the dog, nobody is going to tell me I don't belong there and call the police.

If I go up to somebody's home and I ask for directions, nobody is going to come to the door with a gun and shoot through the door. There are many, many ways in my own life that I experience privilege every day, and yet I want to unpack that and look at it, become aware of it, and challenge my normative thinking, which is just constant, constant self‑work. But in order to really do correction, one must persistently look at the structural underpinnings of this culture. The racism that is inherent in the structures of our culture and try to take them apart and replace them. That's something I hope we can do together. I see people of good will. It's not about intention. It's not about my intending badly. It's not about anybody's intending badly. It's how do we learn together, supporting each other, to unpack our own bags, and to work on the structural underpinnings that support racism every day.

[ Applause ]

JESSE BETHKE GOMEZ: I want to come back to these words that I'd mentioned yesterday. We hold these truths to be self‑evident, and the question is: What can we do to pull the arc of history to aspire to that, for that whom we believe we are as a nation and as a society. 8 years ago, I was appointed by the Minnesota Supreme Court, the Minnesota Judicial Selection Commission, as one person. I had reached out to all of the diverse Bar Associations. We had our first African American woman to the Minnesota Supreme Court. We had the first Latino ever to the Minnesota Court of Appeals.

We worked hard at identifying candidates, and we also made certain we put a check on people that we deemed that had what's called black‑robe disease. People that would not do well as judges. The long and the short of it, we reviewed 2,750 applications. We interviewed 1,000 people over that 8 years. We saw over 181 appointments and 105% increase in diverse judicial appointments in the state of Minnesota.

I mention that so that the question is: What can I do to help pull the arc of history towards that realization of we hold these truths to be self‑evident? My hope is that through today we discover more about what it is that we can do about disability, diversity, and intersectionality, the full realization on our watch today, this generation of Americans, to fully realize who we are. Thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, my name is Zan. I'm from Atlanta, Georgia. I was born in D.C. Pat Hussain is a famous act who's here, LGBTQ2S and Black, she said she was the original angry Black woman. I know that's maybe not true, but she's 20 years older than me. My point is that if ‑‑ what she said to me is that White privilege can be turned around. You use your White privilege to help people. Like, for example, what we did here in Georgia is that we offer scholarships.

I make enough money, or my partner makes enough really, it isn't me, and we can use some of our grant, but I had to be honest with that. But paving a way that people can be invited, and that they can come. I grew up poor. We had to go pick poke on the railroad track. Poke salad. Anybody know poke salad?

So, growing up poor, you can see the classism and all the isms so thank you. That's all.

STAN HOLBROOK: You know what? It's very hard to get into a real conversation and bring up things that are uncomfortable. I want to thank you for that exchange.

[ Applause ]

Because that exchange is needed to move forward. If we don't start where we're at right now, we don't recognize where we're at and say what we truly feel, we can't move forward. So, I want to thank you guys for that exchange. We couldn't have scripted that. We couldn't have. And it just happened and needed to happen. And once again, nothing personal. We're all here to grow and to be better.

And like everybody said, there's systems of structure that are in place that we have to deal with. Yes, ma'am?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Sorry, I didn't introduce myself earlier, my name is Mykah and I prefer they/them pronouns. And so going off this turning around our White privilege, I have a question I want to pose particularly to people of color in the room, and I encourage you to approach me at a later time, since I’m sure that we’re pressed for time right now, and give me an answer, because I'm looking for lots of them: How can I as a White person use my privilege? Because my voice is louder, and some people can only hear a voice from a body that looks like mine.

How can I use my privilege to speak on issues that affect people of color without commandeering the platform that they have and silencing their voices?

STAN HOLBROOK: Thank you. Do we have any takers? See Mykah after.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My name is Liz Sherwin and I'm not sure how White people can help me, but I think I come from a different vantage point than many people here because of my age. I'm 71 years old, and I grew up during that time when it was okay for separate but equal.

In fact, I was born in Louisiana. I went to all‑Black schools, you know. My principals were Black. My teachers were Black. The people in my neighborhood was Black. I had no interaction with White people.

Therefore, my view of the world was quite different. And I moved north in the '50s with the migration of African Americans for work in the north. And so, when I came to the North, I had a different experience. My experience was Black. I had no dealings with White people. Not in my neighborhood, not in the stores, not anywhere.

So, I had to make an adjustment, and I think that it was for the most part pretty successful. So, I'll tell you a story. On the block that I lived in Rock Island, there was one Black family. It was a family, it was my family. There was White people on the block. There was no Hispanic and this young girl every day would come by and speak to me. She was White apparently, but I didn't deal with White people. Didn't want any dealings with them, period.

So, she would come by every day, I would be sitting on the stoop and she would speak to me. I would look at her, and apparently, I still do roll my eyes at people.

[ Laughter ]

So, I would roll my eyes at this individual, and finally I went in and told my older sister. I said: This person is harassing me, bothering me. And she said ‑‑ she assumed it was a dirty old White man, a pedophile. And I said no, it's that girl down the block.

She said the little girl two houses down?

I said yes.

She said what is she doing?

I said she is speaking to me and I don't want to be talking to White people.

And she said that evidently, mama has not explained the situation in the north to you. And I said what is that situation?

She said, well, you're probably going to have to go to school with her. You're probably going to have to deal with a lot of other White people, and in the North, your teachers are probably going to be White. Your principals, the storekeeper, everybody. So, you're going to have to learn how to deal with White people.

I said, well, I don't want to. I want to go back home, because that was my view of the world. I had no dealings with White people, and as a child, I had to adjust and see the world through different eyes.

And I think that what we're trying to get here is get at the point of how we can view the world through other eyes, and eventually, this young person that I had said was harassing me, she kind of acclimated me to the school system and became my friend. And she walked me to school every day and we were friends through junior high school. And I think because of the system that I grew up in, separate but equal, and having to adjust to a different world, I think most people can do that if they really try hard, and try to see things from a different perspective. Thank you.

STAN HOLBROOK: Thank you.

[ Applause ]

Last comment.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you. I just want to talk about the point she made, and the point you made about internalization. When microaggression statements are being made, we internalize that. However, I want to put a twist on it, microaggression as mentioned ‑‑ microaggression as you mentioned is not only done from one race to another race. It is also being done within the race.

STAN HOLBROOK: Absolutely, absolutely.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I want to give you an example. This morning, I woke up to get a coffee, in the breakfast room at the hotel.

[ Laughter ]

And there was this lady who asked me: Do you have a breakfast card? I said yes, I do.

And I showed her the breakfast card. So, I left. I came back again, she saw me. I came back. Sat down. And she said again: Do you have the breakfast card? I said I do.

Okay. So, I waited for my colleague. They didn't show up, so I left. I came back a third time to have breakfast, and she said: Do you have breakfast card?

I said: Look, you've seen me three times already. I showed you my breakfast card. Why are you asking me this?

The point I'm trying to make is, this is a Black woman. Okay. It's not a White person. It's a Black woman. And what I'm trying to lead to is the fact that microaggression, despite the fact that it's structural, is internalized, and people within the race because they see that in the community, the society, every day, they internalize that, and they act that out. I don't know what the situation of this lady was, but maybe from where she works, she's seen or she's had experience where a Black person will be asked questions like that, just like showing up.

So being a Black person, she internalized that and she's acting out that internalization, regardless of who especially to a Black person, and she's Black. So that's just a different dimension that I want to point out. Thank you.

STAN HOLBROOK: Thank you. We talked about addressing systems of microaggressions. It involves monitoring for inequities in exposures and opportunities, as well as for disparities in outcomes. It involves examining policies, structures, practices, norms, and values. Requires intervention on societal structures and attention to systems of power.

And we kind of went around the room ahead of time, talking about those systems of power, talking about what we need to look at to move forward, and this is just reinforcing that.

How should CILs address microaggressions? Because that's why we're here. It starts with leadership and a welcoming organizational culture. And there's a foundation of accountability and personal responsibility that's needed as we move forward.

What we need to do is ask people how they want to be communicated with. There's some formalized training that we could do, and we, as we have today, start and continue those hard conversations.

Because if Mandy doesn't speak up, we don't know. And others chimed in, but if she doesn't speak up, we continue on the road we're on. But there's always different views and different perspectives, and the more perspectives that we deal with together, the better our solution will be when we move forward as a unit to be better as Centers, to be better as people.

BROOKE CURTIS: And then how ‑‑ .

STAN HOLBROOK: Go ahead.

BROOKE CURTIS: How should individuals address microaggressions? So, when you're the target, what you want to do -- and it's difficult to do in the moment -- you want to attack the comment and not the person.

So, if someone says something to you, you can in turn ask: Hey, you know, you made this comment. And I just want to better understand what you meant. And that, like you said, it opens up the door for a conversation.

And then in turn, that's an opportunity to educate and inform. One thing that you for sure want to do is speak up. Because the worst response is no response.

And then additionally, one point that we want to make, people who witness a microaggression can be affected by it, even when the target isn't affected. So sometimes if you're a bystander of a comment, even if the individual doesn't respond, maybe they don't know how to respond, maybe they don't want to, maybe the situation is a bit tricky, you can also respond, as well.

So, when you're the microaggressor, remember that addressing the microaggression is not only the responsibility of the target, or the marginalized group. You don't want to dismiss the experience of the microaggression as an isolated incident. And you want to be sure to reflect and apologize.

And I think it's really important to not dismiss it, because this comment can, in turn ‑‑ it's reflecting your internal bias.

And then the last interactive discussion that we have is: So, at the beginning you told us a word or a comment that was made to you that didn't sit well. We want you to start thinking about how you will avoid committing a microaggression, or how you will address them.

So, I think we ‑‑ are we out of time? We have two minutes, so you have one minute.

[ Laughter ]

And then we'll ‑‑ just real quick we'll have one or two people share.

So how will you avoid committing a microaggression and how will you address them if it happens to you? Or, you can share now. Any takers? Okay.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: For me, I think it's just about being more thoughtful about what I say and while I might not think it's offensive, think about how it might land on somebody else or how they could perceive it to be offensive or aggressive and just being more thoughtful about what's coming out of my mouth.

STAN HOLBROOK: Thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My name is Liz again. I want to talk about a situation that happened in one of our staff meetings. I didn't bring it up earlier, but one thing made me remember it: Several years ago in a staff meeting, at a Center for Independent Living, I was called the N‑word. The issue was, I mean, the Director did not handle it in a very appropriate way I felt, but what I want to touch base is how it impacted the other staff people that were not, you know, doing this type of thing.

I mean, it really made them feel bad. They did not know how to react to it. They knew how ‑‑ they didn't know how to deal with it, period. And afterwards there were really a lot of discomfort in them talking to me and dealing with me, because they felt that they had not addressed it and there was ‑‑ I mean, this type of behavior not only impacts the person that it's directed at, but it impacts the people around us. Because they are in a position, they're put in a position where they don't know how to deal with it, and it makes it uncomfortable for that individual, the people in the whole area. I mean, anybody that has come in contact with it, because they just ‑‑ and a lot of times they just don't know how to react to those kinds of situations and that's all I wanted to say.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, my name is Missy, and I just want to go back a little bit to when you were talking about how a bystander can step in if there's a microaggression. Like, for me, I would want to step in, but I think I would also feel like I was discounting or stepping on the victim's toes, so I just kind of wanted to bring that up and see how people thought about how to handle that situation.

BROOKE CURTIS: Well ‑‑ .

STAN HOLBROOK: What I like to say is: If you felt you wanted to step in, what's that going to do inside of you, if you don't step in? And so, sometimes you have to step in gingerly, and you could speak to the victim after and say why. But I think what happens when you see a microaggression and you're feeling it, you can't stand by but so much and do it because of what's going on inside of you. So that's my thought.

BROOKE CURTIS: And I think you can ask: What did you mean by that, too? Just to maybe clarify, as well.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I think that it's perfectly appropriate to express your personal discomfort with it, because I'm uncomfortable with racism. I'm not a victim of it, but when I hear racist comments made in my presence, I'm uncomfortable. So, when I hear white people using the N word, no matter how they intend to use it, I feel that’s not your word. It makes me uncomfortable when you use the word in my presence. Can you not do that. If they want to have a conversation about why that makes me uncomfortable, I think that's a lot better than retaliating, because that opens up that conversation. Especially as a white person to be able to educate other white people. Because as I said before, sometimes there are certain people that can only hear a voice from a body that looks like mine.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm thinking actually when I started, because for the microaggression, okay, so I knew the behavior. I saw the behavior before, but I didn't know the meaning of that, and I didn't know, okay, what is this. I'm thinking we need to actually increase education about that. Maybe we can have workshop in our Centers and more advertisement or marketing for that.

We need to actually bring people to teach them, because just we said okay how you do that? Maybe I have a lot of information, but when I talk to other person, that person doesn't know anything about that. At first, education, have a free workshop. I don't know in your churches or in any Center you have it, to be familiar people with that topic. And so, when all the people know about that actually, topics, we can work better and so all the community will go a better way.

BROOKE CURTIS: That's a great point.

STAN HOLBROOK: Thank you.

BROOKE CURTIS: I do just want to say on the ILRU website, we actually do have the on‑demand training for microaggression.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you.

BROOKE CURTIS: You get to see Stan and I again.

STAN HOLBROOK: I have to cut this ‑‑ I've gotten the zero sign a couple of times.

[ Laughter ]

I tried to ignore it.

[ Laughter ]

I want to thank you guys for really saying what you said, pouring into this. And as we move forward ‑‑ see, there's Jesse Bogarting me.

JESSE BETHKE GOMEZ: Just one statement. Just this quickly, when I came to NCIL, 100% staff every year harassment training by a lawyer in employment law. No exceptions.

STAN HOLBROOK: Thank you. I want to thank you guys.

 [ End of session ]