

## ***Perspectives of Blind Attorneys in North Carolina***

*Lunch & Learn: May 20, 2021 TRANSCRIPT*

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I'm Lori Cole, I'm a court management specialist in the court programs division at the North Carolina office of the courts. I also serve as the disability access coordinator for our state and in that role, I provide support and coordinate training for all of our disability access coordinators in each county. I also receive and respond to grievances.

I do that in conjunction with some support from Corrine Lusic who is our deputy legal counsel here at the administrative office of the courts and she'll be joining us shortly as well and be available for questions at the end if there are any that that she can help with.

I want to make sure that everybody has a good understanding of what our disability access process is for the court system. We have - we're fully aware that any court employee might receive a request for accommodations under the disabilities act, a request from a litigant or a member of the public. So it's important to us that all judicial branch employees are prepared to respond appropriately. And knowing what they should do with those requests are key.

So for all of our court folks on the call today, um, if you didn't know already, we want to make sure you're aware that each county has a locally designated staff person, and that person responds to our ADA requests as part of their regular duties. It's not a special position. It's another duty as assigned, which were all very familiar with as public servants. In North Carolina, we refer to them as disability - access - coordinators or DACs rather than an ADA coordinator to avoid confusion with the District Attorney's office.

You can contact your DAC by email at the county name dot D A C at NC courts dot org. For example, wake county. Wake county's DAC would be wake dot D A C at NC courts dot org.

Our statewide disability access protocol for North Carolina courts is for all requests to be directed to those local disability access coordinators, who will gather information from the individual or attorney to better understand how we can provide reasonable accommodations. Those requests can be made verbally in person or over the phone, or in writing by letter or email or now we have a new online request form that's available on NC courts dot gov through the disability access page. You can use the help topics to find that. And we ask that those requests are submitted as soon as possible so that we can make sure to get those arrangements in place. And then our DAC will work with the local judicial authority to arrange for those requested accommodations to be made available for the person for their court activity. Then the DAC will follow up with that person who made the request was requested is not possible or available, then our DAC will work with the person and the court to figure out an alternative.

I think that's a pretty brief summary or speedy pass by of the disability access process for our courts.

And I know that what you all are here today is to learn more and hear what the attorney's experience is in the courts and learn from these talented attorneys about the different ways that they access the court system. And I see Corrine just popped on the screen. Okay, good. She waved.

And now I'm going to turn it over to Tricia Shields. She is a staff attorney at Hedrick Gardner. She's a highly experienced trial attorney whose practice focuses on civil litigation. She represents people in their business in a wide variety of cases, including commercial - complex, commercial litigation, malpractice, professional responsibility, product, liability claims, civil rights claims, in addition she also litigates before occupational licensing boards defending and prosecuting licensees. She's had a 30-year career, enjoyed active appellate practice and appeared regularly before North Carolina court of appeals and Supreme Court. So, we are so pleased to have you with us today, Tricia. I thank you for joining us and for moderating our panel.

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Thank you so much, Lori. I'm very, very happy to be here today. And today is global accessibility awareness day so this is a wonderful day to have this particular forum. When Derek Dittmar asked me a couple months ago to help, I was very, very flattered have this opportunity. Derek and I know each other well, and he knows that I attribute any success that I have had in my career to a blind attorney after beginning my career as law clerk to Chief Judge Hedrick at the Court of Appeals. And for anybody in on this meeting that knew Judge Hedrick knows he was quite a big personality and truly taught me everything that I learned all school. So I'm, I'm particularly honored to be here.

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To speak with you all today and introduce you to this wonderful panel of attorneys. We have with us Locke Millholland. Raise your hand Locke and it's showing your name. Okay. Good. So, Locke is a graduate of North Carolina State University. He's also a graduate of Campbell Law school in 2006, so he's been practicing for a nice 15 years now. For many years he had his own private practice and a very active, both trial and appellate practice, and just very recently I understand, he joined the North Carolina Department of Justice. So, we are very, very happy to have Locke here with us today.

We also have Derek Dittmar. Derek is a graduate of Campbell Law School. He graduated in 2019. Not just with the J. D. but also with L.L.M. from Nottingham Trent University in England. For his research focus on disability and accessibility and constitutional law. This past year he has served as a Judicial Fellow for the North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts. Which means he has been a law clerk for all of the superior court district court judges across the state. Fortunately, for me, this past Monday, he joined the law firm of Hedrick Gardner and will be working with me here in our office. So, I'm very, very pleased to have him here today.

We will also, I believe, later be joined by Elizabeth Chapman she is a busy attorney, and I think had a conflict and is not able to start the very beginning but will introduce her when she is able to join.

And finally, we have Corrine Lusic who has been mentioned before, and there she is. Corrine, like me, is a graduate of UNC Law School. She has also worked for the Department of Justice, but I believe has been with AOC for a couple of years. And so she may be chiming in as well. Well, I will go right? And you're not here to hear from me.

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So, I will start. We have a number of topics. And I think I'll start first with Locke. And Locke, maybe the first thing we can talk about are physical accommodations that we need to be conscious of for blind attorneys and also, if you would just add in anything that you think is important that I left out of my introduction.

Okay, thank you Tricia. It's good to see you again. And glad that you were able to help moderate this meeting and thank everybody for attending, uh, like she said, I went to NC State University. In my freshman year, in the fall of my freshman year, is when I started losing my vision. I had been enrolled into the college of forestry planning on being a forest ranger. And unfortunately, it had a summer camp that required operation of heavy machinery and prescribed burning techniques and so that I was going to be difficult if not impossible to accommodate to a successful degree. There's only so much accommodating you could do for driving a bulldozer.

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But I went and switched from a straight up forestry degree to natural resources policy and administration, which flowed pretty smoothly into an interest in law school, and so from there, I went to law school and graduated 2006 as she said. From there, I did start my own solo practice. My vision pyramid is pretty expansive, but it is a blind spot in my central vision. And so I, I do have peripheral vision that I can use to get around. So, a lot of times people don't even notice that I have an impairment. But then a lot of times they quickly learn.

But I did not intend on going straight into a solo practice. But I had interviewed at some firms and I was explicitly told, we understand you made it through law school. We understand passed the bar, but we don't understand how you're going to practice without being able to see.

So, after a couple of those, I started my own law firm. And I do owe a lot of thanks to Brian Bryce, who had hired me as an intern and he did not have the space at his practice to hire full time attorney, but he was able to provide me with some contract work that helped give me some income while building up my own book of clients. From there, I did practice and have practiced family law and juvenile abuse and neglect law on the court appointed list in addition to personal injury civil litigation and so I did have an interest in getting into the courtroom and I've been able to get into the courtroom, and have trials. Up till

May, that's where I've been. And then in May I did start with the Department of Justice where I will be representing the Department of Public Safety. So far that's going well.

As far as physical accommodations, I really don't use any physical accommodations as far as that goes. I have a general understanding of building architecture and uh, yeah, I can listen for the water fountains or watch out for the glimmer of lights when the metal shining and I tend to know that where there's a water fountain, there's what the bathrooms are going to be and then I do use the raised print braille signs that are on the door. Occasionally, we have a building that doesn't have those as one on Hargett street here in downtown Raleigh that does not have that they just have a flat glass panel, and when you had those you really just have to kind of guess and find somebody who is in an office and ask them where you're supposed to go, which that could be a bit of an annoyance. But most buildings now do have to raised numbers and braille and then the figures of the man and a woman on the panel to help identify the bathrooms.

Thank you, Locke. Well, Derek, we'll turn to you. Tell us a little bit more about yourself.

I just want to begin by saying thank you to everybody. So much for being here. This is such a great panel and I've been excited for this since Lori and I first started talking about it in February, or early March when I was still with the AOC, so it's cool that today is finally here.

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I, I'll sort of mimic Locke and go ahead and just explain my visual impairment. I am, uh, legally blind. Uh, my twin brother, and I, both. First in our family were diagnosed with a genetic condition called laborers can channel that has effectively taken most of the vision out of my eyes, but in different places so, whereas Locke has, uh, as he described know certain points that are just don't or do work, mine are sort of spot checked all over. I, I do use it a guide dog. His name is Howard. He tends to sleep next to me. So if his snores, come through on, on Webex, that's his contribution today. Um. My vision has been pretty stable, had a big decrease in a, in an undergrad class, just something that sort of happened. I walked in to take a final and I walked out with, uh. Maybe half of the vision that I've had going in in one of my eyes.

Um, physical accommodations are are no, it's interesting that lock started immediately with the restrooms which tends to be sort of 1 of the focal points, because if you can find the bathroom, you can find pretty much anything else. It takes a lot of the panic out of the transfo, um, braille signs are really important for me as well. And it's it's a little bit interesting because about less than 10 percent of the American, visually impaired or blind community uh, is braille proficient and so the raised print helps a lot as well you can almost read that as braille, and in fact, braille was created to replace How blind people used to read in the turn of the twentieth century and 18 and 19 hundreds, which was sort of those large print raised line type drawings. Buildings tend to be set up the same.

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So Locke said if you find a water fountain and you usually find a a restroom, um, buildings, rooms of type say, seem to be put together. So courtrooms will be next to each other. And a lot of it just tends to be questions. So if I'm in an unfamiliar court house or facility, usually, you know, when you're coming to a front door, there's going to be some sort security or desk services that you can ask uh.

For assistance, but every place is different. So I, I tend to analogize it to every day, going to a different office without GPS. And you do the best you can, and you ask for help when you need it.

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I thank you, Derek and wow, so I think we will stay with you for the next question because I wanted to ask about just general technological accommodations that are necessary particularly with regard to law practice and I know that matters are an obsession of yours personally. So, if you could just illuminate us on that.

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Yes, sure. So the other big credit or physical accommodation that we didn't touch on, because I knew that it was coming is a print. Reading is if it's on in braille challenging, and again, even if it isn't braille, 90% of folks can't get to it. So, most consumption of written word for the blind community is going to be electronic. Um, I use my my smart phone pretty excessively and intentionally, that's where I access everything from, books to apps that will, uh, either scan and read something to me directly, or, um, will actually connect me virtually with somebody who will tell me what the camera's looking at. So that's really helpful for does my tie match or I dropped a piece of chocolate on the floor. Help me find it before the guide dog does. Um, technology we really are in sort of the golden age in some ways of the disabled community in that Technology is growing at a huge pace. Um.

My computer is set up with a screen reading software and so I navigate the entire web and documents with a keyboard instead of a mouse. Um, everything is sort of read to me, and 1 of the benefits of that is I read it incredibly quickly said about 500 words a minute and that's something. That can be done uninterrupted. So, it allows me to read very, very quickly all large files and briefs and orders and documents, which is very helpful for me. The only issue is and this is something I think we might touch on later. Is that technology needs to be designed in a way that welcomes accessible tech. Right? So if you analogize it, which we tend to do on a legal basis to physical disability accommodations, a wheelchair can be the best wheelchair in the world but if a building is not built to accommodate a wheelchair at the doorways or too narrow, if there are too many steps, and degradation in the floor has a, a lot of ramps that are almost impossible, then the wheelchair no matter how good it is, won't be able to be as helpful. It's the same way with technology. It's not built to accommodate screen reading software or other disability access tech of which screen running software is a very small example, then even the best software that really isn't going to do that much good.

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Um, so Locke tell us about your experience and your use with technology.

Yeah, when I first lost my vision, it wasn't the dark ages, but it was the Middle Ages and we had this before we had the screen readers and so I did most of my school work with audio cassettes with people actually reading it and I could speed it up but it did make me wonder how I was going to work once I got out of school and along came JAWS, the job access with speech, which is a screenreader. And so I don't I haven't tracked my word count to know if I'm up to the speed that Derek is, but it does get pretty fast. Most people can't understand it. When they hear talking, I've been on the phone with Derek, and he's been able to follow it which was a little surprising to me, and

-- it's very rude in the community; I was being rude -- I was reading over your shoulder and I'm sorry -

and usually I do have headphones on, but I knew it was Derek and stuff he was interested in. But anyway, so I do rely on the computer with JAWS, and then I have a scanner where if I have mail or other documents that come in, I can scan those in. As long as they're typewritten. It comes in pretty good to where the Adobe can do an optical character recognition and converted into machine-readable text.

And I was reluctant to get an iPhone. Because I was pissed off at Steve Jobs for making a device that you had to be able to see and touch. And just a blank, flat, smooth screen and know what you're seeing in order to navigate it. I like tactile buttons.

But somebody that showed me the accessibility features with voiceover on the iPhone and I did then go out and get one, and it has been a life changer, the amount of apps that you can get that help on the day to day basis would work and in your personal life has been amazing.

And now I don't go anywhere without it. I'm able to use it in the courtroom. If there's a document that's come across my desk opposing counsel is bringing it up and I haven't seen it yet - and that that's not supposed to happen, but it happens all the time in family law - and it allows me to just take a quick snapshot of it and read it and make sure that I'm on page whatever the witness is seeing.

Locke, if I can tag onto that for just one second to add --and we're not sponsored by Apple, I want to be very clear about that-- but technology accessible tech is one of the biggest markups on the market that the cost of production versus the cost of sales is really high and there are a lot of reasons for that.

The iPhone is pretty remarkable, and almost all of apples products are pretty remarkable in that they are accessible out the box. I could walk over to Trish's office and take her phone and within about 2 or 3 seconds, fully independently, make it entirely usable for me.

I'm sure you can and I will, I will say that that my personal experience is that that just like any, any person that i half my age, Derek can do a lot more with technology than I can.

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I also want to just to jump in here and add to the extent that we have people on who employ lawyers, we are, we are working have worked to accomplish the onboarding process with Derek just this week since this past Monday and well, I think one of the things that people worry about is, how will our technology work? The proof of the matter is with a tiny bit of flexibility, all of these things can be addressed and and Derek was fully aware of the kind of technology he needs and how to get it and it's honestly very been very smooth. And people are concerned about that. And so this is a perfect segue. We've had our last presenter join us.

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Oh, yes, I am so sorry that I was late. My prior meeting, the attorney was an hour and 45 minutes late. Um, and I am so sorry.

Well, so it was well, you are speaking largely to attorneys and people and people that deal with attorneys. So we all understand the lifestyle that you lead. And so we're very, very grateful and I'm going to introduce you very quickly.

Okay. Thank you.

Elizabeth is an associate with the law firm of Brooks Pierce, and she is in Greensboro. She got her JD from UNC in 2014. And I, well, I won't - if I went through a list of accomplishments that she could honored, and just and awards, and, and just a relatively short period of practice. It would take the rest of the hour, so I won't do that. Um, but we're very, very happy to have her here. She practices in the area of a education law if I understand it. And, um, and I will tell you that the people from her firm sing her praises to everyone so that, you know, so your reputation precedes you.

But so, what we did before we started with both Derek and Locke, and you can, and anything else that you'd like to say about yourself or your practice would be great.

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Sure, and thanks for letting me just sort of jump in the middle here. Um, I am blind, obviously, um, and I lost my sight over time and so I was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosis when I was 5, but I could see for for quite a while. I never learned to drive, um, but I started doing things. I don't know how to say this word hourly, a-u-r-a-l-l-y, you know audio wise in college and then I finally, actually the last day that I could really perceive light was the day before I moved to Greensboro to start practicing with Brooks Pierce.

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So I was sort of going through a little bit of a grief period when I started practicing. Um, and you know, obviously that is an aside to access issues, but I think sometimes it's important to remember that, you

know, folks with disabilities are also humans who have lost something a lot of times that they had before.

Um, and it takes some time to develop the skills um, to access everything and use all the tech. Um, but anyway, so I represent mainly, um schools, public boards of education, private schools, colleges, universities, nonprofits with an education bent.

I love being in private practice. It's insane as many of you know, time wise - I have 2 kids. But it is so rewarding, um, to think about really tough legal issues with people who you know, want to get to the right answer, um, both for our clients, but also for the law, what should the law be? So, anyway, I am delighted to be here and so grateful to Derek for setting all of this up.

00:25:19.078

Elizabeth, so we've been talking about before you joined us was about physical and technological accommodation. And one of the things that is great about this panel is the variety of experience of legal backgrounds that you all bring to the table. And so my assumption is, you were the 1<sup>st</sup> blind attorney at your law firm, correct?

Correct yes.

Why don't you tell us about the experience of practicing in a very large law firm as the first blind attorney.

Sure, well, 1 of the things I did is. I sort of asked around what about what firms might be able to handle this situation realizing that it's not that common. And received positive feedback about the firm. Um, so I, I kind of had a little bit of comfort going in, which I think was huge. Um, as a first year attorney, learning how to use all of the systems that lawyers use technology-wise was a huge hurdle, because a lot of them aren't accessible and aren't compatible with JAWS.

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And so, and on top of that, I didn't really know what I needed to be able to practice because I hadn't practiced before. So I knew how to find cases I knew how to write and read, I guess, but I didn't know how to manage my billing and how to manage, um, this document system that the firm uses and especially how to manage discovery tools which have been a big issue with access.

And I'm really fortunate that people were willing to invest the time to just try to figure it out with me. Um. And I think it's important for people to realize too is it takes a long time to become a good lawyer. And if you are blind it is going to take you some time to figure this stuff out, too. It's an investment. Just the same as the investment of teaching, you know, a first year attorney how to file a motion, it's an investment to figure out how to make some of these systems work.

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And I have all kinds of crazy workarounds to the technology that doesn't, that isn't accessible. We've started trying to include clauses in our



contracts with these vendors saying you've got to make it accessible. And, but, you know, the tech is constantly changing. So that's a barrier too, because it feels like every time they do an update, we then have to go back and say, Remember??? You also have to make your update accessible to the blind users out there! Um, so, you know, that that's the nice thing is, I think, once you get some things in place and figured out. You know, it's really no different in terms of being able to provide good legal advice and being productive as a lawyer.

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Um, so, Locke from your perspective, you know, Elizabeth was moving into a big firm and fitting in to their culture and their systems. In your office, when you were in private practice on your own, tell us about how that worked for you.

Well, reasonable accommodations have to be provided and when I'm my own Boss, every accommodation has to be required, has to be approved and required regardless of how reasonable other people might see it. (chuckles)

So, I had, I had worked prior to going to law school, and then I had gone through law school. So I, I had a good idea of what I would need as far as I was already proficient with JAWS, and I knew that I could scan things in and having an intern with Brian Bryce's firm, I was able to learn - he is he's probably the best person I've ever met at workarounds, and just knowing that if you have to get something done, get it done. And so I did learn a lot from him about about that and a lot of attorneys in law school, they would have at Campbell that had big brothers, big sister program where you can get outlines from previous year students and a lot of those ran down in paper and handwritten that sort of things. So, those weren't always accessible to me and I had to go to the vendors to get the books in accessible formats and so there's a lot of that and that continues once you start practicing. Other lawyers will show you how to do something. They'll hand you a file and said this is how I did it and so you have to then track and make that accessible to you and for Brian, and if you need a copy of a complaint, go to the court of appeals, pull the record on a similar case. As long as it wasn't overturned on the complaint, that's a good go by. And so I learned that early on that. You get get into some problems when you're actually going to the court and with traffic tickets, there's handwritten stuff and there's shucks that you have to find and at that point, there's really nothing you can do on your own to accommodate it and you just have to ask the deputy or asked the district attorney for some assistance.

I'll be practicing in federal courts now the federal courts have Electronic devices, they want the evidence presented to the witness, the judge and the jurors through. Like, close circuit television type screen and I am anticipating there's going to be some accessibility issues with that and so I've reached out to their accessibility coordinator to try to find out if it is already accessible. And if not, what it'll take to make it accessible.

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And I made that call last week. And she's seemed surprised and confused and she said she'd get back to me and so I'm probably going to have to reach out to her again at the end of this week or next week and see how that's going. And just hope for the best and have to plan for the worst.

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So so, so, Derek, you know, your experience until last Monday has been the judges and you had we had a wide range of judges that you worked with and I think we have some judges on this call, so, can you share your perspective on serving as a law clerk?

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Yeah, of course and the 1st thing I want to do to do that is to give some some genuine appreciation for my colleagues at the North Carolina judicial fellowship, you know, I came out of law school and spent the first six months looking for employment as a lot of people did. And even when I got interviews. Um, uh, in some places. Everything was going great until I mentioned accommodations and then. It would not happen and so am, I am eternally grateful that they gave me a shot over the fellowship, and it was the best year of my life thus far a year and a couple months. I love the people there.

Um, a lot of my judges did not know I was blind and so if any of them, uh, not that I could see who they are on this call. Um. "Surprise your honor" (laughter from presenters) and and I loved it I would be getting a copy of the complaints and of the documents and sometimes if we needed.

You know, we've mentioned a couple times optical character recognition, and the quickest way I tell people to test for is if you can Control-F, uh, Find in a document, Dollars to doughnuts, it's probably quasi-accessible, but if you *can't* then the screen reader - a wise attorney once said - can't tell the difference between a complaint letter and a picture of a sunset.

Locke, does that sound familiar?

Yes

I would be scanning those in and then my fellow fellows were always really intentional about Hey, I think this says, 4,000, although it might be, you know, 4,008. Can you look at this with me really quickly? if I needed something in a high-profile case, I would get the okay from the judge or the TCA and reach out to the parties. Everybody copied on the email for a courtesy copy of their filing and that helped a lot but after that, it was just research and writing. Formatting - I think my fellow panelists will agree. Um, making documents look pretty when you're not looking at the documents isn't exactly easy or a good time or a successful.

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So terrible, so terrible.

And so the two things that I, or the three things, rather that I always had in my mind, the first, is when I used to work in a camp for the blind

teaching music, our boss would always say flexibility is key. And so just because it's a way, something's been done doesn't mean the way it's the way it has to be done now if the way that it can be done now is more accessible and more successful.

Um, the 2nd thing is give and take. So what I would always tell my co-workers, and I hope they would agree is, I might ask you to edit for me a little bit more than another fellow would, but in response if you need any research done, if you need to talk over an issue, if you need somebody to jump in and help on a brief or an order, I want to be your first call. It was very important for me to be a team player and a valued member, they made me feel that way. And I, I'm going to be always thankful for them on that.

00:35:50.818

The third thing that I would say, and this is something, and that Elizabeth and Locke have both mentioned is, um, disability lawyering is layers. Um - I, as a new lawyer and Hedrick Gardner has been absolutely flawless in this. This roll out. I couldn't be more pleased.

Um, not only am I learning to remember to start a stopwatch and time myself for a task; Not only am I learning which bill to attach that to and how much to bill it for? Not only my learning tasks that I'm doing, but then I'm learning how to do all of those things accessibly. So it adds an extra layer, an extra step to literally everything.

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That being said being a lawyer is the most, uh, enriching thing and it's, it's where I generally feel like I was meant to be and I'm very grateful to the giants that have come before me in North Carolina, like my panelists for helping, make me feel less alone in this place.

Can I add that, I think that, and I haven't practiced in any other states, but the North Carolina bar just as a whole is so great because people really are for the most part very ethical and consider it with each other.

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And not trying to pull one over and so if you're on the opposite side, of the law, you pretty much know that the lawyer on the other side, if you say, hey, can you send me that electronically? They'll do that without asking and without making it difficult. Um, and, you know, I just think we're all so fortunate to be in a bar like that. And I hope that I hope that we can continue that tradition in our state cause I've had a few interactions outside and I don't know.

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So, I would concur with that assessment, Elizabeth, I think that that we do have a unusually, in my experience congenial bar in North Carolina, and I personally like that very much.

Listening to Locke's comments earlier. It's clear this is something that you have to that you can deal with every minute of your practice, you always have to deal with.

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That is correct, always dealing with the accessibility issues. Yes.

I noticed that. So, and so you're having, you're having to introduce new people to it in federal courts. Have you had other either negative or positive experiences with accessibility in the courts or program that you can share with us.

00:38:33.090

Yeah, everything in general is improving I've practiced longer than our other 2 panelists and so I have been seeing the documents that come through, every time a new version comes out, they do get more accessible. The PDF forms from the administrative office of the courts, used to be 10 to 20% of them, where they all say fillable, just 10 to 20% of them were capable of actually being filled out with JAWS as far as having the fields labeled properly.

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And I'd fill it out as best I can and ask somebody is if there's anything wrong with this, a paralegal or another attorney. And they correct me and then once I get it correct, I would save that one so that I could go back the next time and not have to reinvent the wheel and make sure I got everything in the right position.

The AOC has been very good about getting more and more accessible with their PDF forms over the years and so I do appreciate that.

And I did, I have, worked with Lori Cole professionally when she was with Wake County when I was just starting out and she was always very open and receptive to any issues I may have had. I was always very willing and able to bring those up with her, and if I needed a document provided, she was always willing and able to provide it as best she could.

And the judges have been great. Every judge I've worked with, especially the ones who know, me. If a document comes up that I haven't seen there. They'll take a break if there's another lawyer in the courtroom that would need to help me review it and they'd ask and those lawyers would always be very helpful, so that was good.

When you practice family, we well, it can be a little more cutthroat and spontaneous, than other litigation where you get all the evidence months ahead of the trial date. Sometimes in family law, you get is the day of, or the minute of, and so you just have you just say your honor haven't seen this? I need to take a break and they're always willing to give me ample time to do that.

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So, Derek had promised, I can't remember if it was before we started on camera, a rousing debate on this and so let's talk about mobility for a minute. Is that something, and I'll stick with you Locke for just a minute because you said you've been doing this a little bit longer, but I did want to hear from the others here too, it is our bank that has been a

consistent issue and dealing with our court system. Is that something that's getting better?

00:41:31.500

It is that the courtrooms have always been pretty well accessible through their proper sign, signage and the elevators, and even now the elevators are starting to speak, which floor you're on. So that so that's been helpful. I have not used a guide dog that I am on the list to get one. The pandemic has put a delay on that. And before that there was a delay, because I have had a dog that was reactive. She was a rescue dog.

00:42:06.840

But with the the phones now where you can just type in the address you want to go to, and it'll start leading you to that location. I don't have to have the routes memorized and so a dog will be helpful to do that. I'm looking forward that to that, so I'm looking forward to that process.

00:42:28.920

So, Elizabeth, have you ever used a guide dog?

No, I am a cane user. I, it's not I don't have anything against them. Sorry to the person who wanted a rousing debate. I have actually seen those two dates before I'm I use a cane because I never got around to get a guide dog just the time in my life when it was appropriate. I was having babies and in law school and all that stuff. And so I never really went through that process. And when I go to somewhere new, I think that's that's the hard part is, you know, it's very helpful if I can be there with somebody at that I know who knows where they're going.

Um, and so, you know, once once I learned our local courthouse that was very helpful. Um. But whenever I'm going somewhere new, that can be a bit challenging. What I was talking with Derek earlier about one of my pet peeves with cane use.

00:43:36.090

So, listen up, sighed people! Uh, the cane is supposed to tell me if I'm going to bump into something. So it's going to hit the thing and then I'm going to know that it's there and what I don't know if people just feel like it's cringy if I hit something, but every time I'm about to hit something, someone will jump in and be like, hey, you're getting something! And almost knock me out of the way and I'm like, no, I'm going to hit something with the cane and then I'm going to know.

So you don't really need to do that. Um, so anyway, that's that's my, my cane pet peeve for everyone so that, you know. That's helpful to know.

00:44:22.619

If I could jump back in, when Wake County was building their new courthouse, I heard a rumor that they asked Judge Stevens if he had any input on the design and his input was "make it look like a courthouse." And there are courtrooms across this state that have not taken that advice and you walk into it, and the Judge's bench will be off to the left and the jury bench will be somewhere else.

I hate that so much.

I like to walk into a room and know where everything is. So I will if it's somewhere where I haven't, then I will try to make sure I'm there early enough before the session will start so I can orient myself in the space.

Derek, I know that you and Howard need to weigh in on this topic. So one of us is asleep. So, Howard is gonna take this one.

00:45:09.989

So, guide dogs and canes differ in a couple of ways. You feed one of them, but on top of that, uh, a cane, like Elizabeth said is there to let, you know where obstacles are and then you navigate around them. The guide dog, it's job is to navigate around the object, so I'll give you a really potent example. I started a Hendrick this week. Monday I brought Howard. Tuesday Howard had to go to the vet and he's doing just fine and so I brought a cane and that was the first time other than there was a sign in the middle of the floor of the lobby on the first floor of our building.

Because Howard just zoomed around it. It's incredibly freeing and my perspective and in my opinion. One of my blind mentor says, it feels like you're riding a motorcycle and it really does. I'm 6'1" and I walk fast. And with a cane, you can't.

You can walk fast, but you can't do full speed because your reaction time needs to be enough so that if you hit something, you can navigate around it. Um, Howard has changed my life. He's my best friend. He's just turned 8 and it's it's outstanding.

00:46:08.605

I do want to mention, pun-intended my pet peeves, like, with service animals, which, which will tag into a little bit of service animal law and etiquette. Right? And the first thing I want to say is, um, so guide dog and seeing eye dog tend to be brand names guy dogs is for guide dogs to the blind California seeing eye dogs for New Jersey. Um, dog guide, is that the term that we usually use for somebody, it's not brand name, but it's also sort of the people that get upset that not all facial tissues are Kleenexes.

The, the big one is this when the service handles harness is on pretend he's not there. Um, and that does not by the way mean. Oh, Howard, you're such a pretty boy, but I'm not supposed to talk to you.

Um, just assume he's not there and when he's off harness and when the, the blind person or the handler or the partner gives you the sort of nod, then it's okay to engage.

00:47:05.940

Don't feed the service animal. Don't play with the service animal. Don't try to tease and service animal. It's actually a crime in North Carolina to interfere with a working service animal.

As well as being incredibly rude and disruptive, and it's sort of like, flashing a laser pointer while you're driving down the interstate. And so they're, they're outstanding. Every everybody. And I, I've gotten experience with different courthouses. Most of mine has been in Wake County.

00:47:28.974

I do want to throw a quick nod to the people there, but I intern there and then in my job as a judicial fellow, and in particular Kellie Myers has always been so outstanding about service animals and has made me and Howard feel welcome time and time again.

Um, but it, it makes you pretty noticeable and Howard did graduate law school using his juris dog-torate. And, uh, I did require that they called him a Law-brador on stage.

00:47:55.679

So, I've got more - can, do we have any questions in the chat?

Um, I did see, this is Lori, I did see a few questions that came through one of them was, can they see Howard? I know you that you said he's napping, but if he, if he could make an appearance before the end of our session, I think we'd have some very happy fans out here. Um. Howard is a super cute doggy, so it looks like, he is going to make an appearance. So that's awesome.

Um, another question that kind of goes into... Oooo, you're looking a little bit like, a little bit like you are a witness protection dog, but, um, Howard is jet black. So his profile is there. You can see him a little more. Thanks thanks, Derek. Very professional.

Another question that popped in from one of our attendees is, um, could you give some more examples of common things that people do, or offer with the intention to help that are not helpful, or actually offensive?

00:49:02.333

And I know you, you mentioned a couple things like, hey, watch out, you're gonna hit something. Is there any other things along those lines that, um, folks who are trying to help might do and not be as helpful Yeah, can talk about consent for a second please? This is a big thing. And for the blind community, you're gonna see a blind person trying to cross the street. Or who might need help.

First of all, ASK, Can I help? Do not assume that the blind person needs help. Because sometimes, you know, the time I get the most, do you need help is when I'm standing at a street corner, waiting to cross and that's an auditory thing. You listen for traffic, so you asked me if I need help us actually, in a way, putting me in danger.

00:49:43.170

Letting me know, you're there, you could say good afternoon and that's the way I know that you're there. And I can ask, hey, can you be my eyes or something like that? But letting that be initiated by me.

But specifically, don't touch people without their consent. Don't grab my hand and move it towards something. Don't grab my arm and try to pull me somewhere adult, especially during covid-19 if you're close, and I know we've, we've looked at our mandates, but if you're close enough to take my hand and lead me somewhere or grab my arm. You're probably not six feet away.

00:50:13.019

And and with the social distancing, not knowing who is and is not vaccinated. Giving a quick, good morning and even your name. You know, Hey, Derek, it's Tricia gives me a sound source. So I know where you are. So I can navigate social distancing. If that's something that I need to do.

Yes, I agree. Don't grab. You'd be amazed! People aren't really thinking about it and I'm like, oh, you know, a woman walking down the street if you're just gonna grab me - What on earth!

It's people are trying to be helpful. I get that. Don't be offended if the answer to your question about, Can you help? is no.

00:50:56.670

I've had so many reactions of well, I'm just trying to be a good person. This is not about you. And don't follow people who say they don't need help around and then later make a snarky comment that they should have asked for help. Cause I've had that happen too, and it's very rude.

I would also say, presume competence.

00:51:22.050

Um, yeah, and and and as a side of that realize that. Sort of like, Locke was saying earlier, not all disabilities or this. We're being very intentional talking about blindness here. Um, that is in in a quarter of Americans are disabled. But blindness is not anywhere close to the biggest, uh, set. So, if you see somebody parking at a handicap spot, and they look quote, unquote, fine.

00:51:44.400

Um, doesn't mean that they're quote unquote fine or that they're not disabled. The last thing that this just brought up, um, and this is a little thing.

00:51:53.460

Blind is not a synonym for dumb or stupid or ignorant. I am blind, I do go see movies, even though I don't see them, I identify as at the word doesn't mean that.

But if, if you could take the word blind out of your sentence and replay it or replace it with dumb ignorant, incorrect, uninformed. It's, it's an inappropriate we're use of that word.

00:52:17.909

You know, Derek, what I've found is that a lot of people are afraid to use the word blind. Yes.



Because, I don't know. In their view, I think it's like, I feel ashamed that you have the disability or a shared embarrassment. And it's kind of like, I'm not embarrassed. It's not my fault. I mean.

00:52:41.789

Last night somebody asked if I experience was going to go "experience" the movie. I said, well, I don't think that technology exists.

One of my other pet peeves is people are so get, like, fall over themselves trying not to use the word see.

00:52:57.690

Yeah. And like, I'm not offended if you use the word "see." In fact, it's kind of annoying if you're constantly drawing attention to the fact that I can't see I know what you mean when you say, It's nice to see you.

Just don't use it as a syn-- and don't use a disability a synonym for a pejorative.

You know, I did one time, have somebody ask me, if I could help interpret sign language, because I was disabled. That goes well.

The talking louder thing happens too. People will talk louder. Like, okay I mean, I can't see.

00:53:38.670

That we're ragging and we're having a good time, but the other thing about it, just like, I think we all understand that disability -- We are probably some of the first folks that anybody will meet that are blind and there's going to be discomfort. That's okay because our society hides people with disabilities away and so it's okay to be uncomfortable. We're just like wild animals. We're a lot more afraid of you than you are of us. Um, but we also like, we, we understand there's a discomfort there and so it's okay not to have answers and it's okay not to know what to say. That's unfortunately normal. Where it stops being okay, is when people just don't care.

00:54:20.429

Thanks guys, I think that really helps to give us more examples and I did see a few comments come through. Um. You know, we are just all trying to to be helpful, and it helps to hear from you all that. Um. You know, "NO" is fine and just move on. We don't need to be concerned. Um, I think that's hard for a lot of us who are helpers, and we want to make sure that everybody's going to be okay, so hearing that, that that's okay. Um, is probably going to help all of us who are the help helper-mode automatically um, or mom-mode for a lot of us. Um, so, thank you for that.

Another question that came through is regarding resources that might be good for folks to look at if they're interested in this topic. And want to learn more um, I kind of quickly said at the beginning, I'm working as the disability access coordinator, statewide and so I help to try to

identify some and we put some on our website. But I know there's other things that you all might recommend for the blind community awareness.

And disabilities in general. I'm really glad that you made the point that so many disabilities are hidden and and they're not things that we walk around. We don't have a label on our forehead to say, you know, what's going on. And so I think our first step is just to be be aware and to you know, respond to the requests that are made for assistance.

00:55:59.545

And not always try to solve the problem that we think is there. Like, we don't probably need to get things translated into braille, especially after hearing that only 10% of folks who are blind know how to use that. So, maybe if you could talk a little bit about resources, that would be really good.

There are a couple, I'll jump in real quick, but there are a couple of agencies and people that advocate for the disabled community. There's National Federation of the blind, American Council for the blind, but then American Federation of the blind. The first two are a little bit more political. The third one tends to be in my experience a little bit more um, resource heavy. There are some really good reading materials. I don't know whether Elizabeth and Locke, if you guys have found this, but I think the blind community tends to be very memoir heavy.

00:56:46.230

We'd like to write about ourselves. Um, I would really recommend Haben Ghirma, uh, H-A-B-E-N, that's the name of the book as well. She's a deafblind woman that, uh, graduated Harvard law. She has a phenomenal memoir out and is a, a really great speaker. If you ever get the chance to read her stuff.

NPR has a really great podcast in one of their series that's on the disability rights movement and the history, because there's an entire history to this space that almost nobody's aware of and that's a great place to start there.

And then if you're looking for a great movie, Disney, I think Disney plus has it now, although it's available obviously on iTunes. Um, it's called Pick of the Litter. It's a guide dog story so it starts with the six baby puppies when they're born. And it goes through all of their lives going to guide dog training, and the ones that get paired, you see those pairings and the ones who don't, fail out, or as we call it career change. It's one of the dog movies that I'll make you cry. None of the puppies get hurt. I give that one a thumbs up too. It's outstanding.

00:57:54.179

Derek, we've talked about before, but I can't remember the name of the book. There was an attorney I think out of California, who was instrumental in getting the audio description on the ATM machines.

00:58:05.940

She was, her name is Laney Feingold, I think. Um, and it's, uh, it's through the ABA and the entire thing, is about the alternative dispute

resolution strategies that she uses to negotiate digital accessibility lawsuits.

And that's the biggest thing that can help is through the digital access, go. The things change so much having something in print 1 day and may change the next month, especially since we've had the covid rules come into effect, right? So, digital access to things is the biggest help that that I found.

Don't be afraid to ask us just please don't be upset if we're in the middle of something and say, hey, I'd love to but not right now.

00:58:56.219

Thanks everybody we actually just hit the one o'clock hour so our lunch and learn time is up. Anybody have some closing thoughts or remarks. Do you want to leave with the group?

I appreciate everybody coming and attending today. I've had an enjoyable experience with all the courts that I've come across, except for those ones that are tending to implement modern art techniques into their quarters. I don't know if my contact information has been provided, but should I provide it now, or can we put it in the notes later? But if anybody wants to contact me with any questions after this, I'll be more than willing to field them and give honest answers.

00:59:46.139

We can totally follow up with all the attendees with the list of the contacts for our presenters here. Today. That's a great idea.

I want to thank Derek and the AOC for setting this all up, um, you know, it's so nice to have a forum where people are caring about this issue and there's light being brought to the issue. You know, it can be pretty lonely, uh, being a blind person and a blind lawyer. Just knowing that people care enough that we're going to actually sit down and talk about it is, it's really wonderful.

I want to thank my panelists both for being here and also, just for your both of you have been huge mentors of mine and when Days and there've been many when I didn't think I could do this. The all the reason that I kept doing it is I can't thank you enough. I really want to thank Tricia for moderating, and, you know, you told me some of these stories about just going through and I love that you began your career with a blind lawyer now you have another one so we tend to come back um.

01:00:59.250

Lori and Corrine and the AOC, I, just on a personal level on a professional level, um, thank you for everything, and then, you know, to people that have tuned in and joined us today, you know, thank you for your dedication to inclusivity.

And to accessibility.

People who are blind, are becoming lawyers more and more every day and it's amazing that we care and I also know that the world of digital

accessibility is really only known right now for its lawsuits. And it's a scary thing because there are a lot of those coming right now. And it's a weird place to understand. And so, thank you for giving us the platform to sort of give you our experience and let you see that digital accessibility isn't just a thing in a vacuum that you need to worry about for litigating, uh, and venting issues.

01:01:48.630

It's really something that impacts our ability to do our jobs and of our lives and engage in the same community as you. So I just I want to thank you all.

I'd just like say it's been an honor to be here today and I'm very, very much appreciate our three panelists coming on and sharing their perspectives with all of us. It's been important conversation. I'm very pleased to have been a part of it.

01:02:11.730

Thank you, Tricia. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Thank you all. Obviously, this never would have happened without you. So I'm just grateful that, that we were able to have this conversation and to all learn more about how you work and what things we can do to make sure that everything's accessible as much as possible. I'm just super glad we could do this, so thank you all. And I'll be following up with some information. If anyone needs to follow up with me, you would have had my contact information in the earlier information. I think that's a wrap. Corrine, do you want to sign us off and give a big wave?

Well, I just realized I shouldn't be waving Lori, because, hey, I know they just said it's okay. We could say I'm waving now. Yeah. Well, doesn't mean I can't wave alone. I have to say I'm waving. I have to say goodbye and thank you all. This is great. Thank you thanks guys.

01:03:17.579

I'm counting your billable hours so..

Great work everybody. Why'd you have to go there, man?