

The Power of WOW!

Transcript: Haben Girma

Scott Monty: *Everywhere you go, you're surrounded with people with different abilities, whether you're aware of it or not. It's part of what makes our society so diverse and wonderful.*

If it's unfamiliar territory for you, striking up an initial conversation might seem awkward. What should you say? Should you talk about their disability, or scrupulously avoid it?

Haben Girma *has some thoughts on that.*

Haben Girma: My disability is one of the things that makes me stand out. It makes me different. I feel that many people have trouble having conversations about other topics if they don't first gain an understanding of my disability and how to communicate. So when I first meet people, the first thing I address is my disability and communication because that's critical to moving on to other conversations.

Scott Monty: *Haben is direct and easy to talk to. And she's very open about discussing how her disability is a part of who she is without being the only thing about her.*

Haben Girma: I know other people say your disability doesn't define you, or some people even say you're not disabled, but that's disrespectful. My disability is a big part of my identity, just as being a woman is a big part of my identity, and I'm choosing to make it a big part of my identity. It should be a choice. So disabled people should be able to choose whether they want to be a disability justice advocate, or if they just want to be a corporate lawyer, or a tax lawyer, you never know.

Scott Monty: *If it sounds like Haben is focused on the law, that's no mistake. It's her chosen profession.*

Haben Girma: I wanted to build up the skills to advocate for disabled people around the world. There's so many injustices, and it's completely unnecessary. We need people to remove the barriers so disabled people can fully participate in society, and law is a powerful tool for making that happen.

Scott Monty: *Even more powerful is the journey Haben took to become a lawyer and advocate, and forge a place in history.*

Haben Girma: My name is Haben Girma. I'm a disability rights lawyer, speaker, and author of the book, *Haben: the Deafblind Woman who Conquered Harvard Law*.

INTRO [THEME MUSIC UP]

All around us, every day, there are people doing things to help others in their communities. They go beyond what's required. They love what they do. And they inspire us. These are the kinds of people whose stories we like to hear. Because they have that special spark that we at TD Bank call The Power of WOW.

Scott Monty: Haben Girma is the first Deafblind person to graduate from Harvard Law School. She's written a memoir, gone to the White House, and is a disability rights advocate. Another notable Deafblind person — one whose name is synonymous with the condition and always invites comparison — Helen Keller. Keller also had experience visiting the President of the United States. Not just one; she met twelve of them — every president from Grover Cleveland to John F. Kennedy.

Haben tired of the endless comparisons to Helen Keller, initially rejecting the idea of a role model that was forced on her. Then she dug a little deeper...

Haben Girma: When I first learned about Helen Keller, I learned about Helen Keller through how non-disabled people portray and describe her. The dominant narrative of Helen Keller is shaped by the film and theater producers who adapted her book, that's how most people know her. I actually discovered just this year that Helen Keller was deeply disappointed and frustrated with the adaptation of her memoir. She didn't like how the film producer and theater producer adapted her memoir.

I've also read that she received multiple complaints that she was talking too much about social justice issues. The media loved when she talked about being a role model for blind people and inspiration, but as soon as she started talking about feminism and racial equality, a lot of people stopped listening, got upset, changed the channel. So what we know of Helen Keller tends to come from messages Helen Keller didn't even create, and that's why I originally was frustrated with her because the message was not actually helpful. But then when I later read her books and learned about her through her own words, I had so much respect and admiration for her.

I'm actually dealing with similar. I published a memoir recently, and I've had film producers reach out to me asking to turn it into a movie. But in that process, if you read those contracts, I would have to give up control of my story, and what happened to Helen Keller would likely happen to me where my own words would be distorted into a message that would not help disabled people, so it's really difficult. It's really difficult to control one's own story when society is constantly trying to force another story on you.

Scott Monty: And like Helen Keller, Haben Girma was invited to the White House

Haben Girma: I met President Obama at the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. It was an incredible honor to meet him. I also met Vice President, Joe Biden, who was also there. President Obama usually communicates by voice, but I showed him my braille computer and keyboard, and he graciously typed on the keyboard so I can read his words in braille, on my braille computer. So many

people refuse disability conversations and accessibility because of ableism, so it's really powerful that a role model like President Obama shows inclusion, demonstrates inclusion. That video from that day is incredibly powerful.

Scott Monty: *To help people understand ableism and the need for inclusion and equality, Haben decided to write a memoir.*

Haben Girma: My book teaches people about ableism. Ableism is the assumption that disabled people are inferior to non-disabled people. So throughout my book, it's a memoir, lots of fun, engaging amusing stories that show how ableism intersects with sexism and racism at school, in the job hunt, employment, so people reading the book can learn to identify ableism and join the movement to advocate for full inclusion and access for disabled people.

Scott Monty: *When the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed 30 years ago, the world was a very different place. There were no smart phones. The internet wasn't widely available to the public. Given that the law existed before these technological advances, you might think that technology is now being built with the ADA in mind.*

Haben Girma: The Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990. Since then, there has been some progress, but there's still so many barriers. Right now, a lot of things are virtual, and the internet has the potential to remove barriers and increase access, but a lot of people build websites, apps, and other digital tools without thinking about accessibility and consequently, that creates barriers. We need people creating websites to design with access in mind. There's the web content accessibility guidelines for making websites accessible, there are guidelines for making apps accessible, such as Android accessibility guidelines and iOS accessibility guidelines. So the resources and tools are out there for making services accessible, it's that a lot of developers don't know about them or don't care, and we need more people to care about removing digital barriers.

Scott Monty: *But what kind of barriers exist in business today?*

Haben Girma: It depends on the company. For some companies, it's a lack of awareness. For other companies, it's a lack of desire to make it more inclusive. The resources for how to make tech more accessible are out there, web content, accessibility guidelines for apps, Android and iOS accessibility guidelines. And if a company doesn't have one, it's helpful to have a disability resource group so employees with disabilities and allies of employees with disabilities can come together on a regular basis and address, "What are the existing barriers? How can we remove them? Let's have a plan to remove these barriers."

Scott Monty: *Haben consistently makes the point that choosing accessibility is not just about legal requirements; it's also good business.*

Haben Girma: For example, podcasts. Most podcasts don't have transcripts and as a result, deaf and deaf blind people can't access those podcasts. But when podcast creators do the work of creating a transcript, they gain a larger audience. Deaf and deaf blind people can access the podcast and learn and participate in the conversations, but also search engine optimization. When there's more text such as a

transcript, more people will find the podcast through keyword searches. So the podcasts gains a larger audience, both disabled and non-disabled. This is an example of how accessibility is a good business. Once you implement an accessibility feature, it benefits the entire community.

Scott Monty: But there are non-digital barriers as well. Obstacles that might seem insurmountable to an abled person placed in a similar circumstance. The American explorers Meriweather Lewis and William Clark faced unknown barriers as they led the Corps of Discovery Expedition across America from 1803 to 1806. So it should be no surprise that a pioneering young woman like Haben Girma chose Lewis & Clark College for her undergraduate education.

Haben Girma: I did not choose Lewis & Clark because of their name or the fact that their football team is called Pioneers. That had nothing to do with the choice. But it may have influenced the mindset of many of the leaders who work there. I interviewed at multiple schools, and some of the other schools were very discouraging. They told me, "You know we don't have braille services. We're not sure we'll have braille services if you start here. It could be really difficult. Are you sure you want to come to school here?"

And no incoming student wants to hear that. That's incredibly discouraging. You want to be able to just work on your studies and be a student rather than juggling the role of student and accommodations professional and converting materials. The school should shoulder the work of making the school accessible. The student should just have to be a student. So that's one of the reasons I chose Lewis & Clark. I also chose Lewis & Clark because they offered me a full tuition scholarship.

Scott Monty: It was at Lewis & Clark that Haben experienced a non-digital barrier that most of us would take for granted.

Haben Girma: One of my favorite stories is in my book. When I was in college, I attended Lewis & Clark college in Portland, Oregon, and the school did a really great job of providing me my books in braille, my exams were in braille, they even worked with the outdoor clubs so I could participate in rock climbing and kayaking, but the cafeteria was a completely different story. The cafeteria had a print menu by the wall and sighted students would walk in, browse the menu, then go to their station of choice. There were about six different stations at the cafeteria. With my white cane, I could navigate the cafeteria independently. I received an orientation to the cafeteria when I first arrived so I knew exactly how to get to station four, station one, all the different stations, but I didn't have access to the menu because it was only in print.

So I went to the manager and asked, "Can you provide the menu in braille or post it online or email it to me? I have assistive technology that allows me to use email and web sites, accessible websites." And the manager said, "We're very busy. We have over a thousand students. We don't have time to do special things for students with special needs." Just to be clear, eating is not a special need. Everyone needs to eat.

I know there are many people around the world who struggle for food, so I told myself, "Who am I to complain? Maybe I should be grateful I can walk into a cafeteria, go to a station at random, get food, find a table, taste the food. And maybe it's not vegetarian and I have to go back in line and find another station, or just make a PB&J that day instead of having a more balanced meal." It was frustrating, but I

told myself, "At least I have food. At least I'm getting an education at a college." I tolerated it for several months, then my friends reminded me it's my choice. It's our choice to tolerate oppression or advocate for justice.

I did research, then I went back to the manager and explained the Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits discrimination against students with disabilities. At that time, I didn't know exactly how to advocate with the ADA, I couldn't afford any lawyers, now I know there are nonprofit centers that help students with disabilities. But back then, I didn't know that. All I knew is I had to try. I had to do something.

The next day, the manager apologized and promised to make the menus accessible. I was deeply skeptical, but they actually did start providing the menus in accessible formats and I had access to which of the stations had vegetarian food and I could go directly to the station serving vegetarian meals. Life became delicious.

Scott Monty: Delicious indeed. Haben shouldn't have had to fight so hard for a simple accommodation. Her conviction and resolve were impressive. More impressive when you consider she wasn't familiar with the ADA and she was fighting only for herself. But as a true pioneer, Haben realized that leaders forge a path for others.

Haben Girma: Yes, exactly, and this is true of many different barriers. A lot of people tell themselves, "Oh, this is just me. I'm not going to bother working on this barrier that only impacts me." Stand back from it from a moment and realize it's never just you. There's a community of people who will benefit if you do the work of removing the barrier.

Scott Monty: That's exactly what happened at Lewis & Clark College.

Haben Girma: The next year, a new blind student came to the college and he had immediate access to the menus. That taught me when I advocate, it helps everyone who comes after me. When you remove a barrier, you help an entire community. It's a lot of work and a risk to advocate and remove the barrier, if you have the courage to do that, you end up helping an entire community, and that realization inspired me to become a lawyer. That's why I decided to look into law schools and eventually went to Harvard Law School.

Scott Monty: That Harvard Law School education didn't go to waste, either. Thinking about her previous experiences, her advocacy for disability rights, and a tech industry that was slow to consider accessibility, Haben took up a significant case.

Haben Girma: Digital accessibility is really important to me. I worked on a case called National Federation of the Blind versus Scribd. Scribd was a digital library, and blind readers were having access barriers when they tried to read books on the Scribd library. National Federation of the Blind sent Scribd letters, asking them to make their service accessible. They didn't respond. They ignored our letters. Then finally, on my 26th birthday, we sued them.

Finally, finally Scribd responded and they claimed that the Americans with Disabilities Act does not apply to digital services. I disagree, my team disagree. The judge heard the case, read briefs from both sides and held, in 2015, that the ADA does in fact apply to virtual businesses. After that, Scribd agreed to work with the National Federation of the Blind to make their library accessible. That was really rewarding to help increase access to books to blind readers.

I love reading. Reading gives you access to so many worlds, so it's my hope that the Scribd case will remind other digital companies and physical companies with digital services to make their services accessible. It's much easier to choose inclusion.

OUTRO [THEME MUSIC UP]

Haben Girma. Graduate of Harvard Law School, relentless advocate for disability rights, author, pioneer. Her mission and her contributions are the perfect example of the Power of WOW.