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## Running for Office with a Speech Disability

# RUNNING FOR OFFICE WITH A SPEECH DISABILITY

A LIVE WEBINAR: DECEMBER 15, 2021 2:30-4:00 PM ET



Coleman Watson,  
2022 US Senate  
Candidate



India Ochs,  
2020 School Board  
Candidate



Sascha Bittner,  
Guest Moderator



Angelica Vega,  
Guest Moderator



**CommunicationFIRST**

## Webinar Transcript<sup>1</sup>

December 15, 2021

**Tauna Szymanski:** Good afternoon. My name is Tauna Szymanski and I'm the Executive Director and Legal Director of CommunicationFIRST. My pronouns are she and her, and I'm a white woman with long, wavy, brown hair. I'm wearing glasses and I have a wonky left eye. I'm wearing a black sweater today, and the CommunicationFIRST logo is displayed behind me.

I'm thrilled to welcome everyone to this one-of-a-kind event called "Running for Office with a Speech Disability." We have four panelists today who have agreed to share their experiences in electoral politics. All four have speech-related disabilities, including one full-time augmentative and alternative communication, or AAC, user.

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<sup>1</sup> This transcript has been edited slightly for clarity and speaker intent. It has been reviewed and approved by the participants.



Because we are a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, I'm required to include a disclaimer about this topic. Nothing about this event should be construed to mean CommunicationFIRST is endorsing or supporting any candidate for elected office in the past, present, or future. As a 501(c)(3), we do not engage in partisan electoral activities, and this is a strictly non-partisan event.

Before I introduce our panel, first, a few words about logistics and accessibility. To turn on live captions, click on the CC button at the bottom of the Zoom window. You can have the captions appear either at the bottom of your screen or in a separate window.

Second, American Sign Language interpretation is being provided. To make the interpreter more visible on your screen, you can pin or spotlight them so they are larger.

Third, this is a webinar and not a meeting, so you won't be able to see the other attendees or use the chat box. Attendees were asked to submit questions to our panelists in advance. If we have time and the panelists are willing, we may take additional questions through the Q&A box in the webinar.

Fourth, we are recording this webinar and we do hope to have the recording and a corrected transcript available in the future.

I am now very pleased to introduce our amazing panel. First up is India Ochs, who is an attorney with the U.S. government. And we believe she may be the first full-time augmentative and alternative communication, or AAC, user to have run for elected office in the United States. Last year, she ran in an extremely tight race for the School Board of her son's school district in Anne Arundel County, Maryland. India also happens to be the chair of my Board of Directors, of CommunicationFIRST, and is a single parent of an 11-year-old son. She lives in Annapolis, Maryland.

Coleman Watson is a candidate for the U.S. Senate in Florida. Before experiencing a sudden stroke in February of 2020, which resulted in aphasia, Coleman was a managing partner of Watson LLP, which is a law firm focused on civil rights, patent, trademark, and copyright litigation and government investigations. He's handled more than 200 cases in federal, state, and administrative courts as a lead attorney, who is licensed to practice law in California, Florida, Georgia, and New York. That is a lot of bar exams. He lives with his wife and two children in Orlando, Florida.

Next up, we have Angelica Vega, who graduated with an honors degree in philosophy from American University last summer. Angelica has interned at EMILY's List, providing services for political campaigns across the country, and for Representative Frank Pallone



of New Jersey. As an Afro-Latina with multiple disabilities, including a speech disability, she is hoping to pave the way for others like her to thrive. Angelica is a member of CommunicationFIRST's Advisory Council, and is currently a law fellow of The Coelho Center for Disability Law, Policy, and Innovation at Loyola Law School. She lives in New Jersey.

And, finally, Sascha Bittner. Sascha has been active in politics her whole life. She is currently a Commissioner on the San Francisco Disability and Aging Services Commission and a delegate to her state party, on which she has served on the Disability and Legislation Committees in leadership roles. She lives in San Francisco, California. And today Sascha is using a revoicer today who is named Annika.

So I am going to stop sharing slides at this point, and I'm going to invite each of the participants to make brief opening statements. And I'm going to encourage them as they do these to describe themselves visually for people with vision disabilities, and if they wish, to tell us their pronouns. And let's start with India.

**India Ochs:** Hi, everyone. And a thank you to Tauna and CommunicationFIRST for putting the spotlight on an issue rarely addressed in society. I am India Ochs, pronouns: she, her, and I am a white cis female in my forties with brown hair going just below the shoulder, wearing a peach suit jacket, covering up a white shirt with the words, "Play like a champion today" on it.

I know we have a lot to delve into today when it comes to running for office with a speech disability or any disability in general, if you think about it. But just to open, I will say the exact same thing I would have said 40 years ago. I do not care where you come from, what kind of disability you have, if any, or how old or young you are, there is nothing more energizing or, dare I say, fun than fighting for what you believe in.

So if you want to make change – change that you yourself want to see – jump into the electoral process at any level, whether it is at school or your city or in larger venues. I had my first letter to the editor published at age five. My son gave his first testimony in support of teachers at age seven. We all can make a difference, even if we do not always realize how much of a difference we are making.

**Tauna Szymanski:** Coleman, do you have an introductory statement you'd like to make?

**Coleman Watson:** Hi. My name is Coleman Watson. I am a man. I am about in my forties. I am biracial. I have a blue shirt on right now and I am clean-shaven on my face. Actually, I decided to run basically because of my stroke, which I had about almost two years ago.



And I lost my ability to talk suddenly that day when I had my stroke. And then I got – I discovered I had aphasia. So it was very hard and humbling for me, because before – I’m sorry – before this stuff, I was – I still am – an attorney and I was really passionate on pro bono issues, because I had helped many clients that have disabilities themselves. But I thought I would be always on the other side of the issue as the attorney. But life does things – wouldn’t you know, and suddenly I had got a disability myself. I actually had been a long supporter of people with disabilities. And when I decided to run, the reason I did is because I didn’t think that a lot of people would actually care for the issues for aphasia and speech disorders.

So I decided to run for US Senate. I know it’s a long cast, but my prior career was focused on federal issues instead [of] state. So I thought it was the best way for us to [get] involved [with] politics and also trying to help others like myself and others with other speech disorders also.

**Tauna Szymanski:** Angelica?

**Angelica Vega:** Good afternoon from New Jersey! Image description: I am a Afro-Latina with curly hair who is also wearing a blue shirt. I have a snowy background because I love the winter season. I will keep my statement brief. Growing up, I knew that I wanted to run for public office. And I still do. I even ended up participating in a Running Start program and interned at EMILY’s List during my time at American University.

But [I] also remember that people used to give me the advice to fix my voice in order for people to take me seriously. I was a kid at that time. However, this was the early – earliest example of ableism I encountered in my life. Seeing all of the panelists and moderators on this call today gives me hope. It made me feel seen. These are the role models my younger self needed. So thank you all for sharing your story about running for public office with a speech disability.

**Tauna Szymanski:** Sascha?

**Sascha Bittner:** Good morning from San Francisco! I am a cis, 48-year-old, white woman, with long, wavy, brown hair, and I’m wearing a black shirt and green sweater. I am a long-time disability and domestic worker activist. I got involved in the 2016 election as a data entry volunteer for my presidential candidate because I wanted someone who shared my priorities. After the 2016 election, I decided I wanted to get more involved in California party politics. I was appointed delegate when there was an opening with my local, very Democratic Congresswoman in July 2017.



I think at first I was tokenized and seen as just the delegate with a speech disability. However, the party leadership in my state really believes in my leadership potential and sees the skills I bring to the table. So that has made so much of a difference. And there has been ableism. But when I shut it down and allies also speak up, and I think at this point, my disability is a bit secondary to delegates and others in the party. I do have some aspirations of holding public office myself, so I'm so glad to be able to moderate.

**Tauna Szymanski:** Sascha, do you want to begin asking some of the questions at this point?

**Sascha Bittner:** Oh I thought you were doing another ... Yeah. One second. What are the major reasons that made you run for office?

**India Ochs:** Hi, India again. Anyone that is around me, even for five minutes, knows that equity has always been part of my life's work and why it wasn't just at the top of my list of issues on my campaign website, but integrated into every issue I have spent years advocating for. The inequities for students of color, especially students of color with disabilities, can be found everywhere from discipline policies and treatment by school resource officers, to transportation, to bullying, to mental health resources, to what schools have cell phone towers and which do not.

Yet the issues themselves were not what made me run for office, since I knew I would be fighting for our kids and teachers no matter what. The main reason I ran for office was people kept asking me to, and it got to the point where I realized two things. One, not everything I had been doing since I was in elementary school was directed at supporting our youth in public schools. And two, if I didn't run, who is going to be that force for everyone pleading for change, for transparency, for turning all these aspirations of high quality education and the safer school system into reality. Not to mention, I thrive on new challenges, and given that this was the first time my district was going to elect someone to our Board of Education after years of appointments by different governors, the time was right to jump in the race and finally direct all my leadership skills and knowledge and passion to support the people of Annapolis, the city I have believed in since I can remember.

**Sascha Bittner:** Coleman, do you want to answer?

**Coleman Watson:** Yes. Well, as I said on my opening statement, I had a – well, I have a – good passion for pro bono issues. As an attorney, I take – took many cases from federal prisoners because I thought there were not a lot of attorneys that helped them.



So when I had my stroke, I – I really understood that there are not [many] people that will help you for many issues. So, when I was trying to recover from my stroke, I really, really needed help from the Social Security Office. But I have been waiting for almost two years with no help. I started a documentary myself to – about aphasia, and I started to record all of my calls with the Office for – the Social Security Office, because I really want to see if a real person will actually answer my issue.

But every day I got voicemails and a lot of them, I couldn't understand. And I stopped at 28 times from the Social Security Office. And we had to get an attorney to help me. The only thing I got from the office – this basically just said – [that] I don't have a disability and I am denied in full.

So then I was thinking back to my prior cases with federal prisoners when they felt so helpless, and I felt exactly, exactly the same [as] them because I didn't – I never got a, a real person for the office, and it was very hard for me to understand the words. So I decided that I was going to run to do something about this to raise more awareness for aphasia and other speech disorders.

So my story actually started because I was denied for Social Security, and I'm still waiting and I – who knows if I will get it. So I, as I said in the first statement, I know it was a very tall order, but I know there are too, sorry, there are not [many] people who actually care about this issue, and that's why I had to do it.

Great.

**Angelica Vega:** Thank you both for sharing some of the reasons why you decided to run for public office and – oh, by the way, this is Angelica speaking. And my question is related: who we are, and therefore our views on public service, is shaped by many factors: our race, disability, sexual identity, culture, family, and many influences. What has informed who you are, and why do you believe you will make a good public official?

**India Ochs:** Thanks, Angelica. Your lead-in actually represents why I always believed I brought the full package to be the kind of public official we want in office. It wasn't just my extensive knowledge and experience in law and policy, nor decades advocating on education and human rights issues. Nor is it even the fact that I wanted to go into public service from the time I can remember, as I started to memorize the election requirements and the Constitution at age six, but I come [from] such a diverse set of characteristics and experiences, whether it was my parents struggling with low-paying jobs or unemployment, as they tried to provide for me, being one of the only white families and what used to be an



almost all Black community, exposure to multiple religions and multiple political views, plus my ability to talk to anyone of any age about anything. And so I feel I not only can listen to my community's needs, but actually understand what they are and the urgency in meeting the needs of those around me.

The fact that I am not a constant talker and actively listen also helps build up that trust with others and at the end of the day, as complex and whacked up as politics can be, a great public official is someone who can sustain that level of trust with those they interact with, which I always knew I could and would do.

Coleman, the floor is yours.

**Coleman Watson:** Thank you. It's Coleman. Well, for me, I think my path has been very similar because of public service. Because I – when I went to law school, I went there because I – because I believed in the law. As an attorney, when I started, when I passed the bar, I was so excited to meet other attorneys and also judges. But I quickly realized in my district that most of the judges are white men, and there are only a few women at all, and there [was] only one minority there in that district at the time. And I thought that was very interesting for me because I always thought the law was to be equal. And when I see judges, other judges on the same district, and it feels the same type of person, I don't really feel – I mean, they don't have to say that, but in my mind, I feel like it was not equal for a lot of the issues and for my [clients]. One of the common things to say as an attorney, when I meet another – sorry, a new client – they usually ask me, the first question they really want [an] answer [to], and what they say is, what is – [who] is the judge? His name is this. And they want to know about if he is white, or a woman, minority, or anything, you know. But I started to look it over the issue for a lot of other districts in our circuit. But there was very – there's not a lot of diversity at all in the law, for judges, especially for judges.

And I guess when I started my career at – well, when I had my stroke, it was 12 years in my career, every year, I felt there was an elephant in the room because it – it didn't feel it was very equal for, for all the issues. And so I think I wanted – actually before my stroke, I really wanted to help to pick other potential judges in any district in Florida. But it's never materialized at all. But one of the ways we can do this is to include more issues, not just like white and Black and women, but we have also for disability. I have never [seen] any federal judge that has a disability at all. So again, when I look at the bench and we are trying to handle all the issues, we don't feel that we have a voice for people who actually understand the issue.



It's very easy to say, oh yes, I support people who have disabilities. But it's very different to actually have one. But it's very – I guess what the – the thing I wanted to say is that we need more public servants for judges, because they have a lot of – enormous power on [our] lives. And we need more representation for this [in] every state.

**Sascha Bittner:** Angelica, do you want to weigh in on this?

**Angelica Vega:** I have no comment besides the fact that I think it's really important in all levels that you are supposed to have representation, especially for people with disabilities, because their lived experience really does matter, and how it has shaped the country and the laws and the policies, including in the legal system. That's what I'm actually learning right now in my fellowship program.

**Sascha Bittner:** And that's wonderful. And yeah, for me, I think me being involved in party politics not only has enabled me to become more involved, but I think the party has gotten more inclusive because they've had to. I'm a part of it. And you know the old saying about if they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a chair, and I already have a wheelchair, and so you know, that's very easy for me to do.

So, the next question is, "How has your speech disability influenced you both as an activist, as well as a candidate and potential elected official?"

And why don't we go with Coleman first?

**Coleman Watson:** Well, for me, I didn't think I was going to be a speech activist before my stroke, because I never thought I would have an issue myself. So for me, when I decided, well, actually before I decided, I really thought of the many ways that I could raise the awareness for the issue.

So about, I guess, one and a half years ago, I decided to film a documentary on aphasia, because when I learned I had aphasia, I wanted to watch any movies about the issue, because I had never – before this – I never knew the word, term, at all. So when I was trying to research, there was not a lot of resources to see. There were about two movies.

One was not really about aphasia. It was connected, I guess, but it was not - it was not - it was not about all of it. But the next one has – it was good, but it was a little short. But when, when I watched that movie, I also realized that my type of aphasia was not the same type as the other man who was on the movie.





So I decided to film a documentary myself to tell – research – all of the, I’m sorry, there’s seven types of aphasia. Not all of them have speech disorders for this, for this. But I decided to film this because I wanted to have a, I guess, a resource for other people who will have a stroke and who will have aphasia in the future.

So I stopped it because I did – at the time, I could not read again and write or speak much, but I had a passion to do it. But I really didn’t think I was going to be an activist before, but when I started my film then, and also before I say this – it is only just me, I don’t have a team to help me film it. Audio, everything. But I knew that there were a lot of people that needed help with other resources. And there were a lot of people that [didn’t] know how to find it. There are only about 7% of the U.S. population that have ever heard the term “aphasia.” And so I wanted to raise awareness for people. Because when I was in the hospital and I learned that I had aphasia, I didn’t know what to do at all, because I didn’t know what it was. And so my path to be an activist was to educate others on this issue. Back to you, India.

**India Ochs:** In all honesty, for most of my life, I always have tried to keep my speech disability as an afterthought except in times where I need to advocate for others with disabilities. But over the last year, I realized that by me not advocating for myself, when it came to my disability, it actually harms all the others facing discrimination and abuse due to their disability. That said, while my speech disability might not have influenced me personally as a candidate, it definitely influenced how others saw me as a candidate, whether it was a positive or a negative reaction. But we can get more into that later in today’s discussion.

**Sascha Bittner:** And for me, so I actually ran to be an elected delegate to my party. I ran last year and it was a big challenge because I don’t think anyone, at least in my area, with a speech disability had ever ran before. And there was a lot going on that had nothing to do with that. But I lost. But I think it was a learning experience for both me as a candidate and for also the local party in San Francisco. As well as – I was trying to get union support. And so they would have forums, so we had to work with that. But as an activist, I feel sometimes, I know I’m not taken as seriously because of my speech disability. And I’m not seen as competent, even sometimes with other disability activists. And so that’s always something I have to fight against. Angelica, do you have any comments on this?

**Angelica Vega:** Well, since I didn’t officially run for public office yet, I can say to all the young people on the call, even though you may not run for public office right now, you are running for student-run organizations. And I think from my personal experience, it’s – you know, as much as, I guess – we encounter ableism every day, and sometimes it can be



exhausting, but from my personal experience from being an advocate is that I want to change the environment. I want to bring in diversity, inclusion, especially an emphasis on disability. Especially, for example – I ran a couple of times in my student organization and yeah, there’s always the thought behind my head saying, what if I mess up this word? What if something came out wrong?

But the thing that matters, you know, our own bodies, we are the change. Our existence is powerful. And when I go into the room and I advocate for myself and I introduce my campaigns from the student organization, like slides or scripts, everybody was walking with the ideals and concepts, and it paved the way for other people.

And I know this will definitely – I will take all of this experience with me to my future endeavors and eventually run for public office in like 10 or so years from now.

And I think this is a good segue to this question. Let me find it. “How has the public responded – the good, the bad or the ugly – to your candidacy?”

**India Ochs:** Most of the time, I had no idea what was behind the different ways the public responded to my candidacy. My district had over 58,000 registered voters and I had the whole gamut of responses, as expected in any election. The fact that I was running for a non-partisan position added to the complexity, such as some Democrats assuming I was a conservative, because I was a registered un-affiliated, or some Republicans, assuming I was this uber-liberal, because I had mailed out an AAC emergency response card for COVID emergencies to all residents that included both English and Spanish below the symbols. Or others writing [to] me to say they voted for the first time ever just to vote for me because I was the only candidate they were absolutely confident in.

But for the most part, one didn’t know if the public supported me or rejected me because of my issues, my nonpartisan affiliation, my disability, or my family legacy in town. Back to you, Coleman.

**Coleman Watson:** Hey, it’s Coleman. Well, for me, I would say mostly – most of my time as a candidate has been good. There have been some times with other people on my campaign, well, I guess potential voters, and mostly the campaign for me was on TikTok because you know, back in Florida when we started my campaign, it is very hard to have any events because [of] COVID. So I was trying to use TikTok or videos or anything, or real time.

But it was really hard to meet people – real person. So when, when I started on TikTok, many people commented that my words were not right or something, and they – you know



it was, it felt like a joke, I guess, because, because [of] the way I was talking. And I will tell you, at the time, my speech was more broken then. But every day, I get more fluid, I guess.

So if you go back to my older videos, you can see the difference. But when people – well for me, and I guess probably for a lot of us, when people realize your speech is not the same cadence or rhythm, for others, I think they suddenly – see that you don't know what you are doing or you're dumb or anything. And that was [what] I got from the comments from TikTok.

My campaign team did respond on my behalf for me to say, "Look, he knows what he's saying, but he cannot say the word. It's very hard [for] him to, to say it." But when you have a person to see that, usually they don't respond and they go on.

But I have been well – I, I think because of this, before that, I have been very open with my stroke and my speech. And that's why I think most people were – my experiences were okay, good, but as I said, there are many times when they were bad. And also I think people thought because my speech was - the cadence - was not right, I was probably [not] a real candidate. And I think they probably still think that today. But I am.

So I guess I – again, I try to educate other people to say that, look, I do have aphasia, but all of my intellect [is] the same, you know, for many years. The only difference is it's really [hard to] express my words before I can say it.

So I used to have long closing arguments for cases. And I didn't have to prepare or nothing, because it would just go in my mind. But I'm not the same person now. And so I have learned that I'm trying to use other ways to connect others on aphasia, and myself and others with speech disorders. Back to you.

**Sascha Bittner:** When I ran to be an elected delegate, I heard from some of my friends that people said I should just be an appointed delegate and that I not try to run for delegate [because] it would be difficult for me. But other people were very enthusiastic. They really appreciated my positions, both my policy positions as well as just my attitude. And so I think it just depends. Angelica, do you have anything to add?

**Angelica Vega:** No, I don't have anything to add because I don't have that almost like the public perception. However, I do have to say that I remember one particular time I was running for historian for my fraternity Pi Sigma Pi. I talked to a couple of close friends about how to go about writing [each] speech, how to go about creating the slides I mentioned in my previous response. And I think – I guess for me, one of the biggest things, you know, that I really appreciate is the allyship and the understanding of, you know, of



that, you know, I need a little help and, you know, everybody comes together, we can really make a big difference, and especially in this generation, I think honestly, when we work together, we can literally change the world.

**Sascha Bittner:** That is so true. I think it is me now. This is related: How do you deal with ableism on the campaign trail? I know Coleman talked about it a little bit. So if you wanted to add a little more,

**Coleman Watson:** Did you say me? You said me, right. Okay. Yeah. Okay. Well again, it's Coleman. I will tell you something that, when I started my campaign on TikTok, as I said, I was really nervous about ableism like you said, because – for the same reasons I said, but I started to record all of my videos and all these takes. And I was so anxious to release them because – because I didn't think it was good, you know, and I was so honestly depressed, but I realized that some – I was thinking in my mind, I said, "Coleman, you are not the same person that you used to be, and just do your campaign, just like you feel in your heart."

So then I start to record many, many, many takes to make it perfect. Then I just tried to, to talk with other people. Honestly, because my feeling, I guess, was I lost my – I guess my ... when I fear for people to say that I didn't know what I was doing because I knew I did, but I, I thought that to have many, many, many takes on the video meant that I was still trying to go back to my prior life.

And I said, again, it's not, it will never going to work. So this is my new normal, and I [am] comfortable with this. And I think it's actually much better for people to know the difference before me and the new me, I guess. So I still wanted people to understand that I could do the same things, just in a different way.

So that was really my experience because – mostly because [of] TikTok, because I stopped the videos. So that's why.

**Sascha Bittner:** India?

**India Ochs:** For the most part, I did not pick up on ableism any more than what I experience on a daily basis. So it was mostly par for the course as I navigated my campaign. The only blatant act of ableism was a microaggression. When my opponent in the general election stated in her op-ed in our local paper that if elected, she would be a "loud voice" for our district. And in that instance, I decided not to let that subtle jab slide by and got one of my friends who is both an actor and a parent of a son who uses AAC to record a video stating why such language wasn't tolerant and ableist.



**Sascha Bittner:** Thank you. Angelica, do you have any... and you know, you can talk about your experience running for office too. Because even if it's not a public office, it's a stepping stone, you know, and feel free to talk about that experience as well. Do you have anything to say about this question?

**Angelica Vega:** I'm so sorry. There was somebody knocking on my door.

**Sascha Bittner:** We were talking about how you deal with ableism on the campaign trail.

**Angelica Vega:** That's a – that's a great question, and I, I [heard] the conversation when there was a knock on the door. And one of the things that I thought about [was that] I actually wrote a blog post for CommunicationFIRST about the 2020 presidential candidates. I'm not saying names, but within, I think it was the one in October, I think it's the one in October, and Twitter was running ablaze. But one of the things that people noted is that one of the presidential candidates has an apparent speech disability. And sometimes he stutters, and people take that as an opportunity to say, oh, he doesn't know anything. He's slipping up.

And they don't realize that one, like, you know, it's okay to have a speech disability and two, we know what we're saying. And honestly, those comments hurt the people around you. And I know that growing up, I mentioned it in my statement, my opening statement, that these are some of the sentiments that people often tell me, saying, "Fix your voice, go to therapy."

And – and the worst part is that they are trying to say, "[This is] good advice [and] I'm helping you." But, you know, part of ableism is that it hurts us, it [tries] to deny our existence. That's why it's, you know, the work that we're doing is so important because we had to break the stigma. We had to say that we are capable and we will win.

**Sascha Bittner:** Yeah, that's so important, Angelica. I think for me, I just dealt with ableism by being on my A-game. And like before I had meetings, I would research the organization I was talking to and see what their concerns were. And then I would try to tailor what I was saying to the organization. It does seem to work for the most part. Frankly I also ignored some of it. If you paid attention to all the ableism in the world, you wouldn't get a lot done. And I knew there would be some people who would not go for me just because of my speech disability. I just kind of knew that and ignored it.

**Angelica Vega:** Thank you so much. Oh, sorry.

**Sascha Bittner:** And now, I was just going to thank you too.



**Angelica Vega:** Yeah, I was going to say, thank you for sharing your statement. And I guess also this question is related: Knowing what you know now, what will you say to other people with speech disabilities thinking about running in service, in public office? And I think we already hinted, you know, our potential response, but it's good to dive a little deeper.

**India Ochs:** As I opened with, run, go after your dream; your speech disability will just be one of many things you have to take into consideration as people decide to vote for you. But like everything in a campaign, you just figure out the best way to shine the light on the advantages while being ready for any negative pushback.

It is really about you and who you want the public to see you as, so decide where your speech disability is on your list of characteristics to highlight or not. Just like some people play up their past history with overcoming illness, or coming from another country, or being a single parent, just as long as you stay consistent with the reasons you want to be elected. The more you believe in yourself, the more others will believe in you as well.

Not to mention, having a speech disability can silence the whole room. So there is that advantage too, if you take hold of such power in the right way. All that said, I just want to add one more thing for anyone thinking of running for office. Whether you have a disability or not, win or lose, the election will have a lasting impact on your life.

I lost my election, but my life got even more busy afterwards because I was able to establish that kind of trust with people I always believe is essential in any endeavor. And so a year later, I still am constantly getting asked for help, advocating for a myriad of different things or asked to take on other leadership roles, such as chairing the Annapolis Education Commission, or like today, invitations to talk about the experiences.

In some ways I think I was kept busier than if I had actually won the election. Although on one final side note, I also was the only losing candidate from all the different districts up for election to stay active in my advocacy, including signing up to give testimony at my County Board of Education meeting tonight.

So there is that too to take into consideration in regards to how engaged you stay after an election.

Coleman?

**Coleman Watson:** Thank you. It's Coleman. Well, it's very – it's been interesting for me for this question because I remember exactly the time when I decided to run. Actually I was



sitting at this desk right here. And I was talking with my friend who, in the future, she was my campaign manager. But, before that, she was saying to me, she was like, you know, this is going to be hard, but I think you have a shot. In my mind, I thought, I've never [seen] any politician that had a disability – I'm sorry, a speech disorder.

So, in my mind, I was thinking, I think I'm crazy – [at] first. But then, I was thinking about my prior career as an attorney. And I said, well, I usually – I don't see – I'd never [seen] any attorneys who have a speech disorder – because usually they love to talk and talk, you know? And so then I had to, I guess, go and open my mind because my friend says, you know what, I know that you have a speech disorder, but this is exactly why you should run. Because, you know, we have about 60 million people who have disabilities in the U.S., but we don't have not much, a lot of elected leaders that have a disability and also to know what it feels like. And so for me, when I knew I was going to run, and even though most politicians don't have a speech disorder, I thought, you know, what, why not? Why wouldn't I do it?

Because it's not like my speech is – I can't go back in time because this is my – it is me now. And so there was no way to practice for many years. I guess I believed in myself and I knew that my path is to use more information. That's why I thought it was the best time for me to go because my life is going to be the same [in] one day or two years or decades. And so I think if you are a person who is looking to run, even though you have a speech disorder, the perfect time is now to do it.

**Sascha Bittner:** Yeah. I mean, when I ran for delegate, I kind of knew I probably wasn't going to win because there was a lot going on. A lot of it wasn't even related to my speech disability. It was a different system than it usually is because of COVID, blah, blah, blah. Anyways, I'm really glad I did. And I would tell people that if they wanted to run, to just run, because you learn a lot from it – even if you don't win. And I kind of considered it a test run, and now I have a better idea of what I'm going to do in the future. And again, I would like to run for something, maybe like the school board or something like that. I don't know yet, but I know I want to run for something. Angelica, do you have any comments?

**Angelica Vega:** Yeah. I just want to add, I guess, to the young people in the audience, if you're thinking about running, run – especially during university, there's a lot of great programs. If you want to get the ropes around campaigning all the way, you know, from finance all the way down to how to create policy agendas. I mentioned that I was part of the Running Start – Running Start program. It was a one day event. It was very fun. I got to meet a lot of highly efficient women who want to someday run for public office.



So there's a lot of resources, especially in college, out there, if you just want to understand. And even if it's just – I don't know, if it's even just a small role in a student-run organization, go for it because every experience counts. Even if you lose – I learned more about myself when I lose than when I win. So keep on building up your credentials. And, you know, also what is also really nice about being a part of the disability community, especially for people with speech disabilities, [is] that we have each other to look [to] for support, for advice. So, you know, we have a really great community. Like, you can do this, I believe in you. We all believe in you.

**Sascha Bittner:** That's really wonderful to hear. And I expect you to run for something when you're a bit older after college, and I'll be right there supporting you. Moving to Question 9. And so the question is, How have organizers of forums and debates accommodated your disability? Have you had to educate them? And how did that go? We'll go with India, I guess.

**India Ochs:** Apologies for making a super short answer, but much in [my] life in general, I never asked for any accommodations and organizers did not do anything for me that they did not do for others, including sending out the questions in advance to all the candidates. For all of the debates and town halls and forums I was in, the one time I did have some assistance was during a virtual meet-and-greet where my host filled up the time talking while I composed responses to on-the-spot questions. But it was a very friendly crowd, mostly of people invited by the host. So it worked out well.

**Sascha Bittner:** Coleman?

**Coleman Watson:** Okay. For Coleman. Well, I have not had any debates yet because they're not until about six months away. But I have had other media experiences mostly because my campaign manager has been – usually she will tell the media outlets about aphasia and say that if you can talk a little slower so he can understand, he knows what he is saying. She will say, "But I need you to do a little slower when you talk."

And they say, okay, they do. But what happens is that they don't do it, you know? So I had to use another strategy because – usually, I have my own whiteboard every day, like that, when I was talking for any person. But I use it now for media outlets because it makes them to stop, to say what I'm doing. Because usually when you talk with a person, you don't have a whiteboard with them. So when you see a person to do it, it also makes them to stop a little bit, to [understand what the person is doing]. So I have been using whiteboards really to make people understand that I do need a little more time to get the





right word before I talk with them. So, the best strategy that I have found for aphasia is this issue.

**Sascha Bittner:** Thank you. I think for me, the only thing I'll say is that first I asked for a bit more time on forums. We didn't do any debates. And I figured out I was actually good in terms of making my responses within the time limit – better than other candidates, because I had to think about it more. And for the last couple of forums I did, I didn't even ask for more time. One thing that happened – one time I was done with an answer, and the person who was conducting the forum said, “Don't you have more to say?” And I was like, not really. But then I ended up getting that endorsement. Angelica, do you have anything quick you would want to add?

**Angelica Vega:** Not so much in the accommodation with debates and forums, but, for some reason, I just think about – in the classroom experience, I know that for a lot of students, we had to do speeches or presentations. And [what] was really helpful, is having extra time to answer the questions. If it's possible, students send some of their questions beforehand so you have something to prepare. I think this is a really easy way to accommodate in the classroom. And this also translates into going on debates or speeches. So this is actually a good segue to our next question, Question 10. “What is door knocking like?” And actually, I will actually start off real quick.

So when I interned at EMILY's List during 2018, I had an experience where I think we all went down to Virginia to do door-knocking to advocate for a candidate. And that was my first time that I ever did that. And I remember when we started knocking on doors, we had to talk to voters and I was super nervous.

All of my words were coming out. I didn't even know how to describe it. And I didn't disclose that I had a history with speech disabilities and needed more time to process or have a script. But the person I was working with kind of recognized, oh, she needs a script. So she took me to [her] side. She, you know, we talked out the pitch that I would say, and then after that, it went fine. It actually turned out to be a really great experience. So that was my experience with [what] door knocking was like, and even if you're an intern, you can make a difference – even if you think it's super small. I think that experience really reinforced that, you know, even when you do door-knocking, it's always good to make sure everybody is being accommodated too.

**Sascha Bittner:** I didn't do any door-knocking. Now let's go to Question 11. I'm so sorry, India.



**India Ochs:** I did start door knocking prior to COVID. But much like how I talked earlier about how I had no way to know why people responded to me in whatever manner they did, door-knocking was no different. Anyone who has door-knocked knows you get the hello's, the no thank you's, and the doors slammed in your face.

And there was no way to know if people closed the door in the middle of my opening introduction because of me personally, or because they never wanted anyone at their door. It was funny because I always did my own recon prior to door knocking in different neighborhoods. And so I found it all too ironic when the door was closed in my face, in the midst of my opening by a man who I could hear had been working on a project and had a dog barking, all of which [are] classic reasons to not want to answer the door, but it was ironic to me because I knew that family had a daughter with a severe disability that impacted her speech as well.

So in some ways it was a compliment that the father did not take time to let me finish talking and just treated me as he would any other stranger at that moment. As a sidenote, whether the children are yours or not, the best chance of successful door-knocking is if kids under 10 are doing the knocking or being the ones to write, "Sorry, we missed you" on post-it notes when no one answered.

**Coleman Watson:** Okay. It's Coleman. For me, I had no canvassing, no door-knocking because my race is statewide. So it's not really great strategy to use that for statewide, because I will never win if I just use the door-knocking. It'd be different if I was on the district area.

So for me, we decided to use Zoom and TikTok and events to reach as much people as I can at the same time. I don't have any problem with door-knocking, but again, if you are trying to run a statewide campaign, there's better ways to use your time. You know, so that was just – it was limited for me.

But I know at a statewide campaign, people can vote at any area that we want. And that was my strategy.

**Sascha Bittner:** Next question is both from Rachel in California and Jack, who is a young person who is interested in running for Senate. "How have you fundraised, and how has that gone?"

**Coleman Watson:** Is that my question?

**Sascha Bittner:** Whoever wants to go first.



**Coleman Watson:** Okay, I will answer. Fundraising has been very, very hard for me, and I think for any person. Because you need a corner for your campaign for people [to] vote for you. So, if you know that the other candidates will have more support, you have to use – you have to leverage your time with other types of organizations that will definitely support you.

So for me, most of my issues are very progressive – like, very progressive. So I'm [liberal], but I think my strategy has been to use those types of fundraising tips, because I know there are a lot of people will never vote for me because they know their other candidate they want to support.

So I had to use only the people that like my ideas, I guess. But I guess fundraising is the hardest [thing] to do. So I have been going to grassroots - strictly grassroots. No PACs, no corps, it's only for real people. And I have used some success to do it. So, I would say you should do that – to know your corner to do it.

**Sascha Bittner:** India?

**India Ochs:** Thank you, Rachel and Jack for the questions. And I just want to say directly to Jack, you just made me smile because finally someone else has the same mindset I had when I was young and decided I wanted to be a Senator and not president, since as much as I would love the adventure of campaigning as president, I knew as a woman with a disability, I would have a heightened number of death threats, and I did not want to take that risk.

But all that said, yay, let's talk fundraising, which I wish I could say in a very sarcastic tone. Fundraising is at the heart of any campaign, but the worst thing to talk about, especially if you are someone like myself, who is a natural giver, not taker, and hates asking for help.

So asking people for donations was the hardest thing emotionally for me to do, yet I knew it had to be done. And so I just did it and looking back, wish I did it more. But that was also another twist with COVID since my opportunities to have fundraisers or ask for donations were so limited during the early days of the lockdown.

**Sascha Bittner:** Angelica, do you want to ask to the last question?

**Angelica Vega:** Yes, I can. I can say the last question, but I just wanted to add with the question that we're just asking. I don't have no experience, like talking to donors, but, so, I have a degree in philosophy and one of the most important takeaways from my degree is



that the most important thing to do is to listen to others, even if they share different opinions.

And that got me through talking difficult dialogue and conversation. And hopefully, people end up coming through your side. If not, it's just, you know, it's about navigating conversation and dialogue. And I think this is a skill that we should all, you know, continue to improve, even outside the campaign sphere.

But yeah. So for the last question, 19, what has been the strangest thing that has happened to you while campaigning?

**India Ochs:** There were a lot of interesting moments. But I think one of the most, out-of-the-blue things, was at the polls in person during the general election and this reporter with a camera man came up to myself and my opponent, which usually would be expected. Only this reporter was broadcasting to Bulgaria and wanted to hear what we thought about the national election, not our own election. So somewhere out there, I was on a Bulgarian news station for 30 seconds. The cool thing is the reporter did not even blink when he saw I used an iPad to respond to his questions.

**Coleman Watson:** Well, for me, actually, the strangest thing for me, is that when I started my campaign, I got a TikTok account because I didn't have one before. And my campaign manager, she says, "You know, I think it's probably the best way for us to reach people – a lot of people – at once." So I thought, well, maybe I will just [create] a video that's only for 10 seconds.

And I thought, maybe I [would] get maybe 100 views or something. Well, I got almost 300,000 views in that 10 seconds for my first video. And so I got about 10,000 followers because of this in Florida. And I didn't know how – I didn't know the power of using TikTok for politics, but actually it's a great way to leverage people that know your story and will support you.

And also it was free. So it's great to do it. So I think you should use TikTok as your strategy, but I was really surprised to know this.

**Tauna Szymanski:** Thank you, Coleman. This is Tauna Szymanski again, and I just want to thank all of our participants – India, Sascha, Coleman, and Angelica, and of course our interpreters and CART providers for this webinar today. We've gotten some unbelievably positive feedback already during the session in texts and messages that I've been getting, and Tweets and stuff. We are recording this session, and as soon as we're able to produce fully accessible video, audio, and text recording of it, we'll be posting it. And we will alert



you to that on our social media and our newsletter. If you're not signed up for our newsletter, you can do so on our website at [communicationfirst.org](http://communicationfirst.org).

And thanks everyone again for attending and participating. I personally enjoyed this an incredible amount. I really, really yeah – this was great. I'm thrilled. So, thank you all so much again, and hopefully we'll see you all again soon.

**Sascha Bittner:** It was wonderful to be here.

**Angelica Vega:** Bye, everybody!