

Just Ask Conference, Opening Remarking

Beth Valentine
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Thank you, President Armacost, for those opening remarks, and thank you as well for your support not just of this conference but of accessibility and equity at UND more broadly.

My name is Beth Valentine, and I am the Equity Compliance and Education Manager in the Equal Opportunity & Title IX Office. I am up here on this stage in my role as chair of the Campus Accessibility Working Group or CAWG. CAWG, in its current form, emerged in the Spring semester of 2022, building upon and expanding on the work of the previous ADA Technology Compliance Working Group. CAWG carried on the work of this group while also addressing accessibility in other areas of campus life. It is comprised of students, faculty, and staff from across campus, with representation from Student Disability Resources, University Information Technology (UIT), Facilities Management, Teaching Transformation and Development Academy (TTaDA), Office of Extended Learning, Human Resources, Housing, Academic Affairs, Marketing & Creative Services, Office of Emergency Management, Chester Fritz Library, SMHS Library Resources, and various colleges. If you are a member of CAWG and in the Memorial Union now, please raise your hand. Please join with me in thanking not only these members but also those joining us online and those who could not be with us today.

For those who also helped with the planning of this conference, please keep your hands raised or raise them now. These individuals were key in taking Just Ask from an idea mentioned in a CAWG subgroup to this. We would not be here now without them, and I encourage you to say thank you to them when you see them, probably working behind the scenes or even in front of them.

There are also many others I would like to thank. First, thank you to Vice President Karla Mongeon-Stewart for her support of this event. Thank you to our panelists and speakers, with a special thank you to our asynchronous presenter, Dr. Christina Johnson, and our keynote speaker today, Haley Moss, who both are sharing their insights with us despite not one but two hurricanes impacting their home state. Thank you to the Chester Fritz Library, in particular Zeineb Yousif, for making the asynchronous keynote address and other materials from this conference available via the Scholarly Commons. Thank you to the catering staff for their help in making sure this event is well provisioned – and well-caffeinated. Thank you to Conference, Camp, and Event Services for their help in managing event registration. Thank you to the Memorial Union Staff for their help in arranging the physical space, and to their Audio-Visual team and UIT in managing the technology and virtual spaces. These teams are critical to the event's success and – or perhaps I should say including – the event's accessibility. For example, not only does UIT enable the event to be hybrid, they also are key in the seamless integration of ASL interpreting and CART captioning. (CART stands for Communication Access Real-time Translation.) The Catering team has provided a variety of options that are compatible with allergies and other dietary restrictions. And the Memorial Union staff was incredibly helpful in answering my seemingly endless questions about things like whether the banquet tables were wheelchair accessible and whether we would have space for standing tables too.

Lastly, thank you for attending. The whole point of “Just Ask” is to spark a conversation, to encourage and empower you to take action in making UND a more accessible, inclusive space. While we may know how to work towards this goal some of the time, in some situations, sometimes we don’t. In those situations, just ask. Ask how you can help. Ask how you can be an ally. Ask questions about what you don’t know. And listen. Listen to the lived experiences of those with disabilities; listen to their ideals for improvement; listen as they explain what barriers exist, what barriers have been removed, and even what barriers you – unintentionally – might have put in their path. Listen, then act. Take what you learn in those conversations and what you learn here out there. If all we do is show up and listen, nothing will change. Now this isn’t to discount the importance of listening. Sometimes listening in and of itself is the most valuable action we can take in a moment, but sometimes other action is called for as well. So, I challenge you to not only ask, to not only listen, but to think of at least one action you can take once you leave the Union or exit Zoom to make campus a more accessible, inclusive space.

At this point, I want to highlight two groups on campus who are working towards this goal of making a more inclusive UND. The first group, AccessAbility UND, is a student organization started and run by people who have personal experience with disabilities within our campus. This group believes in reframing the attitude towards disability and celebrating disability identities. The organization focuses on advocating for a more inclusive and accessible campus and curriculum at UND. If you are interested in learning more, I encourage you to reach out to Crystal Lundmark, the president of AccessAbility.

The second group is UND DANE, Disability Affinity Network for Employees. This group was established last fall for faculty and staff with disabilities and/or chronic medical conditions. Members meet monthly via Zoom on the third Wednesday of each month to discuss issues related to disabilities and chronic conditions, including providing mutual support, raising awareness, improving accessibility to campus spaces, improving access to accommodations and medical leave, and increasing sensitivity to the needs and concerns of employees with disabilities and chronic conditions. While their focus is on employees with disabilities or chronic conditions, they welcome all who would like to work with them.

I want to thank both of these groups for the work they do on campus.

Continuing this theme of gratitude, I ask that we acknowledge both the physical space some of us are gathered in and the date of gathering.

Today, the University of North Dakota rests on the ancestral lands of the Pembina and Red Lake Bands of Ojibwe and the Dakota Oyate - presently existing as composite parts of the Red Lake, Turtle Mountain, White Earth Bands, and the Dakota Tribes of Minnesota and North Dakota. We acknowledge the people who resided here for generations and recognize that the spirit of the Ojibwe and Oyate people permeates this land. As a university community, we will continue to build upon our relations with the First Nations of the State of North Dakota - the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Nation, Spirit Lake Nation, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, and Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.

This land acknowledgement statement is always a part of UND, but today – on Indigenous People’s Day – it is particularly poignant. Although it is not a federal holiday, numerous states have holidays honoring Native Americans, primarily in October. This day celebrates the 571+ distinct tribes of Native Peoples who exist today in the United States. It often replaces Columbus Day as a type of protest to recognize the painful history and genocide Indigenous people have faced and to celebrate their resilience and their communities. This date falls within National Disability Employment Awareness Month, or NDEAM, and I encourage us to reflect on the ways these themes interact and overlap. I want to draw attention to not only the work of Indigenous Peoples within disability rights, such as the work being done by the Native American Disability Law Center, but also to the intersectionality of these identities. 2020 data from the CDC found that 30% of American Indian or Alaska Native adults have a disability. This is the highest rate of disability of any ethnicity. For these 3.7 million people, their intersecting identities of Indigenous and disability can be a source of both resilience and challenge. To learn more of their stories, I encourage you to attend the Indigenous Peoples’ Day talk after the conference today, located in Memorial Union, Room 340, hosted by UND’s Indigenous Student Center. I also encourage you to visit the Just Ask Conference page in the Chester Fritz Library’s Scholarly Commons, where you will find the “[Understanding Disabilities in American Indian & Alaska Native Communities](#)” [toolkit](#), released last year by the National Indian Council on Aging in partnership with the National Council on Disability.

Now, before I introduce our keynote speaker, I will go over a few housekeeping matters. First, this event has live, human captioning for all sessions, and an ASL interpreter for requested sessions. If you are in the Union, it is displayed on the large screen behind me. If you are on zoom, it is provided within that platform. Second, we have provided both sitting and standing tables in the Union. Please move between them freely as needed. At those tables you will find a fidget ball, graciously donated by A Johnston Therapy (a team of mental health therapists in Grand Forks). Those are there to be used, so please, use them and take them with you. Similarly, we have provided refreshments. Please, eat and drink. If you have any questions about ingredients or concerns about allergens, just ask the catering staff, me, or Donna Smith. [Donna, please stand and wave.] Meals and snacks are either compatible with the submitted dietary requests or clearly labeled as containing nuts or meat. My apologies to those online; we haven’t quite figured out an efficient way to get coffee and cookies to you just yet, but if there are any technical issues, please let us know. The chat/Q&A will be monitored during all sessions, including this one. Lastly, please do not hesitate to reach out to myself, Donna, or the chat monitor with questions or concerns during this conference.

And now, it is my great joy to introduce Haley Moss. Diagnosed with autism at the age of three, Haley Moss’ parents were told that she might not ever finish high school or earn a driver’s license. Today she is a lawyer, neurodiversity expert, keynote speaker, educator, and the author of several books that guide neurodivergent individuals through professional and personal challenges. Haley is a consultant to top corporations and nonprofits that seek her guidance in creating an inclusive workplace, and she is a sought-after commentator on disability rights and the Americans With Disabilities Act. Haley’s books include *Great Minds Think Differently: Neurodiversity for Lawyers and Other Professionals*, *The Young Autistic Adult’s Independence Handbook*, *Talking the Talk About Autism*, *A Freshman Survival Guide for College Students With Autism Spectrum Disorders*, and *Middle School — The Stuff Nobody Tells You About: A Teenage*

Girl With High-Functioning Autism Shares Her Experiences. Her articles have appeared in outlets including the Washington Post, Teen Vogue, GQ, Bustle, Fast Company, Law 360 Pulse, and the ABA Journal.

She is determined to make the world more accessible and inclusive for people with disabilities and to encourage others to embrace neurodiversity. Determined to give back to her community, Haley serves on the Board of Directors of Disability Rights Florida, the Board of Directors of Starkloff Disability Institute, the Constituency Board for the University of Miami-Nova Southeastern University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, and the Board of Directors of Florida Lawyers Assistance. Haley earned her law degree from the University of Miami School of Law and was admitted to the Florida Bar in 2019. She is the recipient of numerous awards and honors, lives in Miami, Florida and is a fan of the Pokémon series, Taylor Swift, drawing and painting, and video games.