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Black and Disabled Activist Imani Barbarin speaks on Intersectionality at Virtual Event

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This summer, Access: Student Disability Union's executive board members pondered the idea of bringing a Black disabled activist to speak on the important intersectionality in racial and disability activism. While deciding on the different speakers, the first and obvious choice for Access was writer and activist In Barbarin.

"She is a brilliant and wise woman who makes stellar content on social media and beyond, and we deeply value her emphasis on intersectionality, authentic community, and influencing change," senior Harper McKenzie, a disabled woman and president of Access, said in an interview with *The Intersectionalist*.

On Friday, Nov. 13, at 7 p.m., "An Evening With Imani Barbarin" drew in 35 Black and Indigenous people of color, disabled students, and allies. The Zoom event co-hosted by Access, Protesting Oppression With Educational Reform, Emerson's Black Organization with Natural Interest, and Flawless Brown. It featured moderated conversation with Barbarin followed by a question and answer with audience members.

Access decided to hold Barbarin as a speaker due to her work with disability activism and her focus on intersectionality in social justice. According to Barbarin, she created a dozen trending hashtags such as #ThingsDisabledPeopleKnow and #AbleDsAreWeird, which provided the disabled community an online space to be seen and heard.

"Access believes that justice movements must be intersectional or they are not worth pursuing," McKenzie said. "It's a part of our mission that means a great deal to us, and the events of the summer pushed us to explicitly state our commitment to intersectionality, anti-racism, and the uplifting of underrepresented voices in the disability community and at large."

The event started with an introduction by Barbarin on her background as a disability activist, her intersectional experiences as a Black and disabled woman, the importance of accessibility, and the presence of systemic ableism and racism in society.

"Any work that you do, in any sort of activism, in any space, you must incorporate disability," Barbarin said during the event. "When you organize, when you come together, when you even just have one-to-one interactions, make sure you're making them accessible to disabled people."

During the 40-minute moderated discussion, Barbarin spoke on a multitude of topics, including voter suppression and the pandemic's impact on BIPOC and disabled communities. She shared an incident from the 2018 election in Georgia when Brian Kemp, then-secretary of the state of Georgia, shut down polling places that were located in areas with a majority BIPOC population. She said Kemp justified this shutdown by claiming each polling location was inaccessible and did not meet the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 guidelines.

"I really appreciated hearing [Barbarin] talk about [racism and ableism in voter suppression]," senior Kathryn Smith, a queer and disabled woman, said in an interview with *The Intersectionalist*. "It was definitely a moment that stuck out to me, especially when she said that if voting was accessible for disabled people then, we'd literally have over two million new voters."

During the discussion, Barbarin gave words of advice to journalism students on how to report on the disabled community, saying that it's important to center the disabled person and to tell the story as it is to ensure authenticity. She said to avoid harmful ableist tropes such as inspiration porn.

"Read the story back to yourself, and if it identifies [with] any of those tropes, you need to rework it. Those tropes are incredibly harmful to our community. Try to wrangle it into a narrative that is played out. It seems like a very small thing, but it's not," Barbarin said. "Talk to the disabled person, [and] if the editorially independent publication dedicated to communicating in the way that you're traditionally used to, figure out as much as possible, tell [the story] in their own voice."

Barbarin also spoke directly to the white and non-disabled students during the event, imploring them to pass the microphone and be the barrier between that wants to silence somebody and the person that needs to be heard.

At the end of the event, McKenzie said she noticed Barbarin empowering the disabled students to reject the notion that inaccessibility and ableism is their fault and to instead embrace who they are and the accommodations they need without shame.

"No matter who you are, [Barbarin] spoke to you and made an impact on your life," McKenzie said.

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