John I. Takayama: [Music] Our first speaker of the afternoon is Corrinne Melon, who is an arts administrator, vocal coach, and opera stage director, dedicated to bringing equity to the arts and advocating for performers of all identities. She currently serves as the managing director of Phamaly Theater Company, the nation's longest-running disability theater. Prior to her time at family, she was the Executive Director for the Arapahoe Philharmonic, bringing a renewed focus on artistic excellence to the company. Corrine founded and was the Executive Artistic Director of Denver Immersive Opera, a company dedicated to supporting female-identifying and LGBTQAI+ artists while creating immersive operatic productions that resonate with modern audiences. She has also served as a production manager for Boulder Opera Company and company manager for Boulder Music Institute. Corrine holds a performer certificate invoice from the University of Denver. A dual MM in opera and musical theater performance from Arizona State University, and a BM in voice performance with a minor in theater from Middle Tennessee State University. Corrine lives with anxiety and depression. She will present Accessible Theater Disability Center Stage.

Corinne Melon: Thanks so much, John. I'm so happy to be here today from very snowy and cold Colorado. I am at home because of all the snow, so I apologize if my dog barks in the background. I would love to start out with just a quick little video about family that was featured in the documentary Bear Feet back in spring of 2025, and it is about our production of a chorus line in 2024 that was the centerpiece of our 35th anniversary season.

Speaker 1: Denver. To meet with a family theater. A professional theater company whose mission is to be a creative home for theater artists with disabilities, to model a theatrical process for people with disabilities, and to upend conventional narratives by transforming individuals, audiences, and the world. You are some of the founding members of family. Can you tell me how family started?

Kathleen Traylor: We all went to a special ed school and experienced theater there. After school, nobody would hire us. We decided let's start our own theater company.

Gregg Vigil: It's amazing what this company has accomplished over the years and the number of people that have been a part of it.

Kathleen Traylor: We wanted to do Chorus Line.

Speaker 1: Well, we're going to be doing Chorus Line this year. It's amazing.

Kathleen Traylor: It took us 35 years.

Speaker 1: There you go.

Kathleen Traylor: But every time we'd bring it up, they'd say, you don't have the talent, you don't have the support behind you.

Ben Raanan: Chorus Line is a show about inclusivity and getting to know somebody. But in order to be in Chorus Line, you had to be stick thin. You're going to see 30 people who are all doing the choreography in their way and the way their body is. Isn't that actually more of the message of the show than if it wasn't that?

Speaker 1: In preparation of their production of a chorus line, family invited me to help out with their rehearsals, specifically for the grand finale choreographed by our friend Jari of Feel the Beat.

Jari Majewski-Price: Five, 6, 7, 8, lunge together, walk, walk across, back, side. Beautiful. There is nothing you can do that is right or wrong. You're all good. We've got your back. I'm here to make you all look perfect, feel perfect, feel confident, feel strong.

Speaker 1: My job is to translate Jari's choreography for Linda Wirth, a blind actor in the show.

Jari Majewski-Price: To the right, cross, right, together, arm up, up, down, and then two bounces with your hip.

Linda Wirth: Only this foot spin.

Jari Majewski-Price: Only that foot. Perfect.

Linda Wirth: I knew what it was like to be blind. I knew what I needed to ask for so that I could be successful. But what I've learned through family is how to help other people succeed.

Jari Majewski-Price: If you want to feel my hips, I'm right in front. I'm going, I pop my see how I loosen up my knee, and I go, it's like I have something to shake off my hip.

Linda Wirth: That's it. That's it a girl.

Gregg Vigil: It's incredible to watch not only the talents of the actors, but how they learn to adapt. I think that's one of the challenges I love about this company. We always figure out something.

Casey Myers: Said, I could do that. Who made these? Our production team made those. They're wonderful and yet, they took pieces from actual top shoes and sold them to gloves. There you go. Top gloves.

Speaker 1: That's amazing. I love how, you're using the actual chair.

Casey Myers: I'm glad it doesn't like damage the chair at all.

Speaker 1: You have dents all over it. After experiencing the artistry of family in rehearsal, I really wanted to see the show for myself. I flew back to Denver for their opening night performance.

Kathleen Traylor: To be able to do a show that shows people with disabilities in ordinary circumstances, it's about life. It's about dreams, and art is supposed to imitate life. Sorry, we're here. We're in life. Ultimately, my wish that this is no longer needed in the performing arts, in TV, in everywhere that we put ourselves out of business.

Gregg Vigil: We don't have people coming to see a disabled theater company. They're going to see their favorite theater, and they're going to see how does someone do the tap number in a wheelchair? Someone who's deaf and signs in a musical where you have to sing? What a beautiful thing. I wish so much that everyone would just be inclusive because God, your shows would be so much better if you included the folks that we have here.

Speaker 1: I'll see you on my next bare feet adventure, wherever it may take me.

Corinne Melon: That was that quick little video there and now I'm going to go into my presentation for you all. Phamaly Theater Company here. We are the longest running disability theater in the United States, like they talked about in the video. We were founded in 1989 by five friends who were in theater together at the Boettcher School for Crippled Children was what it was called. They founded the Physically Handicapped Amateur Musical Actors League or Phamaly. We have since changed that just to Phamaly Theater Company, and our very first show was Guys and Dolls. This was incredibly rebellious at the time. It was difficult for people who used wheelchairs to even get into a theater, much less get on the stage and the ADA hadn't even been passed when they first founded family. Since then, we have grown from a community theater to an internationally known professional theater. Founders and actors from our very first show are still active in our community. Our board vice chair actually was the music director on Guys and Dolls. Those folks are still around and still active with us, which is amazing. Our mission and vision. Is our mission is to be a creative home for theater artists with disabilities, to model a disability affirmative theatrical process, and to offend conventional

narratives by transforming individuals, audiences in the world. We strive to create a world in which disability and the differences within the human condition are celebrated, and the theater experience is accessible and welcoming to all. At Phamaly, we practice something we call radical inclusion. We work with theater artists with any type of disability, physical, emotional, cognitive, or trauma-based at any level of impact. We are pretty unusual in the disability theater space in that we work with anyone with any type of disability. Most of the more well-known disability theaters, like Deaf West, for example, work with one type of disability. Deaf West works with deaf actors. Ensemble is a well-known theater in Chicago that works with actors with Down syndrome. We're odd that we work with everyone, and we are a disability only theater, not multi abilities. For all of this to work, we embrace a non-hierarchical view of disability, which I know is a very odd concept for my medical friends here who are used to having to categorize people by level of need. For us to work the way we do with the different disabilities we work with and the different levels of impact, socially, we can't say someone is more deserving of our services because of their disability or their level of impact. That is not how you create a team. You can't create a team that way. We say anyone is welcome at family that identifies as disabled, and the traditional theater process does not work for you. No one is more deserving or less deserving of our services. If you have a disability and you need a different process, that's what we're here for. Artistic excellence is a top priority at family. It is incredibly competitive to get into our shows. I think for our production of little women that only has, I think, maybe 10 members of the cast, we had 150 people audition, and that's pretty common. We have become a hub for the disabled arts here in Denver from Phamaly Foundation. There are a lot of other disabled visual arts, disabled arts ensembles, disabled dance ensembles that all came about, and we've got this amazing environment of disabled artists here in Denver that is just beautiful. Our shows give artists an outlet where disability can become an asset. Not all of our shows are about disability, but we use this disability lens, and it can be for something as silly as in this scene that's pictured here from our production of Pippin. Pippin was getting it on with a lot of ladies, and we had one of our wheelchair users roll him across the stage, which was a very hilarious moment, and so we'll sometimes use it that way or in a more profound way, when we did the Miss Holmes, which it's a female retelling of the Sherlock Holmes story. As we were looking at that script, we realized pretty quickly Sherlock Holmes was probably autistic, and it made a lot of sense to cast an actor with autism as that character and added so much to the story to portray the character in that light and come at it from that angle that the script did not include. That's just one of the many ways that we tailor our productions and give our artists an outlet where that disability is an asset in the storytelling. One of the other things that we're really aware of is the intersectionality that our disabled artists live in, and what those cultural differences in the feeling of disability and what people feel about their disability, how that can affect how they want to be portrayed on stage, or how they want us to address their access needs. One of the easiest descriptions of this is we have a blind couple that acts with us all the time, and the girlfriend grew up in Colorado and was blind from birth, and she is like, I just want people to lead me around like a princess. We say, like, that's what she wants. She doesn't want to try to figure it out on her own. That's just how she wants her access needs to be addressed. However, her boyfriend is from Ecuador and has a little bit of machismo going on, and he doesn't want to ask for help. We know, if we see that this actor is wandering around a little bit, we might be like, Hey, I'm going to go to the bathroom. Do you want to come with me, type of thing? We're always trying to acknowledge that, how do people feel about their own disability culturally, and how do we best serve them that way? We also have a huge overlap with the LGBTQIA community, and we're really proud to be a safe space, particularly for the trans and non binary community right now, and acknowledge the issues that they're experiencing not only socially and culturally right now, but being trans with a disability. We have some folks who can't fully transition because of the medical needs of their disability, and what does that mean when we're working with them onstage as playing different characters, or what does that mean when we're addressing accommodation needs? We are accessible for all. We aim to have a completely accessible theatrical process from auditions to closing night. We do this in a few ways. Probably the most different thing that we do is we have a full-time position at the family called the

production accessibility manager, and that person's full-time job is to help our artists with accommodations and our audience with accommodations. In addition to a regular stage manager on every show, we have an accommodation stage manager who, again, their whole job is to provide accommodations to the actors and crew. We also use an accessible design process. All of our set and costume designs take into account the accommodation needs of our actors and audience. You can see I've got Casey here, pictured, who is in that video with his tap gloves that he was showing off, and that's how we had him do a tap number in a chorus line. We also offer a completely accessible theatrical experience. We offer a full menu of accessibility services to our audiences. We caption every show. There are captions above the stage on every single performance. We offer American Sign Language interpretation. All of our venues are accessible. We offer audio description, which, if you don't know what audio description is, it is where a blind or low vision audience member can wear a headset, and someone will be describing any of the action that's happening onstage that's necessary to understand the story. Last year, all of our staff was able to get certified in audio description, so we can offer that at any time. We do relaxed performances, and we prefer to do relaxed performances over sensory-friendly. We never want to do a lesser performance for our community members with sensory sensitivities. We are always considering those sensory issues from the get-go in our lighting and sound design. We don't have to do a sensory-friendly performance. We just do a relaxed performance where we keep the lights up at about 30%, so you can get up and move around if you need to. You're free to make noise in the audience if you need to, and those relaxed performances have been incredibly helpful for folks with sensory sensitivities or with Tourette's or even folks that have a baby and just need to bring their baby to the show with them or get up and leave if they have a kid with them. We also do tactile tours, and so that is where a blind or low vision patron will come before the show, and they get to feel the set, costume, and props, so they know what the audio describer is telling them about. We also offer quiet spaces to our audiences. We do a sensory warning light, and that is a red light that pops up usually on our caption screen about 30 seconds before anything startling, loud, or with intense content happens. We give all of our audience sensory items, so it's earplugs, sunglasses, fidgets, headphones, whatever you need. We even have weighted blankets, and we tell our audience, if there's anything that you need that's not at the accommodations table in the lobby, let us know, and we'll have it at the next show. Of course, we do braille and large print materials as well. Our programming, we do three to four plays or musicals a year at a couple of different theaters around the Denver Metro. We're a nomadic company, so we don't have our own theater space. We try to get the breadth of the Denver Metro so as many people can experience our productions as possible. Our summer show is always at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, which is one of the largest performing arts complexes in the nation. We've had a partnership with the Denver Center for 33 years now, where they give us free access to one of their theaters for our summer show every year, and we are the only guest company they allow to do that. That's something we're very proud of, that through that partnership, disabled artists are on one of the biggest stages in the nation. We do a holiday concert every year with the Colorado Symphony. That's a program we started two years ago that has been incredibly wonderful to combine our actors and singers with the Colorado Symphony, and has been just a joy of a project to work with them, and even have some of their members come to us and say, I have autism, I have ADHD, and I've never felt comfortable talking about that before. I came into a rehearsal with you all. That's been a really wonderful partnership. Then we also started last year doing a Hunter Heartbeat show every year. The Hunter Heartbeat method was developed by Kelly Hunter, who is a very well-known Shakespearean actor in London. She's performed the globe, she's performed all over the West End, and at the very height of her career and fame, she decided she felt unfulfilled and decided she was going to go work with people with autism. She created this method where she takes a Shakespearean play. She boils every scene down to one sentence and comes up with a sensory drama game that goes along with that sentence. Then all of those games are played with folks with high-impact cognitive disabilities in front of a live audience, and it tells the story of a Shakespearean play. We started this program here at Phamaly last year and brought Kelly over to work with our actors for a few months. It was really

incredible. It was the first time she had disabled actors doing these sensory drama games with people with cognitive disabilities. That's what this picture here is from. You could see our actor Vin here, who has Tourette's and autism, working with this adorable little participant, who's 10 and is nonverbal. They're in a boat right now, if you couldn't tell. The Hunter Heartbeat method has actually been shown the sensory drama games in that have been shown to improve cognitive function in people with cognitive disabilities. There is some research from the University of Ohio about that, that's really amazing. The games also do things to teach social skills like turn-taking and eye contact. That has been an amazing program that we are so excited to be able to offer and include that part of the disability community and families' productions. We also do classes through our partnership with the Denver Center. We offer theater classes for free to anyone who identifies as disabled. That really helps with the pipeline issue of folks with disabilities not always being included in high school theater and things, and being told they can't do theater as a child. They're able to come to our classes for free and get that training. We also offer classes using the Hunter Heartbeat method, where people can come and play those games weekly with us at Lone Tree Arts Center, and we usually do that for six weeks in the fall. Then we also have an internship program. We started that internship program in 2023 to help the pipeline issue of disabled theater makers and making sure that we're able to always have a good representation from disabled directors, designers, and so that program is for graduating high school students, undergrad students, and graduate students. They can have an internship in administration, fundraising, theater tech, props, lighting, sound design, costumes, design, or directing. This internship program has been really amazing. We've had some high schoolers who are now getting degrees in costume design. We've got one in particular who's at NYU doing a degree in costume design that did an internship with us while they were in high school. We have folks who weren't really sure what they wanted to do. We're an undergrad, and then came and did an internship with us, and we're like, I want to work in disability advocacy now. The internship program has been really amazing. We also offer accessibility consulting. We do anti-ablism training and then offer accessible rehearsal process consulting for businesses and other arts organizations. Particularly, we have a lot of times we'll have other theaters contact us and say, hey, we cast this actor that we know works with you a lot, but I've never directed a blind actor before, or I've never worked with an actor with autism. How do I do that? That's something that we're always happy to help folks with. Our impact in the community in that video, Kathleen Trailer, one of our founders, was saying, our goal is to not be needed anymore. Our goal is to have to close someday because we don't have anyone that is auditioning for us because they're all getting cast in mainstream theaters. We're always looking towards that future. I don't know if it will happen in our lifetimes, but that's what we're trying to do. We're always trying to elevate disability and break down stereotypes. When you see disabled characters on TV or onstage, they're typically someone to be pitied, or they are a villain. You don't see a disabled heroine. You don't see a disabled hero or ingenue. But at family, all of the characters are disabled. That really can change people's perspectives on the disability community. We believe really strongly in disability representation at all levels of our organization, from our board, staff, and contractors. All of our actors identify as disabled. We aim for a minimum of 50% of our board staff and contractors. That's our designers, directors, stage managers, all of those positions backstage that make the show happen. We aim for 50% of those folks who identify as disabled. Typically, on a family show, that ratio is more like 60%-70% of those folks identify as disabled. We serve around 200 theater artists with disabilities a year, and we're here to make theater, but the very cool thing about family is it helps build social connections and helps folks with leadership skills. Many of our actors go on to be disability advocates in the community or work at mainstream theaters or even perform on Broadway. These two actors pictured here, this was a production of the musical sideshow about conjoined twins, these two actors in the massive wheelchair we have, have both been on Broadway, and the one on the far left, Janna Bainbridge is currently in Wicked, playing Nessarose, and that is a character that uses a wheelchair, and she is the first wheelchair user to ever play that character on Broadway. It's been on Broadway for over 20 years, which is insane. We're really proud of what our actors go out and do in the world. We work with around 5,500-6,000 audience members a year, and

many of those audience members identify as disabled due to the accommodations services that we offer for our audience. We believe really strongly in collaboration at family. I talked about our collaboration with the Denver Center with the Colorado Symphony. We work with an organization called Access Gallery, that is a visual arts gallery for folks with disabilities. They create all of our season artwork. We work with a service dog training organization called Canine Partners of the Rockies. One of my favorite nights is when we have dress rehearsals just for service dogs and training. That's a wonderful audience that does shed a lot. But we also work with ARC, the Autism Society of Colorado, some other local theaters including the Aurora Fox Arts Center and North G Arts. Then we work with several work training organizations. Whenever I am having an event or, feeding the cast or having a party, we try to put the money back into the disability community. One of the organizations we work with a lot is Dirt Coffee, which employs folks with IDD, or Brewability is another one that employs folks with IDD. We are I Am always, if I am going to be putting money back out into the community, I want it to go to the disability community. Feel the beat is another one of our collaborators that is a deaf dance company where they've developed a dance floor that vibrates on all frequencies, so you can literally feel the beat. We have one of those panels that we use in rehearsals for deaf actors, as well as vet tics that we partner with for free tickets to veterans and first responders. Our current season, we have a calendar year season. We are about to get going with Little Women will open on March 19th in two weeks. This is a play version. It is a regional premiere, and we're really excited about this production because it portrays Joe as nonbinary. We started last year not having our deaf actors, having someone voice their lines. In the past de family, if we were working with a deaf actor, another actor would be voicing their lines. But last year we were like, we're captioning our shows. You can read the captions if you don't understand ASL. We tried that on our last show and it was incredibly successful. In this show, we're doing the same thing and We've actually had the playwright adjust the script a little bit for us for one particular scene where we have a deaf actor that is playing Meg arguing with Aunt Marsh, who is played by a blind actor, Linda Wirth that was in that video earlier, and they have a big fight. That has actually become this very comedic, hilarious scene with someone translating back and forth between the middle of them. After Little Women, we'll be doing a co production with the Aurora Fox Arts Center, which is an equity theater here in Denver, and that will be a cast of half people from family with disabilities and half people from the Aurora Fox. That show tells the story of a woman with facial differences who travels by bus from North Carolina to Oklahoma to see a faith healer. Next up is the show we are probably most excited about this year. It is a world premiere of five oh four the Musical. This is a show that's been in workshops for several years now. It'll be at the Denver Center, and it tells the story of the five oh four sit ins in 1977. We are incredibly excited to premiere this musical that's so important in disability advocacy history and particularly with the lawsuits that have come up in the past this year and last year with the five oh four legislation. Then we'll be doing tiny, beautiful things at a small black box theater in Aurora, and that show is about a vice columnist answering messages, and it's typically done with four actors, one in person and three playing all of the people who write into her. We wanted to get more people from the disability community involved who maybe can't leave home or can't do a rehearsal process, where they have to be in rehearsal every day. We're doing all of those on video, and we're having 104 disabled actors from around the world portray all the people who write into her. Then we'll be doing Pericles, our Hunter Heartbeat show in November at Lone Tree Arts Center. I'm running short on time. I wanted to give just a few things I've heard from audience members. One of my favorite feedbacks from an audience member we've gotten was for our production of Spring Awakening, and they said, This show is so good. I've seen the Broadway production, and this theater really held their own. I think watching this production made me a more tolerant and kind person. I don't see too many people with visible disabilities in my day to day life. Seeing everyone perform together was awesome. That is really what we're aiming to do with every family production is to make people rethink how they think about people with disabilities. That is it. Thank you so much.

John I. Takayama: Thank you so very much. I have a number of questions. I think one question is when you select people to go onstage, you mentioned that there are a lot of people who apply for the

positions. How do you make a decision of who you select don't make it.

Corinne Melon: we do, the traditional audition process. Everyone comes in and auditions. We do accept auditions via video, which is kind of unusual, just so that folks that maybe don't live close to us can audition or, again, have some kind of accommodation need. But we're always looking at a couple of different things. We always want to have kind of a variety of disabilities. We're always looking to fully portray the breadth and diversity in the disability community. That's one thing we're always looking at, but We're also just looking at who plays the character the best, who is the best fit for the role, and what can that be? Sometimes it can be something, when I was talking about miss Holmes, where we were like, It makes sense for Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes was probably autistic, and that came about because we had an autistic actor come in that was brand new, we'd never met before, who was just so excellent, and we saw how, this makes a lot of sense for this character. Sometimes it's something like that where we're like, it really makes a lot of sense and could be really interesting for someone with this particular disability to portray this character. But we're never really going into auditions with that. We're always going in with an open mind and seeing what happens. There is there are people who don't get cast. A lot of people don't get cast, and that can be a tough thing for folks sometimes. But that is why, we have the classes that we have. We do those quarterly, and they're all in different subjects. We've done everything from we did accessible trapeze last year to voice acting. We're always trying to help people build their skills up. Maybe if they didn't get into this show, they'll get into the next one.

John I. Takayama: There's a question about how you provide accommodations for the auditioning process itself. You mentioned about the video, and I guess if they come in person, then whatever is needed.

Corinne Melon: Is that our accommodations manager actually usually calls every single person that signs up for an audition and ask them, what are your accommodation needs? What do you need? A lot of times people don't know what that is at first. One of the things we're really proud of is we help actors be able to to figure out what those things are so that when they do go and work in a mainstream theater, they can say ahead of time, Hey, these are the things I need. I have a seizure disorder, so it would be really helpful for me if I can sit with your lighting designer with sunglasses on and go through the lighting design and be like, Hey, this thing might give me a seizure. That's something one of our actors has discovered or, I have we have an actor that has CPTSD who knows that if they get overheated, that can trigger a trauma reflex for them. We keep ice packs on hand for them. We're always trying to figure out, it's always a learning process, we are always telling people the best thing to do is ask and then be willing to change. We've had times where someone gets a costume and they think that the costume is going to be fine, and then we get into dress rehearsals and they're like, I can't physically move around in this.This is not comfortable for me. We're going to change the costume design. We'll have a whole new costume made for you. That is, it's it's part of the process at family.

John I. Takayama: You mentioned about audience with babies and that brings me to the next question is, do you think what you do has sort of changed what is expected or,, should be provided to everyone?

Corinne Melon: I mean, that's our goal is, I came from before I worked at family, I came from, a very a background of performer advocacy, and I really feel like actors and singers and performers are really not treated fairly in a lot of ways. We expect a lot from those people, and we say, since you're doing something you love, you should not get paid, and you should not get healthcare and all of those things. That means that performing arts has been dominated by people that already have money, that don't have disabilities, that are white, that are beautiful, that are thin. That's what has happened. We feel really strongly that we are, changing what people think about how performers should be treated. Particularly in Denver, we have seen that really start to move the needle, a lot of our a lot of

people contractors that come in and work with us that don't identify as disabled will be like, I love working for a family because it's if I'm sick, I can call and tell you I'm sick and I can't come. I couldn't do that at another theater. Or if I have a family emergency, that you all will be accommodating for that and another theater wouldn't do that. But we have started to see, a lot of people that work with family take those skills and those methods and just start distributing that across the theater world. That's why I think our internship program is so important because those young theater makers are getting their basis of their training in accessible theater, and they're taking that with them for their whole career. that's our goal is to, make it so everyone is doing all of these accommodations so that we do close.

John I. Takayama: Thank you so very much for a wonderful presentation and best of wishes with the rest of this season.

Corinne Melon: Thank you so much, everyone. Have a wonderful day.