[MUSIC] You are listening to Tell Me Your Story where we connect to HLS staff on a personal level.

[MUSIC] Hello everyone. This is Edgar Kley Filho from HLS Human Resources department. My pronouns are he, him, and his. Today we are talking to Laurie Lower from the Accessibility Services who will tell us about her life, how long she is in this position at HLS, and the work she does. Thank you for joining us, Laurie, and please tell me your story.

Hello.

Hello, so to start this, I think the best way to do is, I should say, who are you, and how did you get here? Let's start with that drama.

Well, A, thank you for having me, and B just for universal design purposes, I'm going to do a short image description of myself just because it's a podcast just for listeners. My name is Laurie. I'm an Asian woman. I've got a bob that's almost shoulder length. It used to be black but now it's more gray because I'm getting older.

[LAUGHTER] Thank you for that, Laurie. How did you get here?

That's a great question. As I Edgar mentioned, I work in Accessibility Services. I'm the Accessibility Services Specialist. I arrived at Harvard Law School because I saw an ad that was asking for someone who could help out in the Accessibility Services Department as an assistant whose main job function was to assist and prepare materials for blind students. That really spoke to me because at the time I was working at the National Braille Press as a braille transcriber doing most in the same thing. I had previous experience working with students in a one-to-one situation, so I said law students, that sounds really interesting. Very different from the materials I had been working on with a sixth grader and pretty different from the array of materials I had been working on as a braille transcriber at the National Braille Press. I was really intrigued.

Now I'm intrigued how someone learn braille? and how long does it take in your case, for example?.

That's a great question. Here in the Boston area, we're very lucky to have so many organizations that assist blind people, we have the Perkins School for the Blind. But we also have the National Braille Press. Years ago when I was looking for a job, I saw on Craigslist of all places an ad that said, do you like reading? Do you like puzzles? You like solving problems. And I said, yes, yes, yes, check. It was an ad for a braille transcriber at the National Braille Press. I applied. I got to the point where I'd had some interviews, and I got a working interview in which they brought me in. I sat at the National Braille Press not knowing braille at all or anything. I just sat there for eight hours. It was really awkward because I really wasn't sure what to do, and they gave me a book, and they said, why don't you try? Apparently, my efforts were really bad [LAUGHTER] because I was told by someone thanks for coming in, we'll let you know. Spoiler alert when they let me know, they said that I was not hired. That was going to a crushing blow because I was really like this is so interesting. But I was lucky enough to reach out and learn that the National Braille Press was having a braille transcribers class taught by the person who basically shot me down for the job. I was so eager to enroll in this class. Basically to be able to be a braille transcriber, you have to be certified by the Library of Congress. They have a program in which I think it's 19 lessons. Right now, for most of the people in America, it's done by mail, I guess. But we're lucky enough to have the resources to have in-person classes. I took this Braille class and was really intrigued at how complex and yet how simple it is and the woman teaching it was amazing and she still is. I took the class. Then I did my manuscript because that's like the final exam. Basically you create a real manuscript of 35 pages and you choose a book that you love and you have to do it manually. Six key entry, which means you're literally punching in the dots that you want to be represented by hand with six keys. It's so interesting, you can't use any translation, software or anything.

You had to do on your own.

Yeah, it was a really good learning experience. I learned how to proofread my own work. I learned how to just really practice a lot, and I pass the manuscript and then I got my certification as a literary braille transcriber.

When you apply for the position at HLS, the initial thought was to be working the conversions for blind students?

Yeah, that was really what drew me because I was eager to get back into one-on-one support for students because in National Braille Press. I was doing a lot of menus, a lot of books just for pleasure reading. I felt disconnected to the people, and I wanted some direct service.

Okay. Where did you start working when you applied for the first time?

At HLS?

Yeah.

I started working in the Dean of Students office,.

Dean of students office. But that expanded, your conversions was not just for blind students. What else It took there in terms of your position and what else do we started doing at DOS for accessibility?

I started assisting with wellness programming and commencement activities, orientation activities. But I think that the core mission was always meant to be mostly doing conversions for students.

Can you explain conversion? What is the process? I think a lot of people might not know what it takes, for example, so you have a new student, and they choose specific classes that they're going to take. What you do? What is exactly the work that you do based on the class that they chose? What is more complicated? What's easier in a way? What takes the time for you to do what you do?

Okay, That's a great question. We're getting into lean nerd alert section.

It's very nerdy work, but I love it because basically it's different. Let's say for example we've got a blind student who does not read braille, but instead uses a screen reader to access their course materials. That would be their assistive technology. Basically, I take PDFs of all of their coursework, and I use Optical Character Recognition software to turn things into Word documents because Word Documents tend to work the best with screen readers. When I'm doing the conversions, I'll let the computer do most of it, but there's a lot of editing and cleaning up that one needs to do to make it readable.

For one L doctrinal classes, there's a lot of asterisks in their black letter law classes and I noticed that OCR, which is the Optical Character Recognition software, tends to turn the series of three asterisks into three ampersands or three Ks. You just have to go through and edit and proofread as needed.

Interesting.

I also add heading structure for the students.

What is that?

It's just basically I'm showing the hierarchy of what a follow-up print and I provide roadmaps and the hierarchical structure for the readings, say, like a Level 2 heading would be something that is important but not as important as a heading Level 1. The student doesn't have to read a wall of texts. They can scroll through their documents, say, there's like three level two headings. That's going to be important and they can scroll down because without that, it's just like the [NOISE] and that for me, reading print with any heading structure would be nightmarish.

In my ignorance, what are you do in terms of the headings there they were sent mentioning, would it be for us the highlighting? When you are reading a page or a text and you highlight the most important parts, that would be mean more than the whole tax in general or not?

It's similar yet different. It's actually the best analogy would be like, what an outline looks like and like the Roman numeral one, with a heading Level 1 and then an outline. The letter A would be like close to like a heading Level 2. It's important but not as important as the heading Level 1.

This student that's already accustomed to the software will you understand that and go straight to that point?

Yeah.

These softwares or something is the technology that developed to this point and make it possible for the students to have a better learning process with that. Again, my ignorance here. Is the technology now, when you mentioned that some students don't read Braille, which would be very common in the past. Is the technology now replacing Braille? In general, would be our phone texting and social media replacing the reading papers and reading? Is that something of that nature or not?

That's a great question and I have to say that it sends me to know that Braille literacy is actually on the decline and that screen readers are very popular.

Would it be like a cursive? The braille would be dicursive for us?

Yeah, probably.

Interesting.

Similar screen readers are very, very popular because they can be used on telephones like the iPhone. A lot of my braille or my blind friends use VoiceOver on the Apple phones to access websites and screen readers are popular with people who have experienced blindness later in life. They don't have the resources to learn braille.

You have a different level of students with the needs in terms of a vision?

Yes. There are some students who attend HLS or who have attended HLS in the past with some usable site and they were able to use magnification to access their written documents and they're printed materials. There's also some students who use refreshable braille displays and so I tend to, depending on what assistive technology they use, I tend to tailor make the Word documents for them because a refreshable braille display cannot read a table, but jaws, the screen reader can read a table so you have to be cognizant of what the students assistive technology is and tailor their documents specifically to that device that they use.

When you mentioned about the asterisk that the program reading a different way and you have juggled that incorrect, I heard somewhere that for people who use Twitter, would be better for blind people. Not true add for example, flags or some emojis that makes it more difficult for the blind using the programs to read it because you think that's true, no way or?

I get a text from my blind friends using emojis. I think that maybe for casual.

Or it depends on how the program that they're using.

Yeah. I think it depends. Another thing, I know for a fact because I chatted with you in the past, depending on the class of students take if it is in terms of mathematics or if there are graphics or whatever it is, you have to do a special conversion that the software doesn't do. How does that work?

There's a lot of manual typing. For the one L classes of black letter law classes. Most of the conversions are pretty straightforward because they all come from case books and or course packets, and it all depends on the quality of the scan. If something is some terrible old scan from the Middle Ages that not really, but there's a lot of typing because the optical character recognition just spits it out is like gibberish. I end up retyping a lot of stuff.

You how to describe that picture or that graphic, is that what it is?

I do and I always put a note to the student that says, this is a good description, for more detailed information, please see the instructor or your faculty. The faculty member will always be like the subject matter expert and I am just using my knowledge and what I can see and glean from the context of what this actually means because for example, in the past, we've had three completely blind students take some financial base classes whether it'd be like the four-day introduction to financial concepts class or these six-week introduction to accounting classes and there's some things that I'm not an accountant, I'm not like a financial wizard, so I try my best, but I also say with the graphics and/or tables, here's. I think this means, but obviously please ask your faculty member if you have any questions, because it is challenging to represent complex financial concepts, just like in a paragraph form and I do do a lot of googling. My Google history, the ITS, if you're listening, [LAUGHTER] it's probably like, what is this symbol? What does it mean? What is the context? Actually, I like this chart because it's challenging, but I learn something every day. I literally, I'm like I did not beta, okay, awesome. I know what beta is and now I can recognize it for the next time. It's all of the "challenges" that I face when I'm doing conversions and I'm probably trying to make it sound like it's brain surgery. Spoiler alert, it's not brain surgery, but it teaches me something new. Each time that I go through something that is a little bit challenging, I'm like, wow, just goes in my toolbox, so next time I have this student go through this in class. I know what that is.

Like you have a list of topics that you have visited in the past, but you're always adding something new. How is the relationship? Do you have to have? I don’t know if interview is the word, but do you have to have a conversation with your students to understand them better, what their needs are, how the process work, or they just say send you a message and say, here are my classes. Here's what I need, and you already picking on that. How is the conversation if there is already connection with the students that you have?

That's a really good question. Before they even land on campus, typically, blind students who need the most support will reach out to our office, and say, this is my situation. We have a call with them and I ask, what assistive technology do you use? What have you used in the past? What do you feel most comfortable with? We set a dialogue, and then through various means, I get their course schedule and I just hit the ground running with the conversions. But I always welcome feedback from students like what works for you in this document, and what doesn't work for you, and what suggestions do you have to make things more "readable?'' I had a student a few years ago who had super-duper high standards and working with that student made me work better and smarter and faster because I had to figure out ways to turn things out faster and with the same quality.

To provide that response that person was expecting. Which is interesting. We always learn something and even when maybe feels like, this is going to be complicated or more difficult because of what it seems to be in the first interaction. We always end up putting ourselves in a way that we're going to learn in the process. I remember having a boss. Jesus, way back in the time that I always felt like that he's so demanding. He was so not even here. He was in Brazil just for the clarification. But I remember learning so much from that person, when you had to denote the inventory in the end of the month. We have to count twice whatever you were doing. He wants to make sure we derived forms and I never forget this manager because I learned so much on that. He keep with you in terms of the discipline and how you manage other things. I think that's the experience that in general you're describing when depends on the students have a different standard in terms of what they request.

We're talking about blind students. What other students with disability that you work with or you need to also use special softwares or different skills that you work with?

That's a great question. In my role, I assist with captioning of mini clips used by faculty member, which currently HLS uses a third party vendor. I will upload the clip to the site. It's actually really interesting. I had no idea how this was done, because I'm like, so once you get the caption file. How do you actually get those words on the screen? Like, what is that process? Through trial and error, I learned that it's called for insider lingo. It's called burning the captions on.

Really.

Basically, a caption like if I send a video out and when it's ready, I will do some quality assurance. Well, I will look at the video and make sure that the captions are actually what they say they are. Then I'll download the file, and the file is called an SRT file. Basically, I don't know what that stands for.

Because I was going to ask SRT what?

I know [LAUGHTER] I don't know what it stands for, but I use a program called Freemake to burn the captions on. Basically, I can upload the video to Freemake, choose the subtitles or captions, upload the SRT file, and then Freemake does its thing and the captions are burned onto the video clip. It's so interesting.

That you provide for all the students.

Who are hearing and or hard of hearing and or deaf.

That goes to their classes as well. They are able to or do the system already provides it directly. How they can have their classes and be learning with that process?

I think it depends on the professor. Some professors choose to use video clips in class. In that case, I would send them the files, but some assign the videos as a out of class or homework.

Okay.

I also help coordinate CART, which is computer access real-time translation.

Okay.

It can be done remotely or in class. I think that pre-pandemic, a lot of it was done in class. Basically, CART providers will listen to the audio in real-time as they are linked up by telephone and or Zoom or sitting in the class. Their industry standard is to listen to what the speaker is saying. The industry standard is 250 words a minute. Basically, the CART provider uses like a stenographer's machine. It's not like a computer. It's like what court reporters use. They use probably like shorthand. Their fingers are furiously going over the keys and they are able to produce, like the really good ones are able to produce a verbatim transcript, even though the spirit of CART isn't meant to be word for word. I think the really seasoned and amazingly talented CART veterans are able to basically produce.

Is that what is used during commencement when you see on the screen like when they are showing the commencement of the diploma ceremony or even the university ceremony that you see the captions there?

I think that, yes. I don't know if it's CART. I think that the transcript or the copy of the speeches are sent to someone who can load a lot of the stuff in, but I think there's someone listening on the other side and then massaging it in real-time. That's why there's always a little bit of a lap.

But you also work closely with sign language folks professionals?

The last person who was an ASL user, I believe graduated in 2019, but she did have a team of four ASL interpreters that would accompany her to each class, and they do teams of I don't know if it seems a four teams or two because they each have to take a break.

Okay.

As you can imagine.

They have to go back and forth.

Yes, I'm listening and signing. I think for a two-hour class. I think to do that by yourself would be actually pretty so they work in teams. But it is amazing that the amount of talented people, I just am in awe of the services we can provide the students to level the playing field. I think that the ability to fully participate in class.

Which is an amazing.

Yes.

I miss my word her to say about the support the school gives or the university gives students coming to HLS. Do you have a contact with other university or schools that have the same program? You think that HLS using a different level in terms of how many support they give for students with the many different disabilities?

Well, I know that HLS is, I think, one of the only schools within the ecosystem that has someone in a dedicated role, such as myself to help with conversions. [OVERLAPPING] I think a lot of the others.

Fantastic.

Yeah, I think it's amazing.

I'm forever grateful to HLS because they do this. But I think FAS and some of the other schools, I'll send the book of the materials to the ATC, which is the Assistive Technology Center [OVERLAPPING] so they outsource. I think that we try to do as much as we can in-house. Obviously, there are times in which I need a little help and that I can trust my colleagues at the ATC, to assist with conversions.

In the process, would you or would the accessibility group know ahead of time, for example the Admissions Office, you tell we have these students coming this year. Did you requests that we might find and then the students were going to contact accessibility for what they need for the programs and how does that work?

I think we tend to check in with Admissions first.

Just to have a heads-up in terms of preparation that you need.

But I also think that there is some value in having the owners on the student to actually to make contact with us and say, "I'm coming. Here's what I've used in the past. This is what I will need support with." Because it gives the students that sense of, I'm going to be a stakeholder in my own education and getting, and I'm going to make sure that I advocate for myself to what I need.

That's really good. I know that you also helps with note-takers.

Yes.

Can you explain the process? What is a note-taker? What does it take to become a note-taker? What the student does and what's the service for that?

Note-takers are an academic accommodation that some students are eligible for based on their neuralgia process, which is comprised of their medical documentation and how the answer certain questions and their own story. We offer student note-takers as a supplement to the student's own notes. Basically, if you think of it like, oh, the student is taking their own notes would be like riding a bike, but the student note-taker notes might just like the editor, the helper. They're not meant to be the main source of notes. They're just meant to supplement the student's own notes and basically we send out emails saying note-taker needed in X, Y, and Z classes and we ask students to submit samples of their notes and we review the samples. Sometimes we get a plethora of samples for one class. Sometimes samples are scans and we hire them through HR and the student note-takers distribute the notes to be a Listserv.

That's confidential, so the students who need notes are not going to be known whatsoever.

That is correct.

The students, they're going to be hired as a note-taker. They're going to have a salary and they are going to follow the policies of a 20 hours per week working as a note-taker in combination if they have a different job as well. It cannot go over 20 hours combined.

That is correct. They provide an amazing surplus because some students, as they're taking notes, they probably like, wow, I meant to write that down but I forgot to. Then as they're reading their notes and they see like, oh yeah, that was that point. Thank you. It's it's an amazing service.

For those who don't know in terms of I wonder if someone would say why someone, a student at HLS would need notes. Can you go over a little bit to what is the need there for someone that might judge and a sense of, I can see that if you are at HLS will still be needing notes.

Obvious.

What does it really mean in terms of that?

I think that students received notes for a number of reasons. They may have invisible disabilities like learning disability or ADHD, or they may have motor skill issues.

Anxiety.

Anxiety. They may be blind and want notes as just to supplement their own notes that they take in class. It reminds me of that saying that everyone is going through something, so never assume.

Yes.

That's why we try our best to hire quality note takers that can serve as the students that benefit most from them.

Provides such an important work, right?

Yes.

That's an interesting part of everything that you are seeing more and more recently maybe because it's becoming more common, should talk about it and bringing that conversation to life is the invisible disability.

Yes.

It's obvious for anyone who sees someone with mobility conditions there to say, oh, I understand why that person need accommodation.But you never know the range of invisible disabilities and the scope of everything that the person go through that would facilitate their lives so much in class and outside of the class. That's something that should be in a sense, more explored or told more. People understand more talked about, so people understand that, well, maybe you don't see what a person is going through so the fact that person asked for accommodations as for notes. It can have a range of reasons there that you still should be mindful and trying to accommodate as much as we can. That's fantastic because I know what do you do in that regards. The length of the process, what it is, starting from sending requests for notes for the class and you have an idea, is a good number of classes that there are requests because you have so many students.

I am sad that I don't have the number off the top of my head because I've stared at the spreadsheet, [LAUGHTER] for the past, however many hours, but I think there's at least 45 classes.

Forty five classes?

That we've had requests for and those are upper level classes.

Do you think that increased over time since we started until now, you think that there was an increase in terms of requests for note-taking?

Yes, I think that the requests for accommodations in general [OVERLAPPING] has grow exponentially.

The need is growing and I think it will continue to grow.

Another thing, sorry, changing slightly because I was really surprised with your history in terms of going to learn Braille and everything that you did. But I heard that you also speak German.

Oh, yes. My degree is in German and English and obviously that I realized from an early age that I have no talent or desire to ever have been an interpreter because it's really hard. Like I just, [LAUGHTER] my brain can't do that. It doesn't think like that. I lived in Germany for a year. I did a direct exchange with German university that was called Wesfalische Wilhelms Universitat, it's in Munster. My parents came to visit me and they don't speak any German and so they would look at me and I was like, "Oh God, I have no idea." I would just approximate what I thought the person said because my brain was just like, "Wow, this is slow." That was early on in my year. My German did get better, but still I didn't have the talent or the quickness of brains actually being an interpreter. It was just my brain.

But do you speak German?

I do. It's been years.

You stayed there for one year only?

I stayed there for one year only, but I started learning German when I was in eighth grade. Because my father's family is from Germany, and he would like, when we were growing up, pepper us with some German phrases and now when I think about it, I think he was actually mispronouncing some of the words. [LAUGHTER] I'm like, "Wow." Because I'd say something I'm like, "That's my daddy."

In your thoughts you were editing your father's conversation in German.

Absolutely.

Oh my.

My dad used to say this and I say. I don't think that's the same. [LAUGHTER] Maybe I'm mispronouncing it. I think obviously he was trying his best.

That's really cool. It's interesting because you like to choose. For me, I would say complicated languages because German, I think is really hard to learn. Then you go to Braille, then you are working with all this process, all these softwares and everything. For someone who thought that in the past, maybe I'm not that, I guess you we're ranging quite a number of good skills that you are working with.

Well, that's nice. Or I'm a Lower I like to do things complicated style. [LAUGHTER] Who knows? It's interesting. I think it's just like the commitment to lifelong learning, I guess, because it's always good to stay curious and it's always good to learn something new every day. I guess I didn't need to make things super complicated. But when you stop learning it's like nothing good ever happens when you stop learning.

Do you feel, or do you receive feedback from students on how important your work is?

I have received some nice words and how many volumes of those emails do I have printed out? JK, I don't have the volumes. [LAUGHTER]

But the nicest thing I've ever heard is that they were able to participate fully. I think that my style is, I followed the syllabi, but I like to work far enough ahead of the syllabi. If the student doesn't feel like reading on a particular day, they have that luxury because if they're sighted students don't want to do any reading. They have it all at their fingertips. They can choose to read or not read, and so I want to give the students who need support that same situation. I have it, but I don't feel like reading it. I don't think that's ever happened.

I know you for awhile we have worked together. I think you are very modest in the way that you talk about the work that you do. I really do think. I believe you know the importance of it. I know how important the support that you give to these students, how important it is. You as a person, is a wonderful person and I know a good friend of mine as well. I think your job is fantastic and if people didn't have a chance, I hope they got a little bit the scope of what you go through and how much, and the hours that you put through doing what you do. I just have to thank you. I would speak in terms of the students that you had and I have heard from them how important the job that you do as well. Thank you very much. Thank you for accepting to participate in this conversation, to come here. I know that you are shy like me. [LAUGHTER]

Absolutely. No, thank you for having me. I think this series is amazing. I think that it's so easy to get really ensconced in your own work and not really be able to enjoy your surroundings and the people, your coworkers. Hopefully I will be able to hear the stories of some other of my coworkers.

I hope this brings a little bit more engagement that people can say, "Now I know what Laurie does in accessibility." I know what the other person does in DOS or registrar's office or whatever department that you are going to be talking to. I hope that will bring more of our community engagement and make this a more fun way to talk to each other, trying to engage with each other. Thank you very much, Laurie. For everybody else, I will see you in our next episode and talk to someone in HLS to learn from them as well. See you then. Bye-bye. [LAUGHTER]

[MUSIC]