

## For Immediate Release

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## Katten Celebrates National Disability Employment Awareness Month

(CHICAGO) Katten announced today that human rights attorney and disability justice advocate Haben Girma, the first Deafblind Harvard Law School graduate, spoke at the firm's Perspectives Speaker Series in honor of National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

"We need to create spaces where all voices are valued regardless of whether it's a high-registered voice, whether there's an accent, whether one voices using signing or computer-assisted communication," said Girma. "It's up to all of us to create those spaces where all these voices are valued and treated with respect."

Using her Braille computer to read and responding by voice at the virtual event, Girma discussed how she believes disability is an opportunity for innovation, underscoring the importance of choosing to be more inclusive.

"We are thankful that Haben shared her unique perspective and powerful story with our firm community to increase our understanding of the value of diversity, and leading us to give thoughtful consideration as to how we can further foster an inclusive environment for everyone Katten," said Melanie Priddy, Katten's Chief Talent Officer.

At an early age, Girma was exposed to the assumptions and misconceptions that she couldn't go to school or wouldn't get a job because of her disability — which is what she referred to as ableism, the misbelief that people with disabilities are inferior or incompetent compared to people without disabilities.

Although she did not plan to become an attorney, Girma built her career as an advocate fighting for people with disabilities, spurred by her experience in college when she could not access the printed cafeteria menu.

"I told myself, 'Big deal, it's just menus.' I tried really hard to just ignore the situation and tolerate it. But I was a vegetarian and it's hard to eat vegetarian when you don't have access to food information," she said.

She had asked the cafeteria manager to provide an accessible menu, but it was not until months later after she cited the Americans with Disabilities Act and said she would take legal action that the cafeteria provided menus in an accessible format.

“I had no idea how to do that. I was 19. I couldn’t afford a lawyer but I knew I had to try and do something,” Girma said. “The next year, there was a new blind student at the college and he had immediate access to the menus. That taught me when I advocate, even for seemingly small things like menus, it has an impact on other students.”

Since then, Girma has been named by President Obama as a White House Champion of Change. She received the Helen Keller Achievement Award, a spot on the *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list, and TIME100 Talks. She published her memoir, *Haben: The Deafblind Woman Who Conquered Harvard Law*, in 2019.

Inclusion is a choice, Girma said, and there’s more work to be done to make communities more inclusive. “When we choose inclusion, we role model it for everyone around us. It’s also for our future selves. Our bodies change as we age and we deserve dignity and access at every stage in our lives,” she said.

Katten is a full-service law firm with approximately 700 attorneys in locations across the United States and in London and Shanghai. Clients seeking sophisticated, high-value legal services turn to Katten for counsel locally, nationally and internationally. The firm’s core areas of practice include corporate, financial markets and funds, insolvency and restructuring, intellectual property, litigation, real estate, structured finance and securitization, transactional tax planning, private credit and private wealth. Katten represents public and private companies in numerous industries, as well as a number of government and nonprofit organizations and individuals. For more information, visit [katten.com](http://katten.com).

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