

# Conjuring Up Courage

## #97

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Imani Barbarin

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**Shohreh Davoodi:** You are listening to episode #97 of Conjuring Up Courage. Y'all, today's guest is an icon! She's brilliant, and she's funny, and she doesn't pull any punches—it is the incredible Imani Barbarin, also known as Crutches and Spice on social media. Born with cerebral palsy, Imani is a disability rights and inclusion activist and often uses her platform to speak from the perspective of a disabled Black woman. Imani and I spoke about her use of humor to turn the tables on able-bodied folks, the need for intersectionality in disability justice, better accessibility in the queer community, and plenty more.

To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to [shohrehdavoodi.com/97](http://shohrehdavoodi.com/97). That's [shohrehdavoodi.com/97](http://shohrehdavoodi.com/97).

[Music plays]

This is Conjuring Up Courage, and I'm your host, Shohreh Davoodi. As a self-trust coach, I help people come home to themselves, so they can be more of who they are, and less haunted by who they think they're supposed to be.

I created this podcast to celebrate what's possible when you commit to being brave. You'll hear from diverse guests who are refusing to let fear and self-doubt stop them from building fulfilling lives and creating a better world for everyone. I'll also teach you my favorite tools, strategies, and mindset shifts so you can do the same.

Consider this your invitation to stop living according to "shoulds" and to step into your motherfucking magic instead. Stay open, get curious, and let's grow together.

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[Music fades]

Imani, welcome! I have been a fan of your work for such a long time, and I'm so thankful you've made time for our conversation today.

**Imani Barbarin:** Thank you for having me, I'm excited to be here.

**Shohreh:** So for anyone who has not yet been graced by your presence on the internet, and like, who is that, honestly? But assuming that they're out there, can you start by telling me a little bit more about who you are and what makes you want to get out of the bed in the morning?

**Imani:** Yeah, so my name is Imani Barbarin. I'm a disability rights advocate. I'm also a podcaster, writer, social media—I guess you could say influencer. I'm trying to get used to that word [Shohreh laughs lightly], I don't know what it means. And I use social media to talk about disability and advocate for the disability community as well as share my own experiences being a disabled Black woman.

**Shohreh:** Amazing. And I love your content so much. It is really fucking funny. I laughed my ass off watching your recent TikTok video using Lil Nas X's new song "Montero," so thank you for that.

**Imani:** Thank you.

**Shohreh:** [Laughs lightly] I would love to know more about the role that humor plays in your life and what it's like getting to create that yourself as a disabled person versus seeing yourself as the butt of the joke in mainstream media.

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**Imani:** Yeah, so I think humor is incredibly important 'cause I feel like there's so many devastating experiences that happen in a disabled person's life. And I think what the world's not ready to hear is that when disabled people think of humor, like non-disabled people are the butt of the joke [Shohreh laughs lightly]. And so often we usually see media representations where disabled people are the butt of the joke, and so I like to be able to flip that on its head and be like, no, you all are weird, and goofy, and it doesn't make any sense the way you treat us.

So yeah, I like to be able to kind of put non-disabled people on edge and kind of make them rethink the way that we think of them 'cause it's more important than what they think of us, in my opinion.

**Shohreh:** Yes, you do have the famous hashtag #AblesAreWeird, right?

**Imani:** They are, they're very weird. Like, [laughter] I'll literally be out in public and somebody will come up to me and just be like, "I was having the worst day and then I saw you." And I'm like, I don't know you at all [Shohreh laughs]. And people just think it's normal 'cause they kind of lose all sense of decorum when it comes to disabled people, so that's like really strange to us. I like to be able to highlight those moments.

**Shohreh:** Yeah, so it's like this idea that abled people are taught that disabled people, like, it's just an amazing, incredible inspiration for you even to be like out as part of humanity, when you're just going about your daily life, maybe you're getting food or going to the grocery store or something, and people are *shocked* by this.

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**Imani:** Oh yeah, and like, it's funny 'cause it depends on who's passing as disabled and who's not. So my partner passes as non-disabled sometimes, 'cause if you're looking closely at him, you can see he has a disability, but a lot of times people will gravitate towards me to ask me invasive and weird questions and make weird comments.

So, I remember I was walking into a building, and this woman was sitting on a bench, and I was like, "Oh, hi, how are you?" 'cause I'm polite and I'm a nice person. [Shohreh laughs] And this woman just like looks me up and down and she's like, "Better than you." I was like, it's noon! It's noon! Like, this—it's too early in the day for this. And my boyfriend was about to fight her, and he's like, I've never gotten anything like this. I don't understand how you just put up with it. And I'm like, I don't. It's just a thing that happens so often, like how can you fight every single time? I like to use humor to kind of address those moments.

**Shohreh:** And I think that TikTok and other forms of social media have been really great for people to be able to see disabled folks like, making humorous stuff, living their lives, like, being people. Because unfortunately, the media does a terrible job of showing that and normalizing the fact that there are disabled folks all around us in society—like you said, sometimes it's visible, sometimes it's not. And so I think that's like one of the really positive things about social media, is giving y'all reach. But I also have to imagine there's probably some dark, negative sides to it too, in terms of just the shit that you get on social media that you have to deal with.

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**Imani:**

Oh yeah, it's fuckin' wild. Like there are times when people will comment the most absurd things on my TikToks that have nothing to do with what my TikTok was about or, you know, my content regardless of the platform. And people like to body shame disabled people a lot, or be like, I wouldn't date you. And disabled people are like, nobody asked to date you, like who are you this random person on my comments? And so there's this idea that because we're on social media, people can say whatever they want to us, which isn't really that much different from our actual lives.

So I feel like there's a lot of disabled people that take it in stride. But there's a lot of people that are really harmed by the constant barrage of put-downs and people just not valuing who we are. And then also with the pandemic, just watching people consistently devalue our lives, you know, as we're living through this very devastating and scary time. So I feel like those moments were more devastating to me than people commenting 'cause people will act like jackasses regardless. But watching people actually take action to harm my community, that was harder.

**Shohreh:**

Yeah, because you have this juxtaposition of, of course the people who are not taking the pandemic seriously and who are going out and partying and doing whatever else, not wearing masks, etcetera. And then you also have the other side of this, which is people asking for and getting accommodations that disabled people have been asking for a very long time, but now that everybody needs them, suddenly they're available and they can be paid for.

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**Imani:** Yeah, and you know, because industry always has to work, right? The economy always has to chug forward. But when it comes to disabled people who are genuinely just trying to get through their day, or get a job, or get accommodations, people kind of force us to say like, oh, well I'm gonna be a productive disabled person. I'm gonna be the one that overcomes their disability. But when we actually ask for accommodations to do the things that we wanna do and to be "productive members of society," people fail to provide those. And so, when it's a pandemic, everybody needs it, then all of the sudden those things become widely available. It's really frustrating to watch.

**Shohreh:** And one of the things that is always amazing to me is that, of course, the more accessible that we make things, the better it is for literally everybody, and we've seen this so much throughout the pandemic. And yet, like you said, it takes the capitalism piece of like, uh oh, we need to keep the economy moving and making money, for people to even consider it. And it's like, had you done these things long, long ago, it would have been better for everybody.

**Imani:** Oh right, and not only that, but it would have fostered a culture where the pandemic wouldn't have been that bad, in my opinion. Like if we'd made things accessible and kind of really valued human life as a society and valued community and providing accommodations for our community, I don't think the pandemic would be where it is right now. I wholeheartedly believe that. Because a lot of the things about disability justice is that it fosters a sense of community and community care that we don't foster enough as a society to begin with. So I wholeheartedly

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believe that we would be in a much better place if we fostered those values.

**Shohreh:**

And I think we've even seen that with the countries who have done a better job of that than the U.S. and other countries that have not even tried or had very poor leadership in this, where the countries who really took this seriously and were thoughtful about accessibility and taking care of everybody were able to like, kind of open back up and go back to some more of a "normal life." Whereas here, it's like every second I turn around, I feel like it's spiraling out of control again.

**Imani:**

[Laughs lightly] Yeah, and it's very much so a dog-eat-dog society, and then people turn around and wonder, well, you know, why don't you love America like it loves you? It's like, does it really love me? Or [laughs lightly], does it profit off of me and convince me that it does love me because I'm spending money to be here? Like we spend money on things and think that we love them, when in reality, we're just trying to invest our time and space into it. And we do the same thing with our country too. And so I think that it's been really, really hard to watch all of this stuff happen.

I think that that's been the hardest part about this pandemic has been watching people flout vaccine rules and accommodations. And then people playing around with the ADA, which bothers me, 'cause there were people who genuinely could not wear masks, and the politicization of that just made them feel like they were asking for too much by saying, "I can't wear a mask. I need reasonable accommodation," and

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people not believing them. It's been a whirlwind of a year [laughs lightly].

**Shohreh:** Mm. That is such a good point. I honestly hadn't even thought about how people making this, I'm not gonna wear a mask for essentially a made-up health reason is taking away from the folks who really and truly cannot wear them.

**Imani:** Yeah, and you know, I think that disability justice requires like a lot of nuance. And I feel like when we think of things as black or white, as disabled or not, and people kind of play around with these laws, it trivializes them and it makes disabled people feel like we can't ask for things because people have taken it to an extreme and use it for their benefit. Now, and that's not to say that there's some people with invisible disabilities who may not be comfortable disclosing their disability and not wearing masks, but there was a lot of politicization to begin with as soon as people started asking that the public wear masks.

**Shohreh:** Well, and speaking of nuance, I think that one of the things you speak and write about so well is what it's like living at various intersections and how you can't separate out your disability from other aspects of your personhood, like being a woman or being Black. And I'm wondering, what are some of the ways that you've noticed that people tend to overlook intersectionality in these different spaces, particularly in disability justice?

**Imani:** I think that the disability community has gotten better about talking about race, which I'm grateful for. But there's still a lot of aspects to it

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that we don't necessarily claim. A lot of the time, it usually comes in the form of white disabled people trying to relate to something that really has nothing to do with them. Or like, because social media is so public, Black disabled people have to use social media to communicate with one another because our existences are so isolated to begin with.

And so, simply posting something publicly that is dedicated to Black disabled people is really hard 'cause you get white disabled people saying, "Oh, that's ableist," and "I don't claim that. I'm not one of those white people," and it really was a conversation between Black people. And I think that there's this need for white disabled people to consistently take up space in disability conversations because they're the ones that are most represented as being disabled. And in my opinion, I think that it comes from this supremacist idea that when a white person has a disability, it is a fall from grace, so to speak, of being able to exercise the fullness of white privilege.

When we have conversations around disabled BIPOC and people of color, you'll get this dynamic where we have to kind of wait until [laughs lightly] white disabled people have had their turn saying something before we have a conversation between each other. And it's gotten to the point where Black and brown disabled people are like, forget it, we're just gonna do our thing and talk to one another because we're the only ones who can relate to one another on this level. Because even within our own racial communities, disability is not really a topic of discussion. We're basically our own group and our own community, and we have to be out of necessity.

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**Shohreh:** I see this across a lot of different marginalized groups. Like for me, I'm thinking of the LGBTQIA+ community, where in our community, so often it's like the white male gays who are [laughs lightly] demanding the most attention and who are talking. And there's this idea of like oh, well, if you're queer, then like you can't be insert other thing. We'll say white supremacist in this case, right, where it's like oh, well you have a marginalized identity, thus you cannot commit harm. And that is not how that works [laughs lightly].

**Imani:** Yeah, no, and people get away with that at every axis. There's even this idea that like, being a queer woman myself, I feel like as part of the queer community there's this idea of like, pretty politics, and not wanting to build accessibility for disabled queer people, and not wanting to be inclusive of disabled queer people because we are not what is traditionally thought of as desirable. So people think that oh, this community cannot be ableist, but I mean it's built into it. You know, and you think about all the racial dynamics too and the queer dynamics, a lot of homophobia and racism is tied to tying disability to an othered identity, tying disability to definitions of what it means to be queer and what it means to be Black.

And so there is a history behind it. But what I always tell people is you can't help what happened in the past, but it is your responsibility to change it going forward. And so that's always how I look at it, is, you know, make sure that you're being inclusive of our community. You have no choice. We are a part of you, whether you want to believe it or

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not, and you can become one of us regardless of what you think your plans are gonna be tomorrow [laughs lightly].

**Shohreh:** I'm actually curious for the queer community in particular, do you have thoughts on what accessibility can look like in our community? Or maybe some of the main ways that our community is failing with that right now?

**Imani:** So, even tying it back to the pandemic, I think one of the things that has been quite remarkable is how many cultural events have been able to be held online. Living in a marginalized identity, there's a lot of marches, there's a lot of organizing that takes place in person, but we've seen that the same thing can be replicated in digital spaces. And queer communities need to build that out for the long-term.

We really need to create digital spaces that are commensurate with in-person spaces, build spaces that are community-builders. Making sure that pride marches are accessible, making sure that the conversation includes disabled people and disabled advocates. Planning accessibility from the beginning and not as an add-on or extra later. And I think that there are some people that are coming to terms with that, but I feel like it's never quick enough for me. In the back of my mind I'm like, well the ADA has been a thing for 30 years, so.

**Shohreh:** Right.

**Imani:** [Laughs lightly] Yeah, and like, we try to coax them out of their shell and be like, this is the accessibility that we demand and we need it. And people are like, "Well, we don't have the funds." Well, you can

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fundraise for the funds. "Well, we don't know the culture." Well, there's disabled people in the room, so just ask us.

**Shohreh:** I mean, even beyond funds, I think about time. Like I think about the many people on TikTok, or Instagram, or whatever who don't bother to caption their videos and very basic things like that, or add the alt image text in, even though Instagram now has this built-in feature. And the biggest complaint is people are like, oh, well it takes a lot of time. Well, yeah, it takes time, and also that's how you are accessible. Like, if you're going to have an account, if you're going to have thousands of people who follow you, like this is the least that you can do so that everyone can enjoy your content.

**Imani:** Well, I always ask people like, is your community worth it, you know? Is your community worth your time? And if you're gonna spend time building community in online spaces, at least build out the time to make sure that it's accessible to them. And I'll be honest, like my first couple TikTok videos didn't have captions 'cause I simply did not know how to use the stickers or whatever.

**Shohreh:** Right [laughs lightly].

**Imani:** But as soon as I figured it out, I figured it out, and I was like, let me continue to do this. And I feel like people think of it as it's this cutesy thing to just be nice and kind to disabled people, when in reality, 25% of the population has a disability. And if you're queer, you're more likely to be disabled. That's the end-all, be-all, of it, is if you are queer and you experience medical homophobia, you experience people constantly

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debating your access to healthcare, marriage, to benefits, to things like that. So you are automatically more vulnerable to becoming disabled. So why don't we think of this as an intersectional issue, rather than people just being nice to disabled people? No, your community itself needs it!

**Shohreh:** Yes, oh my gosh, thank you for saying that. That's such a good point there about how because of the way that queer folks are treated by the medical establishment, even more likely to end up disabled at some point in your life. Of course, any of us can end up disabled at any point in our lives. So this idea that we have as a society of like, well this is the other, and we're over here and this is normal, is such bullshit. It's like no, that is not how that works.

**Imani:** Mmhmm. And it's really disturbing to me like just how often we think of these groups as separate groups. We're not separate. Like, we are part of every single group. Yes, there are gonna to be cis women versus trans women and straight people versus queer people, and there's gonna be like this dynamic where we're constantly "at each other's throats" and kind of jockeying for the same resources, but that is a lie. There are enough resources to go around and people keep telling us that there's not enough. And so we keep thinking that we're in competition with each other when we could be in collaboration with each other. And that's the spirit that I hope goes forward after this pandemic, is the spirit of collaboration.

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**Shohreh:** Mm. Yeah because it's the dominant culture that teaches us that there's only so much for y'all, and so you have to fight with each other for the scraps of what you're allowed to have.

**Imani:** Right, exactly. And I feel like we are in a better place than we were before the pandemic, just in terms of understanding just how many of these systems work together and how we are not each other's competition and we could be working with one another.

**Shohreh:** I love that. I wanna go back to what you said too about desirability and this sort of idea of disabled folks, particularly in the queer community, as undesirable. And you also mentioned when you were talking about your TikTok about how you would get comments from people about being like, well, I don't wanna date you.

First of all, I'm sure you don't wanna date that person either [laughs lightly], but I know that this is something that people just cannot get their heads around in terms of the disability community, of like, that disabled people date. Disabled people have sex. Disabled people are sexy. Again, it's the othering. It's the like, oh no, this is the undesirable, we don't want that.

And I think there's a lot of media involved in this as well, of course, of what we're taught of like, this is the one desirable thing. And if we're talking about intersectionality too, then you add on the other pieces of that of queerness, of Blackness, of fatness, and then all of the sudden it's like, oh, well that's not something that we wanna date. And oh, not

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only that, but we're gonna tell you that because the most important thing about you is your fuckability.

**Imani:** Oh yeah, and like, we want you to know that we don't like you, would never date you. Like it'll be a TikTok on like, *The Office* or something like that, and they'll be like, I would never date you. I'm like, who are you, first of all?

**Shohreh:** This wasn't a dating app [laughs lightly].

**Imani:** Right, like nobody asked for your opinion on whether I like myself. You're right, you know, media plays like a heavy role in this. And I remember my very first essay in my media studies class in college was about *The Sopranos* and about this episode of this amputee woman who was having an affair, I guess, with like Tony Soprano. This idea that she did not like him as a person but was still sleeping with him. And I read the shit of that essay [Shohreh laughs]. I was like, this is amazing. 'Cause it was the first time that I really contextualized the fact that my life is very much so ruled by media representations of disability and just how much of media representations people are parodying with me in everyday life.

Like, I read that essay and was like, *holy shit*. Like people do this to me with no introduction. They'll do it regardless. And so, I loved that essay 'cause it kind of explained so much of my life to me that nobody could talk to me about because my parents didn't grow up in disability culture or grow up around disability discussions.

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So, like you said, media plays a heavy role, and when we talk about desirability and who wants to be loved, disabled people are usually last. And also Black women are usually last. And when you consider the fact that like, Black women are some of the most likely people to become disabled, a lot of things start clicking into place.

People will always say to disabled people—they'll let us know that you are supposed to be in this place. I'm gonna put you in this place, and you cannot exit this box at all. In a lot of ways, the system actually confirms this bias about disability because marriage equality is not really a thing for disabled people either. So when I was a little girl looking for disabled couples, who was marrying disabled people? Where could I look up to these couples and these individuals dating and things like that? I literally couldn't because the system literally forced them to remain legally single.

So there's this like amalgamation of different factors that kind of erased disability from the conversation about dating and desirability, even though we know factually that, like I said, a quarter of us have a disability. Like it's unrealistic to think that the entire disability population is single and sitting at home just pining over regular people [laughs lightly]. No, we're out there dating. We're making sure that our date spots are accessible. We're making sure our fuck spots are accessible too. And people just cannot wrap their minds around it. They do not like that idea at all [laughs lightly].

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**Shohreh:** And I also feel like when people are wrapping their minds around it, it's like what you were saying earlier. It's like with the perverse comments of like, "Well how do you do it?" and shit like that.

**Imani:** Yeah. I remember in high school some kid sitting next to me was like—there were two disabled kids in my English class, and this kid would come up to me like, can so and so have sex? And I was like, are you interested in them? Like go ask them. [Shohreh laughs] Why are you asking me? And also, the idea that like, they would never ask me directly 'cause they already automatically knew that I was undesirable.

So it's such a complex issue, and I feel like disabled people are like, I don't care what you think about me. I'm sexy, I'm gonna be dating regardless. But I do think it does put a lot of disabled people in some very predatory situations because nobody talks about sex and disability. Nobody talks about sex and consent with disabled people either. Nobody really talks about reproductive health, or STIs, or predatory dating with disabled people. And a lot of people think that we're in healthy situations sometimes when we're not.

I think a disproportionate amount of disabled women are in abusive relationships that they can't get out of. It's hard to find an apartment that's accessible. And then the idea too that you found somebody that loves you, this is how they're gonna treat you 'cause you're not gonna find anybody else 'cause nobody loves you.

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So yeah, there's so many complex issues when it comes to disability and dating that people don't even think of, and the erasure is, I would say it's literally killing us.

**Shohreh:**

That sex education point is so important 'cause I'm thinking about how again, queer folks have been fighting and trying to get ourselves included in basic sex education. We just attempted to do this in Texas and it failed. So no, we will literally not be mentioned in sex education in public schools.

Even more than that is that I bet very few sex education courses mention disability at all, have any consideration of this. And this is, again, what you were saying about how it's the afterthought, right? Nobody is even thinking on the front end of well, let's make this as inclusive as possible and see what are the things that we need to include on this topic. Instead, it's disabled folks on the back end saying, hey, you forgot us, *again*.

**Imani:**

Another aspect to it is that like, there is a lot of predatory behavior towards disabled people because people know or think that we're "desperate." But also [laughs lightly], on the flip end, there are people that think that whoever is with us is a predator to begin with because we're disabled and they don't think that we can give consent. And talking about those things in sexual education is so necessary. But people often skip consent to begin with.

So I think that every aspect of society needs to be more inclusive of disabled people, it's just getting non-disabled people out of our way

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'cause we could do it ourselves, to be honest [laughs lightly]. It's just making sure that non-disabled people get out of their feelings about how they think we should conduct our lives so that we can talk to one another and keep each other safe.

**Shohreh:** I briefly want to return to what you said about marriage equality too, because I think this is actually something that a lot of people don't know about how the way that disability payments in the United States are structured is that a lot of disabled folks can't get married because essentially, they'll lose their benefits.

**Imani:** Yes. I believe it's on SSI specifically that if you combined incomes and those assets total more than \$3,000 a month for a married couple, you don't have access to things like healthcare, SNAP benefits, a lot of different programs state by state. And technically there's like a different threshold for every state in terms of finances, but it's around \$3,000 nationwide. And so if you get married, you can lose access to your benefits, and you can even lose access to your benefits for just living with somebody. And at one point, social security was mining the social media accounts of disabled people because they looked too happy to be disabled and were kicking them off.

**Shohreh:** What?!

**Imani:** Oh, I'm not kidding. It was a real thing.

**Shohreh:** I did not hear about that. Oh my god.

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- Imani:** Yeah, like social security was going through disabled people's social media accounts to see if they were smiling too much, or doing too many outdoor activities, and looking too happy because they thought that if you were too happy, you couldn't possibly need healthcare. Which is like, how did you get from point A to point Z in one move? That makes no sense!
- Shohreh:** Social security has too much time on their hands, clearly.
- Imani:** Yeah, and so people would get kicked off of social security and lose their healthcare because of ridiculous things like that. And for those who don't know, over the last ten years, 100,000 people have died applying for social security benefits because it's such a laborious process. Most people get denied their first time, and it can take years. And once you do get a lawyer, they can garnish some of your back pay that social security owes you. And I keep bringing up the pandemic, and I'm so sorry [laughs lightly].
- Shohreh:** No, it makes sense.
- Imani:** People prior to the pandemic were always saying, you can just go on disability and you'll be fine. Like, that was never a thing that happened [laughs lightly]. We've struggled with disability services as a nation for decades. And it's not that easy, and I fear that the system is gonna be overtaxed and people are gonna be really shocked by what they find.
- Shohreh:** Well, and again, this is the idea that we have in the U.S. of like [lamenting] oh, there's all these people just taking advantage of the government and stealing money from the government and they're just

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so lazy and they just sit at home. [Normal voice] And it's like, it is really freaking hard to get benefits, to keep your benefits. Like, it is not just this like, oh, Papa Joe Biden's handing me money!

**Imani:** Oh yeah, like people think you're just getting handouts because there's like a handful of cases where people are like, oh, they cheated the system. I would much rather be lied to as to why somebody needs benefits than to ignore somebody who genuinely needs it, if you know what I'm saying.

**Shohreh:** Yeah.

**Imani:** I would rather believe somebody who is lying than not believe somebody who is not. And people don't get that. You know, people are dying because of a lack of access to these services. And it's sad because we have this idea that we're exceptional because we're Americans and everything's taken care of, and it's not. Like not at all. And there are a ton of advocates and a ton of service agencies that are doing the best that they can, but we need to do better by our disabled citizens, especially after so many people are going to be disabled from COVID-19.

**Shohreh:** I literally have a friend who, they got married, tax season came around, and they were having to debate whether or not to get divorced because there was this possibility of losing benefits once they went and saw a CPA and stuff like that. I mean, this is like a real thing that is happening to people every day.

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- Imani:** Oh yeah, and I'm waiting for the article that's like post-pandemic that says there is an increased rate of divorce after people were forced to live together for a year. I'm like, that's not gonna be the reason. You're gonna have to dive a little bit deeper. It's gonna be because of disability.
- Shohreh:** Well, and there's anything I've learned from following folks with a variety of disabilities and hearing their stories directly from them, it's that disability is not a one-size-fits-all identity. And of course there's crossover in experiences, but disabled people have different access needs, have different caring needs, etcetera. And I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on how non-disabled folks can better understand that and kind of stop generalizing about the disability community.
- Imani:** You know, it's funny [laughs lightly]. So like, I always say this phrase, like, everybody wants to be their own special snowflake until it comes to disabled people, and then you're comparing to us to somebody you saw on the CW looking at their phone who is blind. Like, what? And I think that we have this idea, like you said, that media representations very much so shape how we think about disability. And so, what I tell people is think of accommodations as like a Cheesecake Factory menu—and this is no endorsement of the cheesecake I just had last night.
- Shohreh:** [Laughs lightly] But wait, which cheesecake did you get?
- Imani:** Oh! I got Adam's Peanut Butter Cup, like an Adam's Ripple Peanut Butter Cup. I'm obsessed with peanut butter.
- Shohreh:** Nice.

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- Imani:** It's been a lifelong love affair.
- Shohreh:** I usually get the white chocolate raspberry.
- Imani:** Ooh, okay, okay. Yeah.
- Shohreh:** It's legit.
- Imani:** We have one like right around the corner from me, and it's a problem, to be honest.
- Shohreh:** [Laughter] An important interruption.
- Imani:** No, no, it really is because I just had it last night, so it came to mind fairly quickly.
- Shohreh:** Perfect analogy. Alright, continue.
- Imani:** Yeah, so you think about accessibility as a Cheesecake Factory menu, where you have as many options as possible that as many people can choose from as possible for any one event. And I think a lot of people like to plug and play one or two accommodations and think that that's it, but because we have so many different access needs as a community, it doesn't really fit everybody.
- For example, I used to travel a lot, before the end times [Shohreh laughs lightly], and I would go to hotels, and the front desk would always ask me, do you want an accessible room? And I'd always have to ask them, do you mean an accessible roll-in shower or an accessible shower with a tub? Because an accessible bathroom for a wheelchair user is actually dangerous to me as a crutch user. And there's like

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conflicting accessibilities as well, where a wheelchair user has a roll-in shower that has no barrier on the edge of it, meaning the water could flow out of that tub and I could slip on it because I'm not somebody that uses a wheelchair. [Laughs lightly] Whereas if I use a tub with some grab bars, I'm much safer than if I were to use a wheelchair access bathroom.

So, yeah, little things that like that people wouldn't normally think of that disabled people contend with who are in groups together. And always check in with people who are in your group as to what their accommodations are, and you can help them find spaces that are best to accommodate them—and create that space as well.

**Shohreh:**

Yeah, I think checking in is so important 'cause I think, even imagining, right, like the giant Cheesecake menu as it is for some people at the Cheesecake Factory, it can be overwhelming. People are like, but if there's so many things, it can be like, I'm gonna fuck up. How can I possibly accommodate everybody? And it's like well, you can't, but you're not necessarily in every situation trying to accommodate literally every person, you're trying to accommodate whoever it is that is your audience, or who is at your event, or at your establishment, whatever it may be. And so, I agree with what you said, and I think that's an important thing that all of us can be doing, is if you're running a group or an event or something like that, like asking people when they sign up, do you have any accommodations needs? And then go from there.

**Imani:**

And ask everybody! One of the things that's an issue too is that people will try to single out the one or two disabled people that they know are

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disabled to ask them if they need accommodations. But there are so many people with invisible disabilities that may not feel comfortable disclosing those disabilities that may feel awkward about asking for accommodations. So if you make accessibility the standard, then everybody is included. And if you make accessibility something you ask everybody, no one person is singled out.

**Shohreh:** Yeah. I mean, I'm someone who has ADHD, and so, I do talk about it a lot publicly, but it is otherwise an invisible disability. And it's one of those things where it's like, I'm not in school anymore, and I didn't find out I had ADHD until after, but I know that had I known at the time, that I would have been like ugh, is it even okay for me to ask for accommodations? Like, am I being like a little special snowflake or something like that? That is something that can be really difficult for a lot of folks who have invisible disabilities. My friends who are autistic, where people are like, but ya look fine! You feel like it's a burden to even ask.

**Imani:** Yeah, and I think people are getting more hip to making sure—I just sounded like my mom [Shohreh laughs], more hip to, anyways—I think people are coming around to this idea that accessibility is for everybody. I mean, even on TikTok, like the amount of videos I see that are labeled Life Hacks that really just started in the accessibility section [Shohreh laughs lightly] should be an indicator [laughs lightly] to everybody that accessibility is good for everybody. I hope that people build an accessible culture and make sure that they understand that people are disabled that they may never have known were disabled.

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**Shohreh:** And I think one thing that I've learned from running a business is one of the keys you've already mentioned, which is thinking about these things on the front end, baking it into the business in everything that I do instead of seeing it as this like extra, right? Instead of seeing it as like, oh, well, how am I gonna find the money to do that or the time to do that? And it's, no, these are part of your core business practices to do these things.

**Imani:** And I would even double down too. Like, unless you're working with somebody, unless you know that there's a plugin or something like that, it's nobody else's job to make your content accessible for other people. And the amount of brands that like have reached out to me and they're like, oh, well, we never thought about A, B, or C, I'm acting as consultant as well as them trying to use my platform as an influencer, is ridiculous because they don't provide alt text for their photos. 'Cause if you're sending me a photo that you want me to boost on my platform, I'm not gonna post it if it doesn't have alt text or an image description attached to it. 'Cause I don't know what you were thinking—well, that sounds rude [light laughter]. But there's some contextual things that you probably thought about when you chose that photo that I wouldn't think of that you would want to attach to that photo when I post it. So include it! Why is this all on us?

**Shohreh:** Yeah, it's that extra burden where you're also having to like, teach people, but you're only getting paid for like the one part of the job. You're not also [laughs lightly] getting paid for the consulting work.

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**Imani:** Right, and you're just like, oh, okay [laughs lightly]. Like you all need to get on it. And I think that some brands are better at it than others, but I think everybody kinda needs a wake-up call. And I try to not approach it from a capitalistic sense of, point of view, but the disability community has like \$450 billion in disposable income that people just never advertise towards. And it's not that they don't know how, there's tutorials everywhere, but you have to be willing to do it.

**Shohreh:** Yeah, you do have to be willing to do it. And congrats on your new representation, by the way. Super exciting.

**Imani:** [High-pitched voice] Thank you so much, I'm so excited! [Regular voice] I'm very excited to be working with them. Like a disability-led company that understands my needs is invaluable to me. I've talked to some people in the past that didn't really get it. There are some people that approached me that were like, I'm doing this all for disabled people, and then when you asked them about like how they're structured, it didn't jive with how it works in the disability community. So I'm really, really glad to be working with somebody that's disability-led, disability-owned, and really knows our community very well.

**Shohreh:** Yeah, I think it's such an important thing to have those spaces. Both like working spaces, like in a professional area, and then also community spaces as well. I feel like there's still this kind of push, again, it's from dominant-identified people, who are like, well why should you get your own like special place? Isn't the whole point that everybody is equal? Blah, blah, blah. And it's like, no, everybody needs spaces where they know that they will be seen, where it is not safe but safer. And that's

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one of the things that drives me absolutely bananas, is like white people being like, oh, why do you need a Black-only space? Or straight people being like, why do you need a queer space? I'm like, because we do. Because of you. You're the reason we need the space.

**Imani:**

Right 'cause y'all are annoying. Y'all are annoying [laughter]. And like, you don't get it, and you're bothering me [Shohreh laughs]. Yeah, and I think it's really important, especially for disabled people. For every single group that disabled people encounter, there's some issue with talking to the disability community. And so I think that people are getting better at it, but I think it's really worthwhile to have somebody that understands it too, you know?

I'll mention the team at C Talent—they're doing an amazing job. They basically have snatched up like every single disabled, like, female-presenting person and queer person I know of, um, as well as Black women [laughs lightly]. So I think that's great, and which I'm very excited to be working with them. But yeah, like I think that it's really great that we have a space and have an advocate that's in entertainment and in all of these spaces for us.

**Shohreh:**

Yeah, I like to think of it as like, having a space to kind of take your armor off, where you're not just constantly on the defensive and like, who's gonna say something? Who am I gonna have to teach? What is the situation gonna be? And it's only when you're in those spaces that you realize how important they are because you're like, oh, I'm rarely actually relaxed [laughs lightly].

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- Imani:** Oh yeah, like the amount of times I'm on edge. Like at every single meeting, I'm like, [worried voice] oh, who's gonna say something problematic and then I have to be the one to teach them? [Shohreh laughs lightly] [Normal voice] And sometimes I let stuff slide simply because I'm tired. Like, I don't know, I feel like people expect advocates to be firing at all pistons every single moment of every single day, and like—
- Shohreh:** It's impossible [laughs lightly].
- Imani:** —I apologize, but I can't police everything because sometimes I just don't have the energy to. But yeah, I'm very excited 'cause I'm hoping to get more into acting and writing. My life's goal is to never center non-disabled people in disabled content ever again.
- Shohreh:** [Laughs lightly] I love this.
- Imani:** I do not care what they think. I mean, I care about their funding, but I do not care about what they think [laughter]. I'll pull a Mitch McConnell and be like, I don't care about what you think, but please open your purse strings for me.
- Shohreh:** Empty that wallet! That's fine. Good enough.
- Imani:** [laughs lightly] Exactly. What has it gotten the community, to be honest? What has constantly begging for people to keep us alive gotten us? Why would I center the opinion of somebody that would ask that of me and ask that of my community? No.

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**Shohreh:** No, absolutely not. Well, this has been so wonderful to talk to you, Imani. I really appreciate you being here. How can people find you, and how can my listeners best support you at this time?

**Imani:** Oh, great! So you can find me @crutches\_and\_spice on TikTok and Instagram. I'm also @Imani\_Barbarin on Twitter. And I have a Patreon too, it's Patreon dash—dash or slash? I don't know.

**Shohreh:** Slash?

**Imani:** ImaniBarbarin, and you can support my work there. And thank you all. And hopefully in the next couple of years I'll have a book coming out, so look out for that. I know you can't keep up with me for that long. Hopefully you'll make an appearance as soon as it comes time to buy the book.

**Shohreh:** That is right. Well, I will put links to all of that in the show notes. I'm also gonna link to your recent short movie that you did because I think everybody should see it and see some of the work that you're getting to do with your new representation.

**Imani:** Thank you. I'm very excited. That film is with Melanie Waldman; it's called *Couple's Therapy*. It's for the Disability Film Challenge, so please watch it. I'd really appreciate it.

**Shohreh:** Alright, y'all, you heard it from Imani—watch it, follow her. She's amazing. Thank you again, this was wonderful.

**Imani:** Thank you.

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[Music plays]

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[Music fades]