

DISABILITY RIGHTS CENTER - NH

64 N. Main St., Suite 2, Concord, NH 03301-4913 • advocacy@drcnh.org • drcnh.org
(603) 228-0432 • (800) 834-1721 voice or TTY • FAX: (603) 225-2077

Disability Unscripted 2020: Samuel Habib Interviews Representative Annie Kuster, **Democratic candidate for Congressional District 2** drcnh.org/videos/disability-unscripted-with-samuel-habib-annie-kuster-interview

Representative Annie Kuster: Samuel, hi, how are you?

Samuel Habib: Yes, hi, Representative Kuster. Thank you for taking some time for this interview.

AK: Absolutely happy to be with you, okay. Ready when you are Samuel.

SH: It is nice to see you again.

AK: Great to be with you.

SH: I'm Samuel Habib. I am 20 years old and I live in Concord. We will be sharing the video and text on social media before the election.

AK: Excellent.

SH: I use a communication device to communicate and have preprogrammed questions for the interview in advance. I can also speak, but it takes a lot of energy and it can be hard to understand me. Feel free to ask me to repeat myself if you do not understand me.

AK: Will do.

SH: I'd like to ask you about six issues that are important to people in the disability community, the budget, healthcare, special education, employment, housing and voting. Given projected shortfalls of state revenues, many States may be forced to make cuts to programs that support the health, safety, and independence of people with disabilities. What kind of solutions would you propose to ensure that people with disabilities are not disproportionately impacted by these budgetary deficits?

AK: Great question. Well, Samuel, let me just start by saying thank you for the interview. I'm so proud of the young man that you have become and just the incredible impact that you are having by being involved as a disability rights advocate. So thank you for that. I believe at a fundamental level at my core that men and women with disabilities deserve the exact same level of support and services as any other American. And COVID-19 has hit all of us hard, but particularly people with disabilities have been hit very hard partly because it's hard to access the support services they need, their caregivers and such, and partly looking forward the cuts that

DISABILITY RIGHTS CENTER - NH

64 N. Main St., Suite 2, Concord, NH 03301-4913 • advocacy@drcnh.org • drcnh.org
(603) 228-0432 • (800) 834-1721 voice or TTY • FAX: (603) 225-2077

you referenced in our budget. So let me start by saying, I support and have voted for the Heroes Act which is the bill we passed first in May and then again last week, that would have filled the hole in the state budget from not just the response to COVID, but also the lost revenue from the shutdown caused by the COVID pandemic. And so in New Hampshire, that's a lot of money. That's \$500,000 for the rooms and meals tax. When the hospitality and tourism dropped 90%, as well as also at the town level, real property taxes, if people are out of work and can't afford it. So all told the Heroes Act would have sent \$800 million to the State of New Hampshire. And I am very concerned about the budget cuts if that hole is not filled before the state legislature returns in January. We also had funding in both the CARES Act, which was the original the original pandemic response, and the Heroes Act to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars in support for Americans with disabilities. And we need to make sure that we have equal access to education, housing voting, and participating in the economy as a whole.

SH: COVID-19 has threatened to overwhelm the resources of medical providers to a point where doctors may be forced to choose which patients receive treatment and which do not. No one wants to limit medical care for COVID-19 patients, but plans need to be developed in case rationing becomes necessary. Currently an advisory committee is developing guidance for hospitals. What would you want to see included in this guidance?

AK: Well, first let me say we can provide sufficient funding as a society, as a country that we don't come to that. And just a few of the specifics from the CARES Act funding, for example, \$955 million for aging and disability programs funded through Health and Human Services, then 5.5 million in CARES funding for Community Development Block Grant. And then the Heroes Act had an additional 1.7 billion housing, nutrition, home care, staffing, tailored for individuals with disabilities. So I wanna start my answer by saying, I hope we never get to the point that you're referring to. We shouldn't have to, we have sufficient resources. But if we do get there, I wanna make sure that the voices of people with disabilities are at the table as any kind of rationing is being drafted so that we can make a collective community-wide decision. And I think it would be very difficult. I can't value one human life over another, whether it's age or disability or any other factor. There's no reason why we should give up on anyone.

SH: I have been included in regular classes since elementary school and that helped prepare me for college. What will you do to help kids with disabilities be included in regular education and college?

AK: So one of my big concerns is that what we call IDEA grants, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, is typically significantly underfunded, and I'm sure your classmates would attest that you were a valuable contributor to the classroom and that we should do more to bring out the best in everyone regardless of whatever challenges they may face. So I co-sponsored a bill called Keeping Our Promises to America's Children and Teachers, which establishes a 10-year plan to fully fund special education and education for people with disabilities. And just to give you an

DISABILITY RIGHTS CENTER - NH

64 N. Main St., Suite 2, Concord, NH 03301-4913 • advocacy@drcnh.org • drcnh.org
(603) 228-0432 • (800) 834-1721 voice or TTY • FAX: (603) 225-2077

example of that, in August, we had a grant to Keene State College, \$260,000 for a new program to serve 120 first generation low income students and students with disabilities who have a need for academic support and maybe pursuing STEM education. So I think people have value to our society, to our economy moving forward and whatever the challenges they may face for some people it may be physical challenges, for other people, it may be behavioral or mental health challenges, but everybody has something to offer. And I think what you and your generation have demonstrated to our society is how important it is that we not overlook anyone. I was recently watching a show about a young man with Asperger's and it turns out he's an extraordinary computer IT design person. I have a friend, a young man named Isaac, who's a close friend of our family with Asperger's, and he is an extraordinary artist in design. So people will have different talents that need to be recognized and valued in our society and in our economy.

SH: Do you think that the ADA and IDEA are being properly enforced in New Hampshire and nationally? And if not, what will you do to make sure that these laws are actually followed and enforced?

AK: So I think you have raised a very important question, and luckily for us here in New Hampshire, we do have strong organizations including the Disability Rights Center that will bring litigation, we'll address issues of accessibility. I remember writing Concord on the Main Street. We had property owners, land owners, businesses that were not accessible and people worked together to come up with a plan. And when we did the renovations on Main Street they were designed to make those shops much better in terms of accessibility for everyone. And by the way, you know, in your case, we can see because of your wheelchair that you have challenges with access, but I can just tell you as people age, you might not notice but people definitely have difficulty climbing stairs or they might have issues around balance that they need railings. All of these things need to be taken into account to make sure that all public accommodations are accessible for everyone. And so I do think that we should have resources at the federal level to support organizations like the Disability Rights Center in every community so that our entire society will be accessible to everyone.

SH: One in five Americans, including 19% of likely voters experience a disability. What will you do to help more people with disabilities get jobs?

AK: Well, I think it's really important again that we recognize the strengths that people have and that we put resources into accommodation in the workplace. My own disability as with any mother who has born a child was during pregnancy and I can tell you that you know, you definitely need some type of accommodation, particularly in the very late stages people have medical conditions. Lots of people need accommodation in the workplace. I think the society has changed a lot around that, and certainly the technology. The technology that you and I are using today to be able to communicate with each other is really important and we should put resources

DISABILITY RIGHTS CENTER - NH

64 N. Main St., Suite 2, Concord, NH 03301-4913 • advocacy@drcnh.org • drcnh.org
(603) 228-0432 • (800) 834-1721 voice or TTY • FAX: (603) 225-2077

into making sure that that's available and that businesses and nonprofits have access to grants so that they can make these accommodations in a way that's sustainable that they will be able to hire people with disabilities and pay them fairly.

SH: What efforts are you making to reach out and employ people with disabilities in your campaign and your staff?

AK: Well, that's a really good point. I think there's probably more that can be done. We have had a very wide range of people working in my official capacity, in my official office, in my campaign of the interns that work for us, and over the years, we've had a number of people that have had particular medical conditions whether they're short-term or long-term conditions that we have accommodated through scheduling, through time off, we've given people a family leave any number of times. And in sometimes it's been medical leave for as long as up to six months for people that required that accommodation if they had a particular medical, physical or mental behavioral health issue that needed to be addressed. So you can imagine it's private, I can't get into the specifics on particular employees, but suffice to say we have a very open and accommodating workforce and our staff motto is radical hospitality. We wanna make sure that anyone and everyone will feel welcome to join our team and to participate with us. One of the best stories, and this has been in the news, so I felt comfortable telling his story publicly. When I was growing up in Concord, my family was close to a young man named Frank, who was in the Laconia State School for children with mental health and just challenges. And then he was... my father was involved in his release and he lived in Concord with supported housing and supported employment and my father was his guardian. And later in life, when I ran for Congress, our paths crossed again. And Frank is an invaluable member of our team. And when we were able to be all together in an office over the last several cycles since this started in 2010, Frank comes into the office every day. He's been very helpful making signs and shredding and anything that he has the capacity to do and mainly what he does is bring tremendous good cheer to all of us and I'm really proud of his involvement in our campaign, and he's been, I guess you could say a star volunteer.

SH: What steps would you take to increase the availability of accessible housing for people with disabilities?

AK: That's another excellent question 'cause often that's one of the biggest barriers to people with disabilities being able to live in an independent way. So I'm a cosponsor of a bill that's called the Disability Integration Act which provides men and women with options for how support is provided either at home or in assisted living. Home-based care is often less costly and provides independence as I was saying for individuals with disabilities and it's something that... I can remember this is another short story, but when I was growing up in Concord, I was actually in junior high school, and we opened assisted living facility for people who had been discharged from the New Hampshire state hospital. When I was young, there were 3000 people living on the campus of the New Hampshire State Hospital on Pleasant street. And in the early 1970s, the

DISABILITY RIGHTS CENTER - NH

64 N. Main St., Suite 2, Concord, NH 03301-4913 • advocacy@drcnh.org • drcnh.org
(603) 228-0432 • (800) 834-1721 voice or TTY • FAX: (603) 225-2077

legislature passed legislation for people to live in the community closer to home and have supported housing and support services as well as mental health services in the community. And the population dramatically changed to the much smaller tertiary facility that we have now in Concord. And so I can remember going, my mother served on the board of, I think it was probably the precursor to Riverbend and we painted a house and got it all prepared for the people who were moving out of the State Hospital to move in and have supported housing right here in Concord. And that's something that I continue to support. In August, we announced funding through the Cares Act for \$2.2 million to housing authorities and agencies here in New Hampshire for the Housing Choice Voucher Program to help low-income disabled and elderly people afford safe and decent housing in the private market. So it's a good question and it's something I'm very passionate about and committed to.

SH: If accessible voting equipment was purchased with federal funding, it cannot be used in local or municipal elections. What steps would you take so that accessible voting equipment is available in every New Hampshire election including local elections?

AK: Thank you for that and it's very important. I was pleased to participate in the testing of the equipment here in my hometown Hopkinton in the last election, to make sure that everyone does have access to safe, secure, accessible voting. I'm a cosponsor of a bill called Protecting American Votes and Elections Act, and it provides \$250 million in grants to states and local municipalities for the purchase of the equipment that's needed for safe, secure, and accessible funding. And I believe that those grants would be eligible for state voting.

SH: Those are all the questions I have for you. Thank you so much for taking time to do this interview.

AK: It was a wonderful experience for me Samuel. I'm so proud of you. You have no idea. You've come a long way, congratulations.

SH: Thanks.

AK: I can remember when I first met you and it's great to be with you again. Thank you for doing this you're a wonderful advocate.

SH: Thanks.

AK: Be well, stay safe.