>> Tatiana: Welcome, everybody, thank you so much for participating and being here with us. You could have been anywhere in your house, but you're here with us. [ Laughter ] So, I want to --

>> Ryan: Hello? [ Laughter ] I love, like you could be anywhere, you could be in the living room. You could be -- you could.

>> Tatiana: But you're here with us.

>> Ryan: There are so many other Zooms you could be on. So many other Zooms.

>> Tatiana: My name is Tatiana Lee. I am Hollywood Inclusionist for RespectAbility. RespectAbility: we are a nonprofit organization that advocates so that people with disabilities can participate in all aspects of society. I have the pleasure of working as our Hollywood Inclusionist, which means I get to work on all fun things Hollywood inclusion. And that includes creating fun things for our community to participate in, which, this is the start of a series of awesome events we're going to be doing. Please sign-up. Yes. If you're not seeing an ASL interpreter, there is a button that says closed caption, click on that so that you can make sure that you can see the closed captions and then we also have an ASL interpreter. So, make sure that you're able to view all of those things. So, yeah. That’s just the captions. Okay. Okay. So, with that, we are going to be doing a series of events and things that you can participate in. We're starting out with this very, very fun one that I'm super excited to have, Ryan, thank you so much for joining us. I have a couple other housecleaning things. We, last year, hosted our RespectAbility summer lab - that was for entertainment professionals with disabilities. We had a great turnout last year. We are now taking submissions. So, if you want to participate - and we're taking it virtual, so last year you had to live in L.A. to participate. You don't now - you be anywhere and join us virtually, we’re gonna be able to have opportunities to network with so many industry executives and so many people in the industry, so make sure that you sign-up, and our deadline is Friday. And if you don't have your sign-up material or things that you need, whether a writing sample or an illustration that you're working on then just send us a note, myself or Lauren and let us know, and we'll still let you send your submissions later on, but let us know you want to apply. You have until Friday to do that. So, I'm gonna introduce our guest. We're starting this series of Zoom calls that we're gonna have, so, make sure you sign-up and check in to see when we will be having those - they’re all on our website at www.RespectAbility.org. And, this is Ryan O'Connell. He is a writer, producer and actor. And according to the GLAAD 2019/2020 “We Are On TV” report, while 2019 and 2020 television season included 27 characters with disabilities versus 18 in 2018 and 2019, that number still vastly under-represents actual numbers of people with disabilities; representing less than 1/6. Furthermore, while more than 1/3 of LGBTQ+ adults have a disability, GLAAD’s report found that there are too few LGBTQ characters with disabilities. Ryan O'Connell is helping to change that. His Emmy-nominated Netflix series "Special" premiered one year ago - actually a couple of days ago - and it broke new ground for representation of LGBTQ people and people with disabilities. Netflix has renewed this comedy series for a second season - and season one is available on Netflix, so if you’re bored and you just need something to watch, something good, check out "Special" if you haven't already - I binge watched it all of the way through. I promise you, you will not be disappointed. So, Ryan, thank you so much again for joining us. How are you?

>> Ryan: Thank you for having me. I'm good. You know, every day is a winding road… by Sheryl Crow. Yesterday I was like depressed for no reason Well, not for no reason, obviously, like society and the world, blah blah blah, and then, today I was just like plucky and full of life again. So. [ Laughter ] You never know how it’s gonna go - you never know.

>> Tatiana: Yeah, well I'm glad you're plucky and full of life for our audience. We have so many people - I got so many emails and calls and text messages of people saying how excited they were for this conversation so we're going to get right into it.

>> Ryan: Awesome.

>> Tatiana: And then, at the end, we’re gonna have an opportunity for question and answer, so there's a question and answer button if you want to ask questions. And yeah. And if you're having any other issues, hopefully, you're hitting the closed caption button so you can get the captioning. And - yeah. Thank you all so much for joining us. So, my first question is: you started out with writing your memoirs "I'm Special: And Other Lies We Tell Ourselves”; what inspired you to tell your story in that memoirs and why did you feel your story was important to tell?

>> Ryan: Well, I didn't initially, I mean - so I sold the book actually before any mention of cerebral palsy, like, my publisher did not know I had cerebral palsy - I basically pitched this book about 20-something - It was just like an Urban Outfitters, like, toilet book, do you know what I mean? Like, something you keep in the bathroom and you’re like, “this is fun, there’s pictures, there’s graphs - I love a pie chart.” And so I sold that book, and at the time I was closeted about my disability. What happens with Ryan the character in "Special” is something that I actually did, which is I got hit by a car – although in real life it was much more serious, I actually acquired another disability on top of the one I have, because just - one wasn't enough. I got compartment syndrome. So I moved to New York to go to school, and everyone assumed my limp was from my car accident, and I never corrected them because I just thought, “oh, being hit by a car is so much more relatable - no one has really understood cerebral palsy – like, when I had to explain it in the past, people just get confused - everyone can understand getting hit by a car. It could happen to them, blah blah blah. I mean, I didn't know I was also suffering from deep, dark, internalized ableism, but at the time I thought I was performing this amazing life hack when really I was just hacking up my life to bits. So, basically, smash cut to me getting the book deal: I have been closeted about my disability for many years, and, like, deep in the recesses of my brain/heart, i knew that this lie was not doing me any more favors. I was like doing drugs at the time and like pretty les miserable, and I kinda had this rare moment of clarity at like 26, where I was like, “this is my opportunity to be honest about my disability, to come out about who I really am,” and there’s nothing like a book contract to really motivate you - [ Laughter ] to not lose courage, and actually deliver. So I went to Simon Schuster and told them that - it was actually really funny because like, my editor, at our kick-off meeting was like I have a really good title for your book, it’s called “I’m Special." And I was like, “Oh, that’s really interesting because I'm actually coming to you to talk about how I have cerebral palsy and I want to put that in the book, so there's double meaning to that term.” And so, they were onboard, and writing the book was a really interesting process, because I didn't know much about disability - it’s not even in the book - I didn't know about internalized ableism, I didn’t know that I was kinda full of self-loathing. And it just was - the process was me kind of unpacking these old memories from my childhood that I had repressed, and things that - the surgeries that I had growing up and the things that strangers said to me - all of that stuff. So, it was not fun, but ultimately, it saved my life because for the first time in my life I wasn't lying about who I was: either it was me being in the closet about being gay or me being in the closet about my cerebral palsy, and finally at age 28, I was just my authentic self, which I recommend 10 out of 10, for anyone.

>> Tatiana: I definitely feel you on that, being born with my disability, spina bifida, which sometimes people see kinda parallel a little with cerebral palsy, and the process that we go through with society and feeling like we have to be these - I guess what some kind of “super crip” or be more able, and so just to be accepted and so there is this, this process you go through. So, I'm glad you finely got to that point and that being a process for you and telling your story because, it has helped so many people. So, you never know what that journey can do for yourself and for others.

>> Ryan: Thank you. No, and adapting it for television was really interesting, too, because I think that I had grown up a lot about my disability and I kind of become woke to more things. And so I was really excited to kind of have that be reflected in the show. And, you know, also create a TV character that we've never seen before, and make sure that he wasn’t just there serving as inspiration porn - it was important to me that Ryan behaves like an asshole sometimes, because that’s how people act – they’re nice, they’re not so nice, they’re flawed, they contain layers. And I think that, as disabled people, we’re kind of supposed to be these virtuous, inspiring, “how do we get up every day and just live our lives – it’s so brave.” And I think that's just so condescending and just not real, and I think that we are allowed to be as messy and complicated as a straight white man on television is.

>> Tatiana: I love it. Okay. So "Special" broke new ground for LGBTQ+ and disability representation on screen. What scenes were you most proud of?

>> Ryan: Oh, the sex scene for sure. I mean, gay sex --

>> Tatiana: I knew you were going to say that.

>> Ryan: Gay sex is always on my agenda, honey. I'm going to die on my anal sex hill. I had always been kind of annoyed by the representation of gay sex in film and television. I feel like when I had seen it, it was either really fast cut porny vibes of “Queer as Folk” or we were panning away to the moon in “Call Me by Your Name.” I think “Call Me by Your Name” honestly was the reason I wrote the scene, because I saw the movie – and I loved it and I think it is important, etc., etc., etc. - but I remember, when Armie Hammer and Timothee Chalamet finally consummate their relationship, the camera pants away, and you’re left with the fucking moon as they start fucking, and I was like, okay, so we’ve seen Timothee Chalamet fuck a peach – a fruit, we’ve seen him fuck a woman, but we can’t see him actually fuck a man? This whole movie is about homosexual desire, and we get kinda shortchanged. I was really furious, I was fuming in my movie theater seat, and so I really kind of wanted to correct that and kind of write a sex scene that felt honest and kind of how I had been experiencing sex, which is awkward, funny, emotional, sexy, not-so-sexy - all within the span of two minutes - I don't know, maybe I’ve been having sex wrong, but I think that's been my experience with sex, and so I just wanted to see that reflected.

>> Tatiana: That's awesome. I know I had a few conversations when the show first came out with different people kind of in my journey, and people had said that that was the one thing - and it was mostly from nondisabled people that were saying that - and they were like, “it was like a little…” and I was just like, “well why?” I said, you know, you see -- nondisabled people have sex all the time, so why not? Why not?

>> Ryan: Well, that’s the whole point – it’s like, you sit through it, bitch. I had to sit through so much shit, now it’s your fucking turn and I don't care if you like it. I don't care – it’s not for you, you know what I mean? I make gay things for gay people, I make disabled things for disabled people - I don't give a shit about anyone else. If they feel uncomfortable by it, then XOXO, I’ve had to sit through so much bullshit, so get the popcorn and deal.

>> Tatiana: Like you said, it’s our turn.

>> Ryan: Exactly, babe.

>> Tatiana: So on "Special" – and you touched on this a little bit – but on “Special,” you compared coming out as gay as coming out to disabled. Why do you think it was easy for you to do the first and harder for the second?

>> Ryan: Because I honestly think society treats gay people better than they treat disabled people. I think that there has been a much bigger discourse around sexuality than disability. I still feel like that discourse has not lifted off the way that sexuality has. We don't have Ellen “I'm Gay” on TIME - where are our covers, babe, where are our covers? I think disability has not infiltrated the mainstream the way that being gay has. So, to me - society understood what being gay was: there was reference points for it, there was "Will and Grace," there was “Ellen,” there was this, there was that. And I think for disability, I think that the people still have a lack of awareness and a baseline uncomfortableness In discussing disability. So - the message was really clear to me growing up, too, when I never saw disability being reflected back at me on the TV screen or movies, and so I got the message, which was that my existence didn't matter - or that my existence was too fringe or niche to include. And I think that really, really set up house in my brain and settled in for a long time. You know?

>> Tatiana: Yeah. No, that's interesting, because I've kind of have those very same feelings, and we've talked about this before of not seeing yourself reflected and wanting that so badly, and how that reflects on you, and then wanting to tell those stories in that way and be your authentic self and how important that is. And - what was I going to say, lost my train of thought. But how important that story is and telling that in that way - especially with me being a woman of color and wanting to tell my story and people telling me the same thing, like, “well your story is too niche.” Even when it comes to casting and things like that, it’s like, you end up with too many boxes against you. It's like - oh, you can check off one box “disabled,” but then when you add in more, “person of color” or “someone LGBTQ” and all these different things, you end up with the things stacked against you. And we need to break all those things down.

>> Ryan: Yeah, it’s like, God forbid you possess more than one identity: I mean, I think intersectionality is a relatively new concept, but people are still taking in - "Special" took four years to get made, door-to-door, because when we pitched it in 2015, everyone passed, and I think in 2015, we just weren't as woke in our culture - people were like scandalized by “Inside Amy Schumer.” You know what I mean? They were like, “oh my God! She’s like 140 pounds and she has sex and she tells it like it is? That's crazy! Women are funny! Crazy!” So, I think being gay and disabled on the declaration of woke independence was like way down in like 2-point font and I think people didn't really know what to do with gay disabled jelly. So, it took a lot of time - like part of it is that you have to wait for the culture to catch up, but, at the same time, you also have to force it, because no one else is going to - no one else is going to be out there advocating for your story, no one gives a shit. So it really is up to you to really force in through and be like no, no, no, no, no - this is fucking happening.

>> Tatiana: Yes, I hear you. So, how did you feel - with that being said - how did you feel when "Special" received a lot of great features and major press and was nominated for awards?

>> Ryan: I mean, you know, it was very chic. If I'm being completely honest, there’s two sides of me, with the reception of "Special." I thought, there was going to be one way, where it was gonna be completely just here, no one would see it, it would get no coverage, blah blah blah, and then I think the cynical, jaded side of me was like, “honestly, this is a gay disabled show, that has never been done before - I feel like it is literally by law that you have to nominate us for some award.” [ Laughter ] Like literally, they don't even watch the show, they are just like, “oh gay disabled, sex scene with a sex worker.” They’re like, “okay, just give it, just give it to them, okay. Just give it. Give it. Give it. We get it. We get it. We get it.” [ Laughter ]

>> Tatiana: Oh, my gosh.

>> Ryan: I think that like - the thing is like, I’ve always known that my life is not some fringe, weird existence – I knew that there was gonna be universalness in my storytelling, so it was really validating to get the coverage: It wasn’t validating just from an ego perspective of like, “I’ve done good,” it was like, my life does have value, which is something I’ve always felt, even though society told me otherwise, I’ve always known - well, I haven't always known, but in the last few years, I have known - that my life had value, and this just goes to show that, you know what I mean?

>> Tatiana: Yes. No. I hear you. I’ve always had that attitude of, “why are people think I'm weird? Why don't people like me? Or why don’t people think I'm just amazing and fabulous?” You don't comprehend why, but it’s like, oh, it’s because of my disability. But it’s like, no, you should love me and think that I'm amazing.

>> Ryan: Yeah. You know, disability is so interesting. It's like - I think people are fearful; I have like, theories about why I think people are fearful of it the way that they’re not fearful of sexuality, because I think that, a lot of people are going to end up disabled, whether that’s through old age or illness or something like that, and this is a culture the, kind of the whole bread and butter of our culture and the value is youth. It's youth, being strong, being sexy, whatever, whatever, and I think that it reminds them that they're fallible, that this won't last forever, that this could be them and probably will be them, and I think that it makes them very uncomfortable to be confronted with that reality. Again, that's just a theory that I have - I don't know if that's real or not, but there is something there, because there’s been a lot of attention in marginalized populations in the last few years, and I really always feel like disability is the last one to get attention. And I think it because people are a little fearful and they don't want to deal with it, it makes them sad, it makes them not cozy, comfy, chic. You know what I mean?

>> Tatiana: Yeah, it’s like they almost think about their immorality, opposed to thinking it as something vibrant and lively and that can contribute to all aspects of society. And, one of the things I was thinking about, is I always say, it's like “include disability in all of the forms of diversity that you think about.” And it’s like, when you think about LGBTQ and people of color, don't forget about disability, and it's like, we’re constantly having to remind people, but it definitely is getting better. And I contribute that - Go ahead.

>> Ryan: It’s so weird, because I think percentage-wise, we account for so much of the population. So --

>> Tatiana: Yeah, 20%.

>> Ryan: Yeah. So, it’s not even like - that's the part that I truly don't understand - and also from a business perspective, it’s like, you have a quarter of the population that has nothing for them. So, from a business standpoint, it would serve you to make money - I mean, I think About, like if I go to a movie, like if I get the faintest whiff of gay in a movie, I will be there opening night with fucking popcorn, because I’m like desperado for gay content, and like, I will eat up all of the scraps, honey, because I'm fucking starving. So like, I just don’t understand. I’m like, “hon, there’s nothing. There’s a huge gap, why does no one think to fill it?” I think because disabled people have historically not have access to the gatekeepers of Hollywood and they’ve never been in these positions before where they’ve been pitching their own stuff or whatever, we have been exiled a little bit – we’ve been pushed out. And people don’t expect us to be in those positions. It’s like Ali Stroker winning the fucking Tony and then needing to go from the back because there’s no fucking ramp, because no one could conceive of someone in a wheelchair winning a Tony, but guess what, bitch, we are – we are winning fucking Tonys and get the goddamn ramp ready. But I don't think it is out of malice, I don't think there’s like, evil people around the courtroom saying, “we must keep the disabled people out,” like, “please,” like Dr. Evil status. I don't think people have ever thought of us before. I don’t think it’s really crossed their minds. You know what I mean?

>> Tatiana: Yeah. So, what do you think needs to be done to ensure that people who are LGBTQ+ with disabilities feel part of both communities?

>> Ryan: Of the LGBTQ and the gay community?

>> Tatiana: And disability. What do you think needs to be done for them to feel a part of both?

>> Ryan: Well I mean, I think it’s just the golden rule – it’s just don't be an asshole. I think that, obviously the disabled community, in my experience, has been much more welcoming than the gay community. But I also think about the base experiences of going to a gay bar. Guess what, not a lot of those places are handicap friendly. So again, disabled people are shut out again. Again, it’s not Dr. Evil around a board room being like, “I don't want disabled people in the gay bar,” but if you think about that, that is a huge part of gay culture, is fraternizing at the gay bar, and disabled people can’t even become a part of it. And when they’re not a part of it, they’re existence is not normalized, so they stay fringed. So I think the onus is not on the disabled community, because I think we are pretty accepting and down for whatever, I think it’s the LGBTQ community that needs to think about queer spaces and really making sure that they are handicap friendly so disabled people can live, laugh, love with their gays. You know what I mean?

>> Tatiana: Yeah. So, the juicy question. What can we except for season two of "Special”?

>> Ryan: Oh my God. I -

>> Tatiana: Whatever you can tell us, because I know right before everything happened, you were in production, so…

>> Ryan: We were. We shot half of the season, so we shot four out of eight episodes. It’s so weird because I’m just like, “when we will ever be allowed to be on set again?” I mean, sets are day spas for germs, so when you think about life reopening, you’re like, “oh, I can see restaurants being open again, if it’s not at capacity.” But being on a set? Oh my God. "Special" season two, based on the episodes that I have seen – in editing and stuff – definitely feels bigger - I think that season one was small, mostly out of necessity, and it was also a shorter show and the budget was smaller, so I feel like Ryan was kind of in a fishbowl and I feel like you didn't really go out into the world that much, which I think actually served where the character was, because he was kind of the boy in the bubble, and then season two I think the bubble pops and you see Ryan really kind of embarking on his own journey, and you get to see a lot more of Kim - Kim has her own story line this season. That was really important to me – I think, writing season one I found Punam Patel, who plays Kim, I was like this woman is a fucking star, and –

>> Tatiana: She’s awesome.

>> Ryan: and I could not just make her my cheerleader – I want her to have her own interior life, I want her to have depth the way that I have given it to Karen. So, in season two, we see a lot more of Kim on her journey outside of Ryan. There’s a lot more sex, and there is more stuff regarding disability. Ryan, in season one, was still suffering from internalized ableism and I don't think really wanted to be a part of the disabled community in anyway, judging by his disastrous deaf date, and I think in season two, he's going to dip his toes in the waters, and it's going to be fun. [ Laughter ] I mean, when we shoot it - in 2025. [ Laughter ]

>> Tatiana: Hopefully it’s not that long, but we will see.

>> Ryan: I know, but I'm going to show up to the back half of the season, like, 20 years older, dark circles under my eyes - full bear. I left the cub at the end of four and I’m a full bear at the beginning of episode five - I just cannot wait for the continuity problems.

>> Tatiana: Oh, my gosh, you guys will work it out – you’ll work it out. I'm super excited. And I love that you told her story, because I feel like from the show, I was fully fed, because I understood disability from your angle, but then being a plus-sized woman and seeing her story and dealing with her insecurities of being a plus-size woman, I really appreciated that, so I feel like from both stories lines, I, personally, was very much fed, so that's awesome.

>> Ryan: You’re going to be very, very full next season. And I think – it’s so interesting writing a show with a gay disabled lead and a plus-sized woman of color, because there is so many similarities, because I think that Kim and Ryan both - their first thought is, “how do I move through a society that doesn't inherently accept me?” Well, I'm going to be super palatable. I’m going to be easy to digest. I’m gonna wear chic clothes, I'm gonna go to Drybar every fucking day. I’m gonna be so chic that you can’t reject me. I'm going to fit into your mold as much as I can, so don't worry about it - I'm not going to be an imposition into your life.

>> Tatiana: Story of my life!

>> Ryan: Yeah! But really though. I think about that a lot, because I love clothes and I love looking good and whatever, but part of me is, like, “I wonder where that comes from?” Like is a real desire, or is part of me like, “oh, I'm gay and I have cerebral palsy, but I’m wearing APC jeans and Marc Jacobs, and like, don’t worry about it” - like, it’s just fitting into to society, so I'm like the fun, flirty Christini of cerebral palsy, and, I don’t know - it’s interesting. I guess I’ll unpack that later. [ Laughter ]

>> Tatiana: Right, no? Because I have that internal conversation with myself, too, and I’m like, “well, why am I doing this? Why am I having the latest shoes or why am I wearing this certain outfit? Is it because I really do like fashion or is it because I want to be liked because I'm tired of people just wanting to just stare at me for whatever reason?” And I do love that quote from Harry Winston, he said, “People are going to stare: make it worth their while.” It’s a quote I use so much, and it's like, is that internalized ableism, or is it just me expressing me? So, those are internal conversations I have myself, too.

>> Ryan: That’s so interesting. I never heard that quote, but there’s actually a new character in season two who says that to Ryan, who has a disability, and he wears whatever he wants - I don't want to spoil too much, but he’s a person who lives out loud and he’s like, “Look, people stare at me no matter what when I leave the house, so I better give them something to look at.” Oh my God, I love that I just plagiarized, unknowingly, Harry Winston. I dig that.

>> Tatiana: Well, now, you know, yeah.

>> Ryan: Yeah, to cover my ass.

>> Tatiana: So, speaking of staying in and all of that - So, what are you doing to stay creative in the time of social distancing?

>> Ryan: You know, it's been interesting, because the first couple of weeks were really hard. Like - we've talked about this before, but like, I'm a very, very productive person, like, I work a lot - I'm a workhorse, and I get lot done, and a lot of my self-worth, I think, is tied into productivity, so even when I'm doing “nothing” or I feel lazy, I still have 40 things going on instead of 500, but I still feel like a failure. So, for example, like - the first two weeks of quarantine: just shut down my show where I was working 16 hours a day, for a month, and before that running the writer's room, so like, obviously I'm tired and whatever - and I'm in editing on "Special" every day - but I'm still like, “I'm not doing anything, I feel like a loser, I feel like a failure.” But what’s interesting about it, beyond unpacking the whole being disabled and needing to be Superman – needing to be bigger, faster, stronger - I think as a writer and as a creative person, the way I make sense of the world and the area where I feel safest is when I'm making things. So, after a couple of weeks of me feeling unproductive and not really having any ideas, I kind of landed on a new idea and I got really excited, so I’ve been really working on that. Flushing out a series bible and stuff. You know, I think that, overall, though, I've just learned to be really kind to myself, and know that some days are going to be more productive than others. I joked earlier on about like how every day is a winding road by Sheryl Crow and some days I feel really good and hopeful and excited and then other days I feel extremely depressed and anxious and kind of like what is the point of the work that I'm doing right now? And I think what I've gotten good at, because I’ve accepted that this is a rollercoaster that I just can’t get off of and I think everyone’s in the same boat, but what I’ve accepted is that I just have to be kind to myself, and those days that I just feel really depressed, I don't always have to push myself out of it, and like, “come on!” I just have to surrender to the moods and know it will lift, because it always does. And, I just really can’t judge myself too much in the moment, because that doesn't get me anywhere, that just creates a toxic feedback, so, you know, I think I'm doing a pretty good job now, but like I said, not every day is created equal, so, I just kinda had to learn to kind of ride the waves.

>> Tatiana: Yeah. No, self-care is definitely important. Don't beat yourself up, have those days where you're just enjoying your wine and hanging out - I’vee been seeing you on your Insta…

>> Ryan: Oh my God, L-O-L. I'm keeping my wine shop in business, I think single-handedly. Oh my God. It’s like, you know what? But also, like, I don't care - at first I was like, “God, I'm drinking a lot of wine,” I’m like, “you know, I don’t give a shit.” I don't fucking care. Like, you know what I mean? Like, it makes me feel good, it helps me unwind after a long day of being anxious, or whatever. Like, fuck it. I don’t care. It’s not like I'm getting blackout or anything. Like, I'm fine. [ Laughter ]

>> Tatiana: Yeah. So no, take that time to self-care, and unwind and get yourself because - you said it here, you got some other stuff you're going to be working on, so, after this is all over, you guys heard it first, you're gonna get a lot of stuff from Ryan, so, we’re holdin’ you to it.

>> Ryan: Oh, that's good! I love that. I love that. No, I love making things. I love getting lost in new worlds. I think especially now, when the world that we're living in is such a hellscape, I think it’s really nice to kind of build your own world and spend time in that world so you can avoid this one. [ Laughter ]

>> Tatiana: Yeah. Definitely, especially with everything going on, you want a way to be creative and kind of just do something else to take your mind off of it a little bit. So, if you guys are out there and watching the news and stuff, take some time to turn it off and find a way to be creative. So, with that, I’ll have my last question and then we're going to open it up for Q & A. So if you guys have any questions in the chat box, in the Q & A, put your questions out and we will get them answered. So, last question - what advice do you have for other creatives from marginalized communities when they want to pitch their own work?

>> Ryan: I would say walk into every pitch with the confidence of a straight, white, mediocre man. [ Laughter ] Assume you’re Kevin James, you know what I mean? Because, your voice is needed so much more than Kevin James - I think we’re pretty much done, I think we’ve reached that capacity. Your voice has value - I think that's the hardest part I’ve learned in making things and working on things and pitching things is, being like, “what's the point? Does this even matter? Is what I'm saying even worth anything?” And I'm going to tell you that it is - I think the thing that I get most excited about as a writer is removing sigma and talking about things that have never been discussed on TV before. And I think hopefully, by the example of "Special," is showing that like, there is space for us, there is room at the table, and Hollywood is ready to listen. And it really is up to you - which is no easy feat, I understand, because I struggle with it, too - to really have confidence, and kind of be the girl with the most cake - and be like, no, no - this idea that I'm working on has value, I have value, and not only do I have value, but the story that I want to tell, particularly if it pertains to disability, is so fucking needed. I just want more disabled content - I don't think it’s right that "Special" is one of the only shows tackling disability, it’s us and I think it’s “This Close” on Sundance Now, and I think that's pretty much it in terms of disabled leads and being written and created by the people. So, just really, really don't lose sight of that, and know that your stories are again, more important and more valuable than all the other ones that have been told 5,000 fucking times.

>> Tatiana: So, we have our first question – it’s from Rachel. Hey, Rachel. She said, “how far should you push the envelope for disability inclusion?”

>> Ryan: What does that mean? Like, how far should you push the envelope for inclusion. What does that mean? Am I being stupid?

>> Tatiana: I don't know if she means as far as the representation of it or how many characters - I'm not sure. So maybe she’ll get back to us.

>> Ryan: I don't like to push the envelope, I like to cum all over it. So [ Laughter ] I think that, in terms of being ballsy and daring, there is no bounds. I don’t know. I don’t know. I just think, again, you should always be speaking the truth and being as brutally honest as you can be, or otherwise what is point?

>> Tatiana: So, April says, “do you see yourself doing more shows after "Special" on platforms other than Netflix? What would be another dream show you would want to do?”

>> Ryan: I would love to continue working with Netflix, just because they’ve been so supportive and amazing and loving, and they kind of let me do my thing and kind of just – which is really rare – I think that usually, when you have a show or the air, you have 40,000 cooks in the kitchen, and I think that just, they’ve been really supportive about my vision. But, also, I love to slut it up and sleep around, so I also open to like working with other platforms as well. I really want to make a show with a primarily disabled cast. I think that would be amazing, sort of how like “Pose” broke history with having a lot of trans actors. That would be really incredible to see that with "Special," I mean, sorry, with disabled performers, because I know there is a giant well of talent, but - and the excitement of making all of those discoveries is so cool to me. So, yeah - that's kind of what I want to do next, I think.

>> Tatiana: Nice. Nice, I like that. That would be something super dope. I’ve had visions for different things, I'm like, yeah, we definitely something like that, where it’s just - disabled AF.

>> Ryan: Yeah, totally, absolutely. As disabled as "Special" is, and like, especially season two, it gets a lot more in terms of working with other disabled people and whatnot, it is still a show with a lot of able-bodied people and - I don't know, there’s just so much more to explore that I can't do within the confines of "Special."

>> Tatiana: So, Andy says - hey, Andy – “what was the biggest challenge that you hit with studios and how did you get over it?”

>> Ryan: Well, initially when we pitched it, it wasn’t with studios - I was with Warner Brothers and they were down with my gay, disabled agenda - it was networks. But, I don't know, I mean - times have changed. I think, even before my book was optioned, I would go to general meetings with production companies and studio people and talk about putting a gay disabled person on the screen and they would legitimately be confused and be like, “Hmm? I don’t understand.” And this was like, 2014. So, I personally, had been in my own like utopian "Special" bubble, where I had not - and also I think my voice is so specific, quite frankly, that like either you get it or you don't. So, I feel like the people that I work with, I’ve been really lucky, do they just understand what I want to do and they’re not trying to neuter it, they’re not trying to chop the balls off, they understand I have big, huge balls and want to celebrate and showcase them. And so I’ve been really, really lucky, but I think, overall, though, I think there’s this perception of Hollywood being so woke and inclusive, and I think that if you get really down to the nitty-gritty it’s still really hard to get a show made with a marginalized person as the lead. I think that we are totally allowed to be there as supporting. and be the friend and you know, have our own little storyline, whatever, but I think it’s really, really difficult to still have us as the lead. You know, think about "Orange is the New Black," “Orange is the New Black” had to use that, that girl - Taylor Schilling – as sort of the Trojan horse. It was like, oh, this is a story about the white woman who goes to prison - just kidding, no it is not! It’s all about the other inmates. You know? And I think you still have to do that, you have to cover the vegetables in sugar. But - I don't know. I mean, I'm going to probably being going out there again and testing the waters so we'll see, but I imagine it’s still kind of an uphill battle.

>> Tatiana: Yeah, we’ll get there, we’ll get there, ‘cause I still have a goal of being a lead on a show. So -

>> Ryan: Yes, honey!

>> Tatiana: Fingers crossed for that. So, David – hey, everybody's in here, “What do you think "Special" would look like and feel like if it was on network TV?”

>> Ryan: Oh my God, it would be garbage. It would be absolute trash. And it’s actually funny – oh my God, is this David Radcliffe my queen? I love – or my king – okay, sorry - I'm always, I default to queen always - my gay adult brain, it’s a disease. I actually, when we went out - so my book had like a bidding war on it, L-O-L, highlight of my career it, hasn’t been that way since, we had a couple studios bidding, and I told my agent and at the time I was a young writer, I had only staffed on one show, it was my second season, and I was like, “well, I'm not being the network TV with this.” And my agents were like, “what?” Because, you know, they see network TV and they see a down payment for a house in Malibu, So obviously they are incentivized to do that. And I was like, “no, if I do a show about a gay disabled person, I cannot remove the sexuality.” I want to be able to do what I want to do and you can’t do that with a network television framework. You just can’t. I mean, are you kidding me? Have you seen a network TV show recently? They’re absolute trash, it’s like a dumpster fire. So, they were like – shook, Like, my agents could not believe that this like little story editor was like, “no I'm not going to fucking networks.” And I remember one studio even backed out because I refused to go into networks, and so - yeah, it was so funny because I was so passive back then because I was so grateful for anything, and just like, “gee, golly gosh, I can’t believe I'm here, mom and dad,” but I remember like - I'm not necessarily, like - as honest and brash I can be, I'm also like, a people pleaser, so I want to make everyone around me happy - again, disability shit, blah, blah, blah - so even back then, though, I think like, I still had that voice in me enough that was like, “if you take this to network TV, they will probably buy it because it’s chic.” They’ll be like, “gay disabled love!” and then I’ll write the script and they’ll be like, “Wait, what is this? He’s gay and disabled? Can’t he be one or the other?” and then they’ll kill it. So yeah, basically, “Special” on network TV would just be like literally like Ryan having very “special” episodes... Ryan like - and then people comforting him when he’s alone in his bed and asking him if he needs a snack and maybe, just maybe in the finale he’d be able to kiss a man, but who knows.

>> Tatiana: Yeah, I was like, you definitely wouldn’t have had it sex scene, so…

>> Ryan: No! God now. Which was, again, the scene that is the most important to me and I think got the most attention, So, fuck it.

>> Tatiana: So, Ashley says, “love the panel, thanks so much.” She said, “Ryan, I’d love to know how the process of getting Netflix to sign on for season two went.”

>> Ryan: It's a journey. I mean, like, they take a while because they have to get their data for the numbers and stuff like that. So, you know, I think it's different for everybody, I think some people, they found out within a month or two, but ours was a little longer, not because they were on the fence about picking it up, but because there were going to be changes in season two, I can't reveal - but like basically it just kind of made it a different deal and a different show, so, it just took a lot longer to get done, but they were always really supportive - I never felt like it wasn't going to get picked up, I just knew that it was going to be a process just because things were going to be different. Sorry to be so vague, but…

>> Tatiana: No, it’s like, have that confidence, it’s like, my show is the bomb, I know they’re gonna give me a season two.

>> Ryan: Well, you know how I said you can't - you have to give the gay disabled show an award? I feel like you can’t cancel the gay disabled show after one season - after season two, yes, absolutely, but not after season one.

>> Tatiana: Hopefully, we get a few more seasons, so…

>> Ryan: Hopefully.

>> Tatiana: Ryan has a story he has to tell.

>> Ryan: Yeah, exactly.

>> Tatiana: So, then, another one is, “was it difficult, speaking of, was it difficult to make yourself so naked to the world and how did putting yourself out there change your daily life?”

>> Ryan: No. I mean, I’ve always been a really honest person, I think – like, it’s so funny because I made a career from writing, doing these like blog posts for this website called Thought Catalog where I was just kind of bearing my soul and blah blah blah, which is ironic though because the one thing that was such a huge slice of my identity, cerebral palsy, was the one thing I would not talk about. I feel like I was raised in a family where people were kind of repressed, where you didn't talk about a lot of things, things were swept under the rug, and I saw how that eroded your soul, and I think at a young age, I was like, “oh, I don't want to ever be like that. If something is wrong or if something is amiss, I need to get it out there.” You know, again, stigma, is like, survives and thrives in silence. It’s like that Jenny Holzer quote, “your silence will not protect you.” It’s a bit a compulsion that I think I’ve had for a long time to just be brutally honest and I think in terms of being naked, emotionally and physically in "Special," it was really terrifying to me, but when something scares me, that means I know I need to do it. It’s almost like bungee jumping – which I would never do - but, I don’t know, I guess a part of me kind of gets off on the fear of it, and being like – and also like I feel like, in terms of my body, like, a body like mine has not been normalized on TV, and I think that, this might sound a little pretentious so forgive, but I think that when it comes to my show in terms of bearing skin and the doing the sex scenes and stuff, I feel like my bodily doesn't belong to me anymore, it’s serving a much bigger purpose, which is normalizing bodies that are not conventional. So, it’s really not about me, you know what I mean? It's sort of like, whatever? I don't know. And then what was the other question? There was a two-parter. I forget the other half.

>> Tatiana: I think you answered it. They said that - oh, what made you, you know, be more comfortable in your body in your everyday life or how has it changed your everyday life?

>> Ryan: Oh, so interesting. Well, I went from someone who never talked about cerebral palsy to the whole world knowing about my cerebral palsy and talking about it on a huge platform. So, it was a huge transition. And part of me has anxiety because I feel like I don't know as much as other people know about disability and I'm not well-versed in disability rights, and I would never identify as an activist, I just wouldn't - I think that that label makes me uncomfortable because I feel like I could never live up to that. But I would say it’s been extremely freeing. I remember when I went to Provincetown last summer, which is a place I go on vacation every summer with my gay friends, and we were going to this like secluded beach and everyone was like yes! And my CP ass is like, “oh, great, a 45-minute walk through weird terrain and bushes.” It’s so funny, like the math that you do in your brain as a disabled person, you’re like, “yeah, this sounds fun for you, but my I know my ass is gonna be sweating, my feet will be burning, I will be very tired, my legs will get tight, like, goddamn it.” Anyway, so we went to this beach which was gorgeous but like, it was a schlep – and like, truly things had been wild, and then when we walked back, we had to climb through something, I can’t even think of descriptive worlds right now, but it involved some baseline climbing, and I kept slipping, and other people from the beach would pass me and they’d see me struggling and help me, and in the past, that would make me feel so ashamed, I would feel like shit, I’d be like, “oh my God, everyone is seeing me fail to go up with this fucking rock. I’m such a loser. Oh my God. Why am I at this gay beach when I can’t even fucking go up the goddamn – whatever.” And I, for the first time, just didn't give a shit. I really didn't. Because guess what? When I was failing to go up on the rock, there were people being like, “I love your show!” Meanwhile, I'm like, truly a hot mess express, like fucking sweat, like falling skinned knees, Garbagetown USA, and people are like, “yes! We love you queen! Go!” And I think, like, having that support and that unconditional love from the fans of the show - I just didn't care, I was like, yeah, I'm struggling to go up the rock because I'm disabled, which everyone fucking knows, so who cares?” So it’s been really freeing in that way.

>> Tatiana: Awesome, so we have a question from Facebook, Carlos Mitchell, he says, “I'm a gay Latino with a physical disability. Many of us are on low income. Do you have any plan to include LGBTQs with disabilities who are low income and who are dependent on government for basic needs?”

>> Ryan: Does that mean – oh, in the show?

>> Tatiana: Or in anything, I guess.

>> Ryan: Um, yeah. I mean, in the show - I'm trying to think… there hasn't been, but I would love to, in future projects, absolutely. I mean – yeah, absolutely.

>> Tatiana: No, that’s a really good question because I think about that, too, because some of us work and some of us don't and have to be on government assistance, and it’s like, we have to justify all of those stories. You can't tell the chic one and not the gritty one. [ Laughter ]

>> Ryan: Yes. Yes.

>> Tatiana: So, Jamie says, “what advice do you have aspiring actors who have CP?”

>> Ryan: Oh my God. Acting is so funny because acting is one thing I would be like - to anyone inspiring actors with disabilities or not – I’m like, “how old are you? If you’re under the age of 25, don't do it.” Just because, I’ve been around enough actors and it’s like, if you start too young it gets a little weird for your brain. I would say, if you can, like - I think for actors, this is probably bad advice because to me, if you are someone that doesn't fit the traditional box of actors, it would serve you to make your own things, because people have no imagination and they don't know where to put you, so it's your job to tell them, “no, no, this is what I can do.” You know what I mean? However, if you're not a writer and you’re just an actor, I would just audition and if you had an agent, I would say, “don't just send me out for disabled roles. I want to go out for every fucking role that I can.” Because that’s another important thing, too: I would love a disabled person to be on screen where their whole preoccupation isn’t being disabled. That would be - what a rush. You know what I mean?

>> Tatiana: Yes.

>> Ryan: So, yeah. I would just keep up with it - I never thought that I would be acting in my own show, and here I am, so it is possible, and I think it's showing other people that disabled people are so fucking talented and can do all kinds of things. So, yeah, just - keep going.

>> Tatiana: Awesome, and just add to that, I would say if you haven't acted before, start out with being an extra, get some experience of being onset, and getting all of that experience, so you kind of have that under your belt, and that's just something that every actor goes through, whether you have a disability or not. And just keep pushing the pavement, find opportunities and back to your point of making your own content, make your own content, because my very first commercial I got was based off of them seeing my Instagram, and just like you said, you have to give them that vision otherwise they’re not going to get it, and then, you know, people seeing your Instagram, and are like, “oh, she looks cool and fun, let's use that,” opposed to before, if you just say, “oh, I'm in a wheelchair,” they’re like, “well, that's not fun.” So you kind of have to show them if they're not thinking about it. But I will say, they’re starting to think about it a little bit more, but you made a really, really great point.

>> Ryan: Yeah, just hustle for yourself. I will say it’s not a by and large, but I would say, in my experience, Hollywood suffers from a severe lack of imagination. Like, they just don’t – and again, it’s not that they don't want it, they don't think about it or think about it as being possible, like, they just don't get it, so it’s your job to show them that. You know what I mean?

>> Tatiana: Yes. Mhmm. I agree. So, Marisa says, “have you ever or do you plan on hiring people with disabilities to work behind the camera, specifically like PAs, directors, things like that?”

>> Ryan: Yeah, yeah. We have some of that for season two. Yes, but I will say, I'm very vocal about this; making "Special," it's made everyone aware from the crew and everyone, how things are not accessible. Like, we’re a show that shoots on location because we don't have the money to build sets, so we are in homes a lot of the times, like, that are not handicap friendly. You know, we were talking about this before this, but how I discovered that a lot of hair and makeup trailers are not handicap accessible. And so, I think it’s very frustrating, because I think there should be more disabled crew members and there are a few for season two, but in terms of accessibility, Hollywood has a long way to go and It’s really frustrating for me because I want to do so much, I feel like - I want to do everything - and there's still this system of - and I just feel like I'm constantly going up against the system that’s already been in place of like, “oh, we never needed handicap accessible trailers. Like, we don't, what? There’s gonna be someone in a wheelchair that’s getting their hair and makeup done? We’re just not familiar with that.” And it makes my blood boil, because you’re like, “How has this gone on for so long?” And I wish I had Ryan Murphy money, quite frankly, so I could literally just say, “and you get a trailer, and you get a trailer!” like Oprah style. But, it’s been hard, that’s been something I’ve really struggled with where it’s like, I want to do all these changes and I want to have this like perfect utopian vision of what I want the show to be in terms of inclusion of disabilities, but I'm also within my own limitations and with my own budget. It’s been hard. It’s been hard.

>> Tatiana: Yeah. I feel you. I have no doubt that you're going to make it happen, so – okay. So, another question, Rachel says, “did you choose to do a short form series for creative reasons or was it a studio choice?”

>> Ryan: It was a studio choice because everyone passed when we took it out as a half an hour and then Stage 13 – God bless their heart, they’re this digital incubator within Warner Brothers and they were doing short form content so they were the ones that took a chance on the show, and said, “let's do 15-minute episodes,” and I, at that point, would have done a minute. [ Laughter ] I didn’t give a shit, I was like, “Honey, where do I sign?” It was not my choice, but I think ultimately, it was actually really good because it’s like writing boot camp – you basically have to fit half hour of content in 15 minutes, so every line that you do, every line that you write, ever character action – it’s so lean and has to serve it's purpose - you don't have time to just dilly-dally. So, I think it was really incredible from like a story telling perspective; it really whipped me into shape, and I'm really proud of how much story we were able to tell in a short amount of time. I also think that it was advantageous in that sense that, I think the TV landscape is so oversaturated right now, so I think that whenever a new show comes up, people are like, “oh, God, when am I’m gonna have the ten hours to binge this show?” and I think "Special" was very accessible, in the sense that it was like, “oh, you can watch all of this in two hours, you have no excuses.” So, in the end, I am grateful for short form and think it actually helped the show breakthrough. On the other, I would not do it again. [ Laughter ]

>> Tatiana: So, did you have to stick to what you had or could you add more time for the second season or was that an issue?

>> Ryan: I don't know, we'll see, we'll see.

>> Tatiana: Okay, you guys hear that. So, we may be getting a little bit more on "Special" when it comes back. So, we're at the end of this. I want to say thank you so so much: anything you want to say, how people can get in touch with you? Follow you? Keep up with what you're up to?

>> Ryan: I don't know why anyone would want to do that. My content lately is unhinged, but if you feel so inclined, you can follow me on Instagram, @ryanoconn, O-C-O-N-N, and then on Twitter at the same handle. You're gonna see me really becoming unglued in realtime, which may be fun for you.

>> Tatiana: Yes. No, it’s very entertaining - every time I'm having one of those eh kind of days, I see your Insta story and I laugh and just love it, because you’re just yourself and it’s so much needed, more than ever.

>> Ryan: Thank you. I really do it – it makes me feel really good to hear that – I also do it for myself, like I think if I have a bad day, I’m like, “ok, what will make - I need to get myself out of this rut, like, what can I do that’s pretty much no muss no fuss but will make me happy?” And also I have this bizarre fear that my brain is atrophying in quarantine, and I think it’s also me just doing a brain check like, “am I still funny? Can I come up with jokes on the fly?” Some people do puzzles, but that's ableist, because I can’t fucking get those puzzle pieces in. No one talks about puzzles and how ableist they are, but they are. So, whenever people do their puzzles to keep their brain active, I'm like, “must be fucking nice.” Same with people putting on gloves, I’m like, “hmm, must be nice to have working hands.” So, my puzzle is doing an AMA.

>> Tatiana: Thank you. Well, we will be doing weekly sessions like this. Check out and see who will be tuning in next week. So come back, we're gonna have more great conversations like this. Thank you, Ryan, so much, this was so fun and this was so cool. Make sure that you follow RespectAbility on our Twitter and like us on Facebook so that you can stay up-to-date to more events like these and more awesome conversations that we will be having. And don’t forget, if you want to participate in our lab, there’s still time, you have until Friday. If you don’t have all your materials together, that’s okay, just send us a note and let us know. And, thank you again, so much, I appreciate it. I really enjoyed this conversation. It was great. I think everyone else got a lot out of it. And make sure that you're following Ryan. Make sure if you haven’t watched season one, watch it, of "Special," and then, I can’t wait for season two.

>> Ryan: Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you for having me, honey.

>> Tatiana: Thank you so much. This was awesome.

>> Ryan: Thank you, talk to your later.

>> Tatiana: Bye!

>> Ryan: Bye!