>> Jonathan Murray: Welcome to RespectAbility at ADA30 celebration of the 30th anniversary of the American Disabilities Act. I'm Jonathan Murray and I'm a proud member of RespectAbility's Board of Directors, and the co-founder of Bunim-Murray Productions. With shows I produced like "Born This Way" and the documentary "Autism: the Musical," I've always tried to show the ability in the disability. On behalf of RespectAbility, a non-profit that fights stigmas and advances opportunities so people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of community, we are so pleased to have you join us. Led by diverse people with disabilities and allies, RespectAbility knows that people with disabilities and their families have the same hopes and dreams as everyone else. RespectAbility accomplishes its mission with a three-part strategy: fighting stigmas by promoting diverse authentic and accurate portrayals of people with disabilities; advancing opportunities by identifying and promoting best practices in education, employment, civic engagement and access; and leadership development, strengthening the talent pipeline of people with disabilities. Hopefully our strategy for positive change is apparent with the amazing speakers and information you are seeing during our five days of events celebrating the ADA. We have amazing speakers and performers lined up for you today. This is made possible by our sponsors: Comcast NBCUniversal, Sony Pictures Entertainment and the Walt Disney Company. Our theme today is "Fighting Stigmas with Hollywood" - and notice I use the term [ emphasis ] 'with Hollywood' - we're doing this with them. Our first panel covers "Respecting the Ability: Ensuring Authentic Representation in the Entertainment Industry." With one-in-five people having a disability in the U.S. today, the lack of representation, just 3.1 percent on-screen, and even less in children's television, means that millions of people don't see themselves reflected in media. RespectAbility has been honored to play a part in changing this, including consulting on an array of films and TV shows for a variety of studios and networks. But change must be embraced from the top and have buy-in at every level. How are network and studio executives, show runners and writers and actors, working to encourage more disability representation, whether in front or behind the camera? What are promising practices in diversity and inclusion and how are they helping to move things in a positive direction? To address these questions and more, I am so thrilled to have this panel joining me today, because they are really leaders in making this happen. The first, Carolyn Lertzman, Manager, Standards and Practices, Disney Channels. Carolyn works at the intersection of content review with Disney Channel Standards and Practices, Diversity and Inclusion and Walt Disney Television Corporate Social Responsibility, to champion inclusive content that reflects the lived experience of Disney's kids and family audiences. Carolyn joined Disney in 2008, following graduate school at UCLA School of Public Health, specializing in Health Communications and Children's Health and Media. Also joining us is Jennifer Turner. She is the Senior Vice President of Television Scripted Programming at Sony Picture Entertainment, and the current executive for such shows as "The Good Doctor" and "The Blacklist." Over the years, she has worked in daytime and prime time programming at ABC, overseeing such shows as "General Hospital" and "Desperate Housewives," "Lost" and "Grey's Anatomy." While at Universal Media Studios, she managed creative for the critically-acclaimed series "Friday Night Lights" and "Crossing Jordan." Jennifer holds a doctorate in Public Health. Our third panelist is Grace Moss. As NBC Entertainment's Head of Talent Development and Inclusion, Grace directs entertainment diversity initiatives at NBC. She oversees multiple programs that focus on discovering, cultivating and showcasing talented writers and directors of diverse backgrounds with the purpose of getting them staffed at NBC's prime time slate. Grace also manages outreach efforts to community partners to bring their expertise and knowledge to the network. Previously, Grace worked in development and production at the Style Network and at MTV. Our fourth panelist is David Renaud, producer on ABC's "The Good Doctor." At 19, David was paralyzed in a car accident, which ultimately led to an interest in medicine and a career as a doctor - then, as a writer, who can authentically tell stories about medicine. He is a graduate of the Disney ABC Writers Program. Besides "The Good Doctor," David has written episodes for the series "Pure Genius" and "Blood and Oil." And something to look forward to - he is the creator and executive producer of a new series inspired by his life, in development at ABC. Our next panelist is Shoshannah Stern. She is a creator, writer and actress. She is best known for her roles on "Weeds," "Supernatural" and "Jericho." Shoshannah created, wrote and starred in "This Close" on Sundance Channel with Josh Feldman, who is also deaf, which makes "This Close" the first television series created, written and starring deaf or disabled people. Our final panelist is Elisabeth Finch. She is a writer whose credits include "True Blood," "Vampire Diaries" and "No Ordinary Family." She is a long time co-executive producer and writer on "Grey's Anatomy," whose own chronic illness, cancer, inspired her to write several episodes of "Grey's Anatomy" that challenges how we treat and think about cancer as a chronic illness that can also be managed. Thank god all that is over. We're going to start our discussion with David, Elizabeth and Shoshanna. All three of you are proof that the industry is starting to recognize the importance of having professionals behind the camera who bring the perspective of someone with a disability and to make sure that storytelling is authentic. Elisabeth, how has the fact that you are a writer who has a disability impacted the "Grey's Anatomy" writing room? Can you give us an example of that impact?

>> Elisabeth Finch: Yeah. Well, I think any time you have somebody who is representing a community that looks like the world around us on television, people get to see themselves, we get to see different parts of ourselves, there's nuance, there's specificity. I wrote a couple episodes about a character who is going through cancer and ends up living with cancer because that's my specific lived experience and it was born of a conversation from the writers room, where people were talking about treatment in terms of bravery and loss, losing and winning and battles and fights and in my experience, I don't know who wins and I don't know who loses - there were 13 people in my clinical trial, I am the last one who is alive - am I the winner? Are they losers for dying? And these are conversations that don't often get spoken about when we talk about cancer, so the fact that I was in the room to bring that up and have that discussion, our showrunner was able to say, "we should be talking about this. We should be talking about what your life looks like," because they had seen me for years, live with cancer and be in the writers room and carry on a full life.

>> Jonathan Murray: That's amazing. And did you hear from viewers who suddenly felt like there was a story that they could relate to or that somehow related to their life, their experience with a chronic illness?

>> Elisabeth Finch: Yeah, there were a lot of people who reached out on that level, who were living that experience and said, "thank you - now this mirrors my experience." There are also people who are on the crew and in the writers room that saw specific scenes where someone found out that they were going to have to live with cancer, rather than the 'binary state' of diagnosed or dead, or cured or dead, and they even came up to me saying like, "I didn't understand how finding out that you still have cancer left in you could be good news, could be something to celebrate." So I think a lot of people had a perspective that they didn't have before because we've been showing it far too much in a black-and-white state.

>> Jonathan Murray: A great example of how someone with a disability who's willing to share that and with the others in the writing room, can really make a difference to what we're seeing on television. David, have you had a similar experience? Can you give an example of where your unique knowledge impacted the direction of a story?

>> David Renaud: Yeah, I'm probably just going to echo a little bit of what Elisabeth just said, but I think our job as writers, particularly in the writers room, is to bring our personal experiences into our storytelling and that's why our show runners hire us, because they want varied experiences to tell varied stories, and my experience is as a person with a disability, so I naturally am going to tend to bring stories like that into the writer's room. And a lot of times - our lead character in "The Good Doctor" is someone who's on the spectrum, has ASD, and that, to me - I've always connected with that, as someone who's been a doctor, going through residency with a disability, trying to navigate the world of medicine and the expectations of your doctor being perfect and being able to cure everything and I've always related to that in Dr. Shawn Murphy's journey on our show, so I think almost everything I pitch, in some way, is influenced by that. Also, if you look at my body of scripts, you'll see a pattern - there's almost always either a character with a disability in my episodes or there's issues that are really intimately linked to the sort of struggles of feeling like an outsider, feeling underestimated and trying to prove that you belong, and so I think that bleeds into every story, and I definitely get some outsized influence on "The Good Doctor" because I'm a medical doctor, too, so that finds its way into some of the cases, as well, in everybody's episodes, I think a little bit.

>> Jonathan Murray: That's great. Shoshannah, while David and Elisabeth acquired their disabilities as adults, you were born with yours: did you have role models in television that inspired you to pursue a career in television, first as an actress and then as a writer-producer?

>> Shoshannah Stern: Yes, and also no. I talk about this a lot because it's something that recently happened during a premiere, I think oftentimes when I was at home looking to a lot of my old stories that I wrote as a child, I realized that all of the stories were written about hearing children. I think that's because I never saw a deaf child like myself on television or in film while I was growing up, and so I intentionally erased myself from my own stories. And I remember seeing Marlee Matlin, as a young woman, winning the Academy Award and I was like, "wow, I want to do that," but it never really occurred to me to actually write my own story, because there were no deaf writers, no deaf producers at the time, so I think it took me a long time to realize that I can actually write my own story, write a story for myself - I don't have to wait for somebody else to write that story for me. So, I started writing like in my 20s.

>> Jonathan Murray: And did "This Close," your series on the Sundance channel - why specifically that story? How... did you feel that you could perhaps tell a story that other people couldn't tell?

>> Shoshannah Stern: Again, yes and no. I think, when we first pitched the idea, it was two best friends - one was going to be a deaf woman and one was a hearing gay man, and I thought I was just conditioned to always see a deaf person with a hearing foil - that was like the magical equation, like there needed to be a way for a deaf person to explain their experience through another, and so this other becomes the door by which the audience is able to understand the deaf character. But that didn't work out, so then we just decided, hey, let's just go ahead and tell in our pilot, let's just post our pilot on YouTube and tell the story as we believe it to be, and have that story be about two deaf characters, and when that happened, the deafness became like the invisible piece of the story.

>> Jonathan Murray: Yeah, it's wonderful -

>> Shoshannah Stern: Deaf people are not actually deaf until they actually meet or encounter hearing people.

>> Jonathan Murray: Interesting. Well, let's take a little look at "This Close." We have a clip.

[Video Plays]

>> Jonathan Murray: What I love about your show is, deaf people swear like the rest of us, and they have lots of problems like the rest of us, and they can be selfish like the rest of us - I just think it's just so unfiltered and wonderful.

>> Shoshannah Stern: Thank you. Thank you so much for saying so. My struggle as an actor, before I started writing for myself, was a lot of people would think that being deaf was the character - like, being deaf is - that being deaf in and of itself is a character and that is in and of itself a storyline. But it actually can be a layer on top of a character that is already complicated, has their own story to live - it's not the central feature of the story, it's not the central feature of the character's life, and so that has very little to do with our show. I think, and that's true for all people from minority communities.

>> Johathan Murray: Well said. As I said earlier, the industry has started to make serious efforts to bring more lived experiences into the creation of television shows, whether it's racial, sexual identity or disability. David, you were in the Disney ABC Writers Program; I'm guessing you were one of the first people with a disability in the Writers Program - did it set you up for success?

>> David Renaud: I mean, those programs definitely do that for everybody - I'm not sure if I was the first, but I definitely was one of the first people through the program - there have been several since I've been through the program. Yeah, it gives you an opportunity to access writer's rooms and, as someone with a disability, particularly a physical disability, it's really hard to get into writer's rooms, it's hard to get those entry-level jobs, there's a lot of expectation with those entry-level jobs in the writer's room like PA jobs and writer's assistant jobs, that you're going to be running around and getting coffee and getting people lunch and there's the assumption, I think, made - a lot of assumptions are always made about people with disabilities, that you can't do that, so the program sort of opens up doors by giving you access in a way that you you wouldn't be able to get without the program and they're also very incredibly supportive and encouraging when you leave the program, I found.

>> Jonathan Murray: That's great. Now I'd like to bring in our three studio executives who can help us advance this conversation. As I mentioned, we have Carolyn Lertzman from Disney, Grace Moss from NBC and Jennifer Turner from Sony. Carolyn, Disney has been a leader pushing for more diversity in front and behind the camera; what's the biggest challenge you've faced in making this happen?

>> Carolyn Lertzman: I think the biggest challenge is that, just knowing the fact that 25 percent of disabilities are visible and 75 percent are invisible, that there is just - and thinking too how many people in general are comfortable self-identifying for that 75 percent that are invisible, I think the stigma around talking about disability is probably the biggest challenge, and that what I've seen is that the more disability is shows up in content, the more we have great talent like David, the more we have great shows where we're - I can list several from Disney channels and several across - the more times we see someone like Lauren Ridloff be cast in major roles, it's like one thing begets another and all of a sudden we're constantly sharing with our team what's going on in this space and after every time I share with those teams, I hear from colleagues and they're, "oh, well, I don't have a disability but someone in my family does," or "I know..." it's like, it really affects everyone, and so I think that the biggest challenge is just being able to talk about it.

>> Jonathan Murray: Disney, obviously, is known for doing a lot of children's and family programming; you recently introduced a character to "DuckTales" with a disability, the character is Dela Duck, Donald's sister, and the mother of Huey, Dewey and Louie. I want to hear what went into this but first let's watch a clip from "Ducktales" which can be seen on the Disney Channel in Disney Now. Let's take a look at the clip.

[Video plays]

>> Jonathan Murray: Oh my god that is so - it's so irreverent but at the same time it's so emotional. Carolyn, tell us what goes into introducing the character of Della Duck. I'm sure a lot of thought goes into it.

>> Carolyn Lertzman: Oh yeah, I still remember the call that the writers had with the amputee coalition who consulted on this character like it was yesterday and it was supposed to be a 30-minute call and it lasted almost two hours. And they wanted to make sure the writers - they knew they were going to introduce Della Duck, she had previously only appeared in the comic books, and they wanted to make sure that she was -- it was important to them that she was a character from an underrepresented community, and they felt like representing a character from part of the limb loss community was something that they haven't seen a lot of in kids television. And so they asked questions specifically on her prosthetic. They also had to figure out how is Della - she doesn't only walk in the show on Earth, how is she going to walk on the moon? What are the mechanics going to be in her gait with the prosthetic? And also making sure that the storyline – the writers asked lots of questions because it was very important to them that her disability is not something – that's not the only thing that her character is about. It was very important for the team from the start to make sure that she's multi-dimensional, and you can see from that clip: yes, that's one part of her. Using a prosthetic is one part of who she is, but she is so much more than that. And the most amazing thing too is that she's not just in one episode. It's not just a special episode introducing her and talking about what happened to her. She's a recurring character, she continues to be part of the main cast now, which I think is the ultimate way of inclusion. We have these characters and it's not just a one-time thing. Because people living with disabilities, they're not -- they don't appear one day. Everyone's living their lives and that's one of the best things that we can do is to show that.

>> Jonathan Murray: Yeah, that was really wonderful. Jennifer - you're the current executive at Sony for The Good Doctor and other shows. Do you work with showrunners to help them find writers that bring lived experiences, i ncluding disability, into their writers staffs?

>> Jennifer Turner: Yes, absolutely. So we want to tell rich, compelling, emotionally resonant and authentic stories, and I think one of the things that you're hearing about as a theme of this panel is that writers write about what they know. They write about their experience. And it's from that experience that you have that true authenticity and the specificity that you need to really explore a character, to really explore a subject and ultimately produce a better narrative. And so yes, we work very closely with our show runners to make sure that we are having as inclusive and diverse staff as possible so that we can, again, have better stories that are that are truthful and have that emotional connection.

>> Jonathan Murray: That's great. Grace, what's NBC's approach to encouraging more diversity, including disability representation, in front and behind the camera? Certainly the NBC drama New Amsterdam has been a shining star for disability representation. Are there efforts at NBC to connect with actors with disability?

>> Grace Moss: Yeah absolutely. As far as our approach, we really try to make it as holistic as possible. So of course, like Jennifer, we work very closely with our show runners to help them staff their rooms with underrepresented writers from all communities. Specifically, we have our writers on the verge program, which is a great pipeline program for writers who come from these underrepresented groups to get access to our executives. In this current class, we actually have two writers with neuro disabilities who are at the top of our list to get staffed. One of them actually did get staffed at Netflix and we're working on the other one to get in the mix as well. So definitely with the staffing component. We also work with the WGA to get in touch with their writers with disabilities, and see who we can also tap into. We take general meetings with writers all the time and then based on the needs of the network, we curate staffing lists to the different shows. And then on the other side of that, we also work to educate our creative executives and our show runners on the nuances of the different communities. So as an example, we did a media training that was led by RespectAbility, not just with our creative executives but with our show runners to talk about how this community should be portrayed in television. What are some of the blind spots? What are some of the best practices? And we also work with RespectAbility to consult on our shows when possible. And recently they worked with New Amsterdam to consult on a story that involved a character with Down syndrome. So we really try to come at it from all angles and really be a resource for them in staffing and just to bring them more insight into this space.

>>Jonathan Murray: That's great. Now I'd really like to bring everybody into the discussion. And this is really for whoever wants to answer first. Are most show runners realizing the value of having diversity? I know it's natural to want to have your friends in the writers room. Are show runners starting to reach out beyond their own group of friends to to seek out diversity?

>> Elisabeth Finch: Well, before we dive into that, I think the one of the bigger hurdles that at least I've experienced and people that are lower levels as writers have experienced is that when you're talking about inclusion and diversity, disability is last on the list, if it's on the list at all. So, show runners, agents, everyone being informed that that is another aspect of inclusion is something that's really important. And in terms of disclosure, there is a large portion of people with disabilities who have the privilege, luxury, whatever you want to call it - of not identifying from the beginning as someone who has a disability. And I have been told by former agents of mine that it's great that I'm a woman, great about the LGBTQ thing but maybe just don't tell them about the disability, because they might doubt your ability to do the job. And it's only until I've become a supervising producer, co-EP, that level - where I have a track record of how hard I am able to work and that I feel comfortable enough identifying as that. And now I look back at that and feel like oh, I owe it to a lot of other people who don't feel they're in that position to identify as that and identify as it publicly as quickly and as broadly as possible.

>> Jonathan Murray: Do any of our network executives have a comment on that? Are you trying to send the message to everyone that -- to agents that we want -- that disability is part of what we're looking for when we think about diversity and about inclusion?

>> Grace Moss: I would agree with Elisabeth as far as reps go. I've sat in several staffing meetings for several years, and when agents pitch the writers you know the non-diverse writers they'll go off on their structure and dialogue and personal experience, but when it comes to a diverse writer of any kind of background, it's always like, oh, they're diverse and that's it. And then they move on to the next one. So I think part of the problem is the reps, the agents, the managers who are sort of the gatekeepers. They're the ones who are dictating not only who is pitching and going to development with networks, but also pitching writers for the writers rooms. And if they're not pitching a multitude of different writers with various backgrounds, then obviously that's going to limit what the hiring executives and show runners are seeing. So I think that is definitely a huge issue as well.

>> Jennifer Turner: Yeah just to piggyback on what Grace is saying, it's basically - I think what we're talking about is that there's a network of things, of organizations that are part of the television making and staffing process that really have to work together hand in hand in order to open the process up to people of all sorts of diverse backgrounds, whether that's people with disabilities, people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, etcetera. And I do think when we're talking about the reps, we just - in having those staffing conversations, we have to just remember that it's not just about checking boxes. That not only is diversity inclusion the right thing to do, it ultimately does go back to what I was talking about earlier: creating better content. Creating better, more authentic storytelling. And at the end of the day I'm personally not a show runner but I would imagine that as a show runner, you want people in the room that can give you great ideas. You're trying to make a great television show. So you want those people who are not like you to bring in that different perspective and to give you those stories that can ultimately elevate the quality of your show. So I think it's everybody working together to really say this is important and we recognize the value of it.

>> Carolyn Lertzman: And I want to add too - yes to all of that and I know Disney is very proud to be working with RespectAbility so closely. And we recently were a proud sponsor and participated in the RespectAbility lab that happened over the summer that helps with the pipeline of talent behind the screen. And I think we want to be leaders in the space and we want to - we really, like Jennifer is saying, there's so much intersectionality - and Grace and Elisabeth - how a disability is often not thought of when we think about diversity and inclusion, but disability also intersects every dimension of diversity. And the community within is so -- there's so many stories and everyone's always looking for unique, really captivating, great stories to tell to their audiences. And to me it's like the possibilities are endless. And it's such a -- there's just so much opportunity there.

>> David Renaud: Yeah, I have one more thought which is I definitely have felt show runners that I've worked for – and I've had some wonderful show runners, I've been fortunate to work with some really great ones – is that there's definitely a push for diversity and for inclusion and to get those voices into the room to help them tell the stories. But I also think the best way to get show runners to represent people is to make show runners out of people with disabilities and all kinds of diverse backgrounds. That's what we're seeing in a lot of -- where people are making progress, we're seeing a lot of show runners that we're seeing a lot of women. There weren't women show runners, now there are many. And now there's writer's rooms - a lot of writers rooms now filled with women because of that. And I'm not – I think show runners tend to want to tell a story that they can relate to, that speaks to them, and that they and the studio and the network that have worked together to create this show are excited and are proud of, and that's personal to them and that they think is relatable. And I think they tend to surround themselves with people like them so that they can tell their story. And I don't think there's anything wrong with that, I think that's part of what we try to do. That's how you make a story authentic, by telling a story that's personal to you. And for sure, we should have diversity on every single show and we should be representing everybody -- because I would like to think nobody lives in a world where everyone's just like them. But I also think we need shows with people with disabilities at the helm, because ultimately, as much as you get to influence your show runner making these creative decisions, ultimately it's their show and their decision. And I happen to have a show runner who's very open to telling stories when he senses the writer is very passionate about it, and it's very personal. But wouldn't it be nice?

>> Jonathan Murray: So David, you're about -- if your series, the show that you are creating now that's in the development pipeline - if that goes forward you're going to be the show runner of it, and you're going to have an opportunity to staff that room, correct?

>> David Renaud: Potentially. I'm still in the development phase so I don't want to jinx it by saying [unintelligible]. There's a lot of shows trying to go forward right now but in the world where the show does go forward and I get to make staffing choices, absolutely, because part of it is I'm going to want a lot of diverse people in the room because one thing having a disability has taught me, especially what you talked about acquired disability versus being born with a disability, I went from being a caucasian white privileged male to being someone with a disability that all of a sudden had incredible new perspective and understanding and relationships with other people who had been excluded in a way that I didn't understand or even ever think about. So I'm gonna want a room filled with people who understand what that feels like. So I'm gonna want an incredibly diverse room. And I'm gonna want a lot of people with disabilities in my room. All kinds of disabilities - not just wheelchair users like myself, but people with invisible disabilities. People with dyslexia. People with ASD. People who have hearing impairment. All kinds of people. So yeah, I think that will be a natural consequence of having a show on the air run by somebody who that's the story they want to tell.

>> Jonathan Murray: Shoshannah, you started as an actress and you're such a good writer. Are you going to be looking at potentially writing on other people's shows or are you just going to continue to just write material for yourself?

>> Shoshannah Stern: I think my goal really is - out of everything I do - is to never do the same thing over and over again. I always want to stretch myself, stretch myself to do something different. So definitely, like, if it's the right show - the right show came along and they wanted me to be in the writer's room, I would definitely look into that, absolutely. But I think my focus currently is that I want to create opportunities. Like, I want to create a space - a space at the table where people can sit at. So by doing something like that, I think that really would be really focused on creating shows for myself and for other people.

>> Jonathan Murray: And did you - oh, Elisabeth, yes.

>> Elisabeth Finch: I was just going to say we had Shoshannah on Grey's Anatomy and to David's point about variety, diversity of the actual people with disabilities, she was not on our staff, but, Shoshannah, you were a remarkable resource there too to help us. And we got to actually put on tv people who are wearing masks through it's clear, so they can actually lip read so that we can include people in that, because there are a lot of people who are thinking, oh I'd like to be a doctor, but this limits me. So having images of people -- and the only time that her disability was brought up was when she chose to do it, and did it in a way to try and convince a character of getting on board with a medical thing and she was making up half of it anyway. But it was her agency - she had the agency to do it. And the storyline was not about a deaf person comes to Grey's Anatomy. It was about this brilliant doctor comes, and these are the ways that we can change the way that medicine looks at it, so that everyone can do their jobs. So she is not only a writer. She came as an actress but also as an amazing resource that we could talk to to figure out how he could best represent it in medicine.

>> Jonathan Murray: Can networks --

>> Shoshannah Stern: May I just jump in?

>> Jonathan Murray: Oh sure.

>> Shoshannah Stern: If I just could add to what Elisabeth mentioned working on Grey's. Grey's was such a model for how things could work and should work when you bring on a character with a disability. I was empowered in such miraculous ways, primarily by the show runner Krista Vernoff. I feel like she saw me as a collaborator, like Elisabeth mentioned. I'm sorry I'm freezing a little bit, but I was super empowered. Like, I think sometimes when I've worked on other shows, I think show runners feel like if they empower somebody else, they become weaker. They put themselves in a weaker position. But in reality, empowerment makes the show stronger. And so Grey's really modeled that in such a real way and I really hope to see that on other shows, that other writers will use that same kind of model, to use actors that have the minority experience to be able to be a resource.

>> Jonathan Murray: We really saw how when Disney, through ABC, said we're going to have diversity as far as the actors in our shows and I think Disney and NBC were really out front. And it felt like the networks basically said this is what we want, so it almost felt like you were saying don't bring us shows where it's going to be a whole bunch of white people. And it worked! It felt like change was mandated from the top. Can change be mandated from the top in this case with more representation of people with disabilities - their stories? The show about a lawyer who happens to have a disability, it's not the point of his character, disability also behind the scenes in terms of maybe a director who's deaf or a director who's in a wheelchair?

>> Carolyn Lertzman: I think that it definitely helps. It's very important for it to come from the top, but I think it's also important to have champions at every level of a production, so that everyone who's reviewing shows - I'm in standards and practices, when we're reviewing content, we might see - oh, maybe they're gonna add a character who has a disability and it's an animated show, for instance, then we have an opportunity to say okay well who are you, can you voice that character as somebody with a disability, that has the same disability even, for us. And I think that there are so many ways throughout the process when shows are getting staffed. I think it's a matter of everybody keeping it top of mind so that everyone is being a champion. Because I think that just coming from the top that's definitely, like I said, very helpful, but it doesn't have the same impact unless we're creating champions across the whole process.

>> Grace Moss: Yeah, I would agree with Carolyn. I think for us, one mandate that we currently do have is with our female for directors program which really did impact the landscape of female directors in television. And this is a program that is currently going into its third year, but through this program, directors are selected. They shadow on two or three episodes in the season, and they're guaranteed to direct an episode in that same season. And the first year of the program 90 percent of the directors were invited back for additional episodes, whether it was on NBC or a different network. So I do think in that case a mandate is slowly moving the dial. I think the ultimate goal would be to actually really shape the hearts and minds of the decision makers, where they don't need to have that mandate to hire people from underrepresented communities, or to buy and develop shows from these diverse writers. That is the long-term goal, and I think for us we are working to get there. But I do think mandates at some point are effective, at least with our directors programs.

>> Jennifer Turner: I just wanted to piggyback on what Grace and actually Carolyn are saying. Mandates can be effective, but ultimately I think it's an education process. You really want people across the organization, sort of diffusing, having this concept diffused throughout the organization so everybody understands that and believes in inclusion, and is thinking about it as they are creating the creative. So it's not something that is a mandate from the top. And once again because that's – I think sometimes you can get into checking boxes that way but it's really more about we fundamentally understand that this is important. So I think it's exposure and education with our show runners. To David's point, just going back to what he was saying, you know - yes. Your show runner is effectively the CEO of your show, of your company, which is your television show. And so the vision and everything comes from them, so having a show runner who has a disability or having a show runner who is diverse, they will be more naturally inclined to then staff their shows accordingly. So that's why it's very important to have these diverse writers programs and these pipelines to start to create the next generation of show runners, so that in addition to mandates, you also are creating the ecosystem in which diversity and inclusion is a natural part of the world in which we're creating.

>> Jonathan Murray: Great, we've started to get some questions from the people watching. Talia wants to know what advice you'd have for someone like her with a visible physical disability who's trying to get an entry level position in production crew side of things. Does she disclose it up front on the application and say what accommodations she might need? What's the best approach?

>> David Renaud: I mean, I'll jump in on that. I tend to not disclose my wheelchair use when I'm applying for a job. I kind of just show up. And - although I've always got to call ahead to see if I can actually get into the building, but I tend to just show up and just start talking about what really matters, which is what I'm gonna do. So I actually like that question a lot, because I'd like to see - again, if I'm lucky enough to have a show go on the air, I'd like to see diversity in the crew too. And I've seen this question before on other panels I've been on over the years about people on the crew side of things saying I want a spot too, and there's a ton of stigma and assumptions made about whether somebody, particularly with a physical or visible disability, can work on a film crew. And the fact of the matter is it's a very easy thing to make a film set universally accessible. It's a huge open space. And not only is that -- it's a big, empty, wheelchair accessible box that we create obstacles on when we build sets. Just like the whole world is a big, open, potentially wheelchair and mobility accessible box that we create barriers to. We make barriers. They don't exist. We make a house and we put stairs to get into it when we don't need to. So that's part of a bigger discussion, I think, about the world in general and how we set things up, but I think it's true of the crew question. If we create sets that are wheelchair accessible, and I'm only speaking from wheelchair because I'm a wheelchair user, and that's been my experience being on sets, and that's true of every limitation that's been erected to prevent people from being able to do these jobs. If we create sets that allow people access, then it becomes irrelevant. And that's absolutely possible to do.

>> Jonathan Murray: Great. Amy is a fan of great – oh I'm sorry. Shoshannah, yes.

>> Shoshannah Stern: Thank you, Jonathan. If I could just piggyback and add to what David was mentioning, I think it's so important to have disabled people who work behind the camera as well, because they have a hidden value in that accommodations - everybody benefits from them. Like from the ramps. Ramps make it easier to bring the camera, for example, onto the set. Having open caption or closed caption makes it so easy to watch the playback with the sound off. Like with This Close, we were able to hire 25 people who worked in front of and behind the camera. So we actually wrapped early. I mean, not super early, but like really close to being on time and everybody said - that never happens. And it's because members of our crew said we had to learn basic sign language to communicate with the other deaf members of the crew, so they could communicate while we were shooting. So we can make adjustments that didn't have to be made after we stopped. So it made the filming process much easier. So I think just getting into the room and then selling yourself - I mean, don't give them a reason to put a barrier up for you. Just get into the room and sell yourself.

>> Jonathan Murray: Amy is a fan of Grey's Anatomy, and Shonda Rhimes' other shows, but she notices so often that characters use the word lame as a slur. "As someone who is a wheelchair cane user I'd love to hear non-ableist slurs used to express something as uncool or off-putting. Is there a lot of conversation in the writers room about -- because we're all there. I mean, we've all done it. We've all used these words that we've grown up with. And then at the network level, obviously in the studio level, you're looking at those scripts. So is there -- yet at the same time you want your script to feel very real. So what's happening in terms of language usage?

>> Elisabeth Finch: Well I can tell you in terms of Grey's, first of all, thank you for pointing that out. Because I think that as much education as you can gain from people who are living that experience, the better. And the better we can do. So thank you for commenting and asking that question, or making that comment. We, for the most part, if a community is being represented on screen on Grey's that isn't represented in the room, we bring in as many resources as possible. We spend a lot of time the beginning of the season bringing in members from Color of Change, from ACLU, from LGBTQ communities, from both people with lived experience and from organizations about where the language shift should be, what the language shifts are, what's the evolution of it and why. And the why behind it, which to me, is the most important. And things are constantly evolving and changing and people make mistakes and I think what's important is watching people make mistakes and hear and listen to people who are telling them why it shouldn't be that way, and adjusting accordingly, and not be so defensive about, well we try all these other ways and we get all these other things right. Okay, cool, we got some other things right. We got these things wrong. Let's look at it, let's change it, let's do some more research, let's bring some more people in, let's do better. Certainly with the way that the world has evolved in terms of COVID and Black Lives Matter, and that revolution bringing in more people and how we can have discussions and watch our white characters fumble. And so we can mirror what it is to fumble, and to course correct, and to be educated and to learn and to show that you're not perfect, and you're trying. I'll take imperfect and trying any day in any community for anyone.

>> Jonathan Murray: That's great. We have about four more minutes and I'm wondering if anyone else on the panel wants to have a few final thoughts.

>> Carolyn Lertzman: I would love to share that I think it's so wonderful to be a part of this panel, and to see how much more representation of people with disabilities in entertainment media is -- is becoming normal part of the conversation. My son has multiple food allergies and it wasn't until - he's seven now, and when he was four, there was a Daniel Tiger episode where Daniel Tiger learns he has an allergy to peaches. And my son's face lit up like I had never seen before because he never - even though we were told by doctors, oh, you'll meet lots of kids who have food allergies, we actually never met anyone who did. And it was so amazing to see the positive impact that representation can have, and even though Daniel Tiger has a different food allergy than what my son has, just that camaraderie and seeing himself on the screen is just -- that's what it's all about is so that kids and adults can see themselves reflected on the screen and know that -- it can be a lonely experience having food allergies, for instance, and having to sit separately from kids at birthday parties and worrying what's going to touch them or not. And I think there's just so much power, in kids content in particular, where kids can see themselves. Kids who don't have that experience can learn how to relate when they meet someone that has that experience. And also for parents to see their kids, to see that kids can have -- that they can have a life and what that looks like. And I think it's so much -- the impact that media can have really is so large on what we can do for stigma around disability in general outside outside of the screens as well.

>> Jonathan Murray: Oh, that's great Carolyn, thank you for sharing that. Anybody else?

>> David Renaud: Yeah, I would add to that, and I think that's all great, is when I first had my accident, I mean, nobody was talking about disability as diversity or about inclusion, as someone that -- it didn't even feel like there was an organized, cohesive community where everyone got together. And certainly when I moved to L.A., nobody was saying "we need more disability representation in film and television!" I mean, you were either the butt of a joke, or you were an inspirational story or a quick way to make someone feel sorry for a character. So the fact that we're talking about this, and as I said, I've been on a couple of panels. I've been lucky enough to be invited to a few of these panels over the last couple of years now. And I think the fact that we're all talking about this, and these panels are happening. And I don't want to be the only wheelchair user around to be on these panels. There are others now, and there are other people with disabilities. And we have somebody with ASD in our writer's room, so there are other people out there. The more people we get in the rooms, the more people have these discussions, it's just a wonderful thing to be a part of this panel and to see discussions are happening.

>> Jonathan Murray: Well great. Well we are out of time. David, Shoshannah, Elisabeth, Carolyn, Grace, Jennifer - thank you so much for sharing this. I learned a lot, so I'm sure are the people watching this. And the chat room is just going crazy, so I think you've sparked something. So thank you very much for your participation. You're all doing great work.

>> Jennifer Turner: Thank you, it's our pleasure.

>> Shoshannah Stern: Thank you so much.

>> Elisabeth Finch: Thanks for having me!

>> Jennifer Turner: Thank you.

>> Jonathan Murray: All right. Later you will hear about the state of disability representation in the media and the effort to build a pipeline of talented individuals with disabilities working behind the camera. But first, we'd like to shine the spotlight on a few examples of best practice, and delve deeper with additional content creators. RespectAbility's Vice President of Communications, Lauren Appelbaum, caught up with NBC's New Amsterdam's executive producer David Schulner and casting director David Cap earlier this month and we'd love to share some insights with you. Following this recorded conversation, our Hollywood Inclusion Associate Tatiana Lee will bring on Kayla Cromer from Freeform's Everything's Gonna Be Okay and the twice - yes, it happened yesterday, the twice Emmy nominated Rami Youssef and Steve Way from Hulu's Ramy, so let's start the New Amsterdam tape.

[Video Plays]

>> Tatiana Lee: Hi everybody, welcome. My name is Tatiana Lee, and I'm a Hollywood Inclusionist at RespectAbility. I'm also an actress and a model, and you can't see it, but I'm also a wheelchair user who was born with spina bifida. In our next discussion, we are going to show best examples of representation. And I'd love to bring on some folks that I've really enjoyed watching on TV. Kayla Cromer, actress from Everything's Gonna Be Okay on Freeform, Ramy Youssef, Creator, Writer, and Actor from Ramy on Hulu, and Steve Way, actor from Ramy on Hulu. Thank you so much for you all joining us today. Ramy, I am going to start with you. First, huge congratulations to you on your Emmy nomination. You have three Emmys, but two -- one for outstanding lead and one for directing in a comedy series. So congratulations to you.

>> Ramy Youssef: Thank you.

>> Tatiana Lee: What does it feel like to be recognized for your work in such a big way?

>> Ramy Youssef: I think a lot of the foundation of what we've been working on with the show is trying to highlight voices that might feel small, but we kind of get to realize the scope of where they're at, and so awards can be really random and irrelevant at times. But I think for the work that we've been doing, it's really exciting that a show that's so specific can be recognized on that level because I think it -- it kind of brings validity to the idea that the core of a production can feel small, but the reach can be really big. And I think that's really at the core of the work that I have been doing with Steve my whole life. We started comedy together. And so we've been working on crafting these things for a really long time.

>> Tatiana Lee: Nice, I love it, because so many people have that conversation of saying like something that's diverse that's telling a story of being Muslim American, and also having a best friend with a disability, people think those nuanced stories can't sell or even be nominated for awards and you've certainly proved that. So congratulations, and I'm super excited for you guys. So another question, many writers tell their stories and tailor it to make the audience so comfortable, instead of pushing the envelope, and you have definitely pushed the envelope. And you did a great job at it, like I said, being Muslim American, and having a friend with a disability. How did your friendship inform your decision in creating this character, and why was it important for you to have a disabled character and make it a part of the storyline?

>> Ramy Youssef: I think our friendship is really at the core of the the intimacy of what we've been able to craft, and I'll let Steve really speak to this because I think that he's always really inspired me on a personal level, and I think we kind of really, again, like -- the basis of how I've started comedy and of the friendship I have with Steve are obviously central to the show, mostly because they've been really central to my life, and I think so much of what we're trying to do here is look at those organic connections, and I think that's what makes them feel real. So even if something feels like on paper, it could seem like a trope, but because the intention behind it is genuine and we're exploring real things, it becomes really exciting to do that with him.

>> Tatiana Lee: Nice. So my next question is for Steve. Tell us a little bit about your role for maybe people that haven't had a chance to see it, and my question is - what do you hope that it does for storytellers, especially for those who don't tell stories about disabilities?

>> Steve Way: Yeah, basically -- I play Ramy's best friend. I curse a lot, I'm atheist, I yell at Ramy a lot. So I'm basically playing myself, which really helps. I feel really special and honored and humbled. You know, I'm not only a part of this groundbreaking and important series, but I'm able to tell stories from the disabled community that have never seen before. You know, whether it's about death, working, dating, sex - there are concepts that many people have feared to really tackle on screen. So it's really rewarding to be that guy to open those doors and to be able to do it with Ramy. Ramy, when he's in his writer's room, will call me up and he's like hey, we're gonna do this absolutely bonkers idea. I was like, okay, and yeah, I'm totally scared out of my mind, but I know that Ramy will do it right. And I know that he'll craft it in a way that really everyone can resonate with.

>> Tatiana Lee: Nice, I love that, because it really takes people in the room to really stand up and say, "this is the story I want to tell and this is the way it should be told." And I think that is so important. So back to you Ramy, a quick question that I have. So did you get pushback for not only including a disabled character, but also having an actor with a disability as well?

>> Ramy Youssef: It wasn't pushback so much as kind of understanding that nobody really knew who he was, right? And so people didn't know Steve, it was like -- I was kind of writing the Steve character and before we got to shoot, the network was like, "who's going to play Steve?" And I'm like "well, Steve." And then they're like, "oh, we don't -- who is he, why don't we know him?" And then it makes you realize that they don't know him, because they don't see him do stand up, and they don't see him do stand up, because so many of the stand-up comedy clubs are not accessible. And it's hard because so much of New York isn't accessible, right? So I would walk into comedy clubs in New York that I can barely get into, let alone Steve, right? They're these little basement-y things that it's like - how's anyone even in this thing? So it's like, the architecture of New York City, plus, all of these things that get in the way of someone being seen. And so there are all these barriers, which is why it's really important anytime someone does have the opportunity to really advocate for someone who is actually in the role that we're writing, because in many ways, it is the only way for them to be seen. And it's kind of nice because it's a grand stage, and you get to be like, well, you know, this is his moment. So I don't care if you didn't see him come up in the clubs for five years, he's ready. And I think that that's been a really exciting to see the success of that.

>> Tatiana Lee: I love that, because, yes, that is the conversation that so many people have, they say, well, they're not famous enough to do XYZ, and they don't have access to the training because of inaccessibility or just getting the shot or 95% of the time it's -- they automatically give it to someone who's non-disabled, and so there's always these constant barriers. And so it's really amazing to have people that are in those positions to really stand up, like you said, and advocate for us. So thank you. So next, Kayla, you play a character that I love. You are quirky, you are fun, you are just a normal everyday teenager who just lives with autism. And I love this character. She's so fun. It's so relatable to me. I was watching and I said I wish I had this when I was a teenager! This would have made me feel so much better about exploring, navigating being a teenager growing up with a disability. So thank you for your role and everything that you do and just what you bring to this character. What do you see as the future of disability inclusion in programming?

>> Kayla Cromer: I want to see definitely more diverse characters in TV. Like, something that I've always said is cast someone in a wheelchair to play a prosecutor or a little person to play a college professor -- reduces stigmas, create visibility, audiences to see themselves on screen. We're just not given the chances enough to audition for characters that weren't written to be disabled. I just want to see more diversity in inclusive programming to actually give us a chance to play roles that weren't written for disabled people.

>> Tatiana Lee: Nice. I love that. Yeah, people always assume that if you have a character that has a disability, it has to be solely about their disability, and it's like, no, it doesn't! Like you said, they can be the prosecutor, the assistant, the best friend, and so many other things. And it's like -- it doesn't have to be about their disability, it can just be they just happen to have a disability. So, with that, what do you add to the role by actually being on the autism spectrum? And 95% of characters, like I said, with disabilities are played by actors without disabilities. Why was it important that that show casted you authentically?

>> Kayla Cromer: What I brought to the role by being on the autism spectrum is definitely realism, because I've walked in Matilda's shoes multiple times throughout my life. In some ways, I am Matilda. I've brought part of myself into the role and so has Josh, he's gotten some of my quirks into the show -- some of my own experiences, he's brought into the show, which is actually really important, because it just brings more realism to the character and what some people with autism deal with especially when they're a teenager. And regarding the percentage, it was the right choice for Everything's Gonna Be Okay to cast authentically. I mean, it hasn't been done before and it's way, way long overdue. It keeps it real for viewers to see honest portrayal and the timing in this era is just perfect to do so.

>> Tatiana Lee: I agree, I totally agree. Now is the time to really push the envelope for diversity and including disability centered stories and characters. And even within the intersections of it, with your character, I love seeing a young girl navigating the world with autism, and I think it is very much needed. And I've seen some of the people that follow you, and you inspire them so much, and it's so neat, you inspire me as an adult with a disability. So thank you.

>> Kayla Cromer: You're welcome.

>> Tatiana Lee: Oh thank you. So Steve, now that you're a part of a Emmy nominated project, I hope that your phone is ringing off the hook, and I'm pretty sure it is, if it isn't already. What other projects would you like to work on in the near future?

>> Steve Way: Well, Ramy and I are actually currently developing a show for Apple TV+

>> Tatiana Lee: Yes!

>> Steve Way: -- that's focused around my life. Basically our goal is to kinda do Ramy for the disabled community, but with a lot less staring and dramatic pauses. But we're really -- we're really excited to really dive deeper into what is like living with a disability, you know, and what my family goes through, what my friends go through and really just showcase as many disabled performers as we possibly can.

>> Tatiana Lee: Nice, I love that. I can't wait for that. So, you guys more than likely heard it here first, if you didn't hear it already, new project coming to Apple TV. I love it, I can't wait for that. So, Kayla, what message would you like to send producers, writers, directors about creating stories and characters with disabilities or working with actors with disabilities?

>> Kayla Cromer: Okay, let's see. First, actors with disabilities don't know easy, and work their tail off literally. The creators casting need to broaden their vision and include people with differences in their projects. It's time to see disabled actors play disabled characters and roles that weren't written as disabled. I've said that numerous times but that's always what I believed.

>> Tatiana Lee: Nice, I love that, if anybody has any questions that you would like to ask for any of our panelists, they're here, and if you want to have any questions for them, I want to hear that, and what you have. So I had questions about â€“ I guess Steve pretty much answered my question for you, Ramy, too, which was my next question of expanding more story lines about disability and really making that happen. I was like, I feel like you're going to be known as the guy that now is just putting all the disabled people on, so.

>> Ramy Youssef: I'll take that, but it's really Steve. Steve's the kingpin. I just -- I do what Steve says.

>> Tatiana Lee: Nice, I love it. See, my friends are like that too. My friends are like whatever Tati wants, that's what goes down, it's whatever she asks for, it's like you really run the show. So [Laughter] I love it. So Kayla, question for you - what do you hope that kids that are watching this show with you get from it, and what do you hope that they get from seeing themselves reflected on TV, especially young girls?

>> Kayla Cromer: I really want them to connect with us to take some time from life and laugh at our relatable talk, like you're not alone in life, and that literally - everything's gonna be okay. I want them just to relate to all these different characters because in my opinion, there's just so much realism to all the characters. It's just a lot more quirky, and it's okay to be quirky and different. Tatiana Lee: Nice, and maybe this question can go to Steve. We have one from our audience, and it says, what does it look like to advocate for yourself, for your needs, on set? Steve Way: I think it's just, it's not being afraid to ask for accommodations. You know, there have been times where I was filming and I was really sick. And we were shooting for an entire day. And I remember, it was getting towards the end, and I went up to the director and I was like we gotta hurry up, because my body's gonna like explode any minute now. And yeah, they're not going to be like, no, screw you, get offset, you know, because no person is going to say that. And I think this is really just being just up front and honest about everything. And it definitely helps to have someone like Ramy advocate for me, but one of the biggest things that studios always use as an excuse is that, well, oh, disabled people don't have the stamina to shoot an entire day. Well, I've proven that wrong many times before, but again, that doesn't mean that I can't ask for a certain accommodation throughout the day, and if I may real quick, to draw on what you said before about what else needs to happen, just expanding on what Kayla said, yes, we definitely need more stories where you have disabled characters that are not about their disability, but I think we also need to see more diverse and more intersectional stories. Kayla and I are both white, and I'm a straight white guy, but I'm not going to tell the story of a black disabled person, of a gay or trans disabled person. So, it took this long for someone like me to be on a show like Ramy, but I think we're starting to finally go in the right direction where studios won't be afraid to tell those lesser-known stories.

>> Tatiana Lee: No, and I think that's important, because like you said, most of the representation we do see are of cisgender, white male, but I really think that we're just in a day and age where people like you, as a straight cisgender white male, you know to open those gates, so then people like myself and others who are black and disabled and wanting to work in the industry to get those opportunities. Because then they're like, oh, okay, we worked with Steve, we worked with Kayla and it wasn't all that, so then hey, let's go even further, and I love that and I really feel like the industry, it is moving in that direction. So I'm really happy for the future. So question -- go ahead

>> Ramy Youssef: I just wanted to say actually one thing to Steve's point from the question in the chat about how to access -- how to advocate for your access needs on set. Because I think what Steve is really good at doing and just to back up what he was saying, is he's really good about being clear about where he's at. Whether it be, "hey, I am feeling a little tired" or whether it be "hey I do have a cold" or whatever that might be. The truth is sets are used to adapting to something that an actor needs, but the way that Hollywood is kind of rigged is to do it for celebrity. So there are celebrities who will come onto a set and everyone is pretty much in full agreement, where they're like, it might take you an hour and a half to get him out of his trailer and you might only get four good takes out of him. And that's just cause he doesn't feel like it. So if you're getting a talent who, you know what, might only be able to do three-fourths of the day, it's worth it. Because you're getting a story that you wouldn't be able to get without that person. That person is so uniquely qualified. And Steve's not even -- Steve does all the days we do. He does long days, he's talking about -- there are a couple of days where, okay, he's feeling something, and like, hey, can we kind of move a little bit? But the point I'm trying to make is even if he couldn't, even if you could only get four hours of work out of him, just do that, you know? Figure out how to make that happen. Have the writing accommodated, have the shooting accommodated, because we're constantly accommodating things as creatives, whether we're accommodating the attitude of a certain performer or you're just accommodating, hey it's raining outside. We were supposed to shoot outside, let's figure out how to move it inside. We're problem solvers. This is not -- there's no reason why people who are in the position to solve problems aren't putting their attention on making these situations work.

>> Tatiana Lee: Mmm. I love that you said that, because one of the points that I love making when I do a lot of work in the advocating we do at RespectAbility is, we tell them and let people know, people with disabilities, because the world isn't adapted to us, we are natural problem solvers. So you would think that it would be, it actually is a perfect match, because we're going to help you problem solve in a way that even you production people haven't even thought of.

>> Ramy Youssef: And don't get me wrong: it's hard, it's not easy. But also, making anything is hard. It's all hard! Nothing about it is breezy. Making a show is difficult. So yeah, there's no reason why we can't collaborate on those -- on the ways to problem solve. And you're right, because there are ways where we'll be like, "oh I don't know," and then someone like Steve will be like, no, you can get a ramp in here. I've done it. You're like, I didn't even know, he's like, no I've been fine like this, we'll figure it out. There is this resiliency that working with someone like Steve instills in everybody who works with him.

>> Tatiana Lee: Nice. I love that. So I have one last question, and Steve, I mean Ramy you can take it away. What response or advice you have for someone who is a show runner who may have a project, and want to incorporate story lines that involve a character with a disability or include an actor with a disability? What is some advice you would have for them, because they may be afraid to kind of touch on that because of the stigmas that surround Hollywood sometimes?

>> Ramy Youssef: Well I think Kayla's point is probably the best answer to that when she was talking about getting a prosecutor in a wheelchair, just kind of involving people in roles where you're not necessarily having to talk about the disability. Because I think that the important thing with people who are creating stuff is you have to be really careful to not talk about stuff that you don't know about. So if you want to actively be advocating for people in the disabled community, you need to do one of two things. You either need an organic storyline, in which you are involving people who have disabilities in fleshing it out, but it has to feel real to the story, you can't just be doing it to do it. Or, do what Kayla said, which is you don't have to talk about it, just put someone who's disabled in a role and that's it. They're just working at the bank or they're just doing whatever they're doing. So it's actually not that hard if you are doing it from an honest place. I think the worst version of it is trying to force it, because if you don't have someone like Kayla, and if you don't have someone like Steve or if we don't have someone like you, Tatiana, then we're just almost being advantageous. We're kind of just creating something so we can feel like we're part of some convo, which I think can be really damaging. But there, again, are really two clear options, it's either do it super organically, or just cast someone in a role that you would cast anyone in and it'll be great.

>> Tatiana Lee: Nice. Kayla, what are some things that you think that can be done, and I asked you this earlier, but what are some other things or tips that you think that people can use moving forward? Kayla Cromer: I think opening the audition room to anyone would be a huge start, definitely, because so many times, we don't get that chance to get in the audition room, especially if we're a known actor with a disability. Sometimes, they'll think, oh gosh, all the accommodations you might have to do extra costs, like a wheelchair ramp, it's probably not worth it because there's -- and lawsuits and everything if somebody with a disability gets hurt on set. There's just so many things to think about, but they just have to put that aside. They have to realize that we are part of the population. We are part of the audience that watches your TV and film. One of the best instances that I can think of where an actor, from what I understand, kept his disability hidden on set. I believe his name is Robert David Hall, he played the mortician on the original CSI, and he's a double amputee. And during one of the episodes he got frustrated during a scene, and actually threw his prosthetic leg across the room. And everybody was just like, wait, he's an amputee? We had no idea, and like the whole world was shocked, because that was one of the first times people were introduced to a disabled character, but in the most crazy way, I mean like taking off your leg and just throwing it across the room, that is one of the greatest reveals. And we need more moments like that, so people can connect with us.

>> Tatiana Lee: Nice, I agree. Actually he was one of the first times I saw disability represented, and that was a huge moment. So thank you for highlighting that moment in disability TV history. So thank you all so much, I want to thank our guests: Kayla, Ramy and Steve. Thank you so much for this enlightening and just awesome conversation. and all for your thoughts and your comments today. And up next we'll be having a conversation on disability representation in news media, moderated by my colleague, Lauren Appelbaum, RespectAbility's Vice President of Communications, a trailblazer in fighting stigmas in Hollywood, and I'm so happy to work alongside her. She is also the primary author of the RespectAbility's Hollywood Disability Inclusion Toolkit, and former journalist at NBC News. Prior to that panel we hope you enjoy this video of actors with disabilities talking about the first time they saw themselves represented on screen. Thank you so much to my guests. I really appreciate you guys being here, and having this conversation. And I hope you guys have a great rest of your day.

>> Ramy Youssef: Oh, you too.

>> Steve Way: Thank you.

>> Tatiana Lee: Thank you!

>> Ramy Youssef: Great to meet you Tatiana and Kayla. Really good to meet you.

[Video plays]

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Hello everyone, I hope you are all enjoying the powerful conversations that we have been having thus far. I'm really excited about this next panel, featuring journalists who cover disability issues, journalists with disabilities, and journalists with disabilities who cover disability issues. Please welcome Victoria Arlen from ESPN, Tim Gray from Variety, Kristen Lopez from Indiewire, and Dino-Ray Ramos from Deadline Hollywood. I'm going to start with Tim. You've been at Variety for more than 30 years, and have had a really distinguished journalism career. Why in your opinion are people with disabilities not covered in the entertainment media in the same way that other marginalized populations are?

>> Tim Gray: I think people with disabilities are considered the invisible minority. I don't think journalists are putting up a wall. I think it just doesn't occur to them, and even now with all the talk about diversity and inclusion, 90% of that conversation is about racial inclusion, and maybe the other 10% is about gender with women equality, but I think, asians are not part of it, and people with disabilities are off the radar. And it's also interesting because Variety started in 1905. So I've been going through the archives and there were protests by the NAACP, starting in 1915 and they've been protesting ever since then, but people with disabilities didn't start protesting until the last few years. So I think it's a cumulative effect, and I think people are much more aware. I think journalists are much more aware than they were even four years ago, but obviously still a long way to go.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you. Dino, you also identify as an ally to the disability community, and like Tim, you've been very intentional about covering disability related topics. Why is that important to you? Dino-Ray Ramos: I think with me, I identify as queer, I am also Asian American, I'm filipino. And so I have been a advocate for diversity and inclusion in Hollywood, since I even started my journalism career. I was doing it before I even thought I was doing it, if that makes any sense, because I would gravitate it towards people in the margins, because growing up I didn't see people like me, and so I just really -- when it comes to people with disabilities, it's like what Tim was saying -- it's a blind spot, and so I just really started doing more coverage on people with disabilities, and in Hollywood and film and television, probably just about a little bit under or over a year ago, and I'm still a little bit learning, and so, I don't know everything about disabilities. And I want to be a good advocate and I think that's important. I go into diversity inclusion coverage with the mentality of if one of us wins, we all win. So that's why. And I think that people with disabilities are in the margins, and they have been, disserviced for the longest time. And I'm gonna try to advocate for them as much as I can and use my platform for that, just as I do with the Asian American Community, just as I do with the queer community, with the black community, latinx, indigenous, anyone who is in the margin or who has been othered.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you. I love what you said. If one of us wins, we all win. I think that really resonates with everyone. Kristen, while your official title is TV Editor, you unofficially kind of have the diversity beat at Indiewire as well. Why is it important to have disabled voices covering disability in the media? Kristen Lopez: Well I mean, outside of the obvious elements of knowing the verbiage and it's far easier, I think, for an able-bodied writer to kind of stick their foot in their mouth unintentionally in reporting on disabled issues, as it is for any minority issue if you don't really know the correct terms. And really, what you're looking for in terms of criticism. So in that regard, it benefits to have disabled voices, but I think more importantly in the work that I've been doing, there are disabled narratives and a lot more things that the average writer I don't necessarily think sees. So whether that's something like the babysitter's club TV series that just came out and that disabled storyline or even in film, looking at the history of film and how things are coded, and whether that is with regards to race or sexuality or disability, you can see something that an able-bodied person, cis white male might not see. So the more different experiences and perspectives that come through in the writers will allow for more diverse perspectives to come through in the media that is being consumed.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: On that note, it's also important that disabled journalists be given the opportunity to cover non-disability related topics as well. So Kristen, you're on this panel, because you're an awesome reporter, not just because you have a disability, so do you ever feel pigeon-holed?

>> Kristen Lopez: Sometimes, yeah. I have great co-workers, but if there's anything with a tangential connection to disability, I'll get it forwarded or somebody will ask me my opinion about -- what do you think of this movie or this TV show or what do you think of this organization? And I love that they're soliciting my opinion, but it also feels like it's -- I kind of end up filling that hole that they don't really know about, that -- you become kind of the person that takes on all the types of minority issues. And so I really had to kind of advocate, and thankfully my co-workers are really great about letting me -- they know things other about me than my disability. So, if it's a classic film-related topic, they're like, just give it to Kristen. She'll understand, or if it's something else, they know what to send me, but there definitely comes a point where I do get asked to cover stuff that, whether it's LGBTQ or black story lines, and I have to kind of be like, well, I'm not of those groups, so I don't necessarily know if I should be covering them, and that's the problem that comes with being a diversity and inclusion writer is that you end up having to carry the weight of all the minority writing that happens on the site. So you really have to, just for your own mental health, be like, "hey, I need to cover other things because there's more to me than just being a minority."

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Dino, I see you nodding there, did you want to add something?

>> Dino-Ray Ramos: Oh yeah, I mean, I think I'm in the same boat as Kristen, you know, it's like, and I think that just speaks to the importance of diversity in a newsroom. One of my friends called it the highlander syndrome, there could only be one, you know? But that's not true. I think the more diverse voices we have in a newsroom, and I think this applies to any workplace, the more points of view we see, and it lifts the burden, and it's also not the onus on diverse voices to carry, like Kristen said, the burden, this responsibility of talking for every single diverse group, because we're only one person, and we only could do so much, and we don't know everything about everything, and that's why, with disabilities, I - with the people with disabilities and that coverage, I do my best to learn, and write what I know. But I don't know everything, because that's not my point of view, and that's why we need more of those voices in the room, and I was just listening to the previous panel with Ramy and all of them and what they were saying about the importance of just having these different voices on set and it just applies to everything. People just need to open their mind and be nice. [Laughter] That's my two cents.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you. I'd like to shift topics a moment. Victoria, while you no longer need mobility aids, when you started your job as a reporter in ESPN, you were using a wheelchair. Were there any hurdles to finding employment with a visible disability?

>> Victoria Arlen: I was very fortunate, and when ESPN brought me on as a reporter, there wasn't a huge issue when it came to me having a wheelchair, me needing a few extra assistive devices, when it came to reporting and hosting. I think the biggest hurdle was how can I do my job in the most productive way, where my disability isn't the topic of conversation. And so often times when I was doing interviews initially or hosting, I was sitting at a desk, or sitting in a captain's chair, and really wanted it to be about who I was interviewing and their story, and not having mine be the topic of, oh that reporter is sitting in a wheelchair. As great as that is, and as great as that was such a really cool thing, it was also, when it came time to do my job, I really spoke very much up about the fact that I wanted this to be about who I'm reporting, and who I'm talking about, and their story, and not the fact that the reporter there is in a wheelchair. And so I think that it was finding that fine line, because, I had a very colorful wheelchair, and I was very proud of my wheelchair, But I also had a job to do and as a journalist, and as a reporter, I wanted to make my job, and the subject of who I was interviewing the star of the show, and not have my hot pink wheelchair be the one kind of stealing that away or my hot pink crutches. So I think those were the biggest hurdles, but ESPN has been -- even on all my different stages of learning to walk and stuff -- has been so supportive and just getting creative with hosting and different things on set so I could go from A to B. And it was very easy to transition into that, where ramps were installed, but it made everyone think. It made people, my colleagues think about, okay, where's the elevator, where's the ramp, how can we get you up towards the desk and then move your chair out of the way. So I think it definitely made for a little extra creativity but I have been incredibly fortunate that it was a pretty seamless transition as far as A, I was a new journalist, but also, I was in wheelchair, and how do we navigate those waters? And so ESPN really stepped up and allowed me to step into my role without any issues.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: And Kristen, you worked as a freelancer for more than a decade prior to landing your job at Indiewire. Did you have any difficulties with requesting accommodations?

>> Kristen Lopez: You know, you always have difficulties in the sense of feeling like you don't want to make too much out of something. I have always advocated for myself, but once you start getting into the world of media, and I think it was something that was spoken about in the last panel, the fear of being labeled difficult, and you're asking for too much, I know that when I was hired, I definitely figured I'd have to adapt in some way. Thankfully, our office is all modern, so there's elevators, it's all flat, it wasn't about having to reconfigure anything. There were elements that they didn't know were going to be troubling, and I definitely was afraid to mention it. The first time I really needed to ask a question, I was waiting for somebody to be like, oh god, here it comes, she's gonna want us to redo the whole damn thing, and I was really surprised, and I actually told the person that I was working with that I was so happy. I was like, there's no eye rolling, there's no anything, it was just like, what do you need? How can we do that, in terms of rearranging shelves in the break room, which is now irrelevant because nobody's working in the office anymore. I think the biggest thing for me was I wanted an office chair, and I think a lot of people make the assumption that "Kristen doesn't need an office chair, she has a chair with her. She obviously wants to sit in that for the entire eight hours of her work day." And I asked for a chair that I could work at, that was able to go up and down, because I'm short. So I needed it to obviously go up to the desk and there was no hesitation about that. They got me a really cool chair that I kind of wish I'd taken with the office shut down, [laughter] because it's super cool. But I mean again, it was like no hesitation. It was what do you need? Let's do that. I think the hardest challenges for me probably came more when I was freelancing, because you're doing that all on your own. You're your own one woman everything. And going to events in Los Angeles, whether that's a screening room that doesn't have any handicapped seating, because there's no belief that a disabled person will be in there, or traveling to a film festival in a city that you don't know, you have to -- you're the only person. You can't go to an editor or a manager and be like, hey, I need this accommodation. You have to be your own advocate. And that's probably where most of my issues have come from, because there is that belief that you're one person asking for this, so you're a big pain in the ass. But it's been a great experience working for Indiewire, because that all went away.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: And then print and online journalism, it can pretty much be done from anywhere. So can you talk to me a little bit about the importance of accommodations with regards to working at home both before and now with COVID?

>> Kristen Lopez: Yeah, I think the thing that we're gonna see as this continues for however long this continues, you're gonna have to start having those conversations with employees. I think that was the joke when I started at Indiewire, I had been asked, would you be able to transition from working in an office after 12 years of working from home? And I said that's fine. And then I worked in the office for about three weeks, and then we all got told to stay home, and the joke that I told my editor was "do you think you can do your job effectively working from home after being in the office all this time?" I think that's the thing we're gonna end up seeing more of, is that, the reason why there's a lot of emphasis on the office in regards to writing is corporate office space being so expensive, and you want that return on investment, but there's also this valid belief that you're not focused enough when you're able to work from home, which is valid. And it's great to be able to go to an office, do your job, and then drop everything there and go home, and completely separate. But that's very limiting to a disabled person, who wants to work for you. I'm very fortunate that I can -- I'm mobile -- that I can get from A to B, that I can sit for eight hours a day at an office. But I always think about people who aren't that fortunate, who are still writing great things, but they can't work for eight hours a day, because they can't sit, or they're, unable to do office work for a variety of reasons. Are they automatically x'd out of working for a major publication because they can't physically come to a location? We're seeing that that's that's a fallacy that you can do that from home. So I think that as this extends, and as we see more companies want to hire diversity, there needs to be more discussion about making accommodations for writers, I think, regardless of disability. Whether that's working mothers, whether that's people who just can't work in one location. I think there needs to be more discussion about how writing is a medium that is created for choice, and choice in your workspace is one of them.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: And as we heard in previous panels, whether it's writing as a journalist, or writing for TV, having a disability can really add that extra perspective or having any sort of marginalized background is just one more experience that you bring to it. And Victoria, you talked last week with me about how having a disability at any point in your life really provides you with a unique perspective of adversity. How has it helped you in all of your news coverage?

>>Victoria Arlen: I'd say, for me, obviously having my story and going through the things that I went through kind of gave me, at least when I was brought on to ESPN, they were kind of like, look, we want your perspective as a young reporter, because I was 20 at the time. But also, you've seen a lot in 20 years, and we want what you've learned through that to come through your storytelling. And so I think going through the things that I went through gave me in a sense an element of telling the story, but connecting on a different level with individuals. And a lot of the work I did in my early days was with Special Olympics, and with X Games, and with ESPYs, and all these different stories, different athletes from all walks of life. And so being able to connect and you wouldn't believe how many people on the outside seem fine, but have had a journey to get to where they are. And so for me, knowing the journey that it took for me to get to where I am being able to kind of go back and ask different athletes and individuals, okay, how did you get from there to here, what was that moment, what was that mountain you had to climb? And I think having my own mountain that I had to climb really allowed me to really look for those mountains with other people, but also understand and connect with them, and think well, if this was me, how would I want that story to be told? How would I want that to be told in the most authentic heartfelt way that could really have an impact for so many people? And so I think finding that fine line was was a real fortunate blessing in disguise with everything that I had gone through.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you for that, and we've talked a bit about covering different types of issues, and I think whether you have a disability or not, and sometimes, even when you don't, and you start covering disability issues, that can be vitally important. So Tim, you often say that if you don't write about it, who will? And I know that you've thought about it, as a white male, ensuring authentic coverage of different marginalized populations is something that is vitally important to you. So how do you go about really shining a spotlight on stories that aren't typically written?

>> Tim Gray: I mean, what I try to do is -- we have meetings at Variety, and I try and figure out a way that I can bring people with disabilities into this angle, and also to make other people at Variety kind of aware so we can talk about that. Because again, I've been pitched stories by people with disabilities saying, look, I'm having a really hard time making it in the entertainment industry and it's like, okay, but that's not really a story, because everybody has a hard time making in the entertainment industry. So you try and find the angle for that. And so, I would say to people, if you pitch stories, kind of coordinate with other people, try to come up with a good angle that is kind of a grabber, because -- I'll just give you a quick example, but we just ran a story today about the turmoil on the Ellen DeGeneres show. It got one million readers. I did, by comparison, I did an Olivia De Havilland memorial, that got a hundred thousand readers. I did an article on people with disabilities working behind the camera, it got 800 readers. So, a lot of places, they really worry about traffic. I mean at Variety, they worry about traffic, but I'm kind of exempt from that. So I can write a story about people with disabilities behind the camera, and I don't worry about how many hits it's going to get, because I think I don't care, it's the right 800 people are going to be reading that. But again, for most other publications, you got to find an angle that's going to grab people. And so I would say talk to each other. And that's why RespectAbility is so great, because it's like, I think this is a way for people with disabilities to tap into your knowledge, and bounce ideas off of you. Does that make sense? I don't want to put too much responsibility on you.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: So the message that I'm receiving from that when any of you or others write a story about disability, it's on all of us to really promote it and get more eyeballs on it. So that way, others can write more and be given the go-ahead. Is that kind of what you're saying?

>> Tim Gray: Well, I do think coordinating things with each other is important, and to do it on social media, it's a great opportunity. So yeah, I mean now I talk to one person -- this is one person. He said there's a real strong deaf community. There's a real strong blind community, but there's not a really strong disabilities community where everybody talks to everybody else. Now, I don't know if that's true or not, but I think that's one of the the goals, because the more you talk to each other, the more you can coordinate things. You can make a stronger pitch and enlighten people, and again, sometimes one phone call to a journalist is going to make a difference, and you might have to make 20 phone calls over a year before the idea sinks in. But I think for me, the big goal is to make people more aware of people with disabilities.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you, and this question is for anyone who would like to answer. What advice do you want to give to young folks who want to be journalists? The industry is shrinking for everyone. As Tatiana mentioned, I'm a former journalist, and I know there are a lot of former journalists out there. So how do you suggest this as a career for folks, and then how do people succeed in the journalism industry and specifically how do people with disabilities succeed in the journalism industry? Anyone want to -- Dino-Ray Ramos: Don't do it! I'm just joking. [Laughter] Kristen Lopez: Dino's kind of right, but that's what I've been telling people. And it's very weird, I get a lot of emails from young disabled writers that want to get in this industry. They ask me how I do it, and I always think, am I cool enough to dispense this advice? So, I mean, it's twofold. You just have the, in general, element of writing, which is you really, really, really have to be financially able to hustle, and struggle, because this is not a money-making industry at the moment unfortunately. Print has been dying for a long time, the website scene is, as we've seen with COVID, a lot of good writers are now freelance, sites are closing down. So the pool of writers is getting bigger, but there's not a lot of places for them to go. So, for me, I was fortunate that I had a family that was willing to get day jobs and work while I freelanced on the side, and it was enough to keep me going, but if I was living on my own, and had to pay for food, and utilities, and all of that, I would not have been able to sustain myself at all. And it's still -- up until I got my job at Indiewire, I was still living paycheck to paycheck with my family helping bear the brunt of what I was doing. So from that spectrum, if you are financially able to struggle, more power to you. We need more of you. But for disabled writers specifically, there's a whole other level of issues. I mentioned festivals. The entertainment industry festivals are a necessary evil. You have to know what's hot, and what's new, and what's coming. And so you have to go to these events that are in places that you might not have been to. And it requires a lot of planning, a lot of coordinating, not just on your part, but sometimes coordinating with a festival to let them know that hey, there's a disabled writer coming, because they have to reconfigure, sometimes, meeting places or red carpets. I mean it's a process, and it's hard, and it's frustrating, and at times it can be very upsetting. But if you are able to be a really strong advocate for yourself, and you're not afraid to have people maybe not like you at the end of those conversations, it's a lot of fun, I don't know at this point, having done this for so long, any other job that I could do that would be as fun, and unpredictable, and fulfilling as writing has been. But again, I come at it from a very fortunate set of circumstances. It is hard work, not just to write, but to be a disabled person writing who has to take on this extra level of advocacy. So it's a process.

>> Victoria Arlen: I mean for me, being in television, I get asked quite a bit, just being at ESPN is a dream for me and for a lot of reporters out there too. I think for me, If that's what you want to do, if that sets your heart on fire, and excites you, go for it, but do not be afraid to knock on doors. And that's really what got me in the door was knocking on doors. Mentors and taking people up when they offered me to job shadow, and being able to kind of put myself out there a little bit in my wheelchair, with my disability on display, and being kind of fearless in that sense. Yes I was scared, yes it was intimidating, but I knew I wanted to do this, and I knew I wanted to learn, and I was willing to strap a wagon to the back of my wheelchair, and deliver coffee as an intern. I mean, I was willing to do whatever it takes, and so I think if you want to do it, and really are willing to put in the work, go for it, but if you're not wanting to put 110% into it, like Kristen said, then, you know, maybe there's another path. But I think if you want to do something, you have to just go in wholeheartedly regardless and just not be afraid to just dive on in.

>> Dino-Ray Ramos: Yeah, it is interesting in how I came into the journalism industry at a really weird time, when print was just starting to die. And everyone was all, what's this online thing? What is a blog, you know. And then I got my first kind of adult journalism job was at the Oakland Tribune. So I actually worked in print when they used to call news -- they used to measure articles in inches. I don't know if they still do that -- do they still do that? And then I've just seen like Victoria was saying, when I got laid off of Oakland Tribune, and I went into the freelance realm, and print was slowly dying, and you have to be your own businessman, be a businesswoman, and knock on doors and start hustling. And with how the media landscape is changing right now, I think the bottom line with journalism is that it's storytelling, right? And it's reporting. And there's so many different kinds of avenues to do that now. You have Instagram Stories, you have vlogs, you have YouTube, you have TikTok, you want to count that? That could be something too - sure, why not? But there's so many avenues with media, I don't even know, this is going to sound so ignorant, is there such thing as j-school anymore? Do people still go to journalism school? Is there a department of that, or has it turned into a whole blanket media? But bottom line is, I think there is opportunity, you just have to hustle and you have to be willing to get doors slammed in your face, people saying no, people ignoring you, because it's a competitive industry. And then once you find that spot, stay there. [Laughter]

>> Victoria Arlen: And to go off what you said in regards to going to school and stuff like that, I remember, because I was 19 when I started job shadowing, and then 20 when I got offered a job, and I remember going to the producer, and being like, okay, so I'm still in school. Should I switch to journalism, like what do I do? And my mentor was like, honestly no. Spend as much time as you are in front, spend twice the amount behind the scenes, learn how this industry works, learn how to write, learn how to produce, learn the entire -- the whole process where you are. And then do your research outside of that too, but really, if you have an opportunity to go into the door, or knock on a door, and have a door open, even if it's not necessarily a job, don't be afraid to step into that, because you don't know where that will lead you. And don't be afraid of the closed doors because those builds character, but also can lead to better opportunities.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: I'm going to have to find a time to bring all of you back for a longer conversation. I feel like we only began to hit at the top of the surface of this, and you all have really interesting perspectives, and people are really enjoying that you're all being very honest, and giving really frank advice. So I want to thank you all so much - Victoria, Tim, Kristen, and Dino - for your time today. The last segment of today's conversation will focus on a project that's dear to my heart, our RespectAbility Lab for Entertainment professionals with disabilities, piloted in 2019, and then run virtually in 2020. My colleague Nasreen Alkhateeb, Senior Production Advisor for the lab, will be moderating this conversation on building the industry pipeline for the future. But first I'd like to share a video created by several lab participants, and edited by lab alumnus, Neb Dingetu. So we're gonna see a video.

>> Tim Gray: Thank you.

>> Dino-Ray Ramos: Thank you all.

>> Victoria Arlen: Bye everyone, thank you!

[Video plays]

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: Hey everyone, my name is Nasreen Alkhateeb. I'm a filmmaker and the senior production advisor for RespectAbility. RespectAbility lab serves to reposition disabled filmmakers in front of executives, who they may never have the audience with otherwise. Today, we'll be talking about intersections of identity, and how those identities play a role in the opportunities creatives are finding. Most of disabled characters we see in film and TV are still straight, white, cisgendered, and male. So I'm excited to introduce you to the 2019 and the 2020 RespectAbility lab alumni. Natalie Trevonne is an actress, model, and co-host of Fashionably Tardy. Leah Roman is an attorney and producer of Best Summer Ever, a South by Southwest selection in 2020. April Caputi is a creative associate under Disney's Executive Incubator Program. And Kiah Amara is a filmmaker, activist and founder of IndieVISIBLE Entertainment. As a multi-hyphenate, I'm interested to know how your identities have influenced the opportunities you found, and how you leverage your privilege to help BIPOC disabled creators around you? Welcome. So Leah, I'll start with you. Can you give one example of how the lab helped propel your career?

>> Leah Romond: Yes. I guess becoming involved with RespectAbility was a real turning point for me. I was a member of the 2019 lab, and then Lauren asked me to come onto this lab for 2020, and help by being a Senior Production Advisor with you, Nasreen, and I think sometimes with disability, there's a question that we talk about in the community of am I too disabled to do this? Am I not disabled enough to do this, like - how do I fit into this community? And my disability was a brain injury, so I essentially had a new brain placed on my head, after I lived my whole life before with a different brain, and I really didn't have the confidence that I needed to go forward in my career, and RespectAbility really gave that to me, and let me know that my lived experience as a person with a disability is valuable and important, and many many people, 25% of Americans, identify as having a disability. So it allowed me to disclose my disability and be proud of it.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: How about you April, can you give us one example of how the lab helped propel your career path?

>> April Caputi: Sure. So I just want to say I'm really grateful to even be in this position, because I probably would not if it wasn't for the RespectAbility lab. So one of those days last summer, when I was in the program, we had a day at Disney, which was one of my favorite anticipated days, because that was my dream company, and I wanted to work for them. And we had a meeting with people from the CTDI Department, who were talking about all the writers programs that they had, and their directing programs, and a new PA program even, and I just kind of raised my hand, and I said, is there anything for people who want to be executives in this field, as I thought there should be more disability representation on the gatekeeper side. And that was the passion that I wanted to achieve. And they said yes, there's going to be a new executive incubator program coming out in October, this was July at the time, and she said to look out for the job application. So I made sure I kept tabs on that, and I applied online, like everyone else, and went through the interview process, and miraculously, I made it in. So I'm really excited and thankful to be where I am.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: Nice, you were ahead of the game on that.

>> April Caputi: Yeah, for sure. I mean I knew, the RespectAbility lab really does help people with disabilities get, advanced notice in front of other executives and professionals in the entertainment industry. And I just took advantage of that to make sure that I was seen and then I was ready to work.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: Kiah, can you give one example of how the lab propelled you?

>> Kiah Amara: Yeah, well for me, of course, I'm the one 2020 alum here, and I actually got to -- April was somebody who came and spoke to us, and obviously, Nasreen and Leah, you guys were a huge help for all of us to sort of be moving along in that path too. So I still think I have yet to find out how it will propel me, since we've only been out for about a month, but I know it was amazing, not only to be able to speak to so many people, but especially people behind the camera who have disabilities, and some of the other writers who we spoke to, some of the other people who are executives or everything from production assistants and casting on up, the line was something that I -- even though we know we're hugely underrepresented in actors and people who are on screen, we also know we're even less represented behind the camera, and so even knowing that there was one person, let alone 10, who were already doing that was so huge to really give me the confidence to say, hey, I have something that I'm doing that I think people will really want to be a part of, and to know that there are people who are sort of beyond the gates already who are in support of all those things which, even listening to the first panel from today, were some of the people who spoke to us and are all of those people who are like hey, Bring it on. Come on. Let's see what you got. So that's been really great so far.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: Leah -- how have you used that momentum to amplify disabled voices, the other disabled voices that are next to you? Leah Romond: Yes, although I have a disability, I also recognize that I am a white hetero cis woman and I think about this a lot, and I think, oh well, I could tell my story, but I would rather have a story that is much more intersectional. So I see my place and my passion in this industry is to connect the creative, the talent behind the screen and in front of the screen to the studio executives, the show runners, the decision makers, and gate makers so they get hired and progress in their career, and they will become the studio heads and the gate makers and the show runners. So, I do that through mentoring, I do that. My favorite way to do it is to introduce people to people at studios. So if you are an intersectional disabled filmmaker, I want to know you, and I want to connect you to people. So reach out to me.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: April, how about you? How do you use that momentum that you've garnished so far to amplify disabled voices next to you?

>> April Caputi: In my position, I'm kind of a junior executive in training, and I'm actually super grateful to be with Freeform, because they are known to be very inclusive in their brand, and so that kind of already made it a safer environment for me, to kind of just jump in and provide creative feedback, in development, in casting, in current, and in marketing. And I get to be the voice that says, what about people with disabilities? What about black people with disabilities? What about people with disabilities who are part of the LGBTQ community? As we have said, I am a white hetero cis woman, and I get to think more in the room about, you know, who's not in the room? Who's not being represented in the works that we have? And I get to collaborate with any of the creative executives that I'm working with and get to have a say in that.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: That's amazing. Kiah, how have you used the momentum - I mean, it's only been a couple of weeks at this point, but clearly, you've been doing the work longer right?

>> Kiah Amara: Yeah -- yeah, absolutely. And I mean, I am white, but I am not just a hetero cis woman, so on one side of it is, working with my other communities, and doing a lot of LGBTQ intersectional stories with disability and LGBTQ, but on top of that is things like creating universally accessible sets, which is a huge passion of mine and a lot of what I do as a part of indieVISIBLE as well, which is not only worrying about is there a wheelchair ramp, but saying okay, is it sensory friendly? Do we have space for everybody to be there? And again, even though I haven't had that much time post the end of lab, hearing everybody talk about the barriers that are still there, the fact that people still have in their minds that, oh, this is going to be such a challenge and it's going to cost me more money and I'm going to have to figure out how to do this, I am so interested in resetting what the base practice is of that. If we make universal set design what the norm is, then we don't have to worry about somebody saying, oh well, I can't have a PA who's autistic, because I don't know if they can be in the space. And we don't have somebody saying, oh well, I can't have somebody who has CP play my nurse who's not disabled, because I didn't plan for them to be disabled. They can just all be in the space, because that's what we've set up for, and I think again that plays into everything that we're doing, we want to make the space accessible for everyone, and yes, that's disability centric since that's what ADA30 is all about. But that goes into all of the intersectionalities behind that: underrepresented genders, other LGBTQ identities, other race identities, other religious identities. All of that goes into, we want to reset what the base is to say, all of these people are welcome. We've already planned for all of them to be welcome. So we don't need to reset anything or spend extra money on something. We're just ready to go and we're always ready to go, and we're always looking to bring people in and bring them in immediately.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: That's so true, and what a beautiful concept, where you could walk onto set, and everyone would have what they needed, right?

>> Kiah Amara: Yeah.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: Natalie, It's so nice to see you. You're on mute. Let's see.

>> Natalie Gross: I'm here. I'm here.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: So we are running out of time, but I'd love to just, pose a question to you. Can you give one example of how the lab helped propel your career path?

>> Natalie Gross: Yes, so the lab really really was beneficial for me. I started the blindness awareness presentations, where I go into entertainment companies and talk about the benefits of hiring people who are blind or low vision, and I would have never been able to do that without the contacts that I got from the lab program networking and making those connections with all of the executives that we got to meet and talk with during the lab. And they were really open to having me come in, and speak to them about hiring people with disabilities, specifically in the blindness community, because only 30% of us work, and the amount of us is really really low. And it's very interesting, because I've had students who are blind, and they want to work in entertainment, but don't have the opportunities, so I go in. I was able to bring a team in, some other blind people I was able to bring in with me, and to really show our assistive technology, and go over orientation of mobility, how we get around, and how to make things more accessible, on the job. So it was actually really really helpful for me and I encourage it for anyone.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: That's so critical. Thank you so much for sharing that experience. It's a ripple effect, right? It can be --

>> Natalie Gross: Yeah.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: as small as your mentee, helping them get their first internship, or it could be something as big as introducing someone to an executive that cast them in their first major motion picture or television show. There's a spectrum of things that people can do, so thank you all for joining us and let's all keep up the momentum.

>> Kiah Amara: Thank you.

>> Leah Romond: Thank you.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: I want to thank Nasreen very much for bringing some folks on from the lab and I'm glad that Natalie was able to join us at the end. There's always going to be some sort of technical snafus when doing a live event. So a few things to kind of close out the day, and I appreciate all of you for kind of sticking with us for a good amount of time -- is that I want to first of all say that we're really really grateful to our ADA30 2020 sponsors, which are Comcast NBCUniversal, Son Pictures Entertainment, Walt Disney Company, and the Murray/Reese Foundation, and I also want to say thank you to Jonathan, Tatiana, Nasreen, and all of our amazing panelists. All of the initiatives discussed today really give us hope that the future of disability inclusion and representation is bright.