Vincenzo Piscopo: Hello and welcome. My name is Vincenzo Piscopo. I am the community and stakeholder relations director for the Coca-Cola company, where I manage the relationship with disability, veterans and Hispanic organizations. I am also on the board of directors for RespectAbility, a non-profit fighting stigmas and advancing opportunities so people with disability can fully participate in all aspects of community. Today I'm pleased to introduce some amazing panelists. Some of whom are alumni of RespectAbility's Summer Lab for entertainment professionals with disability. All of our panelists today are working in the entertainment industry in various ways changing the landscape of the entertainment industry. Today's conversation will last one hour and include time for participants Q and A at the end. If you would like to view the ASL interpreter in a larger screen, we invite you to pin his video, which will spotlight his video throughout the entire panel. In addition, we have live captioning that is available in this Zoom app by clicking on the CC button or via web. We have posted that link in the chat box. We will be taking questions from you during the second half of the panel. Please add your questions to the Q and A box to do so. Authentic representation of marginalized populations on screen is vitally important. As what people view on screen really influences how they act in real life. This Hispanic Heritage month and National Disability Employment Awareness month, we want to honor their achievement as talented industrial professionals with disabilities and how the LatinX and Hispanic heritage has shaped their creative path. So let's get started and I'm very excited to be the moderator for this amazing panelists panel. And I'm going to start with Diana Romero. Diana Romero is a 15 year veteran in physical production asset producer and line producer who had a relapse of multiple sclerosis that affected her legs, which impair her mobility, and now relies on a wheelchair. Janna, while some things have changed. For example, needing accommodation. Your wealth of experience is still a huge asset. How have you shifted your career to continue working in Hollywood?

Diana Romero: Thank you Vincenzo, thanks for that wonderful introduction. And thank you everybody who's joining us today. I think this is such an amazing opportunity for us to speak and for us to talk with you guys about the different topics we will be speaking about today, but thank you again for being here and listening to our stories and how we can all work together to make sure people with disabilities are given equal treatment in an already tough industry to break into. A little about me, I went from being a heel wearing, dancing, running energetic, energetic individual working on independent film sets for many years, to someone who lost their ability to mobilize without aids. From limping to using a cane and then a walker to finally accepting the fact that if I wanted my life to bear any semblance of normalcy, I would need to accept my new self, my new life, and I would have to swallow all pride and admit I needed the support of a wheelchair. But why pride? Why would anyone feel ashamed of a disability? This is why you're here and why we're here. TV and film have for the most part portrayed people with disabilities in a negative light. Aside from those films that are supposed to target the emotional strings of an audience while telling the story of a character with a disability, I haven't seen much on screen and the likes of regular people, teachers, doctors, lawyers, pilots, parents, friends, et cetera, with disabilities. Imagine being told at the age of 30 that you have multiple sclerosis. I was told that a big percentage of people diagnosed with multiple sclerosis would end up having to use a wheelchair eventually, but I didn't believe that I would end up like that. All I could do was think back of any of the portrayals I had ever seen of people with disabilities on screen. Often mistreated, often made fun of. Look at the president of the United States, often made to be homeless or suffering from some type of addiction. These were not accurate portrayals, but I didn't know. I had never had a friend or family member who used a wheelchair. In fact, I didn't know anyone who used a wheelchair. So when I started limping and could not walk more than a block unaided, then barely able to walk half a block even with mobility aids, I knew I had reached a point of no return. I finally turned to my illness and faced the truth, I needed a wheelchair. After a few years of major depression where I barely left the house or even bed. My mom said to me words that would change my entire life. "You need to start living again Diana." I thought about those words and finally woke up to the realization that only I could create the change I needed. So I called my mom and said that I was going to travel through South America alone with a cane, a walker and a wheelchair. And I was going to film my travels. There was silence on my mom's end of the phone. I could hear the hesitation, but finally after what seemed like hours and hours, she said, "Well Diana, I didn't mean for you to do that." But with her and my father's blessings away I went. For six weeks I challenged myself by traveling through a country that is nowhere close to having anything like the ADA here. The trip ended very successfully. And I came back with a new sense of freedom and probably the most confidence I had had in a long time. Working on sets was going to be tough, independent films don't have large budgets. So to make a set accessible would require more money. I didn't think I would ever be hired to work on sets again. So now it was time for me to reevaluate my love for storytelling. I knew I needed to reinvent myself. So I chose to go outside my comfort level again and decided to throw myself into the trenches, performing standup comedy, which I call sit-down comedy. And I started to get serious about my writing. If I couldn't work on sets anymore, I could definitely focus on my other passion, writing. I had written an award-winning film a few years back and had contributed to a book based on my film. I had also several personal essays published online. So I focused on my craft. Last year, I was finally selected to participate in the producers guild of America, power of diversity master workshop with a pilot I wrote based on an award winning film, I had written and produced. During the workshop, the pilot was picked up by an academy award winning producer. A year later, I was invited to participate in RespectAbility summer lab. I'm currently looking for work in TV as a staff writer with a future goal of being a creator/producer. I think the most beautiful aspect of this industry is that there are jobs for everyone. There is not a single position in film or TV that you cannot do while using a wheelchair. Well maybe stunts, but trust me I do my own stunts only, not always on purpose.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you so much Diana. I love your story. Let's go to Gisselle. Gisselle Legere is an alumni of the Sundance Screenwriters Intensive Lab, as well as the Disney ABC Writers program. Most recently, she was staffed on Quantico where her episode, No Place is Home was nominated for a women's image award. Gisselle, you have talked about how being deaf has helped you hone in our observational skills. How has this giving you a competitive edge as a writer?

Gisselle Legere: Hi, thanks for that introduction. I would say that it has given me an edge through different ways. The first is as a deaf kid who had to go to a regular school where there were no special resources for disabled kids, I had to learn on my own. The teachers that worked at my school didn't have any special training, and didn't know how to teach me. So very early on, I became an independent learner and that helped me when I developed into filmmaking because I didn't go to school for filmmaking. I just started making films, a wide series, a feature. And I taught myself by wearing a lot of different hats. I did, I became from writing the script, to casting, even cooking for my crew, for a crew of 30. So that spirit of teaching myself what I needed to do helped me. The second thing is that as a deaf person, I really have to pay a lot of attention to people when they speak in order to be able to understand them. I am a back track, I don't know any sign language. I didn't have any access to that when I was younger. So I rely on lip reading. And that means relying on people faces, and their emotions, and all the unspoken cues that people get when they're in a conversation. And that gave me extra insight into people ... Into the subtext behind what people are saying. That makes me a better writer. And in the writer's realm, being a better listener gets ... It's ironic that being deaf makes them a better listener, but I have to be 100% focused to capture what's going on in a room and being a better listener means that I pay more attention to what ... I don't want to say what's really important, but I'm just more focused on what is important to the story. And I get caught up on all the things that go on and writer's film. And so that help me deliver what was needed in the writer's film.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you so much Gisselle. I love your story and I think I have to put No Place in Home in my list of things to watch. Our next panelist is Danny Gomez. Danny Gomez is I have two who most recently had a guest appearance on the NBC's hit medical drama, New Amsterdam, where he played a pilot who became paralyzed. Danny himself became paralyzed in 2016. Danny, tell us about the importance of being so authentically cast, especially in a story as no nonsense as this one.

Danny Gomez: Well, first of all, thanks Vincenzo, and thank you for having me on the panel. This is a wonderful opportunity to be amongst such great panelists. And as you said, in 2016 I did suffer an injury that left me paralyzed. And before my accident, I knew nothing about disability. I didn't know anyone who was disabled. So I think that goes for the general public as well. They don't really know what we go through. And I say that because a non-disabled actor, let's say for this role, he can research. He can interview someone who's paralyzed, but he's never going to know what it's like to wake up and not be able to walk to the bathroom. He's not going to know when he needs to go to the bathroom. The things that you take for granted in life, a non-disabled actor can't relate to that. Can't relate to the many struggles that we go through day in and day out of life that before an accident that left us disabled came, it was just second nature. So something ... It's important to cast authentically because bringing those nuances, that pain and that struggle that we went through when we first had an accident and became injured and realized that our world was completely turned around in different. Those are things that I think a non-disabled person as great as an actor, as you can be, and as much research as you've done, you can't really tap into that. And I think that comes across the screen. So when this came to ... When I saw this role, I am not a high level quad, which in this role the pilot is paralyzed from the neck down. Now some people looked at me and said, well you're not a high level quad, but I do understand what it's like to be paralyzed. So I can bring that into my performance. And I did talk to my friends who I know that are paralyzing at a high level quads, and I know what they go through and I see how they are. So, I mean this even goes for disabled people playing other disabilities. I'm not going to know what an amputee goes through or somebody who's autistic or has CP or has spina bifida. So we do need to cast authentically to bring those stories to life.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you so much Danny. A great story and again, New Amsterdam will be also another one that I will add to my watch list. So next we have Roque Gregorio Renteria. Roque Gregorio Renteria has found success in using comedy and storytelling to fight stigmas and to hold people with disabilities back. He has had success in stand-up comedy for Comedy Central and Amazon Prime to name a few. Roque, you have talked about how acquiring a spinal cord injury provided a new perspective influencing your comedic writing. How has your experience informed your creative career path?

Roque Gregorio Renteria: Well thank you for the wonderful introduction Vincenzo, that was lovely. I mean just like any other sort of trauma or experience that any person goes through I think ... One thing I say is I was fairly young when I had my spinal cord injury. I was 15. And from there, you start to learn that you're navigating a new world literally in a wheelchair and you deal with infrastructural, physical, social obstacles. And from there with a disability, you're able to kind of deal with the haves and the have-nots because you have a reference to being enabled body person. And I think with that you learn, I mean like with any writing or artistic endeavor, it's done through observation and we're not just passive spectators. The way we interact with people in other situations, we distill that into our art and that's what I've done with comedy. I think there's the old expression, comedy is tragedy plus time. And I think you deal with sort of the hardships. At least for me, I deal with some of the hardships and some of the awkwardnesses I have dealing with ... Just you can say microaggressions or, oppressions, whatever, and trying to find the comedy in that. Because through that is where you get the authenticity and authenticity is just really niche individualism. And so just being a Mexican American who grew up in LA my whole life and dealing with the lack of public transport or just all these other things, that's kind of the heart and soul of everything. It's just trying to be ... Taking what you've dealt with, with me is spinal cord injury, and trying to try to make that funny and more often than not I hope it works, but it's an ongoing process. And so as I get older, I learn more things and hopefully I get wiser but that's what my experience.

Vincenzo Piscopo: That's great. Thank you Roque. And at the end of the session today, I want you to share with us where we can find your work. I'm excited about watching your comedy. Our next one, our next panelist is Shireen Alihaji. And Shireen if I'm mispronouncing your name, apologies I tried. You are quite an accomplished writer, but have talked about how corporate culture has caused some challenges for women of color? How can the industry shift to be more inclusive of everyone?

Shireen Alihaji: Thank you for asking that. Because the culture of this industry is so competitive, people don't necessarily take a pause and ask how we can support you or one another. So it creates this unhealthy pace that can be discouraging for someone that has unique abilities or disabilities. I would encourage for all of us to just pause more and reflect on something outside of our own experience so we can make this less of a competitive space and more a supportive space.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you. Thank you so much. Great. So I'm goingto go back now to Gisselle. So let's see, Gisselle is not only an accomplished writer, but also a field epidemiologist. She spent a decade working in bio defense and chasing disease outbreaks across the globe. Wow Gisselle, amazing. This hands on knowledge of medicine and research shaped the scientific speculation set stories apart. But we also know that some people with disabilities are not considered for opportunities with hiring managers failing to look at candidate for everything they bring to the table. Especially in this time of COVID 19, your previous experience can be a huge benefit to a writer's room. How has your experience informed your career path and continued to influence your work in the entertainment industry?

Gisselle Legere: Well, a lot of what I write I draw on the thing that I worked on and the thing that ... The conflicts I wrestled with in my previous line of work. But I think more relevant to the conversation is that being able to bring that background to every interview helped me and that it helped me stand out among the many writers. And I think that this is something that any person, regardless of what your disability is, can do. I'm not talking specifically about being an epidemiologist, but being able to find what is the unique thing, what is the thing that only you can bring to a room? What is the thing that you know most about? And if you could hone in on that, if you want to be a writer, if you can hone in on that and find a way to express what your perspective is and what it is that you bring through a room, you will be burning something valuable that can stand out. That can be the thing that gets you into a room.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you. Thank you so much Gisselle. Roque, what do you want people to know when it comes to hiring writers who use a wheelchair and creating space for talented writers such as yourself and your colleagues present today?

Roque Gregorio Renteria: Well I think part of the answer is in the question itself when it comes to creating space. And I think the thing that binds everybody regardless of ability is the infrastructure. And I think what we've seen now in this post COVID world, we've seen kind of like more of a leniency towards virtual meetups and meetings via Zoom and you know, these other apps. Whereas I remember before getting a meeting, if you got a meeting with someone, a lot of these meetings are centralized in West LA or Burbank and the Valley. So it's for a lot of disabled people with lack of public transport, it's like so now I got to find a ride. There's this extra obstacle. And if you can't drive, that's a whole nother thing. And aside from that, I think a lot of writers' rooms take ability and accessibility for granted, like where they say you got this meeting, but then you go there and the doors aren't wide enough or there isn't the stairs or whatever. And there's not really a lack for universal design. And I think what it ultimately comes down to is really creating the space and not having this monolithic idea of accessibility or function and trying to really create a more diversified world that says that authenticity or perspective or difference. All that also means like reshaping the world we navigate all of us and trying to create something that's accessible by nearly everyone.

Vincenzo Piscopo: That's interesting. That's a very good perspective. Danny, let's go with you now again. So you said that after your spinal cord injury, you had to reevaluate your goals in life. Tell us what continues to drive your passion as an actor and an advocate for people with disabilities.

Danny Gomez: Thank you for that question Vincenzo. Really what drives me is knowing the lack of representation that is in the industry. When I became an actor, after I became disabled, I noticed that there was no regular people roles, everything was the depressed veteran or the suicidal guy who's done with his life. But the things that really drive me up the wall, they drive up the wall is when I see non-disabled actors playing disabled actors, which is still happening. I mean, just recently, there was a film that came out. I'm not even going to name them to give them press or whatever, but the three main characters in the film were all disabled. It was a story focused on disability and these three characters going cross country. And I thought that was cool, the trailer was funny. It looked like a fun story. And then when I did some research, I found out that all three actors were able-bodied or not disabled. So I wondered why that happened. So I did a little more research. I spoke to some people who wrote articles about it, and apparently the production team said they didn't have time to find actors with disabilities to fit the roles. They had a for casting. Now I mean just in the stable of LA alone, there's like 100 actors that they could have auditioned. And I know they didn't film in LA is what I know from what I read. But I mean that's just a poor excuse for your casting. And then you're showing a younger generation that they have a disability, but they still can't play these roles. So really what drives me is to show that actors with disabilities exist, we can act and you just got to look for us cause we're there.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Very nice. Thank you so much for that answer. And I mean, I think that's why organizations like RespectAbility are so important to actually fight for that, for all actors and removing that stigma in our society. Because who best can portray a person with a disability than a person that has a disability? I mean same thing that I'm Hispanic, I can not really portray a British. I would definitely be able to portray perfectly an Hispanic guy. So that I wish that was very consistent all across in Hollywood. So talking about Hispanics, let's talk about intersecting identities. Roque, your parents are originally from Mexico and you grew up enjoying stories in both English and Spanish, which helped you appreciate foreign films early on in your life. Why is it important to be able to showcase all of your identities, including as someone who is Hispanic and an individual who had a spinal cord injury in your work?

Roque Gregorio Renteria: I will ... First for those who can't see ... I don't know if my shirt is obscured by the captions or ... But I have a Los Lobos shirt on because as a Chicano in Los Angeles. I thought this was a prime example of showing just how unique intersecting identities can be, especially as me as a Chicano, because we talk about Hispanic sort of broadly, but it's or Latinx, Latina, we use these kinds of as an umbrella generalizing term, but there's so much specificity within those. And especially as me as a Chicana with a transnational identity, sort of bridging American identity with Mexican identity. It's ... Especially in the LA area, my experiences are going to be completely different as a Hispanic for my Cuban-Americans or my Dominican Americans in Florida, or my Puerto Rican Americans in New York. And I think that's ... And that's what we want especially when so much of our filming and stories are set in LA, but we see a lot of Hispanic characters kind of sideline. I always find that laughable because when you look at like about 40% of Los Angeles is Hispanic. And most of that is Mexican-American, it just seems disingenuous and sort of like an LA that I find very strange. And that's kind of the thing, I think by having more authentic diverse voices, you create this rich tapestry that really creates a better scene in storytelling, something that feels like ... That matches the verisimilitude of what we're experiencing around us. So that's why I think it's important to just get every nuance you can to just tell the best damn story you can.

Vincenzo Piscopo: I agree. Like that we can make sure to really show that all the beautiful colors of all of our ethnicities. So when you're Hispanic, there's many colors. And when we make sure that we are focused on showing the real person, it allows people to really know more about us. So I totally agree with you. Gisselle, recently there has been more authentic representation of deaf individuals in the media, both in front of, and behind the camera. Yet that would presentation still is so overwhelmingly light. How can we ensure that deaf individuals over all backgrounds can see themselves represented on screen?

Gisselle Legere: That is a question that has many answers because there's a lot of factors. And I won't go into all the things that need to happen behind the camera, in the studios in the production companies. We need more disabled people represented there in order to get our story to talk. But the thing that we can do, disabled people, disabled people of color is to start owning your stories. Write those stories, make them, put them out there and they connect with people. And that is the first step in getting the things that we want to see on the screen. I know for me writing about how losing my hearing made me feel like I lost my voice led to me getting through ABC program. I say I wrote about that, that got me into the ABC program and that essay like to Quantico show, when I wrote it, I liked it and helped work with Marlee Matlin. And he decided to make a series regular. So putting the things that are really authentic to ourselves out there is the first step. And because if the stories aren't there, nobody's going to make them go. We can take ownership of that. And of course quite a lot of other things have to happen, but that's the one thing that we have in our powers. Pick up the pencil, write it or make the video, do whatever you want to do and post them, so many.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you so much Gisselle. I agree. I mean this is such a fascinating topic that I think we could spend like five hours having this conversation. So unfortunately we don't have five hours, but maybe the RespectAbility may be there's an opportunity to invite them back again. I'm going to go to Shireen. Shireen, as an Iranian Ecuadorian, Muslim woman who lives with a disability, have you ever seen yourself reflected in the media?

Shireen Alihaji: As someone who's multi heritage, I often have to find myself only in pieces of stories and characters. And this just reaffirms to me how important it is to create my own narratives much like Gisselle said earlier. Because my experience is so nuanced, I'm reminded how layered everyone's experiences and everyone carries so much history when they come in through the door. There's a lot of value in that.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Yeah, definitely. Thank you Shireen. Diana, let's go back to you. You've talked about how your Latinx heritage, including fluent knowledge of Spanish, has aided your Hollywood career. How does that combination of being a woman of color with disability work as an asset for you as a writer and storyteller?

Diana Romero: Thank you for your question Vincenzo. An answer to your question, the other day, I was talking to my sister and I was bragging and I was saying, oh man, I own the minority card. 100%, I'm Latina, I'm a woman, I'm disabled. And she quickly interrupted and said yeah, but you're not gay. And I said, well, okay that's true. That's ... So there you have it. But as a writer and a storyteller, one thing I've learned is that stories have to be universal. You cannot isolate stories to one culture, one group of people, one race or one social status, unless the story is particularly about that. And multi-dimensional film is when you bring characters of different backgrounds together. I feel that because I've lived in three different countries and have experienced different cultures, my characters as stories reflect those experiences. But see, I'm not just a Latina with a disability. I'm a woman who was a social worker before turning to film. I'm a woman who has lived in three different countries. I'm a first born American to immigrant parents from Columbia, South America. My parents both have post-grad degrees. My dad has an MD and my mom has a master's in education. I rarely do we ever see a Colombian family on TV or film that have post-graduate degrees for example. My parents made it a point to teach us about our Latin culture and we grew up speaking Spanish. This opened up a whole new world for me and my experiences from hearing my grandparents tell stories in Spanish and being able to communicate with our entire family in Columbia shaped who I am today. I've lived as a rich woman and I've lived as a poor woman. Trust me, I've wandered into abandoned buildings looking for runaway kids and worked in a jail with underage male inmates. I've traveled to the Amazon and I have worked on the streets of Hollywood working with runaway kids, prostitutes and transgender sex workers. I'm not only a disabled woman of color. All of us here have a wealth of experiences and are not defined by our disability or our race. What we ask for is that you take the time to know us, just because you see a wheelchair or someone signing does not mean that that is all we are. Living a life with disability requires a lot of discipline, strength and perseverance. So you can be sure that we work our butts off on our projects and we're a group that will never let anything stop us.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you, Diana. And that's exactly what makes our communities so powerful and such value adders when in the workforce. So that's a great opportunity that many employers have when they hire people with disabilities. Gisselle, you're not only a Cuban American who is deaf. You are also a mother. Parents around the world right now are being pulled in multiple directions, as many of us support our children's virtual education journey while continuing to work full time. What advice do you have for parents with disabilities looking to bring their knowledge to the entertainment industry?

Gisselle Legere: I would say that you should have confidence, because if you have lived with a disability and you have also parented successfully and by parenting successfully, I mean, you're keeping your kids alive. You're capable of doing everything that could be asked of you. And in the industry, you can find a way, you can adapt, you can do it. So don't be scared. Don't let anybody tell you that you can't. Plenty of people told me that I couldn't do what I'm doing and I don't listen, it's one of my fault. I'm stubborn like that. So be confident and know that you will find a way to do what it is that you want to do.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you Gisselle. I appreciate your advice. Being a parent of four kids and all of them doing virtual schooling is definitely ... Turn our world around. Several of you are alumni of RespectAbility's lab for entertainment professionals with disability. This program continues building the talent pipeline of young and need career professionals with disabilities, working behind the scenes while also enabling hundreds of studio executives who learn about the talent and benefits of hiring people with disabilities. Shireen, you are an alumni of RespectAbility's pilot lab from 2019 I believe. You had some great things come out of that, can you share more about it?

Shireen Alihaji: Yes, I'd love to. The project that I was able to workshop in the lab actually placed a semi-finalist in this year's blacklist. And because of the lab, I actually met another alumni Nasreen Alkhateeb. And we developed an episodic called American Girl which placed in the Sundance episodic lab.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Wow. Very nice. Thank you so much. Diana, you participated in the 2020 lab, which was virtual. How has this experience helped you get closer to your career goals?

Diana Romero: My experience in the lab, in participating in the lab just turned my world around. It was for the first time I feel that I found my tribe, that I found people like me not only people of color, but people with different types of disabilities, but also very passionate, creative, talented. People that want to live their dreams and be able to work in the film industry. What I'm grateful for the most was that every speaker that we had that came to speak with us was not only interested in learning more about how they could bring inclusion into either the studios or the companies that they are a part of, but also they wanted to know about us and they opened their doors to let us come to them and maybe reach out, maybe pitch, maybe just do an informational meeting. So that's what I've been working on. I've been working on setting up meetings to meet and to discuss projects or to discuss my experiences. So right now I have a pilot and I'm looking for other production companies that might want to partner up or might be interested in the project. And also I taught a class over the summer of high school kids on how to write a sitcom. And they wrote an amazing pilot. I have a producer now who is interested in partnering up with me to get this out to them, but I also have context through the lab that I would love to pitch this to at some point or another. So again, it opened doors that I never even knew existed, and that is just ... That's what's made me feel really comfortable about getting back out in the world, even if I'm using a wheelchair and knowing that I can do the work that I set out to do along with the rest of my class and along with the other participants.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you, Diana. That's so exciting. Danny, your focus is more on acting and modeling. What's your advice for non-disabled producers, writers, directors on hiring talent with disabilities in front of the camera.

Danny Gomez: Thank you Vincenzo. So first of all, you have to get to know the community. Watch the films. My good friend, Nic Novicki created a film challenge called the Easterseals disability film challenge. So every year we had this film festival where people with disability, you have to use people with disabilities in front or behind the camera to participate in this challenge. It's a weekend challenge and you have the weekend to write, edit, shoot, do posts and everything. But the focus is to use disabled talent. So that being said, watch those films, watch what we can do, hear our stories, especially for the writers. Everybody who's disabled has ... They have a unique story. How we got injured, if we were born with it, we all have unique lives stemming from the disability. And I think most importantly, besides like non-disabled producers and non-disabled actors and writers and directors, to my disability community if you really want to be serious, you have to train and you have to show the industry that we can hang with non-disabled actors. When we get to set, we have to bring our A-game so they know that we're not playing around. And then for the industry, listen to somebody like myself, if we get cast, we're going to be more grateful for getting that role because it's so hard. Our role may come once a year. So when we get that role, we're going to work harder than everybody on set. And I promise you I've been on set with other disabled actors and I'm kind of late sometimes, but we're the first one there. And we're the last ones to leave because we want to soak up that experience and we're eager to do whatever you want us to do on set. So we're going to work our butts off while we're there. So just get out and find the community.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you, Danny. Yes and you are a great example of somebody that has worked and works super hard. So now let's give the opportunity to our audience to ask questions to the panelists. So I would ask everybody that is listening to please add your questions into the Q and A box on this platform. For our friends watching on Facebook, the comments are being moderated and questions will be shared with us on Zoom as well. So while you guys start typing your questions, I'm going to ask the audience ... I mean, I'm going to ask the panelists one last question. But you have to do it in 30 seconds or let's say 45 seconds, but it has to be 45 seconds, not 45 debate seconds, 45 real seconds. So the question is what are you currently working on and how can people support you? Feel free to blog any projects on social media handles to follow. So those are your 45 seconds and I'm going to start with Diana.

Diana Romero: I remembered to take my mute off now.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Good, thank you.

Diana Romero: I've missed about 15 seconds already. I am really working on writing. I'm working on, like I mentioned earlier, my pilot that is not picked up by a producer and we're looking for other avenues to pitch this pilot too. And as well as other production projects that I have. But the most important to me right now is that I am looking, actively searching for representation. I'm currently represented by KMR agency for my acting and comedy. And then I'm looking for a literary agent. So if anybody knows anybody that might be looking for new clients or might want to be ... Is interested in reading any of my scripts, then I'm happy to talk to them.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you Diana. Gisselle?

Gisselle Legere: I am working on several projects, several that are in development right now. So maybe just keep your fingers crossed for me that they actually go to series and you can follow my journey on Twitter, follow me @Gissellelegere. And I'm always happy to answer questions. Anything that might come up whether today or later on.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you Gisselle, Danny. Danny? Danny Gomez: So I have a pilot that we're developing ... I mean it's pretty much developed. We're just going to start pitching it and you can find me on Instagram @DGStyle, Twitter's DannyJGomez504. And then I have my website is up, dannyjgomez.com and definitely check out on YouTube Easterseals Disability Film Challenge. Because you could see a lot of my work on there and a lot of other amazing artists with disabilities and Roque, I'm going to hit you up soon, dude because I think we could work on something together.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Well, that's exciting. Roque, let's go. It's your turn.

Roque Gregorio Renteria: I just found that I'm working on something with Danny. So keep your fingers crossed for that.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Can I join you guys?

Roque Gregorio Renteria: What was that?

Vincenzo Piscopo: Can I join you guys in that project?

Roque Gregorio Renteria: Of course. It's community, it takes a village. But so you can follow me on all my social media handles are Greg Roque is lame, Greg Roque is lame. Got a pilot out and doing some general meetings. So again pray for your boy. And also I was going to say next week, Thursday, October 15th at 9:30 doing the Crip comedy jam with Selana Luna and Danielle Perez my older sister in a wheelchair in comedy. So you can find more information at the Palm Springs International Comedy festival. You guys want to see me do comedy along some other funny comedians with disabilities, check that out and that's it for me.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you. Shireen?

Shireen Alihaji: I would love any sort of focused mentorship, something that might be more one-on-one with an established professional in the industry and I'm going to place my social media handle and email in the chat box, but it's Shireen Alihaji or @shireenalihaji.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Great. Thank you and then Gisselle.

Gisselle Legere: Wait I already went.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Right. I'm so sorry. Did I miss anybody? I don't think I did. Excellent. So let's see what questions do we have? Let me go here. So Q and A, so first question. It says Danny, do you think that disabled actors should have a disability as close to the character's disability as possible? Do you think actors with different conditions can penetrate each other well?

Danny Gomez: See, that's a tough question because I have gone out for amputee roles and I've like -- double amputee roles. And I just know that I'm not right. I don't feel that I am, but I think casting directors, they just cast this broad net and they're like let's just bring everybody disabled in here and they can play this disabled role. Now, I think it's important that if you are disabled, I think we all share this, as people with disabilities, we just know it's like you see someone else's disabled. You just kind of like ... You have this bond that a normal society doesn't have. So I think we can play, like I played like that high functioning quad because I understand what it's like to be paralyzed. And I also did, I played an autistic and I spoke to a good friend of mine who is autistic. And he gave me a rundown because I really wanted to understand the character. And I think it's more about understanding the heart of another person to be able to portray that. But it's always tricky, all I can say is just work on your craft as an actor and then that disability stuff should be secondhand, they should see you as an actor first.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you. Here's a question from Paola Vergara. I love this question. She says what do you recommend? I think Diana you can take this question if you don't mind. What do you recommend for a mother of an average autistic kid, he's not high functioning and lack of some social skills who says he wants to be an actor or an artist. He loves dancing Michael Jackson for example, how can I help him to achieve would make him happy?

Diana Romero: It's so amazing to me that you asked me to answer this question, because just as you said my name, I was typing a message to Paola telling her to feel free to contact me and my email address, and I could help her give her some advice and some thoughts. So I'll say it now out loud is I think I don't know if your child has done any kind of acting work, I don't know the age of your child, so I'm not sure where I could advice you to do with him. But I would definitely say if he can get into acting classes, and I think one of the people ... KMR, which is the agency that represents me and I believe they represent you as well Danny. Gail Williamson there, but I'm not sure ... They are an agency, they're a big talent agency, but they also have a department for people with disabilities, the diversity department. And that might be a place that maybe you could contact an assistant or somebody there that could give you some information about what kids with disabilities, where they may be going to do training, where they're being represented. I think definitely, I mean if he loves singing Michael Jackson or loves dancing Michael Jackson, portray that, show that, put it on YouTube, start something with him that can get him more people, more views, get him more ... And I'm saying him and I'm ... You did say he. So those would be my suggestions as of right now, without knowing that much experience, I'm still sending you the message with my email address Paola. So you're ... Feel free to welcome or to contact me at any time.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you so much, Diana. Our next question comes ... Yes.

Danny Gomez: For Paola, check out gamutmanagement.com, they're my management team out of New York. They also deal with ... Their whole I guess, talent pool is people with disabilities and they have a lot of kids. And also for Paola check out the Easterseals challenge every year because anyone could participate.

Vincenzo Piscopo: That's a great advice. This question I believe comes from our Facebook Live. We can have maybe Shireen answer this question. What would you recommend companies do in order to hire groups with disabilities? What are some ways you combat common refrains like we don't know anyone when it's used as an answer to why actors, group with disabilities are not considered in the early hiring stages.

Shireen Alihaji: I would encourage them to reach out to RespectAbility first.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you for the plug. There's another question that came here. It says are Latinx Muslims depicted in media in Spanish speaking countries more than USA media, or is it rare there too? And I guess this is for you Shireen as well?

Shireen Alihaji: I don't have the particular insights or data on, but I do recall that there was a novella called El Clon that was very, very famous. And it did have Muslim characters and that was shown throughout Latin America. So it does happen occasionally.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Excellent. By the way, can you guys -- the panelists put your social media contacts in the chat room, please, that was a message from Shanalen Palmer. So if you guys can do that or if not I think Tatiana can help us with that. So this is a very interesting question that many people with disability face a lot. Maybe Danny you can answer this question since you're also a model. He says, how can I get into acting modeling without losing my benefits?

Danny Gomez: I mean that is something that ... Actually there was a film made this year, just about that on the -- I'm going to keep plugging the Easterseals disability film challenge. If you want to privately message me, I can find that exact video because he goes into depth. He did a lot of research because it's very confusing. You can't have like over $2,000 in your bank account or something like that. It's ridiculous, we lose our benefits if we can't have a career without losing our benefits, but for instance, let's say I make a little more than what I'm supposed to make. My benefits would be taken away. And then I can't pay for my medical supplies. I mean, my catheters alone, I get three months worth. That's like $6,000 right there. So dealing with that is really tough, but please message me privately on Instagram or Twitter and I can definitely gear you in the right direction. Anyone really.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Thank you, Danny. Roque I think I have not asked you a question from the panelists, so I'm going to give you this one. Let's see if this is something that you can help us, it says what accommodations can we automatically have onset writers' room that can provide equity in this creative spaces in addition to asking about specific needs for each individual?

Roque Gregorio Renteria: Thank you for the easy question.

Vincenzo Piscopo: You've been excellent in answering questions, so you'll rock it.

Roque Gregorio Renteria: So again this is such a multifaceted question that, again the simple answer, because you can get into specificities is like again universal design and it's just, re-imagining the workspace. And again it's understanding that people with disabilities have different needs. So it's again like maybe giving a little more time for bathroom breaks or being accommodating with sort of like chronic illness with allowing more virtual spaces now that we've seen ... And again in this COVID world that we can still ... People, I know friends both disabled and non-disabled who are working in writer's room and now they're doing it virtually and it's shown that we can still be productive and be given ample time and accommodations virtually. So it's just being cognizant of all that and just re-imagining the workspace and whether it's universal design, virtual meetups, a little more time and just that kind of stuff. That's a simple answer, but you get asked like architects and social workers for a more distinguished answer.

Diana Romero: Can I add-

Vincenzo Piscopo: Yes, please.

Diana Romero: Definitely, I think we're all adults and we've all dealt with our disability and we've all learned how to deal with our disability, and how to live our life. And so I think the first thing that needs to happen is we need to lose the fear of asking somebody what their needs are. Don't fear that the person's going to be offended. None of them, we need to lose that fear. We need to be open with communication. So I think that I, if I were to be hired at a location where let's say it wasn't accessible because there's stairs, well that's something that I would talk about. And I would discuss, I think that by law places of employment have to be accessible. But I've seen in a lot of places that they're not, and especially Los Angeles, because we use a lot of the craftsmen homes or older homes and older studios. But anyway, I think that the first question is ask. Ask is there anything that you need, how can we work with you, but it's not going to be what works for me isn't going to work for Roque, what works for me isn't going to work for Danny or for Shireen. So it has to be an individual question that you ask the person that you hire for sure.

Danny Gomez: I wanted to add if you're a performer who gets hired on set, don't be afraid to tell production what you need, because I'm not going to name who it was but I got to a production. It was a big production and they didn't have a restroom for me. And I was peeing in an alleyway in between garbage cans. Because it was one of my first big things, I was scared to say something because I didn't want to be like a nuisance. I didn't want to be that oh here's the disabled guy, he's the only one on set where he's already making problems. But you need to express that you need this, everybody has a right to use a bathroom. So don't be afraid to tell production. And then if you have an agent, tell your agent, they'll deal with it.

Vincenzo Piscopo: Great. Thank you so much. It's five o'clock, I could spend the rest of the day listening to you guys. Thank you so much Danny, Shireen, Gisselle, Roque and Diana. I am humbled by this amazing panel. You guys were amazing, you at least getting one follower and that's me. I'm sure you're going to get a lot, but I'm going to be following all of you because the work that you guys are doing, it's incredible. For the audience, thank you so much for joining us. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did, and I invite you to follow RespectAbility in our social media so that you can find out more about the work that we are doing and continue to learn about events as great as this one we had. So with that, I'll close the event. Thank you so much and have a wonderful day.