Lauren Applebaum: Welcome to our series examining best practices in deaf and ASL representation in children's animation. My name is Lauren Applebaum and I am RespectAbility's Vice President of Communications. As an individual with an acquired non-visible disability, Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy, I've had the privilege along with my colleague Tatiana Lee and our board member Delbert Whetter, of consulting on a variety of projects helping executives that their representation is both authentic and avoids any pitfalls in the process. Today is the second part in our series on deaf representation and animation and we'll take a look at DreamWorks' Madagascar: A Little Wild. Yesterday we looked at Disney Channel's Emmy Award nominated series, Big City Greens. And that is available via recording if you missed it. Both of these shows ensured authenticity by hiring a deaf-led team of ASL consultants. This conversation will include a clip from Madagascar: A Little Wild, will last one hour and have time for participant Q&A at the end. If you would like to view the ASL interpreter in a larger screen, you can pin her video which will spotlight her video throughout the entire panel. However, I want to remind you that both Delbert and Jevon will be communicating via ASL as well. In addition we have live captioning that is available in the Zoom app by clicking on the CC button or via web. We have posted the 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&A box to do so. For today's webinar we're highlighting this new series, Madagascar: A Little Wild, which is available both on Hulu and Peacock TV. This series includes a deaf character who uses sign language and his sister also signs. Chimpanzee siblings Dave and Pickles are really breaking barriers and are part of a movement changing the landscape of disability representation in children's television and streaming content. Dave and Pickles have a meaningful story arc throughout the entire series and Dave is certainly not defined by his deafness. RespectAbility's board member Delbert Whetter who is a deaf film producer and consultant along with deaf actor, filmmaker and ASL dialogue coach, Jevon Whetter and Justin Maurer who is an ASL interpreter. who is a CODA, a child of deaf adults, consulted on the series. Today we'll learn from this team as well as Executive Producer Johanna Stein, Co-EP and Story Editor Dana Starfield and Supervising Director TJ Sullivan on how these teams work together to bring about dynamic deaf characters. Before we bring these panelists on, let's take a look at a clip.

[Clip Plays]

Well that was definitely a fun clip to watch, as a mom of a five-year-old, I can say that it is Morgan approved. So I'd like to invite all of our panelists to turn their video on and we will have a conversation. Thank you all. I'd love to start with Johanna. As the executive producer, you had the power to make this decision to have an inclusive show. Why did you decide to incorporate a deaf character?

Johanna Stein: Hi, well first of all I do want to say we're so excited to be here to be talking with you about this aspect of our show that we're really super excited to talk about so first of all thank you for having us. So I will say that working on an existing property like Madagascar where there's a world of characters already baked in presents challenges but also this opportunity to grow the world and with new characters and new ideas and from the start when we talked about what we wanted the show to be about and the episodes to be about you know we decided to shoot for the moon and we wanted to explore all kinds of themes and ideas that would be enriching, not just for kids but for families and parents of kids who watch a lot of TV. And so inclusion and representation obviously just kept coming, it was at the top of our list so we knew that was a theme we wanted to explore a lot. And as far as why we specifically decided to incorporate a deaf character, in the movies there's a chimp — there are two chimps actually Mason and Phil, and one of them communicates through ASL and that sort of became... Dana who actually developed the show, I know that she identified that character, that attribute as something very interesting and exciting to explore. So it sort of just became a really exciting way to dive into themes of inclusion and representation.

Lauren Applebaum: Thank you. You mentioned Dana, so let's turn to you, why was it important to bring in the team of ASL consultants to achieve this vision?

Dana Starfield: Well I think it's important to know what you don't know and we wanted to bring in someone who could bring this to life. We had this idea but it couldn't have been brought to life without Delbert, Jevon and Justin and so we knew that Pickles and Dave were baked into the DNA of the show. We knew that they were important characters who were going to be recurring, they weren't going to be one-offs and so it was important to get it right because representation doesn't matter if it's being wrongly represented and so we just We lucked out with the best team in the world

Lauren Applebaum: Excellent. And TJ, you had a job where you were working with Delbert, Jevon and Justin on each of these episodes that featured Dave and Pickles. What was your experience? How's that been like working with them and how has it evolved over the course of your collaboration?

TJ Sullivan: Oh boy, let me tell you what it was really like [Laughter] No, these guys are great! Every time we've gotten together it's a lot of work but it's been so much fun and I look forward to seeing these guys and chatting with them. As we've gotten to know each other we understand each other's humor and also how the three of them work together. And it's really interesting for me to be able to watch them as they talk to each other and I kind of glean little nuances every time I just sit back and watch as they communicate with each other. It's been really great getting to know these guys and they're so collaborative and very helpful with helping us, really going through the script and they have ideas, especially keeping Pickles and Dave their own individual people. They'll give us great suggestions on how to do that, maybe shifting a line to another character or Jevon will come up with some great really comedic acting that we'll throw in there for the characters. And then Del is great too because he'll sit there and watch us and always try and figure out the best way to convey what we're trying to say and the easiest for our story team and for the animators.

Lauren Applebaum: Excellent, thank you. And Delbert, you and I have had the opportunity to work together a lot in the sense of Delbert is a board member of RespectAbility. You have more than two decades of experience working on animated feature films from the business affairs side to the animation industry to executive producer. What has your experience been like from working with this team? Talk us through how it worked to achieve this success?

Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert speaking. So starting with animation itself and 3D and CGI, so we had to really keep in mind that sign language itself as far as being animated in the right time frame and matching up with spoken dialogue we have to keep that in mind because you have to kind of match it up. Sometimes closed captioning doesn't match dialogue at the same time and there's a bit of a disconnect, so we tried to figure out the best way we could go about the translation to best fit the spoken dialogue because sometimes signed lines we wanted to make sure it fit in that way simultaneously. And also so that it could be animated extremely clearly from an animator's perspective because sometimes the hand might be blocking the other hand and so we had to make sure that we use different perspectives and different angles and sometimes slow down and we tried to choose signs very carefully based on the animators perspective to try and help them out as much as possible. And we also realized that it's extremely important to have TJ in the room because it's so important to have a representative from the show to really explain to us the scene and what the characters are there for, which characters are in the scene and as far as the storyline goes related to the dialogue. One example might be a ball. So what kind of ball is it? Is it a football? Is it a soccer ball? Is it a beach ball? Because that would really affect the signing choices that we would choose so it's extremely important to have a representative from the show actually there to explain to us and give us a bit of the backstory. And that prevents a lot of repetition and going back and forth. Because if we send them a reference video of ASL for example there might be a lot of back and forth and it's so much better to have someone in the room just to describe clearly so we can just move forward and be more effective as a consulting team.

Lauren Applebaum: Excellent. And one thing that I really liked was how you can really see the expression in Dave and Pickles eyes when they're signing. Jevon can you talk about some of the feedback that you and the team provided specifically on eyebrows and facial expression and why this aspect is so important?

Jevon Whetter: This is Jevon speaking, absolutely! One example might be a "what" question, a WH question. So when you're arching your eyebrows like that it signifies a question in ASL grammar and we have many emotional cues or relations. Another example might be making an expression like this if you're angry! Saying "hey what for? Why did you do that?" or you could say "well what" or you could have all types of facial expressions to signify different meanings. And the eye gaze is extremely important because we don't use our ears for reception we use our eyes for receptive abilities so we have to keep in mind that characters need to maintain eye contact. If a character looks away -- because Dave is deaf right? So if Dave looks away and someone's looking at him, how does Dave know the information that's being signed? So we had to keep the eye gaze consistent as well. And so as we've grown together in our relationship throughout the project we just realized that facial expressions are so important. And it's a way of expressing itself. ASL is not a hundred percent without expressions. You need to have expressions for complete ASL and so you see the characters really become alive and more tangible because of the facial expressions.

Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert, can I add something quickly?

Lauren Applebaum: Of course.

Delbert Whetter: We were so impressed with the Madagascar team as far as being so receptive and fascinated to getting deaf culture and our nuances correct. And often you know they might say hey what would a deaf person do in that situation or a deaf character do in that situation and they would actually include that in the story. And so we really appreciate that they're so understanding. And in showing a deaf character it's not only the language, but it's the lived cultural experience of a deaf person or a young child as this young deaf character is shown.

Lauren Applebaum: Yeah definitely comes across. Johanna, did you have something to add?

Johanna Stein: Yeah I just wanted to add what Delbert was saying made me think back to the first time you came in to speak with us when we were figuring out we were gonna work together, go steady, all of us, and what I really appreciated was how welcoming and open... I for one was very nervous, I didn't want to stick my foot in my mouth, I didn't want to say anything stupid and I think I probably said that from the beginning and I've stuttered my way through some comments and you set me so at ease. You established right from the beginning that you didn't expect us to know everything about a deaf character or how these characters would relate to each other and that's why we're working with you because you're bridging the gap of our lack of knowledge and I appreciated how comfortable you made this experience for us because -- I could imagine that people on other shows might be nervous about entering into a relationship like this but you guys really put our minds at ease and you laid the groundwork for a really fruitful working relationship so thank you!

Lauren Applebaum: That's wonderful to hear and I think what you said, it really means a lot for other creative execs who might be thinking about doing something similar, whether incorporating deaf characters or characters with other disabilities -- that you don't have to have that knowledge, you can bring consultants in, you can bring writers in, you can bring other folks in who can help make that happen, so thank you for sharing that. I think was it Jevon or Delbert who had raised their hand?

Jevon Whetter: This is Jevon. I agree completely with what Johanna was saying. I think I was at AFI, The American Film Institute Producing Program and when we'd have a hearing director, the hearing director would say "what are we going to do with the deaf character?" And I'd say, "hey, don't worry about it. Just think of us as a foreigner. Think of me as Italian, like I'm an Italian producer, so just think of me as someone from a non-english speaking country." And then they'd say "oh okay" and go ahead. And so I strongly believe in collaboration and cooperation and supporting each other and just keeping an open mind. It's so important because we are all serving the story itself, We're here to serve the story and so we have to meet halfway. It's very important for us and it's really nice that all of you feel the same way too.

Lauren Applebaum: So another question about Dave, while none of the other animals make any animal sounds, Dave makes typical monkey sounds while signing. Let's go to Justin, you've been voicing for Jevon and Delbert but you're also here because you are a member of the consulting team. So Justin, why was it so important that Dave actually made verbal sounds?

Justin Maurer: Sure, I think a really common misconception actually comes from the term deaf mute itself. And so people think that, "oh, deaf people, they're deaf so they can't talk or they can't make any noise." And my mom, my aunt and my stepdad are all deaf, and growing up - I apologize to my mother - my mother would yell quite frequently at my siblings and myself, because deaf people have voices that they can use. And so it would only make sense that a deaf character who is a chimp would make chimpanzee noises right? And maybe this chimpanzee would have a deaf accent. That's something we haven't really explored yet. But yeah, I think deaf people can make noise with their voices and deaf mute is just kind of a concept that we need to get rid of.

Lauren Applebaum: Most definitely!

Jevon Whetter: This is Jevon, can I add something?

Lauren Applebaum: Yeah.

Jevon Whetter: So I used to have two deaf dogs and their bark didn't really sound like a dog's bark. I could really tell that there was a little bit of a difference. People told me that they sounded like deaf dogs barking and so I was like, huh, that's interesting. It was like, huh, the deaf dogs actually sounded differently than hearing dogs because they couldn't hear the sound of their own bark. And so that was really interesting. And so probably deaf people are some of the loudest people you'll ever meet, and it's really good to have the sound of the chimpanzees included in the show as well.

Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert speaking, I often emphasize to people that deaf people can laugh, deaf people can cry, deaf people can shout you know they don't have to turn their voices off. It's a really common misconception out there that people think that deaf people are silent all the time. No, we're not and we don't need to be.

Lauren Applebaum: Definitely! And I want to stick with this concept that, Justin, that you brought up a moment ago about being a sibling or a child of folks who are deaf. And so in this series Dave's sister Pickles, you know, she is hearing and she becomes his interpreter. And they're very much partner mischief, a great brother-sister combo. So -- and then they obviously are communicating in ASL. Justin, can you talk about the role of hearing siblings and children in real life and why it's so important, because that's not always reflected in TV today.

Justin Maurer: Sure. I think we have to keep in mind that most deaf people are born into hearing families. And a lot of the parents of deaf children never learn sign language ever throughout their lives and so a lot of deaf siblings will really rely on their hearing siblings quite a bit as interpreters, as intermediaries and it just kind of comes naturally with the territory. I mean, I guess being a CODA - child of a deaf adult - is kind of similar to having parents who are first-generation immigrants. So if you think about it that way, like, the child is there sort of as an interpreter, as a liaison. And so I think this relationship between Dave and Pickles, it really reminded me of a close friend of mine growing up who had a deaf brother. Both of my siblings are hearing. But how they interacted was like -- you know, you go to order an ice cream cone or you go into a restaurant or anything that a kid would do. And it was just automatic the way that the siblings would just help each other out and the way that the hearing sibling would just automatically interpret or automatically sign. And it's just something that when you grow up with, it's kind of automatic. And so I think it was important to us as a consulting team to really focus on that relationship between Dave and Pickles, because Pickles wouldn't want Dave to miss out on any information. And Pickles is just there to support Dave, because obviously she cares about Dave and Dave to Pickles and so on. But they also argue like siblings do, so it was really fun to work on arguments in the show and sometimes just as like background dialogue. It was -- some of my fondest memories were -- because typically in the room I will play Pickles and Jevon will play Dave. And so to come up with some improv arguments on the fly was just hilarious and Jevon with his decades of stage acting experience is just -- he's just hilarious anyway. And so some of my fondest memories were trying to get that sibling rivalry right, and get it so it felt like an authentic --

I guess they call it a SODA, Sibling of deaf adult. So an authentic SODA-deaf sibling relationship. And so it's been really fun and I think that we really got it right. I mean when I see it, it feels right you know and so it is extremely -- it's authentic in the way it's being shown on screen. Lauren Applebaum: TJ, I see you laughing a lot, so are there any particular moments that stand out from your work together? Anything that's really funny or amazing or exceptionally interesting that you want to talk about from the last period of time we've been working together?

TJ Sullivan: Yeah it's funny because I think I know the moment you're talking about. And we really do get to a point where we really have this brother and sister relationship with them, to the point where we'll let them argue on their own for a while. It's just them going back and forth, we don't need our kids trying to understand what's going on, it's brother and sister that are arguing. So we have come up with stuff and the guys have worked together, on like,

all right, "what would we argue about here?" And it was this back and forth, and they came with great suggestions and it's all going to play in the background. People will see it and be like "what's going on over there?" Yeah, it was really fun. One of the other things I was trying to say before is as we're going through the lines and Jevon and Justin are acting everything out, Del just sits and watches him and after we're done, there's a moment of hesitation. And we'll know like on Del's face, we'll know uh oh, we got to do it again. I know we got to do it again! Because there was something that either we could make clearer or easier. But it's fun watching his face to see if we actually got the take. And one of the other things that's been great working with this team, it's been for myself to get a really great understanding -- and Jevon touched on this a little bit before is -- how we're staging these characters. You know, they need to be able to see each other when they're speaking, which means that our board artists have to figure out a way to stage them so that they can be looking at each other. One of the things that we also learned though is if they're not, how do they get their attention? So discussing that with the team was great to understand too. But yeah, it informs everything: how we set up our scenes and then in the back of our heads always being conscious of making sure these characters can see each other and talk to each other.

Lauren Applebaum: Johanna?

Johanna Stein: Yeah I just wanted to add a little, an additional shout out. As much as this team is informing how the characters communicate with each other and their relationship with each other, they're informing the characters of the characters, the personalities of the characters. You know, when we watch the source videos, the translations, you guys are Pickles and Dave. And so you guys are also baked into the characters and you're hilarious and so -- when we talk about our board artists, when we used to work in an office together, we would see them acting, they're acting to themselves as they're drawing, and they're really embodying the characters and that's exactly what our team is doing. They're bringing these characters to life with their own experience and physicality and incredible expressions. So it's so additive to the process for us, this is not just, "oh, we need some people to translate." They're literally helping us build these characters and their relationships and it's just really fun, it's really fun to see. So creatively you guys are as much a part of the team as any other creative artist on our show. That's what I want to say.

TJ Sullivan: I want to add to that too, one thing I was thinking of as Johanna was saying that was it's fun to see them come up with -- suddenly we'll run across something in a script where our character has to be upside down or holding something. And I'm thinking like, "oh you're right, how are they going to be able to sign while holding this?" And then one of the guys will come up with, Jevon will be like, "well what if I use my feet?" And I'm like - oh wait a minute, they can use their feet! Or how do I do this upside down? There was one time we were actually trying to like should I be upside down? I'm like no we can just flip the video. So I think you guys had come up with "let's use their feet more." We can also communicate that way which was a fun discovery.

Lauren Applebaum: Lots of fun... oh Dana?

Dana Starfield: I was just going to add to that. I remember when you all had a great idea for an episode where Pickles and Dave were going to be viewing Gloria while she was underwater/ And he brought up this great idea that they can use their feet and sign underwater. And it was just such a creative thing that we didn't even think about. You know, ideas like that can really add so much to the episode and bring about new story points and ways of approaching things which is just awesome.

Lauren Applebaum: Yeah, utilizing ASL really gives you so many other creative story lines that you can do, and you're only going to know that by bringing in folks who are deaf and use ASL who can share that with you. So one thing that is vitally important to point out is that Dave and Pickles, while not the main characters, they're in nearly every episode, if not every episode. Why is it important that they're included in multiple episodes? Dana do you want to take that?

Dana Starfield: Yeah I mean, well, first of all, in the development of the show, Dave and Pickles were always -- I think I mentioned before, they were built into the DNA of the show. So they serve -- you know, when you make a series like this where you want to have something that is exciting and new and yet predictable that you can do over and over and over for a million episodes, you want to figure out what is the DNA. And they're part of the DNA and they serve as agents of chaos. We have in -- Madagascar is such a series that's filled with slapstick humor and so much comedy and kind of a bit of wackiness to it. And what's nice about Pickles and Dave is they create an obstacle every single episode so things aren't easy. You know, one of the things in writing a series, whether it's a preschool series or an adult series, you want to beat up your characters a little and they help us do that. Pickles and Dave create this -- I'm from Jersey so tolls, getting into the city, I associate with tolls so having them charge for the tunnels just seemed like a natural solution. But yeah they brought so much to the episode. And TJ and Johanna said it right, they are Pickles and Dave and so it's important because obviously from an inclusion standpoint, New York City is a place where you associate with so many different types of people from all walks of life. People come over from all over the world to move to New York City. And our series is our version of New York City and we wanted it to represent what we believe that world looks like and what that world looks like to the kids watching and everything and adults watching. But so from an inclusion and representation standpoint it's great because of course like there was never a thought that these were going to be tokenized characters. These were characters who were fun who needed to be in every episode and so they are.

Lauren Applebaum: Yeah I think that is such an important point that if you were to take these characters out there will be plot holes. And how they really serve a vital plot function in each of the episodes and that is definitely to be applauded. So I -- oh, Delbert?

Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert, I'd like to add something. So what I really love about Dave and Pickles is in that universe without the two of them, you know, the rest of the Little Wild cast could not escape to go on their adventures. So there would be no story. And so they have to go through Dave and Pickles to have their adventures. And so the two of them communicate differently than the rest of the characters, so it forces them to be creative and gesture and do various things. You know children can use more ways of communication and more ways of connecting with people who might communicate differently than them.

Lauren Appelbaum: And this show is obviously aimed for children, although parents, myself included, have enjoyed it as well. So Jevon, you've had decades of experience really working with children's content, acting, teaching etc... What considerations did you bring to the table in terms of knowing that this was aimed for children?

Jevon Whetter: This is Jevon speaking. So after I graduated from college I was offered a job performing with the National Theater of the Deaf and later on when I moved to California, I became involved in several productions at Deaf West Theater. And at that time when I moved to California I became a drama teacher at California School for the Deaf Riverside. And I was teaching there and I was involved with quite a few children's storytelling projects in sign language. And it was really interesting, that translating process to try and avoid complex ASL signs, just trying to keep it simple and easy for children to understand, because the children are your target audience and it's extremely important that they get the story. And so children tend to have a short attention span and so if you tell them a story they might get extremely distracted after about 20 minutes, you know, this is very young children I'm talking about. It's important to be very expressive to keep them engaged so I applied my personal experience to think about what's a way that we can have ideas for our team to look at an idea and the pros and cons and offer different methods or different techniques that we could choose from instead of just doing the same thing every single time, because often we're able to make a lot of modifications and adjust certain ideas. And it's really important for the target audience who are children themselves to really enjoy it and to get it.

Lauren Applebaum: One thing I've noticed is that people who are involved with children's media are particularly forward-thinking when it comes to all types of inclusion, more so than any other genre. Johanna or Dana or TJ, whoever wants to take it, what about this genre really makes it so effective in telling these stories?

Johanna Stein: I'm going to unmute myself and then I’ll talk. It's interesting because as we talk about these ideas of representation, I find myself saying the word "responsibility" but that's actually not right. Because what I really do feel is it's an opportunity because, you know, I'm a parent. I don't think you have to be a parent to work in children's TV, but maybe I've got a little more insight into the types of programming that I want my kid to watch. I want to be entertained, she wants to be entertained. But I really would love it if if she could get a little sweet medicine in there, some really positive values. So just going back to when we were starting this show, talking about what do we aspire to do with this show. We know we want it to be fun and wacky and the Madagascar universe offers a lot of that. But because it's for kids, there's that added opportunity to talk about like, wow, this is a young audience. We want to give them something really -- we want to give them some positive ideas and themes and values. We don't want to jam anything down their throats, but we do -- you know, we want to give them some positive values to chew on. And I don't know that I think about that when I'm writing for grown-ups for some reason, maybe people should think about that, but I think there's a real awareness that these are young impressionable humans and we want to do right by them. We want to be positive forces of creativity and chaos. [Laughter]

Lauren Applebaum: Dana?

Dana Starfield: Yeah to what Johanna was saying, I think you think of children and you always want to leave a better future to the children and you want -- every generation wants the best for their children. You want children to be better than you are and you want children to be better than what you grew up with. And so I think in children's media, you know, by the time you get to adults it's like, they're already too far gone, I mean, no - everyone can change - but you know we hold children to a higher standard. You see adults behaving in a way that would be considered, you know prominent adults, in a way that would be considered unacceptable for children. And so I do think we hold kids to a higher standard, we want better from them and we want more for them. And so I do think in children's media there's this sense of what would be a great thing for them to absorb. This is a world that they're absorbing, they're not just watching -- some of them are sitting and zoning out -- but a lot of them, a lot of kids are absorbing everything that's coming in. And a lot of times this is their first introduction to various ideas and so I think there's, as Johanna said, an opportunity to get it right and get a great message across and and hope that kids are better than we are.

Lauren Appelbaum: Well said. Delbert?

Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert speaking, I'd like to add on to that a little bit. I think it's extremely important to demystify disabilities. Because our kids, they go to school with other children who may have disabilities, and if there's no representation on television of people with disabilities, then what message does that send to kids and how they should interact and communicate with their peers at school who may have disabilities? And so if they don't see it on TV, maybe they think "oh, should I ignore them? Should I avoid them?" No, we have to model good behavior for our children so they're able to see that and that gives them some ideas and maybe the next day they'll be more comfortable to interact with that child.

Lauren Applebaum: Dana?

Dana Starfield: I think that's great, I love what Delbert's saying and I think, to add on to that, I think that it's important also to have that representation be part of the core group. Obviously in Madagascar we had the pre-existing franchise and the main four characters but we consider Pickles and Dave part of the core group. And I do think it's important to model that and not have, while it's nice to have representation of many characters, and have guest characters and everything like that, it's so important to have a core group and to show that they're in the core group. Because otherwise, if you have them in and out, then they're othered. Whereas if they're part of the main group you're modeling that, even if you are nervous about how to approach someone who communicates differently than you or operates differently in the world, you can be their best friend.

Justin Maurer: If I may add something if that's alright? I may throw this over to Jevon because he's the college professor but I believe the first children's show to show ASL was Sesame Street. And I am a child of the 80s, I'm a little bit younger than the Wetter brothers, sorry guys, but I remember it was such an effect on American culture in general to have so many children watching Sesame Street and to see there was a reoccurring deaf actor that was on that show that brought ASL to the American public eye, maybe for the first time. Because in the 1970s, like the end of the 70s, it was finally recognized as an actual language. Before it was a debate whether it was an actual language or not, whether it had structure and whether like the facial expressions we were discussing earlier and all of those rules that can qualify something as a language. And so in a way, Sesame Street qualified ASL as a language by showing millions of people that, hey, this is how people communicate and, you know, deaf people don't have to act or behave like hearing people. They don't have to use their voices and speak in English, ASL doesn't follow the same word order as English. And so I think Sesame Street played a huge role. And so I think, A Little Wild, you guys are groundbreaking as well, because now millions of kids have the opportunity to see ASL for the first time, as well as their parents. And a lot of parents are now teaching their kids ASL because ASL can be picked up before spoken language. And so this is really common now and so we're hoping... maybe -- I'll let Jevon take it because I know ASL is very popular in schools, the third most popular language being taught, is that right Jevon?

Jevon Whetter: Yes, this is Jevon speaking. So before I comment on that I believe it's extremely important for ASL consultants to have patience. Because my parents and they're... we're third generation, we have three generations of deafness in our family. And so our parents always told us it's important to be patient. You know, a lot of people won't understand us, just be patient. And so you could easily be frustrated and and direct and let all those emotions out and it's a lot more challenging to let go and be patient and just educate people and work together and have empathy for others when you're interacting with them and try and meet halfway. And that's a lot more successful than being confrontational or saying hey, here's not enough jobs for deaf people or all these things you've done wrong to us and you know this is a business that is teamwork. And so you need to be a good team player because in this business, relationships are so strong and they're so integral to work together. People that like to work together, continue to work together. When we were young, ASL wasn't taught in any colleges or high schools. It wasn't even offered as a course, period. The only way you would learn it is through deaf family or friends or at a school for the deaf and that's it. And now ASL is the third most popular language being taught in schools in America. And so German has now taken a back seat to fourth place and Spanish and French are up there but ASL is number three right now. And so there's more awareness as far as... there's a lot of disabled people who have a lot to offer. Not only deaf people but disabled people in general have a lot to offer. And so it's really an amazing time because more people have opened their hearts and opened their minds and it's just really a great time for us today and we're really grateful to this team for that.

Lauren Applebaum: So I want to open up... if people have questions. If folks in the audience would like to ask a question you can do so by submitting it in the Q&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. Same thing if you are on Twitter, you can tweet a question and that will be shot over to me as well. So we have a few questions that are coming in already and I have a few others as well. So we have one question about what happens when it goes international? So if this show is broadcast worldwide, is the sign language being animated... will you consider doing any other different sign languages, or will it be in ASL all over the world?

Johanna Stein: Well I'll take that one. It's being animated in ASL. We don't have, at the moment, we don't have a secret store of other visual languages. What is another counterpart to ASL internationally? I don't even know.

Justin Maurer: In England they use BSL, British Sign Language. Australia is different. It's just the US and Canada that use ASL.

Johanna Stein: So yeah, currently we don't. And given the timetable of animation, it takes a long time, [laughter] it takes more than a year to make an episode so… I’ll just say we haven't really considered that yet, yet! Yes please Jevon.

Jevon Whetter: This is Jevon speaking. It's important to keep in mind that the characters are in New York City, and so that's the language that they would use in New York is ASL. And so there's many many types of sign languages all over the world, but people from other countries are already familiar with ASL, more or less. And so you have to remember that we're looking at authenticity here and so these characters are in New York and they're in America and so of course they would be more likely to use ASL. As far as animating It into different languages oh my gosh that's such a process, it'll be like a domino effect.  [Laughter] And you'd have to do the translations all over the place. And so some signs are fine here but in other countries it might be like a swear word. And so you have to be really careful and be aware of that too.

Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert. Maybe in the future someday if you have a deaf character from another country that comes in, then the deaf character from another country would sign that specific sign language from their country so that might be a possibility at some point in the future.

Lauren Applebaum: Excellent! We had another question come in about the budget, you know oftentimes there is a misconception that to include any disability, that it's gonna cost a lot. In reality the average cost of an accommodation is $500 or less. So animating ASL, was there -- were there any budgetary constraints? How did that conversation with DreamWorks go?

Johanna Stein: I'll take that one again. Although I will say I'm not the holder of the purse strings, that would be our Line Producer, Mercedes Salazar. What I can say is that, from what I know of the budget, this is not an issue whatsoever. But more importantly, when we approached DreamWorks about working with this team, there was no hesitation, there was almost the opposite of hesitation. They were sort of chomping at the bit like when are you -- you know, who are you going to be working with? We're very excited to see this come together in the most responsible way. So I would just encourage anyone who wants to do something like this to talk to your studios and producers. I think that people are beyond willing to incorporate consultants and as far as budgetary concerns on the boarding and animation side, no, it's negligible. There's no difference. These are characters moving their bodies. It doesn't add any more animation to move a hand. So yeah, I mean, I've been just incredibly heartened at our studios and they didn't pay me to say this, I'm just saying DreamWorks has been kind of a dream to work with as far as involving and incorporating consultants.

Lauren Applebaum: It's so important what you said that it was negligible costs because as I mentioned, it's often this misconception that incorporating any sort of disability inclusion will make the cost rise. So thank you for being able to point that out. So we have a question that I'm gonna answer, it came in asking specifically about audio description for blind audiences. If anyone else wants to add on please do. Madagascar: A Little Wild is offered on both Hulu and Peacock TV. Both of those platforms offer audio description. Pretty much every streaming platform, not all, but pretty much every streaming platform now has the ability for you to go in and watch it with captions, watch it with audio description, you can kind of pick all those different things and kind of set it up anytime you go on. Now granted, some older content that is brought on to streaming platforms may not have audio description yet, but I know that most platforms are working on that. So I don't know if the person who asked the question had any more follow-up for that but I just want to say that it's usually on the platforms that you will be able to have audio described versions. Did anyone want to add anything to that? Okay. Question if you had any deaf animators involved, and if not, have you thought about bringing deaf animators in the future?

TJ Sullivan: Great question, I actually don't know, we'd have to check with our animation team. Certainly if we don't, we'd definitely be open to it, that'd be a unique perspective from an animator's point of view. But not as far as I know. but it's worth... we can look into it.

Lauren Applebaum: So an interesting question, to Delbert and Jevon, did either of you have any hesitation to join this team as a consultant?

Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert. No. I've been involved in animation for a very long time and on the business side primarily. And so I really feel that I was made for this moment. And I really understand the animation process very well, you know, through and through. So to jump in and join this team, I really knew exactly what to expect and so as far as needing to review storyboards or animatics and, I really get the streamlined approach to animation and so when Jevon and Justin joined the team and it was the three of us, Jevon has so many years of experience teaching and performing. His knowledge of ASL... he's very fluent at translating dialogue. And Justin's perspective as a hearing person who has lived with deaf members of his family and works as an interpreter, the three of us as a team really were a great fit and we really worked out well and I thought we were perfect fit for this job.

Jevon Whetter: This is Jevon. No, there's no difficulty, there was no struggle. I mean I feel like it flowed so well and so smoothly and that we were all going back and forth and really collaborating like a team and so it was just a great experience and I wouldn't really want anything less, I'm completely satisfied with how this is all... the process has gone. It's really important to just be open, communication is key and you know, good things are successful. That's just how it works.

Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert, if I might add one more thing. You know we're so glad that this team has been open to evolving and growing and the characters in the storyline are evolving and growing. And so what you see now, just wait and there's more coming, and there's more exciting stories coming up that you'll see moving forward.

Lauren Applebaum: So on that note, what's next for Dave and Pickles? What can anyone preview for us? Dana?

Dana Starfield: More chaos, more trouble. They're just a ton of trouble in the best possible way. So just like all the characters are developing and sort of coming into their own throughout the series, I think you'll see more of that fun and some elevated chaos from Dave and Pickles.

Lauren Applebaum: Excellent. I'd love to hear from specifically Dana, Johanna and/or TJ, what message would you like to send to other producers, writers, directors, about creating stories with characters with disabilities?

Johanna Stein: Well, specifically, this being an animated show, we are creating the world from the ground up, so again I want to just talk about the word "opportunity." You have an opportunity to create everybody, to build everybody, and to just represent, whether it's New York City or the world, in all of its beautifully diverse glory. So it's an opportunity to just be, not just more representational but incredibly creative. So you know, I think reaching out to consultants like our incredible super team is a great place to start. And as Dana said, we don't know what we don't know, so I would just encourage people to dive in into, what will the studio pay for? What kind of consultants -- who can we work with to help expand our own knowledge base so that we can represent the world as it really is, not through this tiny narrow scope?

Lauren Applebaum: Dana?

Dana Starfield: Yeah, everything Johanna said, plus I'd love to add that, in thinking about the characters, there's animation, you can have the world and there's also sometimes some challenges in animation. But the one thing that's really easy to do is, from a story point of view, think about your characters in a

three-dimensional way that you would approach any other character. You have such an opportunity to create memorable characters and ones that are not like any other character that you've ever seen. And so to lean into that is such an easy thing to do and it's also a great way to -- especially in children's animation -- you're reaching your hand out. And how many people you're reaching out, how many kids... it expands a million fold when you have more inclusion and representation in there. You have the opportunity to create a wider audience and an audience that sees themselves reflected and also an audience who sees characters who they might not have seen represented before.

Lauren Applebaum: We have a bunch more questions, we're not gonna be able to get to everything but what I'll be able to do is pull some and reply to folks via email afterwards as well. But we have folks sharing different suggestions and ideas that they'd love to see so I'm just going to read a few of them. Maybe they were already going to see them in a future season and maybe they'll spur ideas. Questions like, "will other deaf characters from other zoos visit these characters?" "Will there be an opportunity for deaf children to sign with Pickles and Dave?" "Will there ever be an episode where Pickles teaches other animals ASL so they can communicate together?" I think people are very excited by the prospect that future Dave and Pickles can bring. As we're coming towards the end of time I wanted to just give if anyone had any other thoughts that they wanted to share that they didn't get a chance to do so yet.

Justin Maurer: Sure, I'd like to add something really quick. The important thing to keep in mind, a lot of interpreters are approached for consulting gigs every so often. And if you are having deaf characters in a show then you need to have deaf people in the room when discussing it. Think about any other marginalized group and just having a group of people who are not from the group discussing what they might do or what they might think. So I think it's extremely important and as a best practice, A Little Wild, having our team on board. I can't imagine working as a consultant without a deaf member of my team because there's just, there's nuances that I would never think of as a hearing person, even though ASL was my first language growing up. Because deaf people, it's -- they're native speakers of the language. It's their native language that they've used their whole life. And not only that, having the lived experience brings so much to the table. So I just wanted to say thank you to everybody and it's meant a lot to us to be a part of this team and hopefully this could be a best practice moving forward for other shows and other studios.

Lauren Appelbaum: Definitely! Delbert?

Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert. I'd like to add on to, there was an earlier question about deaf animators and I really believe that what we're doing here is creating opportunities and also creating demand for deaf people to become involved in the creative process and deaf animators and deaf writers. I really believe that this is just the beginning and that there will be a lot of growth and potential to create great stories in the future. And so the talent is out there, maybe not as consultants but even deaf actors, deaf writers, deaf directors, deaf animators and this is just the beginning. I really believe that we're starting something here.

Jevon Whetter: This is Jevon, so sometimes when the door is just a little bit open and you're very patient for it to open then it can burst wide open, like kicking the door out of its frame completely now. And so it really takes time, and now that people are noticing that deaf people aren't monsters, they're not scary, we're not scary, and so some deaf people can be successful. And there's a benefit working with deaf people and other disabled people, and that will really start to grow from there, and absolutely - there's so much amazing talent out there that are capable of so many different things. I completely agree with my brother on that point.

Lauren Applebaum: Johanna?

Johanna Stein: I just noticed in the chat that our exec, Pete Cassielbo, said that we would love to meet any deaf animators out there, which we would. Storyboard artists, actors, we really are wide open and, you know, we have a great recruiting department at DreamWorks and we are hungry for talent.

Lauren Applebaum: Shout out to Pete, I responded with my email address and he already reached out with his contact info. RespectAbility runs a lab program which Delbert is intimately involved as a co-creator with me where we are working with folks who are behind the camera with a variety of disabilities. So we are very excited to connect you with individuals who have the training and the experience and are looking for the opportunity. So I want to thank everyone, I know we're going a little bit over but I really want to thank, to Johanna, to Dana, to TJ, Delbert, Jevon and Justin, you all were clearly a really great team working together, it's evident from these conversations. Both yesterday and today's webinar will be available, both on our website and our social media to watch again or if other folks wanted to watch, I saw in some comments about doing some sort of things with different schools, this conversation you obviously are more than welcome to use and show in a school environment if you would find that helpful, and obviously glad to make connections to the DreamWorks PR team if people are looking to do other things as well.

Justin Maurer: Thank you to Sharon, our interpreter.

Lauren Applebaum: Yes, thank you to Sharon our interpreter and Christine who's been doing the live captions. Very much appreciate all that. Our goal is to be as accessible to as many people as possible and we always welcome other accommodation requests. So if you were looking to do something and it wasn't as accommodating as it could be or you know other people who are needing something else, please reach out because we're definitely open to that. Delbert did you want to add something?

Delbert Whetter: Yes if I may just talk about the Halloween episode that's coming out soon, just keep your eyes open for the Halloween episode everyone!  [Laughter]

Lauren Applebaum: We are very excited, I feel like it was a short season that kind of came out already and so we're excited to see what's going to happen next. And it's also just very exciting to see this upward trend of authentic representation, specifically in animation right non, as live action, a lot is shut down, we're seeing animation really push ahead. I can tell you that the RespectAbility team has been involved with 14 different consultations just in the past two and a half weeks on animation projects that include some disability. So it's very exciting to see what the next two to three years is going to bring in terms of disability representation in in animation. So I just want to say thanks again, especially to the folks at DreamWorks for this wonderful series and we are very much looking forward to it and the DreamWorks team just says Madagascar: A Little Wild: A Fantastic Halloween will be on Peacock and Hulu on October 21st. Thank you everyone!