>> Delbert Whetter: Right, I'm gonna begin. For all the deaf viewers here, I wanna ask you guys to watch the interpreter, Gabriel Gomez, they'll be interpreting. We have another ASL interpreter for a DeafBlind person, Aaron. Hello everyone. My name is Delbert Whetter. I'm a member of the board of directors at RespectAbility. They're a nonprofit organization, fighting stigma and advancing opportunities for people with disabilities so they can fully participate in all aspects of our community. I wanna let you know, we have live captions available which you can see by clicking on the CC button down on the bottom of your screen, or you can view the captions on a separate browser, and there's a link for that in the chat. I wanna thank RespectAbility for making this panel possible, and I wanna thank the Helen Keller Center for their amazing staff and their support. I wanna start by describing my appearance and I'll ask each participant on our panel to do the same after I share their bios. So I'm a white male My hair is going away, it's a little bit blonde in gray, with a brown T-shirt on. So a little bit about myself. I'm a filmmaker, I'm also the co-founder of a production company. I produce both live action and animated feature films. And I'm also deaf myself. So we're here today to discuss a groundbreaking short film, called "Feeling Through". The movie "Feeling Through", is about a late night encounter on a New York City street, that leads to a profound connection between a teen and a DeafBlind man. This film is unique because it is the first film to cast a DeafBlind actor in the lead of the film. The film story makes a powerful impact through it's authenticity in a way that I think it will be very hard to accomplish in any other way otherwise. "Feeling Through" is currently on the Academy Award shortlist for the Best Live Action Short and is the winner, is the winner of 17 film festival awards and counting. So now for our esteemed panelists, I'll share their bios. So first we have Doug Roland. He's a social impact filmmaker with a passion for telling stories about individuals and communities that are often overlooked and underrepresented. Himself, he is a writer, a producer, and he's the director of "Feeling Through". Doug has taken the film around the country as part of the "Feeling Through Experience". The "Feeling Through Experience" is a groundbreaking and fully accessible screening event, and has been featured in the New York Times, FOX 5 News and Newsday. Doug has also shared his experience with organizations, schools, and universities, and has been a featured speaker at numerous events and conferences all over the world. I'm gonna go ahead and ask Doug, will you go ahead and describe your appearance?

>> Doug Roland: Hi, this is Doug speaking. Pleasure to be here, thanks for having us. I'm a white male in my mid-thirties. I've got a dark brown beard and short brown hair and I'm wearing a blue, light blue button-up shirt and a darker blue jacket over that, with a plain white backdrop.

>> Delbert Whetter: Next we have Susan Ruzenski. She serves as a Helen Keller Services acting chief executive officer, and is the producer of "Feeling Through". Susan previously had been the executive director at the Helen Keller National Center. During her 40 year tenure at HKNC, she has led and worked with employees across the organization to implement innovative services to meet the identified priorities of the community. Susan has a high enthusiasm for leadership development and mentoring, advocacy and working in collaboration with partners to improve and expand service options for individuals who are blind, and who have low vision or are DeafBlind. Susan, could you go ahead and describe your appearance please?

>> Sue Ruzenski: Sure. Good afternoon everyone. This is Sue, I am a white female. I have a shoulder length blonde hair with some gray, I'm in my sixties. I'm wearing red rimmed glasses, a black dress with a black and white scarf, and I have a black background. and it's wonderful to be here this afternoon, thank you.

>> Delbert Whetter: Thank you. So now I'd like to introduce Robert Tarango. He's the first DeafBlind actor to star in a film. He became an award winning actor when he won the Jury Award for best actor, at the Port Townsend Film Festival and the Lake County Film Festival. Both Robert and his sister, who is also DeafBlind, they both grew up in Arizona, where Robert attended the School for the Deaf in Phoenix. Robert attended the HKNC Comprehensive Vocational and Rehabilitation Program. And after which he was hired by the Center to work in the Food Services Department Robert has worked in the HKNC for over 20 years. Robert, could you please describe your appearance?

>> Robert Tarango: Hello everyone, this is Robert speaking. My name sign is an R, from forehead to chin. I am a 55 year old male, wearing a gray T-shirt with short gray, salt, and pepper hair mixed. I identify as DeafBlind, I am legally blind and hello, everybody.

>> Delbert Whetter: Wonderful, thank you all for being here. I wanna go ahead and start. So first I wanna ask our star, Robert, some people in the audience maybe don't know very much about DeafBlind culture, would you please educate us a little bit? Tell me about usher syndrome, tell me about your experiences with extra syndrome. Please explain.

>> Robert Tarango: This is Robert speaking. Well for myself, I have a tunnel vision, so I have limited vision. And my eyesight has slowly deteriorated. I used to have actually quite good peripheral vision but now over time, what I can see is quite limited. And it really, each person in our community it's different, there's no same two people, but for me, it's a very, very small tunnel vision. Again, for me, my vision, sometimes I have good days, sometimes I have bad days. I have three different sets of glasses, and depending on what the lighting looks like outside, I might use one of those three sets, but essentially it's a very restricted field.

>> Delbert Whetter: Delbert speaking here. So maybe people only audience, don't realize how different usher syndrome is, but it's very common in the deaf community. Many deaf people grow up in the deaf schools and deaf colleges and they get together in deaf communities and they know a lot of people who have usher syndrome. It's important people know that. Robert, can you explain, what does it mean to be legally blind or fully blind?

>> Robert Tarango: This is Robert speaking. Again, legal blindness is a specific designation, it's not somebody who is completely blind but has a specific limited vision. And again, that varies from person to person. So likely they are able to see sometimes out in bright sunlight, maybe they're able to see large prints. but again, it varies by person and they are not fully blind. So again, legal blindness is a designation for somebody who still has some usable vision. And I am legally blind in that how much of my peripheral vision is left. So again, it varies from person to person, and I do use my cane when I'm out in the community to help me navigate.

>> Delbert Whetter: Thank you. Thank you. So again, many people in the deaf community have different levels of hearing deterioration. Myself, my left ear can hear a little bit. I'm a little hard of hearing, so I can use a hearing aid, and my right ear is fully deaf. So it varies. Susan, I'm curious for your description of the HKNC, how do you guys provide support for low vision and DeafBlind people and fully blind people?

>> Sue Ruzenski: Thank you, Delbert, this is Sue speaking. Our services are really designed and very individualized. So it's really taking the lead of the person and knowing where they are in their life. The age of onset for person's vision or hearing, or the degree of vision and hearing loss could impact the type of training or the goals that they identify for themselves when they come for a comprehensive participation in our program. So it really varies. But we have an array of services that can be focused on a career. Could be about employment and identifying ways to be successful and identifying a career that one has an interest in, but also being successful at that career may require some adaptive skills. So it could be about learning orientation and mobility and how to travel to work, or how to communicate effectively with coworkers on the job, use adaptive technology for distance communication, learn more about being self-sufficient in one's home and in the community. So there's just a diverse array of services that we have available. It's really up to the person to design their own program.

>> Delbert Whetter: Thank you, I think it's important that our audience understands the background. And now I'm gonna jump into the film itself. So Doug first, tell us how your story came up.

>> Doug Roland: This is Doug speaking. So the film is a fictional story but it's heavily inspired by a real life encounter that I had 10 years ago when I was still living in New York City where I'm from. And similar to what you see in the film, I was coming home late one night and I saw a man standing alone on a street corner holding a sign that said, "I'm deaf and blind and need help crossing the street." I tapped him, and again, also similar to the film, he pulled out a note pad and wrote a bus stop that he needed. I took him there and realized the bus wasn't coming for a very long time and wanted to let them know I'd sit and wait with him. And so, again, very similar to the film, I just instinctively took his palm and started tracing one letter at a time on it, to let them know I'd sit and wait with him. He understood what I wrote to him. And we ended up having a whole conversation that way over the next hour plus, of me writing in his palm, him writing in a notepad, and really had what turned into a really personal, beautiful conversation with each other. And it was something that, it was it was an experience that really stuck with me and informed me in a lot of different ways. And shortly after, I knew that I needed to find some way to capture it in a story to share it with other people. And that's what ultimately turned into "Feeling Through."

>> Delbert Whetter: That's wonderful. Doug, you specifically had your story. Many writers start with research and then they stop. You are much better than that, you worked with HKNC, what was your starting goal working with the HKNC? How did that transform your movie?

>> Doug Roland: Well, you know, I actually... this experience that I had was 10 years ago but I didn't actually commit to making this film until about a little over three years ago. It was something that at the time that I initially wrote it I just didn't feel like I was quite ready to make it in the way that I wanted to, so it lived on my computer for a number of years. And when I rediscovered it, I instantly had that feeling that I need to make this film right now. And very fortunately my initial instincts were to align with the community. I had a real healthy regard for what I did not know. And my first instinct actually was the moment that I read the script for the first time in a number of years and knew I needed to make it. Before I even really thought it through, I Googled DeafBlind organization, and I called the first number that popped up on Google. And when I was explaining to this man who works in a DeafBlind children's services in the Bay Area, but was just the first number that popped up on Google, I was explaining to him the experience that I had, the film that I wanted to make, and then on the spot I said to him, "And like, I feel like I want to cast a DeafBlind actor, is that crazy?" 'Cause at the time I only had met Artemio, I still knew very little about the community. And he goes, "No, that's not crazy at all, you should reach out to the Helen Keller National Center. So that was the jump off point for me reaching out to the National Center, eventually having our fateful meeting with Sue where we both really connected around the desire to find a way to tell the story. And that led to me flying, I live in LA now, so that led to me flying back to New York and going up to the National Center, which is in Long Island, many times, getting to connect with the students there, the staff there, and then also getting to know the local community in Los Angeles. Going to the Braille Institute, getting to know the instructors and students there, sitting in on DeafBlind classes there. Go out to a DeafBlind living facility near where I live in Los Angeles, meeting a lot of the residents there. And really just had about a good eight or so months of getting to really connect with the community before we actually shot the film. And I'm so thankful for that time, because it allowed me to not only get to know the community much better, but also form meaningful relationships in the community. I got to know Christopher Woodfill, who's the associate executive director of the Helen Keller National Center, is someone that I work closely with, to cast Robert, he's DeafBlind himself, and a number of other people in the community who were really supportive and really embraced what we wanted to do and that I got to know on a personal level. And that was really invaluable because there's so many micro, tiny little decisions that you make throughout telling a story and having a much greater connection to the community and working alongside the community every step of the way, helped inform a lot of details of the film that might not have been accurate had that not been the case.

>> Delbert Whetter: So yeah, many small decisions during filming become large opportunities. So I wanna ask Robert, what's your experience, what was your perspective like being casted for this role? What was it like?

>> Robert Tarango: This is Robert speaking. Man, to make a movie? Wow, I mean, really, when you think about this, the most important thing was really my relationship with Doug as the director and having that open line of communication, learning to do what I was doing. For myself, I'm like, really, you want me to be an actor in a film? And he really worked with me and we set goals and things that I needed to do to accomplish how "Feeling Through" was actually created. And one of those was having interpreters at the ready. So if there was something that needed to be explained, we had interpreters ready. And we were really able to bond through that experience, not only with Doug, but through the entire team, to ensure that there was no breakdown in communication. So it was really easy for me to understand the process and what was going on regardless of my being DeafBlind, because I had the interpreters there who would hone in on salient points that I needed to be conveyed. And that's what made it all work.

>> Delbert Whetter: Delbert speaking here. So Robert, you realize you made history and being casted, or did you not realize till later. That, "Whoa, I'm the first DeafBlind actor in a leading role?"

>> Robert Tarango: This is Robert. Yeah, I think it's actually pretty important for people to realize that DeafBlind people can do it, and that I am actual DeafBlind person. And we want people in the world to know who we are and how we live and breathe in do, and this is critical for doing so. Not casting somebody who is hearing to act like a DeafBlind person, but to have a real DeafBlind person, that people can go, "Huh, that's real life. That's what their experiences are, they've lived this." And again, those are the things that I saw as a DeafBlind person learned at Helen Keller, to become independent, to take all of those skills and then go use them.

>> Delbert Whetter: Delbert speaking. So now Susan, after you've made the movie I'm sure a lot of people have come and talked to you, "I have a movie or I have something about a DeafBlind character myself." What do you tell them?

>> Sue Ruzenski: This is Sue. You know, I hope people do come and ask that question because I hope there are more opportunities like this one and more movies made, and Robert keeps on going with his new career. So I would say to those who have a work of art, like Doug, and have the best intentions to let's work together, and how can we make this happen? How can we support you, provide you with any tools or resources and information?

>> Delbert Whetter: So this is Delbert. So one thing I wanna point out and the wonderful thing about you casting Robert, he's not acting like he's DeafBlind, you casted him because he is a DeafBlind character. That's different. Robert performed the character, many times movies don't understand that, there's a difference. So bringing realism to the role in many small ways. For example, during the movie, the first time you see Artie, his character, he's standing there. And he's standing with confidence, self-acceptance. If the actor themselves wasn't DeafBlind maybe they would be tempted to act lost or confused, maybe they'd be scared. Robert didn't act like that. So little things like that really hit me. Do you have more examples, Doug, of little small things and small ways he brought realism to his role?

>> Doug Roland: Well, you know, a really good example of why it's great to have to collaborate with the community, I'll give one specific anecdote about it. There was, when we were shooting that initial scene where Tereek meets Artie, and Artie has to, he has a backpack on, he has a cane, he also has to write in a note notepad, he had a lot of things in his hands and we were struggling a little bit figuring out how to do all the business, and someone on set suggested, "Oh, what if he just hands the cane to, Artie hands his cane to Tereek, just so he has more, so he can use his hands to write?" And we were gonna explore that and someone who knew better on set said, "No, someone who's DeafBlind would never hand their cane to a stranger like that." And I think that's just one of a number of examples of why it's important to have a collaboration like we did, because when you're on set and you need to make changes on the spot, you're that much more likely to make an inaccurate choice if you don't have other people around who can inform you on what is accurate. So that's like a really great example of a moment where I was fortunate to have a team around me who could help inform me in the places that I needed to be informed.

>> Delbert Whetter: That's wonderful. So, Robert, so when you were acting with your actor, he never acted with a DeafBlind person before, how did you approach him? How did you teach him how to act with you?

>> Robert Tarango: This is Robert speaking. I'm gonna use Steven as the example, when I first met Stephen, the actor of Tereek, we practiced at the Helen Keller National Center, we talked about how we would work together and what we would use, whether it be print on palm, I just really introduced him to a lot of different ways that we could communicate and prep, from when we were actually on the movie set, so that there wouldn't be miscommunication. So I think it's that pre-conferencing, learning, collaboration, training prior, to actually being on set, where one can really learn about our community and things that they may not have been known, so that when they happen on set, you're sort of mitigating it, you're more prepared, so that things like that won't happen. And really those are a lot of the things that Doug suggested prior to the shoot that made everything almost seamless and why the movie looks as beautiful as it is.

>> Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert speaking. Thank you. I wanna discuss about the production and the filming on set. From movie makers who've never experienced working with you people, DeafBlind people, how do you approach disabilities without fear? How do you talk about things safely without worry about, worrying about big things that aren't that big. Safety is important, but I want you guys to explain for our audience who themselves are filmmakers and I've never worked with a disability or a DeafBlind actor before, what is it like, explain your process? What's your advice to people out there who are ready to make a movie onset with the DeafBlind and that's DeafBlind friendly?

>> Doug Roland: Well, this is Doug speaking. I'll start off by saying that, there there's a couple of key things to keep in mind. And I think first and foremost is, as a storyteller, as storytellers we have an obligation to accurately reflect the world around us. Even if you're telling a fantasy movie or a sci-fi movie, there's still a responsibility to have it in some way, even if it's in a metaphorical way in genre films represent the world we live in. And a huge part of that is understanding that, depending on what numbers you go by, as many as a fifth to a quarter of the people on this planet are part of the disability community and that those people need to be represented on screen. And then beyond that, I think there's the very simple understanding also that even if you don't have a lot of experience with the DeafBlind community or other disability communities, like I didn't prior to this experience, that there are people just like anyone else. So if you approach someone with respect, like you would anyone else, that's gonna take you really far away as you learn more about, in this case, in my case, the DeafBlind community. And I also found that coming in with good intentions and a willingness to learn is really most of the battle. Because even if I were initially to maybe say something or not understand something about the community, I always found that people were more than happy to inform me or dialogue with me so that I could understand those things, 'cause they understood that I was coming with with pure intentions and a real desire to actually do this in the right way. So I'd say that makes up for whatever lack of knowledge you might have at the beginning of the process. So don't be scared. You know, Robert I'm sure has something to say this. He says some beautiful things about not to be afraid of the DeafBlind community, if you're not familiar with the community, but certainly don't be afraid just be really clear on your intentions and your willingness to learn. And that'll really take you most of the way. I mean, on top of that, the last piece is it's really important to align with people that know more about whatever community it is that you're working with, if you're not that familiar with it and that also can help. In our case, it was invaluable to have the interpreting and communication team that we did to help facilitate communication. And again, to have people from Helen Keller National Center, be a part of it throughout each step to make sure that it was authentic. But first and foremost, it's really, don't be afraid, don't be intimidated. Just be willing to connect with other humans and learn

>> Delbert Whetter: Delbert speaking. Yeah, it sounds like it's important that people understand not to be afraid. When you come from not knowing, the best way to deal with not knowing is to ask, ask the question, have a partnership. HKN, the Helen Keller National Center, and asking the DeafBlind actor himself, Robert, and he'll explain. Your unknowing is gone and there's less fear now. So Robert, if you had a different director and a different movie and someone who wanted to work with you, and they asked you, "How can I make their film DeafBlind friendly?" What should they do?

>> Robert Tarango: This is Robert speaking. If I was invited to be on another film, again, I think it would be first and foremost, having interpreters from HK who are familiar come in and be on the set, and to be available so that people can learn. And for me, as an actor, it made my job easier just to focus on my role. And again, as Doug said, don't be afraid. There are so many resources out there for people to learn from, like the Helen Keller National Center, is to take the time, take the initiative, to learn and be prepared because that'll help you collaborate as a team member and really mitigate those miscommunications that might happen. So have interpreters at the ready who were knowledgeable, have communication easily accessible and learn from each other. It's not one sided, be open-minded, be ready to work together as a team. And again, use places like the Helen Keller National Center who has the expertise, to really inform everyone's understanding who are ready, willing and able to help because their goal and charge is for deaf people to live independently in their communities. So that's really, what's important.

>> Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert speaking. So yeah, DeafBlind people can, of course, do anything. They can be lawyers. They can train to become doctors and nurses now in the UK. They have DeafBlind teachers, leaders. So really you're right. Susan, you really worked with and advised many companies. How do you advise them to work with DeafBlind people, do you have anything to add?

>> Sue Ruzenski: So this is Sue, so at the core of our mission is to really support everyone who is DeafBlind that comes to training, to really identify what their career interests are, and where their talents are, their aspirations, and support them in gaining the skills to be successful at that. And part of that is establishing partnerships and relationships with employers in all different types of businesses, all kinds of sectors. So we've really modified our approach a great deal and work with employers, and really try to learn about their business and find about what is important to them? What's going to impact their bottom line? And then introduce them to people who are qualified candidates for their workforce, and provide education support to them on how to make that match really be successful in the longterm.

>> Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert speaking, thank you. Doug, you know, Robert is the first DeafBlind actor in a leading role, so Whoa, you guys made history there. You're also the first time director that directed a DeafBlind actor in a leading role. So I'm curious, what was your process for the audience who's curious how to work with a DeafBlind actor? Can you explain your process, what did it look like? Help us understand.

>> Doug Roland: Sure, this is Doug speaking. So again, to reiterate some other things we talked about earlier, it was really important to have a great communication team. Robert mentioned this in his previous response, but when you're finding a communication team it's ideal to have the interpreters be familiar with the individuals that are communicating. So in this case, we were really fortunate because our interpreting team knew Robert very well and then got to know me very well throughout the process. So that's something that really helps facilitate smoother communication when the interpreters know the subjects and the subject matter being talked about. So it was really fortunate again, to work with Helen Keller National Center and have a core team that was really dedicated to this throughout. Beyond that, again, working with HKNC, I got to know about other accessibility considerations on set. Robert described his vision earlier, and so Robert's someone who under certain lighting conditions relies on his vision, and at night he's completely blind, and we were shooting almost entirely outside at night. So we knew ahead of time that in order to facilitate communication in the best way on set, that we needed to create certain lighting setups that were just for communication not for the actual shooting but just to help facilitate communication. So that was another place in which it was invaluable for us to learn about all of this and plan for it ahead of time, so that we were prepared when we were on set. So there were a lot of details like that where we, it's getting to know Robert, getting to know what accessibility needs we needed to have figured out ahead of time. And then from there, it was a lot more about Robert being a first time actor than him being a DeafBlind actor, because that's kudos to Robert for doing such a great job as first-time out of the gate, 'cause it's not an easy thing to do. So a lot of it from there was working with Robert, to have him just take ownership over this role and know that he was the right person to be playing this role and really to embody that. But, you know, again, it's all about preparation and having the right team to help you understand what it is that you need to prepare for. Something that's come up a lot in talking about this, is that, I think it's a mindset thing too and a mentality, because I think someone looking from the outside in, who might not be familiar with working with someone with a disability, might think, oh, so many more things to have to worry about or take care of. And really the reality of the situation is, filmmaking is hard no matter what kind of film you're making, and there are so many considerations, regardless of what what film you're making. Rather than look at this as like an additional obstacle or impediment, I say, embrace it, just get the right people to make you, like help you understand what it is you need to do. And it's really not that different from planning other elements of a shoot. And one step further from that is, and Delbert, you mentioned this right off the top in a really great way, ultimately the film, what is so special about the film, is inextricably linked to Robert being a part of it. And Robert, specifically Robert being there, and breathing life into this character, and all of the things that brought us together as a crew and as a cast, in it being a very new experience for everyone else on set, that breathed a new life and a new energy into the shoot, that wouldn't have been there had Robert not been there, and it wouldn't have been as good of a film, had he not been a part of it. So I say, not only change your mindset to embrace these new considerations, if it's the first time for you, but also understand that if you do embrace it, that is your film's gonna be much better for it.

>> Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert speaking, thank you. So, one thing I noticed, you guys are very successful in filming. In TV and movie, just dealing with people, it's not limited to once, and that's it. Once you deal with an actor they're in, not only the person but the organization, the community, and you continue, before filming, during filming, after filming. I've noticed in a lot of dealing with people you've given a lot of confidence, and what is that confidence doing to help your film?

>> Doug Roland: Well, this is Doug speaking. Sue, I would love to like pass it over to you to talk about what that continued partnership is like, because just before I pass it to Sue, just a huge, tremendous credit to Sue, being someone who not only championed this from the very beginning, but understood the value of continuing to partner with me throughout the process. So please Sue, you have a lot more to say on this than me.

>> Sue Ruzenski: I could go on for many hours about it. The journey that has been now almost three years, and the powerful impact that this film has made. Doug talked about breathing life into the film that Robert breathed life. Well, Doug breathed life into Helen Keller National Center, bringing this to us as a project, a gift, for us to really partner and have this relationship. And this partnership has just, it's just grown and grown and grown. And look at this now, Doug is up for possibly to Lasker. And what has this done for us at HKNC? So many wonderful results and outcomes from this. So not only does it have the power to infuse energy into an organization, it has a transformative power for people at all levels. To watch Robert in his glory and and really succeed in this role in the film, that alone was inspiring to everyone who works at HKNC. And then to be able to understand the beauty and the power of film. So Doug has a story, and now we have seeing how important that story brings to light, to people who have never met a person who is DeafBlind, perhaps. And sometimes it's through film that people get an experience. And that is something that has meaning. It's almost as if you could have lived that experience because you saw it on the big screen. And what better way for people to be introduced to someone, even in the context of this beautiful story of someone who's DeafBlind and connect with them at that level, and the help that that will change that presupposition or that mindset, and that there will be connections in the community for people throughout. It's just been tremendous. And then to know that he's representing the community and that has never happened. Why that, why hasn't that happened? So to be a part of that, breaking that barrier, is so exciting to us. And I thank Doug every day, and I thank Robert, for letting us just be a part of this whole thing because it's really been so meaningful to all of us.

>> Delbert Whetter: So this is Delbert speaking. That's wonderful, I'd love to follow up on that. Really, the authenticity helps so much. Not only the research, the acting, but also when you guys released and you showed the movies, I wanna ask Robert, what's your experience like, going and sitting and speaking and showing this movie at different places all around the world, do you enjoy the experience, what's it like?

>> Robert Tarango: This is Robert speaking. It's been an amazing experience. I still remember the first time sitting in the audience. I mean, the impact of that! People were looking at me as an actor, but me as a person watching the film for the first time, I was like, wow, yes, look at all of these people watching this film. And then when it was over being part of the panel and answering those questions. And people just saying, "Is this your real life?" And I'm like, "Yes." That kind of impact is amazing. And as we went from place to place to place and screened and people were me for my autograph, that incentive, that inspiration just built. And that feeling of pride and just that goodness showing people that people who are DeafBlind can.

>> Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert speaking. Robert, for the people in the DeafBlind community, you made a huge impact, just so you know, or do you feel like you made a big impact?

>> Robert Tarango: Yes, this is Robert speaking. I think that when people see a DeafBlind person on the stage or on the screen, as a DeafBlind person, they're finally cheering, they're like, "Yes, it's us." And to be that person is amazing, to recognize that it is authentic, that I am DeafBlind and that people can meet me. Deaf- blind people, when they meet me, the hugging and just the enthusiasm, for seeing themselves represented, is amazing. And for me, I'm like, "Come on, there's more of us out there."

>> Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert speaking. That's right, I'd like to tell everyone in the audience a secret about authenticity in movie making. And authenticity inspires trust when the audience watches your movie and they will be more into your movie. That's why authenticity is successful in film. So now we're getting close to our time, so I'd like to start with some Q&A, if you guys don't mind. So one question says, I, myself, I'm a writer. I've seen films, I mean, seeing this film made with a DeafBlind character is amazing. I'm struggling with writing to tell a story about a character who's DeafBlind or has another disability without making it look... without making it look inauthentic. How can I write a creative story that feels authentic and honest and doesn't feel like...

>> Doug Roland: Well, this is Doug speaking. That's a really great question. I think first and foremost, fortunately there is a lot more focus right now in mainstream storytelling, on including, not just characters, but narratives of people with disabilities. So I think as the mainstream language evolves in that space, there'll be the ability to have even more and more nuanced stories. So that's a good thing as far as where we're moving. Right now, we're operating in a context where there's been very few stories told in that space and very little nuance. I know it's something that RespectAbility has talked about on your platform a number of times, but some of the pitfalls that people fall prey to when I'm telling stories about people with disabilities and telling them certain narratives that are things that are really kind of antiquated. So we certainly wanna evolve past that but I would say, first and foremost, being that you are a person who is DeafBlind and a writer, you obviously have a personal connection and experience that someone who's not won't be able to articulate. So I would say really stay true to what it is you want to express about your experience, or you know, maybe ultimately this story doesn't have anything to do with deaf-blindness, it just includes a character who is DeafBlind, whatever it is that you want to express through story, you're gonna have a degree of authenticity built in there being someone who lives that experience off the bat. From there, it's probably good once you have something more fully formed it's good to bounce it off all different types of people to just get a sense of how it lands. Other people in the DeafBlind community, people who know who aren't connected to the community at all. It's good to get different perspectives, just to understand how other people are interpreting what you say. And that might give you some more context of how you might want to polish it up or do another draft of it. But, again, I think if you just stay true to the stories that you wanna tell, you being someone who is DeafBlind is already going to be, you're already gonna be speaking from an authentic experience right off the bat.

>> Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert here, thank you. I have a short question, where can I find the movie, I'm asking the panel and put in the link, please put it in the chat link, but where can I watch the movie if I haven't seen it yet?

>> Doug Roland: Yes, so you, oh, sorry to interrupt. Just for people who are asking, I know there was another question about this, if you go to feelingthrough.com, you can see not only the film, but you can also see the supporting documentary called "Connecting the Dots", which tells a little bit more about the origin of the story, follows the process of me aligning with Helen Keller National Center, with us casting Robert, and also our year-long search for Artemio, who's the man in real life that I met many years prior. And I know someone's asking this as well, there also is an audio descriptive version on our website feelingthrough.com. And just to note that as well, before we ever showed the film, in a film festival or any other space, Sue and I worked together to create a fully accessible screening event called "The Feeling Through Experience", which is what we were taking around country, first in-person and then virtually, which included "Feeling Through", the supporting documentary, and a panel discussion and Q&A with the DeafBlind community. And we would have as many as 50 interpreters and support staff at an individual screening to provide that one-to-one accessibility, as well as have audio description available, and a number of other accessibility features to make it accessible to anyone who wanted to experience it. So that's been something that's been there from the very first screening we've done, and has been a hugely important aspect of bringing this film out into the world.

>> Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert speaking. So, the social impact on movie makers because of COVID is huge. So it's a great place to show movies at movie festivals but many film festivals aren't accessible. So I feel like that's starting to change. And now we're in COVID again. So recently Sundance Film Festival showed everything online. They had captions, they had audio description of some movies. So I feel like movie film festivals are really starting to change and become more accepting and accessible. What do you think?

>> Doug Roland: This is Doug speaking. And I know RespectAbility is aware of this 'cause I know you covered some of the films from it, but kudos to the Slamdance Film Festival, that we were a part of recently. This year was the first year that they had a block of films specifically dedicated to people with disabilities both in front of and behind the camera. And also implemented a lot of other accessibility elements that they had never done before, because they understood the importance of it, and really understood that it's something that they needed to get better at, and worked really hard to get a lot better this year. So to have a film festival of that scope, like Slamdance, really make that something that was at the forefront of their festival this year and really talk about how they can do better and why it's important, is exemplifies the really great direction that we're moving in. Certainly there's a lot more that needs to be done, but the fact that this is so much more visible now, is huge. I mean, prior to this, going back three years ago, I didn't even know what audio description was. And now it's something that's so much more talked about in the mainstream. So many more filmmakers understand why that's important. And also just the ease of there's really no excuse to not do these things anymore because there's so many people that can help you with it. And it's really not hard to generate captions. There's a lot of different softwares that help you do it a lot more, a lot quicker. And so there's really the combination of awareness and technology and is really helping things get a lot better in that space.

>> Sue Ruzenski: Hi, this is Sue. I just wanted to add something because I thought it was so important about some of the "Feeling Through Experience" events that were held around the country, and that Doug really helped us to be a part of, it brought together the community in that area, in that locality. So the community of folks who are DeafBlind were able to join in at the movie and enjoy a night out, having accessibility to the film, to the documentary, to the talk back, and it was a time of connection. And it was really a way to sort of really demonstrate, that this can be done and we just have to get together. And there were groups within communities, and it could be interpreters, it could have been different groups coming together that supported the event. And it was just a really great collaboration all in all, just to bring those resources together. And when everybody kind of does a little part, it really can really be successful. So we thought we had a chance of really impacting the theater industry and showing what can be done to improve that experience for moviegoers who were DeafBlind. We'll get back on that as soon as the the movies get a little bit more accessible in the public theaters, but it was really positive.

>> Delbert Whetter: Delbert speaking here. So one of the most important things about the social impact of the film was the outreach. You guys got continued feedback from all and everyone in the audience and the community too. It really showed. I think it was wonderful, that's a great point, and thank you for adding that, Sue. So Doug, are you prepared to continue to keep making socially impacted movies?

>> Doug Roland: Yes, absolutely. And you know, the next step would be to, we really wanna tell a feature-length version of "Feeling Through" and continue working with Sue, and Helen Keller Services and the National Center to do so. So that's something that, is very fortunately, there's nice train tracks laid for that already. But yeah, I mean, looking forward even beyond that, this experience has forever changed not just who I am as a storyteller but who I am as a person. You know, this is the type of experience, going back to meeting Artemio 10 years ago, and then over the last three years, getting to work with Sue and the National Center, getting to work with Robert and do so many of these discussions with him, and the many, many, many other people that I've met, not just in the DeafBlind community, but in other parts of the disability community who have really made a lasting impact on me. It's something that, there's a before this experience and then after. So it will forever change how I go about what I do in ways that I don't even know what they will be yet, but I know that that that this experience will impact all the all of the stories that I tell, moving forward.

>> Delbert Whetter: Delbert saying, thank you. So Robert, we're almost there, time's almost up. I wanna ask you, what's next for you and your acting career? What do you hope for?

>> Robert Tarango: This is Robert speaking. I hope and pray that Hollywood will see "Feeling Through", they will recognize what DeafBlind people can do, and then I'll have the opportunity to act in more and more productions. That's really my hope, but really not only for myself, but what I really hope for is that the public at large will encourage other actors like myself to take part.

>> Delbert Whetter: That was wonderful. Sue, what's next for you and what's your goals?

>> Sue Ruzenski: Oh, (laughing) I just hope, if Doug will partner with us again in the future, we'll be there, 100%. So we look forward to his success and that has been part of ours. So, thank you (laughs).

>> Doug Roland: This is Doug speaking. I just wanna note as well, because Sue's very humble, but Sue is one of the most integral people in this process and a producer on this as well, and shares in all of the success of this. So I would respond by saying, "If you'll have me, I'll certainly have you in the future ongoing." So the feeling is mutual (laughs).

>> Delbert Whetter: And Delbert saying, I think Hollywood will see more of you three going after this movie, for sure. I wanna go ahead and close by thanking everyone for coming and sharing your experiences. I really enjoyed it. I wanna add before I end, I wanna thank the interpreters for being here. The interpreters from the Helen Keller National Center and from RespectAbility, I thank both of you. I also wanna talk about for those in, we have an exciting opportunity in the program in the summer for people with disabilities and careers in the entertainment industry. Maybe you're an emerging professional or someone mid-career, with years of experience, we have a wonderful, amazing opportunity this summer at RespectAbility. Which is an award winning eight week program called the Summer Lab program for entertainment professionals with disabilities. The program's purpose is to develop and elevate the talent in pipeline. So thank you guys all. Thank you guys for coming everyone.