>> Kelley Cape: Thank you for taking time today to join us for this panel discussion. My name is Kelley Cape. I am wearing a blue dress, very fake pearl necklace and my hair is curled. I'm sitting in front of my childhood living room with a tree to my left. I am the entertainment and media Fellow at RespectAbility, a non-profit fighting stigmas and advancing opportunities so people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of community. I identify as bisexual and my pronouns are she/they. If you would like to view the ASL interpreter in a larger screen, we invite you to pin their video which will spotlight their video throughout the entire panel. In addition, we have live captioning done by a real live person, and this is available in the Zoom app by clicking on the CC button, as well as via your web browser. And we've posted that link in the chat box below. This panel is live, and we'll be taking questions from you during the second half of the panel. Please add your questions to the Q&A box to do so. And if you're watching us on Facebook during the live airing, we'll be monitoring for questions there as well. This panel is being recorded and will be available on RespectAbility's Facebook page and website after the event concludes. A high resolution recording with open captions and our ASL interpreters will be posted and sent to everyone who's registered next week. If you want to stay connected to RespectAbility, I invite you to sign up for our weekly newsletter on disability inclusion and equity in the entertainment industry. Check out the link in the chat box. In celebration of Pride month, we are discussing LGBTQ+ representation in media, highlighting best practices and folks living at the intersection of being queer and disabled and what that means working in media as we strive for better and more equitable representation of this intersectional identity. According to a recent study from the Movement Advancement project, an estimated three to five million LGBTQ people are currently living with disabilities. Queer individuals face a disproportionately higher unemployment rate than people without disabilities, a stat that has perpetuated even further during COVID. And 26 percent of LGBTQ students were bullied or harassed at school because of an actual or perceived disability. Evidently, our society still has miles to go to empower our communities fully and equitably, and I believe entertainment media has a big role in that. Before we dive in, I'd like to formally allow our expert panelists to introduce themselves and talk a little bit about their journey. Before you answer though, please describe yourself. For example, the one I did earlier - I'm Kelley, wearing a blue dress, fake pearls, in my childhood living room. And then give your answer. Shea, would you like to start us off?

>> Shea Mirzai: Yes I do, but I don't know how I'm going to be able to -- I don't know how I'd be able to follow that act. I'm Shea Mirzai. I'm an Iranian American, I'm gay, and I'm also -- a person who stutters. I'm sitting -- in my apartment. I'm wearing a dark blue shirt. I have a pair of -- eyeglasses and hair that is short and alarmingly going gray. I'm a screenwriter, I'm a producer as well. I'm the CEO of Space Coyote. I'm repped at Zero Gravity and APA, and I'm really excited to be here.

>> Kelley Cape: We are happy to have you, and Shea, I love the gray. It looks very flattering on you. Eric, would you like to go next?

>> Eric Ascher: Sure. So hi everyone. I'm Eric. It's fun actually speaking on this panel, because I usually run the tech only. So I'm the Communications Associate here at RespectAbility. I'm wearing a gray shirt with the RespectAbility logo on it. I have short hair and glasses and I'm in front of a white wall. My pronouns are he him and his. And as I'm both gay and on the autism spectrum, it's good to be with all of you here to talk about intersectionality and to celebrate Pride month 2021.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you so much Eric. Eric is truly the pride and joy of RespectAbility, and I have so many problems -- I couldn't have made it here without him today, so thank you so much. Kiah, would you like to go next?

>> Kiah Amara: Absolutely. Hi, I'm Kiah Amara. My pronouns are they/she. I am wearing a blue suit coat and repping my national disability theater shirt. I'm sitting in my room in New York City, which -- there's currently a thunderstorm outside, so if you see flashing lights or hear loud booming that's because we are in the middle of a thunderstorm. And I'm surrounded by some plants and a bookshelf and all of my lovely favorite things. I am also queer and disabled. Everybody said it so now I feel like I should too: happy pride everybody! And I am the founder of IndieVISIBLE, which is a production group that focuses mostly on making accessibility accessible in indie film. So we do a bunch of stuff for production, pre through post, as well as making our own films. And yeah, super excited to be here as well.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you so much. I felt like everyone pinned your video the second you said thunderstorm, and everyone's just going to be watching looking for lightning, so thank you. Facebook, keep an eye out for that. Nasreen, would you like to introduce yourself next?

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: Hey. My name is Nasreen. My pronouns are she her and hers. My body is currently occupying Tongva land. I'm multi-heritage. I have long curly brown hair that's currently styled in a long braid. I'm sitting in a gray chair and I'm wearing a black lost boys t-shirt. I have seven identities. I have six disabilities, five of which are invisible. I'm neurodiverse, I have chronic pain and I walk with a cane sometimes. I create content for Film and TV behind the camera. I'm a screenwriter and cinematographer.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you so much for that introduction. I should also disclose too that I have a very long list of mental disabilities, the top of which are PTSD and anxiety and depression. So thank you for being vulnerable and sharing all of your identities with us, that's such an important part of this discussion. Lenny, would you like to go next?

>> Lenny Larsen: Sure, of course. I'm Lenny Larsen. I'm a spinal cord injury victim, so I'm paralyzed from the neck down. But that doesn't stop me from doing much of anything. I'm also gay and I run my own production company called Next Generation Creative Group. We work on -- primarily content for kids and families. And we're getting ready to start our first feature over the summer. I'm wearing a dark charcoal gray shirt, and I'm in one of my home offices.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you so much for the introduction. Thank you all for being here and sharing your experiences with us today. To start things off, I am really excited to know from our panelists, what examples of queer representation have you seen in film or television lately that you feel empowered by or you feel are authentic?

>> Eric Ascher: I can take this one first. So I'm going to focus on -- there's a lot of good queer representation and a lot of good disability representation. There's not as much that is both at the same time. So I'm going to pick two examples that are both at the same time. The first one is obviously Special on Netflix starring Ryan O'Connell, and has lots of other people cameo in it. And it's a fantastic show -- very funny, and Ryan is both gay and has cerebral palsy. And he spoke at our event last year. So he's fantastic and the show is definitely worth a watch. The other example I'm going to give is from the world of reality television. If anyone knows me, I'm very interested in reality competition shows. And so I wrote about Robert White, who is gay and autistic like me, and finished as runner-up on Britain's Got Talent in 2018. And he's a comedian and he was fantastic. So those are two examples I would recommend that people -- check out.

>> Kelley Cape: Absolutely. Thank you so much for sharing those! I know Special has been very trending on Netflix, and that's just so great to see, especially because Tatiana from RespectAbility is in it as well, so big shout out to her. Does anyone else have any favorite examples they'd like to share?

>> Shea Mirzai: I think it'd be cool for us to actually talk about a multimedia property. It originally started off as a flagship series on Sony's PlayStation. So I like "The Last of Us" a lot. It's actually being adapted into a similar flagship series on HBO. And I like it for several reasons, I guess one being I'm already a huge nerd, so I fit in exactly well with it. But it's basically set in a zombie apocalypse, but I was most excited by the fact that its lead character is actually a lesbian. But I bring this up and I think it answers a broader question for us all actually. If a character is written as being a queer person, it doesn't mean that his hers or their story has to only be about being a queer person. So it broke a lot of ground, it got a sequel as well that also features -- a trans character as well. And of course it starts off -- I just like to say that -- in stories like that -- it doesn't vibe like a little bit of backlash where a small portion of the audience is always saying, "well I don't want this pushed down my throat," when it's not at all. It's a part of this person's identity, and I think she makes a kick-ass hero, so.

>> Kelley Cape: I love that so much, especially when someone's identity can just be not -- the center of the plot, it can just be more dimension to who they are, so thank you for sharing that perspective. I'd love to hear from the rest of our panelists too.

>> Lenny Larsen: And I have to agree with you. If I see one more coming out story I'm gonna [Kelley laughs]. It's like, when you're representing queer characters on the screen it's -- it doesn't always have to be about coming out. We're just normal people integrated with society, and those are the shows I tend to appreciate most.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you Lenny. I think it's time that our community is pretty vocal about condoning the tropes and the overplayed plots that we're always seeing, so I am a huge advocate for more dynamic plot lines for the queer community as well. Thank you. I really appreciate that in Schitt's Creek as well. I think it's one of the earlier shows that kind of incorporated sexuality in a really fluid environment.

>> Lenny Larsen: Yeah.

>> Kelley Cape: Yeah, it was a pretty awesome shoot. Does anyone else have any recommendations?

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: I just saw a film on Hulu directed by Natalie Morales called "Plan B," and what struck me was that the two main characters are brown women, young girls. And one of them is represented in the LGBTQ community. And I just love seeing that there was some intersection in that storyline.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you so much. And that's definitely a huge part of our panel today. It's not just queer identity, but understanding that our community as a whole is distinctively intersectional and that's something that is worth celebrating, through not just this month but through the whole year. And it's so great that we have all these characters to hold on to in these stories, and I can't wait to see what new content the post-COVID world, post-COVID-safe production teams will be able to create moving forward. How can these sets and the casting process as a whole make the entertainment industry more accessible -- a more accessible workforce? What do you think they should change moving forward?

>> Lenny Larsen: Well I think the key to getting a more accessible workforce both in front of the camera and behind the camera -- it starts at the executive level. I think there's one person I know who is on the executive level of any of the studios who's disabled. And that's where it has to come from.

>> Kelley Cape: Absolutely. It's all about taking advantage of those powerful seats at the table and using that -- that access for good, and helping pioneer a driving force in diversity further, so thank you for that. Shea, I see your hand. Would you like to share?

>> Shea Mirzai: Yeah -- I just want to follow up on that point, because I think it's a fantastic one and I'll speak a bit more -- about how things have changed recently. And I wanted to point out, as awful as our pandemic was and everything, it did present a paradigm shift for the world. And then I think it showed the importance of accessibility. So if you look at a program like the one we're on right now, it allows people to be able to work from home. So if you're a wheelchair user, it eliminates accessibility issues like that. And it really showed us that a work-from-home shift, it really wasn't like a doomsday scenario that all these major corporations have actually made it out to be. And I'm afraid, frankly, because now that it seems to be in our rear-view mirror, I know -- a lot of companies are insisting that -- a lot of people come back in and work from an office. I don't think it's necessary, I think it's a bad idea. But again, it was a bad situation but it did show that a lot of our preconceived notions about who can show up to work and not were very outdated. So I hope technology systems like this certainly stay in place, and I don't see a reason why it shouldn't.

>> Kelley Cape: Absolutely. I really do think that the future of work is a hybrid model that's accessible to everyone. And it's a huge bummer that it took a pandemic to shine this light of accessibility and this opportunity to help everyone put to work the best way that they can possible. But hopefully moving forward we keep those modes of accessibility open and thriving for all of us. I even found myself using -- being able to take social breaks to recharge and have some alone time. That's helped my -- all of my depression so much through through the pandemic was being able to really reflect on myself. And so I think that having a hybrid model is such a crucial part of moving forward. Anyone else want to share?

>> Kiah Amara: Yeah, I absolutely want to jump in after Shea, since he brought up this point of, you know, it wasn't until the pandemic affected everybody that then we had this thing of "oh, now let's try to make things accessible." And I thought that was so -- I mean, not surprising, sadly, but super interesting, and I think something that a lot of times people don't think about. And especially execs, when we come up with all these barriers of -- "oh, we can't hire this disabled person because they have an accessibility need," that accessibility and disability are the only things that are connected, instead of recognizing that accessibility is something that everybody needs. It's not intrinsically connected to the disability community. You know, whether it's somebody who is a person who is going through a pregnancy and needs time off for that -- that's accessibility. Whether it's somebody who -- just like during COVID times, if somebody has a sick family member and needs to take off leave, that's accessibility. And we tend to look at it like it's too much when a disabled person asks for it, but when a non-disabled person asks for it, then it's fine. So I think one of the big changes that needs to happen as well is sort of this break of yes, recognizing that disability and access hugely go hand in hand, but also recognizing that those aren't the only two things that are connected. And so we really need to be focusing on access as a whole production aspect, and as a whole holistic aspect of filmmaking, not just about disabled people, but about making all of our processes more accessible to everybody across the board, whether it be during a pandemic or post-pandemic.

>> Kelley Cape: Snaps all around that, girlfriend. You got it right on the dot. That is just exactly the kind of voice and narrative we need to be amplifying, that it shouldn't take a pandemic for our voice to be heard, or a semblance of our voice, so you are absolutely so right there. Oh my goodness, thank you for sharing. Does anyone else want to share on this topic of making entertainment more accessible?

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: Yeah, I think there's stigma and there's so much fear around the fact that someone who's disabled who may come on set or may be in the writers room will have too many needs, or they'll be astronomical in terms of financial impact on the budget. And that's just not the case. I've seen time and time again on multiple sets where positions above the line will start thinking about accessibility and the needs of their crew members, whether they're disabled or not, across the board and start to ask the right questions at the very beginning of pre-production, to start to lay out what that schedule and that production is going to look like. And when you have universal design on set, the content you're creating just becomes that much more valuable. The disability market is a trillion dollar market. You know, you can't just write disability storylines without the disability community. We have to be there. We have to be part of that fabric. And if you want us to be part of that fabric and tell authentic stories, you have to welcome us into a space that we can actually work in. And it's not as hard I think as a lot of people might think it is.

>> Lenny Larsen: And I have to agree with you. All I need is the doorway I can fit through and I can do my job as a director, as an EP. I just need to get in the room. [Laughs]

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: I think it's like just a matter of breaking down this wall, this invisible wall, that's been created about -- this person has a disability, and -- the person who doesn't have a disability, seems like it's such a huge mountain to climb over to reach them, to collaborate with them, and it's not. It could be as simple as having pieces of paper and pen on different surfaces when someone who's deaf is on set. I mean, that's a really non-expensive way of including someone. Creating a doorway or choosing a room that has a doorway that Lenny can fit through: that's not an astronomical ask. [Lenny chuckles] Those are simple things.

>> Kiah Amara: I'm going to jump on one more time at the end of that, just because I so loved what Nasreen said about that idea of -- they think it's this crazy ask, and it's really not. And I think that's something that people in the disability community are really comfortable with doing out of necessity, which is saying "this is what I need in order to do my job. Here is the thing," which is really making it so much easier for execs. My sibling is also in the industry and told me this story about somebody else who is working on a feature and was super proud because they made it through this feature living off of lucky charms marshmallows. And at the end they weighed 90 pounds. And that's not an accessible process then. A person just isn't asking for the things that they need -- to actually make the process accessible. Not that that's on that person at all, obviously there's tons of issues in the industry that continue to perpetuate that system. But I think that's something that's really scary to execs is that the disabled community comes in and just goes "actually I need this and there isn't any other way." As you -- as Lenny said, "I have to fit through the door. There you go, that's a need and you have to accept it." If I'm the person who's going to be working here -- and I should be the person working here.

>> Lenny Larsen: [chuckles] Right.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: You know like, we're already asking people -- we're finally at a point in history where we're asking people what pronouns they use on a daily basis, which is awesome. And before that we were asking people what dietary needs they have. So these are becoming kind of part of our everyday language. Why not add a third question: "is there anything that we can provide to help make your work possible?" And that's not just asking someone who's disabled, that's asking everyone. Everyone has needs.

>> Kelley Cape: Exactly. And that's something I've always kind of struggled with internally is this phrase "special needs," where really, the need to feel accepted and to have access to work isn't a special need. And it's -- we all have accommodations that can be made to help make our lifestyles more healthier and accessible, so thank you for bringing up -- and thank you to everyone for chiming in so much. I really appreciate all of your input. These are such great ideas. Once we finally have some sense of inclusive workspaces in the industry, it's always nice and always empowering to feel a sense of community. Have any of you felt or found a safe space in entertainment or media and have advice for others on how to build community, how to find community and what that looks like?

>> Shea Mirzai: Yeah. I would love to speak to this, as a member of the Writer's Guild of America West, and that it's always been a part of our guild that -- like -- there's certain subsets of our disabled writers committee, LGBTQ writers committee, and as a shameless plug, our recently launched Middle Eastern writers committee. I want to talk about that one too because its about a decade in the making, where originally it actually wasn't a thing, because we were deemed a micro-minority, which, I think that that in itself is just a really crazy term, but it does seem to be a thing of the past, in that all of -- our different committees are doing things that are raising awareness and visibility of its own members. But I also see a strong sense of solidarity as well of all these different groups that are looking out for each other. So it seems like a bunch of these different kind of safe spaces are there, but I'm blown away by the fact that they seem to all work so well together.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you so much for sharing that. You're right. This development of subcommittees and groups where we can meet like-minded individuals and identify people is just so empowering, to feel you're not -- maybe not as different or not as alone. I know that there's a huge difference in diversity equity inclusion work where you have equality, you have equity and then you have liberation. And one first step is hiring diverse people. The second step is creating communities that break down barriers and facilitate diverse interaction. And the last step is tearing down the wall that even separates the difference between minorities and majorities. And so you're right - taking that step to make committees where we can feel included and empowered is so important. Does anyone else have anything they'd like to share?

>> Lenny Larsen: Well, I mean, one thing I'd like to bring to the table is the diversity and inclusion positions that almost every major studio is putting in place right now. And if you really look at it, it's all cultural. It has nothing to do with disability, it has nothing to do with LGBT status, and it's -- they're so focused on diversity and culture, and it really needs to be brought to their attention on both the committee level and on the executive level that diversity is so much larger than cultural. And that's something I've run into over and over again, and it's like -- wait a second, no, it's not just cultural.

>> Kelley Cape: Exactly. And I think a lot of that has to do with this very dangerous phenomenon of tokenism, where if you can't see the diversity per the color of someone's skin, then it doesn't count as diversity. And it's -- we're in such a strong era where that's expanding, and corporations are starting to listen and change. And I think that this process of coming out that we all experience as queer people is also part of the intersection with disability. Where do we disclose our non-visible disability? It's this idea of disclosure and the dangers that come with that. And I was just wondering -- and it leads perfectly to my next question, Lenny, is that with this idea of coming out, has anyone ever navigated this disclosure dissonance that comes with both disability and sexual identity in a way that's been celebratory or a really healthy environment? Does anyone want to share their story or journey with that?

>> Eric Ascher: So I'll go first on this one. So I actually came out much later than I would have liked because of the stigma of autism. So in high school, I knew I was gay. In like ninth grade, I knew. I didn't come out to anyone until 12th grade and I didn't come out to most people until college, because there were lots of -- I was bullied and I wrote about this a couple years ago for RespectAbility. And so I was afraid that I was already being bullied for being different -- read: autistic -- and I didn't want to add to that by also being openly gay. And I feel like it's a huge problem that people are afraid to come out because of the stigma and because -- it's becoming less of a problem, thankfully, but it is still a problem. And there's stuff that needs to be addressed.

>> Lenny Larsen: Well every time you fill out a job application somewhere, it's like "do I click the 'I have a disability' button or do I not?"

>> Kelley Cape: Exactly.

>> Shea Mirzai: Yeah, I think that's a fantastic point too, and I just wanted to say this as well. I first started out here like -- I worked at a mini major studio. I got hired on as an unpaid intern. I don't wanna be that guy but I kicked ass there, so I eventually got hired. But I did hear that there were whispers coming out of HR that I couldn't be hired at businesses, because I couldn't work. But it brings up one of those adages where I had to work -- a lot harder -- in order to prove myself, which I did. I went to -- I ran our studio story department. I stayed there for over six and a half years. But I do want to say, the fact that I worked in an environment like that, where many of you can imagine I heard things like homophobic comments and stuff, so I didn't want to tell people I was gay. And then at the same time, as ironic as it sounds, because it's very obvious I stutter, I didn't want to tell people that I had a speech impediment like this. So it has been an uphill battle. I have had a rep in the past who actually told me that it was a problem I stutter. So eventually, I moved on, and now I'm based with a major management company and a major lit agency. And it was super important to me that I signed with reps who understood me, and I landed with fantastic people who actually don't see it as a problem. So I very much have to stress it's important for us to come out and speak very specifically about our disabilities. Because it's not fair that almost everybody else is allowed to own their truth except us, because it doesn't make people feel okay around us. No, I don't think that's acceptable. And if we all come out, then I think it's a major force for good.

>> Kelley Cape: You are so right. Thank you so much for sharing. I myself had a quiet coming out, where my outward expression of my bisexuality was wearing rainbow pajamas watching Schitt's Creek during quarantine. And I was bisexual, and no one really had the chance to celebrate it or anything. So this is kind of more of a public opportunity for me now. But when I joined RespectAbility, it was a kind of different space. It was the first time I felt celebrated and seen and heard, where I could come out, not only about my sexuality, but come out with the long list that my therapist gives me every week, and be proud of it and know that I have the platform to create change for people like me, and help facilitate authentic stories because of it. So I just can't even articulate how thankful I am to RespectAbility for that opportunity and for being an organization that stands behind such strong values. Does anyone else have a journey they like to share with disclosure and coming out with disability and and queerness?

>> Eric Ascher: I just want to quickly add that if you are not comfortable coming out then there's no rush. To clarify, I think it's important that if you don't feel like coming out will be safe for you, don't do it. But it's a process that everyone has to go through, and you have to make your own decision, and just know that you're valid regardless of whether or not you're out. And that's just -- I feel like that's important to say.

>> Kiah Amara: I want to follow up from Eric there, just because I feel like the last three things that were said all really touch on sort of a similar issue for me, which is that I'm super passing - both in LGBTQ space and in disability space, except for you know the 15 percent of the time where my disability makes that impossible for me to choose to be passing. And so that's always been a really interesting line for me of when I'm choosing to disclose and when I'm not choosing to disclose, sometimes because it is a situation of "okay, if I tell them I'm disabled, I'm not going to get this job." But also sometimes it's a situation of "okay I'm the person who's passing." So, like Eric mentioned that he was bullied for this and that and didn't want to add on to his bullying. But because I'm passing if I just choose to embrace my passing identity, I can sort of bypass a lot of these social stressors that come at me. But that also means that as a queer disabled person, I find myself in that invisible space a lot of "what should I be doing?" "Should I be saying that I'm this person and claiming this space and this identity, or is that taking away from somebody who is going through a lot more stigma from having those identities?" But just like what Shea was saying, I do think that even -- across the spectrum, as Eric said, be safe. You know your own life and your own world and surroundings. But that somebody like me coming out as well and being very loud and proud about saying "hey, I'm this too." A lot of the issues that we get in the entertainment industry have to do with "well, what is the audience going to see?" Or you know, "what do the executives who are producing the show think that the audience is going to see in this character?" So unless you have the white thin gay man who only wears rainbows and has a high pitched voice, and all of these very very basic stereotypes of what a gay man is -- not that gay men can't also be that, but that's a very classic stereotype. And then the stereotype of the disabled person which is just, you know, the icon that you see on the bathroom, which is -- it doesn't even matter who the person is, they're in a wheelchair and that's their whole identity. But that coming out, wherever you are on that spectrum, changes what the landscape of both disability and LGBTQ identity looks like. And that can change the way executives feel about things, it changes the way that audiences feel about things, and especially for other queer and disabled people, the more that you come out and say "hey, I'm here," that sort of gives other people the space to say "oh, maybe I can be myself and identify boldly wherever I am in the spectrum." So yeah.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you so much for sharing that. It's this balance of empowering others to come out so that we can pave the way to make lives easier for the youth of today, and that's just so empowering. I just added the pronoun "they" to my name and that was a really awesome experience. I remember being very nervous about it and only doing it in the safe bubble of RespectAbility. And then the next day, Demi Lovato announced [their] pronouns and I was like "okay--for sure," and "this is an easy decision for me." And so it was just such an awesome opportunity to feel seen and heard through that representation. And thank you all for being so vulnerable. Yes?

>> Shea Mirzai: Yeah, sorry, I just want to add on -- I think it's a good point to make about this is that if you look at something like Stonewall, it was always people who couldn't pass, who were already out there and visible who opened up all these doors and stuff. I would say or I would hope that if you are a person who can pass, that you can stand out and and explain who you are, then it starts to -- raises awareness that there are a lot of us out there.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: Agreed, yeah. I think growing up in spaces where it wasn't safe to disclose all of my identities -- we're getting to a point in history now where our stories are being sought after, which is great. It's really exciting, we're not there yet, we still have so far to go, but the fact that major studios are seeking out writers and creators that occupy intersectional voices is huge. And it's not always -- you're not always going to be in an environment where it's safe to disclose to the people around you, or to your office or even publicly. But just know that binaries are coming to an end. People that occupy LGBTQ spaces and the communities and disability communities that we occupy are actually -- like, we're coming and we're coming strong. And there's -- nothing anyone can do about it. So just, you know, keep yourself safe, however you're keeping safe, and hopefully we'll continue to build a world where it's safe for you to be you.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you so much for sharing that and your rhetoric is -- it gave me chills, that binary is non-existent and the end of the gender regime is just one of my favorite topics ever. So thank you for sharing such an insightful perspective, and to everyone for being so vulnerable in this panel. I know that disability can take immeasurable amount of forms. And per a question, also in the Q&A, I would like to acknowledge is how can we navigate non-visible disabilities and what kind of stories do we want to see more of in our television, in our movies from a non-visible disability standpoint? This can be from neurodiversity or mental health stories. But how can we offer more representation to this community that -- like Kiah said and like we've been talking about, that is passing?

>> Kiah Amara: I'm happy to jump on again here to kick it off, just because -- so I'm a spoonie. I'm somebody with a chronic illness, so an invisible disability that crosses over into a bunch of things, which as I said are sometimes visible and are sometimes not. But as a spoonie, I always thought it was incredibly interesting that one of the sort of very common types of shows is our hospital show, right? And yet, we are not casting tons and tons of chronically ill people in order to play those roles. And we are not then putting chronically ill people behind the camera. We are not -- like, we don't utilize that space a lot. And again, I'm being focused here, just since this is my own identity to talk about that space, so -- I think chronic illness is one of the invisible disabilities that sort of scares people the most, because I think, especially the nature of sometimes it's consistent and sometimes it's not, is really terrifying to the film industry. So when dealing with invisible disabilities, I usually have two things. One is are you doing it because you want the brownie points of your general audience to see and understand this? Or are you doing it because it's the right thing to do, it's going to make your content way better, you're actually representing the community and authentic voices, and the community is actually going to see themselves in it, as opposed to whoever's idea of what that person should look like is. And then the other thing being that a lot of times when we're talking about accessibility, that can just be as simple as flexibility, which is if you want to cast somebody or hire somebody who has a chronic illness or some other kind of disability, which is a lot of disabilities, that fluctuates and is one way on one day and is a different way on another day, then flexibility has to be a part of the way that you work accessibly. You have to be able to say "all right, I have this person who's doing this job. They're doing it fantastically. They are the authentic voice. I need to give them three days within a time frame where they're going to spend 24 hours doing x." Obviously there are a lot of other options for ways that you can make flexibility work, but I think flexibility and definitely flexibility with time is something that the industry's really scared of so. That's always a big push that I'm making.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you so much for sharing your story with us, that's just so awesome to hear. Does anyone else have any comments on passing or non-visible disabilities, and maybe the kind of stories you want to be seeing on screen?

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: Yeah, you know, I think our community -- we have very unique experiences and those experiences are things that people can understand in any part of society, in any part of the world. So I think -- the more people realize just how many of us are out there, and the fact that we occupy all spaces -- I mean your neighbors, your colleagues, your family's colleagues, people inside your family, young and old -- we are everywhere, our stories are everywhere and our traumas are unique to us. So the more our stories start to get folded into the storylines we see on screen, the more they start to normalize, and the more stigmas start to dissipate. Because right now it's the stigmas that are keeping us from being part of society openly. Right now it's -- between 20 and 25 percent of the US is disabled. I think that number is much larger, honestly. I think people don't identify that way because there's so much stigma and heaviness around the fact, that to admit that you're disabled or to admit that your body works a certain way, that there's some sort of shame in that, and there's not.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you so much for sharing that. And I think that's a misconception a lot of times with the numbers is that there's -- for some reason are more gay people in America every year, that's just -- huh, I wonder why? Maybe our country's getting a little bit more safe for everyone to disclose and come out. So thank you for acknowledging that. I think that's something people need to talk about more. And I would also, as a side note to everyone listening, like to invite the audience to ask questions of the panelists in the Q&A forum. Please add your question to the Q&A box on this platform. For our friends on Facebook, the comments are being moderated and questions will be shared on us on Zoom as well. So type in those questions so we can get them and make sure everyone's voice is heard. And while we wait for the questions from the audience, I do have a question for all the panelists. What projects are you and your teams working on now that you are moving forward in this pandemic-cautious world and trying to get more involved? How can we help support your journey in whatever you're working on right now?

>> Lenny Larsen: Well I think one of our favorite projects that we're working on is kind of on hold until it's safe to send children around the world again. We do a show called Destination Conservation, where we take teenagers and we send them out with wildlife biologists to the far-flung corners of the world to work hands-on with endangered wildlife, bringing them back from the brink of extinction. But with COVID going on right now, it's almost impossible for us to continue producing until the world is safe again. We can't put children at risk, even though we're putting them -- with elephants and orangutans and tigers and what have you, we can't put them up against the virus.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you for sharing that project. Oh my goodness, wow, what a show! And I know the post-COVID production is going to look so different from what we saw before. That actually transitions to one of the questions that we received, is how has covid impacted the mental health space in entertainment? Does anyone want to take that question? I think it's an awesome topic because cinema and film distinctively have mental health intersections, and it's so empowering to talk about.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: So some of the work I've been doing with RespectAbility is kind of exciting, because we are seeing specific partners reaching out and asking us to consult on script projects that have neurodiverse characters embedded into the story lines. And these are major studios that are looking for authentic representation, instead of doing the project and then seeing how it lands. They're incorporating disabled consultants into the process of storytelling, which is integral to making it authentic. And so I think that sort of gives us a peek into the evolution of where we're going. The more we see those storylines normalized on screen, the more -- we'll see more stories that way, the more people will start to come out -- maybe teachers will come out, maybe people in leadership will come out, so that it makes it -- so that it's a safer space for all of us to really spread our wings wherever we're working.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you so much for sharing that, and you're right. It's this idea of normalization that's really empowering right now, where people are putting in their pronouns in their names, so it's safe for me to put "they" or for someone else to identify however they choose to. So I think that's such an important aspect of our world right now is normalization. If anyone else would like to share how neurodiversity and entertainment intersect or what stories we should be seeing?

>> Lenny Larsen: Well I think coming out of -- this year and a half long COVID nightmare, I think we need more stories of inspiration and more stories of the changes that we can make in the world ourselves. Stories of empowerment where we can overcome the massive oppression that COVID would put on all of us. And I think that inspiration is necessary for all of humanity, that we can get past this, we can move forward as a community, as humanity.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you so much for sharing. Oh yes, Kiah.

>> Kiah Amara: Oh. I was just going to say to that point, just speaking about being in a post-COVID world, to touch on what Nasreen said and what I said a little earlier about, although in the US we might feel like COVID's over, we're moving on, we're doing our own thing now. Especially as Lenny mentioned with his project too, if you're working with folks from all over the world, or if you're working with folks even just from different areas in the States, really recognizing that we're not through COVID yet. And COVID isn't over and even if -- again, I'm in New York, we have some really low numbers now. You know, you can walk down the street and get a pcr test and get your COVID vaccination on the sidewalk. It's incredibly accessible for most people to make that happen and be safe and feel like they're ready to go back to work. But even just speaking about neurodiversity and mental wellness and things like that, one of the things we've been doing at indieVISIBLE is just -- as I mentioned, time. Really giving people ease and space to breathe and take rests when they need to. Everybody please rest. Rest, and say "hey, I need to pause working on this. Can we come back to things?" And just recognizing that yeah, we have stuff that's in post-production now that's been in post-production for over the COVID year, but there's no -- stress, there's no real reason why it needs to happen now, why it needs to get out now. And I think it's so much more important to prioritize the human element, and prioritize your artists, and prioritize your co-workers, and just prioritize the mental health of everybody that you're working with. And I think in the long run that gives you better product, it gives you better story, it gives you better everything. [Chuckles]

>> Kelley Cape: Absolutely, and it's -- I like the stories when we see mental health not as the plotline, but where it's, "oh yeah, I go to therapy regularly." Or it's taking medication on a daily basis. And these nods to a lifestyle of struggling with mental health, but also a lifestyle not separate from inspiration, like Lenny was saying earlier, not separate from conquering all of the world. You know, it can be a superhero who is almost a pro or whatever that might look like would be so awesome to see, so thank you. Thank you for sharing that. Let me see.

>> Nasreen Alkhateeb: Yeah I mean I'd love to -- one of the projects I'm really excited about is a toolkit that I helped to create in collaboration with RespectAbility. One of the major studios commissioned us to really get into the details of what people need on set and what it looks like to make a universally designed and universally accessible set where everyone is welcomed. So we interviewed upwards of 25 people and really -- and the people that I interviewed were a spectrum of people. So when I talk about disability, I mean like the entire spectrum of disability, not just someone who uses a cane, not just someone with chronic illness, but someone who's neurodiverse. Someone with migraines, the whole gamut. So we created a toolkit that basically gives sets step-by-step instructions on how to make their environments universally designed, and that's coming out hopefully this month.

>> Kelley Cape: Thank you so much. That is such an awesome toolkit, and I feel like will benefit everyone in the space. I have been doing consulting work too, where we help create authentic scripts for stories with neurodiversity and mental health diagnoses in them, which I feel like can also benefit so many industries and so many corporations and networks that are trying to produce diverse content but to do it authentically. And that's kind of what's at the root of all this, is wanting to produce the most true and honest stories that we can, that pioneer our communities forward and not backwards. Perfect. Well, it looks like we're nearing the end of the time here, so if anyone has any last things that they would like to say, I would like to close with a thank you to everyone and to our panelists, and for such a lively discussion in the Q&A. I am so thankful to be part of this community and part of this process and sharing my story with everyone. Happy Pride! And the resources will be made available to you not only in the chat, but when we send out everything the recordings and such. So you can look forward to that in your inbox and thank you for registering.