>> Ashley Eakin: Hello everyone, my name is Ashley Eakin. I'm a white woman with blonde hair. I'm wearing a navy shirt with an orange and yellow neckline and I'm sitting in front of a blue and white wall. I am a writer/director and I will be moderating this panel today with other fellow disabled writers. So thank you for taking the time to join us on this panel discussion. If you would like to view the ASL interpreter in a larger screen, we invite you to pin the video which will spotlight their video throughout the entire panel. In addition, we have live captioning done by a real life person that is available in the Zoom app by clicking on the cc button as well as via your web browser. We have posted that link in the chat box. This panel is live. It is also being recorded and will be available on RespectAbility's Facebook page and website after the event concludes. A higher resolution recording with captions with open captions and our ASL interpreters will be posted and sent to everyone who registered next week. If you want to stay connected with RespectAbility, you can sign up for a weekly newsletter on disability inclusion and equity in the entertainment industry. Check out the link in the chat box to do so as well. We are here today to celebrate the 31st anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act by spotlighting a great group of disabled writers from the current cohort of RespectAbility's summer lab for entertainment professionals with disabilities. So let's get started today by having everyone come on camera, which I think everyone is here and introduce themselves. So I will call on people by alphabetical order. So let's start with Amanda.

>> Amanda Aguero: All right, hi my name is Amanda Aguero. I'm a mixed ethnicity woman with brown skin and dark brown hair. I'm sitting in front of my small library with a variety of classic movie posters behind me. I primarily work in a variety of roles during physical production including script supervising, assisting the director, boom operating, etc. but most recently I've completed my second feature screenplay and I'm just loving getting into my journey in the screenwriting process.

>> Ashley Eakin: Great. So next let's talk to Leo.

>> Leo Allanach: Hi, my name is Leo Allanach. My pronouns are he/him. I am white, I have short brown hair and black rimmed glasses. I am wearing a dark blue button-up shirt with pink flamingos on it and I am sitting in front of a yellowish just plain wall. I grew up in rural Oregon as a trans queer and disabled person. i'm a recent graduate of USC school of cinematic arts, a writer, producer and social justice organizer with the long-term goal of becoming a showrunner for sci-fi television that elevates marginalized voices and pushes for revolutionary changes in our world.

>> Ashley Eakin: Awesome. Thanks so much. How about Nikki?

>> Nikki Bailey: Hi, I'm Nikki Bailey. I am African-American and I have braids with little pink streaks through them. I am wearing a button-down striped floral print shirt and I'm sitting in front of a white window and some signage over to the side. Let's see, I'm a writer, I am a performer, I'm an Emmy nominated producer and I've most recently completed a pilot and I am currently working on a screenplay for a film that's going to be coming out hopefully in the next year or so.

>> Ashley Eakin: Awesome. Great, thank you. Let's have Colin go next.

>> Colin Buckingham: Hi my name is Colin Buckingham, my pronouns are he/him, I have light brown curly hair and wearing black headphones and a reddish purplish shirt and I'm sitting on a white couch with an off-white wall in the background. I'm a writer, actor, producer, and choreographer. I most recently completed production on my first short film that I wrote, produced, and choreographed, and have a number of scripts that are in development. And I recently established my production company called Chromatic Lens whose goal is to provide a platform and to provide stories that historically denied and marginalized people can have a voice and feel represented.

>> Ashley Eakin: Great, thank you. Let's go with Tamika.

>> Tamika Citchen-Spruce: Hello everyone. My name is Tamika Citchen-Spruce. My pronouns are she and her. I am an African-American woman. I have brown skin with straight black hair wearing white earrings and a red shirt and I have the background of a green plant that is looking out onto a window that has a city landscape behind it. And so, I am a Disability and social justice activists. Also an indie filmmaker, specifically producing and screenwriting. I started a production company, Influential Films, that tells the stories of underrepresented communities and I produced two projects, a short film (indistinguishable) which won awards and screened at multiple festivals and also a documentary, A Girl's Story, which has also screened multiple film festivals.

>> Ashley Eakin: Awesome. Great, let's go with Bella.

>> Bella Cosper: Hello there, I am Bella Cosper. I'm on Tongva land, I am quite with Cherokee undertones or what I like to think is I have a good tan. I've got dark brown hair in a ponytail, straight as a poker, as my grandmother would say. I'm a TV comedy writer, a UCLA alum, and you might hear my southern twang but I've been in LA for almost two decades trying to cover this up. I write a lot of characters, I've played a lot of characters in the past and I've done comedy in the past at UCB, The Pack, and a bunch of other stages here and I just -- TV comedy is my specialty. I like old school, new school, three beats, make everybody happy and get out of there. And I live in Hollywood. I have a metro pass and a white cane that can get me to any writer's room in town and yeah. I hope you all enjoy the panel.

>> Ashley Eakin: Great, thank you. So let's go with Ty.

>> Ty Freedman: Oh hello everybody! Thanks so much for having me here. My name is Ty Freedman. I am a white male with kind of longish hair now, it's like covid cut haircut and I've got a striped shirt and I've got this cool bottle cap pin and some paper clips around my neck. My pronouns are he and him and I am a children's media writer. I'm also a educator and I teach at different preschool classes and activities all over the place and and yeah I -- preschool activities and yeah and I used to be a former circus clown. So I've kind of lived the life of trying to make kids laugh and that's kind of my special superpower and I am working on trying to be able to make kids laugh to the largest degree which would be getting into their television sets or their film sets. So I've been working on that. I'm the creator, writer, and star of Ty the Pie Guy which is a kids cooking show that's available on Amazon and YouTube and yeah and I'm looking forward to doing this panel today very excited. Thank you for having me everyone.

>> Ashley Eakin: Awesome, thank you. Let's go with Sarah.

>> Sarah Granger: Hi, I'm Sarah Granger. I'm a white woman with long auburn hair wearing a turquoise top and I have a bookcase backdrop. I studied playwriting and screenwriting along with computer science at the University of Michigan and then I worked in tech and digital media where I wrote for publications like LA Weekly, Huffington Post, and San Francisco Chronicle. It came back to screenwriting a few years ago and I currently write dramatic features and series including sci-fi and supernatural. Had a couple of small projects produced and my scripts have been finalists in several competitions. My feature The Pain-Free Day was on the 2020 Disability List curated by The Blacklist and the WGA writers with disabilities committee. I'm really looking forward to today's panel.

>> Ashley Eakin: Great, thanks so much. Let's go with Juliet.

>> Juliet Romeo: Hi everyone, good to be here. My name is Juliet Romeo. I am a Caribbean, brown-skinned woman. I'm wearing a pink dress with some embroidery, really pretty embroidery. My hair is in braids some of them are red some of them are brown with a lot of gold tinsel and design braided into it. I am in front of a white wall with a really cool vision board that I made a long time ago and I am a writer and an award-winning documentarian. My latest documentary just screened on PBS and it is now eligible for a regional Emmy. I'm really excited about that. I write romantic dramedies and sometimes thrillers that are women-centric. My story style, it brings awareness and amplifies diverse and disabled voices and I'm also the founder of Unstoppable Films for disability inclusion in film festivals and beyond because we are have a lot of new things in store and we've debuted at Slam Dance this year and we are coming back this year and we are also pulling together a bunch of other festivals that are also interested. So I'm very excited about that.

>> Ashley Eakin: Awesome. Great, so last but not least, Hilary.

>> Hillary Van Hoose: Hi, I'm Hilary Van Hoose, she/her. I'm a fair-skinned woman with dark hair wearing headphones and sitting in front of an image of Sherlock Holmes's study from the Sherlock Holmes museum in London England. I'm a 2021 RespectAbility lab fellow and recent grad from USC's film production MFA program and for the last couple of years I've been putting every bit of free time and resources I have into building a career as a screenwriter. I most enjoy writing character-oriented genre adventures and light dramedies about fish out of water or outsider protagonists who make a difference in people's lives. So a little like early edition Lucifer or Mandalorian but probably with the female lead. I'm so pleased to be here because like the old adage says it's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness which is to say that it's often preferable to encourage a better way of doing things rather than to only point out what's wrong, so thank you.

>> Ashley Eakin: Great, thank you. So glad to have everyone here. If you want to go ahead and turn off your camera except for Juliet, we're going to talk to you first. So Juliet, I would love to chat a little bit about breaking into the industry and kind of expectations and if we have enough time I'd love to know a little bit more about you putting together Unstoppable and that festival.

>> Juliet Romeo: Sure. Well as far as breaking into the industry as a writer, I feel like there's so much that is said about how we can do it and I think that people with disabilities are left out of those suggestions. You know, 'just take a chance and drop everything and move to LA or move to New York' and we, you know, people with disabilities, we have a lot to consider. Like we have a lot of baggage. We have to think about doctors, specialists, accessibility, our support system when we do things like that. So it took me a long time to kind of just really figure out how I was going to do that and I think that that's why RespectAbility and programs like this are so like essential to to our growth as filmmakers and creatives because we wouldn't -- I don't really feel like we would have been able to get there without really huge adversities and that's actually how Unstoppable came about. There was a lot of adversity, personal adversity for myself, to be able to travel and participate and partake in a lot of the festivals that I wanted to to be a part of and to learn from these workshops and network with other filmmakers. My first trip to fly to New York to go to a film festival, I ended up in the hospital, missed my flight back home, it was awful. You know, the ambulance is wheeling me out of Hilton hotel, it was a whole fiasco and it's like, yes that didn't deter me, I was in the hospital like, 'I can't wait till next year,' but I knew that this was going to happen again and again and it just made me think. I have an invisible disability, what about someone in a wheelchair? What about someone that's blind? Like going to Sundance is a challenge just for you know an able-bodied person, like this is really tough. So that's how that came about. To really encourage people and to really change the narrative of what disability is, who we are, and the stories that are told around us. That was really important to me and Slam Dance definitely stepped up and was really interested in my proposal and we just hit the ground running. I do believe 2020 and a lot on time of our hands had a lot to do with it as well but it was for the good so I'm really grateful.

>> Ashley Eakin: Yeah, that's amazing. It was an amazing program where tons of disabled filmmakers could connect and sometimes you don't get that opportunity so, this really cool program.

>> Juliet Romeo: And a way to really encourage and educate people about authentic storytelling and not this idea that we can have a story about someone with a disability but someone an able-bodied person playing that like we really are trying to to make these changes and it starts with us because we have to to educate sometimes. I know it can be exhausting but it has to start somewhere so that now they can pass it along. And I saw that immediately that there was that we had created this blueprint that other festivals were like, 'hey, there are some great stories out there that we didn't think about,' and now they want to also follow what we've done. So I'm really excited about it. I'm happy.

>> Ashley Eakin: Amazing. Trailblazing. Awesome. So we're next going to talk to Bella and Leo. Thanks so much, Juliet. If they want to come on here. So I'd love to discuss this idea right now that's happening where disability is like a trendy thing in the diversity conversation and you know times -- how have you reminded executives that this isn't a trend we're actually human beings are here to stay and what is kind of your interaction with that experience and what are your thoughts on it. We'll start with Bella.

>> Bella Cosper: Okay. A trend to me is like this shag haircut I decided to get when it became all trendy and I'm trying to let that stuff grow out now. I was told by somebody higher up in the ranks a few years back that disability diversity with different ethnicities and stuff was just all a trend and it's all going to go back to normal. Which I thank that person because I created Eggroll Media, my company that is going to be sure that we carry on. Disability isn't something we just choose like a haircut that's in, it's something we live with. There have been disabled people since the beginning of man and women and there will be forever. It's nothing that's just gonna go away.

>> Ashley Eakin: Yeah, that's great. Do you have any thoughts on this, Leo?

>> Leo Allanach: Yeah. I think we also have to look at how the current structure of you know of capitalism for example like really purposefully has made people with disabilities invisible and push them off to the side, right? As well as also being aware you know we're having more conversations about accessibility because of covid but we're also going to have and currently have a larger pool of people with disabilities who had covid, covid long-haulers as they're currently being called, so like conversations about disability are coming to the forefront because of the current times in which we live as more and more people become disabled and you know struggle with really finding accommodations and accessibility and so it's been really helpful in terms of just us becoming more patient and more generous with each other and just figuring out how we can help each other out because the biggest thing to take away is that we all benefit from accessibility right. Even if you don't identify as having a disability, you know, we all benefit from doing something like a Zoom call when everybody can -- you don't have to be in a physical location to join. So everybody benefits.

>> Ashley Eakin: Right, that's great. Anything else you want to add Bella?

>> Bella Cosper: Just because we're different, I mean, authenticity and real life is what people like to see on TV and in film and all sorts of media. So, you know, people -- you might have a disability. I didn't know I was vision impaired as a kid. I didn't find out until later and so this can be you with any sort of disability, it can be your child, your grandparent, whoever but your work is more authentic if you have really people telling real stories and real characters that you see in everyday life instead of just putting on the you know pretty "normal" shiny picture.

>> Ashley Eakin: Absolutely. Thank you and talking about you know complex characters and creating authentic disabled characters, I would love to transition to chatting with Hilary and Sarah. Why is it important to create these well-rounded authentic characters and how have you dealt with this in your writing and trying to disrupt the narrative of what we usually see when it comes to disability? We can start with -- let's start with Sarah and then Hilary.

>> Sarah Granger: So I grew up with a disabled dad. He was paralyzed by polio and seeing how he navigated various obstacles every day definitely shaped my perspective. So even before I was injured and came to identify myself as a person with a disability, I was already deeply interested in telling these stories. So when I started screenwriting seriously, I realized that every one of my scripts had at least one character with some sort of disability. It wasn't something that I set out to do consciously, it just happened because that was part of my lived experience and now I put a lot of thought into planning and creating complex characters with disabilities and in all my writing so that there's a wide spectrum represented and disability is just one facet that we show as you know nuanced and layered characters. And, you know, I find that we're still seeing a lot of these flat characters with disabilities shown on screen and the thing that needs to get across to industry is that there's so much more we can do here and we're starting to see some changes though. Like I'm very excited about CODA, comes out in a couple weeks on AppleTV. So I think that some of the trend is you know obviously good and we just need to keep keep building on that momentum and get these stories out there.

>> Ashley Eakin: Agreed. How about Hillary?

>> Hilary Van Hoose: Yeah, I definitely agree too. A whole lot of what you'll see as inauthentic representation of disabilities on TV and movies will be obvious stuff like someone on the autism spectrum being anti-social instead of having difficulty socializing or portraying their feeling of over stimulation as being identical to a panic attack or say someone with diabetes not checking their blood sugar or measuring their dose of insulin before giving an injection but you know just doing a little research can avoid examples that in your face but writing complex authentic characters goes beyond just doing research on the internet although again doing a ton of research that's you know in-depth research is necessary too. And by getting the details right, that doesn't mean I can't be creative. As a fiction writer and especially as someone who writes genre fiction like sci-fi or fantasy, there are a lot of ways I can choose to extrapolate from what I know or what I find out from research to create characters and stories. One of my favorite examples, one of my favorite sci-fi examples especially. in a number of ways is Jordy Laforge from Star Trek the Next Generation? The fact that this character has a disability and uses an integrated device, you could even define him as a cyborg, while he also fits organically into the story as one of the most effective and multifaceted characters on the show illustrates how smoothly a character with a disability can fit into just about any type of narrative. It's the easiest to write subjects about which you're already an expert of course, but one more thing I want to mention is if I'm writing about a specific lived experience that's at all different from my own, I reach out and talk to a number of people or spend time in a given community in order to pick up on the small subtle things that you just can't know about any other way. It can make a huge difference in the quality and enjoyability to the viewers that of what you write. One way to tell if you're on the right track is if you're able to successfully use in-jokes. So for example, the South Park episode Basic Cable had a joke about the diabetic protagonist eating an entire pie and having to give himself a massive amount of insulin to compensate which might not play to everyone but it's a great in-joke for the type 1 diabetes community. So yeah, hopefully this is giving the people watching this panel some good ideas about where to start and a few common pitfalls to avoid. Sarah do you have any other thoughts?

>> Sarah Granger: I think you hit a lot of important points. Yeah.

>> Ashley Eakin: Yeah, I think that's great. The joke thing is something that it is very it's almost important to have actual disabled writers instead of just consultants sometimes because those writers will make the jokes and feel they can cross that boundary where sometimes other people won't want to do that and I think it only makes the content better. So I love you bringing that up. Thanks so much! So let's transition to chatting with Amanda. And you know I know Amanda you've done some acting and we'd love to hear about your experience of disabled characters being presented in these auditions and like what do you hope you would see more of? Amanda Aguero: Totally. That is a great questions and it kind of transitions very well from what we were just talking about. To me, it's really an interesting topic because I feel like screenwriters are so -- they have like put a big burden on themselves to write disability into their screenplays and like, 'oh I want this character to be disabled, how do I write that in?' Whereas I don't like I want people to know how easy I guess is what I would say to include a character with a disability into their movie. For example, when I go into auditions like if I'm being cast as Girl with a Bucket of Popcorn at a High School Football Game. I've gone into auditions that are similar to that and the casting director or the director even will approach me and say like wow we're so interested in like your performance of eating this bucket of popcorn but I'm not sure how we'll explain why you're missing your arm or how we'll go about explaining that and it's so interesting to me because like you don't need an explanation for someone who's sitting in the stands that has a disability because in reality when we walk around to like the grocery store or we just in our neighborhoods, we're all different. Like all people are different people and there are people with disabilities like in our everyday lives so that is more normal I think than people realize and from an acting perspective it would be like I would be thrilled to enter an audition for an extra even where that isn't that's not a question being asked and it's not like a kind of a hindrance to the casting process.

>> Ashley Eakin: Right or they don't have to make up a big backstory to compensate for why you exist the way you do.

>> Amanda Aguero: Totally. Yes.

>> Ashley Eakin: I totally agree with that, you know, and as far as writing goes, do you so when you're writing do you include specific descriptions about disability or are you more open or how do you treat it?

>> Amanda Aguero: Great question. So if there is going to be a character who at some point has to address a disability or you really want a certain character to have a disability and they're the main character, I think it's totally valid to do like what Hilary and Sarah were saying about researching it, including it into the story, but also from a writing perspective, it's great to write extras or little bit player parts into your story and have an open mind when going into casting because those are characters that you might not necessarily know exactly what you're looking for until you go into the casting room and just have an open mind about that

>> Ashley Eakin: Yeah, I think that's a good message for all creatives and all executives in the industry so thanks so much. We're gonna transition and talk to Nikki Bailey and this leads us into a place where usually when there is inauthentic writing, we end up with something called inspiration porn and everyone in the disability community knows what it is but others may not know what this is, maybe you can explain it and then talk about how you combat against it in your own writing.

>> Nikki Bailey: Sure. Inspiration porn is a term that was coined by Australian disability activist Stella Young in a TEDtalk in 2014 and it is -- the meaning of inspiration porn is portrayals and uses of disability that are overly sentimental or pitiful that have like an uplifting moral message primarily aimed at non-disabled viewers and people with disabilities being objectified even when they're being named. So inspiration porn is sort of all of the stuff that -- it's a lot of what we do see in the medi showing people with disabilities. So one of the ways that that we combat that which we've heard already multiple times is by writing complex authentic characters. So characters that are not just there to serve the purpose of being the person with a disability or characters who are not there just to be the inspiration or the the the sentimental hopeful character who makes you feel good about yourself like that's not all that people with disabilities are that isn't necessarily a full expression of what a complete human being is, that's just using their disability as a way to pull on heartstrings and that's kind of cheating if you ask me. You know, people with disabilities are fully well-rounded individuals who have a wide range of interest, a wide range of abilities, and a wide range of things about them that make them interesting and their disability may or may not even be one of the reasons that they're interesting and so it would be much more -- it would behoove Hollywood, I think, to be much more intentional about making sure that we're telling stories about people with disabilities, with characters who have disabilities, in a way that shows them as complete human being that have -- that have a whole bunch of different experiences. Like one of the characters that I think was really that's been a really fun portrayal of a person with a disability is the character of Steve on Ramy. Steve in the show is just a huge jerk. He's like a huge jerk and and we're not used to seeing a person with a disability being portrayed as a jerk and it's wonderfully refreshing but it also shows that that you know people with disabilities have bad days, people with disabilities fight with their friends, people with disabilities have needs that their friends can maybe help them meet but also that their friends get in the way of meeting and so that show really showed to me a portrayal of a person with a disability who was not inspiration porn but was instead just a really well-rounded character and that's the point I think of what we're all trying to say.

>>Ashley Eakin: Yeah that's great. Do you have any characters that you're creating right now that you're really excited about? Are they sassy, are they unlikable, or is there one specific kind of character from any of your work?

>> Nikki Bailey: You know, I have a character that I'm working on right now who is the personification of someone's bipolar disorder and so they are they are a comic book not a comic book an animated personification of someone's bipolar disorder and she's like a total a-hole. (laughs) And it's a lot of fun to write because number one, I get to have fun with bipolar which is something that is not necessarily thought of as fun and it's not fun to experience generally speaking but you know people who have mental health challenges make jokes about it constantly and so like to the point that Hilary made earlier about in-jokes, this character has got a lot of jokes that people who are dealing with mental health challenges will get and also will understand that this is just one facet of this character but it's not all that that person is is not just thei bipolar.

>> Ashley Eakin: Right. That's awesome. I can't wait to see it. Okay great. So let's transition and talk to Colin and Tamika. Hello. So I would love to chat here about intersectionality and disability on screen and why that is so important and how do each of you include it in your work? So we can start with Tamika and we'll go to Colin.

>> Tamika Chitchen-Spruce: Oh yes, I think this is very important to also showcase, you know, there's various types of disabilities but for very various races, ethnicities, and backgrounds is such because of you know disability it's not just a monolith, it's just not one type and so I was like some experiences that I have for example as being an African-American woman with a physical disability might be a little bit well is a little bit different you know than a white woman with a physical disability because of race for example. So I think that in films we have to you know show those complexities and stories and so that's why my personal mantra is of one film the book that is recently out My Girl Story which tells the story of two African-American girls from Detroit fighting to be the young women they're going to become. And one of the girls are featured in the documentary actually has a disability, has spina bifida, with her spina bifida you can't really tell just by looking at her but in the film she talks about that, it's there, and other projects that have been in development are you know centering on black women with disabilities so you know that's just you know I would like to see more representation of various kinds such as what I'm doing so that's what I'm trying to do now.

>> Ashley Eakin: Yeah, great, thanks so much. How about Colin?

>> Colin Buckingham: Intersectionality for disability is super important because disability by its own nature is intersectional. It's one of the only demographics that you can you have the potential to enter at any point in your life and it's something that affects everyone no matter your race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, that kind of thing. And since it's the first anniversary of the Americas with Disabilities Act which wouldn't have been possible without intersectionality of the Black Panthers specifically bringing food and supplies to the sit-in that made the act actually get signed. So including multiple voices and collaborating with people to create notes of authenticity for other people not just, you know, I mean, I myself am a white agender person but those are the only perspectives that I can truly speak to so if I want to create moments of authenticity in the work that I'm doing and uplift multiple different demographics with the work that I'm doing then I want to -- it's important to be able to collaborate with and at least at the very least get, like Hilary was saying, research from multiple different sources of what I'm writing about. You know, the rising tide that lifts all ships kind of thing so if we can create work that not only uplifts people with disabilities but also provides other historically denied people the chance to be seen and feel like they belong in media and therefore in life then that can I think be really impactful and necessary.

>> Ashley Eakin: Yeah, that's awesome. Is there anything you're working on specifically now that is speaking to that? I know you said you started a production company and that was kind of a main focus?

>> Colin Buckingham: Yeah. So I'm writing a feature dramady kind of slice of life ish thing right now that explores different -- has multiple different leads and supportings from different demographics and I'm collaborating with a couple people to make sure that those stories are told with authenticity and do it make sure you do the research but you know it's definitely a learning process and I'm currently in the finishing touches of writing this short film that will explore that as well.

>> Ashley Eakin: Great, cool. Excited for both of your guys's projects. All right let's go next to we're gonna bring back Sarah and also talk with Leo. So a study just came out by Nielsen recently about how there's only 16 representation of characters with disabilities in TV and what is the difference between features and television and kind of tell us what you've seen in your experience because we definitely need more in TV. In both actually, but. We can start with, how do we start with Leo?

>> Leo Allanach: So I'm kind of biased because I'm more of a TV person than a film person but TV has always kind of because it's faster paced and because there's so much more television produced than there are movies now, it has always been kind of ahead of the game and a lot of ways of diversity and inclusion but that said it's frustrating and I think several other people have already talked about this already but the the few times where there are disabled characters portrayed, they are very rarely portrayed by disabled actors and it's frustrating to see that continue. A good example is you know one of my favorite books was recently adapted to a TV show. Shadow and Bone, and they have it was a big deal because they have such a major character with a disability and it was like this really cool thing and they did not cast a person with a disability and so that was really disappointing because in the few times when you know you get a glimpse of it you know a glimpse of representation and a glimpse of like really cool well-developed characters there's still a lack of connection in either you know they have they don't have a disabled writer or they don't have a disabled actor and so there still seems to be a disconnect even in television and movies about you know kind of syncing up the fact that disabled people need to be involved in all elements of the of this creation of disabled stories and disabled characters. So yeah, TV is like ahead of the game but also very much still behind in a lot of ways.

>> Ashley Eakin: Right. Do you have thoughts about this Sarah?

>> Sarah Granger: Yeah, I mean, I think what was the other statistic it was like two percent of -- there was another one, I think that was from the RespectAbility study that two percent representation across the board of actors with disabilities and that's just so much lower than even, you know, most of the other demographics that you see or under represented groups. So it's frustrating. It does seem like there is some work being done to get more people with disabilities on and off camera but you know and it also doesn't seem like there's a lot of pushback, it's just that the education needs to happen so that the people making the films understand that this is actually very possible and very doable and just need to talk to people and have conversations about what accommodations they need and then you can end up with such a richer more well-rounded product overall having people both on and off camera. From the writer's perspective, generally speaking you know it's been easier to be a feature writer, it's always been more flexible than working on a series, you can do it from anywhere, you can have your own schedule, you know, it lends itself a lot more easily to people with disabilities. That said, it seems like writers rooms may be changing as a result of the use of Zoom in the pandemic and I think this is a really exciting time and we need to capitalize on this opportunity. You know, personally I started writing features because that's you know, unlike Leo, I was more comfortable with features and the more I learned about TV I thought, 'oh, the writer's room environment might be just too difficult for me to navigate,' but when the pandemic happened everything went remote and I decided to write my first pilot you know just for the heck of it and it got me some meetings with producers and from what I'm hearing, a lot of rooms are planning on continuing to at least have a hybrid setup. So you know, some writers if they need to work from home, I think part of this was done for for parents for example, to be able to have more flexibility, some are going to stay fully remote because they like it so you know time will tell but I do think it's a time with a lot of possibilities right now and I was really skeptical but now I'm feeling a lot more hopeful. I think it's a good time to be a writer.

>> Ashley Eakin: I agree with that. Okay, great! We're gonna transition into chatting, I think last but not least, with Ty Freedman and you know you said you work in kids content, I've written something in kids content. Never thought I wanted to go into the space but it's so important that kids see, at a young age too, disabled characters and narratives. So if you want to talk a little bit about how you got into that and and what you're working on and how you're putting that forward.

>> Ty Freedman: Oh yeah, absolutely. Yeah and so important for kids to be I guess exposed to people who live different lives and that goes not just with disabilities but just with, you know, with gender and you know people on a different spectrum, on the LGBTQ, and it's just it's very very important to show that and to normalize it. I think just as we give as we have more options where they can see maybe themselves or you know just different people they'll be things will be they'll be able to make a you know a more understanding more kinder more inclusive generation of kids who become great adults as well. I think that's I think personally that the best way to make change is to go straight to kids and I think that they're the ones who are going to be you know making this world a better place. So I mean you know Gina Davis she did she has that Gina Davis Institute for Women so when she first started, the first thing that she did was go directly to the kids media world and try to get gender parity with the the main characters and it makes perfect sense too that that is the first route to go and I think that needs to be done absolutely with disabled characters as well. I know you know I know Ryerson from in Toronto, they have the children's media lab out there and they had a really great report about the 2019 year of television with kids content and that you know even with 20 percent of the population of Canada having a disability, only 9 percent of the characters on TV that year had glasses. When only -- yeah -- and only two percent of them had any actual like characteristics of disability and there was actually almost zero percent of any neurodiversity within it. And so I mean, for me personally I only just found out about being neuro-diverse this year, this January. I found out that I got diagnosed with ADHD and ASD which is autism spectrum disorder and you know think that if maybe I was exposed to characters on television, I might have been able to understand myself a little bit better. But, ever since I have been able to, it's only opened things up for me and made me feel more able and kinder to myself and I've been able to be a better writer because of it because I understand what makes me great and what makes me tick and how to make my how to help myself but yeah and so I mean I think that that's a really important part of the puzzle is getting kids to see themselves and getting them to to expose different types of people with different disabilities. I think there's some great kid shows out there that are starting to do that now and it is again I think we talked a little bit about how it is starting to get a little trendy and it seems like there is a lot more. The kids you know the kids media world is actually really great. It's a bunch of people like me who are like former educators who care about kids and they want to see a better world and so it's a little bit easier for that world to -- it's a little bit easier for that world to kind of make points but even so with all that being done there still wasn't a whole lot of disability representation so hopefully that can start to change. Yeah.

>> Ashley Eakin: Yeah, I agree. I think it's hopeful. At some of these RespectAbility events they told us that they started consulting I think the first year -- these facts might be off, so Lauren, someone can give better statistics -- but I think it was like 10 projects and this year now they have 70 that they're consulting on and that's amazing to hear so I can't wait --

>> Ty Freedman: It sounds like it's specifically like the kids media, like kids television that really wants to, wants to do it the right way and wants to make sure that they're able to expose kids. There's some there are some great ones this year. There was a, I really loved that show, my favorite show this year was City of Ghost and there was there's a couple of characters that I thought kind of were on the neurodiverse spectrum and then there was the great show The Healing Powers of Doug had such a fantastic had so many fantastic characters that were disabled. And I think that as we see more of that and as we see well-written characters and I think on both of those cases by actual disabled writers as well like within the writer's room or at least consulted, I find that to be -- you start to see more authentic and more interesting characters and I think it's I think kids media deserves just as important authentic characterizations as anyone.

>> Ashley Eakin: Yeah yeah. So I got the facts from Lauren, it was 12 projects in 2019, 70 in 2020, and then this so far in 2021 there is 160 projects, so that is encouraging that it's shifting, so. Thanks so much, Ty, for chatting about this. So I'd love to invite everyone actually to come back on screen and to see all your faces and one thing I want to talk about and kind of open the floor whoever wants to speak up can talk about this is why and we touched on it a little bit but why are accommodations so important in hiring disabled writers and you know how this year Zoom has opened the door to so many people,Ii've worked in the Zoom writers room, worked great, you know. It's possible and we're seeing that, but I'd love to hear about specific experiences or things you wish that you could be given because sometimes you know executives or people hiring don't want to ask or they don't know how to you know, what are the accommodations we need to make and I love talking about it directly because that makes people go, 'oh, okay yeah we can do that.' You know, so anyone can start.

>> Hilary Van Hoose: have some thoughts. Yeah, so I think one of the more interesting things about the accommodations issue is that a lot of the accommodations that are desired or needed for people with disabilities are often times the same as what people should have or would like that don't have disabilities necessarily. Like, you know, we've discussed how a lot of buildings where writers rooms or pre-production is taking place don't have elevators still 30 years after the ADA was passed and you know that's something that is necessary for a lot of people with disabilities but even for people who don't you know they're having to carry giant pallets of paper and water and mini fridges up three flights of stairs into production offices and that's you know, that's not something that should be happening and same thing with having quiet rooms available for people who need them for you know everything from people on the autism spectrum to nursing mothers to just people who need to you know get away from the noise and the craziness for a little bit. That's something that should be available for everyone, especially for people with disabilities, but should also be available for everyone and then same thing with healthier working hours and healthier food availability, you know these are all things that yes they're absolute necessities for people with disabilities oftentimes people will literally die without some of these accommodations but you know it's very very detrimental to the health of people that start out without any sort of you know need for them and they end up needing them later because they weren't given them beforehand, so I think that's just something that is very good to point out and to keep in mind.

>> Ashley Eakin: Yeah, that's a great point. Does anyone else have anything specific?

>> Bella Cosper: Hey, this is Bella speaking. This is Bella speaking. I'll speak from the blind and vision impaired perspective. We really don't need much of an accommodation other than I would just say like in the writer's room if there's gonna be a certain note taped onto something we might not see that. If you're gonna give me a high five you better call it out. But otherwise, I have my own laptop, I can read, we have all the tools we need. Well I'm speaking for my disability, I don't know about others, but with the vision problems. We can adjust everything on our screens that we need to and I prefer to be in the writer's room because I like catered lunches and craft services but yeah we just need the opportunity and you know we know our way to the bathroom. I've been on sets before where people are like do you need me to wait outside the door and we can take care of ourselves. If you've never been exposed and you're worried about those types of things, we're big kids and we can do it on our own. So don't be afraid of us and don't be afraid to ask, you know, it's not awkward. It's better to ask us questions instead of you know being like, 'well I wonder but I didn't want to say anything.' So we're open.

>> Ashley Eakin: Absolutely. I think that's great.

>> Juliet Romeo: Yeah Bella, I definitely want to piggyback on what you're saying. Speaking from someone that has a non-visible disability try not to make assumptions. I get a lot of, you don't look sick, you don't look like there's anything wrong, and so then when I do ask for something I kind of get this judgment or vibe of, 'oh well why you? Everyone else is walking, why can't you walk?' You know? There were so many times that I would have loved to just like -- I love to be on set -- just to be on set and be a PA or whatever. I feel so uncomfortable doing it even though I want to do it so so badly because I know I'm going to be judged or just seem like I'm being lazy but the more I'm running up and down the more my oxygen is getting depleted. And I think to myself, if I just had a scooter I could literally carry even more things than what one person can carry, you know, and get the job done probably you know better than if i was just one person walking but that's not even something that they're thinking. They're automatically thinking that you know I'm lazy and I don't really want to do it or whatever and I feel like if you know this person has a disability you know the situation is like, don't like you don't know what the limitations may be and so don't have any assumptions like, ask. Like Bella said, you can ask. It's not gonna come off. We're not gonna be upset that you ask the question respectfully.

>> Ashley Eakin: Right. I agree with that. I've been on a couple of sets and things where people assumed something and almost didn't cast someone because they assumed the person couldn't do it and I said let me ask. Like, I walk differently. Let me ask this person if it's going to be an issue and I think that's what we need people to do for us is not assume or not think it's going to be awkward and ask and then be willing to accommodate because usually as you're saying it does benefit everyone so. Anyone else?

>> Colin Buckingham: Something that would be nice is if you know if people could just ask like what you need and not have that be lip service like if that could be like a genuine thing of like what do you need and not viewed as an imposition when you honestly and truthfully answer. I mean to change someone's preconceived notions of like what is an imposition on them, what's difficult and inconvenient, which I'm sure all people with disabilities have heard one of those words used to describe them at one point or their requests at one point or another. And like, I think we talked about it in one of the sessions how there's you know depending on the person's you know income guarantee based on their level of fame or that kind of thing they get all these insane or like -- not, sorry -- absurd accommodations of you know only red m&m's and like that kind of thing and so it would be nice if that could be extended for people who say that like we're casting and we're including people on this set that regardless of their abilities or non-disabled versus disabled neck and thing for that to actually ring true would mean to earnestly ask what people need and not view that as a hindrance or a burden on them.

>> Ashley Eakin: Great. I have one last, we have two minutes left, and we have one question from the audience if someone wants to answer this. It says, "how do you collect your creativity against prejudices?"

>> Hilary Van Hoose: I'm not sure I understand the question entirely. "Collect your creativity."

>> Ashley Eakin: I'm wondering if it's kind of pushing against like still being creative and pushing against when people are potentially judging you or judging your story. How do you kind of push forward through that?

>> Juliet Romeo: I actually have a really great experience that just recently happened. It didn't happen to me but because I heard it, it made me want to reconsider so. Someone else had went to had a general meeting and the person just literally was like yeah we -- no one wants to see this type of disability on screen. And it made me feel like, 'wow, so then they don't want to see any of my work.' Right? And the person actually said, 'well you know I really feel bad because I am working with them and I just had to like you know do something else and take out all of the creativity and the work that I was passionate about putting into the story. I just took it out, you know, it's a job, right?' And so at first I was excited to do it as well and I was like, 'I don't know if I want to continue to you know have this meeting or go forth with this project or this opportunity actually?' So but I really thought about it and I said you know what every time someone says No, I mean, we wouldn't be here, we can -- You know, as a black woman, if we heard No, I would not be here. Things would still be the same, you know what I mean? I'd be on a field somewhere, so. We have to push back. We have to push back and so I decided, you know what, I'm going to give my log lines and they're gonna love it and then I'm just going to keep sprinkling in some disability here and there eventually -- you know, I feel like sometimes they're like babies. It's like they automatically hear vegetable and they're like, 'No' and so then you have to like you know -- my sister buries you know vegetables in things for my niece and then she's like, 'oh, I love it I didn't even know!' So I feel like that's what we have to do to these people that have so much resistance because they're just so used to what they think it is and their understanding that we have to kind of you know passionately and yet empathetically crack the wall, you you. Some people you do have to go hard and you have to be like, 'listen, this is not what's up,' but those people that you know they don't really mean it, they just don't understand it, they're not being villainous, they're not being vile, eventually they're gonna see and again you have to understand too it comes down to the bottom line. So they could think what they want to. I mean people thought Black Panther would be ridiculous. They proved that people didn't think for a black woman as a main character would be anything then we have Girls Trip. And now everyone wants a Girls Trip. So we have to just do it until they realize, 'oh, whoa, this this makes us money,' you know. Whatever it is for them, we know what it means for us.

>> Ashley Eakin: Yeah exactly.

>> Hilary Van Hoose: Yeah, that's such a good point, yeah.

>> Ashley Eakin: I think we have to wrap up because we're just over time but anyone can reach out to any of these people and connect. This video is going to be up in a week and I know the people from RespectAbility, they're around. All their bios are over there, find them and we can chat more about this because this conversation is very big and we could talk for hours about it but I think it's a good place to leave that there are people who will say yes and keep pushing past that with your projects. So thank you everyone so much for joining this and it was a great conversation.