>> Alex: Okay great! There's the webinar getting started. And we can see some writers starting to pop up. So well, hi everyone!

>> Marc Muszynski: Hello, thank you for having us!

>> Alex: Yeah thank you and thank you all for joining. I'm so excited to put this panel together and be here. Well really, you know, miss Lesley and Tatiana did a lot of work putting this panel together. So thank you all so much. But welcome to the Roadmap Writers and RespectAbility panel on, you know, writers with disabilities in TV and film and sharing their experiences and advice and all of that lovely stuff. So really quick, writers, just to make sure that I am able to keep things organized, do me a favor and find that Q&A box. That is where I want you to put questions that you would like us to address at the end of our talk. Please don't put questions in the chat box, because I will never find them and then I might skip you, and that's not nice, and I don't want to do that to you. So help me out, put them in the Q&A box, please. Awesome. Okie dokie. So before I have our panelists introduce themselves, I'm going to turn the mic over to miss Lesley and miss Tatiana to do a little introduction on RespectAbility and what your mission statement is.

>> Lesley Hennen: Yay! Thank you Alex. Hey everybody, I'm Lesley Hennen. I'm the Entertainment and News Media Associate at RespectAbility. I'm here with my colleague Tatiana Lee who is the Senior Media Associate at RespectAbility. And yeah, we're just really happy to be here. RespectAbility is a disability-led nonprofit that fights stigmas and advances opportunities so people with disabilities can participate in all aspects of community. And we're just really excited to introduce you to some of our favorite writers that we've had the chance to know. And thank you Roadmap writers for doing this event with us. And Tatiana, did you want to add anything?

>> Tatiana Lee: Nope, you said it all. Thank you so much for having us. This is an awesome collaboration. And again, yes, these are some of our favorite writers and a part of our lab program for entertainment professionals with disabilities. We have almost 100 participants that have gone through our lab. This is some of them, some of -- we're a little biased sometimes, some of our faves. But yeah so, I'm excited to hear this conversation and thanks.

>> Alex: Awesome, you're allowed to have favorites I think. Especially if it's these folks I think. Okay awesome. So now we're gonna have our panelists introduce themselves, and let's start with miss Diana. Ladies first.

>> Diana Romero: Hi everybody. Tatiana, I was just gonna say I bet you say that to all the panelists for everything. But you're our favorite too. You guys are all our favorites. We love RespectAbility. And yes, I am Diana Romero. I was a Summer Lab participant in 2020 and I am currently a writer's assistant on a show called the 4400, which is premiering on Monday night - shameless plug here - Monday night on the CW at 9:00 pm pacific time. And I worked in film, prior to switching over to TV, so I'm happy to answer any questions either for film or tv. And I've been in the industry for a long time, but TV is a completely different beast than film is so that'll be fun to talk about.

>> Alex: Awesome. All right cool. Next up let's go Mark.

>> Marc Muszynski: Hello, I'm Marc Muszynski. I'm a red-headed man with freckles and a very white room behind me with a plant. And I'm wearing a, I don't know, a sort of gingham shirt. I don't know exactly what you'd call this. But I am a writer. I've worked as a staff writer on Dexter: New Blood, the revival of Dexter, and then I also wrote a script for the show Abby's on NBC when I was working as the writer's assistant. And I've also been lucky enough to develop a couple projects with studios. But the only film experience I have is making movies with my friends as a high school and college student. So I'm actually also really excited to hear what everyone has to say about film stuff.

>> Alex: Awesome, I love whenever we can have panels that are sort of universally educational, so we can all learn from each other, in addition to the writers learning from us. So that's one of my favorite things in the world. All right awesome, let's go to Andrew now.

>> Andrew Pilkington: Hi I'm Andrew Pilkington. I am a white guy who has a goatee and in front of pictures that my girlfriend took, and I am a writer and producer. I wrote a film called Best Summer Ever with my other co- writers in 2020. It's now available on Hulu - shameless plug. And I was an alumni a year ago as well, and I do TV too, so I can't wait to talk about that. Thank you!

>> Alex: Nice. Awesome. Okay so I -- hold on -- I have to get this link to your film. I have to save this. Pause -- pause for me saving this. Okay it's saved.

>> Marc Muszynski: Pause for all of us to save it.

>> Alex: Yeah, everybody save the link. All right awesome. Okay there we go. It's saved, it's saved. We're good. I will be watching that as soon as this webinar is over.

>> Andrew Pilkington: Cool!

>> Alex: You're gonna get a message from me like Andrew, I saw your movie, it was great. So just wait for that. That's coming. Okay great. So let's go over to Shea? Shea? Oh goodness me, help me. I'm so sorry.

>> Shea Mirzai: Shea yeah.

>> Alex: Shea, I was so wrong. Well please introduce yourself.

>> Shea Mirzai: I mean I feel like I always get that all the time so I'm very much adjusted to it by this point. Anyway hi everybody, I'm Shea. I'm a writer and a producer. I do both as features and TV. I'm an Iranian American, LGBTQ, and a person who stutters. I have dark hair. And I'm sitting in a white walled guest room. I'm repped at Zero Gravity as an APA, and I run a production company called Space Coyote Productions.

>> Alex: All right, awesome. Well, so nice to meet all of you. This is my first time meeting the panel. So I'm very excited to be here. And thank you so much for, I suppose, trusting me with your webinar experience today. So we're gonna get into our questions. We have some sort of a panel of questions we prepared. And then afterwards, writers, we will take questions from you all. But if, as we're chatting, if something comes to mind, go ahead and throw it into the Q&A box so that you don't forget. Okay awesome. So first question that I have for you all: did you always want to work in film? And if not, what was that spark of interest for you? What is your origin story, in other words?

>> Diana Romero: Maybe you should call out our names because all of us are too shy. [Laughter] We're used to writing in our own little world and then we get asked something and we're like shell-shocked.

>> Alex: You're also all too nice, you don't want to interrupt anybody.

>> Shea Mirzai: All right, well hey guys. I feel like I'd be happy to go first. I always knew that I wanted to be a writer in general, and a film writer in particular. I know it might be hard to tell, but I grew up as a huge geek. I originally got my start back when I was in 7th and 8th grade. I was a huge fan of a big science fiction property. So I wrote a lot of very unfortunate fan fiction for Star Wars. I eventually won a student writer of the year award, like, right around that time. It definitely let me have a little more faith in myself and I thought that I could do this, so it was always the goal. I majored in film theory and African American studies at UC Irvine. I was always very interested in examining questions of race and representation. I immediately moved out to LA after, actually, I left school. I was able to get an unpaid internship that actually became a six and a half year gig at a mini major studio called Relativity Media. I worked my way up to being a story analyst, and then eventually the head of our story department. And I really learned -- the ins and outs and do's and don'ts of being a screenwriter, because I read, like, an excessive amount of very bad scripts there. [Laughter] I'm clearly joking. But scene. Yeah.

>> Alex: [laughs] Now that's -- a great button at the end of the scene right there.

>> Shea Mirzai: Thank you Alex.

>> Alex: All right I can call on folks. Okay Diana. We're gonna go to Diana now.

>> Diana Romero: I'm like, please call -- on me. Or not on me, but please call us by name. Hi. So no, I actually, I mean, when I was a kid, my sister and I used to put on productions. We'd write our little plays, and we'd advertise them, and we'd sell tickets to our parents who are the only people who are willing to pay for them. And then we would cast our friends or neighborhood friends and stuff like that. So we loved production. But when going into school and just -- it never was never presented as an option that it was something that you could do, that you could learn to write for film or TV or any of that. And I have a very famous uncle from Latin America, very famous novelist. So kind of that was our world was books, more than anything else. But as I got older, I decided I was gonna be like my dad and I was gonna be a doctor. And when I started college pre-med, I realized that I hated blood, I couldn't stand the sight of blood. And you know, I wanted to be a surgeon, so you're gonna see a lot of blood being a surgeon. So that quickly went away. That idea went away. And I ended up with a social work degree. But I was going to school at Whittier College which is right outside LA, and I would see all the signs and all the postings for extras. People wanted extras. And I thought ooh, that'd be kind of fun to do. And I ended up getting into acting. And at the time -- this was many many many years ago, there weren't really very many roles for latinos unless you were older and you could play, like, a maid, or you were you know very east LA chola type, which I didn't fit into any of those. I left LA because -- and it was nasty. Hollywood was really nasty in those days. People were just nasty. And I left. And then I decided eventually that I didn't want to be behind the camera, I wanted to be -- I mean in front of the camera, I wanted to be behind the camera. And so I went back to school and got a second BA in film production. And then somehow, I always loved TV, but somehow just the paths I took ended up with me being more in film. And I came back to LA, and I got my master's at AFI. And it was so -- many many years I worked as a film producer. I wrote some but just kind of on my own and I wrote a couple of scripts on my own. And it was my AFI thesis film that I wrote that was greenlit and went to production, and that's what gave me the real -- my actual, what I really wanted to do which was write. And then three years -- I have MS. Three years ago the MS, got my legs and I lost my mobility. So I use a wheelchair now, and I couldn't really work on sets anymore. So then it was just me deciding what I was going to do with the rest of my life, which was -- the decision was to go back to my childhood dream of writing for TV. And so that's where I started now. And in April I got my start in a writer's room, so that was really cool. But I think like, every experience that I've had up until now has brought me to where I am now. I think social work -- I wrote a lot -- a lot of my scripts are, I was telling Alex earlier about -- I love mystery and detective work and things like that. But it's pp my social work allowed me to like, you know, learn people, get to know body language, get to know what people are like, how they act in certain situations, things like that. So that helps me a lot with what I have now, so. Or what what I write now, what I do now. But so anyway what I was saying is basically yeah... it's kind of like they say, they tell you to look at your childhood and what was it that you love doing as a child and then that's probably -- pretty much probably what you're gonna -- if you really want to follow your true passion, that's what you're gonna end up doing later in life. So it's true, for me it's true. I loved putting on productions, I loved writing stuff and here's me doing it now. I'll let somebody else speak now, I won't take up the whole time.

>> Alex: Oh all right awesome. Let's go to Andrew. What is your origin story?

>> Andrew Pilkington: Oh my god well, I loved tv and movies growing up, my favorite movie was Jurassic Park. Great movie, I could quote that movie cover to cover. So I started writing in high school. Me and my friends all worked for the local TV station, and we wrote a show about our high school. It was like freaks and geeks but in the 2000s, so like every other high school show. And when I went to college I made movies, and when I graduated I moved to New York and worked in documentaries for a couple of big companies. Yeah, and then I got offered to work on this film that was being developed in Vermont. It was called the Homecoming, but every movie that came out in 2017 was called the Homecoming, so we had to get a new name. So I produced that and co-wrote it. And really, it got in South By Southwest and won the final draft screenwriting award. And then it kind of did really well and we got a lot of great press. So I'm trying to turn that into a couple of projects I'm working on right now in the TV landscape. I've done a little bit of everything. I've dipped my toe into pool of content. I love it all.

>> Alex: All right awesome. And then fun fact, so Roadmap's esteemed leader Joey Tuccio, his favorite movie is Jurassic Park.

>> Andrew Pilkington: I love it all. Not the new ones. The new ones are -- I mean, nothing beats the classics.

>> Alex: I mean they're just, the classic ones are magical. So you -- I'll have to introduce you to Joey. You two will get on like a house on fire. It'll be great. All right. Awesome. So going to Mark. Mark, you're the last one on this question, so it better be good. What is your origin story?

>> Marc Muszynski: I mean -- I think the reality is it's kind of a fusion of everyone else's. I remember seeing Star Wars when I was too young to really understand what was happening. But all I knew was, like, that I'd rather live in that world than whatever world I was currently in. And that was like a big imagination sparker for me. And I was lucky enough that one of my neighbors -- or actually my best friend's dad was also a neighbor, was a science fiction author and so I spent a lot of time writing short stories but I had always loved watching movies and tv shows. And when I got to, like, middle school and high school, I found a group of friends who also loved movies and we just started making them. And so I -- you know, they weren't necessarily great, although some of them ended up pretty good because we've been doing it for, like, six years by the time we hit college and we're doing it then. But after that I ended up doing a bunch of sketch and improv comedy stuff before I ended up in LA, because I'm visually impaired and LA is such a driving intensive city that I didn't think that I would be able to hack it here. And then finally I just was like, well, screw it, if this is the thing I've wanted to do then I should just figure out how to make it work. And so I wound up in LA, and I've been lucky enough -- through a string of coincidences and hopefully hard work, I managed to get assistant jobs that got me closer and closer to actual writer's rooms. And the whole time I'd been writing my own TV comedy scripts and now drama scripts.

>> Alex: All right awesome, so I think we kind of -- we sort of already answered my next question which was going to be: what was y'all's first job in the industry? It's like you knew what I was going to ask!

>> Marc Muszynski: Yeah, An unpaid internship technically.

>> Alex: Which -- I'm fairly certain, those are you know, maybe -- like, I have interns right now and they're getting school credit. There's a whole rigmarole that I have to go through with their university to make sure that they are good. But yes same, same. Anyway, we can share those stories later. Okay, so moving right along. Next question. So TV writers and feature writers have, you know, very different paths to securing work and making a living at this. So for those of you that have done both or either, what -- can you share a little bit about how you approached securing those jobs and, you know, actually going about making a living at this?

>> Shea Mirzai: Yeah I think I'd be really happy to start with that. So yeah, I briefly mentioned that I had my first gig at a mini major studio. It was actually back when it was first getting started so it really had like a lot of room for growth because it initially started off as a film finance company. So I basically fought for myself. I think the best advice I'd be able to give anyone who's listening is to always fight for yourself first. It really does take a lot to get noticed and if you have anything that actually helps you stand out or establish a brand, I really would encourage everybody to go after that route. And I really can't stress enough the importance of networking. So I originally started working unpaid at the end of '08. I didn't get my first reps until about a a year and a half after that, and I was able to do that because I networked with anybody that I came into contact with. I would go out for -- like after working a 10 hour day, I would meet us assistants around town or younger executives. I would hang out with them for like an hour at a time. We'd grab like a coffee or something like that. It really helps to get to actually make yourself known to as many people as possible. And I feel some people like also think it's important to network with like a president of like a studio for example. But I really think it's helpful advice, if you get to know anyone else who is like a gatekeeper because if someone is an assistant today, it's definitely possible that they're an executive later. So I would just put your best foot forward and meet as many people as you possibly can. And also, I think it's important to to also pay it forward too. If you're able to help somebody else, I highly encourage that, because I'm a firm believer that a rising tide actually does lift all boats.

>> Alex: All right awesome. I love it, both the rising tide lifting all boats and networking. And I know it's probably scary for a lot of writers -- and I have to go to a virtual networking event later tonight and I'm a little bit nervous for that. So I get it, but there's just -- there's really no replacing it. It's really not. Sorry everyone, wish I could tell you otherwise. Okay so we're doing, we're gonna -- call on folks. So Marc!

>> Marc Muszynski: All right.

>> Alex: We're going out of order.

>> Marc Muszynski: I couldn't agree with Shea more. Especially because so... I mean, when you think about what it takes to get a job, a really competitive job anywhere, but especially, you know, in this case to, say, write on a TV show or to even pitch on a feature assignment or something, part of the battle is just finding out that jobs exist. Even the assistant jobs I was competing for when I first started, they would -- be gone in like 48 hours if I didn't hear about them. And then the other thing that's super important is, like, having people who can put in a good word for you to get them to actually consider your application. Because every single open writing job, if it gets publicized anywhere, is going to get bombarded with applications. And just more than they could ever read. And so they need -- the sort of de facto system of deciding what to actually -- who to take seriously is who's getting recommended by someone that you know and respect. And so, that networking thing is both your source of information and oftentimes it's your source of qualification. And when both of those things fail, it's also your source of moral and emotional support, because it's really hard out there. And if you're lucky enough to hear about a job, and if you're lucky enough to get someone to recommend you in a way that will get your application actually considered, then it's normal preparation like any job. You know, if it's a show, you watch as much of the show as you can or you read whatever's available. You look at all the other stuff that the people involved with it have done so that you can say that those are all your favorite things. And maybe most importantly, you try to find the things where you have some personal connection to them. Because at the end of the day, a lot of people can write pretty well. And because all of that is subjective, it really helps to have something -- you know if you're like, they're doing a Field of Dreams reboot and you're like -- I grew up playing baseball for -- little league teams and the White Sox were always my favorite and I had a Shoeless Joe poster and I could name all of their stats from their baseball cards. Like, that's the kind of thing that may matter to them, versus, like, I'll write a really good script. They're like, great, you and all of the other people that we're taking the time to interview because we've already read them and they were pretty good. So finding a personal connection is another part of the practical element of it. And the other thing that I'd say that has been emerging lately, is that as writer's rooms get shorter and as rooms get smaller and as residuals shrink because streaming is not as kind in that way, being a writer is not the consistent job that it used to be. And your first -- unless you're lucky enough to land on a show or a movie franchise or something that's a big hit that can propel you through your next couple of jobs, it's really tough between jobs. And so having some kind of skill that you can use to make money or some place you can return to working -- like, if you get your first writing job and it's a 10-week writer's room, that's not enough to live on for the rest of the year. And it might take more than that to get your next writing job. And so planning for a fade in to your writing career versus, like, a jump start is an increasing thing that I'm seeing from a lot of other people in the early stages of their careers.

>> Alex: All right awesome. I haven't actually heard somebody give that advice before and I think it's very -- I think there's something to that, so thank you very much. Okay, we're we're still gonna... we're gonna call on folks. We're still going out of order so I'm going to call on Andrew next. And while I fix my lighting.

>> Andrew Pilkington: Nah you look great! I think the main take away here is don't become a writer! Just kidding! I mean, everyone has a different pathway. Like my fellow colleagues here all have different pathways to get where they are, and we all have different disabilities and abilities. I'm a guy who types with my nose so people are unlikely to pick someone like me for a traditional job of being a script assistant. But yeah I had to navigate my own way to be where I am. Making a hit movie to show that I am capable of doing those types of jobs. Getting those entry level jobs is hard when you're not exactly able to get someone coffee. You don't want me getting someone coffee. You gotta figure out what's the best way to showcase your abilities and prove that you can do the job. Like sometimes, the reality is you're not gonna be able to get that opportunity. When I moved to NYC, I applied to a million jobs, and most of the time, like Mark said, your resume gets deleted in some automated system that is looking for how many years, you know how to use Microsoft Word. So there's no right way. That's the main takeaway I think. And making a living, like, I've had to do so many other jobs to support my career, so being able to do other things in the industry, like producing, editing, being as versatile as possible. That way, if you work on a project, maybe you make friends with a producer or someone, so it's all in one. Yeah, does that make sense?

>> Alex: No absolutely. Yeah, I like the piece of advice to -- writers to be as versatile as possible, not just for job opportunities, and, you know, abilities to make a living and pay rent and buy groceries and all those things, but also, you know, maybe some editing experience will make you a better writer. I personally don't know how to edit, so I can't confirm if that's true, but I can see how it would be.

>> Marc Muszynski: It definitely does. And, like, directing acting, any of those skills -- some of the smartest filmmakers I know, editing is such a crucial step of that whole process. And the way that they conceive of the medium is, like, completely different if you've been in the trenches doing something like that.

>> Alex: Yeah. I've had the privilege to watch some really talented editors work. And it's like -- y'all are wizards. I don't understand this. Other than that you're wizards, that's my only explanation. Like, that's it. That's all I got. All right, miss Diana. Let's go to you. You're gonna close us out on this question.

>> Diana Romero: Here I am. Okay so the question is -- what we did for a living or how we -- were able to pay our bills. I'm just very barely able to pay my bills. Since I started out in acting, I did a lot of extra work which got me -- that paid the bills somewhat in some way or another. But then -- when I decided to go back to school for film production I learned a lot about scheduling and budgeting films. I also had free -- and it's about using your resources. I also had free use of cameras. I could edit at school. And so I started a wedding video company which was really -- because I would see so many people looking for student filmmakers to shoot their -- to film their videos and edit them. And I thought, well, I can start doing that, I can get free cameras, I can get free editing equipment. And -- eventually my company became one of the biggest companies in Chicago for wedding video business -- for doing wedding videos. And what happened was that I realized that that's not what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, but it was a way to get by for a few years until I kind of got my footing into where I was going to go and what I was going to do. And so I sold my business, which was really great because that gave me some money to live on when I came here. But also there, I got my first producing job and I was paid for that. So I was working on set as a producer which gave me those credits. And when I came here, I went to AFI. And in those two years I was okay because I had sold my business and I was doing fine. Getting out of AFI I had even more -- I had a lot of experience in development, so I started doing internships. But for pay to make films, basically you have to start your own business in a way, if you want to just be able to have time for your own projects as well as be able to make money to pay the bills. So I started putting it out there that I did budgets, I did scheduling. So a lot of independent -- small independent low budget films would pay me to do their schedules and budgets. What was good about that was that I learned a lot about budgeting a film. Right? How much money does it cost to make a film. And on top of that I was doing coverage, so I was working for a lot of the script coverage places and I was reading tons of scripts, doing tons of notes. And that taught me a lot about script writing as well, right, because you see about a hundred -- like, let's say out of a hundred scripts I read maybe two of them were good. So you learn the bad ones. You learn what not to do. You learn that, like, if you don't grab a reader's attention in the first 10 pages, the first 10 minutes, like a movie, it's gone, it's done. They're not going to look at it again. And then I worked as a program --programming director for a film festival which also gave me a lot of, like, what are good movies, what are not good movies... So basically what it is you have to be really creative, what can you do, what can you put out there? I worked in film -- in distribution which was a good full-time paying job. But as a producer it was great to know about distribution, because they don't teach you this in school. And so what does it take to have a distributor? What does it take to sell to the foreign market? What is all that? So basically trying to get little jobs all around that will pay your bills but will give you still that knowledge so you're still learning even though you're getting paid. And on top of that you're also able to work with your projects and your own projects and things like that. And then I was -- you know, like, they say -- a good mentor of mine who was a producer on Back to the Future way back when, he was a producing mentor of mine at AFI, had worked with Orson Wells. And -- I think he worked with Orson Wells. And that he was told, the quote was that "every road in LA takes you to the airport, to LAX, just like every road you can take in this business will get you to where you want to be. And there's no one" -- you know and everybody said the same thing, "there's not just one way to get there." So yeah, and -- a lot of it is luck. A lot of it is talent. I mean, talent that you know what you're doing. That you wrote a really good pilot for example that you can send that out, and you know it's good because you've done tons of notes, you've got tons of notes, you've gone -- you've rewritten it a million times. But it's also it's talent, it's being at the right place at the right time. And it's who you know. A lot of it is who you know and so you start developing. And so I absolutely -- I used to love networking. I used to love going. I used to, like, walk the room -- work the room and everything. And then as I got older, I started not liking it anymore. I didn't. I do not like going into an event where I don't know anybody. If I go with somebody else I'm cool. If I go by myself it's not as fun. I hated it. But with the pandemic and everything being on Zoom, that was huge. That was helpful. It's easy for me to sit and do Zoom and meet people. I did a lot of general meetings and stuff over Zoom and it wasn't as intimidating to me as it was just going to a networking group where I don't know anybody. But yeah, so definitely networking. And I'll defer back to you Alex if you want to ask the next question, because I can keep talking.

>> Alex: All right, all right. Well that's awesome, thank you. I love how you kind of brought everything that we had all said and sort of distilled it right there for us, so thank you very much. Okay awesome. So looking specifically to TV writers rooms, there's been some changes over the past, what are we, almost two years. Ooh! Yeah that landed there. So there's been some changes over the past couple of years. So I'm curious to know what y'all's experience in the room was like, either pre- and during the pandemic, or just during the pandemic. So whatever that looks like for you.

>> Marc Muszynski: I can -- jump in on this one. So I worked as a writer's assistant in a room pre-pandemic and then I was a writer in a room that got split by the pandemic. But what I will say is that both of my experiences were fairly traditional. One was for a broadcast show. It was a multi-cam so we got, you know... there's a lot of... it was mostly sitting around a table, you know, breaking stories on a whiteboard. And then as the stories came together, writers would be sent off to write them, we'd revise them as a group, usually on, you know, on a shared screen that everyone was looking at, which was great for me as a person who couldn't see very well. But I was the writer's assistant, so no one was really expecting me to do much. And then we'd also split off some people to do, like, joke punch-ups sometimes. And then the other room was very similar, it was for premium cable for Showtime. And that was also a very traditional writer's room, whiteboard, everyone's sitting around, this time not around a table but on couches -- big difference -- and then -- similarly sending writers out of the room to write their drafts of their script. And when the pandemic happened, we switched to Zoom. And initially we were using some of the more -- the sort of newer digital tools. I think we had writer's room pro for a bit. And using that to sort of keep ideas together the same way we would on a whiteboard. But that became kind of cumbersome and the solution we ended with was a writer at their home with a giant white board on camera. So it was just this digital version of exactly what we were doing before. My personal experience as a disabled person was awesome. Every single job I've had has gotten progressively more accessible as I approached the writers room. And being a writer, as long as you can communicate with the other people you're working with, like, that's what most of the job is. And then the other part is you writing stuff, which usually you can do at home under conditions that you can curate. And I was also lucky in that I had really wonderful people who were extremely supportive -- didn't think twice about disability and were generally just looking to help and mentor younger writers. So I feel like I had a very lucky old-school version of the writing room experience so far. And since then, you know, I know a lot of rooms have gotten smaller, most of them are digital now, and a lot of stuff is different. So I'm curious to know what my next experience will be.

>> Alex: All right cool. I'm glad to hear that it was so positive, so -- I think things are getting better, but I've heard some horror stories.

>> Shea Mirzai: I feel like I want to hop on that too, because I think Mark actually made a few very good points. Again, like, the bulk of my experience is that I'm a feature writer but I have sold a couple of original pilots and I actually got staffed a little while ago so I'm working in a physical room at HBO Max, and exactly as Mark said, I think I found myself in a very lucky situation because I'm working with a very cool show runner whose mantras are all about equity and inclusion and actually giving everybody a shot. Because I have been up for some very cool rooms before, and this is very hard for anybody to actually get to that point because first of all, like, you have to hear about the job, you have to be actually put up for the job, and then like a showrunner has to see something in you in order to actually want to sit down with you. So I was confident in all of my abilities, and my writing samples and my resume. It's just like, if you get to that final round, it's like oh, I have to say, hey, I speak with a pretty serious speech impediment. And I think that, I'm not 100% sure but I think it definitely played a factor in a couple of jobs that I didn't get before. But I think things actually are getting much better. Again, like Mark said, I think things are are becoming a lot more inclusive. So it really is just like -- A lot of it depends on, like, who you're working with. I know all show runners aren't as inclusive thinking, but I would hope that like, a lot more rooms if they're like a physical or just a digital space actually keep this up. Because I think everybody who works hard for this actually deserve the chance irrespective of our disabilities.

>> Alex: Awesome. Let's see.

>> Diana Romero: I'll throw something in there too about all of that. I was not working in a room during the pandemic because the first room I've ever gotten into was in April when we started this job, but we're still doing Zoom. And everybody loves doing Zoom. Our whole room, the show runners included. We have two show runners and they're like, hey, we will keep Zoom as long as we can. Maybe eventually we'll turn into a hybrid situation, but for now everybody's happy to do Zoom, as am I. I think that, like Shea was saying, like, the same thing with my room is that we have a very diverse group of people which is amazing. And the show itself is incredibly diverse. It's something that our show runners keep -- one of our show runners has been around forever, the other show runner, this is her first show running it. But the one who's been here long, he's like, I've never seen a show like this before. I've never seen a room like this before. And so like I keep saying, and Marc's heard me say this a million times because we do panels together, but is that I couldn't have been luckier ending up in the room that I did. And -- but also, you know, you need to know your limits as far as disability and those are limits that you have to speak up about up front and let people know, because you don't want to just come out and just all of a sudden out of the blue say, "oh and by the way, I can't work 12 hours or 8 hours or whatever." And I don't -- I could be in a room physically, or I could stay in Zoom, and I'm okay either way, and I don't have any of those things. But I think that that's one of the biggest fears people -- is that, oh, "because I'm disabled I'm not going to get a job" is not true. You know if you're upfront and you're honest and you say here's -- you know -- if you qualify for the job and you're getting an interview, you can bring that up and say these are the limits I'll have, would I be able to work under those circumstances or those limits? And that's I think the best -- like, for me it's very important for people to know that I can do the job. Just because I can't walk, doesn't mean that I can't write, you know? And I don't need my legs to write, like I say. But if there's things, like you know, if there's things where you can only work -- four hours a day because of any other limitation you have, you have to be upfront about that. And you know, like anything else, it's up to the employer to decide what they're gonna hire based on what -- it could be because they don't like your black hair or something. You know, it could be for a million different reasons. So just don't let that be -- don't let that make you fearful of applying for jobs or trying to find jobs or trying to meet people, don't. And you know, we're lucky. We're at a really good time right now where diversity and inclusion is huge and we're seeing it. And I've never seen this to the way it is now, like, all the headlines of all the trade papers. Everything that you read about is diversity and inclusion. So we're in a great place. So take advantage of the fact that we're in a really good place right now. Yeah, okay. I'm good.

>> Alex: All right awesome. Andrew, do you want to weigh in on this one?

>> Andrew Pilkington: I mean yeah, I have never actually -- well, I did more development when I worked in documentaries. I did treatments for shows and I did all the research. The name of the game is throwing stuff at the wall and seeing what sticks, cause some guy made this bicycle that does this thing, let's make a show about that. Going back to what Diana said, she has the ability to use her hands and voice, you know, I don't. So I have to find a different avenue to work on a show. And really, having a movie that does well is one way to sort of skip the proverbial ladder of working your way up. So like, you know, that's true of every content. People are like "oh they made this movie, let's give them a TV show!" That's kind of the way I'm going. It's not a very linear path, there's a lot of unknown elements along the way, but nothing is known. Like Mark said, they could shut down tomorrow and have one guy writing True Detective season 5 or whatever. But yeah, that's all I got for that.

>> Alex: Yeah, I like that. That's always good to remind people, you know, it doesn't have to be linear, it doesn't have to be like... I don't know. Like nobody hands you a road map, pun intended, whenever you are entering the entertainment industry. You're like, I want to be a writer and it's not like -- it's not like being an accountant.

>> Andrew Pilkington: Yeah all my friends when I was in college, they all went to accounting school and they got jobs making 200K a year out of college. And I'm like, why didn't I do that? [laughs] That's a joke, I love what I do.

>> Alex: Yeah. My brother is an accountant, I know. [Laughs] I know what they are like. You know. Hey, he loves what he does, I love what I do. We're cool. All right awesome. So final question from me, y'all, before we open it up to questions from the writers attending. So writers, if you've been sitting on a question and you have not asked it yet and we have not covered this, please throw it into the Q&A box for me. But I think the big question -- we saved the big one for last -- is what advice would you give to a writer with a disability who wants to work in TV and film? If you could distill it down to a few things, what would you tell them?

>> Marc Muszynski: This is the part where we all wait for you to call on someone. [laughter]

>> Shea Mirzai: I'd be happy to volunteer again.

>> Alex: Go for it, take it away.

>> Shea Mirzai: Yeah so like, just speaking from like personal experience -- also this echoes exactly what Diana had said earlier is that we're very much in a time where everyone is actively looking for inclusive projects. So like, back when I got my start, it was a very different landscape. I wasn't comfortable telling people the fact that I was a gay man, because of all of the rampant homophobia I heard around town. And ironically enough, I never wanted to actually admit the fact that I spoke with with a diagnosed severe speech impediment like this, which I find very ironic because there's no hiding the fact that I speak with a stutter. But like, I signed with a couple different agencies over the years and managers as well. I was always afraid like if I open my mouth, am I going to fuck everything up, like if they find out the fact that like, oh I might have a little harder time going up for a studio pitch or something like that. I like to think of what my showrunner told me on my current HBO Max gig. I have a lot to say, it might take me a little bit longer to say it than everyone else in the room, but I still get my point across. So if you have a disability, I can't stress this enough: don't let it hold you back. Because I was afraid for a long time that all people would see was that I have a speech impediment like this. And in fact I think there's a lot of benefits from it, like I learned empathy for other people because I face a daily struggle like this. Like, it's hard for me to go order food at a restaurant or something like that. At a certain point I think you just have to stop being afraid and embrace all aspects of you. And on top of that, it's a perfect time to do it because people are buying stories like ours.

>> Alex: All right. Let's go Diana!

>> Diana Romero: I was just unmuting myself. I was getting ready. So my advice, I kind of touched on it earlier when I was saying don't let your disability stop you from pursuing your dreams or doing anything. I know -- at least for myself, I know I can be my own worst critic, and I can also bring in my own insecurities that may not necessarily be real. But I do that to myself. And many times I just have to stop myself and say, like, look at it seriously, honestly, is this true or is this not? And -- most of the time you're going to be like yeah no, I'm probably just making all this stuff up. Right? But you're -- we're so good -- a lot of people are so good at limiting themselves and making excuses. But maybe it wasn't that I use a wheelchair to get around, maybe it's the fact that I'm not a good writer, or I didn't do a good job with that script, or maybe there were people more experienced than I was and I didn't get the job. So don't ever let the fact that you didn't get the job, don't ever blame it on your disability. Because it can be so many other things, and it's probably the last of it being your disability. So really believe in yourself. And also be honest with yourself. Ask yourself this, are you ready? Do you know enough about the industry? Do you know enough people? Do you have a good support network? Do you have a good pilot? Do you have a good writing sample? Have all of those things in place before you start going out and trying to get jobs, because you're going to be a lot more disappointed with the constant no's. And I tell people, I'm like every no gets you closer to a yes. And this is part of the industry, this is part of our world and this is something that we have to believe and accept that it's -- there's a lot more rejections than there are approvals, if you will, or more no's than there are yeses. But you can't let it stop you and it has to be in your blood. And I say just be honest with yourself. Is it in your blood? Is it something that you're able to -- can you scrape by without barely making any money at all for as long as it takes? Like, it's going to take four years, five years -- it's not like you come and you say okay, I'm going to give it a year and we'll see what happens. That doesn't -- it's not that way, it's something that you commit to. And there's nothing wrong with saying deciding after a few years that it's not really what you wanted to do. That's fine too. Just -- don't blame your disability for the no's or for the rejections, because I think that really can hurt you mentally and psychologically in so many ways. And just know that there's a place for you. There's a place for everybody. And it might take a little while to get to it, but you'll get to it. You'll find it. And don't believe that you're too old to be in this industry or you're too old to be getting started. Or don't believe the, oh, it's because you know my disability stops me from doing blah blah blah, whatever. Just don't fall into those because those are really hardcore psychological things that you can fall into and it can be really really hard, especially for us writers who like to put everything on a page and don't really speak about these things. So that's my advice.

>> Alex: All right, I love it. Would you like me to call on you folks or? Either way.

>> Marc Muszynski: I can go.

>> Alex: I don't want to put you on the spot if you're still sort of thinking it over.

>> Marc Muszynski: No, no. I can go. I always just pause because -- partially on account of my eyes, because I'm never sure if someone else is, like, opening their mouth to speak and then I'm about to cut them off. So, but I mean, look, I should have gone first because those -- the things that Shea and Diana just said were perfect. And I think the other thing is that, kind of like building on the, like, don't let a disability or whatever hold you back, I think what people are looking for -- there's a lot of people who can write really really well, definitely good enough to be in a writer's room. And what they're looking for is what makes you unique. And that, oftentimes, is a part of that. And so look to that for strength, and look beyond that for all the other stuff that you do that makes you unique, whether it's experiences you've had, passions you have, you know, weird talents or abilities, anything. Because all of that stuff is what is going to make you different from everyone else. And that's the thing that's going to make them remember you. It's going to let them know where to place you, because if you're like, I write everything, and then they have a show they're going to be like, well I don't know, is this really what they do? If you're like -- I think actually Shea mentioned this earlier, when he talked about having a brand. You know, if you're like, I like dystopian, sci-fi, werewolf shows, that's maybe a little too specific of a brand. But if someone ever had a dystopian, sci-fi, werewolf show, they would 100 percent remember you. And so knowing what you love and what you really want to do beyond just, like, get paid to write stuff, will help everyone else know how to help you. So that I think would be what I wish I was better at when I was starting out.

>> Alex: All right awesome. All right Andrew. Going over to you. Bring us on home.

>> Andrew Pilkington: [unintelligible]

>> Andrew Pilkington: Networking, like everyone else said, networking networking. I would say you gotta be good at your job, because if you're not good -- [unintelligible] You gotta write. You gotta keep writing. [unintelligible] My girlfriend had to bring my dog out. Yeah, so everyone else said all the good stuff. Keep trying, yeah.

>> Alex: Yeah, I love that. Just keep trying. And the immortal words of Dory from Finding Nemo, just keep swimming. I was hoping you all liked that movie. All right, all right awesome. Well friends, that is -- those are all the questions that I had for you. "I loved Finding Nemo." Oh good -- I'm not sure we can be friends if you didn't love Finding Nemo. I'm gonna be real honest there. All right folks, so those were all the questions that I had for you. So go into the writer Q&A. Just getting it open here. La da da...Let me just read your question miss Hillary. Okay cool, well congratulations. So to read Hillary's question for everybody, Hillary is asking "I recently got hired for my first writer job in a writer's room for an animated kid show intended for a network's YouTube channel. What is your advice for next steps to progress towards writing on, say, a dystopian werewolf show, as Mark phrased it, for regular TV?"

>> Marc Muszynski: Oh I mean, yeah it's tricky. I've done -- I know what it feels like because a lot of times, the writers don't cross over as much as you wish that they would. Like, a lot of the people that I met doing comedy stuff -- don't have a lot of connections with the people that I've met doing drama stuff. And so if, you know, if you want their help getting you to a drama, it's a little trickier. I mean I think the biggest thing is if you want to write dystopian werewolf stuff definitely write a really good dystopian werewolf thing, and then -- great ways to do that would be if the other writers in your current show can help -- you know, if you build a great relationship with them and they'd be willing to recommend you to, say, their agents or managers. The agents and managers are great people with lots and lots of connections in ways that might help you do that sort of sidestep from what you're doing now to a similar -- or to you know a different genre. And also just knowing that, like, every credit is a good credit. Like people -- just knowing that someone at some point paid you to write -- because the weird thing about writing is, like, we all can do it, and it's the most important thing any of us do at any point in our careers is, like, actually doing the thing. And the only difference earlier in a career versus later is, like, people sometimes pay you for it now. And that's less about something changing dramatically within your writing, and more about you just convincing everybody that your writing is worth paying for. And so the fact that you're already working in a writer's room is a lot of that battle. And I know it feels far away because it's a very different type of show but people will still look at that and be like, oh, okay, so Hillary gets paid to write, so what do we have? Do we want to pay her to write? So I think you're weirdly closer than you might think. And then yeah, maybe representation, or seeing if just asking those other writers if they know anybody closer in the direction that you want to go, and if they might set up, like, a coffee -- you know, introduce you for a coffee or a drink or a Zoom version of either of those things. That's probably how I would do it.

>> Alex: All right awesome.

>> Diana Romero: I started typing out an answer to Hillary but I'll just read my answer, in case other people don't see it. But I was just saying congratulations and was wondering if the show had aired yet. And my advice is kind of like what Mark said. Find out if you can get general meetings with people. And the way that you can find this out is look up all the shows that you like, that you would love to write for, whether it's a dystopian werewolf or even kids, if there's any, like, kid shows that you want to write on. And find out, do all your research. Find out who the producers are, who are the show runners, who are the writers, who is everybody, you know, and you're gonna have to, like, figure out your investigative skills and how you can find all this out. Find out who -- maybe one of those people is connected to something and I always tell people do six degrees of separation. Like you do the six degrees of Kevin Bacon. And there's always going to be -- if you do a six degrees of separation and you can find out through IMDB, you can find a lot of things -- there's a huge likelihood that you know somebody that knows somebody in one of these shows, or that they have a friend or they know somebody. Duh duh duh, whatever. You do your six degrees of separation and call them and say, hey listen, I'm really interested in seeing if I can meet with this person. I know you guys are good friends and you know me, duh duh duh, do you think you can help me set up --maybe they're willing to talk to me. And even if it's not somebody that is in the position to hire you just yet but they can give you advice and you're already on their radar, so that if their bosses say hey, we're looking for another writer or whatever, that person can turn to you. So definitely -- but do your research and find out. If you're connected to anybody in any kind of way, that's a huge thing to start with, you know? Because you can contact them and say hey I also went to Columbia College Chicago and I had this teacher, did you have this teacher? And you personalize it. And that's a good way to break the ice, and that's a good way to get somebody's attention as well.

>> Marc Muszynski: I would actually say it's better to approach them when they're not in a position to hire you, because when they're in a position to hire you, they're on guard. And so, and not only that they're getting bombarded with every single other person that wants to get hired. And it's the relationships that you've built beforehand that sort of blossom in those moments. You know that's probably -- it's a longer-term way to go but it's gonna pay better dividends.

>> Shea Mirzai: Yeah I think that makes a lot of sense as well. I would say this is a human business so if you're going to approach people, it definitely helps to appear like without your hand out in like a metaphorical way. Like, it really helps to build a relationship first. Like, I got staffed on this HBO Max series because I met with its executive producer after a mixer. I introduced myself, I didn't immediately ask for a job, I built that relationship. And then I eventually got a staffing offer for it about eight months later. So I would caution against expecting immediate results, but in the end it just helps to be a friendly person. And again, if there's a way for you to help anybody else like, I strongly believe in paying it forward because I think it does come back to you.

>> Andrew Pilkington: Are we all answering?

>> Alex: You don't have to. If you want to, you're welcome to.

>> Andrew Pilkington: It's all about networking. Being versatile, writing a set script, and if you like that, write something in the genre. Being aware of that genre and know the space, it sounds like you -- maybe you need a rep. Your rep should get you in front of those people. If you're not repped, then networking. Everyone else has way better advice, so definitely listen to them.

>> Alex: Everyone's advice is equal and awesome, because, you know, networking's definitely something. And -- [laughs] see Hillary agrees, Hillary agrees. All right, awesome y'all. Well I think -- we are running out of time and I do believe that we answered everybody's questions, because you all are just that fabulous. Oh yeah, you are. So bask in your fabulousness. [Laughs] Oh my goodness gracious. I'm very silly. So just wanted to say thank you so much for joining us on a Saturday afternoon, or evening, if you are in various other time zones. And you know, sharing your thoughts and your advice and your wisdom, and smiling at my not very funny jokes sometimes. So I thoroughly, thoroughly appreciate it. Yeah, and thank you -- Lesley and Tatiana for helping organize, and you know putting me in contact with all of you. This was so fun!

>> Lesley Hennen: Yay, thanks everyone.

>> Alex: All right all. I'm gonna set you free. Go forth, enjoy the rest of your day or evening and I will see some of you on the next one. Thank you so much everybody.

>> Everyone: Bye!