>> Lesley Hennen: Hello everyone, my name is Lesley Hennen. I am the entertainment and news media associate at RespectAbility, and we are a disability-led nonprofit that fights stigmas and advances opportunities so people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of community. My pronouns are she/her, and I'll also give a brief visual description of myself for our blind and low vision audiences. I'm a white woman with brown hair that is currently in a bun top knot situation. I am wearing glasses and a green sweater, and I am sitting in front of a black banner with the RespectAbility logo in white and yellow. I just want to take a minute to say thank you to all of you for taking the time today to join us for this panel discussion. If you would like to view the ASL interpreter in a larger screen, we invite you to pin their video which will spotlight them throughout the entire panel. We also have live captioning for this panel done by a real live person, so that is available in the Zoom app by clicking on the CC button in the toolbar at the bottom of the screen, as well as via your web browser. And my colleague Jacquill is going to post that link into the chat box where you can go to view the captions in a separate window if you would like. Thank you Jacquill. And this panel is live! We will be taking questions from you during the second half of the panel. Please add your questions to the Q&A box if you would like to ask a question, and if you are watching us on Facebook during the live airing, we will be monitoring there for questions as well. This panel is being recorded and will be available on RespectAbility's Facebook page and website after the event concludes. A higher resolution recording with open captions and our ASL interpreters will be posted and sent to everyone who registered next week. if you would like to stay connected with RespectAbility, I invite you to please sign up for our weekly newsletter on disability inclusion and equity in the entertainment industry and you can check out that link in the chat box as well if you'd like to sign up. So today we are going to be talking about some best practices for implementing accessibility in film school programs. For many of us -- or for many people who are looking to start a career in the entertainment industry, whether they'd like to go into development, writing, production, marketing, everything else in between, or you know, you're just kind of figuring it out -- for a lot of folks the starting point is often going to film school. And since we all know that the best way to improve on-screen representation of people with disabilities is to hire more disabled people in all aspects of the storytelling and filmmaking process, we are excited to dive into some ways that film school can ensure that their disabled students are being fully supported in their work and their journeys through film school and into the film and TV industry. We have a really awesome group of panelists with us today, all of whom are disabled creatives -- who have attended film schools and are currently working in the industry in various capacities. I myself attended the Harold Ramus Film School at Second City Chicago, which is currently the only film school of its kind devoted to comedic storytelling, and I'm also a writer when I'm not doing my work with RespectAbility. And now I'd love to kick things over to each of our panelists to introduce themselves, tell us where you went to film school, a little bit about, maybe, what you're working on these days, anything you'd like to share, and just a reminder to please give a brief -- visual description of yourself for our blind low vision audiences. So I will just go down the order of folks on my screen. First up is Tyler.

>> Tyler Hoog: Hello hold on one second I might -- nope we're good. Hi my name is -- oh there it is, sorry spasm. I knew it was coming, of course it had to be me first.

>> Lesley Hennen: All good, we can hop over to someone else if you want.

>> Tyler Hoog: No, no, I got it.

>> Lesley Hennen: Okay.

>> Tyler Hoog: Hi my name is Tyler Hoog. I am currently -- I also have a top knot, I have reddish blonde hair. I am a c3 c4 spinal cord -- I have a c3 c4 spinal cord injury which is causing me to spasm and shake. And I'm wearing a light green hoodie in front of -- and I'm in front of my bed, also a wheelchair user. I went to USC where I did my map -- hold on.

>> Lesley Hennen: All good.

>> Tyler Hoog: So I first did my undergrad at the University of North Carolina where I got my Bachelor's in media production and my minors in screenwriting, and then I went on to USC, where I did my masters in screenwriting from 2017 to 2019. And since then I've just been kind of kicking it out in LA, just writing and sending stuff out and helping people where they need help, doing consulting and doing a little bit of part-time production assistant work.

>> Lesley Hennen: Awesome, thanks Tyler. Next up I have Michael.

>> Michael Dougherty: Hi, I'm Michael Dougherty, and I am -- I do not have a top knot, unfortunately, but I have grayish brown hair and a reddish gray beard and a purple shirt. And I'm sitting in front of a blurred existential background. I was born with spina bifida and I went to NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, an experience that I hated on a bone deep level, but about 18 years later, ended up getting a Master's degree in -- I'm sorry, not 18 years later, nine years later -- ended up getting a Master's degree in screenwriting from the National University of Ireland in Galway. I'm a dual citizen and being Irish means a lot to me, so that ended up actually being an incredible experience, despite it raining every 37 seconds, which is no fun if you're in a wheelchair. But I managed. And now I'm out here in LA. I'm part of the writers with disabilities committee at the Writer's Guild, which I've been on for going on 11 years now. It's a second home for me. And I am also the co-founder of the ReelAbilities Film Festival: Los Angeles, which is a three-day festival dedicated to the stories told and about people with disabilities.

>> Lesley Hennen: Awesome, thanks Michael. Next up I have Faith.

>> Faith Strongheart: Hi, my name is Faith Strongheart. I'm a writer director, and I live in Los Angeles. And I also went to film school, both for undergraduate at the defunct college of Santa Fe in my hometown of Santa Fe, New Mexico. And then for graduate school I went to UCLA. And I have some similar feelings that Michael has about that experience. I am a gray-haired blonde woman wearing glasses and a yellowish orange long-sleeve shirt against a blurred background, and I'm glad to be here.

>> Lesley Hennen: Awesome, glad to have you. Thanks Faith, and next up is Laura.

>> Laura Alsum: Hi, I'm Laura Alsum, my pronouns are she/her. I'm a white woman with shoulder length brown hair and a black shirt is what I'm wearing. Background is blurred. I went to UCLA for grad school to get my Master's in screenwriting, graduated in 2014 -- yeah, 2014. A few years after that I got hurt and so I came back to Colorado, where I am now. I have had muscular dystrophy since I was born and use a scooter, but you can't see that now. Right now I am working just a nine to five job in communications for a non-profit, and I do a lot of writing on the side, trying to get my way back to California someday. I'm working on a feature with one of my friends who went to USC, so rivals, but you know, we get along. So yeah, that's what's going on right now.

>> Lesley Hennen: Awesome, thanks Laura. Last but not least is Andrew.

>> Andrew Reid: Thanks Lesley, I am Andrew Reid, I am a he/him, and then I am wearing a tie-dyed greenish-gray shirt, brown -- I have brown hair, brown eyes, brown skin. I am a graduate of the USC MFA film production program, and I walk with a cane due to a spinal cord injury -- t3 incomplete paraplegic.

>> Lesley Hennen: Awesome. Well thank you all so much for being us here today as panelists and sharing your experiences, excited to dive in to the accessibility conversation. So let's just kick things off with a few questions. And then as a reminder to our audience members or anyone watching us on Facebook, feel free to put any questions you have into the Q&A box on Zoom or leave a comment on Facebook and we will find it there. And we'll get to those towards the end of the panel. So first off, I guess I'd like to start by just, you know -- accessibility can look like many different things for different people. I think sometimes people have sort of limited views of what accessibility can look like. But it really -- you know, accessibility is for everyone. We like to emphasize that point. You know, it's not necessarily just for people with disabilities. Accessibility really helps everyone when it's thought about from the beginning. So I was wondering if people would want to share a few examples of different things that made your film school programs accessible to you, or different accommodations maybe you asked for to make things more accessible, but basically just to give kind of an overview of what accessibility can look like in different ways. If anyone else -- anyone wants to start off, otherwise I can call on people. [chuckles]

>> Tyler Hoog: Sure, I'll start off with kind of a general thing. It's not as much film school specific, but more college specific. But all colleges should have some sort of accessibility resource center or disability resource services or whatever their version is and they call it. I found them -- especially in undergrad, if you're going to do your film school undergrad, I found that they're pretty important for getting everything worked out, even just understanding -- navigating your classes, getting your testing done, any accommodations you might need.

>> Lesley Hennen: Yeah, that's a great point. I think that's a good recommendation for, you know, accessibility overall is having, you know, one main point of contact where people can go to make requests or, you know, just make sure that they're going to be covered. That can help streamline everything. Does anyone else want to share some examples of what accessibility looks like for you?

>> Michael Dougherty: Well I had something similar where there was an accessibility -- I think they called it the students with disabilities department, which was basically one sad old lady sitting by herself in a windowless room. And she was ostensibly there if I needed anything, but I -- in fact, again, this is back in the late 90s so the ADA was still very very very young. And I'm not sure that they knew exactly what they were doing in terms of how to implement all of that. I mean, there were basic things like if you needed an elevator to get fixed they would -- make sure that they got on the people to do that. But in terms of the actual film school, I'm not really sure, because I remember during the orientation, one of my main professors in that first year came up to me and said "are you going to be okay with this? Are you going to be able to handle this?" Rather than, "what do you need and how can we help you?" And I think that that was the general attitude early on. And I think accessibility requires a certain amount of openness and listening, but it also requires the students to be able to push for themselves. But I know we're going to get to that probably later.

>> Andrew Reid: I'll piggyback off of Michael as well. I mean, I graduated 2018 from the USC MFA program, and I think you get the same questions, like, can you handle this? And to be totally honest, there's a lot of elements of filmmaking that are extremely physical and extremely rigorous if you're directing, if you're a cinematographer, if you're on set every day. They're valid as questions to ask, I just think it's the manner in which it's asked is kind of sometimes where I have a certain conflict, because it's not, like, "will you be able to do this?" It's "you can't." There are ways in which it can be done, and I think, you know, having conversations like this and people within the community are showing it can be done. But just like any other individual has certain needs, people with disability have certain needs in order to tap their full creative potential. So I don't think it's just about are we able to handle it, I think it's definitely possible to do that. It's just making sure that we are very vocal to the people on set and to the schools. Because, like, for me all the class assignments -- unless I voiced that I wanted assistance or, like, I need to take a seat or, like, they're loading and unloading stuff into the truck and I'm like, I can do all this, I can't do that, or I'm really tired from standing all day. People don't know, so you have to voice it and you can't be ashamed of it, because I think that's another thing that I have come into conflict with in my past, that you feel a certain level of shame or you don't want to voice it because you want to be like everyone else. No one is the same. It's okay to have your differences, as long as you're able to maximize your full creative, which is ultimately what people are going to be watching on the screen.

>> Lesley Hennen: Yeah, totally agree with that and I think, yeah, over-communication is key, I think, in a lot of things, especially with accessibility. And we'll get to a little bit later, you know, some tips for how to advocate for yourself, you know, when you have a disability or you need an accommodation. I really like the point that's been made about, you know, in the way that we are being asked about, like, things that we need I think -- yeah, the question isn't, you know, can you handle this, it's what do you need to handle this. And I think the more we just open up that question overall to everyone, you know, it's -- an example we like to use a lot is, you know, when you're asking if people have any food allergies or dietary restrictions. You know, that's such a commonly asked question these days, and it can just be applied to accessibility as well. It's like, what do you need to do your job well? What do you need to complete this film school program? So yeah, I think it's just kind of shifting the way people think about accessibility, just that little bit can really help. Does anyone else have anything they'd like to add on this, or we can move on to the next question. Cool, move on to the next one. So we've talked a little bit about, you know, like, best practices for accommodation. Are there any examples that people want to share of a time, you know, that they encountered something that wasn't accessible to you during your film school experience and your school was able to successfully implement a change that helped make things accessible to you, or, you know, are there ways that, you know, maybe it wasn't successfully implemented but, you know, moving forward, something you would like people to keep in mind that, you know, this is how things could be done in the future?

>> Faith Strongheart: I would say -- I mean, I didn't have any direct experiences related to my disability during my time at either my undergrad or graduate program, but I was pregnant when I entered graduate school and when I had my baby, and when I asked for accommodations for nursing or, you know, pumping, the department had no idea how to deal with it. It's like they had never been approached with it before, and so they just gave me this, you know, a room that could essentially be opened by other people if they had access to it, so it wasn't actually private, and it was windowless, and didn't have -- it wasn't really, you know, like a proper room that it should be. I know other departments within the campus have better facilities, but that type of, you know, accessibility and assistance just does not exist within the film department at school. They also have, like, no diaper changing stations in the bathrooms, and there were other mothers in my department as well. So I think that that just speaks to how the film department at least at UCLA specifically handles any kind of accessibility. There was not -- there was one person in the writing program when I was in school that was in a wheelchair, and I don't think the school was just properly equipped to deal with and to be in service to people with disabilities. And that -- it's not something that I think typically people associate filmmaking with people with disabilities, whatever that means, right? And so I think that they are outdated, to say the least, and they really need to get up to date.

>> Laura Alsum: You know, I can add on to that because I also went to UCLA. And yeah, like, the film school part of UCLA is pretty old -- the buildings are old. And I mean, I was just a writer so I just went into classrooms and most of the time they were accessible. And there was one instance where -- well, to back up, before every quarter or semester or whatever, we kind of audit classes before we decide what we want to take. So one such classroom I went into to audit was not accessible at all. There were like three stairs down, no way to get there. And of course all my fellow students were just appalled and surprised, and I was like, this happens all the time, right? But to give them credit, I mean, like, the instructor who was in that room said immediately, like, oh, we'll just change rooms. I mean that's a quick fix, which I appreciated, but that doesn't, you know, solve the whole issue of the entire building being accessible. I did find that they were willing to adapt along with me, but I definitely had to be vocal. Like you said, I don't think they're set up necessarily for it, but I found that they were more willing to work with me, so.

>> Andrew Reid: Yeah I would piggyback off of Faith and Laura as well. At USC, like, I mean USC's building is very accessible, like, they have an elevator and such. But you know, like, for instance, like, being on set and, you know, having advice or setting up ways in which, like, okay -- you know -- it's like there are certain -- I feel like sometimes the bare minimum is set up, but you don't feel welcome 100%. It's not like I feel 100% comfortable in this environment. No, I have hurdles I constantly have to overcome and I constantly have to be vocal about. And that's really hard, because you wanna -- you struggle as well with, like, wanting to just go with the crowd, because the crowd is moving so easily. But at the same time, you still have to be vocal, but I think it's changing just also because, like, you know, with the opportunities to film now -- you have more opportunities to film now more than ever, and including the, you know, to make it accessible for people with disabilities. So we are finding ways to pave the road and I feel like we're actually teaching the schools, literally, as we are making movies now [laughs] how, like, yes it can be done and it can be successful and they can be really good movies, so.

>> Tyler Hoog: Yeah, going on the set experience kind of or location, in my experience one of the things that was very nice and very lucky was at USC, I got to work on two projects that had sets built on campus. And both times they made sure they were accessible for me. But location almost never is. So it's about communicating with your peers -- not necessarily always your professors, but the kids or the other students that you're working with, and discussing with them, hey, what locations can we pick that are also accessible, or help set myself up for the most success? Because like, it's film school. It's not film job. So you have to make sure that -- cause you're working with other students, you're not just working on your own projects. So you can set up all your locations at your own accessible location, but, you know, everyone helping you also has to -- you have to be willing to be open and vulnerable with them, so that they can help create a space for you as well.

>> Michael Dougherty: And for me again -- and NYU was something of a lost cause, but when I got to the National University in Galway, I was going to school literally in what was parts of a medieval town. And so you can imagine the trouble that one might come up with cobblestones and things like that. But as far as school was concerned, they did have -- again, it was -- a very jolly woman in a -- a room with windows. And she was excited to help me, and I found out at the end of the year that part of the reason was is because I was the only one who actually showed up and said "I need help with these things." So she was more than happy to do whatever she could, whether it was getting me larger print things, or having files sent to me by email if I needed to read certain things, because I have a visual issue as well. The most extraordinary thing was that because I was rolling to and from my apartment to the school, again, in this medieval town that did not have a lot of curb cutouts, I was often faced with having to go into the street to get there. And I brought this up to the woman who was working with the students disabilities at NUI, and by the time I left there - this is a true story - the town actually had cuts made into the curbs because of that. So it -- it's good that you can have somebody who's in a position of power to make a phone call to say, look, he's doing this borderline crazy thing. Can we please enter into the 20th century, or 21st century as it were? So that was -- a great thing.

>> Lesley Hennen: Yeah, that's awesome. I love that story. And I also love, Tyler, when you said it's film school, not film job. Because I think that is such a good point that, you know, this is -- it's a learning environment for everyone. And I think that kind of ties really well into our next question is just -- any advice for how film students with disabilities can advocate for themselves? You know, we've talked a lot about being very vocal, and what you need and, you know, that's really the best way to sort of normalize accessibility for everyone. But I know for me, it's -- especially when I was younger it was very hard to sort of advocate for myself, because I didn't really know how to do that, I didn't know what that really looked like, because I just wasn't around a lot of other disabled people. So I think if there's any advice you all could share based on your experiences, like, how do you advocate for yourself in this environment in film school, and, like, making sure that you are getting the access needs that you need.

>> Michael Dougherty: Speak up. Speak up. Speak up. Speak up. That's -- you have to have your voice heard in every single way. And -- don't be a jerk about it, you know, just say look, this is what I need and it's completely normal. And I think it's -- my problem with NYU was I was dealing with a lot of young angry man type of stuff, on top of the spina bifida, and I didn't know how to process feeling left out from everything. And so I locked myself away in the editing room, and that is not conducive to a collaborative art form. So you have to constantly be putting yourself in the middle of things. And you tell people what you cannot do, because I found that there were some people that didn't want to work with me because they thought I couldn't carry things, but it was like, who wants to pick up a 40-pound lighting rig? Nobody wants to do that, whether you're in a chair or not. And so you just have to be able to know, you know, when you legitimately need to ask for help. And I want to just say a general thing -- and this goes back to Tyler's thing about film school versus film job -- the biggest problem that I had with NYU is that it was like bloodthirsty on a competitive level, because everybody wants to be Martin Scorsese or whoever. And it feels like the whole learning process goes by the wayside, and you're not allowed to make mistakes, and especially -- if you're a person with a disability, people have their eye on you anyway. You know, preempting you to make a mistake. And it -- for me it was not an enjoyable experience, because I felt like, well, I should be getting more out of this because I love movies, and I know that I can bring more to the table because I know so much about this, and the history and the technique and all that stuff. So I don't think that you answer competitiveness with competitiveness. You just go in and you have to be yourself, stay calm, and -- realize that you're here to tell a story, and that will grab people in the end. It's not about you. And I carried that philosophy into Ireland, and now for the decade that I've lived in in LA, and it's worked.

>> Andrew Reid: I would totally echo what Michael said. I know personally from my own experience it's not always easy to voice, you know, because, like they said, you don't want to feel as though you're different or -- you know, you don't feel like you want to create a problem. So I understand that feeling that probably a lot -- hesitance sometimes a lot of people have, but it -- I mean, Michael really is right, you really do have to say something. It doesn't mean that there's anything wrong with you or that, you know, that you're any less than any of your peers. We all have things that we need in life in order to continue to move forward. And I think one thing that's great about also that story about, you know, the town was fixing it as a society we're constantly growing and hopefully learning from our -- that's the goal, right, learning from our mistakes, and wanting to grow so the next generation can have it a little bit easier. And we have an opportunity to do that in the end. So whenever you have doubt in yourself -- because there are several times that I had to do that on my sets, like -- for me, I need a director's chair, you know what I mean, if I'm gonna survive 10, 12 hour days. I probably need a golf cart, if I'm in a golf cart from one location to xyz, you know, I'm not going to be, you know, walking with my cane a mile. Not doing it. I can but I'm not doing it. [laughs] So it's like -- and I don't want to exhaust my energy. So know yourself, know what you need, and speak for yourself. And if the school doesn't respond to it then, you know, more work needs to be done. There's something wrong with the school.

>> Laura Alsum: Yeah and I would say don't apologize for either what you need, right? Like you belong there. You -- you belong there just as much as anyone else, so don't apologize. You know, and then I also found something that helped with my advocacy is just doing a lot of research. I mean, maybe that's just my personality. I like to know things ahead of time a lot, but you know, check out the classrooms if that's what you're worried about or check out how far you know -- Google Map it. I do Google Map stuff all the time. See how far away something is, you know, if you do need to use a wheelchair instead of a cane or whatever it might be for you. So yeah, just research the crap out of it. And I think that helps with your advocacy, really, so you're more informed about, you know, what your needs are instead of just entering a place and being like, oh, this doesn't work, you know? People want need to know, like, very specifically what you need, so.

>> Lesley Hennen: Yeah those are all great points. And I think I would also add, you know, a lot of -- for a lot of us, you know, our journey advocating for ourselves is a learning experience in itself. So like, I know for me -- my disability -- I was born with club feet and I wear leg braces, and I -- like, some days I don't have much mobility issues at all. Some days I have more than others. So it's kind of just being open to, you know, going with the flow. Some days you can do certain things, some days you can't, and just being very vocal with the team that you're working with or your professors or whoever and just -- you know, making sure it's really an ongoing conversation. And I think also for me when I was in film school I did a lot of PA jobs which can be very, like, historically it's like you're never supposed to sit down, you're always supposed to be on your feet, running around doing all these things. And I think just being very vocal with my supervisors, whoever I was working at the time, I was like, hey, every now and then I need to sit down. Like, I can do all of these things you're asking me to do, but like, maybe I'm going to organize the snacks while I'm sitting on an apple box or something, and just sort of giving them a heads up that, like, everything's going to get done, but you know, I need to sit down or otherwise I can't come back tomorrow because I will be in bed. [chuckles]. But you know, so just being very vocal and honest with yourself if you realize in the moment that you need something and maybe you didn't realize you needed it before, just being vocal, and then you know for next time that's something that you need to advocate for ahead of time. But yeah, I love this conversation that's happening right now. We've talked a little bit about this, but any advice for, you know, people who are on the receiving end of these requests or who are creating the programs, the sets -- any advice for the faculty, the film school people who are creating the programs, you know, when they do receive accommodation requests? You know how -- best practices for kind of handling those?

>> Tyler Hoog: I think there's kind of two area like two areas that you have to make space for, right? Like I think in my experience and kind of, like, the obvious one for everyone is when it comes to physical disabilities, can we get through the doors? Are the doors ADA accessible? I think it's a general rule, like, keeping an open mind -- and just like, saying yes to as much stuff as possible is pretty important when it comes to any kind of accessibility or accommodation feature. But then, like, I think, like, another big thing is I remember at USC, we had a big event in which there was -- like, it was a giant networking event in which we had, like, over 150 people in this ballroom all, like, talking and pitching to, like, studios and all these different people. And one of the things that they did was they sectioned off a separate room in the hotel that had couches and chairs and, like, all this other stuff there was a quiet space for people who had sensory issues to go and be able to spend time outside of that, like, vibrant environment. So I think like a lot of times it's -- knowing just how multi-faceted disability is, and kind of listening and believing everyone who comes to you. Because like -- it's pretty easy for me to roll into a room, and everyone is saying, oh, that kid can't move his arms, he might need help with the door, right? It's being open to all the other things that disability is.

>> Andrew Reid: Yeah, I agree with Tyler. From film school -- like you have -- there's a lot of people with invisible disabilities, you know, and I think voicing that is a big thing. But I also -- you know, I feel like there's two sides to the coin, right? There's the film school students and then also you have to think that you got into this film school because your -- work, your application got you in on merits, and that's the key thing that, you know, disabled creatives are -- you know, can create amazing, beautiful content. So I try to think as well sometimes from their perspective in the sense that I've seen this person's work, I know what they can do, I want to continue to maximize and make them flourish. What can I give to them to create this content which will ultimately make us all look good, because that's all that we want as well. But I so I think the biggest thing as, you know, from my personal experiences at USC after -- having more of my work and -- be received was just saying, okay, if you want me to continue to produce xyz, these are the things that I'm going to need. And ultimately at the end of the day it always comes back to communication.

>> Lesley Hennen: Yeah, so true. I love that and I think -- yeah, the key is really communication. And again, just sort of shifting the idea of what, you know, accessibility or disability looks like. You know, it's very different for everyone and just a constant learning process. Let's see. Well I think most of us are writers, if not all of us, in some capacity on this panel. So I would love to talk a little bit about accessibility when it comes to -- and we talked about this a little bit, but, like, feeling comfortable kind of writing about disability or, like, including our personal lived experiences in the projects that we're creating. I know for me that was a big part of film school was about, like, you know, everyone was finding their voice. And for me my voice was that I had a lot of stories I wanted to tell about being disabled and, like, what that looked like in ways that I hadn't already seen on screen or on TV. So I think a big part of it is, like, feeling comfortable, right, like, with your peers or with the just general environment is, like, kind of sharing these stories. Do you guys have any advice or any just thoughts around that on how to sort of create that comfortable environment to begin with?

>> Michael Dougherty: It was never a question of comfort actually, it was more of a combative thing that -- helped me get comfortable, because I realized -- I wrote one full-length screenplay in my undergrad which had a disability through-line, and I'm still -- it's one of the best things I've ever written. But when I went into any class afterwards to write something, I knew that if I was writing something that was uncomfortable, that was angry, was upsetting, was a hilarious word, was all of those things -- that the temperature would go up in the room. And so you gain nothing by not being brave about your own experience and who you are. And if they can't handle that, that's their problem. And as a piece of advice from Ang Lee, who who made "Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon," who's one of my idols, he had a problem as an Asian person with language when he was in NYU, and I -- when I met him once, I got to ask him, like, how did you deal with it? He said at the end of the day stories stand up in a room. They want to be told. So tell the one that you want to tell, and don't -- the rest will eventually follow. It may take you a bit longer than -- other people, but it will happen. And I've sort of carried that in my back pocket the whole time.

>> Faith Strongheart: I would say that I was really not comfortable disclosing my disability, and when I would, I felt -- I was terrified to do it and I just felt a lot of shame around it. So in my last year of graduate school when I started making this documentary about how I became disabled and I started sharing openly, I was surprised by, like, how receptive the feedback was and how open people were and how -- you know, I was not really being judged in the way that I thought I would be. So I think I agree with Michael, just in that, you know, becoming vulnerable and honest and brave in order to share your experience is incredibly important. And so I would advise people to not do what I did, but to just be brave, because people want to hear that and want to see the story that you have to tell. And I feel -- I wish that I had done it earlier in my film school education because I would have finished my documentary by now, instead of it still being uncompleted. [Crosstalk]

>> Andrew Reid: No, you go ahead.

>> Laura Alsum: Okay, yeah, I just love what you said. I also feel like film school can be a really great place people to celebrate their differences. Like I know, at least when I was at UCLA, my group, you know, whatever year -- everyone had lots of diverse backgrounds and we really celebrated that. And so that's one thing I really loved about film school is I really felt comfortable sharing my story and listening to others, so that's all.

>> Andrew Reid: Yeah, I was gonna say as well, it's so interesting because as filmmakers, you know, normally we're, like, perfectionists and we're our harshest critics on our work. And that also applies to ourselves as individuals. So I totally relate to what Faith is saying about, like, you're beating yourself up or like, you know, you're afraid to share, you know, the side of you because it's so boring, you know, maybe you haven't even come to terms with it yourself, you know, but ultimately at the end of the day, I mean, all the projects that we normally connect to is a level of truth and authenticity that we can relate to. So it's just sometimes being able to be aware that you are a part of that conversation and you being able to have -- and it's courage, it takes courage, it takes strength, and you know, fear of rejection, and I totally get it. You know, you come there at your own time. But I think a key thing to know is that you are not alone. There are so many people in this -- in this world and filmmaking can be such an arduous and lonely path already, regardless of disability, so you know, I think that adds to it. But even in that lonely arduous path, there is still several filmmakers that have struggles that we can all relate to, and we have to have the strength to stand together and to communicate and to share and to voice, to let our voices thrive.

>> Lesley Hennen: Yeah, I love all of that advice and I had a very similar experience to Faith of, you know, I was sort of sitting on these stories but like, didn't feel fully comfortable or, like, ready to share them yet. But then you know, had to just have a moment where I was really honest with myself and was like, this is what I want to do. These are the, like, films and the stories I want to write and to make. And so as soon as I did, it was like the feedback was just not at all what I had created in my mind. I had set up all of these, like, things that I thought I was gonna give. But it was like people were very open, very receptive, and other students, like, in the class ended up, you know, feeling comfortable disclosing certain disabilities that they had. So I think that's another thing to think about is that even if you don't feel comfortable yet, there's sort of, you know, we've kind of touched on this idea of getting comfortable with being uncomfortable, which is a phrase that we use a lot in the advocacy community. But you know that's where the real change comes from. And so I think that, yeah, the more we are just open with our stories -- and it's definitely scary and it's a journey that everyone is on a different path or a different, you know, a different timeline, but yeah, I think really great advice here.

>> Faith Strongheart: I just wanted to say one more thing about writing characters with disability because I -- all my characters that I write have a disability, but I've struggled with how -- I don't want that to be the forefront of the story, like, this is just a part of who this person is but it's not actually what the story is about. And so I'm really interested in seeing stories where we see more disabled characters. I'm loving -- I don't know if you guys watch Sex Education on Netflix, but there's the guy in the wheelchair. And I think it's like -- he's such a good character because he's such a good writer, and he's just this regular person who happens to be in a wheelchair. And so I want to see more of that in our entertainment. And I think we are moving closer to that. And so I just think everyone should be including people of all different types of backgrounds in their stories.

>> Andrew Reid: Yeah, you're right Faith. Sex Education, so good, love it. [Chuckles]

>> Faith Strongheart: Such good writing.

>> Lesley Hennen: Yeah, that's such a good show. Great recommendation. And yeah -- and I think, you know, including disabled characters that their story doesn't revolve around their disability at all, they just happen to be a person with a disability that is also this character doing whatever it is they're doing in the story, I think is so important. And also just like realizing that disability is a community that, you know, anyone can join at any time and it's also very intersectional. Like, there's so many different identities that people can have, and disability is just one of them. So I think, yeah, the more different perspectives we get, the more -- the more representation will keep getting better. I don't know, did anyone else have anything else they wanted to add about writing, or I think that kind of opens up, like, an authentic casting type of conversation, which is, I think, interesting from a film school perspective as well, because kind of thinking about, like you know, we did a lot of table reads and different, you know -- there weren't a whole bunch of disabled actors for me to pick from the specifically, like, school resource of actors. There was a lot of kind of doing my own research and reaching out to other actors or maybe even reading parts myself, but yeah, that's just sort of an open-ended question. Awesome and I do want to leave time for any audience questions if we have any, but I will kind of close things out with a question for everyone, it's just -- you know, what is one main takeaway that you hope people will get from watching this panel, whether it's film students with disabilities or film schools thinking about best practices they can implement in their programs moving forward? Maybe if everyone wants to go around and say -- one main takeaway they just really want people to get, and then that'll give our audiences some time to put some questions in the Q&A.

>> Tyler Hoog: Do we just start in the order that we started in?

>> Lesley Hennen: Whatever, yeah.

>> Tyler Hoog: Okay, be open with your peers. Like, the authority figures matter, but -- in all that all that stuff, but their -- it's, like, their job to be there for you. You have to create the space with your peers. And so if you do that and you can be open and communicative, then you will find far more success than you could ever imagine.

>> Michael Dougherty: I would say you're enough. You're enough. And film schools, they are enough. And we get nowhere unless we type "fade in" or we decide what the first shot is going to be. And we have to foster that comfort in being able to do that, because -- once you let people fly, they will do it.

>> Andrew Reid: Yeah, I'd piggyback off of Michael. Like, communicate. Don't be ashamed. Voice your opinion. Empower yourself. And don't set yourself up -- to fail. Put yourself in situations where your creative can flourish and you can shine as a filmmaker. But the only way to do it is to speak up and say what you need to to bring your creative to life.

>> Faith Strongheart: I would say that -- exhaust efforts before film school. Like, if you're a writer, apply to or submit to all of the contests to see if you might get a deal that way and get some recognition that way before you go to film school. Because I don't know if film school is actually financially worth it in this day and age, when you can get success as a filmmaker or a writer in other ways. I think the value of film school, for me, was, one, you build peer relationships and you have the opportunity to make work. But I went into massive debt to go to film school and so I really regret it. And I think that I could have, in retrospect, worked some and saved money to make a film and just made the film. I mean, I learned a lot about directing and I'm grateful for that, but I also think there's programs set up to help with that. So I -- I'm torn about whether film school is actually worth it, and I don't think film schools do a good job of having any kind of career advancement for their students either, so I really am frustrated with the whole system, because people sort of -- I think are -- have, like, rose-colored glasses on when it comes to going to film school, and I think there's other ways to educate yourself in this industry besides film school. That said, I also really enjoyed both of my experiences and I'm glad that I did it. And I would just say that if you do decide to go, it's really important because we need to hear these stories so --

>> Laura Alsum: Yeah, I -- to go off what you're saying Faith, I mean, I -- you know, not being from Los Angeles originally, I tried to do as much as I could outside of film school, and then I just kind of hit a wall. And I feel like, for me, film school was a great way to make connections. And so if you're in that boat, you know, I would say go for it. But then also, you know, because it is kind of expensive, take advantage of as much as you can. Like I've done -- I did internships, I did -- just a lot of networking stuff. And I think that would really help make your time there worth it as well. And when you are there, yeah, just know that people do want to hear from you, you know, you don't have to be quiet or try to blend in, you know? People -- I feel like -- in Hollywood really value unique voices. I mean, maybe that's staying the obvious. But yeah, just don't be quiet. Don't fade into the background, so.

>> Faith Strongheart: I also was just gonna say like Michael said, I was surprised at how competitive my graduate program was, because I thought, wait a minute, we're all in the program, why are we competing with each other? And a lot of it had to do I think with just -- you know, I was much older than most of my peers in film school, in graduate film school. So there was this sense, like, I've already accomplished a lot, like, I have a career in the film industry, so I didn't feel this need to prove myself constantly, like, I don't care if I know how to open a c stand and set one up, like, and I don't have to prove to anybody that I know how to do that, because I definitely do not want to do that in my career. But there was this, like, idea that you needed to, like, you know, everybody wanted to be the best at everything, and I was like, it was exhausting, I thought most of the time.

>> Lesley Hennen: Yeah, I relate to all of that as well. That's a good -- I'm, like, very torn because I loved my film school experience, but also, you know, it's not necessary. I think there's so many different ways into the industry, and film school is one of them, and it's really great for some people, and if that person is not you, that's fine, I think is a good way to think about it. We do have one question from social media that I want to get to. Someone is asking, you know, what other programs either before after film school do you recommend instead of or in addition to film school?

>> Faith Strongheart: Well apply to the RespectAbility lab, because that's a good program that can help to make connections. And there's on -- if you look up on cover fly, there's tons of competitions listed, and on the DGA website there's all of the directing shadowing programs listed. I mean, those are super competitive. Everything is really competitive, but I encourage people to just keep applying and trying.

>> Andrew Reid: Yeah I would agree with Faith. Like, it's all really competitive. I mean, you should be glad if you get one. I -- you know, what's worked for me is literally you throw as many logs in the fire as humanly possible. I mean, you know, good logs, not -- like, don't throw mediocrity out there. But like, you know, the best version of you, as many as humanly possible, extremely exhausting process, but odds are if your, you know, work is strong, you know, you're able to communicate, one of them is going to pick you up, and you never know which is going to be the one. I mean Faith's, you know, path in the industry, Laura, Michael, all of our paths -- were different, even though we have parallels. So never just look at, you know, mine or Faith's or anyone else and think, oh, that's what you have to do. You find your own path. But there's just some chosen things that I think are recipes to success. Film school definitely benefited me. The debt sucks, I don't recommend it. But you know, you choose for yourself which one you want to go. But I do think throwing as much out there as possible until one catches is something good to keep in mind. [phone rings]

>> Tyler Hoog: And I would say ask yourself what you need most. I think that if you're here today, part of the reason is because you have a disability, so one, look for all the money you can for scholarships if you decide that film school is the best route for you, because there is money out there to be had. You just have to apply and you have to do the research. And that's a hard and long process but it is a viable one. But also when I say ask, like, what do you need? For me, coming out of undergrad I didn't have, like, a lot of close friends coming out of undergrad. I wasn't comfortable putting myself out there because of my disability. I went into undergrad only two years into having a spinal cord injury. And so there was a bunch I wasn't prepared for, but I knew I wanted to be in this industry, and the easiest way for me to get into it was for the industry to be my homework, because I've always done my homework. So rather than, like, working a full-time job and then having to convince friends to get together on the weekend, or being one of seven people accepted to this fellowship, it just provided a space for me to know that I was always going to be doing industry work, and that's what I needed, because it was also, like, the training and all that. So really spend time with yourself and evaluate what you're looking for out of your experience.

>> Michael Dougherty: For me -- and yes Faith, Faith and I seem to be riding in the same car about this, is that I really am - down with undergrad film school. However, graduate might actually be okay because you're a little older and you've been dealing with things. So I'm -- a little more on the fence about that. But in terms of, if you want to be a writer, join a writing group or find one of these non-credit professional studies type of courses -- like, I know that UCLA has offered that in the past -- where, you know, you write a screenplay in 10 weeks, because it's the best opportunity that anybody can have to actually get your work up on its feet and talking. And you'll know whether it's working or not right away. And because it's not -- it's these non-credit things, nobody's grade grubbing, nobody's pushing each other, and people are all of different skill levels. So you find out what works and what doesn't work, and you're all in that together. And if you want to make movies, you have an iPhone, strap it to your wheelchair and go film something. And it will probably be terrible. But then you do it again, and it will be a little less terrible.

>> Lesley Hennen: Awesome. Yeah, all great advice. Thank you everyone. Yeah, and I agree Michael -- to your point about -- there's so many different classes out there that aren't necessarily credit based, but I find myself am a very deadline oriented person, so having the structure of a class to be like, okay, you're gonna write a script in this set amount of time, and then I know I'm gonna have something done, so like, that's been really helpful for me is finding -- whether it's a writer's group or finding different accountability partners to sort of do that together where we're setting deadlines and getting things done, or signing up for a class where, you know, over six weeks I'm going to write a pilot or something like that -- or an outline for pilot -- can be really helpful. Yeah, let's see. I am not seeing any other questions in our Q&A box, not seeing any on Facebook either. So yeah, we can just wrap things up a couple minutes early, unless anyone has any other questions they'd like to ask, or any points they'd like to make. I just want to thank everyone for joining us today, both the audience and our lovely panelists. Thank you for sharing your insight and your time and your experiences. If you would like to stay connected with RespectAbility, my colleague Jacquill will drop that link again to sign up for our newsletter. And you can also learn more about RespectAbility's upcoming events. We'll share that link as well. Yeah, awesome, does anyone have anything else they'd like to add, as a -- to close us out? Otherwise we are good to go. Thank you so much for joining us, everyone, hope everyone has a great rest of their day!