>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you all for joining us today. My name is Lauren Appelbaum, and I am Disability Belongs™' Senior Vice President of Entertainment and Media. My pronouns are she and her. I am a white woman with shoulder length brown hair wearing a navy blue top. Behind me is a light gray background with the Disability Belongs™ logo in the corner. As an individual with an acquired non-apparent disability, reflex sympathetic dystrophy, I work at the intersection of disability, employment, and the entertainment industry. I oversee our content advisement work and trainings to ensure authentic representation of disability, as well as building the disability community within the industry through our various Entertainment Labs and pipeline programming. This work helps increase diverse and authentic representation of disabled people on screen, leading to systemic change in how society views and values disabled individuals. Today we're going to have a conversation with some of the talent behind the hit children's series Donkey Hodie. Donkey Hodie is the Emmy-winning puppet series produced by Fred Rogers Productions and Spiffy Pictures for PBS Kids. The series is inspired by the funny, quirky side of Fred Rogers, and builds on the legacy of the children's television pioneer with re-imagined characters from Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. Since its launch in 2021, Donkey Hodie has become known for its joyful stories, handmade world, and original music, as its beloved characters take on adventures throughout Someplace Else. In April, the series introduced Jeff Mouse an all new character named in honor of Jeff Erlinger, who appeared in an iconic episode of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. Jeff Mouse, an intrepid explorer and avid nature lover born with muscular dystrophy, made his debut in the new episode titled Hee-Hee Hider Seekers, which is available to stream now on PBS Kids. We're now going to allow each of our panelists to introduce themselves. After that we'll watch a short clip, and then we'll start our panel conversation. Let's start with Kristin.

>> Kristin DiQuollo: Hi Lauren and hi everyone. I'm Kristin DiQuollo. I'm the co-executive producer of Donkey Hodie for Fred Rogers Productions, and what that means is that I oversee everything about our show, from creative to logistic, working closely with our production partners at Spiffy Pictures. And I am a white woman with blonde hair shoulder length, wearing a black button-up shirt in front of a blurred office background.

>> Lauren: Thank you. Jay?

>> Jay Manuel: Hey, I'm Jay Thomas Manuel, and I am a short handsome light-skinned brown man with glasses. I'm sitting in an awesome blue power wheelchair. And I'm wearing actually really great headphones that have gray cushions on them and a blurred background. And I am the voice actor of Jeff Mouse, which is super exciting. I'm also a reality TV personality, music producer, content creator. I just like to have a good time and live life, and that's me. So thanks for having me, and hello everybody.

>> Lauren: Wonderful, thank you. Sam?

>> Sam Krauss: Hi everyone, my name is Sam. I am a writer and a disability consultant. I'm a white man. I've got brown hair. He/him/his are my pronouns. I'm sitting in a power wheelchair wearing a nasal canula and I'm in a greenish room.

>> Lauren: Thank you everyone. Before we get into the panel, we'd like to share a clip from the show. Kristin, would you like to set it up?

>> Kristin: I would love to. The clip you're about to see is Jeff Mouse's literal entrance on Donkey Hodie. We're going to see him meet Donkey and Panda and introduce his adventure and mission for the day. They're all everything explorers, which means they're out exploring nature. And Jeff Mouse is looking for a picture of a super hard-to-find moth. And Donkey and Panda are along on the adventure. So you're going to meet him, you're going to hear the beginning of this adventure set up, and if you listen closely there's a little easter egg to Mister Rogers' Neighborhood during Jeff's entrance, because the music score under his entrance is the same song that Mister Rogers and Jeff Erlinger sang on their episode of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. And so let's roll the clip.

[Clip Unavailable Due To Copyright]

>> Lauren: Welcome all of our panelists back on. I really loved watching that clip. I love seeing how Jeff acknowledges that there are things he cannot do, but there are a lot of things he can do, and especially Jeff saying he would ask for help if he needs it. Representation is so important, especially authentic representation like we see in Donkey Hodie. Of note, representation of disabled characters in children's television series is quite low. Just 1% of characters are disabled according to the Geena Davis Institute. Kristin, why was it so important to you and your team to include a disabled character in Donkey Hodie?

>> Kristin: We have been -- well let me back up for a second. Donkey Hodie is a show all about resilience, perseverance, and problem solving. It's also a show that celebrates joy, friendship, and what makes each of us unique. And Jeff Mouse is the latest character we've introduced who has a unique perspective and way of looking at the world. And that's true of all of our characters. We want to continue telling stories and creating characters who represent the experiences of our audience. And -- just like Mister Rogers did with Jeff Erlinger on Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, we also want to keep making stories that celebrates what – celebrate what make each of us special. And that's really our goal here. We were inspired to introduce this character after I was at KidScreen two years ago sitting in the audience of the panel you moderated, Lauren, about disability inclusion behind the camera and then on screen. And it seemed that we really had an opportunity with Donkey Hodie as a live action puppet series to create a character with a physical disability and see that come through in a really meaningful way. And that's sort of the big picture, and I look forward to talking more about it as we go.

>> Lauren: Thank you. We're gonna go to Sam now. I really appreciate how the Fred Rogers production team brought you in for your expertise without tokenizing you as a disabled creative. Can you share a bit with us about what it was like working on Jeff Mouse as a character, and something that you would want the audience to take away from watching a show like Donkey Hodie?

>> Sam: Oh my gosh. Well, it was such an incredible experience. When you work as a disability consultant, it's really important to sort of apply what you know, but in – the best way possible, because every project is so specific. So like, for example, we're dealing with puppets. And so like, learning about how puppets move, how they don't move, and sort of figuring out how we could take Jeff – a mouse with muscular dystrophy – and authentically portray him in a way that's -- that's manageable. And so we really talked about, like, what – how Jeff could move with his arm. So like, with muscular dystrophy, you're weaker with your muscles of course. And so I sort of explained my own life experience with the team. And I talked about how one arm is stronger than the other, how I use assisted devices like grabbers and reachers, and you'll see that with Jeff. I talked about my wheelchair quite a bit, because with the production build, we wanted to like really make sure that when you see Jeff move, like, going on ramps or in elevators, that it seemed very real, very authentic. And like I said earlier, you have to apply your knowledge as best as you can, because you're translating reality into this beautiful creative world. And so it's been such a pleasure, and – what I've so enjoyed is the conversations and being able to workshop this with the team. And they've always been on top of it – like, just their enthusiasm for accessibility and inclusion, it made it such a joy.

>> Lauren: Thank you. I love how you were talking about ensuring that, like, the power chair looks real, and works for the show, and applying things from the real world into this puppet world.

>> Sam: Yes, yes.

>> Lauren: Now we're going to head over to Jay. As a person with a disability, you brought your life experience and perspective to the role as well, using that to bring Jeff, the character you voiced, to life. How important was it for you to ensure that, while it's crucial to represent his disability, that other aspects of his story and personality were also highlighted?

>> Jay: So as a person with multiple disabilities – I have osteogenesis imperfecta type three, which is a brittle bone disorder, I'm autistic, I'm hard of hearing, and I always say I have a grab bag of disabilities. And even outside of that I'm still a person. And so when I was voicing Jeff, I really wanted to bring his personality and -- as he mentions, he can do things differently outside of what other people do, and he's still a part of the story. It's not just like all the focus is on him being disabled. It's he's disabled, and he's also a really cool mouse and guy or -- just having a great time, and he's going on an adventure and trying to -- find this – you know what I mean? Like, I felt that was important for – as a person myself with multiple disabilities – wanting to be seen as the person that I am, with a personality and likes and dislikes and -- qualities that make a person and character. I wanted to bring that same thing to Jeff and it really shines through and I'm really excited about the feedback that's already happened when people watch it, so, it gets me excited.

>> Lauren: Wonderful, yes – it's so great to see all the feedback of people, kids and parents -- really relating to the character of Jeff. And that's due to the world of Donkey Hodie being crafted by a talented team of artists and crew members. We're going to show another clip so you can hear from one of them now who's not on the panel but how this world was created.

[Behind the scenes clip plays]

>> Lauren: Thank you. It's always fun to see behind the scenes video of how things are made. Before we move on to our next question, I just want to acknowledge that we will have time for Q&A towards the end of today's webinar. There is a Q&A box. You can click on that and add your question, and we will hopefully get to as many as possible. Kristin, during the production of Jeff, we know that when we spoke to you and your team, you all really went into depth on how creating visually accurate details were crucial to bringing Jeff to life. Could you please share more specifics about designing Jeff's chair and props, and how the puppet interacted with the world elements?

>> Kristin: I'm happy to and I'm so glad that we got to share that behind the-scenes video, because I think it gives everybody some really nice context for our production specifically and how it operates. As you saw in that video, we have – or might have noticed, we have a raised set, and all the puppeteers are performing with their arms above their heads. Jeff Mouse and the wheelchair were specifically designed for that style of performance. And I want to credit a few people, including our production designer, Justin Vandenberg, and our director and one of the co-creators of the show and a puppet designer, David Rudman, for really thinking through thoughtfully how we were going to execute on a puppet in a wheelchair – a power wheelchair specifically – on our set in front of our single camera. And there were a lot of considerations there, and you saw Jamon talk through a lot of them when we decided that Jeff would use a power wheelchair, that's a decision that we made early on in consultation with Sam and others. And one of the reasons was because you all told us that power wheelchairs are still very under-represented in media, that most representations in media are of manual wheelchairs. So it was important to us that Jeff have a power wheelchair. Coincidentally, that is also what Jeff Erlinger had on Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, so that was a nice connection there. And then so once we knew that, Sam worked with us on the disability that Jeff would have. And that's what – and you heard Sam talk about some of that. We decided muscular dystrophy would be a disability that we could represent authentically with the puppet, and how we were going to operate on set. And then from there, the design of the chair itself went through a lot of rounds of prototyping, design, and review. And Disability Belongs™ helped connect us with Permobil, which is a company that designs many many power wheelchairs, and their local Chicago rep – our production is based in Chicago – brought a demo wheelchair to our art production shop so that they could experience the chair themselves in order to inform the design of Jeff's chair. And that's how we were able to achieve so much amazing detail in Jeff's chair, which by the way, as you saw in that video, is like this big. It is not very big. And the amount of detail that they were able to achieve from the headrest and the lap belt, the breathable fabric, which you probably didn't really get to see, but we even represented the breathable fabric. The rear stability wheel, a satchel, the ability to store accessories, all of that was very important. And that's just the chair. And then how the chair was going to move through the world was a consideration. And I want to give credit to our puppeteer, Stephanie D'Abruzzo, who puppeteered Jeff on set, because she met with Sam in advance, and she also met with Jay in advance to talk about the character. But Sam helped her work through some specifics of how Jeff might move, like, what it would look like when the chair went over bumpy ground. And then Sam also helped us review other world elements that we had to build. For instance, can the chair go on this grass? Can the chair – we have – the show culminates at the rainbow tree in Someplace Else, and there's a ramp up the rainbow tree. And we thought, oh, there's a ramp up the rainbow tree. This might work out well, Jeff could go up the ramp. And Sam and others, were like "Nope, he cannot." Like, that ramp was not an accessible ramp. And that actually led us to build an elevator in the rainbow tree, which was a wonderful whimsical addition to our world that was created as part of this story which we're so excited about. And so those are just some of the details that went into it, and Sam was reviewing those builds and every step of the way to make sure that we had everything. And I remember Sam specifically – every time we met you, like, there's a lap belt, right, where's the lap belt. And we just made sure that that lap belt was there at the end for sure.

>> Sam: I definitely had to check on that belt. I was like, I remember when I was younger, I did fall out of my chair, and I'm like alright, I gotta – that was definitely on my top – top of the list, so – which they had it all the time, so it's perfect.

>> Lauren: Checking – checking every step of the way that it was still there, and I think that that's one of the nice things that in our work with you and your team, Kristin, is that we would share things and your team internalized it. And I think that that's so important, because it wasn't something where it's like all right, this episode it was here. and then that episode it wasn't there. It's that your team was able to learn a lesson and apply it to everything, and I think that that is just, like, vital when we're ensuring authentic representation. Jay, I want to come back to you. So this is your first voice acting role on a children's puppetry project like this. What are some things that you had the opportunity to learn while recording and navigating in this new space?

>> Jay: Well first of all, I was just so excited that I was chosen because I was like did they send the wrong email to the person when I got confirmed for the role? But they didn't, so I'm very grateful for that. And I really learned that they're so patient with you, because you have to say the lines several times in different ways and they piece things together, and it's just actually a really fun process when you're going through the recording – process. And seeing how your voice matches up with Jeff, because you're in the scene, and so – it just – it's so fun – I really – because I just did a session, so I – I'm remembering how I was just there. And again, everyone's just so patient with you, and it's really whimsical, again, because -- you're in this children's show, you're having a good time, you get to have fun – it's not – it's serious but not too serious. You also have to sing. I had to sing songs, so had to get my vocal chops up, and I took vocal lessons as a kid, however it had been a while. So thankfully we get a vocal coach that -- you get to work with, so shout out to her, cause she really helped me out. And – it's all just such a fun process where you don't take yourself too serious. You just get to really have fun. And again, as someone that's in a power wheelchair full time, being able to see that representation when typically, as it was mentioned, you're only seeing manual wheelchairs on mainstream media, and getting to see someone that looks like you, even though I'm not a mouse -- is really exciting, and I just – I've enjoyed the whole process and I'm looking forward to doing more.

>> Lauren: Excellent. Yeah I mean the whole goal is – continuation and more, right? So on that topic, Sam -- as a consultant on this project and -- being able to work on this and other things as you mentioned, not just as a consultant but also as a disabled writer, what are your thoughts on how other productions can learn from including disabled creatives in the process of adding disabled characters to their shows or films?

>> Sam: Well, one of the things that I learned at Disability Belongs™ and many other disabled advocacy groups is that one in four adults have a disability, but they're very underserved in representation on the screen. And so anytime there's a disabled character, there's almost a celebration. People want to watch it, they're curious, they're excited. And so I would tell folks that when you include a disabled creative in your process, you're adding so much culture to your project. I mean, disabled people, we – in our communities, we have a culture of – acceptance and accessibility. It's -- it is a community. And so I think when they do that, it brings life to their stories, it's – and the audience gets to see a part of themselves in those stories. It's – incredible and every person of the team for Donkey Hodie has been incredible. Like, they've been really on top of it and really proactive. I think as Kristen talked with the Permobil wheelchair folks, the reps that helped build the chair, manufacture it, they totally just -- set that up – it was wonderful. I was so excited because I actually have a Permobil chair. So it's like, they were actively -- curious – and I was so just elated to be able to work with them, so.

>> Lauren: Yeah. Kristen, I know you alluded to this prior, but can you share a little bit about benefits of having someone like Sam on board to help get this project over the finish line, and what other creatives can learn from that as well?

>> Kristin: To start I have to say that Sam was – and has been, we continue to work together – an absolute delight to work with. And I think what's so helpful is that -- Donkey Hodie is an educational series. All the series we produce at Fred Rogers Productions are educational in nature in some way. And we are very used to, as part of our process for all of our shows, working with advisors and consultants. Some are educational like early childhood development advisors, some are subject matter experts. On our other series, Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood and Alma's Way, they also have characters with disabilities, and they have consultants who help advise specifically on those characters, or on characters with different ethnicities. And so this -- this is part of our mission and part of our process. And it's something we are very accustomed to doing. So working with Sam and working with Disability Belongs™ came very naturally. Sam has been wonderful and -- there are lots of examples, I've talked about some of them. But one that I thought was -- really great was that during the scripting process, we had already developed the character of Jeff, and then we started working on the story. And every episode of Donkey Hodie is framed around what we call a core message. And there are – they're first person eye statements. And it's really the key learning takeaway from that episode. And for this episode the core message is we can do the same thing in different ways. And what Sam was amazing is that Sam helped us with examples of how Jeff could do the same thing as Donkey and Panda in different ways, or how they could all do the same thing in different ways. For instance, Panda has a telescope, Jeff has binoculars. Or Donkey and Panda use their arms to reach something, Jeff has his grabber. And one of the examples that Sam gave us was that to get someone's attention, Jeff might use the horn on his chair, like the beep beep horn on his chair, to get someone's attention. And as soon as I saw that in one of Sam's notes, I thought that's going in the script. [laughs] And so there is a moment in the episode where they come across some penguins who are blocking their path and Donkey and Panda are trying to like wave them down and ask them to move and the penguins don't hear them. And so Jeff beeps and then the penguins move. So -- that's just one small example, and I think what Sam said about adding texture, like, it's just so wonderful. We -- our characters are intentionally designed – this was something from the beginning – to have different size relationships on screen, different colors, different vibrancy so that they all work in frame for a single camera show, so that they all complement each other beautifully in frame, both from a size and an action perspective, but also for colors. And what's wonderful about Jeff and his chair is that he fits into the frame of Donkey and Panda so perfectly. And you saw it in that video, his chair, actually, the wheels do move. So we are operating that chair and making those wheels move as the puppeteer walks with Jeff throughout the show. And having Sam bring his experience to what -- what could help bring texture to Jeff was really wonderful. And to me, it's just been a very organic natural process every step of the way.

>> Lauren: Thank you. So at Disability Belongs™ we constantly discuss how important representation is and how media plays a significant role in shaping our interactions with people who may be different from us, very much in line with this show and this episode. The same holds true for disability representation. We often talk about 360 degree characterization and intersectionality, because portrayals, while sometimes well-intentioned, can still reinforce stereotypes. This can lead to a disabled person being viewed solely through the lens of their disability, without acknowledgement of their other characteristics. With this in mind, why is it so important for a disabled character like Jeff to have a fully developed storyline that highlights his personality and interests, especially in the shows you're part of? Let's start with Jay.

>> Jay: So as I mentioned earlier -- it's really important for people to see disabled – other disabled people as actual human beings beyond their disability. And so especially when it comes to characters and in shows that's also important. And since this is a children's show, starting at that age range of how other children are going to interact with their peers or maybe individuals that they see out in the world that have disabilities -- they're typically curious – children are curious. And beyond that, though, how can they interact. And if they see someone like Jeff who -- may not be a human but is a mouse, they can associate like "Oh yeah, Jeff, he's in a chair, but he's really cool and he likes to do adventures, and he's fun, and he's exciting, and other people can be like that." And it helps them be able to develop relationships, again, with peers or just others out in the world, which I think is very important. And just in general in media, it is important for disabled people to be represented, because we are people and we contribute a lot to society. And a lot of times society is not able to look beyond a disability of a person and understand that they have wants and needs and desires and personalities and just want to exist in this world like most do. And so -- it's just really exciting to be a part of something so special and also have authentic casting of someone that's disabled to represent a disabled character as well is super key, and I'm just honored to be a part of this project and very grateful to be here, so.

>> Lauren: Thanks Jay. I mean, you brought up, like, the importance of authentic casting, which is something we all advocate for, whether it's live action, animation, voice over, or not. So it's wonderful to see in this project as well. Sam would you have anything to add too?

>> Sam: Oh absolutely -- I was thinking about Jeff the Mouse's – his talent with photography. And I remember being so impressed that the writers created that moment for him. I feel it's really important to show disabled people doing things and -- being good at something, and, like, having interests, and I was so like overjoyed that he -- was taking pictures and was just -- it's a very natural and normal thing. I mean young people and -- all people with disabilities, we have interests, we have -- specialties. We've got things that we're experts at. And seeing that – I mean, I think I even told Kristin somewhere early in the process, I said I remember when I got my first camera, I had a DSLR and it was a Canon camera, and I took pictures as well, and it was, like, really special. And so like, moments like that in scripts and then turned into actual episodes – it's really special and I'm really happy to see that Jeff -- has something that he loves to do. I'm sure he has many things, as we'll sort of see him go on, so.

>> Lauren: So important – we get to see people who look like us if we have a physical disability, we get to learn about people who are different from us if we don't, and -- especially when we're talking about kids content like this, vital for children growing up. But so Kristin, we know that Jeff Mouse actually – he doesn't exist in a vacuum at Fred Rogers Productions. This is a value that you live. And so this series has made accessibility and inclusion a priority throughout. Can you share a bit about that?

>> Kristin: Absolutely. We – well, we were talking a lot about Jeff, so I think -- we've covered Jeff in this episode. And Jeff, as Jay and Sam alluded to, he comes back. He's a -- he is a friend we introduced. We introduced him – just to speak a little bit to what they were just saying, and then I will answer this question – we introduced Jeff in the way we would introduce any new character and any new friend on Donkey Hodie. We did not introduce Jeff in a very special episode about anything, other than Jeff is a pal, he's a neighbor, He wants to be part of the problem solving adventure with Donkey, Panda, and he is leading it. And that is how we would have written any story with a new character and that was really important to us. In terms of our other efforts at Fred Rogers Productions -- for Donkey Hodie specifically, last year we launched a new game called Cousin Hodie Playdate. And it was our first game produced for neurodivergent children first. And it is a game that models and teaches early empathy skills like naming – recognizing and naming feelings. And in addition to the design of the game itself being for neurodivergent children first, but of course all children and everybody, it also has a large range of accessibility features for different players. For instance you can turn certain emotions on and off. If you don't want mad to be a feeling in the game, you can turn it off and have it not be in the game. There's high contrast settings, of course captions, and adjustable volume levels. And that's something that has become standard for all of our games across all of our series at Fred Rogers Productions to have those suite of settings so that you can customize your experience visually and in terms of audio. So Cousin Hodie Playdate has been a wonderful project and game and it's out in the world. You can go play it now and go search for it. So we're making a lot of efforts around accessibility and inclusion, which in that game, by the way, we did play test with neurodivergent children as well. So they were part of the design and the building process of the game, so – and it applies across all of our shows. In addition to interactive, we also have a large suite of accessibility offerings on our video content. And this is something that we've prioritized. And every episode of Donkey Hodie, Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood, Alma's Way are available with ASL interpretation through partners at the Described and Captioned Media program, through their free portal. You can also watch many of them on PBS Kids. So if you go to PBS Kids video, you can watch our shows with ASL interpretation. And that has been a major priority of our team here. We also have Spanish audio, Spanish and English captions, and Spanish and English audio description on every one of our episodes. And those are just some examples of our efforts around inclusion and accessibility. And it is, as you said Lauren, part of our mission at this point as everything we make and do moving forward in production.

>> Lauren: Thank you. So I want to remind folks that if they want to ask questions, you can do so by putting it in the text box. You click on the Q&A at the bottom and then you can add a question and submit it. You can submit it with your name, you can submit it anonymously, and we will ask our panelists. While we're waiting for questions to come in, I have a question for all of our panelists. What advice do you have for disabled creatives wanting to enter this industry, whether as an actor, animator, writer, producer, or any role? Let's start with Sam.

>> Sam: Well I would say get involved with Disability Belongs™ because I am an alumnus of their programs. First I did the -- I guess TV director Entertainment Lab, and then I went on to do the Leadership Fellowship, and -- but another thing that's -- even more practical. I joined a writer's group – there's five writers, and then we're mentored by an individual who works in development and current programming. And all six of us, we're all really good friends and we've done it for years. And just like Donkey Hodie tells us that friendships really matter, I think coming into this business, I've learned so much from my friends. So I think that's, like, what I would say is build your community, so.

>> Lauren: Thank you. Kristin?

>> Kristin: I love that Sam. I'm going to think about putting this in a Donkey Hodie core message as well, which is one of our – one of Donkey's big messages is I can do hard things, I can do big things, I can keep trying. I think building community – I think everybody who's here today, this is one example of something you can do to get connected and network and be curious and learn more about the work that we do and meet people who have pathways into it. At FRP, like to Sam's point about groups and the Disability Belongs™ Fellowships, at FRP we have the Fred Rogers Productions Writers Neighborhood, which is a program for emerging writers and – to bring new voices and perspectives into children's media. We're – we run that program. Other organizations and media companies have similar programs. And I think looking for those opportunities, especially if you're looking for a new way in, if you're early career or if you're trying to get started, some of those types of programs are a great place to look. And I think connecting, joining groups, Children's Media Association is another one. I'm speaking from the point of view of a producer, since I am not an actor, but there are lots of affinity groups out there for the career pathway that you're interested in. And -- also just to speak a little bit about casting and acting, if that's something that you're interested in. To cast the role of Jeff we worked with a casting director who specializes in casting disabled roles. And there are groups, organizations, casting directors out there who do specialize in this work, and connecting with them is another great way in. And looking for those groups and getting connected with representation or others who can help you in that matter. So those are just some examples.

>> Lauren: Thank you. I think -- you named some groups that do a lot of mentorship, which is really important. Jay?

>> Jay: Well, as the actor in question that is playing Jeff, as Kristen mentioned DPD Casting, which is ran by Danielle, she's the one who had sent me over the role – well not directly, it was actually through Gamut, which – Gamut manages disabled talent. And at the time they were doing, like, acting roles but they don't really do that anymore. So at that time DPD Casting discovered me, got that role, and all that happened. But yes, Danielle's fantastic and she's sent other stuff since then. And as everyone has mentioned on this panel is community is super important. Building up your community. And another thing is just truly being authentic to yourself. You know, people can see through when you're not being yourself -- and that – that's really helped me, because I put out my content online, and that's honestly how I've been discovered for a lot of the opportunities that I'm a part of is through my social media presence. And on top of that, though, outside of just having a social media presence, I really think what draws people in is just the fact that I'm myself. And that sets you apart. Because anyone could make an Instagram or -- a Facebook and still not get anything. But when you're coupling that with being yourself and just putting yourself out there, you're going to start to attract those opportunities. And don't get discouraged -- there's going to be times where you're just not going to get that role or you're not going to get that opportunity. And -- don't chase but attract. So if it's meant for you, it'll happen. If it doesn't, it doesn't. And as we talked about, this is my first role that I've done and it worked out, you know what I mean? And I mean, I had to sing Take Me Out to the Ball Game, so they – they have that recording for the rest of their life to listen to to remember the choices that they made. But I'm very grateful for this opportunity, and I think just putting yourself out there, being connected. I'm in different parts of the entertainment – so music, there's RAMPD, which is for recording artists and music professionals with disabilities, it's a very great group if you're looking to get into the music industry. So lots of opportunities out there, and just continue to build that community and be yourself, and you'll be great.

>> Lauren: Thank you Jay. Alright, I'm going to be taking some questions from the audience now. We'll hopefully get through as many as possible. We have one from Haley Cheong, I apologize if I mispronounced your name. "Such a fan of all of your work. I love Jeff Mouse so much. I wonder if there were any characters or heroes that you loved and felt represented by when you were growing up?" And this is open to everyone. Or is Jeff the first time you're seeing yourself represented?

>> Jay: Okay, well I'll just go first then -- Jeff is actually the first character that I've seen where I've been represented. I truly don't remember anyone, like, on TV that I saw like me. And -- I feel like it would have been nice, honestly, if I think about it now, it would have been cool to see a character that especially specifically had a power wheelchair was rolling around. I mean there might have been some characters that have manual wheelchairs but nothing is, like, coming to mind. So just in general, that representation would have been really great. And what is such an honor is to be the representation that you would have wanted to see as a child. And so the fact that I can be representation for someone else's child, or even if you're not a child and you're just an adult or teenager or whatever, and you're feel represented by that character, I'm really proud and I'm doing my job. So I'm glad I get to be someone else's representation, even if it wasn't something that I saw growing up.

>> Lauren: Sam or Kristin, would either of you like to?

>> Sam: I – I love that answer Jay. I know I'm like, I'm trying to think, I'm like, well I loved Miss Congeniality growing up, but I'm not Sandra Bullock, I wish I was. She's gorgeous. I mean growing up as like a gay kid I guess -- the beauty queen with -- kicking butt and taking names seemed like – I don't know. But it was like a movie I loved. And I guess her sense of humor, that character's sense of humor is very much my vibe. So that's – that's a strange answer but it's my answer.

>> Lauren: Everyone's entitled to connect with whatever character they desire.

>> Kristin: I love that answer because it helps segue to mine, which is that I was very connected as -- an angsty teen in the suburbs of New Jersey, very connected to some angsty teen characters growing up, but also really like boss young girls like Pippy Longtocking, I loved, Punky Brewster I loved, these are the kind of girl characters that I connected with. And I even looked up to like adults on sitcoms, I constantly cite Angela Bower from Who's the Boss, because she was like -- she was the boss, and I thought she was awesome. So perhaps all of that helped steer me on a career into producing and putting all of my good type-A skills to work. But yeah, those are some of the characters I loved.

>> Lauren: Thank you. This next question is going to be for Kristin. It is from Sabrina Mansfield, who is a children's TV writer and director – she's also – sorry, a children's TV writer and the director of events for Children's Media Association. She also is another alum of Disability Belongs™ pipeline programming. And her question is "How do you and your team decide which core message /social-emotional themes to explore? For example, do writers pitch ideas, or is it planned out at the start of the season?" And well – I'll stop there because it looks like it's two-parter question, so I'll let you answer that one first.

>> Kristin: Sure. Hi Sabrina, thanks for your question. And hi Haley, did not say hi to you in the previous question. It works both ways. It works a lot of ways. Structurally overall and mostly, we work with our educational advisors, our child early childhood education advisors and child development experts to create core messages around a theme or themes that we might want to explore in a given season. For instance, season 3 of Donkey, which will be premiering this summer – August – we worked on new themes such as self-care and emotional well-being, and building confidence in girls. And then we work with our advisors to craft core messages against those themes or against our general themes of resilience, perseverance, and problem solving. And we share those with writers, and writers can brainstorm against those core messages. But there are times when we work with a writer and they say, "We have -- I have a really great idea. What would you think about this?" And then we work with them to find a core message that might work for that story. So it's kind – it kind of goes both ways. Sometimes we're inspired by a certain theme or something happening and we don't have the core message yet but we say "We want to do a general story around this." And we talk to a writer and they brainstorm a premise against it, so broadly we have the core messages in advance, but it's not a one-size fits-all, and we're very flexible just like Donkey. And it kind of – stories generate in lots of different ways sometimes.

>> Lauren: And the second part of this question, I think, is applicable to everyone. "What's been one of the most surprising things you've learned from watching kids respond to these stories?" Who would like to go first?

>> Kristin: I'm unmuted so I'm happy to go first. [laughs] [indistinct] Most surprising – most suprirsing. Well I'll say, I think – we see a lot of feedback on social media. Parents will share either their feedback or things that their kids have responded to. And Donkey Hodie is a very musical show. We have a song in every episode. Music is very much a part of the joy and the DNA of our series. And in a lot of our songs, we work in core messaging. Some are just pure fun. And it's really wonderful to see how many kids love those songs, sing those songs, to see parents say that their kids are requesting the episode with this song. Got a video of my friend's kid doing pirate song and insisting on just watching that over and over again. And the beautiful thing about this – it's not necessarily surprising, we know kids connect with characters and stories and songs -- and they want to play them over and over again. But I think the joy of seeing them connect with the joy of our series and pick up the core messages, like, it's okay to be upset. I can change my plan -- and, see, I can take a deep breath to calm down -- see kids really internalize those – and young kids – and repeat those strategies back to their parents is really wonderful.

>> Sam: It was really exciting – there was a post on Instagram with this young girl with a disability, and she was just so excited about the show. That is such a pleasure. It's just – it's so exciting to see that, and -- it's not every project you get that. Not every project you get to like, inspire – just entertain other disabled people by showing them themselves on screen. It's such – it's just so cool. So yeah, that's my answer.

>> Jay: Yeah, I mean, like Kristin and Sam have said about social media, I've been able to see posts and that's just really cool. I think the young girl that you're talking about – we probably saw the same video, maybe it was all different, I don't know, but I feel like we might have seen the same video, and that's just been really awesome. And there was a LinkedIn post about this parent that was talking about her son and how he would be represented. And so it's just really beautiful and shows how powerful representation can be. And -- you really never know who's going to be impacted. And if you just impact one person I feel like -- we've all done our job, and – so excited that this is out here.

>> Sam: And we love those songs.

>> Jay: Yes.

>> Sam: Songs are great.

>> Lauren: So we have a question from Kennedy Lewis for Jay and Sam. With authentic and positive representation for characters with physical disabilities being so underrepresented, what kind of stories or messages would you love to see at the forefront of mainstream media?

>> Sam: That's a very good question. Well -- it's different age groups -- there's – what I could say is I would love to see a variety. I think where there's so much pressure when you're a writer or you're -- you're creating stories, is that there's a lot of pressure to take one disabled person and make it sort of represent every disabled person. And so I would encourage folks to think of a variety, like, even seeing a show with multiple disabled people. In my real life, that's not a – that's not a big deal. That's, like, normal. We have our own community, our own culture -- we have to honor our disabled ancestors -- it's just part of it And so I would love to see a variety. And I think when you bring in a variety of disabled characters, it alleviates the pressure for writers who want to get it right -- if you have a variety, it sort of – it makes it easier. So yeah.

>> Jay: I love that you mentioned, Sam, about the fact of seeing diverse, like, story – disabled stories represented because it is true, there is a lot of pressure sometimes when there's only like one person that's representing the whole disability community. And I felt that pressure myself just in different forms, of course doing this voice acting, but also having a reality TV show as well, and that has always been a big concern. Cause I'm like, if you've met one disabled person, you've only met one person. And so there is a lot of pressure where you feel like I have to be everything for every single person that ever has a disability. If no one ever meets a disabled person again, which is super less likely, you're going to probably meet someone that's disabled -- and even if you don't know it, and yeah, I mean diverse stories would be really great, and just in different mediums. I'd love to see like a sitcom of people that have disabilities, I mean, animated series – just different ways that disabled people exist, because we exist in day-to-day. We're at the grocery store. We're at way more than just doctor's appointments -- and so I agree with that sentiment that we should have more diverse stories and how different types of disabilities, different people representing those disabilities, race, identities, sexualities, all that across the board just to show different stories, because intersectionality is so important when it comes to disability, and you experience disability differently typically -- just in the way that maybe you're raised or your cultural background and things like that. So it's just very important to have those stories represented as much as possible.

>> Lauren: We only have two minutes and I know we have several more questions. What I want to offer is if folks who have questions that we didn't get to, if you want to email that to us, we will then send it out to these lovely folks and -- share some responses. So – but since we only have about a minute or so left I want to give each of our panelists an opportunity to kind of share where people can follow them, and what's next. Is there anything else you're working on that people can pay attention to? Let's start with Jay.

>> Jay: Well you can check me out @MiniProducer. I'm MiniProducer everywhere: M I N I P R O D U C E R. And I also have a website – miniproducer.com. And in general, what I'm working on, of course more Jeff, so you can't get rid of me [laughs]. I'll be doing more of that. And hopefully more of the show that we have, Jay & Pamela, which is with my wife on TLC, or who knows where it'll platform, we don't know. And in general, just look out for more exciting stuff. I'm always on the move, I was just in New York City, like, last week. So always having a good time, and more smiles, more fun, and authenticity and yeah, hopefully collaborating with more creatives in the disability community and again, just sharing my story and connecting with others, so see you all on the flip side. Thank you.

>> Lauren: Sam?

>> Sam: Yes, you can find me on Instagram @Samuelkraussla and then SamuelKrauss.com which has a little info about me but -- and oh, I've got a few – in terms of disability consultant work, I've got a few projects that will be coming out. I think one on HBO Max, so that's wonderful, it's an animation, so that's really exciting. And then I'm – of course I'm developing some of my own projects that feature disabled characters of course. So I'm really excited about that. I'm really excited to -- get my feet wet -- and hopefully get more disabled stories out there, so.

>> Lauren: Wonderful. And Kristin, I'm going to fold another question in of are we seeing Jeff again – or I guess when are we seeing Jeff again?

>> Kristin: Spoiler alert. Yes, of course you're seeing Jeff – some more Jeff in season 3. So I referenced it earlier, season 3 of Donkey Hodie premieres this August – August 11th. And Jeff is not just in the first batch of episodes, but Jeff is reappearing as part of season 3, not only in episodes, but perhaps in some other forms of media for us as well. And you can follow us along @FredRogersProductions, @DonkeyHodieOfficial on all the platforms to find out the latest. Just speaking of music, because I know Jay is a music producer among other things, we just launched our first ever Donkey Hodie music videos just last week. You can find those on PBS Kids, and there are some real bangers in there for summertime, including a country style spin on the Mister Rogers classic, It's Such A Good Feeling, Snap Twice. So check out our music videos, season 3 coming soon, more Jeff coming soon, and we're excited to share all of that with you.

>> Lauren: Thank you. And I just really want to share my thanks to Kristin, Sam, and Jay for joining us today. Also want to encourage everyone to check out Donkey Hodie on PBS Kids, as well as an exciting crossover episode featuring Daniel Tiger on August 11th on your local PBS station and pbskids.org. Thank you everyone, hope you have a great rest of your day.

>> Kristin: Thank you so much.

>> Sam: Thank you so much.