

Rachel Byrne ([00:05:28](#)):

Thank you. And I am so excited to be here this afternoon and be moderating this panel and thank you everyone for joining us for this panel today. Uh, as you just heard, my name is Rachel Byrne and I'm the executive director of the Cerebral Palsy Foundation. And, uh, you know, NYWIFT Talks is their weekly series that brings updated news and vital information about the impact of COVID 19 on the media and entertainment industry, industry professionals be in conversation discussing what you need to know about theatrical releases, digital advances, virtual tools, festival opportunities, production updates, and so much more, uh, just a little bit of housekeeping. This session will be recorded and then posted publicly on the NYWIFT programming goes digital hub, um, which you can find on their home page. And we will talk one-on-one with our panelists and then open it up to questions at the end. So please, if you've got any questions, make sure you put them in the Q and A box which is featured at the bottom of your screen. And we also hope that you'll post today's talk on social media and share it. And if you do, please, don't forget the hashtag NYWIFT. Now I am thrilled to actually welcome our first panelist, Isaac Zablocki. Isaac is the director of film programs at the Marlene Meyerson JCC in Manhattan and the director and co-founder of Reel Abilities, the New York disability film festival, since 2004, Isaac has been developed in film programs at the JCC, including the Israel Film Center. Beyond Reel Abilities, he programs multiple film festivals annually, including the acclaimed Other Israel Film Festival about Arab and minority populations in Israel. So thank you so much for joining us.

Isaac Zablocki ([00:07:17](#)):

Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Rachel Byrne ([00:07:21](#)):

The next panelist that I would like to introduce you to is Michele Spitz. Uh, Michele is of Women of Her Word and is a voiceover artist, public speaker, philanthropist, and influencer most passionate about advocating for media accessibility and disability awareness. She has over seven and a half years experience of producing, narrating, consulting and project managing audio description assets for over 80 projects, including film broadcast and digital media. Among creating audio descriptions for many film genres and various subjects, Michele is a member of NYWIFT instating audio description grants for their annual disability film finishing fund, and is also aligned with the Reel Abilities Film festival funding the audio description film assets for their annual film festivals. So thank you so much for joining us, Michele.

Michele Spitz ([00:08:09](#)):

Thank you very much. Looking forward to being here.

Rachel Byrne ([00:08:12](#)):

And we are also hoping, um, that Lisa Denker will also be able to join our panel, um, throughout the afternoon. Uh, Lisa is a filmmaker who grew up in a family of artists and designers innately, uh, developing her visual skills, working as an art director and set director in the LA film industry. She also worked on features and production such as "Gas, Food, and Lodging", the Grammy award winning "Ain't It Heavy" music video from Melissa Etheridge and was the set director for the film "Citizen Ruth". Uh, Lisa is also the recipient of the 2020 New York women in film & television Loreen Arbus disability award. A grant for her film "Still Judy". And so hopefully Lisa will be able to join us, um, in a moment, but I would just like to welcome everybody and we will start the panel, uh, with Isaac and Michele. So to get started, obviously we are in interesting times. There's no doubt about that. Isaac, tell us a little bit about your venture into founding Reel Abilities and what your goals have been since founding it.

Isaac Zablocki ([00:09:19](#)):

So this is our 13th year of the festival, so it's been, it's been an amazing ride and it's amazing to see, I look back at like the early years and see how much we've changed. Um, we founded it, um, really as a concept of actually I run was running the film program back then of the JCC in Manhattan. And my, my take on film has always been that film was a form of education. And although I have a very close relation, I personally have a learning disability and have very close relation to the disability community. Um, I have a brother with a disability and of course, like most of us have aging parents that, uh, um, uh, of course relate to the community as well. And yet it was not really from the personal connection to the disability, as much as it was from the cinematic perspective of seeing that there are these amazing movies out there about a community that is underserved and underrepresented, and they are not fitting in, in, um, you know, the Hollywood or film festival, um, uh, um, playgrounds.

Isaac Zablocki ([00:10:25](#)):

And, um, and I thought that these films, we, you know, we were showing films here and there that related to disability, and there was a clear interest and there was a clear demand. And after a while, I saw that I had, it was back in the DVD days and are getting my screeners on DVDs and I had this whole stack and I said, you know, we have enough here for festival and as fate would have it, I would meet a woman named Anita Altman who ran a network of disability organizations and together we founded this festival and that, that concept that she brought to the table of really having this be part of the community and as part of a network that this is not just, um, this is not another, you know, want to be Sundance or we, we don't aim for that. We are actually coming very much from, you know, high level cinema, but, um, from a perspective of, uh, the community and bringing the community together and finding ways to create change through film.

Rachel Byrne ([00:11:26](#)):

Yeah, no, I think what really abilities is done has the exposure. Um, and also as you said, this real piece of community is so important. And, you know, as a, you know, uh, executive director at a foundation who obviously, uh, serves our community with disabilities, you know, I think you've actually putting these together because it was such a big hole in the festival, uh, same within everything going on. But how challenging has it been for you to pull off Reel Abilities this year, and last year, really? Like what's, what are the changes that have happened when we're thinking about what's going on with COVID?

Isaac Zablocki ([00:12:05](#)):

There's something going on?! I'm still in denial. Um, it's, it's really, so last year we actually pivoted to a, um, to a virtual festival. We were supposed to run mid-March and towards the end of March, mid to late March. So we had planned everything in person tickets were bought for all the guests. Um, and we had to make this tough decision of like, you know, nobody knew what was going on then. And we decided we had it. We had a lot of experience through some of our other programs with the virtual world. So we felt comfortable enough to find the ways it was really like, you know, grassroots and, and we really like put it together. And it was one of the first virtual festivals, honestly, definitely one, the first one that was taking on the concept of, um, being accessible and what we learned last year, and we learned so much, but, um, most of all, we got all these emails from people saying that the, this was the first time they were able to attend Reel Abilities.

Isaac Zablocki ([00:13:04](#)):

We doubled our numbers, people who were always trying to be accessible. And we realized that being virtual actually allows you to be more accessible. We figured out all the ways to have everything we needed. Michele's wonderful audio description played, um, openly, um, you know, you choose the audio description, film, and, and, uh, and that version, you get to watch that version. Um, we had, you know, ASL interpreters live captioning, zoom had not done their captioning yet, but we're still keeping a live stenographer to actually do the captioning. And this year we already like knew what we were getting into and were able to really build on that and find the right ways to, to, to flow with this virtual format. And we've, we've been running over a hundred programs throughout the year of different kinds and have had, uh, had, have been building this kind of format. So we, we really feel confident this year we're going to actually have our first in-person programs in, um, uh, in over a year. So our opening night is going to be a very safe, um, uh, drive in and the Queens drive in with Rooftop Films. And our we're going to have a comedy night. We tried comedy night last year on, on zoom. And that was one of the places that we learned that comedy just doesn't work well on zoom. And, um, we're doing it on our, on the rooftop of the JCC. We're going to have, uh, the first in-person event at the JCC for over a year, that's outside of our gym and nursery school. So it's really exciting. We're building it all from scratch, you know, like following the rules and making it all as safe as possible. Um, but I'll share like one, one little element that's changed. So we use, for instance, uh, as our streaming platform, we use a platform called Eventive that is really popular with lot of film festivals and we've been using it and we're going to be the, because of our festival. They have implemented audio description. We are going to be, we just tested it out this week. It is, you can imagine the pressure, like, you know, like it's, this technology is being tested out two weeks before our festival runs and we have to get all of our films up there and make sure it's all in sync, Michelle, you know, how many details go into this and it's, and it's just amazing. And I tested it, it works beautifully. Um, so, so we're really excited. Um, the, the, um, um, drive-in first time, this is going to be an accessible drive-in. We had to figure out with the, with the drive and folks who have run, you know, these tech folks who have run dozens of these, um, they've never done this kind of technology before it took like, you know, adding other channels, figuring out we had the bottom line was we have to buy little transistor radios for imagine this because most people who need audio description are not driving themselves, hopefully to the drive in people with low vision or blind, or usually take having somebody drive them to the drive-in.

Isaac Zablocki ([00:16:00](#)):

Um, except for my grandfather. He'll, he'll, he'll take his chances anyway. Um, but, um, but that means that the people in the car, this was like something that we never thought of. The two people in the car, one is seeing, one is not. They need two different sound systems, but the, um, the, the sound that's coming through the radio will only work for one, one of them. So we're buying little transistor radios that can pick up the other signal and handing them out to people as they come in.

Rachel Byrne ([00:16:29](#)):

And I think this is the phenomenal thing about COVID right. There are some silver linings that we are identifying, particularly when it comes to accessibility and thinking what we would have thought was too hard before we're now coming up with creative ways like buying radios and saying, no, this isn't too hard. This should be the gold standard. This should be the way it is. Michele, before we actually getting to some of the different pieces. I won't be able to just in case they're not aware of Women of the Word, what word and the work that you do. Could you just describe a little bit about the work that you do? So everyone's familiar?

Michele Spitz ([00:17:02](#)):

So my, my work is very deeply invested in creating a secondary audio track for low vision and blind audiences. And I work on various content for a good percentage of it is disability based. And it's a fairly detailed process in terms of creating that asset. And once the asset is created, ultimately we hope that the filmmaker will take that through the festivals, through their distribution, whatever their distributors are. And I often work with project managing the assets to be sure that the accessibility gets to the finish line is throughout the lifespan of the film, so to speak. And it often comes from, for example, reliabilities, we'll say, you know, we have some films, are you interested in working on these? And I've had the honor of being offered those films, which have turned out to be really meaningful to me. And I often have the, also the luxury of meeting some of the filmmakers and the subjects of the films, and it brings us work that much more forward, um, and relevant because of disability at large, the subject matter at large.

Michele Spitz ([00:18:10](#)):

So I also put in place grants for post-production, in-kind grants so that films can become accessible. And by doing that, we raise awareness and we educate the public and we educate one filmmaker that hopefully the domino effect will be the next filmmaker and the next filmmaker, but really what's happening, um, with Reel Abilities right now, I think I was very excited about the drive-in. And now I just heard something else incredibly exciting because no streaming platform has given us the opportunity. For example, like Vimeo or Cinesend. None of them have offered this particular proprietary way of experiencing the audio description. So this is actually really monumental something I can't wait to share when I learn a little bit more about it, and I know other festivals or other filmmakers or people are streaming right now, we're struggling with how are they going to use this asset? So essentially it's, it's quite a process, but it's a wonderful process to go through. And I ended up often narrating them, or I hire talent to narrate or narrate with me, or what have you.

Rachel Byrne ([00:19:09](#)):

No, I think it's at the phenomenal piece that, you know, when, if any, if anyone's, who's watching gets an opportunity to actually experience a film with audio descriptions, you know, I highly recommend it because it really gives you a, an opportunity to see it in a potentially different light. And obviously the ones that you've done, Michelle are phenomenal. You know, I've been pushing up to listen to the ones that you've done. And I think this is the exciting piece, as you said, you know, moving forward, you know, what does the future look like for film? What does the future look like for accessibility, for festivals? You know, we know, as you said, Michelle, the audio descriptions have been done and, you know, uh, I'd love to know what your thoughts are for live events. Like what's going to happen with, uh, you know, Reel Abilities and hopefully who we need to get on board to see this happening more.

Michele Spitz ([00:19:58](#)):

And are you speaking of also cinemas and theatrical releases? Or are you saying

Rachel Byrne ([00:20:02](#)):

Absolutely like, even like, like thinking, okay, like for the festival. I am so excited to hear that this is potentially going to be happening at real abilities and good on you as like for taking that on for being that I suppose, you know, they're the first adopters and testing out this new technology, is there a future? Yeah. Is there a future where you would see this in cinema where you will see opportunities for a lot more access?

Michele Spitz ([00:20:29](#)):

Um, I'll, I'll respond to that initially. We already have a fair, a bit of access because it was mandated in 2019, that all movie theaters, for the most part, unless there's some sort of financial distress have to have it, a handful of audio description headsets in addition to captioning bars or any accommodations for both those communities. So the interesting sort of disconnect is that while the movie theaters are required to have the equipment, and it's only a minimal amount, it isn't required that all media be audio described. So what's happened is it is required that media be captioned. So because there isn't that requirement audio description in many cases, either voluntary or by contract of very large production companies, but what's happening is Sundance and South by Southwest. And, um, there's another one I can't remember the name of right now are all now adopting audio description and caption accommodations in terms of their screenings. And then we have to bear in mind that there are people voting for these films at the film festivals, how would a low vision or blind person who's voting, be able to vote if they can't experience a film? So there's a long way to come with that aspect, but it is moving the dial and, and thanks to Reel Abilities and Isaac that they set a precedence and other film festivals are looking at them as models of how to do this. Um, I think that, pardon me?

Rachel Byrne ([00:21:58](#)):

I said, no pressure Isaac. You've got two weeks to sort this out.

Michele Spitz ([00:22:03](#)):

But it really, it really is the case. And in addition to that, other than theaters and streaming, which of course is what's happening, which is proprietary, for example, was Amazon, or people are putting things on YouTube or iTunes, or what have you. People are finding other ways to do what they're doing, but if it's broadcast, a lot of broadcast is adopting it, but it's not a hundred percent, but a large percentage is better than no percentage. And the percentage is expanding greatly because people are learning more about it and taking it on as a mindset of inclusivity, not just in terms of content, but in terms of accessibility.

Rachel Byrne ([00:22:37](#)):

And Isaac, I'll ask you this question, actually, both of you, this question, but, you know, have you seen a growth and a shift in this in the last 12 months has, COVID actually helped put, I suppose, pressure on other industries or other festivals to do more, um, or, and, and given, I suppose even some of the tech components. So, you know, we spoke about some of the other platforms. Is there a shift happening in the last 12 months?

Isaac Zablocki ([00:23:05](#)):

I think we're amidst of revolution actually. I mean, both on the technological level as you pointed out, there's definitely, I mean, I mean this virtual world that has opened up that a year ago when we started working with this, we had to like, you know, piecemeal it together. And now we see that these companies actually can run things and offer things virtually if Hollywood realizes that they could continue to offer their films in a virtual, more accessible format for people who can never go to a movie theater. So they could be there as part of opening weekends. Um, that's something that, of course we have a long way to go, but, um, something that, that definitely this pandemic has opened that concept to, um, in, in general, I think, I mean, of course we try to do we try to help out other the industry in general and the industry is changing very quickly.

Isaac Zablocki ([00:23:55](#)):

I mean, this goes also as far as, um, as far as inclusion of people with disabilities, within the themes of films, um, within actors, um, authentic casting, um, within, um, people behind the scenes with disabilities. And, um, I have to admit that we're living at a time right now where diversity and inclusion is on the forefront of a lot of people's minds. Um, the Academy has finally actually made some big changes and that's going to impact everything. And I think we're going to see more, we were already seeing more representation and we're going to see even more and it's going to keep growing. And, um, and we're excited just to be a part of that revolution. And we've always said, you know, we're, we're there till Reel Abilities becomes obsolete till, till there's a time where a disability film festival would be so redundant because you know, the films are everywhere, um, that we're not needed anymore.

Michele Spitz ([00:24:55](#)):

I can also comment on her. Oh, excuse me. I'm sorry.

Rachel Byrne ([00:24:57](#)):

Michelle. I was just about to say,

Michele Spitz ([00:25:00](#)):

Sorry, I just want to, I just want to make one comment about that. I actually am. I am, um, I live in San Francisco, but my travel has been back and forth between New York, San Francisco and LA for the last seven years. And I'm often sort of right in the middle smack in the middle of the sensibility between really East coast sensibility and also the European sensibility. And let's, let's say for all purposes, maybe the Hollywood sensibility about accessibility and they do vary and they also merged. So part of my awareness and my involvement in the disability community at large, and helping them participate as artists or patrons also is it's really coming together. Right? So in Isaac's commentary, this is very true. It's because of the pandemic, in addition to everything that's happened in the last year, I believe that everybody is intended to be considered now. And so that means many more things than just the peripheral conversation. So with that in mind, and the fact that we can't reach each other in person, we have no choice, but to make our world more accessible and more inclusive. So I think it has resulted actually in a gift outside of what this pandemic and other things have happened last year have resulted in.

Rachel Byrne ([00:26:13](#)):

Yeah. And I think this momentum, as you said, this Isaac revolution that is happening and the men mentioned that's getting, uh, hopefully within Hollywood and to a larger scale, you know, across the world, really, as you know, just sort of mentioned, Michelle is really important. Now I am excited to actually introduce our other panelist, uh, Lisa Denker, who has been able to join us. Welcome, Lisa.

Lisa Denker ([00:26:37](#)):

Thank you. Apologies. But I'm here.

Rachel Byrne ([00:26:40](#)):

No problems.

Lisa Denker ([00:26:43](#)):

I'm honored to meet you all also. Hello, Isaac. Hi Michele.

Rachel Byrne ([00:26:49](#)):

Um, as I mentioned, uh, earlier, Lisa is a filmmaker and is the recipient of the 2020, uh, New York Women in Film & Television, Loreen Arbus Disability award grant for her film "Still Judy". And so just welcome Lisa, and we're excited to have you on the panel and we've got some really great questions about that film actually in that documentary. And, um, I was fortunate enough to be on the panel, um, for looking at those awards and I must say this, uh, that film and that documentary is amazing.

Lisa Denker ([00:27:23](#)):

Thank you.

Rachel Byrne ([00:27:24](#)):

So just to sort of keep going on, obviously on the conversation that we were just having, um, Michele, what do you see that still needs to be done though? You know, where do you see these sort of big gaps when it comes to audio description? What, what does, what needs to be done within the community and what can others do to support this more?

Michele Spitz ([00:27:44](#)):

I have always said that first of all, educating as many people as we can about it first and foremost, and talking about it in the industry outside of the industry, sort of a universal conversation is probably one of the biggest tools we have. Second to that is that unfortunately there are disconnects, there are breaks sort of in the chain of command, as far as the assets making it to the finish line, which means there's a lot of work put into creating, for example, audio description, tracks that go along with the film and often one person didn't give it to this person to distributed, know what it was, the filmmaker didn't maybe perhaps push it far enough. And then at times it may get to one distribution arm and not the other, whether it's streaming or theatrical or, uh, for that matter travel industries, there are so many things that have to take place.

Michele Spitz ([00:28:34](#)):

So there has to be some knowledge base in terms of the value of what it is, how it is used, how we can advocate for it and be sure that we are all advocating, that it goes to where it needs to go because to create these assets and for them not to reach the, the intended audience, leaves the audience out and leaves that incredible artistry of the filmmakers or whomever out of reaching these individuals. So I think that it really is knowledge-based and part of it, I will be talking at, um, as a guest lecture at NYU this year, and I'll be doing a lot of that this year. And next year, part of it is to go to film school, into these, you know, areas where we can talk about it and the future media makers and current media makers like, like panels like this. And so and so forth, we'll learn what this is and the curiosity and embracing it. Um, I think is key. That's part of how we're going to do this, but it's a lot of knowledge and we can't blame people for not knowing what they don't know. We can only try to educate and enlighten people as to what this is and the value of it. And I think that really is one of the most important parts of it.

Rachel Byrne ([00:29:42](#)):

Yeah, no. And I think obviously the work that you're doing is accelerating that and understand that, you know, how instrumental you have been to actually get it to where it is at the state.

Isaac Zablocki ([00:29:54](#)):

I have to have to add to that, that, I mean, and yes, everything Michelle says is, is crucial. And it's really, I mean, when you think about, I've been speaking to different cinemas and cinema owners and a lot of the art houses who are not necessarily required to have the same kind of, um, of, uh, audio description available. But, um, for so many of them, they said that, you know, the vision loss, um, community is not showing up in our theater. You know, we put it in this folder system and they don't show up. And I explained to them that they're not showing up because, you know, for so many years. And so, and I mean, it continues even now, you know, you'll go to a film festival, the film festival will say we have audio description, but then they never tested it and it doesn't work or they have audio description, but not for certain films, and they didn't very clearly, um, um, uh, note that somewhere. Um, they have that only for some of the films. So you're like, you know, which ones, where do I, how do I figure this all out? And it becomes so complicated that yes, of course, a lot of, a lot of people who would actually enjoy these accessibility aids, um, kind of, uh, lose their hope or, or just, just give up. And I think that's something that, uh, that we need, we need to rebuild the trust, really make things so easily accessible and not just for some, but really across the board. There's the concept of universal design, which is where you don't have to ask. You don't have to look for the person. Who's gonna show you the special way to get in, to be able to see the film. Um, it should be in a way as easily accessible for absolutely everyone. And, and, and it's not, it's not so hard to offer that it's, uh, really a change of attitude. I mean, take a festival like Sundance can say, you know what? We require you to have a DCP in order to show your film, we require you to have audio description to show your film. And, um, and, and that's, that's all it would take to, to begin that change, um, make, make the people who create the technology, offer it in the simplest ways. And there's, there's plenty of easy solutions today with the technology that's out there.

Rachel Byrne ([00:32:01](#)):

No, and I think, you know, I think anyone who's watching this panel today, if you get the opportunity to participate in the Reel Abilities festival this year, please do so because you're going to see, as we said, some things happening that potentially have never happened before and, you know, have a look and go, wow, this is the way it could be. And this is the way it could be an all festivals. And, um, you know, I think that's a really exciting place to move forward from, to say, all right, well, this is, it can be done. And as you said, Isaac, sometimes it's getting creative, but most of the time there are easy solutions. Most times it's just going, okay, let's do it. Let's actually make it happen. Now, Lisa, I want to make sure join you into the conversation as well. And obviously as a filmmaker and, um, those different pieces, you've probably had to deal with some of these different things in, in making films. What's your view on, um, as a filmmaker, the, the steps in looking at accessibility of a film.

Lisa Denker ([00:32:58](#)):

Well, um,

Rachel Byrne ([00:33:00](#)):

And what's your experience more than anything else, you know, has it been an easy experience for you or has it been difficult actually finding some of these different things to be able to do?



Lisa Denker ([00:33:10](#)):

Well? I, I think that, um, when I think of first is funding and I mean, I'm here because the film just recently received that the NYWIFT Loreen Arbus grant, um, which is fabulous with the additional bonus of Michelle doing the audio description. And that just is amazing. This film is long, uh, in the making and there are many, um, the film when I started, it was never in fashion. So it was kind of hard to fundraise to begin with. And, um, but it certainly wasn't in fashion as far as fulfilling criteria, what funders were looking for most of the time, the initial key grants were local to Judy Finelli, the subject in San Francisco. And that's how it really got going. Um, but thinking about, um, I guess your main question is about accessibility for this film and getting this film out, or...

Rachel Byrne ([00:34:11](#)):

No, you kind of just answered it though, like thinking about funding and thinking about filmmakers going, okay, how do we get this into place? How do we make it that this is common practice? And as you said, Isaac, maybe it is, if you want to enter this in a film festival, you have to have audio description, but then it does come down to this next piece, is will, how do you get that audio description funded? And, you know, Michelle, I know you offer your services, you know, far and wide. And, and, you know, obviously as part of this grant, um, which is phenomenal, but not everyone has that opportunity. So, you know, is there other places that even Michelle you're aware of where people can go to try and get things like this funded,

Michele Spitz ([00:34:51](#)):

I'm going to defer to Isaac for a minute, because Isaac, do you want to explain how you've put audio description in place and what's happened over the years?

Isaac Zablocki ([00:34:58](#)):

Um, of course, of course, um always thanks to Michelle. Um, but now we definitely, I mean, we've, we've had to raise money for this. We actually, it's kind of one of the perks for Reel Abilities. It shouldn't be the business plan, but yes, if you go to Reel Abilities, we create audio description and captions for all the films. We actually, I have to note this year, Michelle, you probably went over all the films with us and, and this year more than ever, um, films came to us with those accessibility aids. So we're, we're going in the right direction. Um, and, and we, we, you know, some years in the past had to create for a hundred percent of the films and for we've looked for like creative ways. We've looked for, we actually created a sponsorship for each, each, um, each film. So you create the accessibility for a film. And one of our sponsors comes in and supports that and create some, all their credit lives on with that film. So, um, it's there whenever those audio, those, those accessibility aids are used. And it's a great gift to the filmmakers. The filmmakers, I think, have to start writing into the budget when they were from, from the beginning of the film, you know, the same way you write it in a budget, into the budget, color correction you write in, um, the accessibility AIDS. It should be made a requirement. A lot of the time, I understand, especially independent filmmakers that have such limited funds. They're waiting for the distributor to take that on because it really only come once it's in the distribution stage. Um, but ideally this would come actually in an earlier state, ideally this would come when they're even submitting to their first film festival.

Isaac Zablocki ([00:36:36](#)):

Think about it, that a panelist from a film festival can't have, can't be either, either deaf or blind to use, those specific examples. Um, they won't be able to access a film. It doesn't have audio description or

captions, which means they won't be part of the selection process. That's already, um, a w w we'll limit, um, how our entire industry works. So if this is really, you know, part of the finished process, like, you know, in those, in that final stage, and by the way, I have to say, it's all very much artistic and the directors need to be involved with this. Um, a lot of the times I see once a distributor takes it on, then a distributor checks out the audio description and the captions, and you never want that to, as a director, Lisa, you never want that to happen. You want to have obviously have an eye on it and know where, where this is being intrusive, where this is being actually not accurately descriptive, and, and therefore it needs to really happen. Um, within that artistic, before the film is locked within that artistic stage.

Rachel Byrne ([00:37:38](#)):

And I think one of the really big, you know, important things to point out is when we're talking about, you know, who, uh, who is this community, it's a large community we're talking about, you know, 20-25% of the United States individuals have disabilities. So there is a huge amount of people potentially in different formats that are missing out on the opportunity of, um, being represented in films, obviously accessing films. You know, so it's not just for a very small amount of people where we're talking about a lot of people here, um, who should be able to actually experience these, uh, films. Now I want to start taking a little bit of a switch on gears, cause I would really love to talk about obviously the, the documentary Lisa that you have made and obviously sort of the why, you know, you spoke about that. It wasn't really on trend at the time when you started this. And, um, obviously you've got some very passionate people on this panel and myself included with accessibility and disability is our world. And it's everything that we do that. What made you want to make a documentary about Judy Finelli?

Lisa Denker ([00:38:42](#)):

Um, you know, I, I knew Judy Finelli when I was young, when I was a young woman. Um, I used to juggle when I was a kid. So I was introduced to Judy early in my life, but later in my life, a couple of people that I knew approached me and said, Hey, you know, Judy's now back at circus center. And, um, it's, it's pretty cool. And they kind of, you know, nudged me a little and I investigated it. And, um, I initially I really considered it. And then I thought, no, it's too similar to, uh, the previous film, "Heart of the Sea" about a Hawaiian legend Rell Sunn who was Hawaii's first face for breast cancer. And, but then a year went by and I did attend a big fundraiser for Judy. And it was in this moment at the palace of fine arts when I saw the community there fundraising for her. Um, and I saw the students wrapped around her after the show. Um, it was a moment where I was drawn in and then I started talking to Judy, Judy shared her unpublished manuscript. And when I saw that story arc, I was really pulled in and then I started talking to Judy about it. Yeah. And then I, then I started envisioning a film too, and we worked from there,

Rachel Byrne ([00:40:08](#)):

You know, and as I said, for those that haven't seen "Still Judy", it's a really phenomenal, um, piece and, um, you know, Judy's life and, and, you know, the story off that you've had and you're looking at Judy's life, you know, what do you hope that audiences will take away from it?

Lisa Denker ([00:40:26](#)):

Well, I think what it really centers on that, that gives it universality is, is that in the hardest or, or most challenging of situations or times, she's just an amazing example of finding new meaning and moving forward. And she's had to do that over and over again. And the film, um, does, um, get at that. And, um,

I would say that is maybe the main theme that, that I personally really appreciate. Um, there's so much more, but that's a simple answer.

Rachel Byrne ([00:41:12](#)):

No, and I think there's, there's joy in that answer there, right there is going okay as, as a viewer, you know, what is, what are they taking away and to see her, um, strengths, resilience, there's, there's so many wonderful descriptions, the duty as a, as a human being. Um, so sort of moving on, like thinking about those different steps, what do you hope, um, uh, you know, for, for the film? Like what, what do you hope, uh, at the next steps for you, obviously you were awarded this grant, um, yeah. What are you, what are your hopes for the film?

Lisa Denker ([00:41:51](#)):

Well, I'm really on the post-production path and right now working on archive and that's, that's, um, that's hard going because, um, some of the archive is expensive, so it's forcing me to re-edit it, and this is a typical process, but, um, and make decisions, but the film tends to get better. The more I shake out of it. And, um, I, you know, once, um, this is all locked in, which will be soon, then I can move on into bigger post phases. Um, you know, it's a lot to fund. I mean, I will still need to fundraise to get it through online audio composer. Um, but you know, I, the film does not have distribution. And in the past, um, you know, I had, uh, applied to, um, some of the, the obvious realms for this film, like PBS series, like independent lens or, uh, and so on or reframed America, you know, at one time reframed America was interested and truly California was, but the film wasn't far enough along, they were on such a quick time cycle that the turnaround and the lack of funds didn't make those happen. And now I'm really glad that it didn't happen actually, because I think it's a better film now than it was at that time.

Rachel Byrne ([00:43:11](#)):

Yeah. And I think this, you know, for anyone who is a filmmaker, who's watching, um, Isaac, I'll ask you this question, you know, when we, when we hear stories about this film and, and, you know, "Still Judy", how important this film is for hopefully other people to see and be distributed. Um, what are some of the tips that you might give to any about sort of who are watching today to get it to that stage? You know, and particularly on some of these, uh, topics where we're trying to promote, uh, obviously film around disability, make sure those stories are told, what are some of your tips that you could, um, throw out there?

Isaac Zablocki ([00:43:48](#)):

Um, that's a good question, but I think I, first of all, seeking out, um, as much authenticity as possible, I think is something that's crucial and will elevate your story and allow you to, to really be honest to, to the community. And I think, I think the community itself, um, has, is it's very broad and it's very spread out, but, um, there's, there's a lot of resources within it and it's great to try to engage that community. And I think it will, that will make whatever community, whatever, whatever part of the of the disability community. Um, you're making a film about, I think, to make sure to have some level engagement, um, is, is a great place to start, um, funding as in for any independent filmmaker is always challenging. And I have to say that if it's a, if it's a film about, um, disability, unfortunately Hollywood has not made it, um, easy enough yet. And we are, and we're still trying to put those images out there. So P I mean, I, I hear it myself. I live on the upper West side and this is a progressive community. And people say to me, I don't do disability. And it's like, would you say that about any other minority group? And how do we change those perspectives? And I think the more we see it out there, the more we make sure that people go to

those films. I mean, when you remember that 20% of our community is our, our, of our society are people with disabilities. People with disabilities have to start that community. Our community needs to start seeing these films. If 20% of the population went to see a certain film, that film will make a lot of money and more people will invest in films like it. So, um, so we need to start internally. It needs to, we need to change these perceptions. We need to allow people to also, you know, you gotta meet people where they are as a friend of mine. Uh, Lawrence Carter long always says, you gotta meet them where they are. So I think it's a lot of time working hard to bring these concepts. This might be a challenge for somebody, people bring it to them and challenge them.

Rachel Byrne ([00:46:02](#)):

No, I think that's such great advice. And I think, um, Michelle is sort of a question for you for filmmakers as well, who are sort of potentially in this sort of final stage and ready to go put audio descriptions on what do they do? How do they get that bit sort of across the line?

Michele Spitz ([00:46:20](#)):

In terms of..

Rachel Byrne ([00:46:21](#)):

Well, who do, who do they reach out to? You know, what is to get these audio descriptions done? Like what's there and what resources are available to them?

Michele Spitz ([00:46:29](#)):

The number one thing I wanted to respond earlier was, um, after Isaac was speaking, I think another way to create more funding for people to perhaps create audio description and captions, what have you, uh, before the film goes to any festival or what have you, are other finishing film grants, for example, there are many other organizations, not just film festivals that should have this in place. It would make a very big difference because it would, it would bring awareness to it. And I think even for example, grants, perhaps one day from the NEA and the Ford Foundation, all these people, I think there should be a pool of funding. Hopefully it will be my dream. One day. I'd like to facilitate some of this, that these larger organizations that are supporting disability at large are also going to help the accessibility assets. That's one thought I've had the other, as far as addressing that question. So people can go to larger companies, post production companies and request that their film be audio described and or captioned. They also can go. For example, to the ACB website, there is a page of various people that do this work, and perhaps they can determine what budget they're working with and call some of these individuals or email, some of these individuals. So it happens in many different ways. I also believe the San Francisco film festival is now also creating, finishing film grants with part of that protocol of audio description, captioning being part of it, it's sort of a condition. So there are many ways to do that. Or, you know, we can refer people, Isaac, you probably can refer people. I can refer people. And if I have room in my budget and my time, I will certainly consider people when I can. So I think we just have to figure out a way to do it.

Michele Spitz ([00:48:16](#)):

And I'm, I agree with Isaac when I'm doing any of my lectures and my panels, I do suggest that people carve out, um, perhaps align in their budget to dedicate to this. And if the mindset is built there in place, I think the funding will come. It's not an enormous amount. It's not a very small amount for some people, especially that are working with every penny matters, right? Especially independent filmmakers,

but where there's a will, there's a way. And I encourage people to reach out to me and perhaps I can redirect them more if I'm available, we'll see what my schedule is, but I just want, I don't want people to find a reason not to do it. I want people to find a reason and every reason to do it.

Rachel Byrne ([00:48:54](#)):

And I think you brought up a wonderful point as well. Like there are lots of organizations. So even for example, the Cerebral Palsy Foundation, you know, we may not have a specific grant for this particular purpose right now, but we absolutely are always looking to try to support our community. And if a project is put in front of us, that we support, we would do that as well. So I think this is the thing looking sort of broader potentially than just even the film industry for some funding opportunities. You know, we really do look at supporting the community and making sure this authentic storytelling gets told, um, you know, we've got some wonderful questions actually coming in. So I do want to go to the audience. Um, now one of the first ones is actually sort of talking about what we've just been going on about like, how can we, as a community break down some of the stigma throughout projects. Um, so just, uh, for a bit of background, um, this, uh, individual, uh, is a survivor of a Comber in grad school. Who's now developing a feature documentary, highlighting the science of neurological restoration, but really sort of the question is around stigma. And I think, um, Isaac, I'll start with you with this question, because, you know, when you think about what Reel Abilities is doing, you really have broken down so many barriers when it comes to stigma and bias towards individuals with disability and particularly in the film industry.

Isaac Zablocki ([00:50:15](#)):

Um, absolutely. And I give credit off of course, to the cerebral palsy foundation as well. Um, this is, this is like part of what we're all about. Film is a great way to break down stigmas and first of all, to give representation and that there's, there's a definite lack of, um, uh, it was amazing. We showed, we showed a few years. I, we showed a few years ago. We showed a film to a group of kids from a school for children with disabilities. Um, this was the first time having a film experience part of their, their school experiences actually to, to be taken to the supermarket for the first time to be taken, uh, to be trained in, in certain areas, um, and cinemas weren't opening up to them. So they came to, um, to our cinema for Reel Abilities. We were of course, open to them and we show them films that happened to be, and it's not always that, you know, Oh, if you have, um, if you're autistic, then you want to watch a film about autism and it might not be true.

Isaac Zablocki ([00:51:15](#)):

But for these children to see people like them up on the screen for the first time being played in, in an authentic way, um, was, was groundbreaking for them. And it gave them, you know, such a, such a, such an understanding of the presence of who they are and, and, and a recognition. And so I think that that's one side of it showing it, um, to the community themselves, but there's also, of course, uh, of course film was a great way to get people. I mean, we, we choose films that are just good stories and are engaging. And I like to think anyone, you can think you have no connection to disability whatsoever. Um, everyone does. Um, but, but you might think that you don't, and you'll enjoy these films because they're, they're, well-made, they're, well-told, they're, they're, they're moving, they're exciting. They're funny. They're whatever they are.

Isaac Zablocki ([00:52:14](#)):

And that's, and film is just such a great way to open that door and to allow people to who normally in the street possibly. I mean, sometimes say they don't know how to interact with people with disabilities.

When I see somebody in a wheelchair, what do I do? What do I say? Um, hi is a good place to start by the way. But, um, um, but when you see, when you spend an hour and a half watching a feature film, um, about somebody with a disability, this enters your psyche a little bit and, and makes you more familiar with a world that is inclusive.

Rachel Byrne ([00:52:49](#)):

And I think it comes down to these authentic storytelling. So at least I'm going to ask you this question, because obviously that's what you've done with this film is sort of tell an authentic story and tell it a story that doesn't have, you know, it still has its trial and tribulations, but it's telling Judy's story in a way that, um, is authentic to her. I think you've really given her a, such a powerful and strong voice in your film, but how do you maintain that authenticity, you know, as you're writing that narrative. And I think this is important for filmmakers to think about.

Lisa Denker ([00:53:20](#)):

Well, I do think that paying attention to the backbone of the film, which, um, was, it was Judy's interview and that was one of the first domains, um, and really, um, utilizing Judy was very articulate. And, um, not only did we have some, some great, um, delivery of, of her sharing her life story in from the interview, but we also went back and recorded audio, just audio, um, what we called the Judy monologue, um, for fill in pieces, um, in the opening of the film, um, throughout the film actually, and the ending, um, in three major places. Um, so it was important to let Judy tell her story. And, um, just one note about the Judy interview is that it was unusual to film that because for Judy to have the vocal energy, uh, to withstand an interview, which as we all know, interviews take awhile.

Lisa Denker ([00:54:26](#)):

Um, and we, um, had to put the camera on a jib and put it over Judy as she was reclined backwards, which was better for her, for her lungs, for her air, for her, um, delivery. And, and she, um, said she could let you know, for her, that was a longer lasting position to do an interview in. So we did that and, um, working with her energy also, it was over two months period, and it was 13 hours and there was a lot to pull from. And Judy was, um, the reason why it was so long as she shared her manuscript. So I was over prepared and asked way too many questions.

Rachel Byrne ([00:55:12](#)):

I think you got creative as well, right, and I think this is the piece from the very beginning. You had Judy at the forefront of being involved in the, also in the making of film telling you, okay, well, this is where I need to be. You need to meet me where I'm at. You need to meet me kind of what you just said before. Um, Isaac, you know, meet even the subject where they're at, don't try to push them beyond, you know, what might be possible, because then you will get the actual, authentic story. You will get what you want. Um, you know, there's a lot, um, right now, I suppose, in the general media about authentic representation, you know, particularly in Hollywood, in particularly in feature films, um, Michele, you've been sort of in this industry now for a while, what, what can be done in relation to that? Obviously there's a lot of stuff now. There's, there is a shift in Hollywood, we're seeing more, um, actors with disabilities actually playing those roles. Um, but what about behind the scenes? We've got a question that's coming. Um, what is being done to address underrepresented voice has been included in using the audio description. So it's like thinking about specifically for you, but as a whole in film, you know, in every aspect of filmmaking, how can we have a disability representation increased?

Michele Spitz ([00:56:34](#)):

I think it's happening quite a bit, by the way. Uh, for example, I mean, Isaac can also speak on this. The opening night film, is "Best Summer Ever", and best summer ever is a wonderful film that incorporates people with disabilities and those without, and they are behind the camera. They are some of the, um, production. They are also, I believe, or some of the music and singing and so on and so forth and acting. So that really goes on both sides of the screen, particularly for that film, which I audio described as well. And I think the other thing I wanted to point out just listening to everybody and I want to make sure I mentioned this. If you look at the Oscars right now, where we are with nominations, there are three films that are very prevalent there right now, um, that are based on disability subjects and that's "Crip Camp" and "Feeling Through", and, um, "The Sound of Metal".

Michele Spitz ([00:57:25](#)):

And that's unique that three films are in that category. And I think that says something about where we are as far as that's concerned. And as far as behind the camera in front of the camera involved in every way, shape or form, um, I have to also commend respectability because respectability was stands behind all of that. And they put on beautiful, uh, summer lab programs that I've participated in as well. And people in the industry are helping people with disabilities, learn about where they might see themselves. They're currently in their mid-career track or their early on, or what have you. And so for me, it's almost already there and I'm already part of that because I work within that. So I see that as part of the fabric already, I think more of it needs to take place and I think it's happening. And a lot of the studios are taking this on behind the scenes, behind the scenes rather, and also in front. So it's really already happening and evolving. And I think it's only going to get more and more like that. And I think more people who are talented need to put themselves out there and make themselves visible as far as what their capabilities are and reach out and apply for these positions. I think there's a wonderful future. We have ahead. It's just really starting to evolve, but it's definitely moving.

Rachel Byrne ([00:58:42](#)):

Yeah. And I, and I think the other thing is, is for anyone who's watching, if you are a filmmaker and you're putting together your crew or you're putting together, who's a part of it, have a look around you, do you have diversity? Are you, is the, is there representation, um, within the people that you're working with? And if not, I'll start asking those questions going well, why, um, you know, if, if you're doing a film and, um, the, the story is around somebody with a disability and you're looking to fill that role, you know, look within that disability community, look with in finding that authentic, authentic voice, because there's another question that's coming here. And, um, where is the best place to find crew members who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have a disability, they want to make their crew more inclusive, but they're saying they're having trouble finding crew members. And I think to your point, Michele, they're out there. So absolutely it's not that whole piece. Well, if they were there, um, we would hire them or, you know, there just isn't enough, enough, good actors who have disabilities well no there are, um, it's just a matter of looking in the right places and, you know, making your film feel accessible to those people.

Michele Spitz ([00:59:50](#)):

So I can respond to that. Not only would I personally suggest you reach out to respectability as an organization because they will post and they do every week, um, opportunities for people that are being cast for various reasons with disabilities, so that that's already in place. Lights, Camera, Access also does the same and they'll put posts out of opportunities. The other thing is there are, um, a couple of

agencies that represent talent with disability and they're helping place them in the media. So there are many ways to do this. And again, I would make myself visible and I would reach out to find out where they can make themselves more visible, but it does exist.

Isaac Zablocki ([01:00:34](#)):

It takes the slightest bit more effort, but, um, but it makes all the difference. So it's worth making that effort to find them out there and agree that those, those are great organizations. We too, as part of the real abilities, try to post any kind of cinema related, um, ad. And I want to know them. Uh, Rachel, just based on going back to your question that yes. So, so often, I mean, obviously the visibility is on the actors and that's why that gets a lot of attention. Um, but I mean, I think actually inclusion starts with, with actually the writers, the directors, um, the people who are on sets and making sure that's an inclusive environment and by the way, the, the way to, to change it. And, and I mean, I mean, Michelle has, I'm glad Michelle has such a positive outlook on this that we're really going in the right direction. Um, but it should be required. I mean the same way, you know, there needs to be an equal, if not higher percentage of women on every set, there, there should be inclusion of full diversity and don't forget within diversity, often the disability and diversity is included is forgotten. So, um, yeah, definitely. Um, keep that in mind. And, um, uh, and it really, I think will once, once it's once different productions start really taking this seriously and hiring people with disabilities, um, it's going to change our world.

Rachel Byrne ([01:02:01](#)):

I love your storytelling that you're going to hear and that the films themselves are going to become so much richer for it there, you know, and, um, the stories that you have seen before that have been pretty much told sometimes by people without disabilities, you know, it's from their perspective. And, um, if they had included people with disabilities in that film, it would have been so much better than what it was. And so I think, you know, that's where I hope we see this progression and it continued to go because I, I hope it, I hope it goes like this. I hope we're just at the start of it. And it's going to really sort of, you know, lift off in a way because it needs to happen.

Michele Spitz ([01:02:41](#)):

May I just mention two other things really quickly? Um, Jim Lebrecht is an amazing person and of course he is the subject and, and involves, of course the film, "Crip Camp". He has created a wonderful group of people with disabilities making documentaries called forward doc. And I think if people are interested in participating in that, it's a great organization it's in its infancy, but they're incredibly wonderful people. In addition to The Casting Society of America is also putting together protocol for accessibility onset and best practices, so on and so forth in casting. So it really, it really is there it's really there. You just have to also seek it out. So I just wanted to note that also.

Rachel Byrne ([01:03:23](#)):

Yeah. And I think, you know, a question for you now, Lisa, um, as we sort of wrapping up, people want to know when's your film going to be available to the public? How can members of NYWIFT see this film?

Lisa Denker ([01:03:37](#)):

Well, I'm hoping to get it through post this year. It would probably take about eight, eight to 12 months to get it through, I think.



Rachel Byrne ([01:03:47](#)):

Okay. So for anyone watching has a very sort of important piece. And I think the other piece, you know, when you're thinking about, um, the, the makeup of your teams and who's been hired, you know, sometimes, uh, not all disabilities are visible. I think that's important to sort of note out, we've spoken about very much sort of, um, potentially visible disabilities and people don't have to disclose their disability and all of that as well. So that's what, you know, it's an important piece to think about when you're sort of looking at your team and you can't just presume people don't have a disability just because you can't see it. But, um, you know, I think that sometimes those individuals are left out of the conversation as well. You know, we think about, okay, accessibility, you're thinking about a physical disability. Yes. You can see that you think about ranch. You think about those other things that there are so many more components.

Rachel Byrne ([01:04:36](#)):

Um, I think we've got maybe one more question time for one more question. And, and this is about, um, actually Broadway. So do you feel since the Broadway closure has now begun to stream performances, do you feel this is an opportunity to follow suit, to provide a ASL interpretation once Broadway reopens? So this is kind of it's, this is an interesting thing. Thinking about live performances somewhere like Broadway and opening, uh, I suppose, opportunity up there for, um, other individuals to be able to go watch.

Michele Spitz ([01:05:13](#)):

I can respond to that. There's a fair percentage of Broadway programs that are audio described and that have captions on so forth captioning bars, so and so forth that happens, uh, perhaps on certain days, certain times, but that actually is more prevalent in New York, uh, perhaps also in Europe than it is in California. So it is there and there are headsets that are used. There are also apps that are being used now, and apps are becoming very prevalent. Also, uh, you can use them in movie theaters, you can sync with your, your television. So this is, this is already embedded in it. And TDF theater development fund does incredible work around accessible, um, Broadway programming and also accommodating other, uh, accessible, uh, other disabilities such as autistic members in the audience and so on and so forth. So they're extraordinary and they're based in New York.

Rachel Byrne ([01:06:07](#)):

Well, I think, you know, we have just had a wonderful conversation and I'm really excited to see where all of this is going to head in the next 12 months in the next two years. I think the work that this panel is doing is extraordinary. You're really elevating and lifting up and, um, promoting what should hopefully become gold-standard. As you said, Isaac if all of this would go away, if this panel didn't need to be had, because it was a common place, that would be a really wonderful thing. And I think we're on the right trajectory. So I just wanted to thank you all for being part of today's panel. And, um, it's been wonderful being here with you all.

Michele Spitz ([01:06:50](#)):

Thank you. Thank you for having us.

Rachel Byrne ([01:06:53](#)):

Thank you everybody.

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