

CAC Corner: Expanding Roles for People with Disabilities

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“Hollywood’s Greatest Role Ever: Expanding Opportunities for People with Disabilities,” was a panel discussion sponsored by Shriners Hospitals for Children at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival. Panelists included Montel Williams, a famous TV talk show host; RJ Mitte, an actor in the TV series “Breaking Bad;” Peter Farrelly, a director, whose films include “There’s Something About Mary,” “Dumb And Dumber,” and “The Ringer;” Lizzy Weiss, the producer and writer of the TV shows “Switched at Birth” and “Blue Crush;” J.R. Martinez, an actor and motivational speaker who is in the cast of “All My Children” and who a finalist on “Dancing with the Stars;” and Amy Purdy, a Paralympian Medalist and “Dancing with the Stars” finalist. The Utah Developmental Disabilities Council was invited to attend and James O’Neill from Park City (former DD Council and CAC member) and I attended this panel on a late Sunday afternoon during the height of Sundance.

The panelists started a wonderful conversation as they each introduced themselves by describing their connection to the film industry and their connection to the disability community. RJ Mitte kicked off the discussion by stating that his passion is to get media (TV and the movies) to reflect real people and their real lives. People with disabilities are the largest minority in the United States, but currently only a tiny 2 percent of actors in the media portray people with disabilities! Each panel member

expressed his or her interest in increasing the visibility of people with disabilities in TV shows and movies to reflect the actual percentage of people with disabilities in the population. And, they urged the film industry bigwigs to hire actors with disabilities to play these roles. That would mean an increase of at least 12 – 40 percent in the number of actors with disabilities working in both films and TV. We have a LONG WAY TO GO to reach that number, but the exciting thing is the panel’s dedication to making Hollywood cast people with disabilities in these roles!

Panel members focused on the impact Hollywood has on how the general public views people with disabilities. The panel’s main message was to encourage members of film and TV industry to write scripts that accurately portray the wide variety of people with disabilities in our world and to hire actors with disabilities to play these roles.

Lizzie Weiss spoke about the research she did to create main character who is deaf in her TV show. Lizzy spent several months at a deaf school in LA to learn about deaf culture and better understand how to best portray the character she developed. Lizzy told the audience that the students at the school were extremely excited when they learned that the character she was creating was going to have a **lead role** and not just be a one-shot character as is too often the current situation in TV series that include a person with a disability.

Seeing yourself or someone like yourself on screen is really important for everyone. If you think about it, that has been the history of TV and movies for every minority for the past 50+ years. Black people really liked “The Cosby Show” as it reflected a “normal” Black family doing “normal” things. Gay people are more accepted and less “scary” because lesbians and gay men are now portrayed in film and TV as our neighbors and our friends just like in real life situations. Panel members said it loudly and strongly: the time has come for the media to cast and portray all people with disabilities in a way to showcase their ABILITIES!

Following the panel discussion, James and I got a chance to chat with Montel Williams during a dinner for the panel and special guests hosted by Shriners’ Hospitals for Children at Zoom’s, Robert Redford’s restaurant on Main Street in Park City. Montel said that he wants to carry this conversation on all over the country and to push Hollywood to make these changes now!

How cool will it be when Hollywood begins to better reflect the lives of people with disabilities. The conversation has begun – and it is going to gain ground. I came away from the evening with hope and excitement that things are

going to get much better soon! Peter Farrelly said he had hired many talented actors with Down syndrome for his movie. He said, "They were on time and they knew their lines!" This sounded so familiar to me – it is the chorus of the majority of employers who hire people with disabilities. Employers say time and again that people with disabilities make the best employees – they are on time and they do their job well.

Hollywood is starting to take up the cause of inclusion for the disability community – disability is a natural part of life and that should be reflected in the media we all watch! Isn't that what we all really want – to feel a part of the community and to see people like us on the screen? There is no better way to educate society about the lives of people with disabilities than to see ourselves reflected as a "normal" part of society on TV shows and in films.

I guess I will have to hold my breath for a long, long, time but maybe I'll actually get to see a large older woman super hero who looks like me on the big screen someday! (LOL stay tuned ...)