

# Crip Camp as a Case Study

“It’s been an extraordinary experience to get a sense of the impact that our film is having and I think that perhaps it’s shown the gatekeepers that there is a way of making films about disability that aren’t stuck in the old tropes. But that’s not going to happen very quickly if we’re not in the position of being producers, writers and directors. I think it’s the responsibility of the entertainment community and business to understand that we are a culture, we have a great deal of pride. If Crip Camp shows you anything, it’s that there are incredible stories out there that aren’t the same old, same old.

– Jim LeBrecht, Co-Director of *Crip Camp*



Feature documentary *Crip Camp* (Netflix, 2020), directed and produced by Nicole Newnham and Jim LeBrecht, produced by Sara Bolder and executive produced by President Barack Obama and Michelle Obama, offers an empowering example of a world-class collaborative film production whose methodologies ensured disabled inclusion and access **on-screen, behind the camera** and for **audiences**.

Infused with the spirit of the disability movement's mantra, **"Nothing About Us Without Us,"** the film is a significant milestone in disability representation and inclusion and attracted global distribution on Netflix and critical acclaim. Filmmakers and film participants with disabilities are empowered to tell their own stories with authenticity. Together they create an entertaining and universal piece of cinema, featuring a playful and nuanced representation of valued lives. In turn, they challenge and shape attitudes towards, assumptions about and expectations of disabled people in the world.

---

## Collaboration

An essential component of the working ethos on *Crip Camp* was a collaboration that valued everyone's expertise. This was built on trust, making the time and space to elevate everyone's voices, and ensuring that the needs of everyone on the team, whether connected to disability or not, were welcome in the working environment. Nicole and Jim had already collaborated on several films together (Jim as a sound designer and mixer on Nicole's films, and Nicole as an award-winning director experienced in working equitably with marginalised communities). Their co-directing partnership brought everyone's skill sets to the fore and enabled powerful interactions with film participants.

**Nicole Newnham: "Corbett O'Toole, who is this extraordinary activist in the film, said [during her interview], 'This is really nice. It's really nice to be interviewed by a director who has a disability.' He wasn't going to ask her to put her shoes on and get out of bed on camera, or any of that bit of Othering that often goes on when we non-disabled people try to show people with disabilities and how they live. It was about the way Jim was looking at the world."**

This trusting collaboration also empowered the co-directors to navigate the demands of both co-directing a film and one of them featured in it.

**Nicole Newnham: "We were completely capable of having both these very intimate internal conversations [about Jim's life] and then these more film structure conversations, and as a co-director, Jim was a part of putting on different hats and doing all of that [as one of the participants in the film] even while things were very raw and difficult."**

This process of trust-building and collaboration demonstrates the richness that storytelling forms can take when those with lived experience are in senior positions on productions.

# Authentic empowerment

Empowering people with disabilities and people from other marginalised perspectives to tell their own story was embedded in the values and actions of the *Crip Camp* editorial team, and directly benefited the storytelling dynamic. The filmmakers worked with archive footage captured by The People's Video Theatre during the days of the camp, and collaborated with legendary activist and camper Judy Heumann and several other campers and camp staff before, during, and after filming.

**Nicole Newnham: “We kept having screenings to the disability community. We would caption and audio describe cuts during the editing process so that we could show them to folks and get back impressions from people with disabilities. And we really accepted that it was not going to be done until we had a film that people responded to as ‘Yes, that’s the authentic experience.’”**

**“And sometimes things that we might do in another film that would be great, actually we discovered with this film they would bump people’s minds over into an [‘inspiration porn’](#) way of seeing the story, or into ‘Oh God, tragedy’. So we were always trying to figure out ways that we could avoid that. Our ‘secret sauce’ became emotional complexity. So we were going for a ‘laughing through your tears’ kind of a feeling. Things that were so complex that they could feel true and authentic. Because I think unfortunately a lot of people’s brains have been worn down or just co-opted by the paucity of authentic disability representation and the tropes that the media serves up.**

**“We just kept, kind of like a sculpture, honing away at it until we felt we had something that was an authentic representation of the experiences and we had got to those truths.”**



Image Description: A group of smiling filmmakers and executives is gathered together in front of a purple Sundance Film Festival press backdrop. From left to right: Priya Swaminathan, Tonia Davis, Howard Gertler, Nicole Newnham, Jim LeBrecht, Lisa Nishimura, Ariane Wu and Adam Del Deo.

# Accessibility

Thinking about accessibility in terms of physical barriers was important throughout the filmmaking process, and the team ensured that everyone, including wheelchair users, could get to and from locations for interviews, shoots and post-production. This was an important consideration during filmmaking, but also throughout the process of distribution, festivals, awards. Physical access is crucial to all events that are important to a film's life cycle.

The team at Netflix worked proactively with the filmmakers to support the logistics of attending the film's world premiere at Sundance Film Festival 2020, the National Ability Centre (NAC) provided accessible transportation to the film's cast during the festival in snowy Park City, Utah, and the film festival considered the access needs of *Crip Camp's* cast and crew.

**Jim LeBrecht: "At Sundance, they removed chairs to make sure that the cinema was accessible for all of the film crew to be able to sit together on the opening night, and the whole team was able to fully embrace the experience because it wasn't being held back from people on the team with disabilities."**



Image Description: The Crip Camp team including (in order) Neil Jacobson, Judy Heumann, Nicole Newnham, Jim LeBrecht and Denise Sherer Jacobson are sitting in a crescent in front of a purple Sundance backdrop.

# Accessible deliverables

The experience of crafting accessible deliverables centred around engaging with the disabled community on appropriate language use, as well as finding creative ways to craft rich audio description and captioning so that these accessibility features would further enhance the experience of the film and its characters. Through working with the community and with the scripts for captioning and AD, the filmmakers were able to capture nuances that might otherwise have been missed.

**Nicole Newnham: “[Captions were] something we experimented with a lot actually, with our editors and with each other. What we found is, using a standard subtitle treatment with the folks who have Disability Affected Speech was frustrating, because often the sentence would come up on the screen and then the punchline of the joke or the thing that they were saying would happen in their voice five or six seconds later, and we wanted people to experience the way that our characters were speaking in real-time. We also felt that the way those particular characters spoke was very poetic and powerful and we wanted to honour that. It was Lauren Schwartzman, our associate producer, who started playing around with something that looks a little bit more like beat poetry, moving the placement around so that your eye didn’t have to always go down to the bottom of the screen, and it’s lifted up so you’re able to see what we think was the most important thing in the frame more easily. That’s how that evolved.”**

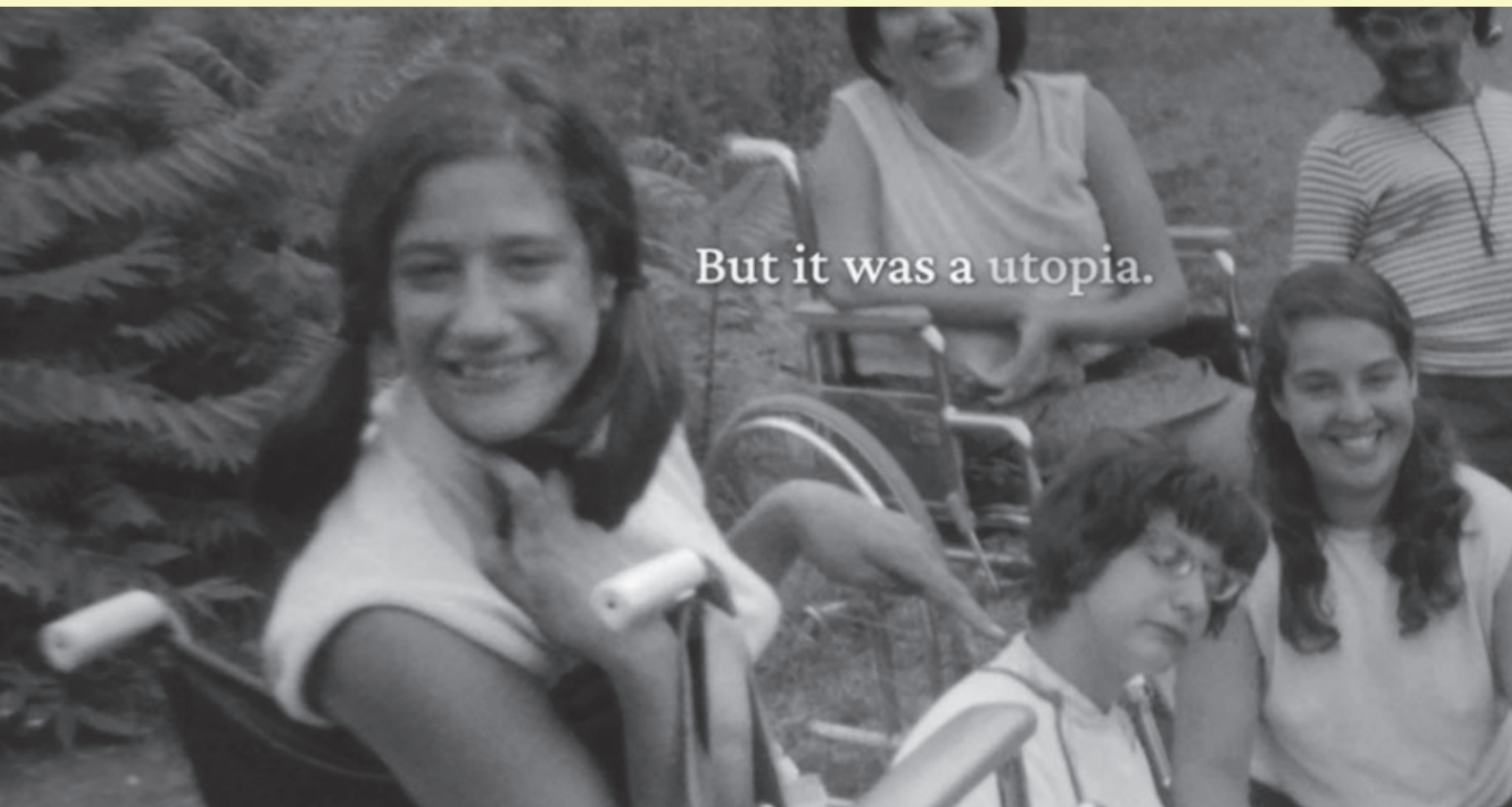


Image Description: A black and white film still of a smiling, teenage Denise Sherer Jacobson sitting with other Camp Jened campers in the 1970's, with 'But it was utopia' written over top in a jaunty style.

# Impact strategy

A major starting point for *Crip Camp's* impact strategy was based around asking people in disability activism, 'How do you think this film could be most useful?' Through hiring experienced disabled talent and engaging with the disabled community and its allies from within, the impact strategy set its goals to promote understanding of disability as a social justice issue and build relationships across lines of difference. They prioritised four main elements: leadership development, community and cross-movement building, education and capacity building for people with and without disabilities.

The series of online workshops that they hosted online during 2020, on various topics surrounding disability including intersectional movement work, was attended by over 10,000 people including President Barack Obama.

Andraéa LaVant, founder of LaVant Consulting, which specialises in helping brands "speak disability with confidence", and *Crip Camp* Consultant and Impact Producer: *"We have a lot of work to do as a society in terms of representation. I've always placed myself in the mainstream, and my goal is to infiltrate spaces that those with disabilities have never been before."*



Image Description: President Barack Obama and Andraéa LaVant on a video call. Both are smiling into the camera. Barack wears a blue button-up shirt and Andraéa wears black-rimmed glasses, a wide-brimmed hat that says 'Crip Camp' and a camp counsellor style outfit.

# Making difficult discoveries and learning from them

Although *Crip Camp* is a disabled-led film and it centres around the experiences of people with disabilities, there were instances in which the team was still learning about best practice for accessibility and inclusion, and they didn't always get it right the first time. For example, the devices providing closed captions for D/deaf viewers malfunctioned at the film's second Sundance screening, and an open-captioned copy of the film hadn't yet been made to use as an alternative. For all filmmakers, it's important to acknowledge that learning journey, and recognise that even knowing a subject firsthand and working within a community, we can still make mistakes. At Sundance, Netflix supported the urgent creation of an open-captioned copy of the film. In fact, the open-captioned version is what ALL audiences experienced once it was available. In this way, the *Crip Camp* team were able to invest even more deeply in accessibility features for the film's release going forward.

As news of the film's release started to circulate, the team received an email from an internationally known Deafblind activist asking if there would be a transcript that could be downloaded so that this community could experience *Crip Camp*. Without blinking an eye, Netflix agreed to create this and so opened up the film to an even wider audience.



Image Description: In a home location, Jim LeBrecht, a white man with curly hair and a goatee beard, sits in a power chair behind a microphone suspended on a stand, while he interviews a woman with short grey hair who has her back to us. Jim and his interviewee are surrounded by lights, cameras, cables on the floor and three film crew members.

# Visibility

One of the most important takeaways for the team working on *Crip Camp* was, as co-director Jim puts it, “If not now, never”. The filmmakers were aware that they would inevitably come up against people’s bias and sometimes ableist ways of seeing disability. So they were proactive about seizing the moment for full visibility and representation with this film, and they built partnerships with supporters like Netflix, Higher Ground Productions, Consulting, Uncommon and Sundance Institute, who were ready to join them in pushing through barriers at last.

**Disability rights activist Judy Heumann: *“I’m hoping that this film not only educates people about the movement, but really enables non-disabled people and people with disabilities, visible and invisible, to recognise the power of story and how this can help make reforms that are so desperately needed in every country.”***



Image Description: Nicole Newnham looks forward, intently, while sitting beside a large camera and film light on set. She is watching action in front of her, while two male crew members watch beside her.