

# Why Make Film Representation of Disability More Equitable? And How...

“Disabled people in film, on television, and in other forms of media should reflect the reality of our lives—our joys, sorrows, struggles, victories, and the everyday issues we all face. Only then will we be able to effectively counteract the themes of our being invisible or seen only as incapable, a drain, a tragedy.

– Judy Heumann, disability rights activist <sup>14</sup>

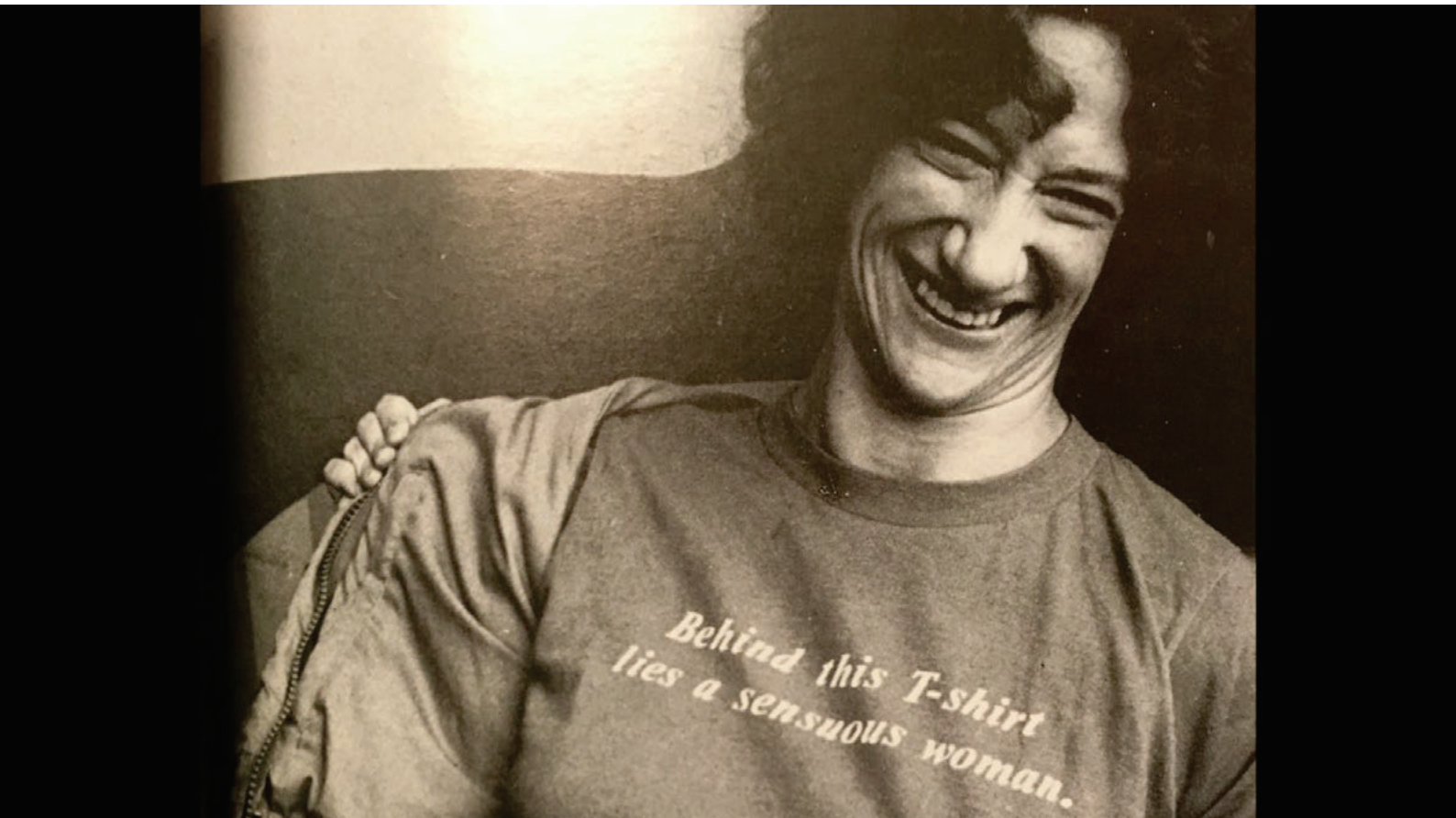


Image Description: A black and white photo of Denise Sherer Jacobson, a white woman with dark curly hair in her early 30's, grinning widely. Her t-shirt says "Behind this T-shirt lies a sensuous woman".

The real-world impact of D/deaf and disabled representation cannot be overstated.

“Keah Brown wept uncontrollably when she saw the documentary *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2020.

**“I couldn’t believe that that was the first time I had seen a disability narrative that wasn’t steeped in self-hatred,”** explains Brown, a millennial writer and activist who has cerebral palsy. **“It was just really refreshing to laugh, and cry, and to get excited about a future where disabled people can tell stories like this one, and not have to hide it under the guise of, ‘How does this make a non-disabled person feel better about themselves?’”**<sup>15</sup>

There is a long history of minimal, stereotypical and often harmful representation of D/deaf and disabled people in film.

**“Stereotypes which medicalise, patronise, criminalise and dehumanise disabled people abound in books, films, on television, and in the press. They form the bedrock on which the attitudes towards, assumptions about and expectations of disabled people are based. They are fundamental to the discrimination and exploitation which disabled people encounter daily and contribute significantly to their systematic exclusion from mainstream community life.”**<sup>16</sup>

Colin Barnes, author of *Disabling Imagery and the Media*

Meanwhile, representation of disability by non-disabled filmmakers continues to benefit non-disabled people and often ableist points of view.

In Hollywood, “59 non-disabled actors have earned Oscar nominations for playing disabled characters. History suggests that those nominees have nearly a 50% shot at a win.”<sup>17</sup>

In fact, “No disabled actor has won an Oscar since [Marlee] Matlin’s 1987 victory. Yet since 1989, the majority of Best Actor Oscars have gone to men playing the sick or disabled.”<sup>18</sup>

**“We continue to hear ‘representation matters’, and yet representation often leaves out 15% of the global population, and that’s people with disabilities. That’s a billion people, which actually means we’re the largest minority in the world. And yet we’re still fighting for equity in every facet of life. ... We’re not a monolith, we all have varied experiences. It’s also [about] recognising the experiences of those of us that experience multiple forms of oppression; Black, indigenous, people of colour, the LGBTQ community.”**

Andraéa LaVant, *Crip Camp* Impact Producer

We asked D/deaf and disabled filmmakers from FWD-Doc, Press Reset and beyond to highlight their priority advice for better D/deaf and disabled representation on-screen. Several key recommendations arose repeatedly:

### **1. Treat disabled people (and characters) as people with the full complement of strengths and flaws.**

- “Understand three things about us before you attempt to tell our stories: 1) That disabled people are **people first**. 2) That we are **not inherently ‘inspirational’** and equally our lives are **not inherently tragic**. 3) That many of us are proud of our disabilities; that we accept ourselves and often see our differences as a gift.” – Actor, Writer
- “Disabled people should comprise around 20% of the characters in the media, representative of the one in five Britons who have a disability. Their roles should take **all forms**, from a romantic lead to a drug dealer to a barista.” – Activist and Writer
- “Stop centering stories solely on people’s disabilities, and stop the **harmful stereotypes**.” – Actor

### **2. Be willing to bring D/deaf and disabled expertise into your projects from the beginning and respect their knowledge and recommendations.**

- “Look at examples of successful films/shows about disability that have been **embraced by D/deaf and disabled audiences**, like *Crip Camp*, *Vision Portraits*, *When I Walk*, *Unrest*, *This Close* and most recently *CODA* ([which was bought by Apple for \\$25 million at Sundance 2021](#)). Think about what they’ve done to earn that embrace (you’ll usually find D/deaf and disabled expertise right at the heart of the filmmaking).” – Producer/Director



- “Able-bodied filmmakers often fall into the trap of **‘inspiration porn’** and this can be seen at a very high level by respected and award-winning filmmakers as a good thing. In one recent documentary example, able-bodied filmmakers had a profound misunderstanding of disability and the disabled community and felt that by crewing the film with disabled filmmakers at junior (non-decision-making) levels they could make a film with integrity. But it didn’t have integrity because it is **pity porn** and contributes to the trope that disabled people are in some ways inspirational for triumphing over adversity. The one simple thing they didn’t do was **ask disabled filmmakers** about good and bad representation on-screen.” – Director
- “Recognise that there is **no one unified experience of disability**, and talk to a range of people with lived experience during filmmaking, from the very beginning of your process. Collaborate with a **variety** of D/deaf and disabled voices to understand the nuances of the experience you’re representing, pay them for their expertise (even a small fee), and actually implement their editorial advice (what’s the point of asking for insight if you ultimately override it with your non-disabled expectations of how a film should be made?).” – Producer/Director



Image Description: Lindsey Dryden, a young white woman with long dark hair carries a tripod, and Marcus Chandler, a young Black man with short dark hair, carries a camera, outdoors with the sun shining behind them.

### 3. Try to understand the systemic nature of exclusion and oppression as it applies to disability and how that shapes the lives of individuals. It impacts real lives; it will impact your project/story.

- “Understand the **social model of disability**: essentially that a person isn’t ‘disabled’ by their health condition or the ways they differ from what’s thought to be the medical ‘norm’; rather it’s the physical and attitudinal barriers in society – prejudice, lack of access adjustments and systemic exclusion – that disable people. Once you understand this, you start to understand why D/deaf and disabled people are desperate to see **on-screen depictions of ourselves that actually value our lives and experience**, and why inspiration porn and ‘disability as tragedy’ and ‘overcoming disability’ tropes are so offensive.” – Producer/Director
- “Portraying disability as negative can be harmful. Imagine watching a film in which **your life experience is portrayed as the worst thing that could ever happen to a person** – how would that affect you? Media done badly makes people feel worthless.” – Producer & Director
- “The filmmaking community needs to understand the **social and medical models of disability**. All public funders and awards bodies should be educated on current thinking in disability politics and opinion, so the same mistakes don’t happen again and again.” – Actor, Writer, Director

### 4. Examine the protocols and processes you use in your creative projects to see if they are exclusionary or based on harmful stereotypes. If so, change them.

- “Disabled people are seen as **risks**. It’s embedded in film protocol, this needs to be rethought as our stories, attributes and skills should be what we’re remembered for.” – Actor, Writer, Activist
- “I have had producers compare working with disabled people as a risk because our ‘needs are unpredictable, like working with babies or animals on set’. I’m not writing about this experience in search of pity; I want people to know what attitudes we are viewed with and how much work needs to be done to undo ableism in the industry.” – Actor, Writer, Activist