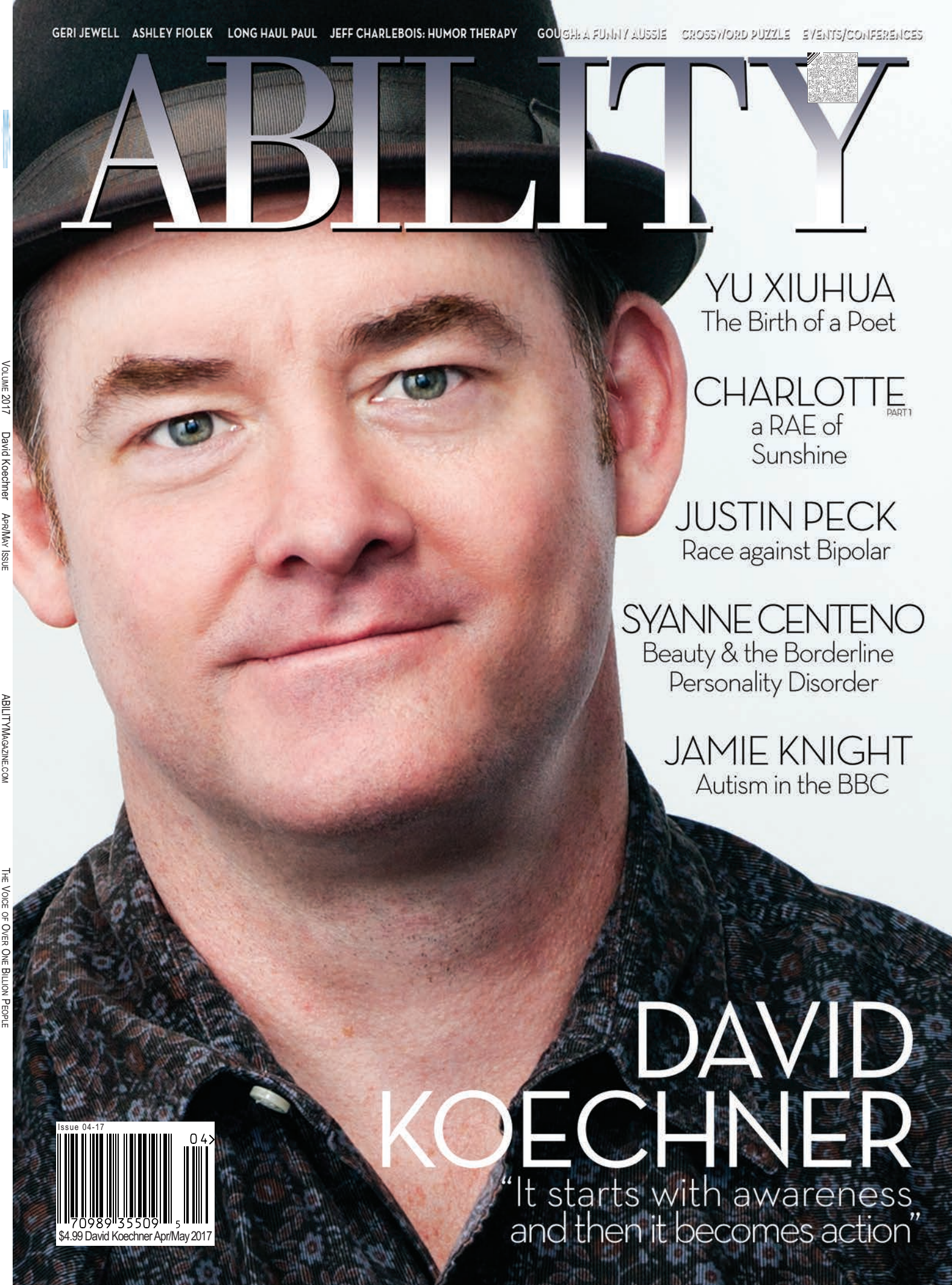
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The Birth of a Poet

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a RAE of Sunshine

JUSTIN PECK
Race against Bipolar

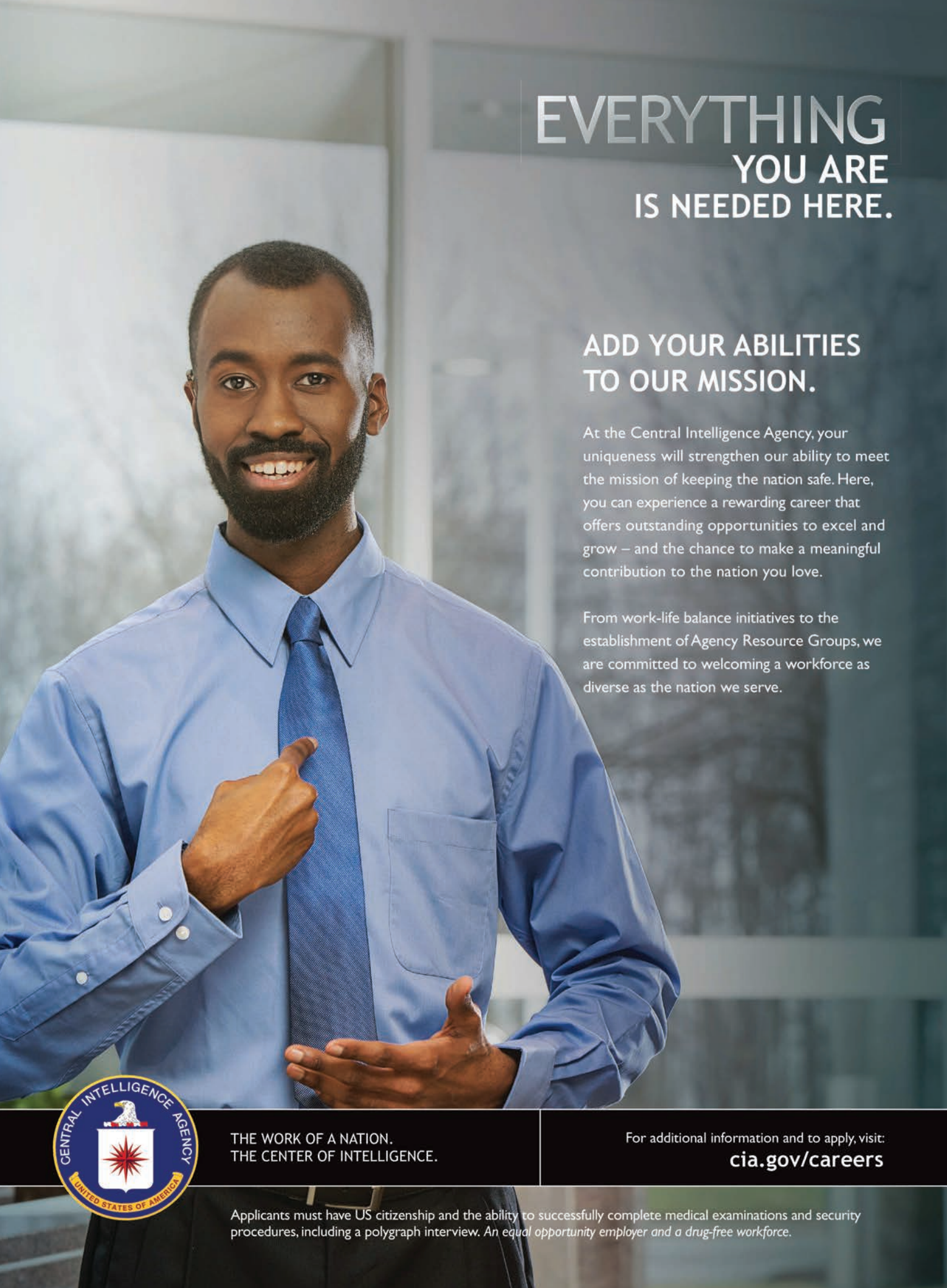
SYANNE CENTENO
Beauty & the Borderline Personality Disorder

JAMIE KNIGHT
Autism in the BBC

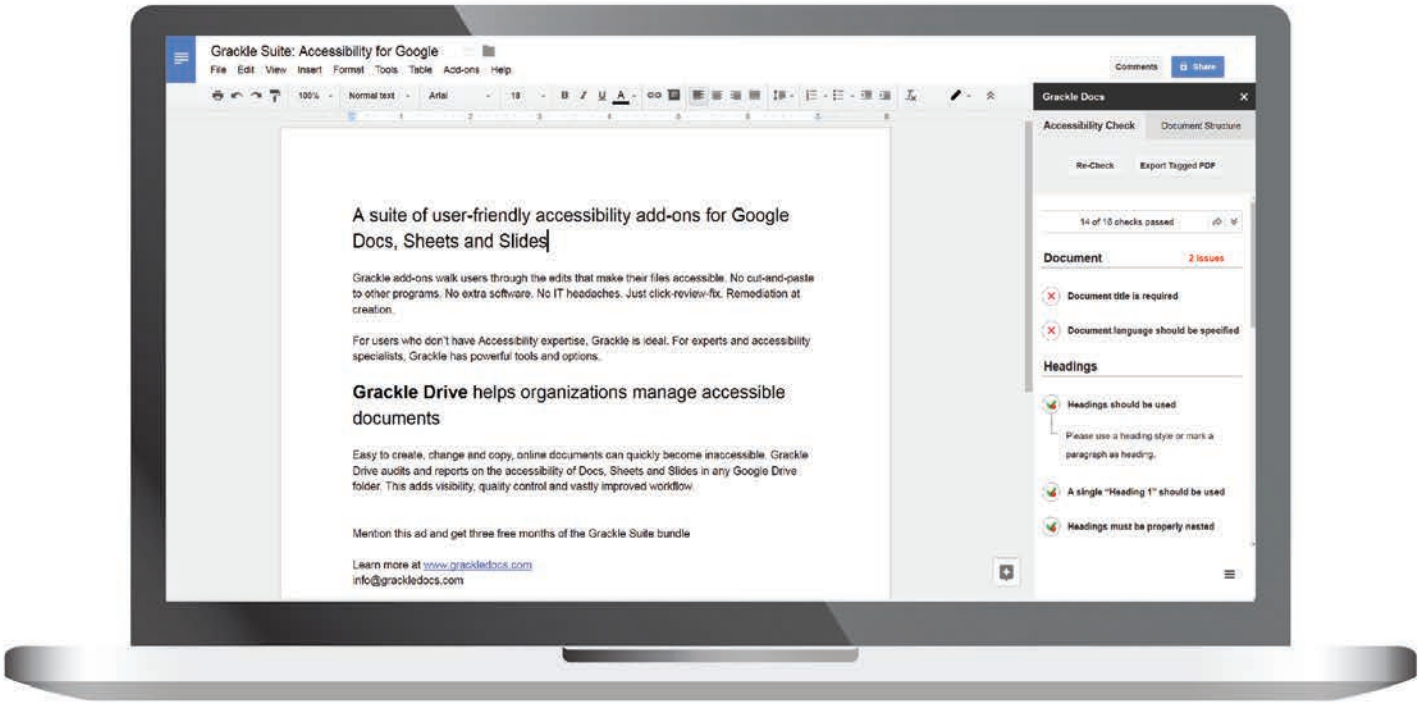
DAVID KOECHNER
"It starts with awareness and then it becomes action"

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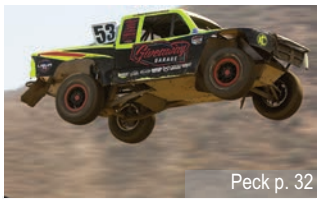
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CONTENTS

6 ASHLEY FIOLEK — Back on track!

8 HUMOR — Can we Fast a Little Faster?

10 GERI JEWELL — Dad on Aisle 7

12 LONG HAUL PAUL — The Brotherhood of MS

14 YU XIUHUA — Poetic Documentation

20 GOUGH — The Vision Behind Beernuts

28 CANDOCO — Art of Diverse Dancing

32 JUSTIN PECK — *Bulletproof* and Mental Health!

40 JAMIE KNIGHT — Lion to Autism

42 DAVID KOECHNER — An Anchored Man

50 SYANNE CENTENO — Beauty and BPD

54 CHARLOTTE RAE — The Facts of Her Life - Part 1

60 *ABILITY'S* Crossword Puzzle / Events & Conferences

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MANAGING EDITOR
Gillian Friedman, MD

MANAGING HEALTH EDITOR
E. Thomas Chappell, MD

HUMOR WRITERS
Jeff Charlebois
George Covington, JD

EDITORS
Paula Fitzgerald
Renne Gardner
Pamela K. Johnson
Sylvia Martirosyan
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Molly McGovern
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CONTRIBUTING WRITERS
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Ashley Fiolek
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Myles Mellor (Crossword Puzzle)
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Sophie Parker
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Lia Limón Martirosyan

ABILITYJOBS.COM
Marge Plasmier
Casey Mims

EDITORIAL
editorial@abilitymagazine.com

PUBLISHER / EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Chet Cooper

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iOS

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- For High Contrast modes, press the button with four colored squares.
- To access the 58 Language Translator, move to the next bar by pressing the button with three dots. Select the first box, with the letter "A". To translate into another language, select the language button to the right, choose your language of preference, press done, then hit the "Translate" button on the bottom left of the screen.



Android

- To hear the text, press your phone's "Option" button, then select "Start TTS"
- To get text in large font, under the "Setting" selection, press the "+" button, and to decrease font press the "-" button.
- For High Contrast modes, under the "Setting" selection, press the button with four colored squares.
- To access the 58 Language Translator, press your phone's "Option" button, and select "Translate". To translate into another language, select the language button to the right, choose your language of preference, then hit the "Translate" button to the right of the selected language.





Happy Spring! I hope your year has been going smoothly so far, and that you were able to get rolling on your 2017 resolutions.

I'm all moved into my new tiny house, and I'm still in the process of getting everything set up. I thought it would be turnkey ready, as they say in real estate, but I was wrong! Fortunately my dad has been amazing with the fixes just by using his homeowner skills and by Googling things!

Right now he's working on my septic system, and that'll be the final big-ticket item that needs to be done to finish my abode. I didn't realize it would take so much work. Dad had to dig a trench, get big plastic barrels with all kinds of PVC-stuff attached, and then he and mom had to shovel rocks into it! I'll take over the next rock-shoveling shift. Luckily I was out of town for that first go round.

To set up my Internet, I had to call my area phone company to come out, which I thought would be simple, but no! The guy showed up at my tiny house in the middle of a plot of land—on my parents' 10-acre property—and looked at me like I was crazy.



"You can't just get Internet out here," he said. "We need to lay cable and have a pole installed. It takes heavy equipment..."

I told the phone company the situation when I first set up the appointment, but they had said it was "no problem." As we stood there, trying to sort it all out, it was clear that it was a problem.

Two good things happened while we were going through it: Mom showed up, and the guy called his manager. The supervisor asked my mother if it was okay to take the cable from the pole on the other side of our family home, and run it all the way to my house. She told him "yes," as long as it didn't affect her Internet or my brother's gaming! Still, you can't even imagine how much cable they had to lay to cross all those acres. It was insane!

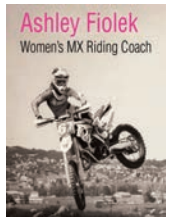
Several hours later, though, it all came together. Now I have great Internet, even better than at my parents' house, because their cables are old.

Now that I'm set up, I've given a few private lessons on my old track, which is also on my parent's land. It's so nice to walk out of my house and teach a class right there! Mom helped me to interpret for a hearing student, but next time I'm going to do it on my own, because the girl that I'm coaching is pretty used to me now. We should have no trouble writing messages to one another on a pit board.

I also have all my "toys" right here, including my 110's and Go Karts from Monster Moto, so all in all it's a fun place to live.

My next items to tackle are fixing up the track so it's even smoother, and getting my dogs out of my parent's home and moved in with me. I need to build a fence around my place because there are wild hogs out here lurking, and hogs and dogs don't mix! ■ ABILITY

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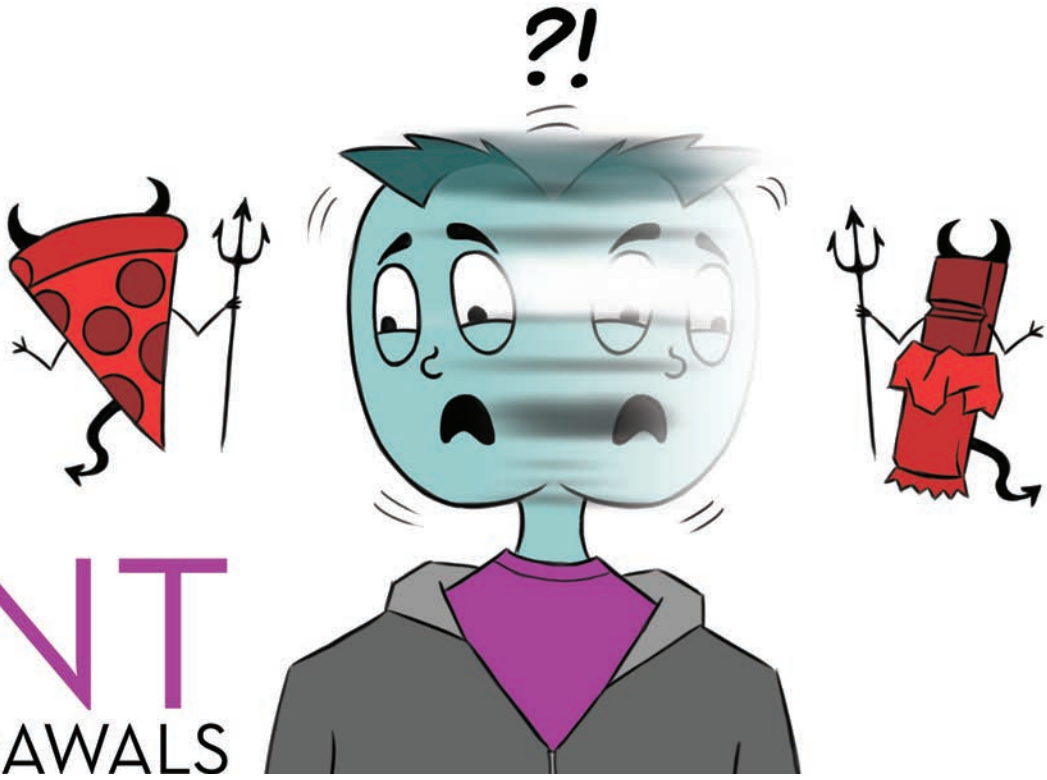
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THE LENT WITHDRAWALS

Being a catholic, every year I'm hit with this thing called Lent. This is the Christian season of preparation before Easter. The Lenten season is a time when many Christians observe a period of fasting, repentance, moderation, self-denial, and spiritual discipline (Of course they would pick all the things I'm not good at). The purpose is to set aside time for reflection on Jesus Christ—his life, suffering and sacrifice, death, burial, and resurrection. This specific period of time is good, because it gets my mind off of women and that Facebook thingy.

During the six weeks of self-examination and reflection, Christians who observe Lent typically make a commitment to fast, or to give something up—a habit (such as smoking, booze, watching TV, swearing), or a food or drink (such as sweets, chocolate or coffee). In other words, all the good stuff. Life is already hard enough as it is, filled with suffering; now, during lent, Christian's feel as though they have to add to that suffering.

This year, I gave up all sweets, desserts, and sodas (which I tend to do every year). I'd like to admit that it's because I'm a good Catholic Christian, but I know, down deep, it's partly because my belly looks fatter this time of year, which is a result of all the eating of goodies over the holidays. So, in all honesty, Lent is partly an excuse to diet, but this time I have God as my personal trainer for forty days so I don't cheat—which tends to happen all too often on the previous attempts. Christians should change the rules. I mean, for Christmas, I celebrated the birth of Christ by eating pies and cookies, shouldn't I be able to celebrate the resurrection the same way? They're both big events.

I know I should try and give up something more challenging, but sweets and sodas are right at that "I think I can do this" mark. If I picked something like "No pizza," I'd put myself in the "You don't have a shot in hell" category. Then, instead of feeling good about my triumphing fast over the Lent period, I would spend it feeling guilty with tomato sauce on my face. Plus, I hate squirming and backpedaling to the priest during confession. "Forgive me father for I have sinned, I vowed to give up pizza for Lent and, somehow, well, I ended up eating pizza last night. But, wait, I got to thinking… isn't pizza good for you? It has tomatoes… and that's a vegetable. God says we should treat our body like His holy temple… and vegetables are good for you so, in a way, didn't I do something good?"

Forty days of giving something up really should not be that big of a deal—especially when it's usually something you should be giving up anyway for your whole life, i.e., smoking, drinking, or eating processed foods that make you fat. You should rejoice in the fact that you've taken a little break, prolonging the cancer or diabetes diagnosis. But, it hasn't been easy, every night, after dinner I hear this soft squeaky voice coming from the junk food cabinet. When I go to check it out, I see a Kit Kat chocolate bar lying on the shelf, smiling at me.

"Hey sweetie, how was your dinner?" it says.

"Good. What do you want?" I reply.

"Oh nothing, really," it continues with a devious smirk. "I was just thinking about those special moments we used to share after a nice meal. Hey, remember you used to take me and a couple of my friends out of this dark cabinet and we'd sit on the couch watching *Little People of L.A.* and you'd slowly unwrap me then gently nibble on my corners. Those were the days. I could just melt in your mouth."



"You shut up!" I snap. "I made a commitment to stay away from you and, as God as my witness, I'm going to. I don't want to see your chocolate-cookie face for the next forty days. You hear me?"

"Forty days is a long time, and I can already see your knees starting to buckle," it quips.

I slam the cabinet door and go back to the couch where I begin to knaw on the sofa pillow. To hell with that Kit Kat bar. I don't need that thing. What's it ever done for me? Besides… besides… help me… satisfy me… ease my cravings. "Oh Kit Kat bar, hang on! I'm coming!"

It's interesting, during Lent, they do not count Sundays as part of the forty days. How should I know why? I just go with the flow. So, there are some religious folk out there that have determined that this means you can, that you should indulge in what you've given up on the Sundays that aren't counted. No dice. It's just an unfounded rumor lacking any doctrine. Sorry, Charlie. The determination of a human being to always find a loophole never seizes to amaze me. And, to add fuel to the unbearable pain, you can't eat meat on Fridays. That's crazy. No sweets, no meat. There goes my favorite treat… Pistachio Ice Cream with Beef Jerky toppings.

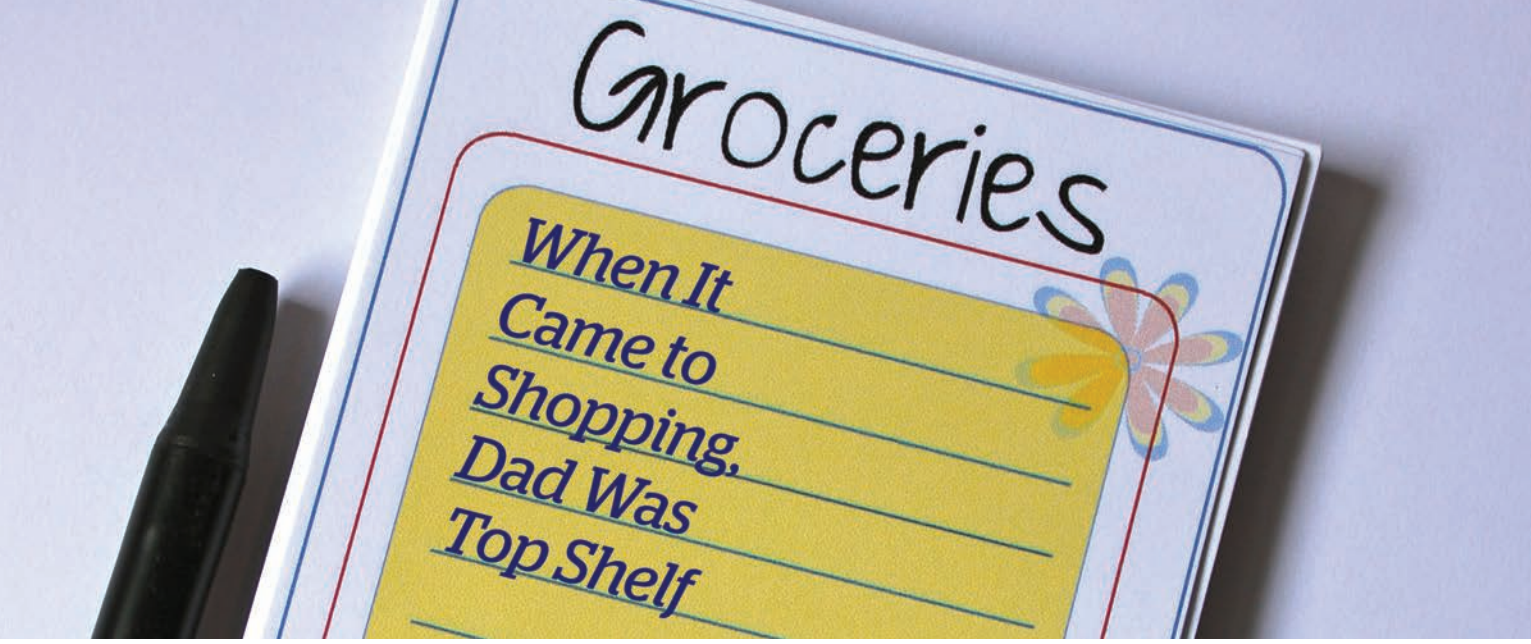
So far, I have done very well with my no sweet fast. Sure, I shake, tremble, and sweat when I see a Coke machine. At times, I'll curl up in a corner and mumble incoherently when a Keebler Elf commercial pops up on TV. But, all in all, I'm proud of myself. I know there's a light at the end of the tunnel and it is shining down on a giant vanilla shake that's waiting for me.

The key is to be strong. Stick to your commitments. And, handcuff yourself to the bedpost. I am glad that I have made this sacrifice during Lent, because it has brought me closer to God. Every night I get down on my knees and pray, "God, can you please tell me where I hid that bag of Snicker bars? Please Lord. Well, how about the Reese's Cups? Come on God, what did I ever do to you?!"

To me, the key is, during the moments of weakness, to take a deep breath, clear your mind, and then go to bed and sleep. Sometimes I sleep twenty-three hours a day. It really helps subdue the cravings, barring the Butterscotch pudding dreams and the Cheesecake nightmares. Another trick I like is when I'm at mass I pretend the communion wafer is a Peppermint Patty. In these tough times, you have to use whatever you can to get through the sugar withdrawals. But, I feel good. I think I'm going to make it. Hell, it's been almost three days. Who am I fooling? I know what's coming… "Forgive me father, for I have sinned…" ■ ABILITY



by Jeff Charlebois



Like millions of other Americans, grocery shopping is frequently a part of my weekly routine. I do it independently, and there's a certain comfort in that. For example, knowing that I have enough money to grocery shop feels good, and a well-stocked refrigerator and cupboards mean that I can rest assured that I'll have something to eat when I'm hungry or thirsty.

The experience of going to the market also evokes fond memories of tagging along with my Dad on food-shopping excursions when I was a kid. Memories of him and my sister accompany me down every aisle as I reflect on how my father approached this Saturday-morning chore.

First of all, I believe he had undiagnosed Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), because he had a system that had to be followed the same way every single time, and he never wavered from it:

He made his grocery list, and checked off each item as it was placed in the cart. That, in itself, wasn't odd; but if Gloria and I spotted something that we wanted, and it was not on his list, he wouldn't let us buy it. However, he'd write the items down for consideration for the next list.

Dad religiously cut coupons, and tended to choose the option that was less expensive over the one that tasted better, which undoubtedly came out of his growing up with six brothers in Buffalo, NY, during the Great Depression. In fact, for most of my childhood, we ate canned vegetables over fresh or even frozen ones. A lot of the time our meals consisted of what his mom or my moms' mother made—food that was cheap and could go a long way. We always had leftovers.

In the store, he'd start down aisle 1 and proceed to aisles, 2, 3, 4, and onto to every aisle in order, until he'd hit the last one. There was no skipping ahead, even though there might not be anything on an aisle that was on his list.

Everything would have to be placed in the cart a certain way, and at the checkout counter, the items had to be bagged the way that Dad wanted them bagged, even if it meant him showing the clerk how to do it.

Fortunately Dad was charming, so his quirks were met by more smiles than grimaces. In some ways, I'm like my father, only I've never made a shopping list in my life. I keep it in my head, and yet rarely return home having forgotten anything.

I know exactly what I'm going to get and, like Dad, I rarely waver from my mental list. I use electronic coupons stored in my phone, and I request that things be bagged a particular way. While I don't correct the store clerk when they get it wrong, I'm quietly annoyed when it's not done the way I want it.

Once I'm in the car on the way home, I feel a sense of comfort in having spent the last hour or so with my Dad. I know that he probably rolls his eyes when I unpack two bags of gummy bears and a pint of chocolate ice cream, but at least I do get some Malt-o-Meal and yogurt to balance out the junk.

The only thing that would make my grocery shopping any more comforting is for stores to have a call button in each aisle, so that an employee can come to my aid when I need to reach something that's too high on a shelf. Dad never had that problem, because he was well over 6 feet. I, on the other hand, am only 5'3". I usually have to stand there waiting for someone tall to happen by, and usually they do.

Sometimes I wonder if Dad spiritually sends them over. I wonder if he whispers into their ear from the Great Beyond:

"Hey, go over to aisle 7, my daughter needs some help with that bottled water on the top shelf!" And then I look up, and my angel has appeared. ■ ABILITY

by Geri Jewell
gerijewell.com





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BROTHERHOOD OF THE TRAVELING UNDERWEAR

For the past 75 years, while most of the country transitions into spring by swapping out snow shovels for garden hoes, a bazillion bikers from all over the country migrate to Daytona Beach for Bike Week. For most, it's a ritual that starts by giving up shaving for a week or two, dusting off the leather patched vests and polishing up the bikes before loading them onto trailers for the pilgrimage, *even if it's just an hour away*.

I understand not everyone rides their motorcycle like I do, I honestly do, but there was a time when out of state folks would at least pretend to ride to Daytona by parking their trailers in an empty lot a couple hundred miles north and trying to hit every puddle on the ride into town to at least appear like they were riders. As I sit here in the hotel lobby typing this column, I count 40 trailers in the lot, twice the number of bikes! While wondering if the 18" of snow that fell at my house in New Hampshire yesterday would be cleared by the time I roll back into my driveway, I get to listen to three men discuss the tricks and techniques for backing up a trailer.

For the past six years, I have made the trip from New Hampshire to Daytona *oddly on two wheels* and planned to do so again this year, leaving directly following a patient speaker conference I was attending in Boston. My good friend Scott was driving down to Daytona Beach and had agreed to take some of my stuff down in his car. I now sell T-shirts to help pay my travel expenses, and I wanted to have a few dozen available in Daytona so I dropped them and some extra clothes off at his house a few days before I left.

The conference was put on by a pharmaceutical company, and although it involved compliance and skills training, it was an opportunity for the company to acknowledge and celebrate the important part patient speakers play in helping others cope with their multiple sclerosis (MS) diagnosis and symptoms. For us, it's a chance to visit and hear each other's stories.

Between training and eating fabulous meals, I watched with increased intensity the snow and frigid temperatures that crept over New England. The conference ended at noon on Saturday, and as I was preparing my winter gear for the ride to Daytona, I realized my special and very favorite extreme cold weather long johns were missing from my luggage. Clearly a brilliant move of mine to pack my thermal underwear in with clothes I'd left at my friend's house, now in the trunk of his car and eight hours into his trip to Florida.

As I emerged from the $50 per night underground parking garage and crossed the cobblestone sidewalk onto the street, my bike's thermometer read 11 degrees. I cranked up my heated jacket and gloves, pointed my head into the 40 mph wind and found my way to the



highway. Despite wearing all three pairs of dress pants I had packed for the conference, my legs were still cold. The thought of trailering my bike certainly danced in my head.

I rode for eight blistering hours, made it to my brother's house just outside of Washington, D.C. and called it a day. When I left early the next morning, it was 24 degrees, but I expected by mid-morning I would be able to catch up with Scott, *and more importantly my long underwear*. When I found my friend and his Toyota in the middle of North Carolina, it was 32 degrees and snowing pretty hard. We had been communicating by phone, and he took some photos of me as I passed him on the highway. I took the next exit to get gas and somehow he missed the exit. Getting gas is when I realized how cold and windy it really was, and I struggled to get my wet gloves back on my cold, shaking hands. I returned to the highway and vowed I would catch up to him and get my special thermals once and for all. After about an hour I called him again, wondering why I had not spotted him yet and was informed he had gotten sidetracked in search of a Starbucks. Unfortunately his app routed him to a coffee kiosk in a hospital. He wasn't happy, but I had no sympathy, for I was now almost 30 miles ahead of my underwear and was not about to stop or slow down for him to catch up. Besides, as I was almost into South Carolina by midday, I figured it would start to warm up soon.

I was wrong again! Passing through the famous South of the Border tourist trap, I could not help myself but to grab a couple of photos of the sign because it was plastered with snow!

I longed for my warm and cozy underwear for the next hundred miles, envying the growing number of bike-hauling trailers I passed as miles to my destination clicked down. It wasn't until Georgia that the snow had transitioned into a beautiful freezing rain. My electric heated jacket was on high, and the slush that had built up on my windshield began to slide off and plop me in the face shield. It was now 36 degrees, the wind had died down, and I was relieved. Half way through Georgia the sun came out and the temperature reached 50. I got gas, changed to my warm weather gloves and got a coffee, *without using an app*.

I wasted an hour before heading out once again, letting Scott get within a few miles of me.

For the first time since leaving Boston, I began to enjoy the trip. It didn't last long. About 30 miles from Daytona the sky turned gunmetal gray and the loud ticks of raindrops began pelting my helmet shell. By the time I was corralled into the bike week traffic, it was a full-fledged typhoon.

Soaked to the bone, I dismounted the bike and tried to shake off the excess water before entering the hotel lobby. As I let out a long sigh of relief, a group of leathered bikers who were intensely watching the weather channel took notice. When the guy with snakeskin boots asked me where I was coming from, I cracked a water wrinkled grin: "New Hampshire." "No," he said, adding, "I mean where did you leave your trailer?"

I instantly became damn proud of my puddle and my 1300-mile adventure getting to Daytona Bike Week.

"Real bikers don't trailer their motorcycles to bike week, we ride 'em here, even from New Hampshire."

My biker badge of badass was quickly revoked when my friend burst through the front door loudly proclaiming, "Excuse me, sir, are these your undies?" ■ ABILITY

longhaulpaul.com
officialbikeweek.com



the birth of a poet

Yu Xiuhua is a poet with cerebral palsy who became massively popular when one of poems went viral. Thereafter, everything changed for her. Her poetry was published, her book signings drew crowds and her income increased dramatically. But not all that happened to Yu was joyful and positive. Her mother was diagnosed with cancer and died, and Yu divorced her husband. Her laughter, anger, sorrow and happiness were captured in the moving documentary *Still Tomorrow* by filmmaker Fan Jian, which tells her remarkable story as a female poet from rural China. Fan worked as a documentary filmmaker for CCTV before launching his own independent work. In 2016, Fan's documentary won a special award for the long film division at the Amsterdam International Film Festival (IDFA).

Accepting the award, he said, "The film, in a powerful and poetic way, explores the complexity of human experiences. The powerful story of the protagonist compliments the intimate and deep meaning of the film, capturing a film about poetry is not easy, but this extraordinary woman has achieved this without making it seem cliché."

In the film, Fan Jian recorded the emotions felt by the poet Yu Xiuhua, whose achievements in poetry seemingly contrast deeply with her image as a peasant woman with a disability, but, at the same time, this image is no doubt part of her poetry.

I AM A SLUT, BUT SO WHAT

At the end of 2014, Yu Xiuhua wrote the poem,



Poet Yu Xiuhua

"I Would Travel Through Half of China to Sleep With You," which became an instant success. After her fame, she made the bold decision to divorce her husband Yin Shiping, whom she had been married to for 20 years. People on the outside wrote to her, "She can write poetry, but she forgets her own family name and disowns her husband." They also mocked and judged her harshly, writing, "Now I am famous. Now I have money. I don't need my husband anymore."

Yu was afraid how these perceptions would affect her son's life, and if he would ever be able to marry due to her bad reputation. She sought advice from Fan Jian who told her his sister's story: she, too, wanted a divorce but was afraid of the negative impact it would have on her children, so she hurt herself. She was entangled in a messy divorce for years. He told Yu there is no need to sacrifice your desired life for others. After that,"She very easily moved onto the next stage of her divorce," explained the filmmaker.

Fan said that her financial situation before wasn't good, but now she is fully financially independent, and she was able to leave the small closed-off village of Hubei and take a look at the broader world which touched her, and also helped her to quickly progress through the divorce.

In late autumn 2015, Yu formally filed for divorce at the civil affairs bureau. The day before they were to sign the papers and legally divorce, Yu informed Fan of this big step. The next day she rushed straight back to her



home in Hubei to inform the filmmaker that she was now officially divorced. The documentary depicts the scene after the divorce, when her husband tells her, "Come, you can lean on me. I'll help you." With her husband holding her hands, the couple walked down a muddy path together near the fields. As she did so, she felt a warmth rise within her.

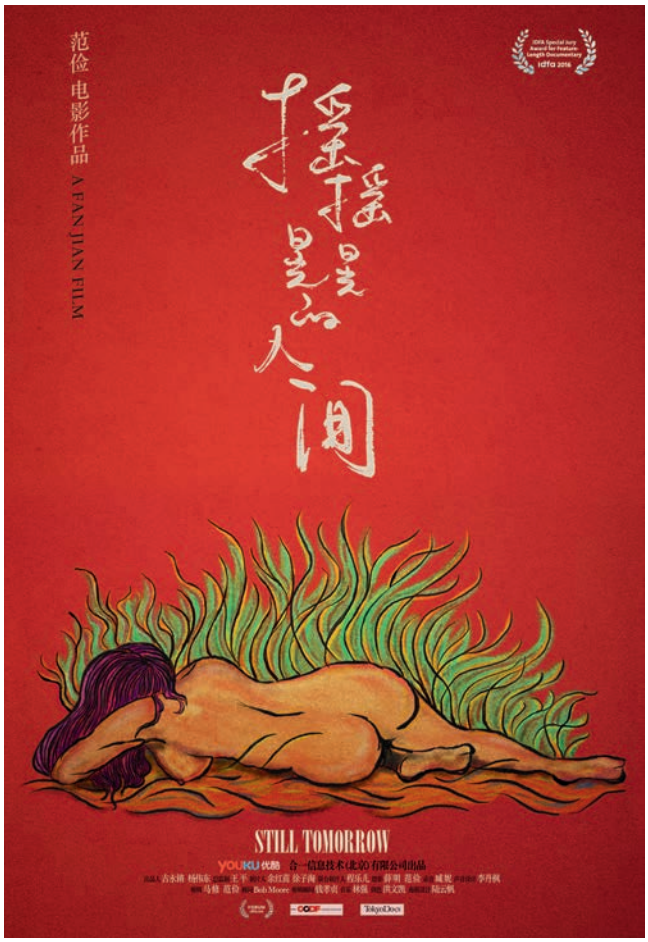
Yu said she was forced to marry at 19, and that the marriage had been arranged by her mother Zhou Jinxing. It was her mother who "called the shots" and made the decisions. She chose Yin Shiping to be her son-in-law. Her mother told her, "You have a disability and cannot fend for yourself, so you must find someone to marry in order to live a safe and stable life. Then there will at least be someone who can take care of you later in life." Her mother's idea was widespread and common, as most parents living in rural areas thought the same.

Her husband worked year round, travelling to various cities to find jobs, and only during the busy harvest season would he return to help out. When he was not home, life was peaceful, but when he returned friction ensued. With Fan's camera lens pointed at them and recording their every move, their quarrels intensified, even when not fighting or simply eating dinner, the two shared few words. She wrote, "He looked at me sitting in front of the computer writing poetry, and I was not pleasing to his eyes, yet I think he was not pleasing to my eyes. Two floating clouds did not blend, how lively and green grass can be, how it can also wilt and dry out." These words came to Yu while sitting near a pond trying to clear her mind after her parents initially refused her request to divorce her husband.

Later on, Yu's mother was diagnosed with cancer, so Yu accompanied her during her stays in the hospital, in addition to helping and waiting on her mother while at home. This was a period in which she wrote a few poems. Although her mother set her up in an unhappy marriage, the bond between mother and daughter could not be broken. In a poem to her mother, she wrote, "You can't be smarter than me, don't be bigger than me, I have never cried in front of you."

After the divorce, her ex-husband, Yin Shiping, was given all the earnings from the royalties of Yu's book; in return, she was given the freedom to pursue the life she desired. Love was a topic Yu did not shy away from, and stats show that from her poetry collection released in 2014 and 2015, the word love appeared more than 140 times.

In Fan's documentary of her life, Yu didn't attempt to conceal her appreciation of males nor did she attempt to cover up her big smile and laughter. She admitted that she has loved a few, but all ended painfully. During the filming, Yu fell in love with a man much younger than



herself and confessed her love, but was rejected. "She cried all night, then had a stomach ache and vomited blood." The shooting stopped and Fan stayed with her throughout the night.

In her poem, "I Love You," she writes, "If I send you a book, I will not send you my poetry, I will give you a book about plants which will tell you the difference between wheat and tares, telling you the hope for spring with a beating, worried heart." She compares herself to wheat, describing herself as the tare: "I am not good enough for others' wheat." She cannot compare herself to others for she believes she is unworthy and not as good.

"Others in the world of poetry will scold her because she writes sultry and provocative poetry," Fan says, adding, "These people make her out to be nothing and worthless. One example is her poem called "I Would Travel Through Half of China to Sleep with You," in which she says the title was merely a joke, for the poem's deeper meaning was about expressing her emotions and desires."

Yu is straightforward about her experiences: "I have not properly experienced physical body love and to love one's soul. I am regretful I have not experienced this kind of love. Some say my poems are sultry." She adds with a smile: "And so what if I am a slut?"

IN ANY CASE, I WON'T KNEEL DOWN

For years, Fan wanted to make a documentary about a non-professional poet. "He or she can be a farmer or a factory worker—in work that has nothing to do with poetry," he said. But he emphasizes the person must have a passion for poetry. In 2014, poems about workers were very popular, but that wasn't what he was looking for. He thinks those poems describe groups of people but not individuals. In 2015, YouKu contacted him and told him about Yu Xiuhua and asked whether he wanted to make a documentary based on her story.

So Fan began to research online and read some of her poems. "Yes, I read a few and was quite surprised because she lives in the rural countryside and has a disability, and yet she is able to write such poetry."

After Yu's poems became popular, her small village home in Hubei Hengdian became a popular place to visit. There were constant crowds and reporters visiting everyday. She had fans, lovers and even people wanting to make her story into a movie. She was told that she could be the film's main creator, but they would also begin searching for female stars to play the lead role. Yu was ecstatic about this opportunity; however, Fan told her that with a budget of only 3 million yuan ($435,000) they couldn't afford even one female actor. So the feature film never happened.

Fan recounts: "When I first started talking to her she thought I was just another reporter, she did not refuse me and said if I wanted to come over and film then just do it." The filmmaker wanted to shoot a documentary, not simply a few hours or even days of just interviews, so in an effort to stand out from the rest of the media and let Yu understand he was not the same as the others, he prepared beforehand. "So I started doing a lot of homework. I researched her poetry and read it over and over again." Yu admired the poems of Lei Pingyang, so Fan also carefully read his poems. Yu agreed to some of his interviews, and Fan kept on reading her poetry over and over again. He knew that Yu liked the book, *Miserable World*, so Fan gifted her with a hardcover copy. Yu recognized Fan's genuine side saying, "You have come prepared."

All of the reporters took the same picture with the poet in a snowy background, yet Fan's team took the task much more seriously. His photographer lay on the cold ground to take the shot. Yu took this to heart and slowly began taking the initiative to open up towards him about her life.

Fan talked with Yu's mother and learned that the poet used to beg on the streets. Local people call this "begging for grains." When Yu was in Beijing to receive a literary award, Fan noticed she was in a good mood and asked her about the matter. Yu laughed and said she did beg but never kneeled on the ground for her pride wouldn't let her. "The few years before fame were very lonely, along with not having a good relationship with my husband, and it being impossible to rely on my son.



My parents were sick, and I did not have skills beyond the ability to do simple farm work. So I turned to poetry to learn it as a skill. I wanted to learn a skill to survive."

This was the first time she had admitted this to anyone. She began opening her heart to Fan, and they would chat when shooting ended and sometimes over a home-made drink or when doing farm work together. The film shoot took longer than a year. The filmmaker travelled from all over the country to Hubei six times, and during this period he and Yu became friends, since there was basically nothing the two of them couldn't talk about. Yu's trust in Fan can be felt from the small details seen in the film. Fan said he and Yu are often shown flirting in the film. The small amount of flirting back and forth between them was his intention to show the trust between the two of them.

The first time the filmmaker went to Yu's home he said, "There was a big crowd wanting to take her to Beijing for an exclusive interview with her, including even CCTV, yet Yu took the step of telling us that she would go with us. We told her that we didn't have a car and would have to take the train, so we asked if she was still willing to follow me. She said, "Go!" Yu did not hesitate to get on the train to Beijing with him.

Fan accompanied Yu on her trip to Beijing, which was her second visit to Beijing. The first time she was 10 years old and went in the hopes of finding a cure for her illness. This time, however, they took the train and transferred at Wuhan, and then took a plane for the last leg of the journey. Although this was Yu's first time on a plane, she felt both nervous and excited. On this visit, she also experienced the lights of the city. Sitting in a car, her eyes never left the windows and never stopped staring at the tall high rises.

When meeting with her fans, Yu answered questions and spoke with humor, giving natural flowing answers. It showed a different side to her image as a peasant woman. Fan also accompanied her to Shenzhen and Hong Kong. At Shenzhen's seaside, he describes Yu like a young child stepping into the water and playing freely. He said she likes lively places, such as the big city, but the village environment provides a peaceful space for her to write her poetry.

The wind gently brushing the golden wheat, the agricultural roadside, and the lively green ponds—these images not only represent Yu's environment, but are also the background of her creativity. Wheat, trees, springtime—all these subjects and themes appear often in her poetry. Her environment offers her the simplest and purest inspiration.

More recently, new, rural developments with rows of houses began replacing the fields and ponds of Yu's hometown. Although Yu still had her home, the local



Documentary filmmaker Fan Jian

government wanted to develop it into a scenic spot, but in Yu's eyes, her home is no longer the same and says, "I also cannot write that kind of poetry anymore."

OTHER THAN THE PROTAGONIST BEING UGLY, THE REST IS BEAUTIFUL

An early collection of her poems called *Moonlight Falls on the Left Hand* includes a poem entitled "Staggering Humans." The filmmaker says, "I felt it was a pretty suitable title. She faces a very objective world, her physical condition and some of her subjective inner feelings are all staggering, all uncertain, and she is always looking for a balance, but there is no lack of beautiful language."

Yu's parents and ex-husband all appear in the film, but not her son. Fan said the whole family was resistant to having her son in the film. "Yu's son is a science and engineering student at a university and only returns home during summer vacation. He has little communication with his parents and shows little interest in his mother's poetry." Yu told Fan that her son never invites her to visit school, and he rarely mentions to friends and classmates that she is his mother, and he never reads her poetry. He told Fan, "I am not interested in modern literature."

After the film was completed, Yu carefully watched the film and said, "Apart from the protagonist being ugly, the rest is beautiful." The film has been shown abroad, where fans were warm and supportive. "In the previous two showings, the results were good, and for the second showing, tickets sold out before they were put on sale at the box office." Fan was more surprised that some people came for his name alone. Because Fan's former films, Alive and Soil, garnered a large number of fans, they came specifically to watch his new work.

He dreamed of becoming a reporter. Later, he entered the "legal system" show, also known as CCTV's "Today's Argument." In Shandong, Fan filmed the story of someone sentenced to death who had to donate his organs as atonement for his actions. After finishing, he won the province's documentary film's first prize.

In the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, he filmed his documentary *Alive*. The film was about a middle-aged couple, Zhu Junsheng and Ye Hongmei, and told how they lost their only daughter. It showed the pain and suffering they went through to get pregnant again. Since then, Fan's focus has shifted from social issues to family. Also during this time, Fan Jian met his wife, Zang Ni.

In 2015, Fan wrote on his weibo: "Walking around the district, while thinking about the significance of documentaries. They do not concern the country or large crowds, nor social issues either. But rather they are about people, and the complexity of human nature and our delicate emotions, and how the food and grains we eat form our existence and life."

Admirers of his work say he's "Good at showing the feminine side of women," Which Fan attributes to the influence of his wife Zang Ni, whom he says is better at finding and showing the delicate thoughts that run through a women's mind, because he is more of a logical thinker.

Yu and Fan's wife became friends and go to Chongqing together. "She has published three books and sold 300,000 copies, but she has also become the Hubei Writers Association contract writer.

"In fact, she is very pitiful." Fan said, "With her becoming so famous, you'd think her life has changed dramatically, yet the results show that seemingly nothing has changed. She is hopeful and full of expectations for the future." However, at the end of the film, Yu did not move to the city but returned home to continue doing simple farming—a tragic cycle of fate. One of her poems used at the end of the documentary states, "There is still tomorrow, too bad there's still tomorrow." In it, she explains how reality gets in the way of a lot of things and that she still has to think about every upcoming day and cannot always pursue her dreams. ■ ABILITY

by Zhang Simon

This story is part of a series of articles published as an exclusive editorial exchange between *China Press for People with Disabilities & Spring Breeze* and *ABILITY Magazine*



Beer, Nuts & Laughter

Most filmmakers rely on their ability to see in order to make films. But Australian filmmaker and author gough's vision doesn't rely on sight. Instead gough (pronounced "goff"), who is legally blind, writes, directs, edits and produces all of his films with the help of a well-curated crew. His eleven-year-old company, Beernuts Productions, makes pointed documentaries and entertaining short films, including an upcoming mockumentary on the environment. Irony and wit are all part of his gestalt, for he's a natural-born storyteller who cut his teeth in radio and on the stand-up comedy circuit before devoting himself full-time to filmmaking. He relishes slippery subjects—pornography, disability, mental illness, to name a few. *ABILITY*'s Lia Martirosyan chatted with gough about his creative process and his passion for showing the world that a disability needn't be a hindrance to doing what you love.

Lia: Where does gough originate?



gough: It's a nickname I had when I was young. It was given to me because of a musical band in Australia. I was a little bit obsessed with them when I was young, so I got the nickname "gough" from them, and I just started using it professionally because that's what everybody called me. It's a lot more interesting than my actual boring name, so I thought I'd go with "gough," you know?

Lia: Sure. Whatever makes you happy.

(laughter)

gough: Well, yes, it's just a nice point of difference as well.

Lia: Speaking of names, how did you come up with "Beernuts"?

gough: I think it sort of sums up our work well. I like to think that our films are fun and enjoyable, so beernuts—have a beer, eat some nuts, laugh, and have a good time watching our stuff.

Lia: Is beer big in Australia?

gough: Oh yes, yes, we drink a lot of it. Don't worry about that.

Lia: Cheers. So you were born in Australia?

gough: Yeah, I was born in Sydney but was raised on the Gold Coast. The Gold Coast is a little mini-Florida. I've been to the US quite a bit, so I know it well. If you packed Florida into a little tiny area, that's the Gold Coast, which is where I live. So it's reasonably tropical, like today, in the high 90s, as we're right in the middle of summer so it's very hot at the moment.

Lia: I like it, a lot of people don't like tropical humid weather.

gough: It does get hot out here. We've just been through a really big heat wave. Lots of bush fires out west.

Lia: Is most of your time spent on productions at Beernuts?

gough: Absolutely. Beernuts is my production company, which I started back in 2006. I write, direct, edit and produce the films. This is my full-time job; it's what I love to do. It's Beernuts Productions all the way with me. Onward and upward.

Lia: You have a team of people who are designated certain tasks, or are you doing everything?

gough: I can't see very well, so I have a guy named Simon who is sort of my sighted guide who helps me out. He's very, very good. He makes sure everybody—as in the actors—are giving me the facial expressions I

want them to give, and that the camera is choosing the angle that I want the camera to shoot, and all that sort of stuff. And when it comes to editing, Simon makes sure everything syncs up. I edit by audio, which is like doing a 90-minute radio play. He makes sure that the vision syncs up and how it should be.

Lia: Sounds like you have that figured out. Do you have any sight?

gough: Yes, I do. I have no vision in my right eye and very limited vision in my left eye. With my nose to the monitor, I can kind of see what's going on, but I have to get very, very close to the monitor and the screen to make sure that I can see things. Even then, I always like to have somebody back me up just in case I've missed something, which I do on occasion. But the interesting thing with film, of course, is that people don't really understand that it's 80 percent audio. If you take horror, for example, which isn't my genre, but it's a good example. The thing that scares people in horror films is very rarely what they see on the screen. It's what they hear and what they feel, very rarely what they actually see. So, film people think of film as a visual media, and it is, but it also isn't, if that makes sense. There are a lot of other aspects to film than just what you see on the screen.

Lia: Do you focus a lot on music as well?

gough: Well, my films are very dialogue-heavy, so when I write something, it is about the dialogue. I always make sure there are no big action sequences or stunts or anything like that. I focus more on the dialogue and making what the characters say interesting. But I find that stuff more interesting and entertaining anyway. When I direct my actors, I know how I want my lines delivered because I wrote them, so the number one thing for me is to make sure my actors are delivering the lines the way I want them delivered. And yes, music as well plays a big part in film because it helps convey what you want the audience to feel. I do try and incorporate music wherever I can. A couple of professional musicians who are very good help me out with that.

Lia: Very cool. What motivated you to get into movie production?

gough: I always enjoyed writing. When I first left high school, I started out as a stand-up comedian, and obviously stand-up requires a lot of writing and performance. Then I was always writing scripts during the daytime when I wasn't on stage. So I tried getting my scripts made, but of course when people found out I couldn't see, they didn't really want to invest money in a blind filmmaker's film project. They thought I wouldn't be able to do it. I thought, well, the best way to make my movies is to fund them and do them myself. So that is sort of how it all came about. I wanted to make my own work. Like I say, I've always loved storytelling, and wanted to get my stories out there, so the only and best way to do it was to start up my own production company.

Lia: Wow. So you're funding the production company?

gough: Absolutely. I'm totally independent. Here's how it works: I make a film, which I fund; put it up on beernutsproductions.com, people download it, and then all the money I earn from that download goes into the next film. It's the circle of life kind of. Every cent I make from Beernuts Productions goes straight back into the company to make the next film. That's how it works at the moment. I fund everything myself. It's all fully independent.

Lia: That's great. If you have the means, I think it's one of the best ways to do it.

gough: I agree. It's great in that there is no third party interference. Don't have some guy in a suit telling me I can't do this or that. I can make the films I want and how I want. I get the actors, the crew, and make the kind of project I want to make. In that regard, it is fantastic because I'm fully independent—I have full control and full creative say.

Lia: Are you inclusive with your casting? Hiring actors with diverse abilities?

gough: Absolutely. Whatever the role requires is what I have to cast. I've worked with all kinds of shapes and sizes and colors and creeds. There is no discrimination here—we are fully inclusive.

Lia: Good. About your sight, is it a progressive condition?

gough: I was given the whooping cough immunization when I was 12 weeks old and ended up having a hemorrhagic stroke, which is a cross between a stroke and a brain hemorrhage. I was very, very ill, and it caused me to lose my sight. I'm a little bit paralyzed down the right side of my body, but that's due to the stroke.

Lia: You must have been a strong baby.

gough: Obviously I don't remember any of it, but I was in the hospital for a couple of weeks, and had a couple blood transfusions. By all reports I was close to dying, but didn't. Pulled through, and here to tell my story.

Lia: That's wonderful. Let's go back to the movies you've produced over the years. Which of your films have audiences been more drawn to? And what have you learned about yourself and your writing?

gough: Those are really good questions. The first film (*I Will Not Go Quietly*) I did was a documentary about disability and mental health, which was brought about



gough acts, writes and directs...





because of my frustrations with people not understanding my disability. There is a lot of ignorance in Australia about disability, but the film received a wonderful response, which I was really happy about. Since then I've gone on to do more comedy, because it's what I really love. I love making people laugh and entertaining people in that way. Obviously, being in film is different from stand-up comedy in that when you make a film, you're not in the person's lounge watching the film with them, so you don't have that sort of instant gratification. You can't tell if they like it or not unless they send you an email to let you know. With stand-up comedy you get the instant gratification. With film, I've been getting positive reactions, which has been fantastic. People do seem to really enjoy what I do.

What have I learned about myself? I'm trying to think, since I've never been asked that question before. I think I've learned that I'm a little bit more cynical than what I originally thought. When people watch my stuff, they laugh a lot, and they say there is a little bit of satire and cynicism in what I write. I just write what I think is funny. I didn't really think it was overly cynical, but apparently I'm more cynical than what I originally thought. But people seem to enjoy it, which is the main thing.

Lia: There you go! So just continue doing what you're doing.

gough: Absolutely. That's pretty much my theory, until people tell me, "I'm not enjoying what you're doing," I'm just going to continue to try to make every film better than the last one.

Lia: Are you still doing stand-up?

gough: No, I haven't done stand-up for about five or six years now. Once Beernuts Productions kicked into gear, I gave the stand-up away and focused 100 percent on the production company, because that's what I wanted to do ultimately anyway. Stand-up comedy was a gateway to the production company and also a way to hone my writing and performance skills as well. The production company was what I always wanted to do. It was always the goal.

Lia: There's a lot of hustle in stand-up comedy. I have friends who are in it, and they're constantly jumping from one venue to another. I know it helps with the writing, but what did you think about the hustle?

gough: Well, the one thing I really struggled with—and it's mainly because of my bad eyesight—is transport and getting from gig to gig. Comedy is a very competitive industry. Well, the whole entertainment industry is competitive, so there is not a lot of help and support. Other comics don't want to help a guy out, especially in Australia, because there are a







lot of comics and not enough venues, therefore if I needed a ride from one place to another, I've got to take a Greyhound bus, plane, or taxi. Transportation was costing me a lot of money, so that was another reason why I finally thought it wasn't worthwhile. I'm better off focusing on my actual passion, which is filmmaking.

Lia: Are you planning on submitting your films to any independent film festivals?

gough: Not really, there are too many rules and stuff like that, I'm not the kind of guy who is into rules. I just like to do my own thing. So I make my films, put them on the website, and people can just download them. With my documentary about disability and mental health, I did try to enter it into one or two film festivals, but there are a lot of politics when it comes to that sort of stuff. It just turned into a big hassle, to be honest, at the end of the day I just couldn't be bothered. So I thought, "You know what? I'm just going to release my own work, do my thing my own way, and hope for the best."

Lia: I saw some books on your website. What is your involvement? Are you writing them?

gough: Yeah. I like to be as diverse as possible, so on the website we've got four books, which I've written. We've got seven audio downloads, which I wrote and produced, and that's with me and other actors doing the voiceovers, plus 12 films. With the films, there is the documentary, which I mentioned earlier, and then 11 short films. And of the short films, the last thing we've done is a series of seven mini chat shows with *The Tonight Show* kind of a setup where I interview a famous person. It's a fake person, but there is a famous rock star, a famous movie star, and a famous politician. Each episode runs for 20 minutes. That was the last project we finished.

Lia: That's fun. How often do you do that?

gough: As often as I can. I was joking with one of my production crew the other day saying, if I had the financing, we'd be doing one of these every two weeks, because I'd do as many as I absolutely can. The first thing I do after I finish writing the script is cast the film. So from the time we begin casting to finishing the final edit, is about an eight-week time frame.

Lia: Do you have any projects you're working on right now?

gough: Yeah, absolutely. We've started doing a mockumentary, I like that kind of style as well. A comedy mockumentary or a fake documentary about the environment, talking to fake scientists, journalists, conservationists, park rangers and sort of making fun of it all. I



have just finished writing that one now, so that will be our next project.

Lia: What's it called?

gough: It's called *The Environment: An Inside Look*. I do enjoy that sort of mockumentary sort of style, as they can be quite funny.

Lia: As long as you're clever with it!

gough: Yeah, I agree.

Lia: Do you travel a lot? I know you said you make it to the States quite a bit.

gough: Yeah, as much as I can. I love traveling. I think traveling is one of the great educations in life, because you meet so many diverse people, and you go to so many diverse places. At the moment, the production is based on the Gold Coast. But I have made it out to the States for many years. The last time I was there was 2009, a awhile ago now, but I'd gone quite a bit and had a great time. I was up in Canada as well and that was a lot of fun, too. I really enjoyed that—and over to the UK. I have traveled quite a bit, all for work. I only ever go where I'm working, and it's been really good.

Lia: Nice. How do you find traveling in terms of accessibility?

gough: Not too bad. The biggest problem I have is always getting there, but once I reach my destination, I'm usually fine. It's the airports, trains and bus stations. That's what I struggle with the most, just making sure I'm in the right place at the right time. I've found people are usually pretty cool. Once you explain to the ticket guy or whomever that you can't see very well, there is usually some kind of meet and assist kind of program they've got going on, so they usually help you out. But I don't have too many dramas. Haven't found myself lost in too many woodlands, so it's been alright.

I like to be as independent as possible, and not one to jump up and down and make a fuss. But when it comes to airports, that is probably the only place where I'm happy to jump up and down and make a fuss, because they kind of freak me out. People and luggage are everywhere, and the staff runs around trying to get help. But yeah, the biggest struggle when it comes to traveling is the actual traveling part itself.

Every country is different in how they handle these issues, some are fantastic. You've got to give credit where credit's due, and some places are terrific. Other places aren't so good. Also, a lot depends on the airline carrier you're traveling with. Some airlines are terrific and have great meet and assist programs where as soon as you get dropped off at the airport's front door, there is someone there to help you from the moment you step into the airport to the moment you get off the plane. They help you off the plane and get you to the luggage area and make sure that you pick up the right luggage because again, the baggage carousel, I mean, when the bags are going past, I've got no idea which one's mine. So I always need a bit of help with that kind of stuff. But a lot of it also depends on the person who's helping. If it's someone who has experience with disability, they understand and know what's going on, but if the person is new to the job or hasn't had a lot of experience with disability, you might encounter a few problems. A lot of it comes down to education and what people learn in the community about disability.

Lia: I traveled to Japan, and they were the best in terms of the transitions between platforms on train stations to the airports. They were wonderful, and that has a tremendous amount to do with their aging population.

gough: I think Japan would be a really interesting country to visit. Did you find it interesting culturally?

Lia: I did. They're incredibly interesting. From their organization to cleanliness—they're very friendly. I enjoyed it.

gough: It's a place I would love to go. I love Japanese food, so I reckon I would be happy over there with the food as well.

Lia: They have these incredible underground markets. There was one right below a train station that had an entire floor dedicated of various foods, especially sushi, which were delicious. So you would enjoy it.

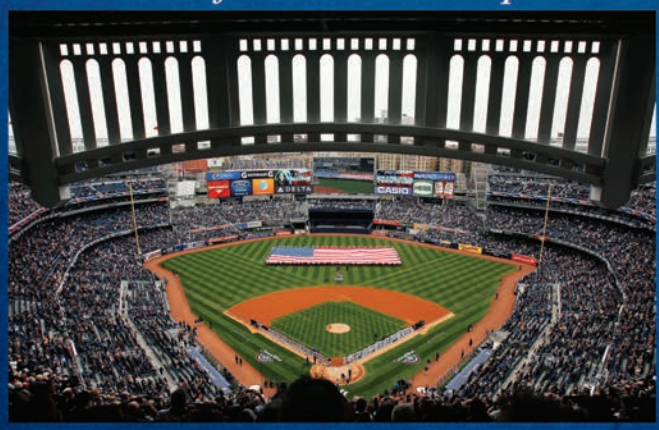
gough: Actually, this is quite funny. Recently, it was my birthday…

Lia: Happy Birthday.

gough: …Thank you. My friends took me to a teppanyaki restaurant, and the chef didn't know I couldn't see. One of his tricks is with prawns. He flings the prawns at you, and you're supposed to catch them in your mouth.

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I, of course, couldn't see the prawn coming at me until they were right in my face, so I kept missing, and he kept throwing them at me, thinking I was just uncoordinated or whatever. I ended up getting a few extra prawns before he gave up and realized this guy isn't going to catch any prawns.

(laughter)

gough: That kind of thing happens quite a bit, because I like to be independent, so people sometimes don't realize that I can't see very well.

Lia: That's a funny story. A skit in and of itself.
gough: (*laughs*) Yeah, I might try and incorporate it one day.

Lia: You should. Is there anything you want to add, put out into the universe?

gough: I want people to know that just because I can't see doesn't mean I can't make entertaining, engaging, fun and enjoyable films for people. That's my number one message. When I first started out, I faced a lot of doubters. But people have really enjoyed my work, and they find it funny and entertaining, which is great. I love entertaining people. I think it's a wonderful thing to help people forget about their problems, and know that you've helped someone forget their problems while they watch your movie. You make them feel good about themselves, and it's a wonderful feeling. Just because you have a disability doesn't mean you can't be a constructive member of society, can't do the job you want to do, and can't live the life you want to live. The only person stopping you is you. You know what I mean? So you've got to just get out there and live the dream and do what you want to do. If that's being a filmmaker, then be a filmmaker. If you want to be the best mechanic or chef, then go out and do it. That's what's really important. That's my main message.

Another point of interest that enters my mind is the process of making films when you can't see. As I said earlier, when I edit a film, it's like editing a radio play, because I edit by audio. When I film, I know how I want my lines delivered, so there is a lot of trust with the cast and crew to make sure they're doing what I want them to do. After all, I'm paying their paychecks, so they've got to do what they're told, but I haven't had too many problems. I've got a lot of trust. It took me awhile to find a good team, there's no doubt about that. It took a few people coming and going to find a good group I could work with, but once I found them, they've been really good and supportive, and they do a fantastic job. I'm happy with the work we put out.

Lia: Well all right then, good luck to you! ■ ABILITY

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CANDOCO CELEBRATES 25 YEARS OF INTEGRATED DANCE



British weekly newspaper *The Observer* reviewed the Candoco Dance Company in 2007 with a bold statement:

"Candoco is the company for which choreographers reserve their wildest and often most inventive work."

Today, Candoco is still living up to that description as it celebrates 25 years of dance in the UK.

"We believe this is partly because of the many artistic possibilities that come from working with and celebrating difference—different bodies, different perspectives, different experiences, different ways of doing things," said Joanne Lyons, who has served as general manager of Candoco Dance Company for the last seven years.

The contemporary dance company is comprised of dancers with and without disabilities and embodies a vision of what dance can be, challenging audience members to redefine their perceptions of ability and art.

"Candoco has a very strong commissioning policy, inviting world-class choreographers to create new works with our company of seven disabled and non-disabled dancers," Lyons said. "With a repertoire as diverse as the company itself, Candoco continues to push the boundaries of dance and widen perceptions of 'what dance is and who can dance.'"

Celeste Dandeker and Adam Benjamin founded Candoco in 1991 after numerous integrated workshops at the Aspire Centre for Spinal Injury in London. When they branched out on their own as the first integrated company of its kind in the UK, the aspiration was no longer to operate as a recovery outlet or rehabilitation option for dance, but instead to establish an elite dance company. So, Dandeker commissioned 30 performance works from internationally renowned choreographers.

Candoco's reputation quickly grew. Current artistic co-directors Stine Nilsen and Pedro Machado, both of whom danced with Candoco for at least seven years, have maintained the vision. Under their watch, Candoco restaged Trisha Brown's *Set and Reset* by including dancers with disabilities, and they took international stage at the Paralympic Games in Beijing for the handover ceremony and again in London for the closing ceremony.

"Since the company's inception, it has always been the intention that the quality of Candoco's work should be assessed on the basis of its artistic output as a mainstream contemporary dance company," Lyons said. "With that, the success of our work inherently advocates for the mainstream arts sector itself to become inclusive and more reflective of the diversity in society at large."

Exhibiting that diversity, the composition of dancers is inclusive of people with and without disabilities.

"The ratio of disabled to non-disabled dancers in our company is always changing and isn't something that can or should necessarily be quantified," Lyons said. "There are Candoco dancers that, for some, may tick the 'disabled box' as they have a visible physical impairment. However, they themselves would perhaps not identify as disabled."

As Lyons explained further, disability is simply not a focus.

"As a company, we're not actually that interested in 'disability' itself; we are interested in the individual dancer and what they can bring to the creative process," Lyons said. "We're interested in equal opportunities and working towards a time when no one is excluded from participating in dance, whether as a career choice or for pure enjoyment."

In addition to the seven dancers with Candoco is a team of 15 Candoco Artists who deliver the Learning Programme, which focuses on improving access to dance for people with disabilities through youth classes, school and college workshops, artist development and labs, and teacher training.

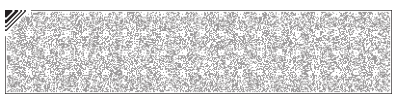
Tanja Erhart remembers her first workshop in 2010 through the Learning Programme. She was pushed out of her comfort zone in a new and challenging way. She remembered thinking, "I'll take this challenge and make it my path to grow."

Erhart, who is originally from Austria, moved to London in 2014 and was hired to be a company dancer with Candoco.

"I loved it," Erhart said of her first experience with Candoco's workshop that got her hooked with dance and the company. "The utter engagement and working together as a team from everyone in this workshop sparked a seed in me that is finding its strength and developing its skills as an artist."

It's stories like Erhart's that Candoco is featuring all this year for its 25th anniversary celebration. In that time, the company has delivered more than 500 performances and 7,500 workshops to more than 400,000 people across 60 countries.

"All the touring around the UK, to Sweden, Germany, Italy, Poland, Greece, Mexico, South Korea, teaching and seeing the participants going with the challenges and enjoying it, performing on those amazing stages and getting adrenaline kicks rushing through your body, reaching so many people through the Candoco platform to empower and spread our ideas of inclusion," Erhart said. "It gives me goosebumps and makes my heart jump over and over again."









Candoco held a 25th Anniversary Open Week in February and invited the public to participate in workshops, teacher trainings, performances, talks, and rehearsals. Additionally, the company has collected 25 stories that offer in-depth experiences people have had with Candoco, capturing the voices of dancers, instructors, students, and company employees who experienced those first years in the early 1990s.

"By sharing our stories and activities, we hope that people will engage with Candoco and become part of our ongoing story into the next 25 years and beyond," Lyons said.

Meantime, Lyons and the rest of the company can't help but reflect on the moments when they're glad they are involved with Candoco. Like when Candoco restaged Jerome Bel's *The Show Must Go On* and performed it at Sadler's Wells Theater in London—the world's top venue dedicated to international dance—to public and critical acclaim. Or like when the Cando2 youth program collaborated with war veterans and school students to create *Traces of War* and a common communication among two vastly different demographic groups was established through dance.

"Being absorbed by day-to-day administrative duties, it is easy to forget why I do what I do, so seeing the work in the studio or theatre helps renew that buzz, that sense of excitement of being useful in the right place and at the right time," Lyons said.

For dancers like Erhart, Candoco is more than just performance art. It's storytelling through new lenses.

"The pieces are so much about individual movement signatures as they are about individual, personal stories," Erhart said. "Every dancer is seen and heard, and together we create something unique. Therefore, the diversity everyone in Candoco brings into the space enriches the art form. The more diverse we are, the more stories we have to create from and shift perspectives on what dance and disability is or can be." ■ ABILITY

by Joshua R. Pate

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CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

JUSTIN PECK







To say Justin Peck lives life at full-throttle would be inadequate. Yes, he's a champion off-road motorcycle and race truck driver; yes, he's a serial entrepreneur with numerous businesses including his own racing team; and yes, he outworks just about everyone on and off the track. But perhaps among his more noteworthy achievements is his openness navigating the perilous terrain of mental illness, which he documents in his recently released memoir, *Bulletproof*. Humble and well-spoken, Peck talked with *ABILITY*'s Lia Martirosyan about his remarkable journey, his penchant to do good, and what he loves most in the world.

Lia Martirosyan: When did you first notice your symptoms?

Justin Peck: For the bipolar side of things?

Martirosyan: Yes.

Peck: The symptoms started when I was roughly 13, but I didn't understand what they were back then. Thirty years ago, you were never quite sure exactly what was going on. As I got older and started realizing what was going on with the way my mind was working, I can look back and say that 13 was my first manic phase. But I do know that prior to that—ages eight, nine, ten—I was still that goofy kid who didn't have much of a social life and was awkward. I knew my brain was just a little off.

Martirosyan: So you had a gut feeling something going on?

Peck: Yeah.

Martirosyan: Interesting. How does it affect your daily life?

Peck: Right now, the impact on my daily life is probably more positive than negative. It took me a long time to ultimately understand it, realize what it was and put a name to it. Daily life can be hard. I think that sometimes the people who are broken the most evolve the most. The disorder has made me who I am today. Dealing with it on a day-to-day basis consists of getting out of bed first thing in the morning. Once my feet hit the ground and I get showered, cleaned and out the door to start my day, things typically work well. But it really is the first five minutes after I open my eyes in the morning that's the biggest struggle.

Martirosyan: Do you have a medical regimen?

Peck: Oh, yeah. I have to take meds. I wish I didn't, of course. I think any bipolar person will tell you they hate taking their meds. I hate taking them because it ensures I don't have a manic phase. A manic phase is something I like. So I do take meds to control that part. And then my racing helmet is part of my medication regimen as well. There's something about being able to take my helmet and put it over my face right before I race that takes away the outside chaos and keeps me focused. It's pretty amazing.

Martirosyan: That sounds amazing. I've read about people who stop taking their meds when they feel better, and they're feeling better because of the meds. What's your take?

Peck: Oh, I do it all the time. (*laughs*) I guess it's one of those things I shouldn't admit. What happens is, you take your meds, and the reason why you start the medication is because you're at the low spot. You're where suicide seems like an option, or where you can't get out of bed for months at a time, and your friends and family look at you and say, "Look, things have to change." Change always happens at the hardest times of our lives, right? When you're in that struggle, you tell your doctor, "All right, Doc, this is what I'm doing." The doctor always asks, "Are you taking your medication?" And then you say, "Well, no, I stopped because I was feeling OK." And then he says, "The reason why you're feeling OK is because the meds are working. Start taking your meds again." So you start taking your meds again. You get past the struggle, and you start feeling normal again. Your day-to-day activities go on and you start feeling like you're on top of the world.

For me, I hate to be controlled by a pill. I want to be able to think I have control over my own fate, and I have control over my own mind. So I stop taking the pill because I think, "How can this little white pill change my world? This doesn't control me." I'm slowly starting to realize that even though I'm older now, it's not so much the little white pill controlling me, it's more just something that helps me maintain, focus and find my balance.

Martirosyan: That's a great revelation. Have you always been into extreme sports?

Peck: Oh, yeah. (*laughs*) I was always that kid. I was so goofy as a kid, I was severely bullied because—I mean, I was weird. I get that I was weird. But the one thing everybody knew within my small group of friends was no matter what circumstance or what situation we were in, if we were in a position where there was something scary or crazy to do, they could always look at me and say, "Justin, I dare you." And I would always be the first one. I've jumped off cliffs in Lake Powell. I jumped off cliffs at the age of 12 that were over 150 feet tall. I calculated the math, and I hit the water at 87 miles per hour. No fear of consequences. I don't assess risk at all. So when it comes to the adrenalin, the motorcycles, the racing and the extreme sports side of me, it doesn't seem extreme to me. It seems like something that slows my head down fast enough so I can focus better.

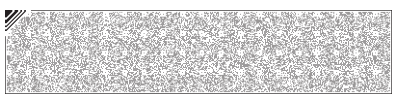
Martirosyan: Interesting. What motivated you to write Bulletproof*?*

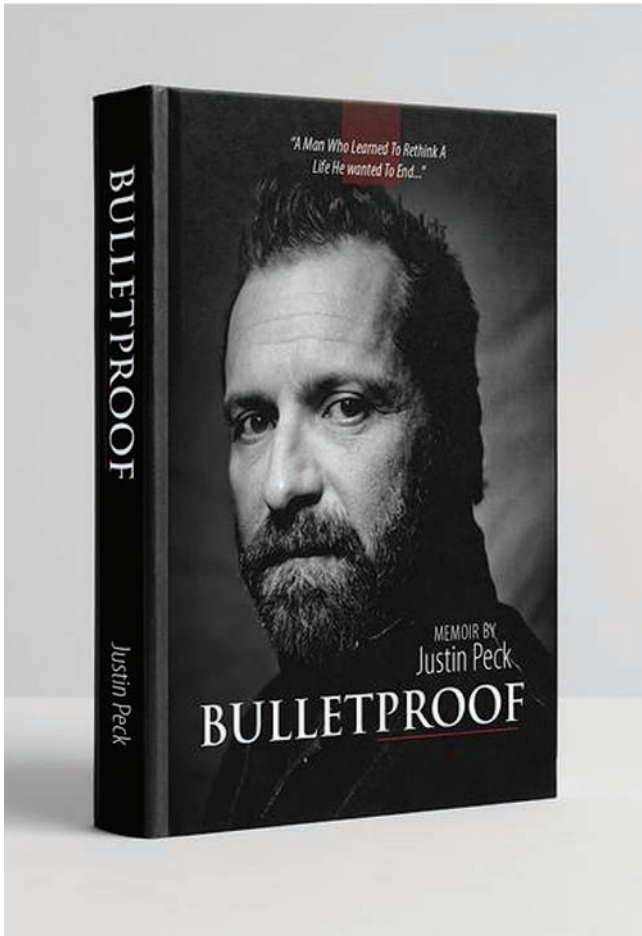
Peck: It was probably 10 years ago, roughly, when my youngest brother, right before his 21st birthday, overdosed on opiates and died.

Martirosyan: I'm sorry.

Peck: Oh, it happens. It's an epidemic. It's happening all across this world. It's pretty rapid now. But after my brother passed away, I remember sitting at home and thinking to myself, "All right, if I were to die, would my kids know who their daddy was?" As a young kid, or as a young person, we see our parents as our parents. But we don't really understand the struggles and hardships that our parents go through because there's such an age difference and a generation gap.

My main focus was to write an account of my life so





when my children get to be my age, they could read it and understand, "This is why Daddy is crazy. This is why he acts the way he acts." It could give them an understanding of how I've always lived my life. There were no intentions of actually writing a book. I just wanted to write journal-type stuff, and get things down. I started, and one chapter turned into a couple chapters, which turned into seven or eight and then 20. Eight years later, I had 38 chapters done.

I handed it to an editor. She read it and explained it was quite powerful, and it would not only help my children, but it would help a lot of other people, because a lot of people think and feel the same way I do. The difference is, I have the voice. I'm OK with giving up my sanity to help other people. That's where the book has evolved to so far.

Martirosyan: I'm trying to let that part sink in, where you said you're willing to give up your sanity?

Peck: (*laughs*) Let me explain. If you look at the normal populace who suffer with some type of mental illness, there's a stigma behind it. Would you agree?

Martirosyan: Absolutely.

Peck: It's one of those things people don't talk about. The influencers—whether they're a celebrity, athlete, artist or band member with a physical or a mental disorder that they know about it—I would say probably 90 percent of them do not talk about it. For a long time we never understood why. If, 10 years ago, someone would have said, "Hey, you know what? Scott Stapp, the lead singer of Creed, has bi-polar disorder." If he had come out 10 years ago and said, "Hey, this is what I suffer from," I would have listened to him. I would have said, "Wow, you know what? If Scott Stapp can do this, I can do this." I did not realize and understand why people weren't talking about it.

About six or seven months ago, I was speaking at an event, and that's when it hit me. I realized why people with a disorder do not talk about the disorder. It's because every single time I tell my story of trying to commit suicide, that's burned into my brain like it's a movie, and it plays over and over again. Every time I tell that story, I relive the story and the emotion. I relive the depression and the manic phases of it.

We don't talk about it because it's hard, and it really does affect our mental state if we decide to talk about how it affects our lives. What I've decided—and this is just me personally—is that I am OK now with sacrificing my mental stability for the good of other people around me. I am willing to tell the stories and explain how I felt and had beaten some big struggles in my life. And I'm willing to deal with a few days of mind torture thereafter. I'm OK with the sacrifice if I can look into a crowd and hope one person decided not to kill him/herself that night because of my words. That's a sacrifice I'm willing to give, and I'll give it every single day.

Martirosyan: Thanks for the explanation. I can only imagine what you have to deal with afterwards. Is there a line or two in the book that stands out to you?

Peck: There are a couple lines I always share with people that have been a mantra to me and that I repeat to myself on a daily basis. One of them is "Adapt and overcome." Situations and struggles will always arise. We're humans. It's built into our DNA. There's nothing that is typically ever easy. We have problems and issues, we adapt and then we overcome them. When we do that, we become better people. We grow in character, experience, and in so many other ways.

Another big one I try to explain to people is that anything worth doing is worth overdoing, in my opinion. Moderation is for those people who don't believe in their abilities. If you're going to do something, if you have a task in mind to start a company, become an amazing guitar player or a great chef—whatever you want to do in life—take your gifts, take your passion and put everything you possibly have into it. If you overdo, then you're going to learn and master it. If you go into each task with moderation, then you don't believe you can actually accomplish your goal. Those are a few things I try to explain. I don't know if



"teach" is the right word. Those are a few things that have always run through my mind that keep me going every day.

Martirosyan: I like it. Do you consider racing a form of therapy?

Peck: (*laughs*) Yes, racing is my therapy. Absolutely. I race 38 weekends a year right now. I've been a pro driver for seven or eight years. I've been racing for 25 years. Without racing, I honestly don't know what I would do. I'm asked that question quite often. "What happens if you break a bone?" I've broken 78 bones. I've had 19 surgeries. I've got 12 rods, nine plates, 300 screws, cadaver parts, and I physically have died twice—all from racing. I refuse to quit. I overdo, because it's a position. I refuse to give up on my sport that I love.

Martirosyan: Amazing that you found something in life that you are so passionate about.

Peck: I'm very fortunate.

Martirosyan: Does it matter if you win or lose?

Peck: We always like to win. (*laughs*) There has never been a time that I have sat at the starting line and said, "You know what? I'm gonna take eighth place today. I'm OK with that."

(laughter)

Peck: Any time I put on the helmet, it's always first place or no place. And I've had really good success over the course of my years. I've probably physically started over a thousand races in my day. I've got a couple hundred trophies and awards and things from winning races. I understand what it feels like to win. I also know what it feels like to lose, which is really hard as well. But the goal is always the top of the box, to stand with your number one finger up.

Martirosyan: I like that answer. I want to step back to when you mentioned the stigma around mental health. Do you think it's changed over the years?

Peck: Slowly changing. It's a really slow process. I'm still trying to figure that one out. I try to think logically. I know I overanalyze a lot of things, but I've never understood why it's taken so long for people to accept mental health and mental disorder. A couple years ago people kind of stood back and went, "Oh, wow. OK." It was when Mr. Robin Williams had killed himself. We're talking about one of the most incredible men ever, a guy who made millions of people laugh, an incredible talent and an all-around good human. But he was able to hide a disorder that no one knew about. What if he had been able to stand up and speak about it? What lives would have been affected then?

Honestly, I think it took a lot of people back, and they said, "If this guy can do it, there must be something behind it." There was more research, and I think that since that time the ball is starting to roll, but again, we've got an uphill battle. I'm really good with challenges, so when people say, "You know what? You're not gonna be able to change the world and end the stigma," in the back of my mind is, "Challenge accepted. I'll prove to you that it will happen."

Martirosyan: That's awesome. What question are you never asked that you want to be asked?

Peck: (*laughs*) Oh, wow! I've been interviewed a lot, and that one I—geez. That's kind of a put-you-on-the-spot question. (*pause*) I don't know.

Martirosyan: You can brag if it's something you want people to know.

Peck: I try to be very humble, because I understand I have a fan base, that I have people looking at me all the time. It's very important for me to convey that I am a humble man. I grew up with nothing, and I was fortunate enough to grow into a business and start my own companies and work hard and create and know what I've created. I think what I wish people would ask more about is how I love my children.

Martirosyan: Sweet!

Peck: And I know that probably sounds goofy.

Martirosyan: No, it doesn't.



Peck: With my book and having the disorder, I have to talk a lot about myself all the time. I've never been much of a person who likes to talk about himself. I like to always stand in the back of the room and listen. Because you can learn a lot by silence. Watch the crowd, watch the people, and then walk up to someone and listen to what s/he has to say. You can learn a lot about someone in the first five sentences they say.

When I speak, it's a lot about me, which is sometimes hard. But the main reason I'm doing this big push on the mental health side of things, is because I want to create a legacy for my children. My children are the absolute loves of my life. Without them I am nothing. So I guess that's the question I wish I would get. "How does it feel to be a daddy?"

Martirosyan: How does it feel to be a daddy?

(laughter)

Peck: If you take rainbows and glitter and unicorns and pixie dust and all the fun things and then attach that to screaming and yelling and fighting, that's what being a daddy feels like.

No, it's amazing. I look at it as, when they're born, I am in control of these people. I could go to jail if something happens to these people. I have to take care of them. I have to understand that they need to be fed and they need to have shoes and go to school. And so it's always a fun process. Being the age I am now and having the age of children that I have, it's fun to listen to their mentalities and their concepts of reality compared to the concepts of reality I had when I was their age. I learn a lot from them. I learn a lot about technology. For heaven's sakes, I get that Facebook and Instagram and Snapchat and all these things are huge. I totally understand that, and I do them as well. Even last night, my daughter and one of my sons and I were watching a movie and laughing at the movie, and my daughter pulls up Snapchat and says, "Dad, check this filter out."

I'm like, "I don't know. What does that even mean?" Taking pictures and showing funny faces and funny voices. It's crazy that you can look at technology as one of those things that can pull us apart as people, but I know that for me, we sat on the couch for 45 minutes laughing so hard because of the silly things that were happening. And because of that, I'm closer to my kids now. It's little things like that that make me appreciate my children and help me learn from them. I don't always have to be the teacher.

Martirosyan: It's nice that you realize that as well. How old are they?

Peck: I have four children ages 23, 21, 16, and 11. My oldest is about to turn 24. And then I have a three-year-

old grandbaby, a five-year-old grandbaby, a three-month-old grandbaby, and a grandbaby that's due in May. And to top it all off, I'm only 43 years old. It's not like I'm an old guy. I still race professionally. Still fast at what I do. It's not like I'm an old guy. I just started real young, and my kids started pretty young, too.

Martirosyan: Are you ok with them racing?

Peck: Out of all of my children, and it's the funniest thing, because I would have thought as they were growing up: "This one will race. This one won't." The first three, I was hoping that one of them would race. But they just never did. The fourth one—my very last child, a boy—the second he was born, I just knew. It was the craziest thing. By the time he was one year old, he was not even walking yet, but there was this Daddy instinct. "All right, he's gonna be my racer." I put Dylan in his very first racecar when he was four years old. He has been racing ever since. The kid has almost seven years of experience behind him, and he's 11. He's won championships. He is fast. He is humble.

So yeah, it's great. It's nice for me, because it's fun for me to win. I enjoy winning. But there is just something about watching your little man stand on the top of that podium with a trophy in his hands that completely beats every last trophy that I've ever won in my life. It's amazing.

> **"But at that moment, I pulled the trigger, and all I got was a click."**

Martirosyan: Any motorcycle racing?

Peck: I race motorcycles. I raced professionally for about 14 years on motorcycles.

Martirosyan: Motocross?

Peck: Yeah, some motocross, mostly the long distance-type stuff in deserts. That's how I was introduced into the racing scene, because of dirt bikes. They're an inexpensive way to race and compete. I did that for a very long time, and that's where the broken bones come from. When I was 32, I had broken both of my legs in a race, and realized, "All right, enough's enough. You can't do this any more." I recovered from the broken legs, and then started racing on asphalt, and that was fun. It's still fun to do 180 miles an hour. But there's nothing like the dirt. I did asphalt for about six years and then transitioned back over to off-road racing with trucks, and I've been doing it ever since.

Martirosyan: Quite a journey.

Peck: It's still going, too. That's what's fun!

Martirosyan: What question are you always asked that you prefer not to answer?

Peck: (*laughs*) The question I'm always asked and it's not that I don't want to answer it, but it's the hardest question I get. Here's a quick, brief story to lead up to my answer:

Eleven and a half years ago, it was a normal day. I had felt kind of down. Hadn't been diagnosed with the disorder yet. I woke up, leaned over and kissed my wife at the time, walked upstairs, kissed the kids goodbye, went out back, got my dog and threw her in the back of the truck. These were just normal day-to-day things I had done for years. I was a big construction guy, owned a couple of construction companies, but while I was checking on my construction jobs, I felt a sense of despair, of not being worth anything.

Instead of dwelling on that, I decided to drive up to the top of the canyon I'd been to a million times before. I got to the top of the canyon. I know exactly where it's at because I've been there thousands of times. I let the dog out of the back of the truck, and as she was running around, I was trying to feed off of her joy. What's it like to be a dog and run around in the mountains? I'm sitting, listening to music, and in the moment I was thinking rationally about life, those thoughts turned into irrational thinking for a split second. In that second, I reached into my glove box, grabbed my pistol, loaded it, put it to my head and pulled the trigger.

Martirosyan: Oh.

Peck: I had given up. I had decided I did not want to be here anymore. I was done. Done feeling the way I was feeling. It was one of only two times in my life that I've quit. I don't quit. Anybody who knows me knows that Justin does not quit, ever. He doesn't quit when he should quit. But at that moment, I pulled the trigger, and all I got was a click. I didn't get the result that I wanted. So I unchambered the bullet, and it landed in my lap. I picked it up and examined it, and I could see where the firing pin had hit the back of the bullet. I don't have any explanation for it. I wish I did. I wish I could tell you why it didn't go off. I have my personal beliefs, and I know other people have their personal beliefs, but for some reason that one bullet out of the thousands of bullets that I had at that particular time decided not to fire.

The question I'm often asked that is the hardest to answer is, "After you pulled the trigger, how did you

feel?" I try to put it into perspective for people, because society's pretty crazy with guns anyway. But when I explain this experience and tell them that when I pulled the trigger the gun didn't go off and that it was probably the most incredible feeling I've ever felt in my life, people give me funny looks. (*laughs*) They don't understand, and I don't expect them to understand, because it was my struggle to bear. But I do know that when the gun didn't go off, I knew then, and I still know to this day, that I was ready to die. I was OK with it. I was OK with being done. But things didn't pan out the way I thought they would. But the second the firing pin did not work and the gun did not go off, the adrenalin coursing through my veins was probably one of the most amazing feelings I've ever had in my life. And that was the beginning of understanding who I am, because I drove down the canyon sobbing, not understanding, and on the phone with my doctor I explained to him what I had just done, and he immediately said, "You need to come down and sit and talk to me. We need to figure this out."

That's where we went through a six-month to a year process of narrowing down what disorder was affecting me the most. And because of the exact timing of that event, I am here today, able to talk about bipolar disorder and how it's affected my life. In return, I am hoping to be able to affect as many people as I can to keep those people away from the top of the canyon, to keep a gun out of their hands, to keep the bottle of pills in their closet. That's the goal. That's the purpose.

Martirosyan: That's a powerful story to be able to share.

Peck: Thank you.

Martirosyan: Was your doctor a psychiatrist?

Peck: No. He's actually a good friend of mine. Believe it or not, he's the same doctor who delivered all of my children. He's a general practice MD, and I trust him. He's still a part of my world. Once we figured out the drug path, he understood it was out of his realm, so I went to other doctors who specialized in mental health.

Martirosyan: Speaking of your drug path, what drugs are you taking?

Peck: There are a few things I don't talk about. Not because I'm embarrassed. I don't care if people know what I take. But I have to be careful. I want people to listen to what I have to say in a way that inspires them within themselves. I don't want them to look at my life and say, "OK, I'm gonna have to take a gun, put it to my head and pull the trigger, and hopefully it doesn't go off for me to change my life." I don't want that. I want to be the inspiration. I've gone through every single type of medication you can think of. Some of it works well, some of it doesn't. My suggestion to people, because I'm asked that question a lot, is first find the drugs that work for you, and then also understand and realize that the drug that works in 2016 may not work in 2017.

Always be self-aware, always have a good group of people around you, whether it's one or two people or five or ten. I call them my tribe, my little tribe of people, who know who I am and know that when the triggers are happening, they are the ones to bring it to my attention. "We think your medication is not working any more."

Martirosyan: Let's end on a light note. Is there anything else you'd like to share or put out in the universe?

Peck: I think everybody in this world should experience an adrenalin overload. Life is an amazing journey, and if we can stop the intolerance in our society, if we can stop pointing the finger at someone else, if we could just stop and look at a situation, even to the smallest extent of the next person you meet, whether it's someone at the gas station or a TSA agent or whatever circumstances you're in, just look at that person and tell that person, "You know what? I appreciate you. I appreciate you for who you are." If we can bring smiles, hope and happiness to one person, that one person will pass it on to the next.

I know what brings happiness to me. When I'm able to have a smile on my face, the normal day-to-day chaos goes away, even for a brief moment. I think that's the same with everybody else. If there's a TSA agent sitting in that line, and he's checking IDs and boarding passes, he doesn't want to be there. He sees hundreds of thousands of people. So I try to be that one guy he remembers on that one day. "Wow, that guy was really nice to me. He said something that made me laugh." If I can pull him out of his thoughts and his struggles just for a second, my day is made, and hopefully I made his.

Martirosyan: Lovely. Are you coming to Southern California any time soon?

Peck: Yeah. I just moved my race team. We were based out of Utah, and I loaded up my semi trucks and all the equipment and moved it to Ramona, California.

Martirosyan: I just got a crazy idea. What if I take one out for a spin?

Peck: You know what? I can absolutely put you in one of the racecars. I typically don't let people drive them because they are a handful.

(laughter)

Martirosyan: I can imagine! ■ ABILITY

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CSUN & KING OF THE JUNGLE

WHY LION REIGNS OVER TECHNOLOGY







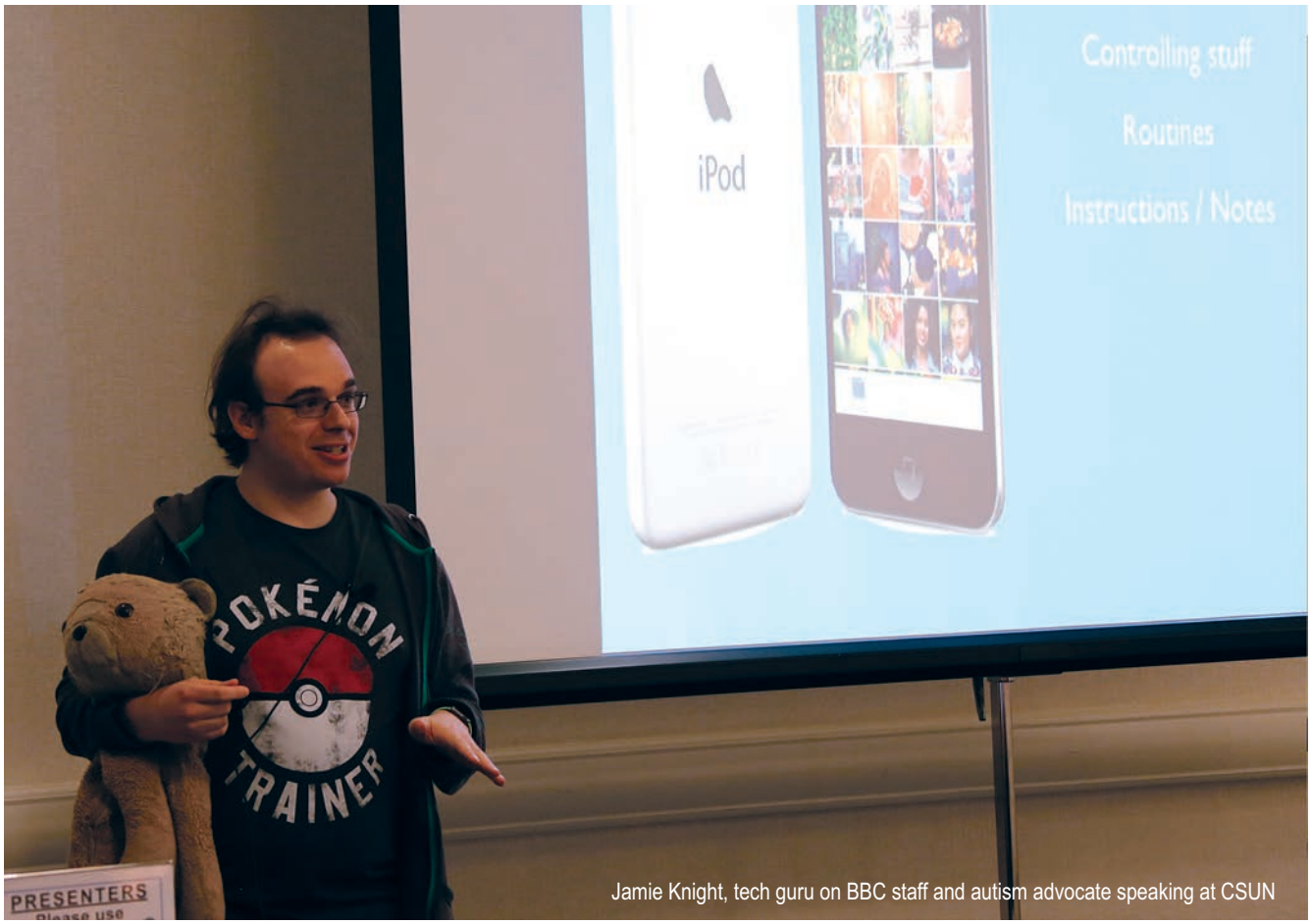
"Can I pet your dog?" is a question that is rarely heard at the CSUN Assistive Technology Conference. Participants, speakers, and even hotel staff simply don't ask. If it's March, it's conference season, and service dogs and their owners descend en masse to San Diego. These dogs are working as service animals: assisting people who are blind, have epilepsy, or need emotional support. You wouldn't ask to pet someone's wheelchair. Indeed, the CSUN Conference, now spanning over 30 years, highlights the best and most innovative technology and research used to accommodate people with disabilities, but also developed by people with disabilities.

Most participants, vendors, and attendees have an accommodation that work best for them. There's little judgment at CSUN, for after the last session of the day wraps up, it becomes the largest and most inclusive party on the West Coast. Don't be surprised if Stevie Wonder is standing next to you. When we met Jamie Knight, a software developer out of the United Kingdom working for the BBC, we got to meet Lion as well.

Jamie has autism. Characterized by difficulties with communication and forming relationships with others, autism can make interpersonal relationships tricky for some, impossible for others. Jamie, though, has Lion. Not a real lion, of course, although that would be quite a standout in the menagerie of dogs at the CSUN conference. Lion is a four-foot-tall stuffed animal that is Jamie's accommodation. He helps Jamie ground himself and engage in conversation. He enables Jamie to participate in jam-packed conferences, go out with friends, and be productive at work. As Jamie shares, "The autistic guy with a giant lion is pretty memorable".

For all intents and purposes, Lion is absolutely no different than a sentient, living and breathing, service dog. Of course, Jamie knows he isn't real, but for Jamie, Lion is the accommodation that fills his backpack, has Twitter followers, and makes him a more cogent software engineer.

Why a large stuffed lion? As Jamie shares, Lion has weight and substance. He provides structure in a world that is chaotic. Given to him as a young child to help



Jamie Knight, tech guru on BBC staff and autism advocate speaking at CSUN

with speech and language development, it was a perfect fit. Jamie and Lion go to work together, go to conferences together, and even blog together. It's a match made in heaven, even if slightly less conventional than the technology that usually adorns the CSUN conference. How does Lion, with a 'fluff brain,' as Jamie says, stack up against the latest tech?

The exhibit hall of this and many technology conferences promises time savers and life enhancers. Indeed, as Jamie shared and we witnessed, we learned about squeeze vests and apps to track procedures, develop routines, create organizers, become more effective communicators, and obtain books that help a person with autism maintain structure and balance. Jamie likes iBookstore, which gives him endless access to books on various topics, without having to navigate a brick and mortar library. ABILITYMagazine.com has a list of apps for download. Still—can technology replace paws?

One of the reasons why Lion is such a benefit to Jamie is that it is personifying, despite its leonine background. Lion's owner is a person with thoughts and emotions. Apps may dehumanize. We've seen a backlash with South by Southwest's well meaning but ultimately extremely ableist hashtag of #EndOfDisability, proclaiming that technology can end disability as we know it. Lion is disruptive without being offensive. Jamie shares that when "…people don't know what's different, they assign madness. Lion is an indication there is something different there."

Different is good. Sure, as Jamie puts it, interesting means you get poked at by doctors, but it can also open you up to different experiences. Lion gives hugs when Jamie cannot. Even within the realm of accessibility, Lion is the demographic of user that Jamie develops around. Lion's paws have no dexterity, can't use a mouse, his ears are cloth and his vision is bad, but perhaps the clincher: his fluff brain. Too often, many of us see how technology will benefit just us, or those very nearby. Lion might be the closest test case to universal design there is.

Others with autism use stuffed animals for accommodations, and they have seen tremendous benefits in helping people with anxiety, ADHD and PTSD. Are Lion and his friends going to replace those products on the app anytime soon? Unlikely, but there's no reason not to find your spirit stuffed animal. The author herself admits she has a penguin named BoBo. Stuffed animals are an inexpensive and reasonable solution to a complex problem. There was a time when Jamie couldn't talk in front of people, and was best at communicating via email or text. Now, he's king of the jungle, that is the CSUN Assistive Technology Conference, roaring a message of inclusion and accessibility. ■ ABILITY

by Sharon Rosenblatt

jkg3.com



LET'S FIND A QUIET PLACE TO CHAT WITH DAVID KOECHNER



There's funny and then there's hysterical. Comedian, writer and producer David Koechner falls clearly into the latter camp. You'll recognize him, for his face jumps out from some of the funniest comedy films and TV series over the last decade and a half, including *Anchorman* and *Anchorman 2*, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Get Smart*, *The Office*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, to name a few.

An alumnus of Chicago's Second City Theater, Koechner landed his first break as a cast member of *Saturday Night Live* and has since graced the screen in more than 150 films and TV shows. He currently appears on CBS's *Superior Donuts* and Showtime's *Twin Peaks*, among others. As if this isn't enough, he also performs live stand-up comedy across the country and creates original content videos for his YouTube channel, *Full On Koechner*. And did we mention he's the father of five children—yes, five—with his wife Leigh?

ABILITY's Chet Cooper and Lia Martirosyan met up with the congenial comedian at Shane's Inspiration's 16th Annual Gala in Los Angeles, where he spoke movingly about his involvement in the organization, which creates playgrounds for kids of all abilities, as well as his busy life as a funnyman and family man.



David on a stealth mission of bulb picking

Lia Martirosyan: How did you get involved in Shane's Inspiration?

David Koechner: My wife, Leigh, met Catherine Curry-Williams years ago. Leigh and I have been blessed with five kids. And when our youngest [Eve] was in utero, we were told that she would have severe disabilities. [*near tears*] Oh, God, I'm getting emotional!

People from Shane's reached out immediately to my wife upon hearing it. Our story turned out differently, in a situation where Eve was not handicapped. But we were told that she would be unable to even recognize us, and they got it wrong. Who knew? The year was 2010 and in Los Angeles you think you have the best resources. As it turned out, we didn't have a child with severe disabilities, but that's how we got connected with Catherine and Scott Curry. We've been part of it for six years. We hosted it one year. We come back every year. We were able also to participate in *Kitchen Nightmares*. We did an event earlier this year that highlighted Shane's. There's a motorcycle going by. We're out here. I hope you add this to your article.

(laughter)

Chet Cooper: That was my stomach.

(laughter)

Koechner: So that's how we're part of it.

Martirosyan: Have you let Eve experience the park?

Koechner: Of course. It's interesting. We live in the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles. It's fantastic to just roll up to different parks, not knowing that it's going to be a Shane's Park, and sure enough it is. Which is amazing. [*near tears*] Ah, I'm getting emotional again!

Martirosyan: I love it.

Koechner: It gives you pause. Because you don't want any child to roll up or walk up to a play place and think, "Oh, this is not for me." It's heartwarming when you do roll up or walk up to one and you say, "Yeah, this is for me!"

Martirosyan: Oh, now you've got me going!

Cooper: Me, too! I haven't had emotions for a while! I'm an asshole!

Martirosyan: And I'm a robot.

(laughter)

What are you doing, David?

Koechner: I've got five kids, so I will cry at commercials.



David hanging at the counter on the set of *Superior Donuts*

Martirosyan: Do you have any idea how long it took me to put this eyeliner on? This is your fault.

(laughter)

Koechner: So yeah, I'm happy this exists, and we're able to be part of it. We've met so many lovely friends through this organization. I think it gets bigger every year. In fact, tonight when we came, I tend to forget it's a big deal—a big fundraiser—and it's fantastic. It has grown. You're home getting ready, and you don't fit in the suit you're trying to put on— and there's a red carpet. And I'm like, "Oh, shit! I'm too fat to fit in this suit!" "Honey, stand in front of me." Everything gets bigger every year.

(laughter)

Martirosyan: Good stuff. Are you working on anything fun right now?

Koechner: Currently on *Superior Donuts*, a CBS show on Monday nights. We've got 13 episodes. It's a great cast. It has Judd Hirsch, Katey Sagal, Jermaine Fowler, Anna Baryshnikov, Darien Sills-Evans, Rell Battle, Maz Jobrani and me.

Martirosyan: It sounds like you're thanking people on an award show.

(laughter)

Koechner: I'm remembering the entire cast.

Cooper: Catered by—

Koechner: We're having a blast doing the show. I'm grateful we're on, and hopefully we will be back next season.

Cooper: I remember the commercial now. There was a great one where Judd Hirsch is talking to someone who's from the Middle East—

Koechner: Maz Jobrani.

Cooper: —and somebody is doing something else and saying, "There's a Jew." I forget how it went, but there's a great cast.

Koechner: That was called "The Protest Episode," I think. Maz plays an Arab and Judd is a Jew and Jermaine is a young African American. We're a diversity show, so we have a chance to play with all kinds of cultural episodes. And I'm white.

(laughter)

Very white.



Cooper: So somehow you need to have Lia on the show.

Martirosyan: Diversity, that means I have a chance.

Koechner: Absolutely.

Cooper: She sings opera.

Koechner: Do you? Wow! Fantastic!

Martirosyan: Tell them to write it in. You got this, David.

Koechner: That's real talent. That's a measurable skill. I don't have that. If I had that much influence, I would give myself more lines.

Martirosyan: If you show that emotion and say, "You've got to get Lia in there!"

(laughter)

I think you'd sell it.

Koechner: I will mention it. Of course, why wouldn't I?

Cooper: We were in DC one time, going to dinner in Georgetown, and restaurant after restaurant was not accessible. After 27 years of the Americans with Disabilities Act, there were still two steps to get into each restaurant.

So I went into one and talked to the manager and said, "Do you have a ramp? Just a $75 ramp that you could unfold." He said, "We don't have people with disabilities in the restaurant." I said, "Maybe it's because of the steps?"

Koechner: "Of course you don't. They can't get in!"

Martirosyan: So bizarre.

Koechner: "You don't have to leave it out there. Just make it available."

Martirosyan: The best suggestion from a stranger is, "We'll pick her up and bring her in."

Cooper: No, you don't pick people up.

Martirosyan: Next time I should let them and begin shouting, "Ow! Oh!"

Koechner: *(laughs)* Exactly!

Cooper: It would be a good episode, because it's so easy to get, just one or two steps that makes it totally different.

Koechner: Yup, it makes life inaccessible. Well, you know, the TV show *Speechless* deals with it. They're here tonight.

Cooper: That's a unique show, because, Scott Silveri, had a connection with cerebral palsy (CP). Typically it takes that for awareness to occur.

Koechner: Awareness, that's all we want, right? It starts with awareness, and then it becomes action.

Martirosyan: That's what the magazine does. It brings awareness through content.

Cooper: When did you start acting?

Koechner: When I was 24 I moved to Chicago to start—

Cooper: So two years now!

Koechner: (*laughs*) Yeah, two years. I moved to Chicago to start studying improvisation, and it went on from there.

Cooper: Did you work with any legendaries?

Koechner: All of them. Del Close, who is probably the major legendary teacher of improvisation. And I had an opportunity to be in Chicago and work with a bunch of people who have now become major stars, from Chris Farley to Mike Myers to Adam McKay, who wrote and directed *Anchorman*, to Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and everybody who started the Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB) sketch comedy troupe, including Ian Roberts, Matt Walsh, Rachel Dratch, Rachel Sands, Steve Carell, and Stephen Colbert.

Cooper: I'd like to thank—

(laughter)

Koechner: I try to remember everyone I've worked with and came up with. It happened to be a very fertile time when I was studying in Chicago. You look back, and it's absolutely remarkable.

*Cooper: This is pre-*Saturday Night Live *with John Belushi?*

Koechner: Right. That started in 1975. I'm not that old!

They'd already studied at Second City, so that's why I went there. I happened to be there in what I'd call the next most fertile time.

Cooper: The second wave.

Koechner: Well, there's probably a wave every time. My guess is, we're probably the third wave. The first would have been John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd and Gilda Radner, and the next wave would have been George Wendt, Tim Kazurinsky, and that crew, and then our wave would have been all those people I mentioned heretofore.

(laughter)

Martirosyan: How about stand-up?

Koechner: I have a stand-up routine now. I wish I had done stand-up when I first started improv, but there was a great prejudice against stand-up. I've been doing it for the last six years, and I'm having a blast. I still do long-form improv, and I use those skills I learned in Chicago in every acting job. But yeah, I'm doing stand-up now as well.

Cooper: Do you tour nationally?

Koechner: I tour nationally and internationally. Right now, though, my focus is only on the television show, because that's what I'm doing every week. My next gig is in San Diego in April, and then I have a bunch of gigs booked through the summer and fall that I hopefully cannot do. I keep getting other work. In fact, I had a show booked in Austin in June that I just had to cancel because I'm doing a movie in London. That's the nature of the business. You book things and then they go away.

Martirosyan: What's the name of the movie?

Koechner: Pre-Nup*, with Emile Hirsch and Alice Eve.*

Cooper: London will be fun.

Martirosyan: How's stand-up versus on-set and the preparation involved?

Koechner: You know what? I go out every week here in town, so you'll go out and do sets where you don't get paid because you just do it for the practice. You'll do a show with five other headliners. In Los Angeles audiences are spoiled, because you'll do a show with 10 headliners. When you're out in the heartland, you're the only headliner who's there. They're week to week. It's a lot of fun.

Cooper: Do they laugh differently because of that?

Koechner: No. What you do find everywhere is that the laughs are in the same spots.

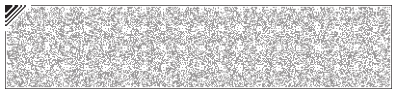
Martirosyan: Oh, good.

Cooper: So blank, always, just nothing.

Koechner: *(laughs)* Just dumbfounded looks like, "Whaaat is he doing?" How is that versus television? For television, someone else wrote it, so you're doing their lines. But every time you act, I believe, you get better, so everything you do adds to your quiver of abilities. Oh, wow, I brought it right back to *ABILITY Magazine*! How about that?

Martirosyan: That was awesome.

Cooper: Will you do anything within the next week or so that we can see?





The *Anchorman* Crew: (L-R) Paul, Will, David and Steve

Koechner: A show? Let's see. I don't know what I have next week. I just did a show last night. My wife is doing stand-up now too, so that's an interesting challenge.

Cooper: Who's funnier?

Koechner: Oh, anyone would say her.

Martirosyan: Happy wife, happy life.

Koechner: (*laughs*) We just did a show. My wife and I have five kids. I don't know what's happening tomorrow. We tape a show on Tuesday, and I know we're off for a week, so I won't have a bunch of shows that week. I think I have one at the Hollywood Improv on—or no, is it the Comedy Store? I don't know. We had a special event at the Laugh Factory for *Superior Donuts*.

Martirosyan: You're a lot of places. Okay, let's try something new.

Koechner: Okay.

Martirosyan: What question are you asked that you don't want to answer?

Koechner: I don't judge questions.

Martirosyan: You don't get the same question over and over—

Koechner: Of course. But I'm not going to judge a question. I know a lot of them come again and again. The one I get all the time is, "What's Will Farrell like? What's Steve Carell like?" And I can honestly answer, and I'm happy to say, they're as good human beings as you'd hope.

Martirosyan: That's nice.

Koechner: And that's the truth. It's not a funny answer. It's a truthful answer. The truth will always serve you. If you try to be funny, then you have the right of offending someone or offending the person you're talking about. I find the truth always wins.

Martirosyan: And on the opposite end of that, what question are you never asked that you would like to be asked or to share with the world?

Koechner: I have not thought of that answer yet. I don't know. I will say this, I'm grateful that someone finds it interesting enough to ask something. People often ask, "Don't you get tired of someone saying, "Won't you say whammy to me?" or ask you about a movie you'd been in. I say it would be so much worse as an actor if no one asked you anything. The fact that anyone's interested to talk to you is enough to be grateful for.

Martirosyan: I like that. Do you like that?

Cooper: I don't judge answers.

Koechner: *(laughs)* Look. People are walking down this red carpet, right? For me, part of my body goes, "Oh, shoot, I have to do that." But what if I wanted to and wasn't asked? Then it's a different story. So I have to remember to better be GD grateful someone wants to take my picture or ask questions.

Martirosyan: Lovely meeting you. Have fun! ■ ABILITY

We also met Leigh (David's funny wife) who tells her story of parenting, knowing oneself and wellness. Watch for it in our upcoming issue.

davidkoechner.com

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LIVING ON PURPOSE

"I advise that you keep your diagnosis to yourself." These were the first words my psychiatrist uttered upon revealing that I am living with borderline personality disorder (BPD). BPD is a serious mental illness that is highly stigmatized by the public, and even some mental health professionals refuse to treat those affected. The illness is characterized by severely unstable moods, unstable sense of self and identity, and unstable relationships with others. It affects one's overall ability to function. Both biological and environmental factors contribute to the development of BPD.

As I heard my psychiatrist deliver my diagnosis, I contemplated whether or not I would go against his counsel and be open about my illness.

I was a former Miss Maryland 2015 for the Miss World Organization and in the top 12 at Miss World America. I had just published a book about my previous struggles with anorexia nervosa and my past hospitalizations in mental health facilities as an adolescent. I wrote about how I was now free from mental illness and thriving in my adult life. But the truth was that I was hiding my worsening mental state—even throughout my reign as Miss Maryland. I knew my reputation could be jeopardized by such a consequential diagnosis. Deciding if I wanted to go public with my diagnosis could be detrimental to my status. But I also wondered if my admission would make a difference in the lives of others—and would doing so be worth it.

I drove home in complete silence, putting together the puzzle pieces in my head as to why I have been "this way" my entire life. I am emotionally sensitive not just to my own pain but also to the pain of others, which affects me in monumental ways. This is a symptom of my illness that I see as both a blessing and a curse.

I think back to the time when I was five years old, playing outside my parents' home in the U.S. Virgin Islands. I'd found a butterfly that couldn't fly and that was being attacked by ants. I quickly brushed off the ants and noticed this beautiful creature had a hole in its wing. I then made it my mission to make sure I could somehow nurse it back to health by collecting flowers to allow it to eat and survive—which, surprisingly, worked. This tiny insect gained my trust and would walk towards me when I would hold out my hand. After having it for just two days, I woke up and noticed that my sweet pet had passed away. I was crushed and held a funeral for it in the backyard. I cried for the next few days over the death of an insect.

From this memory, I then recalled times I had experienced extreme mood changes—the polar opposite of the sweet child I described above. I could go from euphoric happiness to bitter rage in a split second.

For instance, I once had trouble opening a bag of dog treats and became so furious I slammed it against the table and squeezed it until it exploded. I've also broken mirrors, slammed plates, and shattered glass cups out of uncontrollable rage at seemingly small things—such as disliking the appearance of my make-up. I even stabbed a half cooked chicken because I was frustrated that it was taking hours to cook. These dramatic reactions were just a normal part of my existence. I did not know it was an indicator of a serious mental illness.

When I got home, I sat on the couch and began looking at photos of myself as Miss Maryland. I thought to myself, "*Who is that person?*" as I ran my fingers through my short hair.

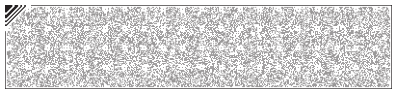
I impulsively had my hair cut into a short pixie in search of identity. Since I was no longer Miss Maryland, I did not know who I was. I had painted myself into a picture of wellness and perfection, elegant and poised from head to toe. I had spent the last few years wearing the identity of a pageant girl and without that identity I felt lost.

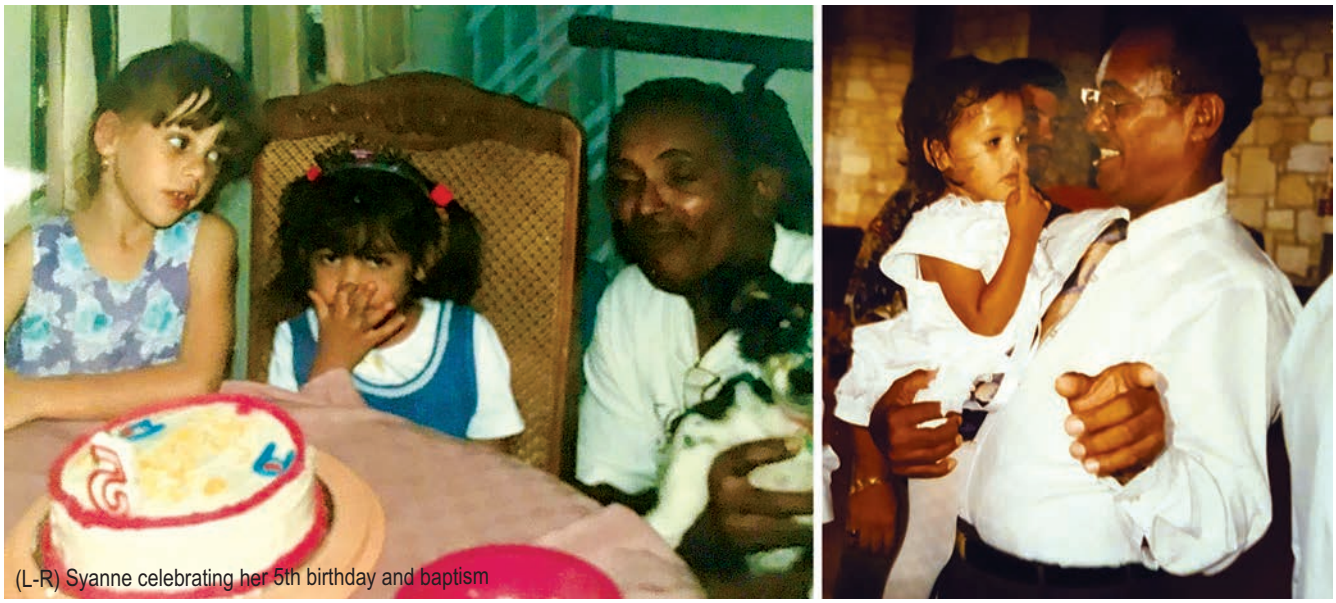
As an "identity chameleon," I morphed myself into anyone whom I thought could be pleasing to those around me. As a child, I experimented with different identities. When I couldn't find anything (or anyone) to identify with, I fell into anorexia nervosa. "Ana," as I called it, was how I coped with all of my overwhelming emotions—good or bad. Eating disorders are common in those diagnosed with BPD because they can be used as a coping mechanism, and they have their own identity. My battle with anorexia was so severe that it left me with an incurable bone condition called osteoporosis. Despite the dangers that came with anorexia, I kept it as my identity for ten years.

But then, at the age of 20, I found pageantry. Pageantry was meant to be my saving grace—a good representative I could hide behind. But it was nothing more than a beautiful mask. Behind the scenes I was struggling with mental illness that never went away. Oftentimes, I would self-mutilate on my hips with a razor when I had overwhelming emotions that I did not know how to cope with—in the same ways that I used "Ana" to cope. But even though I was struggling, no one would have to know. I had my mask: I was Miss Maryland, and Miss Maryland represented happiness, success, inspiration, and perfection. No one could knock her down.

However, when I didn't win the Miss World America title and my year as Miss Maryland came to an end, I didn't know where to turn, and I could no longer hide. Miss Maryland was gone and all that was left was this person whom I did not recognize.

My popularity diminished, and I began falling backwards, isolating myself from family and friends and becoming consumed with paranoid thoughts. I had delusions my family and friends were working against





(L-R) Syanne celebrating her 5th birthday and baptism

me and no one actually liked me. After months of self-mutilation, suicidal thoughts and isolation, I had finally seen this psychiatrist whose sole advice was to keep my diagnosis to myself. It was infuriating, and it made me feel ashamed.

After looking at photos of my beauty queen days, I decided I would not fall silent, and I would not be ashamed of something that made me unique. On that same day, I pulled up my computer and wrote about my diagnosis on social media.

From there, I began to raise awareness of mental illness and became a contributor to the popular website The Mighty. I also made videos explaining my condition and day-to-day life with BPD.

But I was still hiding, not being completely honest about how badly I was struggling.

I had difficulties holding down a job, quitting at the sight of conflict or disagreements. I was job-hopping in search of stability, since I lacked stability within myself. My paranoia worsened, and I spent most of my days crying. I was unstable, but tried hard to lean on my Christian faith—even finding a job within a Christian-based business.

I really believed that my new job in a Christian setting would be the answer to all of my problems—that I would stop having ordinary conflicts and finally be happy with my life.

After a disagreement with my supervisor, I began to lose touch with reality. I had pictured myself crashing my car numerous times before, but the following morning I felt more determined than ever to complete that mission.

I woke up feeling completely disconnected from my body. I quite literally felt numb to everything around me. I proceeded to go through the motions of getting ready, but was not *really* present. I would later learn that what I was experiencing was called "dissociation," another key symptom of BPD that occurs when your mind and body are in the fight or flight mode.

Although my body was in full panic, I grabbed the keys to my car, walked out the front door, and began driving to work. As I drove, I had obsessive, intrusive thoughts telling me to crash into a tree. I was desperate to feel something, because at that moment I felt nothing. I could hardly feel my hands gripping the steering wheel. It was as if I was watching myself through the eyes of someone else. I couldn't understand what was happening to me and realized that I needed help.

I called a friend twice, but she didn't answer. As I began to steer my wheel off the road and towards a tree, my friend called back. I immediately answered and told her I could not feel anything and that I *needed* to crash. She spoke to me calmly and directed me to take myself to the nearest emergency room or urgent care. I fought to keep my attention on her voice while the rest of the world continued to fade into the background.

To be honest, I cannot remember much of what was said during that conversation, but I do remember her steadily telling me to stay focused on driving.

Once I arrived at urgent care, I walked up to the receptionist and told her I needed help. There were a lot of people in that tiny waiting room for a weekday morning. She asked me what I needed to be seen for, and since I did not want to say it out loud, I slipped her a note that read, "*I don't feel like I am here. I wanted to crash into a tree. I have borderline personality disorder. I am not in control.*"

She asked me to wait a moment, and before I knew it I was taken into an office and told to wait.





As I waited, two policemen entered the room and questioned me about what happened. I became increasingly distressed and found great difficulty in explaining to them everything I had experienced. Once I was finished, they all agreed I needed to be hospitalized. The police then escorted me to the emergency room where I was evaluated for several hours.

That was the beginning of my third hospitalization, and second partial hospitalization program (PHP). It had been eight years since my last hospitalization. To say that I was nervous would be an understatement. Although I was a nervous wreck, the program helped me immensely. I was placed on medications that I needed in order to function somewhat normally. The medications included antipsychotics, mood stabilizers, and anxiety medications. There is absolutely no shame in receiving medication for a mental illness. Just like a diabetic needs insulin, someone afflicted with a disease of the mind needs regulation as well. I also received the proper therapies to learn how to cope with my illness. As one of my counselors once said, "Just like a diabetic, the management of your illness is composed of several parts: Theirs is diet, exercise, and insulin. Yours is medication, communication, and therapy."

I spent more time in PHP than any other patient that was admitted, and I faced many challenges during my time there. Several times I walked out of group therapy when I didn't want to face a haunting memory from my past, or when I would argue with a doctor over his/her understanding of what I was going through. But despite the difficulties, I rose above and made incredible triumphs over my illness. After my release I was assigned a caseworker and therapist to oversee my care.

It has now been almost two months since my discharge.

If I were to write a story highlighting that I was miraculously cured and living my wildest dreams, then that would be a misrepresentation of reality. My reality is that many days are tough, but I am living—not just existing. I am not quite sure who I am, but I do know that my identity doesn't revolve around a crown or how others view me. I do not hide behind any masks. If I could offer one piece of advice to anyone suffering from a mental illness, it would be to stay involved in medical care and keep an open dialogue between friends and family about your illness. In order to stay well, you must face your illness head on.

BPD is what I have, but it is not my identity nor does it define me. I have found my true voice in knowing my illness, and it is taking me on a journey to a more meaningful, purposeful life. I am now living on purpose. ■ ABILITY

syannecenteno.wordpress.com

Charlotte RAE

On a beautiful Los Angeles afternoon in a high-rise overlooking the city, contributing writers Geri Jewell and David Zimmerman had a wonderful visit with the legendary actress Charlotte Rae. Both Jewell and Rae starred in the 80s sitcom *The Facts of Life*. They were joined by publicist and friend, B. Harlan Boll, for a loving get-together of memories with a woman who became a light for any kid that was alone and who needed a mom.

Geri Jewell: These are for you. [Handing Charlotte Rae a vase full of flowers]

David Zimmerman: I saw that and it said, "This is for Charlotte."

Charlotte Rae: Oh, thank you. Come on in. I've got a few goodies around.

Zimmerman: Oh, how yummy!







Charlotte Rae and Geri Jewell

Jewell: I just turned 60 in September. Can you believe it? Where does the time go? Hey, here's a new joke for you Charlotte: I've just been signed to a new series called The Alternative Facts of Life.

(laughter)

I knew you'd like it!

Rae: We're so lucky. Let's just look at the sky, look at the clouds.

Jewell: You have an amazing view.

Rae: I am so grateful, I cannot tell you. I can't believe I've been able to make a living in this field.
Jewell: It can be a very difficult field, for sure.

Rae: I come out in the morning, I look out the window and I say, "Good morning, world!" It's so nice.

Zimmerman: Where did you both first meet?

Jewell: I think we met the night I performed at the second Media Access awards, correct?

Rae: Yes. Fern Field had you do that role, right?

Jewell: Yes, Fern did! We met briefly, and then we didn't see each other again until I appeared on The Facts of Life*, and that was in December of 1980. I was a little squirt.*
Rae: It was so important to have this terrifically talented girl. You added so much to the show.

Zimmerman: I was listening to your book, because I love to hear people tell their own stories. I was laughing, I was crying. And I felt the journey with you.

Rae: You mean you heard the—

Zimmerman: —the audio.

Rae: Oh my God!

Zimmerman: You lived it. It was like a roller coaster

ride, but a beautiful one, you know? Although it had its up and downs.

Rae: Yeah.

Zimmerman: I so identified. When you talked about your dad, holding on to him, and he fell asleep and was snoring. It made me remember my dad. He would snore, and every time he snored, I would walk, and when he stopped, I would stop.

(laughter)

Coming into your home, too, and seeing the mezuzah.

Jewell: Yeah, I remember that.

Zimmerman: It makes me feel proud to be here, period, knowing that connection.

Rae: Thank you. How did you like the moment when my husband, John, wanted to introduce me to his new fellow and partner, Lionel? We met at Fromin's and had a cup of coffee. And he called me there and said, "Well, what did you think of Lionel?" And I said, "Well!" Don't you remember? I said something like, "I'm glad to see you have a nice Jewish boy."

(laughter)

Zimmerman: I love that. You made huge history. You were like a mother to everybody and listening to this book and watching you on television brought that feeling.

Rae: I realized when I did the book signing that Harlan got me at Barnes & Noble, there were a lot of people there I didn't know, and they had waited for hours to speak to me. They said that some of them were latchkey kids, and that I meant so much to them.

Jewell: You were everyone's Mrs. G!

Rae: I had no idea. And it makes me feel terrific that show, which I always felt proud of.

Jewell: Absolutely. I feel the same way about my role on the show as well.

Rae: Wonderful issues. It meant something to those kids and to the parents as well.

Jewell: I heard that the recent Facts of Life *reunion we did on the* Home & Family Show *was one of their highest rated episodes.*

Rae: Really? No kidding?

Jewell: The Facts of Life *is still in the hearts of millions of people who grew up with us.*

Rae: Yes, and you were fabulous on that reunion show!

Jewell: Awe, thank you! So were you!

Zimmerman: And there was chemistry on the Home & Family Show *that was still there from the series itself.*

Jewell: I'll never forget the first episode I did, maybe the second. In my naïveté, being such a newbie, we kept messing up on something, and so it was the second show, where they keep you over until you get it right. And what you didn't know was, is that I had my theater arts department chairman from Cypress College in the audience that night, and she came to see me work. And, also, I can reveal this now: I had a huge crush on her.

Zimmerman: Oh!

Rae: Who?

Jewell: Her name was Kaleta Brown. I was so excited. And because I had a crush on her, that was where my mind was focused. I was like, "Oh, God! Kaleta's here! Oh, my God!" I had never spent time with her outside of college. And on set, we kept having to repeat and perfect one certain scene, and I kept looking at my damn watch—my attitude was: "But I want to talk to Kaleta!" I'll never forget what you said to me. "Geri! Geri!" And you had both arms on my arms, and you said, "Geri! Pay attention! We are trying to make you a star! You are an actress—act like one!"

(laughter)

Zimmerman: Oh, I love that.

Jewell: You did look out for me. And I so appreciate it now looking back. You really did.

Rae: Well, we were lucky to have you, let's face it. I can't get over what you've done with your life. It's just incredible. The challenges that you have and that you still have. You're amazing! I guess it's because you're very talented. That's all there is to it.

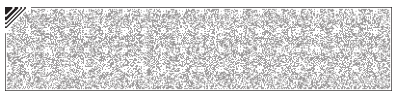
Jewell: Well, thank you. That means a lot coming from you.
Rae: Well, we know how brilliant you are.

Zimmerman: I also want to know about Norman Lear and your connection with him. Tell that story.

Rae: Well, you know, I auditioned for *Hot L Baltimore*, which was one of his television series.

Zimmerman: And one of my favorite shows, even though it lasted, what, one season?

Rae: It didn't last. It was a wonderful show, a little ahead of its time. Because the stars were two gays, two prostitutes, and I played Mrs. Belotti. But wait a minute.





Rae on set of Diff'rent Strokes



Rae with cast of Facts of Life

I auditioned for a different part—an older woman. And the director, Rod Parker, said, "You're too young." But I said, "I'm a character actress, I can do it."

He said, "I know you can do it, but this isn't like film with the makeup and everything. It's not going to work because you look too young." And I said, "But I can play it." And I went home and I cried and I cried. Later, a friend of mine said, "Don't worry, God's got something better for you." And guess what?

Zimmerman: Yes?

Rae: The next week they called me to do a one-shot appearance on it as the part of Mrs. Belotti and her son Moose. So I went in to do a table reading, and Norman was there. And I sat, I listened and I read. And he said, "You were very funny." He said, "I think we're going to use you more." Before I knew it, I was a regular. My friend was right, God did have something better for me.

Jewell: Yep, a universal truth!

Rae: Isn't that amazing?

Zimmerman: What's wonderful, too, about that story is it shows how you meet people, and then you're working together.

Rae: I remember when I was signed to CBS, and they were looking for a series for me. I did not like anything. Understand, when you signed those things, you never knew what was going to happen. You might tie yourself up and miss something good.

Jewell: Exactly.

Rae: I didn't like anything they offered. I had a couple of weeks left on the contract, and I got a call from Jane Murray, the casting lady over at Norman Lear's, to come in for *Diff'rent Strokes*. They said it was all cast; Mr. Drummond and the two boys, but they needed a housekeeper. So I went in. They asked me what I thought a housekeeper would be like. I told them I thought that since the kids were without a mother, they'd need a little mothering and a lot of affection. So... I went home, and I got a call that I was offered the job. I nearly fainted!

Jewell: Wow!

Rae: Especially since it was after John and I decided to have a divorce, and I was in this house, wondering if I should just get rid of it, because I didn't think I'd be able to keep up the payments. I didn't want any alimony. I just wanted both of us to mutually take care of the children's needs.

I called Norman Lear on a Sunday, and he was always so available. That's one thing about Norman. You can always get him.

Zimmerman: Isn't he a blessing?

Rae: Yes, he is! I called him and told him the situation—that they wouldn't release me from my contract with CBS. He said, "Oh, I know whatever his name is at CBS. He owes me a favor." Most of the sitcoms were on CBS. He said, "I bet you a nickel I can get you out of that contract." And he did!

*Zimmerman: (*laughs*) But now you owed him a nickel!*

Jewell: Wow! Now, in making the transfer from Diff'rent Strokes *to* The Facts of Life*, how did that come about?*

Rae: They brought the *Diff'rent Strokes* gang along with us. It was a very complex situation. But everyone was very cooperative. It was not easy, because there were so many of us. But everyone got along. It was nerve-wracking, but it all worked.

Zimmerman: Why was it nerve-wracking?

Jewell: Well, she was the only adult!

Zimmerman: Oh, right, the adult and kids.

Rae: Except for Mr. Drummond. But it worked.

Jewell: Yeah, I guess he was an adult too.

(laughter)

Zimmerman: Which reminds me, before I forget—Hank Garrett says Hello.

Rae: Oh, yes, from *Car 54*!

*Zimmerman: "*Car 54, Where Are You?*"*

Rae: Yes, exactly.

Zimmerman: We said we were going to visit you, and he said, "Please give her a hug from me!"

Rae: Thank you. Is he still working?

Zimmerman: He's writing his book. In fact, I think he's finished now.

Jewell: Yes, he is. I've become good friends with him. He's very funny and such a sweetheart.

Rae: *Car 54* was one of the funniest shows ever. Nat Hiken was a brilliant genius of a man. He should be in the Comedy Hall of Fame, along with Norman Lear and Gary Marshall. He belongs there, and they've never put him in there. And even though it's—how do you say it?—posthumous, he still belongs there. He also wrote *The Martha Raye Show*, *The Phil Silvers Show* and *Car 54*. Before that, in radio, he had *The Fred Allen Show*.

I'm lucky. I'll tell you when I was doing *Li'l Abner* in 1957 and played Mammy Yokum, I really didn't want to do it. I really didn't want to play a cartoon character.

Zimmerman: Why not?

Rae: I'm an actress. I wanted to do something that was real. So I told my lawyer to ask for more money, thinking they'd turn it down. "Ask for $750 a week, and I'll never get it." And they said OK! And I did it.

Jewell: Did you do stand-up comedy at any point?

Rae: Not like you. I started at the Village Vanguard in New York City, which is still there. It's the famous jazz place.

Jewell: Oh, wow!

Rae: Judy Holliday. And the lyricists Betty Comden and Adolph Green. They wrote so many musicals, including *Bells Are Ringing*.

Zimmerman: In high school, I played Dr. Kitchell, the dentist.

Rae: Oh, what a funny part!

Zimmerman: I loved it!

Rae: They were called the reviewers at the Village Vanguard. Then they all became very big, famous stars, and I went in there, and I think Barbra Streisand did, too.

Jewell: Not to interrupt, but did you consider you and Paul Lynde a comedy team?

Rae: Well, we did comedy sketches together in the musical at Northwestern University. He was so very funny.

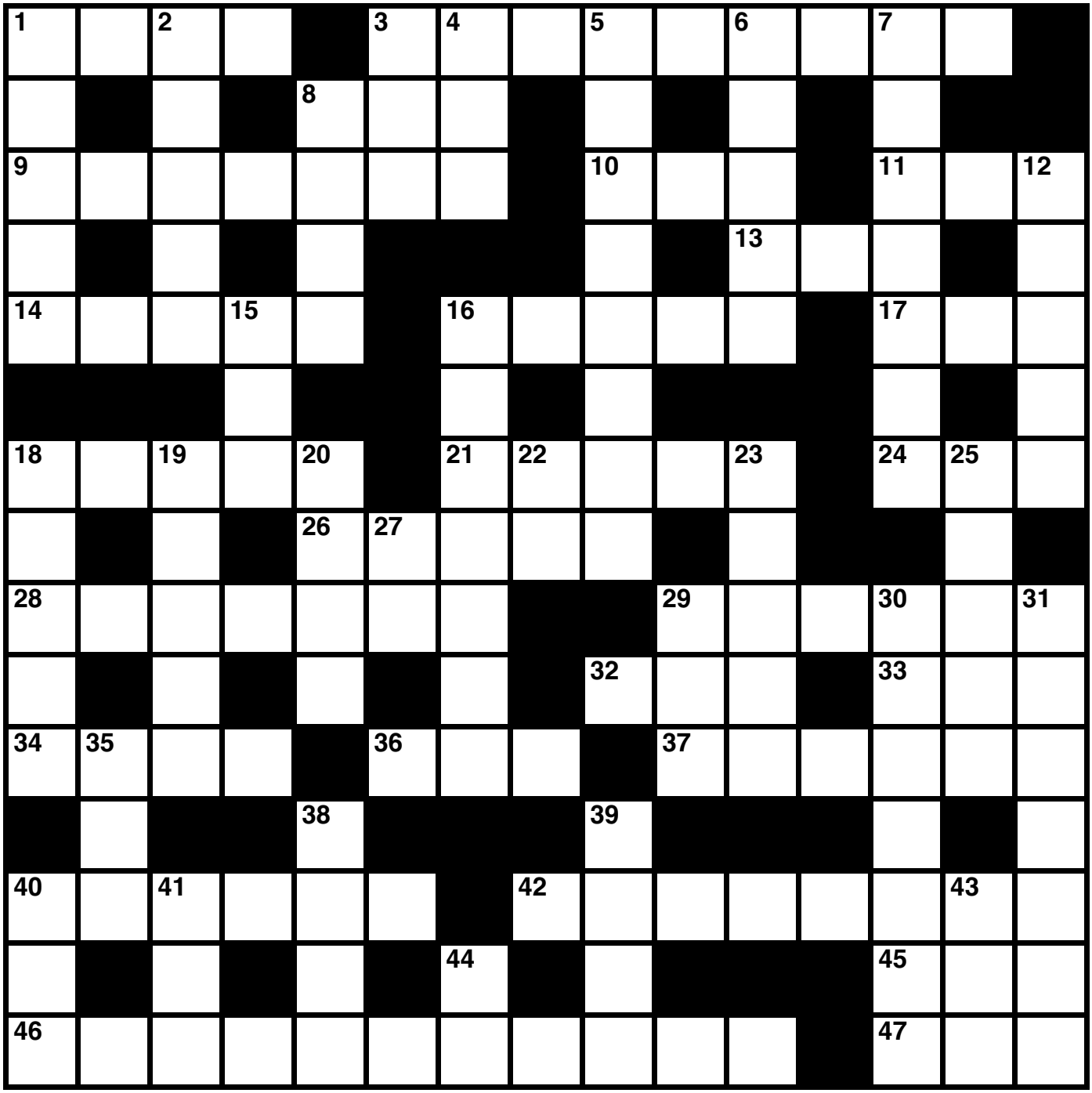
Zimmerman: When growing up, I would watch him, and he would bring me so much joy, so much laughter. Which reminds me, I was on the Internet, and I saw some of your stand-up there. There was a clip of your stand-up and singing.

Rae: Oh, you mean *The Ed Sullivan Show*?

Continued in next issue

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ABILITY's



Crossword Puzzle

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ACROSS

1. Cornell based organization placing people with disabilities in jobs, abbr.
3. Comedian supporting research to cure breast cancer and alzheimers, 2 words
8. "I am ___" starring Sean Penn
9. Globally trusted hearing aid brand
10. Part of some addresses
11. Unvarnished
13. Egyptian King, for short
14. Revealed
16. Courageous
17. www.abilitymagazine.com for example
18. First name of the actor who played Ray Charles in the film biography
21. Parental endowments
24. Star Trek rank, for short
26. Be sweet on
28. Disbled actress starring in Broadway's "The Glass Menagerie" - goes with 29 across
29. See 28 across
32. Pro
33. Sternward
34. Declares
36. War film, "___head"
37. "Born on the 4th of July" star, Tom
40. Actor with cerebral palsy who plays a teenager wth CP in "Speechless," Micah _____
42. New World explorer
45. Performer Yoko
46. Thinking for oneself
47. Success in sports

DOWN

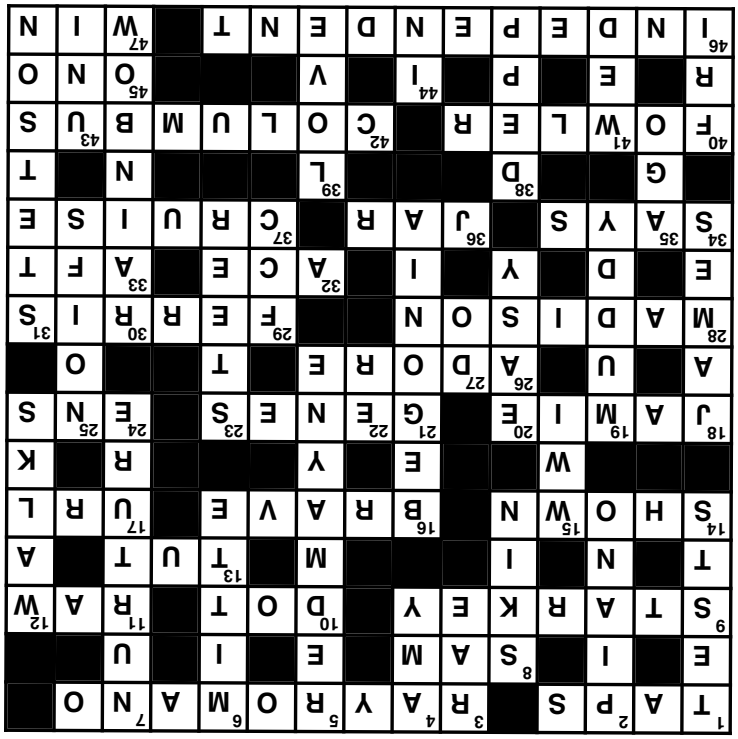
1. Lab analyses
2. Alicia Keys' instrument
3. Corinne Bailey ___ 2007 Grammy nominee
4. "Little Women" woman
5. Actor who played Stephen Hawking in "The Theory of Every thing"
6. "Breaking Bad" actor who has CP, as does his character
7. Take care of
8. Moisturizer target
12. Goes free
15. Conflict of 1914-18, abbr.
16. Ornamental flower
18. "50 Shades" writer
19. Bluesman Waters
20. Simple
22. Hospital show
23. Helm
25. ____, ands, or buts, 2 words
27. Accomplish
29. Network monitoring org.
30. "Somewhere over the ____" lyrics
31. Hat for J. R. Ewing
35. Days gone by
38. He co-starred in "What's Eating Gilbert Grape?" Johnny____
39. "All You Need Is ___" (Beatles)
40. End of the week day
41. Marry
43. Prefix for corn or form
44. Fashionable

Crossword Puzzle

answers on page 62

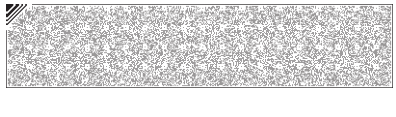






Crossword Puzzle

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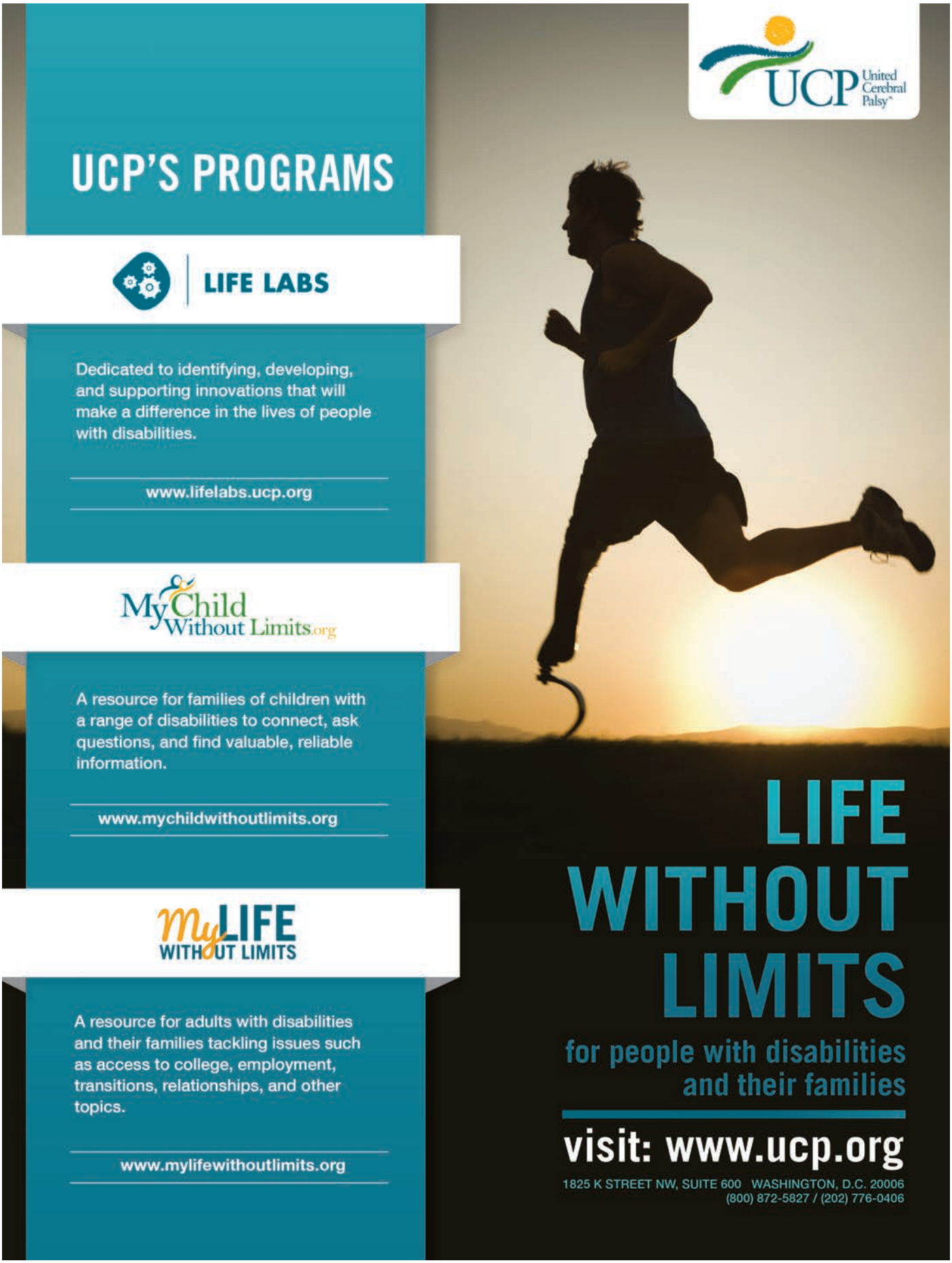
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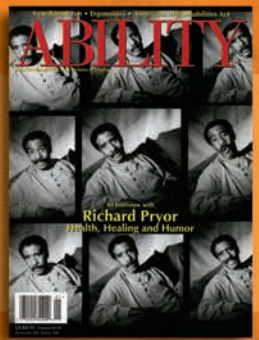
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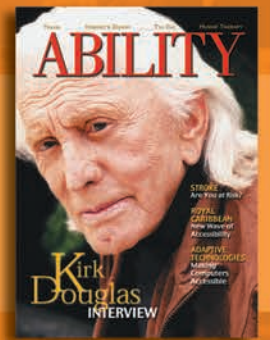
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