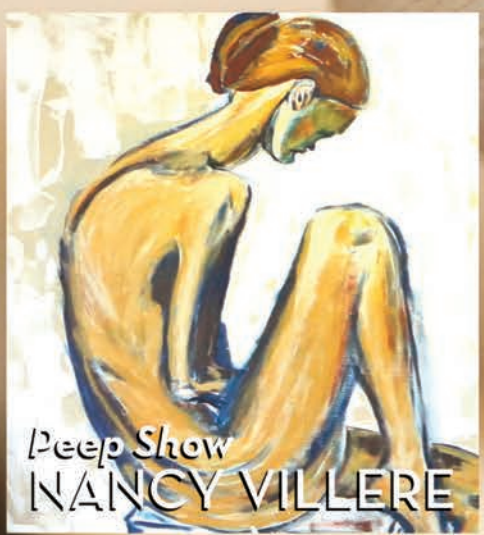
GERI JEWELL ASHLEY FIOLEK HUMOR THERAPY DANI BOWMAN ABILITY'S CROSSWORD PUZZLE EVENTS/CONFERENCES

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I've always enjoyed those cute little nursery rhymes that I heard as a small child. I never put much thought into those stories, but now that I'm older, I have started to rethink some of them. Call me a maverick, but as I examined the verses, things just didn't add up. Who were these characters; and, what was their motive for what they were doing? It seemed crazy to me. As a once-long-ago psychology major, I decided to delve into the psyche of these poetic stories to provide an in-depth analysis that could very well explain some of these baffling questions that I had.

Little Jack Horner
Sat in the corner,
Eating a Christmas pie;
He put in his thumb,
And pulled out a plum,
And said 'What a good boy am I!

Is it me or is something not right with this boy? Hey Jack, can't you do something normal like… go outside and play with the other kids? There's an eerie oddness about him just sitting in a corner and playing with a pie. Did he not get any toys for Christmas? Something tells me he often talks to himself and to fruits. I'm going to guess that he lives in reality most of the time. I have feeling there's a wonderful land of make-believe in his head.

Is he really a good boy? No mother would give her child a whole pie… even at Christmas time, so one has to assume that this Horner kid took that pie without parental permission (I'm going to guess it was on the window sill cooling with the plum aroma floating throughout the place and Jack was drawn to it. Maybe there were several pies and Jack figured no one would miss just one. But, that's a conjecture and not really important). The pie stealing theory seems very plausible, because this boy just comes across as the type that gets extremely hopped up on sugar and bounces off the ceiling driving his mom crazy. So, at best, the mother would most likely only give him a sliver of the tart.

What *is* important here is that Jack has the audacity to label himself "a good boy." Really? A good boy? You just stole an entire pie, punk. Does he also twirl cats around by their tails and claim to be a "kind boy" to animals? Also, let's not forget that "good boys" don't sit in the corner. They're there for a reason. I can hear the mother now, "Jack, have you seen the Christmas pie that was on the window sill?" And ol' Jack is sitting in the corner with his face covered in plum sauce, smiling in his sugar excitement, chiming, "I'm a good boy!"

My only hope is that Miss Horner was able to get Jack into therapy before he became an adult. He has the makings of a liar, thief, and wife beater.

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet,
Eating her curds and whey;
Along came a spider
Who sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away.

Well, I think it's safe to assume that nothing good ever comes from sitting on a tuffet. You never want to sit on anything that rhymes with your name (Ask Fred, who sat on a bed, only to wake up dead). A tuffet is more or less a footstool that usually goes in the living room. Miss Muffet should certainly know that the kitchen is the place for one to be dining in. And why the curds and whey? These are lumps of liquid found in cottage cheese. They taste disgusting! Prison guards won't even serve curds and whey to starving people in a Beijing prison. I'm always leery of people who like weird foods. At least Jack Horner went for the plum pie. That I can understand.

Maybe Muffet had never tried curds and whey? Perhaps some mean school kids told her, "You've never had curds and whey? They're the best! You have to try

'em!" As luck would have it, the spider helped her out. Muffet ought to thank the creepy crawler for chasing her away from that dreadful lunch.

There is something very cute and endearing about Miss Muffet. She seems quiet and perfectly content with her meal; just sitting there, minding her own business. Maybe the spider wasn't a bad guy either. He didn't attack her. He politely sat down beside her. Perhaps he was just curious. Maybe he enjoys the curds and whey. We just don't know. But it's very possible that the little girl shrieked when she ran away leaving the bewildered spider to ponder, "What did I do?" And, most likely, gave him a complex for the rest of his life.

Muffet did develop a phobia of, not on only spiders, but the refusal to enter any room with a tuffet, because it brought about severe anxiety. Strangely, later in life, Muffet killed three husbands by poisoning their curds and whey dinners with arsenic. Here's the kicker, she's was known in London as the "Black Widow."

Jack Sprat could eat no fat.
His wife could eat no lean.
And so between them both,
You see,
They licked the platter clean

Have these two no couth? Licking the platter clean? You gotta be kidding me. Both of them! Usually, it's the uncivilized man who is engaged in this kind of behavior. God created women to elevate man. Not Mrs. Sprat, she joins right in with the barbaric fun. My guess is that these two animals lived in a trailer somewhere in the woods. I can hear the hick-like voices through the trees now. "I ain't doing the dishes! I always done do the dishes! You kiss my ass! What the hell you do with my chicken bone?" But, you just never know with any couple what goes on behind closed doors. Maybe this is just a little something they do that brings them closer to one another? They could wear each other's underwear. Who are we to cast aspirations? It's not our place to judge. But, I'm sorry, it just seems odd.

"Honey, I just finished my meal," Jack says with a content smile. "Oh wonderful, I hope you liked it," his wife responds. "Do you mind if I lick the platter clean? You know how much I like them gravy juices?" "Only if I can join ya, sweetie," Jack chimes.

My question is… was this an every night thing or just a one-time deal? Perhaps neither of them likes to do the dishes. I wonder if their pets were doing that slight head tilt as they watched the bizarre pair. The dog looks at the cat and says, "You seeing what I'm seeing?"

I don't blame Jack for not wanting to eat that fat. That's a third world country meal. It's quite obvious that Mrs. Sprat is by no means a health nut. Lean meat, like chicken and turkey, is good for you. Something tells me that she likes to stuff her face with big old bacon cheeseburgers. I'm going to go out on a limb and say that she's got to be a steak and potato princess.

The Sprats lived a long, happily married life. Townspeople claimed that the couple did everything together, from taking baths and to sharing a toothbrush. Maybe the key to a blissful marriage is to spend quality time with your spouse, just doing the simple things like… licking a platter clean.

Jack and Jill went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water.
Jack fell down and broke his crown,
And Jill came tumbling after

There was no need for Jill to go up the hill. Jack should have been able to fetch a pail of water by himself. It's not rocket science. Besides, it's a man's job to lift the heavy stuff. Jill should have been in the kitchen making… some curds and whey, because I'm sure Jack would be hungry when he got back… probably not thirsty though. But, this is all predicated on the assumption that Jack could handle the task. Doubtful. By all appearances, Jack seems like a bit of clumsy stooge… and Jill doesn't seem to be at the top of the class either. Jack needs some medical assistance, but instead of running over to check on him, she tumbles after him. You have got to be kidding me. I can hear Jack now. "A little help here. I think my crown might be broken." Jill just tumbles by him, most likely, giggling. This is not playtime, Jill. Jack seems to be seriously injured, and your response is… to roll by him after he has just broken his crown. Show some love for Jack. Run up and kiss his crown and ask if he's all right. Maybe you don't love him. Maybe it's all about you. Don't be surprised if you catch ol' Jack one night in some cottage bed with Miss Tuffet. A man needs to know that his girl cares for him.

I don't know, whatever happened to this couple, it just sounds like they weren't good for one another. How could they survive if they couldn't handle a simple task of going up the hill and getting some water? They certainly sound like they'd have trouble planning a wedding, which is not easy. It's just not something you… tumble into.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall;
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the King's horses
And all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again!

Let's start with the name, Humpty Dumpty. Tell me this guy wasn't teased in school. I blame mother Dumpty for this travesty. I just feel that choosing a name like Humpty invites turmoil into the boy's life. Bob, Carl, or even Henry Dumpty would have giving the kid a fighting chance. Names can bring feelings or images of people. "Humpty" seems to suggest that this is someone who

had trouble controlling his sexual urges. It makes me wonder what was he doing up on that wall; catcalling, peeping, stalking, and preparing to pounce on something? Perhaps he was doing something innocent, like watching the royal parade. After all, we do know that the king's men and horses were in the vicinity.

There is no doubt that this was an extremely high wall, which is why it is described as a "great fall." So great that there were pieces of Humpty scattered everywhere. It must have looked like a war zone with body parts strewn all over the premises. The absurd thing is that horses, yes horses, were attempting to put the poor lad back together again. Common sense dictates that maybe, just maybe, the king's doctor would be summoned for the task. We're talking major surgery here. It's hard enough to get a horse to prance and now you want them to attempt to suture a body?

Why would he fall? A clue may be found in his last name. Dumpty suggests that one is perhaps overweight, unbalanced, and/or maybe even wobbly at times. Had he been drinking? Was he clumsy? Did the constant teasing of his name or weight drive him to suicide? We just don't have enough information to go on to make a wise decision.

All in all, it is a tragic story. Humpty may have had a bright future ahead of him. He seemed well connected, well, at least, before the great fall. For the king to use his men and his horses to try and revive the shattered guy tells me that the kid had some importance. Humpty was given a royal funeral and buried in several graves in the royal cemetery.

Mary had a little lamb its fleece was white as snow;
And everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go.
It followed her to school one day, which was against the rule;
It made the children laugh and play, to see a lamb at school.
And so the teacher turned it out, but still it lingered near,
And waited patiently about till Mary did appear.
"Why does the lamb love Mary so?" the eager children cry;
"Why, Mary loves the lamb, you know" the teacher did reply.

What can you say? It's just too darn cute. Nobody dies. No creepy spiders. No one steals a pie or licks plates. The religious elements jump off the page. We have the virgin mother Mary with the lamb (of God) who is white connoting innocence and blemished-free purity. Even though this lamb was turned away it shows us that it will wait patiently for people to come to him—like children. Finally, it is through Mary's relationship with the lamb that we see the importance of love. Would she still love it if it wasn't as white as snow? I think so. Mary doesn't seem like the type looking for the bigger, better deal.

I don't think it was necessary for the teacher to turn the lamb away from the school. A lamb has the right, like anybody else, to learn regardless of his or her barnyard stature. I'm sure the teacher was just glad that Mary didn't bring a bull to school.

There is no mention that it was "Show and Tell" day at the school. So, my only beef with the lamb is that this fluffy animal could very well be a distraction to children who should be focused on their studies which could lead to bhaaaad grades.

Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man.
Bake me a cake as fast as you can
Pat it and prick it and mark it with "B",
And bake it in the oven for baby and me.
Patty cake, patty cake, baker's man.
Bake me a cake as fast as you can
Roll it up, roll it up
And throw it in a pan!
Patty cake, patty cake, baker's man

Wow, is the customer impatient and rude, or what? He struts into the bakery and expects the baker to drop everything he's doing to bake him a cake… like now! He doesn't even make a halfway pleasant demand like, "Hey dude, I need a cake, pronto." Instead he throws out a grating, irritating, singsong request "Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man. Bake me a cake as fast as you can!"

I can see this poor baker rolling dough, beating eggs, and exasperatingly moving as he pulls loaves of bread out of the hot oven. He looks up with flour and sweat on his face saying, "Excuse me?" Then the customer stomping, clapping his hands, and busting out his pissy rhyme, "Patty cake, patty cake, baker's man! Bake me a cake as fast as you can!" The baker releases a sigh responding, "I'm kinda busy right now. I've got the Jack and Jill wedding tomorrow. The Sprats want a no fat, no lean cake tonight, and the Miss Horner needs another frickin plum pie, so you're going to have to wait." The impetuous customer snaps back, "Roll it up, roll it up. And throw it in a pan!" The baker does his best to remain calm as he replies, "Yeah, you're not getting it, are you? I have lots of other customers before you so, why don't you take a number and I'll get to you." The customer jumps up and fires back, "Patty cake, patty cake, baker's man. Make me a cake as fast as you can!"

The nameless obnoxious customer never got the cake. He was later found in the back alley with a rolling pin stuffed up his nose with a big "B" drawn in icing on his forehead.

The human character is complicated and often difficult to examine. One can only assume what these nursery folks were actually like in real life. We don't know them personally so we must go off the historical accounts. In reality, we only get a snippet of what they were doing in their lives. We do know one thing, for whatever reason, they do stick in our mind and put smiles on our faces.

■ ABILITY



by Little Jeff Charlebois



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I have been traveling all over the place and loving every minute of it! My classes keep me busy, and yet I managed to squeeze in time to fly home to Florida for a quick "visit." I put visit in quotes because it really wasn't down time; I actually had an agenda. I'm looking for property there, as I'm thinking about moving back, and I also bought a utility terrain vehicle (UTV). It's basically a cross between an All Terrain Vehicle and a pickup truck. I got it because I'm thinking of racing it! Yep, a UTV (ha ha!). They're becoming so big around the country, and they're the new adventure for us motocrossers. I'll be doing it professionally, while looking for sponsors!

Racing UTVs is so much fun that when my dad found one for sale in Georgia, we drove up to get it during my trip. I didn't get to ride it too much, though, because tropical storm Erika lurked, and there was a deluge almost every day! So hopefully my little brother doesn't wreck my new toy before I get back there to practice riding it again.



Ashley in LA for a Make-A-Wish event

After my UTV purchase I flew home to California, and had one *day* to relax before I was back at an airport. I was trying to make my way to Ruston, LA, for a Make A Wish event, but you know with me travel is never smooth! I thought I was going to have a nice, simple flight because it was booked out of the airport closest to my house, only 40 minutes away, and I was just going for the weekend.

The first leg of the trip was from California to Texas, and the second was from Texas to Shreveport, LA. But my plane out of California was delayed for over an hour, and even though I warned the airlines that I wasn't going to make my connecting flight, they said nothing could be done until I landed in Texas. I started to panic and asked them to change my flight to Shreveport to a later time, but I was already booked on the last flight out. When I finally got on a plane leaving California, I asked my mom to get me a car rental just in case.

I landed at 7:50 p.m. and my connecting flight was 8:10. The flight attendant said I probably wouldn't make it, but I was going to try. By the time we taxied in, and I ran over to my next flight it was 8:12, and they had closed the doors :-(

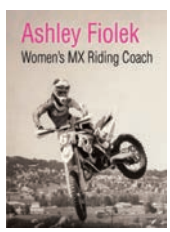
Luckily I had a rental car waiting. But over there, the line was a mile long. After more than an hour, I got the car. Argh! Then I had to make the four-hour drive to Ruston. My dad was not happy that I had to go through all that hassle. I got in around 2 a.m., totally exhausted, and immediately fell asleep!

It was all worth it though because the next day was amazing. I'm so glad I made the effort. Josh Branch, who is a track owner in LA, worked hard on the event, and it was so cool the way it came together. We all got to race on mini bikes and the kids had a blast!

They weren't allowed to ride, but me and Blake Wharton (another motocrosser) got to give them rides around the track and you should have seen their faces light up! Even though it was super hot outside, everyone was smiling and had a wonderful time.

A few of us riders had a couple of "friendly" races, and then the track was open for everyone to ride and have a good time. I borrowed Josh's new razor UTV and ripped it around the track! After the event we had a big BBQ and everyone hung out on a perfect ending to a great day! ■ ABILITY

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Antenna Vs. Cable

Are We Too Tuned In?

As a member of the Baby Boomer Generation, I've always said that television played an integral role in my development. Even when I was in the womb, I was influenced by it, according to my mom. Her favorite series while she was pregnant with me were *The Gary Moore Show* (with Carol Burnett), and *Your Show of Shows* starring Sid Caesar.

It's no accident that at 13 I had a pen-pal relationship with Burnett, and years later become a professional comedian myself. Then there's the fact that in '84 I worked with Caesar to develop a sit-com called *Sid's Kid*, where I was to play his daughter. Coincidence or not?

From the 50's on, TV has been a staple of American culture. Though it's evolved from a grainy picture in a box with rabbit-ear antenna, to crisp HD images in a sleek unit mounted on the wall, TV has remained an extension of the world in which we live. Some people cannot even fall asleep without TV's sounds and images flickering through the night.

Back in the day, there were only a handful of TV stations, and they all signed off at midnight. The national anthem would play as the American flag waved, and then a high-pitched beep would sound—I don't know—to an Indian dart board(?) for the next six hours.

Anyway, for me the late 60's through the 70's, TV was my emotional outlet. I was often lonely and isolated, so the characters on the screen became my friends in the subconscious realm. I would watch *Leave it to Beaver*, relating to all of the Beav's adventures. Couldn't wait to tune in each week to the *Mary Tyler Moore* Show (and always wished I had a friend like Rhoda), or watch *All in the Family*, where I learned through Archie how NOT to be.

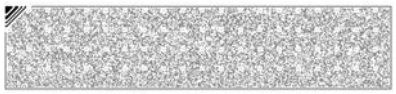
By the 70's, TV created a diversion from those dateless teenage years, and the cuties I had in my mind were John-Boy Walton and Keith Partridge. (Sorry, Brady boys; I never had a crush on you.) However, years later I did have a date with Blair's French teacher, Mr. Palmer on *The Facts of Life*.

I'm so glad I'm a boomer, and that TV had such a powerful effect on me, motivating me to carve out a career in that medium. I like also how TV influenced generations of youth to overcome disabilities and pursue their dreams.

With programming now available 24/7, I wonder if TV would have had the same impact on me and my career, if I were a member of the current generation, Perhaps I just would have become a TV junkie and gone, instead, into selling televisions at Sears, or possibly teaching or writing.

Seriously, we can find anything we want at any time of day on TV. We can watch whatever our heart desires, from *Perry Mason* to *Happy Days* to *American Horror Story*, and so on and so on. With cable, the channels are infinite!!! The History Channel, The Travel Channel, the Logo Channel (which runs marathons of *Facts of Life*)… Not to mention the Pet Channel to amuse our fur babies, the Cooking Channel (you can tell by my cooking that I've never watched it), or even the Investigative Discovery Channel, stories 24/7 about solved and unsolved murders.

Today we live in a very different world, obviously. Not to say that TV can't have a positive influence on us. Of course it can, but with more than 2000 channels some of us get so engrossed in other people's drama—and comedy and horror and suspense—that we forget to turn off the TV and get more involved in our own lives. Remember, it's okay to own a TV, but it's not okay for a TV to own us! ■ ABILITY



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Photography by Fan Bai

CHEN ZHOU: *"I NEED TO BE NEEDED"*



Before 2002, Chen Zhou was invisible to most people. He could've been any of the street singers who wandered China's bustling streets. Today, however, he is a well-known and highly respected speaker who draws huge crowds at stadiums, schools and hospitals. Although Chen is without legs, he scaled China's renowned Five Sacred Mountains in 2012. Since then, he's given many speeches around the country, as his inspiring story continues to touch people worldwide.

Chen Zhou uses 2 six-pound wooden boxes as legs, shoes, or carrying bags. "If necessary, they can be used for self-defense, too," he jokes. The first thing he does each morning is to find his glasses and his two hollow wooden boxes. He has worn through dozens of these small wooden boxes since he was 13, when he lost his legs in a tragic accident.

Using these small battered boxes, Chen has managed to walk all over China. Since climbing China's Five Sacred Mountains in 2012, he has given more than 200 speeches throughout the country. When we interviewed him, at Hebei Province, Baoding, he was in the middle of a four-month non-stop tour, speaking at one city per day.

When we arrived at the Baoding lecture hall, each of the 1300 seats was full and nearly 300 people stood to hear the 32-year-old speak. After the audience watched an introductory film about his life, he swung his arms forward enthusiastically as if to say, "let's go" and with a broad smile, climbed atop a lecture table to share his humble story. The audience burst into applause.

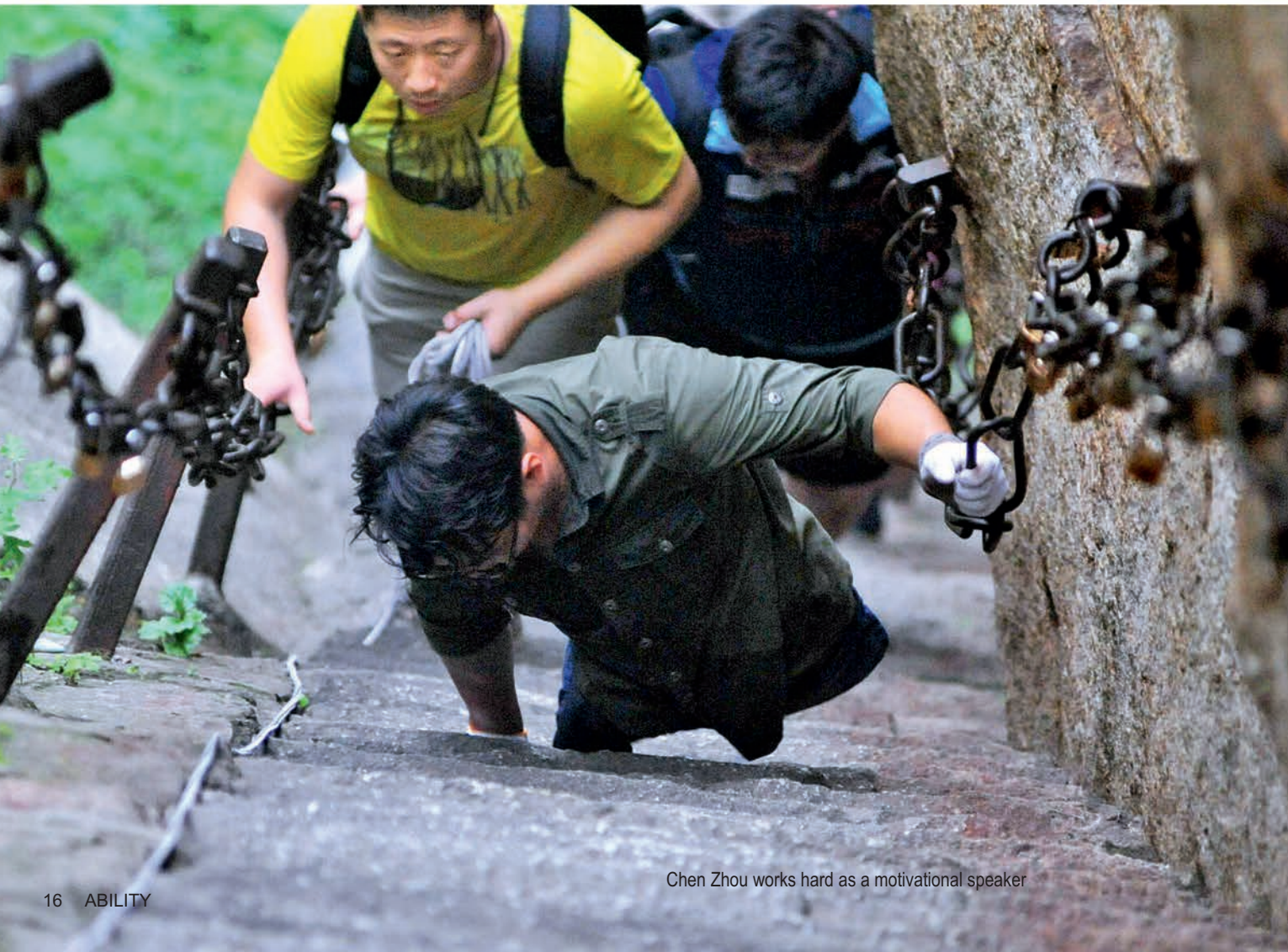
"My Life Could've Ended Anywhere"

After Chen's remarkable ascent of the Five Sacred Mountains in 2012, he found himself on a popular TV talk show called "Great Orator." Its famous host, Yue Jia, kneeled down and hugged Chen, a gesture that made national headlines. This was not only a moment of recognition for Chen, but it also marked his first professional speech.

Although Chen's talk was not particularly exciting—he'd had no formal education or public speaking experience at the time—he remained relatively calm. He was also a natural at interacting with his audience. Chen reflected, "I'm still thinking about that speech. What makes a good speech? I just wanted to share my story."

Born in 1983, his parents divorced when he was a small boy. His grandparents raised him, but they were so poor that he eventually left home at an early age and searched for ways to earn a living. One day, while riding a train, he realized that he was headed in the opposite direction that he needed to go, so he made the decision to jump off. When he landed, his legs were severed; one leg was far away and the other under his head. Although he was in shock, he kept thinking to himself that he just needed to reattach his legs and jump back onto the





Chen Zhou works hard as a motivational speaker


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train." Fortunately, a railway worker named Baohua Sun saved the teenager's life.

"At one point," he said, "I thought my life would end in a corn field or on a street corner." Although his life has been full of hardship, Chen found his way to music and began singing on street corners.

His life, he says, has turned out far better than he ever expected. In July 2002, Chen noticed a young woman listening to his songs. After three consecutive days, she finally asked him: "Do you need any help after you finish singing?" After that day, despite 28 consecutive days of rain, the two met each day and began to fall in love. Eventually, they married and had a beautiful daughter. Chen says of his wife: "She never treats me as a disabled person, and we are made for each other."

In 2012, when Chen decided to climb China's famous Five Sacred Mountains with his wife, he had a special surprise in store for her. At the top of the last mountain, Mount Tai, Chen organized a special wedding ceremony to celebrate their 10th anniversary. That day, July 7, was also the traditional Chinese Valentine's Day called QiQi. So when his wife reached the top of the mountain and saw the wedding scene, she was overjoyed to renew their vows in such a spectacular setting.

From Street Singer to Public Speaker

Chen's path to public speaking was unexpected. One day, when he was singing on a street corner, a man approached him and asked: "Could you come to our hospital to speak to some children?" Chen replied: "I sing well, but I'm not sure that I can speak well." "Don't worry," the man advised. "Just tell them your story."

So Chen went to the hospital and told his story, which the children loved. "I had never considered that my story could actually inspire people," he said. After this experience, he started giving speeches at nursing homes, hospitals, and schools. He simply told them about his personal journey and admitted that he couldn't write Chinese well. He has since shared his life with thousands, and his life story continues to inspire audiences.

Although he's earned coveted spots on national TV talk shows and in magazines, Chen speaks openly about the fact that he was uncomfortable at first with his newfound celebrity. Understandably, he was all sweat and nerves when he made a speech in Shan Dong Stadium to nearly 40,000 people.

Currently, Chen's speaking schedule is busy. One of his favorite questions to ask his audience is what do they need most in life. People give him many different answers, but Chen takes a more fundamental approach: "What people need most is to be needed by other people," he says.

His empowering speeches give his audiences encouragement, which is what people also need. Chen Zhou still loves to sing, but he's now studying at a special-needs school. Someday, he hopes to become a special-needs teacher, which is what is strongly needed in China for children with disabilities. This remains his ultimate dream. ■ ABILITY

by Yiheng Liu

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*.

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PART II Highway to Health

Arctic Circle to Death Valley

With approval from the cafeteria worker who had wheeled my low-fat lunch into my hospital suite, I left New Hampshire for Alaska one day after being discharged and just three days after having a couple of stents inserted into my heart. Have I told you that I'm on a mission to ride a million miles, and I just don't have any time to waste?

I rode to Lake George, New York, where I presented two seminars at the Americade motorcycle rally. I left New York for a five-day ride to Anchorage and the start of my three-week speaking tour out west, sharing my story with others who live with multiple sclerosis (MS). The first two days of the trip were fairly boring until I reached British Columbia and the Yukon. The towns began to shrink in size and became few and far between, but the wildlife got bigger and more numerous. Deer, bison, moose, bears and coyotes were everywhere!

Accommodations became more interesting the farther north I travelled. In British Columbia, I spent a night at



the so-called "famous" Fort Nelson Hotel where I was the only guest, and another at a place in the Yukon called Beaver Creek RV Park & Motel. I was a welcomed stranger to the locals, a lone explorer from a distant land. Daylight was extending each day by a few hours, and by my fifth day on the road, the 20 hours of light made it easy to keep riding. The roads, however, were rough and brutal on the bike's tires and suspension, but I just kept pounding down the hours and miles. It was a great example of the therapeutic use of riding, for all my issues and problems quickly faded behind me. I was certainly getting a good dose of MotoMedicine on this trip.

I found it a bit weird having to present my passport to visit the 49th state, Alaska. I made great time to Anchorage despite the frequent road construction delays.

"We have two seasons here, winter and construction," informed the chatty flagger as I waited 30 minutes for the lead truck to return and guide me and the twenty vehicles behind me over a 10-mile stretch of loose gravel







and sand. This scene would repeat itself a dozen times before reaching Anchorage.

I arrived on time for a morning appointment I had at Anchorage Yamaha to have a set of Bridgestone tires installed and an oil change. At 83,000 miles, this was the very first time my YAMAHA had been to any dealer for ANYTHING!

My smart phone's camera had stopped working again, but thankfully Anchorage had an Apple store downtown that was able to swap me out a whole new phone. My phone pictures had been all selfies since Fort Nelson. I always carry a point and shoot camera, so most of the trip was shot with my waterproof, shockproof and bulletproof Olympus Tough camera.

I spoke to an enthusiastic group of people with MS and their families, had a decent meal and contemplated my next move. I had fresh tires and oil, and six days before I was due to speak in Las Vegas. I knew I had about 24 hours of extra time to play with before heading south, so I decided to push north, ride by Denali National Park up to Fairbanks. If time allowed, I would then attempt to ride part of the famous Dalton Highway. I knew at mile marker 175 there was a trucker camp at Coldfoot, and if I could make it there by evening, I would have passed over the Arctic Circle by 60 miles or so. More importantly, I knew it was the last chance to get gas, food, a hot shower and a bed.

I made it to the famous Slate Creek Inn and apparently got the bridal suite. My room was in a trailer, had plywood walls and a camper-sized shower. No HBO, turn down service or mini bar, but the room was clean. Believe it or not, I would have paid twice the $229 rate for a bed; after all, I had just about ridden to the end of the earth!

The Dalton Highway, or Haul Road as it is known, runs along the Alaskan Pipeline and eventually ends in Prudhoe Bay, but my northern most point on this trip would end at Coldfoot. I had ridden 5500 miles in less than a week from New Hampshire to Anchorage, and the Arctic Circle was a bonus I had not expected. I now had just five days to ride 4000 miles to Las Vegas. The additional 500 miles of gravel to Prudhoe Bay and back would have gobbled up another 15 hours at best—a risk even a







Vegas veteran would walk away from. I had a story to tell and folks were counting on me to share it in Vegas.

Riding two days later by accident through Jasper National Park in Alberta, Canada, was probably the biggest jackpot of my entire trip. I was merely following the GPS prompts for the quickest route back to the States, and WOW! Mountains with snow, glaciers, and wildlife—it was truly breathtaking. I stopped and took quite a few photos. My only regret was the same as it always was: that Elin, my wife, was not with me. And, as always, I jotted down the location and promised myself I must return to this very spot with her.

The temperature in Canada and Alaska was mostly in the 40's and 50's, but as I returned to the lower 48, it began to rise. I made my way to Vegas, and rode through 117-degree heat. It was so hot I could not keep my hands on the bike's handgrips, even with gloves on!

My personal cooling system, the CTC-100, had been strapped to the side of the bike for the entire ride so far, waiting for the call to duty. When I turned it on for the first time, it yelled and screamed to a stop. Nearly 8000 miles of dirt, mud, gravel and bugs had packed themselves into the unit and jammed the cooling fan. It broke. I was left with trying to cool myself down the old-fashioned way, switching my dash temperature gauge from Fahrenheit to Celsius, so 100 degrees became 38. My brain didn't fall for the trick this time; it was just too damn hot.

After my talk in Vegas, I was really looking forward to visiting one of the famous casinos, but between the heat and fatigue, I never made the quarter mile walk from my hotel to the strip. My body gave up, MS struck hard and rendered me powerless. I was sad and felt defeated for the first time since leaving New Hampshire. I had managed to ride a motorcycle across the country and to the edge of the continent, but at that moment, my body was utterly useless. I did not have the ability to make it down the street. MS, like many other illnesses, can rob people of enjoying even the simple things in life. Depression is very common in people with chronic illnesses, and I can certainly understand why.

I am, however, one of the lucky ones. These feelings that often overwhelm people do not stay with me long.



Retreating back to my room, I cranked the A/C as cold as it would blow, stripped naked and swallowed every loving spoonful of an overpriced tub of Ben and Jerry's *Karamel Sutra* that I had charged to my room. Vegas plan 'B' was screw MS and heart disease; and I got to gamble after all; *I had the drapes wide open*. What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas, *right?*

I left at 4 am when it had cooled down to 86 degrees. I followed a route that bypassed Death Valley by riding through the canyons to Los Angeles. My safety relied on my ability to stay hydrated and cool as much as possible. I packed ice into the pockets of my Aerostich riding suit, drank like a fish, and found interesting signs along the way to keep myself amused, like the giant ice cream cone in the middle of the desert and multiple icy road signs.

The cool distractions worked for most of the morning, but by the time I reached Beverly Hills, I was smack dab in the middle of another heat-induced pseudo MS attack: leg weakness, mild confusion, fatigue and an inability to speak clearly. I could not understand where the valet wanted me to park my bike, even though the garage was just around the back of the building. He repeated it four times, but I just nodded, unpacked my bags, check in, and went to my room. I didn't think they would tow my bike, and frankly by this point, I didn't care if I ever saw it again.

I lay down for 20 minutes, took a cold shower and regained most of my heat-induced deficits before returning to the front of the hotel an hour later. I explained about MS and that I was not trying to be rude earlier, I just could not move my bike another foot because of the heat. By now, my encrusted bike had become a Hollywood celebrity, drawing a small crowd of hotel staff, guests and live bugs feasting on the dead ones. A couple wanted to take their picture with me, people took my brochures and were amazed to hear that I had travelled to the Arctic Circle and Alaska just a few days earlier.

It was a humbling moment of realization for me, as well. Despite being challenged by having a progressive disease that can strike at any given moment, I had indeed just accomplished something absolutely amazing. For the first time since leaving home, it also occurred to me that it was because of my MS that I was experiencing the trip of a lifetime.

That's a level of cool that will never be affected by temperature. ■ ABILITY

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Next issue, *Wheels out West* part III
Coast to Coast and a Chat with Chet



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NANCY VILLERE'S *Peep Show*

Accomplished artist Nancy Villere has photographed *ABILITY Magazine* covers for years, but her talents as a painter lay mostly dormant until her recent health challenge. At Villere's Crush Photo Studios in Orange County, CA, she spoke with editor's Chet Cooper and Lia Martirosyan about how facing a major illness also helped her face her fears. Nancy shares her life's journey with art and latest exhibition called *Revealed*.

Chet Cooper: We've known each other for years, but I realize that I don't know that much about your background as a painter.

Nancy Villere: Professionally, I've been a photographer





since my early 20s. And then, in my 30s, I went to school for painting. I didn't believe that I could render anything recognizable. I had a friend who was a painter, and I would watch her do her thing and just kind of pine about not being able to do that.

One day, she took me down to the art store, and we got supplies so I started playing with it, and then, all of a sudden, I had something that I could relate to and that I enjoyed. Shortly after that, I had an opportunity to go to the Laguna College of Art + Design.

Cooper: Tell us more about that.

Villere: My photo studio and the art college shared space in the canyon right by the Laguna Art Festivals, and one day the dean of fine arts came to tell me they were kicking us out of our parking places. I had never met the man before in my life, but I told him, "Here's my first painting ever, and your school's awesome. Wouldn't it be—" I don't even know what I said, just some compliment about the school, and he liked it.

He goes, "Well, you're a photographer and we always need photography, so why don't we trade photography for tuition?" And I said yes immediately, and so I did all of the photography for this college, all the documenting of student art, all the art shows that came through their gallery. I did photography for their brochure, their booklet, their marketing material, and I got to go to school.

Cooper: All four years?

Villere: I started out as a freshman, and dropped out when I was a junior, because my photography business was too busy. But my time there was really good. I had fun. I was blown away by the other students. I felt like an imposter. (*laughs*) I was with 18-year-olds who had so much talent. They knew they were gifted, but I was gifted, too.

Cooper: He gifted you with the class, with tuition.

Villere: That's right! I was gifted as well. I was glad I had the opportunity to go, because as an uneducated painter, I would have thought that I needed something to be better than what was coming out of me. Then I realized that what was coming out of me was fine. It flowed. It's like channeling. I always feel like I'm channeling a painting. So having the school background gave me the reassurance that I had the technique and knowledge that I needed, but I don't feel like I put it to full use because I just do what comes out.

Cooper: But you stopped painting for a long time?

Villere: I painted in and out of those years, but never with the idea to sell my work or have it be shown publically. It was very personal.

Lia Martirosyan: So this new thing that's happened, where you're painting prolifically, came about because of your breast cancer experience? Can you tell us more about the connection?

Villere: At the end of 2013, I got diagnosed with cancer in my right breast. They were unable to schedule the surgery until January 2014. When I had the cancer removed, I got reconstructive surgery, and had to take about four weeks off, because I couldn't lift or carry the cameras. But I like to be busy, so I decided that I was gonna get my painting materials out, buy some new supplies, and paint while I recovered. I figured that would feel good, and I would have some concentrated time to paint.

It felt like a new experience, and it was fun. I challenged myself to go beyond what I had ever experienced with painting. I felt like I wanted to get over old conversations and just see where I am now. *(crying)* I'm sorry, I don't know—

Martirosyan: Don't apologize, let it all out.

Villere: I was painting and communicating with my sisters a lot during that time, because I have another sister who likes to paint, too. So when I started doing it, I invited her over and we had a day of playing, and then she went home and got her supplies out and started painting at her house, too, so she and I would communicate, take pictures of our work as we did it, and send 'em back and forth to each other.

I was willing to paint only while it felt beautiful, not when I was feeling frustrated or pissed. I don't know if you've ever experienced that, but sometimes every layer isn't what you want it to be. It's actually a foundation for something else, and so when you're looking at it, you have to make judgments and evaluations. There was a freedom. I was willing to paint until it was complete. That gave me permission to play and play and play and play.

Martirosyan: You played until you completed some works.

Villere: And then there was a moment where something shifted, and the layers started coming out beautiful more often. I was doing both abstract and figurative work simultaneously. The figures started to become bolder. Rendering the female figure has always challenged me. It's fun to create dimension with light and shadow. In all my years of photographing women, I've been looking at light and shadow, and how it defines curves and all of that. So it was time for that to come out.

I don't know if this has anything to do with breast cancer, except for the fact that it got me painting again, and stopped me from being distracted.

Cooper: You started to get emotional there. What things were you holding onto that maybe you started to let go of?

Villere: Whether what I painted was good enough or interesting or valuable. It didn't really matter. I got to the very peaceful place of having no agenda for the final product, and that always gives me room to go deeper into creating.

Cooper: Art for its own sake?

Villere: Yes.

Cooper: So there weren't any other issues you were holding onto, like your mortality? Even though breast cancer has come a long way, I would imagine that it still made you give some thought to your mortality.

Villere: Actually, it was more about should I put these paintings out for people to see or not. I think contemplating my mortality helped me move forward because if not now, then when? Who knows what's just around the corner? That was part of the impetus to let the stuff go into a public forum, and see what I could do with it. Because we only have today (*laughs*) as you know. We have today to be the best we can be.

Cooper: I don't think we have today. We have now.

Villere: Exactly. So not waiting till the right time felt like it was based on the cancer. I think what it also did was, as a woman—I don't know—it's like, our bodies are beautiful no matter what they're doing. I don't think anybody's perfect, and so the concept of perfection really is overrated. Physical perfection may happen for a handful of people out there, and I do see them in my photography world. But if you asked those women, they wouldn't think they're perfect. Being at peace with the imperfection of our bodies, I think that I got pretty clear about that. It is whatever it is. I'm not my body. I'm my heart, my soul, my brain, too...

Cooper: You're no body?

Villere: I'm nobody. I'm not my body. I'm a nobody.

(*laughter*)

I'm somebody, dammit! I don't want to be all woo woo with this stuff, but—

Cooper: Do you think what moved for you was the freedom from fear?

Villere: Maybe conquering the fear. Creating for me sometimes is connected with fear, because it's really like being my true self in that expression.

Martirosyan: Exposing yourself?

Villere: Yeah.

Cooper: Like a peep show?



(*laughter*)

Martirosyan: Yes, there were so many times I was reminded of a peep show as you were talking!

(*laughter*)

Villere: That's awesome!

Cooper: Now that we've said "peep show," we've got to explain.

Villere: (*laughs*) No, I don't think we have to explain "peep show."

Martirosyan: We can't just say "peep show," and have people figure it out. We've got a picture of Nancy in the peep show, don't we?

Villere: I've been, for the last year and a half prolifically, painting a number of pieces that are figurative and abstract, and I've been asked to participate in a SoHo show at The Living Room. The woman who put the show on has known me for about 10 years as a photographer, and when I introduced myself to her as a painter and showed her my work, she asked me to do the show, she said, "Nancy, nobody knows you're a painter. This is like your secret life. We should do something with the name of the show where you're uncovered or whatever." And what came to me was "Revealed," especially with the nude figures that I have in the show. So I decided it should be called "Revealed," for me and for my pieces. (*laughs*)

And it just so happens that right after that, we moved, and I had a lot of my old family photos of myself and my children in a couple of crates. I also found this roll of photos that I had done of myself naked for my husband, 'cause I liked to do that in my cute early 30s *(laughs)* or late 20s. I decided that I was gonna paint from those photographs and did three self-portraits for the show, because how better to be revealed than to have my body exposed?

Martirosyan: There you go.

Villere: And while I was painting, it kept coming to me that I should have these photographs in the show. I liked them as they were: 5x5s on a roll, having come out of a printer and not yet cut apart. But then I thought of the idea of having a box that you look into, or something where it's a private viewing, and you can attach the pictures to spindles and turn them from side to side to see...

In my head I was remembering an old stop-motion thing that I had seen at some point, but it wasn't gonna need to be stop-motion. It was just turning it from side to side as the way you view the pictures. I have a friend who's kind of a handyman construction guy, and I told him



what I wanted and he had this old great breadbox (*laughs*) that you could flip the lid down, and he fashioned the spindles in there, and I applied the pictures and it worked exactly the way I had imagined.

So I named it "Peep Show/Artist Revealed," which would be me doing what I ask women to do every day in my photography, to go in front of the camera either unclothed or partially clothed. I thought it would be fair if I put myself out there in that. And looking at myself from 1991, I felt a little bit of separation, (*laughs*) so it wasn't like it was me doing it today. I don't know why that made a difference, but I enjoyed the pictures. I thought they were cute and sweet. There was something I saw in them, so putting them in the show was fun. And why not?

Cooper: You sound like you related to the pictures.

Villere: I could relate to them, and I could relate to the person in the pictures, slightly. (*laughs*) That's peep show. It's in the show for $25,000. Should anyone want to buy them, they are for sale—at a price. (*laughs*)

Cooper: There's been a lot of talk about art therapy. Were you thinking that when you started painting again?

Villere: I think I was. I'm so happy when I'm painting. I'm truly in the most peaceful place.

Cooper: Are you laughing as you paint?

Villere: Sometimes. (*laughs*) When I'm shooting and painting, I'm really laughing! Or listening to my karaoke, I really laugh. When I paint, it's definitely for therapy, like a release.

Cooper: The word "therapy" seems too clinical.

Villere: Right. For me, I like to have a positive attitude about things, and I like to think my way through my life as if I imagine it's gonna go a certain way, and then it goes that way. I believe in the power of your intentions. To deal with the cancer, for me, I just kept my intention that it was gonna be easy, simple, not disrupt my life and not kill me. (*laughs*) The painting helped me to stay clear and positive about that. When I'm in my painting mode, nothing else matters. There's no stress, there's just that process that's going on.

Martirosyan: It's different than photography?

Villere: I get a lot of that with my photography, too, that's why I love what I do so much. My joy is when I'm working with another person. This is more solo. But any time I'm expressing myself artistically. It's the transcendence, letting go of the physical and I'm somewhere else. That's how it feels when I experience art, painting and photography are the moments when that occurs.



*Cooper: Different people have that reaction to different things. I was just listening to NPR where the guy was talking about his passion for soccer. It wasn't even getting the goal per se, but the whole setup with the line and being in the moment. That was his thing. But he was known for something else, so when the reporter asked him what his passion was, it wasn't what they were talking about. It kind of threw the NPR guy off. He was like, "what?" (*laughs*) I guess Lia has that transcendence with her singing. Of course I have that with my—*

Villere: motorcycle riding.

Cooper: Yes.

Martirosyan: Do you prefer acrylic or oil?

Villere: I like acrylic because of the way it operates. I love paint and texture. I love to show texture. I love to have you feel the paint as well as look at what the painting is. I also like the drying time of acrylic. Oils dry so slowly. My inspirations are a lot faster, like when I have something coming out of me. If I'm blending a layer, I only want to have to wait a little bit of time to blend it. There's all sorts of mediums you can add to 'em.

But sometimes even acrylic is too slow. (*laughs*) It's like, "Stop. That blue. Get rid of that blue! I want white now!" But I definitely like acrylic work for the way I paint. At my show, this collector was like, "I love your work!" Then he said, "You paint really fast, don't you?" And I was like, "Whoa! How can you tell?" He felt the energy in the way I create my images. It was really cool. I think he might be the one who bought—

Martirosyan: "You get a discount!"

Villere: "You get a discount for paying attention!" (*laughter*) "For guessing right!" But I thought that was funny, that he could tell that I was a fast painter. Maybe you can tell in the style of them.

I never feel like I'm doing something that I'm not supposed to be doing. The fact that all of these paintings are coming to me, and I've managed to figure out my work schedule so I have days to paint, when I never used to look for days to paint before. The universe has lined me up with a good assistant for the flow of my business, so I can spend days painting in between days photographing, so I get to continue on with the painting, which is really fun. And now I want to share it with other people. It's bigger than me, so I'm finding out how many ways I can get my work out there, how many places I can display it.

Cooper: When I first saw that you'd started painting, it seemed like you were doing an overabundance of breasts in your work.



Villere: My figures are mostly all women's torsos, and a lot from the front.

Cooper: But recently I've seen a lot more of other things, especially in the abstracts.

Villere: I feel there's something pleasing about my torso. I connect with them as far as the painterly quality goes, and also in rendering the figure. I don't know that there's necessarily showing breasts for the sake of showing breasts. I would say it's probably some subconscious thing; I just like rendering the shapes, and those orbs are so fun to render! For whatever reason, my nipples come out 3D, even though I only give them two seconds of time. I put highlight, shadow, a twist, and I leave 'em. And for some reason, they pop off the canvas.

(*laughs*)

It's the channeling. I don't feel like I'm the one who's always in control. I like letting it flow and seeing what happens. And sometimes I'll be standing at my canvas painting, so close to it because of the length of my brush, and I'm doing things that I am seeing to do as far as putting paint on and adding color, highlight, shadow, whatever, but when I step back it looks so different. Like I didn't even know I was creating dimension because I was right on top of it, but if I take a little break and step back, I see what I've done.

Cooper: That's good.

Villere: I don't know if that's good or not. Probably not good (*laughs*) that I don't know what I'm doing until I step back! (*laughs*) But it's the whole being connected. And I'd say if I have done anything since starting Crush Studio for my photography, it's been about stepping out of my way with my thoughts and judgments, and allowing myself to be in the moment as I create with my clients.

That practice serves me a lot when I paint. I try not to predispose myself to doing something specific. I just open up my thoughts and allow what's there to come through and see how it looks.

Martirosyan: You get so intimate with each piece. How are you when it comes to selling?

Villere: Oh, my gosh, it felt like somebody was taking my children away. I think I sold two paintings out of this last show. I put 'em up for sale—

Cooper: —and bought 'em back?

(laughter)

Villere: I may have to buy them back!

Martirosyan: Write yourself a check.

Villere: I had a discussion with the woman who was having the show, and she was like, "Nancy, you can price them at, say $5,000, but until you're known, they may not sell that that price. You can decide how you want to price them." And she let me decide the pricing on everything. So part of me was like, "I don't want to sell that one because I know that one's gonna be more valuable later," because to me, they're all like miracles. So to have them priced at somewhere between $2,000 and $5,000—mostly in the $2,000 to $3,000 range—that doesn't feel like enough. It feels like, "Wait, they're gonna be worth more." But, no one knows for sure; this is the tricky part about art...

Cooper: The higher price comes after your death.

Villere: There you go. (*laughs*) I have a few saved for my family so they can cash out.

Martirosyan: You're going to create more.

Villere: All of my babies are precious. But I've got to let 'em go. And yeah, by having 'em sell, it gave me—

Cooper: Start selling your kids now, and you'll feel better.

Villere: My children! (*laughs*) My girls are 35 and 34, I don't think anybody's buying 'em. Their husbands are already paying for them, so there you go.

Martirosyan: Funny.

Villere: So anyway, I bought two palettes of canvases and made room for them in my garage. All different sizes, or multiples of the same size, so that I have five to 10 of each of my favorite sizes. I even got some so that I can go bigger when I'm ready.

Martirosyan: Go big or go home.

Villere: Go big or go home! There are some babies that people are never gonna see. I have to keep 'em. I like what they were for me at that time.

Cooper: So you paint at a home studio? You're not doing the painting here, right?

Villere: Right. I've created a home studio.

Martirosyan: Very nice. Your own corner to focus on your art.

Villere: Yeah. It's always ready to go; I can go down there at any hour.

Cooper: The neighbors don't complain about the noise?

(laughter)
Martirosyan: Do you listen to music while you paint?

Villere: I do. I have my headphones or ear buds.

Cooper: You do karaoke, where you're yelling and screaming. I forgot the name of that thing you do.

Villere: It's called Smule. I actually can't Smule and paint at the same time, although in the very beginning I did some really fun Smules, when I was super-shy. I was like (*singing softly*). That's how singing feels to me; my voice scares me.

Smuling is like the ultimate frontier. Singing in public—because I'm letting people listen to it—and even singing for myself is a new experience. I was singing "The Girl from Ipanema" and spray painting at the same time. So the music's starting, and the microphone starts picking up what's going on, even if you're not singing over it right away, or you're not supposed to, so I was shaking, and it's like the shake of the spray-paint can, it was all adding texture to what I was doing.

Cooper: The kind of paint can with the metal bead inside?

Villere: Uh-huh. It was really fun. Adding that texture, that layer of sound to the process was fun. So I spray painted during my Smule. (*laughs*)
Cooper: Can you do graffiti-type art with that spray-can effect? Are you spraying the larger areas?

Villere: I haven't really created graffiti, so far.

Cooper: The people who really can control a spray can, can do an amazing amount of work in a small area.

Villere: That's not my forté. I like to do big swatches with abstracts. I like to play with the paint. I have a series, you put stuff on it and it changes it. I was doing a thing where I had one spray can that was carpeted and it would kind of splatter, but that was perfect, so I knew when to use that one. So again, just taking what was happening and using it to create layers and texture and whatever happens for me for abstracts, which is the layers and textures and what came first and what came second, who knows at the end of it?

Martirosyan: Thinking about what you said about letting go of the fear of, is it good enough? For me, I think, "Am I creating anything that anybody would look at, let alone buy?" It's a huge step you took just being comfortable and confident enough in what you created and putting it out there.

Villere: Part of the process is giving up attachment. I'm not attached to whether somebody else likes them. And I do feel confident about these paintings. My mom has a bunch up at her house from when I was in school, and they make me laugh. But they're good, there's nothing wrong with 'em, but I never took 'em seriously. I don't take these seriously, but I do enjoy them, and I feel like I am happy. When I had that show, it was the first experience of having a lot of my pieces hung and displayed and observed, and I was afraid that I wasn't gonna be able to stay present that night, like I wasn't gonna be able to stay in my body, because it was about me, and that's usually when I check out. But I stayed present. And it was wonderful to have people look at the paintings, and experience 'em and enjoy them and have comments about 'em.

I loved eavesdropping, walking behind people as they were talking about 'em to hear what they were looking at, and what they were seeing, and how it was affecting them. That is so fun for me. Even if they said they didn't like it, it didn't click or whatever, I'm like: That's fine for you, 'cause it's different for everybody. The experience or the connection or non-connection is a very personal thing for people, and I don't expect them all to get it or want it or like it or whatever. That part was pretty freeing.

*Cooper: (*snores*)*

Villere: Is he sleeping?

Cooper: What? I didn't stay present, sorry about that!

(laughter)
Martirosyan: He was waiting to slip that in somehow.

Villere: "Chet snores"





(laughter)

Cooper: I was thinking about if you'd ever been tested for having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and then when you said that about staying present, I was thinking about that, and that's why I made the joke.

Villere: I've never been tested for that. I definitely could have ADHD.

Cooper: I love the fact that you thought enough to know that you might check out in certain situations, like, "I don't want to hear this, I'm just gonna go over there."

Martirosyan: I can relate to that.

Villere: I'm not good at being that center of attention with groups of people. Performance is not comfortable for me.

Martirosyan: Being the center of attention, is odd, but I enjoy expressing something I'm confident in. I like the part you said about walking by and experiencing what people are saying about you, without it being fabricated because you're there.

Villere: Yeah, that was fun. I had the time of my life that night. Having the show was for everyone else, too. It was for the people to have that experience. Patricia, my assistant, she's a good therapist for me, because sometimes I'll be like, "Why am I doing this? Who cares?" And she brings me back to, "You know, why would you deprive people of seeing this if it would give them pleasure—or pain?" (*laughs*) I'm like, "Okay. It's not about me."

Cooper: That how I got pulled in at Chippendale's.

(*laughter*)

Cooper: It's not just about me; it's about the audience.

Villere: Are you a guest performer at Chippendale's these days? (*laughs*)

Martirosyan: He pulls out his sequins.

Villere: His breakaway pants come off. Magic Chet.

(laughter) ■ ABILITY

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There's a curious message on Sesame Enable's website: "Touch is overrated." But it begins to make sense when you learn that users can activate the company's cellphones with a turn of the head, creating new possibilities for people with disabilities. Chet Cooper and Lia Martirosyan of *ABILITY Magazine* recently caught up with Oded Ben Dov, co-founder of the Israeli-based Sesame, about how he and partner, Giora Livne, conceived their forward-thinking technology.

Chet Cooper: How did you come up with the idea for this phone?

Oded Ben Dov: My background is in gesture technology and computer vision, where the computer understands what the camera is seeing. Then I demonstrated a touch-free game on television, where you controlled it by using hand gestures. Giora Livne, who is paralyzed from the neck down, saw the show and called me up the next day to ask if we could use the same technology to make a smartphone accessible for people like him.

Cooper: Had you thought of creating anything in the area of accessibility before Giora called?

Ben Dov: I hadn't. I didn't have a disability, but I was very glad to partner with him and address the challenges of people who can't move their hands, but can use their head.

Lia Martirosyan: Tell us about the game you demonstrated, which moved him to call.

Ben Dov: There was a character that would pop up in one of four windows on an iPhone, and you could use your head to control a cursor or a hand to catch that character. It kept popping up, and you'd chase it around the screen using your head movements.

Most companies in gesture technology create entertainment and games. The most known example is Microsoft's Kinect.

Cooper: I don't play games on my devices, so I didn't know that was a trend. I know there's head gestures in other areas, like in biofeedback, where you think and move whatever is on the screen. Have you tried going into that area?

Ben Dov: We definitely mapped out alternative solutions and technologies. The brain wave solutions are very primitive. The research is just getting started. I think they're still far from consumer-ready products. There are other solutions that use special cameras to track your head or eye movement, and let you control a computer through that interface.

Cooper: I would think that there are other, similar products out there; how is Sesame different?



Ben Dov: We're different in that we went after smartphones. There was one solution that was available for Windows tablets, but that's still not a native mobile platform like the Android or the Mac IOS. Unfortunately, Microsoft is still behind in that way. So going after an Android smartphone in the Android ecosystem is something really unique to Sesame.

Beyond that, we're using the standard built-in cameras you can find in any smartphone. It's the equivalent of a simple web camera that's connected to a computer. It doesn't require special hardware like our competitors' products, and that brings with it several benefits. We can price it much more affordably, and the solution is more elegant.

Martirosyan: Elegant?

Ben Dov: You don't need extra hardware or extra cables. We've received feedback from users that having a phone that looks just like everyone else's is a good thing. They don't want to stand out with their accessibility device. And you wouldn't know that Sesame was a special accessible phone just from looking at it. It's a standard smartphone with our software installed.

Cooper: What phone do you use?

Ben Dov: We started off with Google's Nexus 5, but it's being discontinued, so we're now searching for the next version.

Cooper: Your product is not an app, right? It's a platform built on a smartphone.

Ben Dov: That's right. We're looking to make it into a downloadable app, but currently it's a platform that needs special installation. We're talking to carriers and phone manufacturers to have the technology available on their devices.

Cooper: I know the prices might change going forward, but at the moment what's the cost for someone to get one of your phones?

Ben Dov: Currently they're going for $700, and you get the smartphone pre-installed with our touch-free interface.

Martirosyan: Tell us more about Giora's input.

Ben Dov: We founded Sesame together. I came to the company with the technical know-how, and he came, obviously, with a need. We began with founders' money, some of which was his insurance money from the accident.

Cooper: What is his background?

Ben Dov: Giora is what's called a high-current engineer, which means he deals with environments such as power



plants and power grids, where the current is huge. He's actually built power plants. He was released from the Navy where he was a ship commander. We both have the same alma mater; we both graduated from the Technion. He lives in my hometown, a street away from my parents, which is quite serendipitous. (*laughs*)

Martirosyan: Small world!

Ben Dov: Yeah, in Israel you get that a lot. It's a small country.

Cooper: Are you both doing this full-time?

Ben Dov: Yes, this is full time and has been for over two years now. When pursuing a start-up, which you can't really do part time. It requires commitment, perseverance, and one-and-a-half—if not two times—your available resources.

Cooper: The old joke is that when you're an entrepreneur, you only have to work half a day: 12 hours.

Ben Dov: (*laughs*) That's right!

Martirosyan: So when were the first phones shipped?

Ben Dov: We had several beta versions with testers, and we've gotten great feedback. But the official launch was in May. We also donated some phones to people in need.

Since we won a big award from Verizon, we decided to take the money coming in from the crowd-funding community, and put it towards free devices for people who haven't had the option of using a smartphone. They're now taking advantage of all the wonderful things it can do.

Cooper: Do you still have the financial capability to provide free phones? Is that campaign over?

Ben Dov: Most of our phones are purchased. We're taking the names of people who want to wait for a free device. As we get contributions, we can give away more devices. We are working with state agencies and other organizations to subsidize this program, because people with disabilities usually have higher expenses and lower available income.

We're targeting many countries for this. The only program that's currently in place is in the US, in Texas, where they're subsidizing disability solutions. If you purchase a Sesame smartphone through them, you'll get reimbursed $550.

Martirosyan: In Texas? That's interesting.

Ben Dov: When we reached out, they responded quickly, but very few states have a subsidy plan. We're work-

ing with two more: one in Missouri and one in California, and we hope to see others pick up this model, especially given the ongoing push with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Cooper: Do you know where the funding in Texas comes from? Is it oil revenue?

Ben Dov: I can send you a link to the program when our conversation is over.

Martirosyan: Great.

Cooper: Who says it's gonna' be over?

Ben Dov: Hey, it's 9:30 p.m. in Israel, so it needs to be over some time!

(laughter)

Cooper: Other than the US and Israel, are any other countries onboard?

Ben Dov: We are looking into markets in Europe. We're currently more in touch with nonprofit organizations and assistive technology distributors. We'll continue to branch out, but it's a matter of prioritizing. There's a limited amount of work we can do.

Cooper: And you're also looking for a new phone manufacturer.

Ben Dov: Right, and searching for new offices. We're expanding. There's a lot going on.

Cooper: That's all good.

Martirosyan: Tell us about your relationship with Beit Issie Shapiro.

Ben Dov: They take care of many children with disabilities. In English, it might be called day care. They hosted the first Israeli accelerator program for start-ups in special-needs scopes. Do you know what an accelerator is?

Cooper: It's something that slows things down, or is it the opposite?

(laughter)

Ben Dov: Right, it speeds things up. Accelerator is a common term in the start-up world. They're programs that teach you all the things you need to know about market research, and how to build a business plan, etc., build your vision, how to market, etc. I think Issie Shapiro hosted the first accelerator in the world that was focused around special needs. It was called A3I; it stands for Accelerating Inclusion in Israel—the three I's.

Cooper: Clever.

Ben Dov: We were a part of that accelerator. We're well connected to the Beit Issie Shapiro people. Since then we've been scratching each other's backs. When the accelerator program ended, we were happy to continue to promote their messages and to make presentations at their events, which gave us the opportunity to speak before interesting audiences.

For example, we presented Sesame at the UN, something I never dreamed we'd do. That's just one example of what this partnership has brought us.

Cooper: We spoke at one of their recent conferences; that's how we learned about you.

Ben Dov: Oh cool.

Martirosyan: How did you come up with the name, Sesame Enable?

Ben Dov: We debated about it for a long time. I even brought in a professional to help us choose a name.

Cooper: Did they work for Sesame Street?

Ben Dov: (*laughs*) Yeah! They get royalties every time "Sesame" is used. (*laughter*) So we were looking for names. We had some more standard names, and then Sesame came up, originating from the phrase, "Open, Sesame!" The story is Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves." There was this magic cave, and to enter it you had to say, "Open, Sesame!"

When we ran the name by Giora, he really connected to it. I think it's because it expressed that we were opening new worlds for our users. It turned into Sesame Enable because the register in Israel already had the name Sesame itself.

Cooper: It's interesting that you're having all these issues with the Arab world, and yet you got your name from an Arab story. Hopefully one day you could start working with some of the Arab countries. In Qatar, for example, they have Mada [Qatar Assistive Technology and eAccessibility Center]. Do you know about them?

Ben Dov: No.

Cooper: They're an NGO. They get their funding from a small tax on cell-phone usage. Their government was pretty good in organizing that, so they're well funded and sustainable. Within that small country, they work with people who have disabilities. They're doing really good work. I think the majority of people who work in Mada have disabilities, so they already know the need. And also, they come with a background in technology. Politics sometimes get in the way, but they want to work with other people.







Ben Dov: I'd love to see that. I remember about a year ago, I noticed that we had a new follower from the Nation of Islam on Twitter. That to me was a small win, bridging gaps through technology.

Cooper: Families are families, and families care about their children. They often have common issues around disabilities. As a matter of fact, we've been to Israel and worked with some of the engineers and scientists who work hand-in-hand with their counterparts in Palestine, helping kids with cerebral palsy. The partnerships happen, but not enough.

Ben Dov: There's a place near where I live that I go for hummus. The person there is Arabic, and he's constantly asking me to let him distribute our solution in the Palestinian space. And we'll get to that, but as I said earlier we need to prioritize. It's a nice thought, though, connecting with people—particularly children—with disabilities.

Cooper: I think that's percolating. We've been in a few different Arab Gulf states, and we go, typically, because of the children with disabilities. We're always trying to advocate for more inclusion. We trust it will happen some day, whether it's in our lifetime or not. Anything you'd like to add?

Ben Dov: We're coming out with a tablet version soon.

Cooper: We're not going to mention that.

(*laughter*)

Cooper: Have you found a manufacturer for it?

Ben Dov: We're looking to continue with the Nexus series. Giora has switched from a smartphone to a tablet and is loving it, so that was the assurance we needed.

Giora has also installed a system that can be used through a computer or smartphone to control the lights, thermostats, TV, etc., from wherever he is in his home. Initially, we didn't think our reach would extend so far beyond the virtual world.

Martirosyan: That's nice.

Cooper: Some of that technology's been around, but it's required lots of different devices to connect. HP did a program with us circa 1999. They helped us build a smart home for a person who is a quadriplegic. He used voice activation, but it was still in the primitive stages.

Ben Dov: Since we receive feedback from users, we issue updates monthly or bimonthly to make it better and answer their needs. We issue updates for the existing product, and we're looking to offer the tablet and choose our next model to run off of and distribute that.

Cooper: It seems you could even explore the possibility of packaging your smartphone concept.

Ben Dov: We're taking it one step at a time. We want to make sure the smartphone technology is solid and amazing and then reach out to the Internet of Things and connected machines. As we expand, we'll be able to take on more challenges at a faster rate. ■ ABILITY

sesame-enable.com



Nancy Villere - CrushPhotoStudios.com

NORMAN LEAR

PART 1

Even This...

On a foggy morning in Bel Air, California, *ABILITY*'s columnist, actress Geri Jewell and interviewer David Zimmerman, found themselves driving through a gated property and down a long driveway to a sprawling home redolent of royalty... Hollywood royalty, that is: the home of legendary TV producer and writer Norman Lear. The creator of groundbreaking sitcoms *All in the Family*, *Maude*, *One Day at a Time*, *Good Times*, *The Jeffersons*, and *Mary Hartman*, Lear also recently penned a memoir, *Even This I Get to Experience*.

Lear greeted the duo warmly, giving his longtime friend, Jewell, a loving hug.





Entering the home, they were greeted by a beautiful woman named Monica who asked if they would like a cappuccino to start the day. As the camera crew busily set up lights and sound, the trio sat down to reminisce about their history together, their shared joy of making people laugh, and Lear's early days in Hollywood. By all accounts, it was "all in the family" time.

Geri Jewell: Thank you for this interview, Norman.

Norman Lear: Even this I get to experience.

David Zimmerman: Geri and I interviewed musician Chris Hendricks from Sedona.

Lear: Oh yes, yes, yes.

Zimmerman: He said, "Please give Norman a hug." And he said, "I keep on thinking about singing "Imagine" that evening."

Jewell: He is such a cool guy. I'm wearing one of his shirts—"Define Normal." I wore it because I saw it in my closet and thought, "Define Norman."
(laughter)

Lear: That's funny!

Jewell: I put in a new hearing aid battery for you.

(laughter)

Lear: I'm pleased that you put in a new battery for me. When you put in a new battery, do you hear well?

Zimmerman: Do you hear yourself sometimes?

Lear: No, it tells me when it's working.

Jewell: And when it goes dead, it goes boop, boop, boop, boop, boop, which means you have ten minutes to change the battery.

Zimmerman: Does it speak to you? "Dear Geri, you have 10 minutes to replace me?"

Lear: Mine talks. It says, "Battery low."

Jewell: Oh, you're lucky. You have a talking hearing aids.

Zimmerman: Can you change the voice? It could say, "Battery low." (Speaking in a lower register)

Lear: I don't know. It does change the input, three ways.



Jewell: They're working on hearing devices that will translate languages. When somebody is speaking Spanish and you know English, you put your hearing device in and it will—

Lear: Oh my God. Next thing you're going to tell me is that people will get… heavier than aircrafts and fly.

Jewell: Very interesting if it happens!

Zimmerman: So this is family here—the two of you.

Lear: This is family. And the crew is family. It's the human family.

Zimmerman: I read your book. Actually, I heard your book on CD.

Lear: Yes?

Zimmerman: I loved it, because my father passed away about 13 years ago, so to hear your voice and to see your face brought him back to me. Thank you for that.
Lear: Oh, how sweet.

Zimmerman: I was listening to it, and all of the terminology—especially the Bar Mitzvah—and I was reliving my life, in a way, while I was listening to you.

Lear: Well, all of our lives connect. I have a bumper sticker that reads, "Just another version of you." We're versions of one another.

Zimmerman: Right. One of the things about your book was that you have lived your life fully.

Lear: Not yet.

(laughter)

Zimmerman: There was something about how you lived it. You didn't seem to have fear. You went through the fear. Some people just sit there and go, "Aaah, I don't know, can I move my foot?"

Lear: Well, I dealt with the fear. It wasn't that I didn't fear. It was that I chose to move ahead, I guess. I don't know how to… I didn't let the fear overcome me. I didn't necessarily overcome the fear, because it was there. But I moved on anyway.

Zimmerman: And I remember you said you had joyful stress.

Lear: Oh, yeah, when we had a number of shows

going, people used to say, "God, it must be very stressful." And having thought about it, I'd say, "Well, more like joyful stress." Of course we were, but we were all working hard. We had the joy of doing something we cared about; the joy of seeing it score and hearing people laugh. Oh God, the joy of hearing people laugh!

Zimmerman: Yeah.

Jewell: Yes.

Lear: Now you do standup.

Jewell: Absolutely.

Lear: So who knows better than a standup what that joy is all about?

Jewell: Yeah, it's a high, and there's no comparison. I mean you cannot get that comedy high when you walk off stage. There's nothing else like it.

Lear: There's nothing like it. And all the stress it took you to get there is gone, and you leave on a high.
Jewell: I read your book, too. I haven't listened to it yet, but I intend to. But your book inspired me all over again. I mean, I thought I knew you pretty well, going way back to 1980. And I learned a lot of things about you that I didn't know before.

Lear: Name twelve.

(laughter)

Jewell: You know what got my attention? Your vulnerability. When you think about successful people, you think they're not vulnerable anymore. And you're so real. You have maintained that throughout your life.

Lear: I think I learned early that it's hard to be a human being. I don't care what the circumstances of one's birth, it's hard. If life hasn't made mischief for us, we'll make it for ourselves. But that's the game of life. We pay a lot of money for these fancy games of all kinds. It requires us to compete and engage and beat that game or this game. And the game of life we don't think of that way, and perhaps we should. It's tough. Telephones ring when you don't want them to—

(Phone ringing in the background)

Jewell: Part of the human experience. And the title of your book—Even This I Get to Experience. *I have to say, one thing that stood out immediately—and you wrote about it very early on—was that you met Charlie Chaplin.*

Lear: Oh, I didn't meet him. I sat behind him.

Jewell: Yes, yes, and I was like, "Oh my God, Charlie Chaplin?"

Lear: My first night in California.

Zimmerman: Your first night?

Lear: Yes. We drove across the country—my wife and my not-quite-two-year-old daughter Ellen. I had $30 in hand and came out in an old beat-up convertible. We were eight or nine or ten days on the road. We were staying in a motel on lower Sunset Boulevard. It was a Saturday night, and I went out to get a Sunday paper that was printed on Saturday night, to look through the ads for a place to live. I'm driving off of Sunset Boulevard, and I come across a little theater that had been a home. It's on El Centro, a stage theatre. "Opening tonight—Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*," maybe my favorite piece of literature. And a guy is sweeping up in front of the theater. He turns out to be the fellow running the place. I get out of the car. When he hears that I have a wife and daughter in a motel and that I want to be a press agent—which was what I told him I had come to California for—he said, "You know, we have someone working for us, and we don't pay him. But I'd love to introduce you. Maybe you can help us. We can't pay you, but you'll meet people." And I was fascinated by that. My first minutes in California. He said, "By the way, if you want to see the show tonight, opening night, I have a ticket for you."

Jewell: Wow.

Lear: Imagine having to call my wife in a motel, after 11 days or whatever the hell it had been, driving here, alone in this cheesy motel. "What are you doing?" "I'm going to the theater."

Zimmerman: "I'm here. Might as well start."

Lear: I had to. There were three seats in front of me, taped off. And as the lights were going down—it was only 90 seats or maybe a few less—in walks Dame somebody, a great British character actor, and Charles Chaplin. He sits immediately in front of me. I'd been in California an hour and 20 minutes. How's that for an omen?

Zimmerman: If that's not a sign. When I was listening to your book, I felt so close, like family. Like the time you got the dog.

Lear: Minsky.

Zimmerman: Yes, Minsky. And how it related to your film.

Lear: *The Night They Raided Minsky's…*

Zimmerman: Yeah, I loved that story. How you were happy your daughter got the dog, but you also felt sad about the other children who wanted the dog as well.

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Lear: Oh yeah, I was able to spend $100, and everybody else there… We had seen this dog at the pound, and they told us it was going to be auctioned off on a Sunday morning, I think. So other people had been there and fallen in love with the dog. So there were a dozen and a half of us, all wanting that little dog. So $2, $4, $8, $12, and $30. At $30, it was painful. And maybe it had gone to $40 or $50 or something, and I said $80 or $100, and I could see a crestfallen kid and his mother who had hoped to get the dog. But my little girl wanted the dog. So it was a joy to have it for her, but it was tough to walk out of there.

Zimmerman: What do you want the most at this moment in your life?

Lear: Days that turn into weeks that turn into months that become years. I'd like a lot of years. And I don't care how selfish that sounds.

Jewell and Zimmerman: (looking at one another) *We don't either.*

Zimmerman: And then "That's Cousin Geri!" (looking over at Geri) *That's what you said at the Media Access Awards. It was so groundbreaking that she was the first performer with a disability on TV.*

Jewell: A visible disability.

Lear: Amazing how long it took me.

Zimmerman: And listening to your book, going through it, you did that with everything. You did it with gay, with transgendered—

Jewell: On All In The Family.

Zimmerman: Black, white…

Lear: You know, we were a group of people just making a living. A good living, but working our asses off, supporting families and so forth. With show business, with all of the bullshit glamor and all of the success and the money and everything else—that comes a great deal later. It starts with people working their asses off to make a buck to support a family. Now, as we did that, we were dealing with the language of our time and the subjects of our time. There wasn't anything—whether dealing with menopause or the economy or bigotry or the language Archie used—it wasn't anything that wasn't familiar to us, as we lived. Nothing that you wouldn't hear in a schoolyard. It was the stuff of life we were living. Yes, I suppose you could do a show around a family whose worst problem was that the roast was ruined and the boss was coming to dinner.

Zimmerman: And how you had to fight it. It seemed like everything was an uphill battle.





Lear: Nothing has changed. With all the political stuff I'm watching on television now, and there is some glorious stuff like *Veep*. I haven't seen much funnier than *Veep*.

But they're not dealing with the problems people face in their homes. They're dealing with big international things or murders or sex and what not. I like those everyday things, and I like live audiences. And we're going to do it again.

Zimmerman: Good. You're going to do a live show?

Lear: I'm working now on doing a Latino version of *One Day At A Time*.

Zimmerman: I love that.

Jewell: Oh wow. Do they need a maid with cerebral palsy?

(laughter)

Zimmerman: I could just imagine. "Here's your water. Oh, I'll clean that up."

Jewell: "I don't do windows."

Zimmerman: "I don't do windows—they do me."

Jewell: That's wonderful. You know, Norman, you changed society.

Lear: No, we reflected society. We didn't change it.

Jewell: No, but you know how you changed it? You added humor to something very painful and very hostile—the hatred and prejudice. And you allowed us to laugh at ourselves—at our own ignorance. I can remember my dad laughing hysterically, watching All In the Family *and hearing Archie, and laughing at his ignorance and bigotry. Today you don't see that. There's so much hatred and so much prejudice. But we're not overcoming. You helped us to overcome our own disabilities, if you will, with humor. That for the most part is pretty much gone.*

And then there's Maude.

Lear: I go back to the same thing. We were working hard. I think about life. Why that should be such a surprise, at that time, for a 54-year-old man…?

Zimmerman: I used to watch it with my mother every week. It was her favorite show.

Lear: I loved it. Bea Arthur made me laugh in places I didn't know I had.



Zimmerman: Talk about ability. You have used your abilities and are using them to the fullest, and you've opened the door for others to use their abilities.

Lear: Well, that's what we're supposedly about.

Jewell: Yeah. I think that goes back to your vulnerability. You allow yourself to feel. I read in your book of your struggle and pain with the relationship with your Father. You took something that was extremely painful and motivated yourself to create something beautiful in life.

Lear: And what would you know about such things, with your cerebral palsy? You know, going through life, carrying on like this?

Jewell: Yeah, okay, except I really don't have cerebral palsy. It's an act.

(laughter)

Lear: Well, to know you well and spend a lot of time with you, one could almost believe it, because of your spirit. And if ever there was an example—which you are attributing to me—but a life example, visible 100 percent of the time, it's the way you've handled your situation.

Jewell: Well, thank you.

Lear: When I really mean something, I find myself having to say, "f#cking." What a real f#cking way of expressing what you're talking about. A lifetime of living your life the way you live it.

Jewell: Well, I went after what I wanted, just like you did.

Lear: I marvel at it just the way you're thinking about my book. So what do you know about that?

Jewell: Because I wrote my autobiography, I want to know how you could remember everything? I was able to go back, because I moved a lot. And every time that I lived in a different place, I knew that this was going on in my life because I lived in this apartment, or I lived in that apartment, or I lived in Las Vegas. How did you keep the chronological order of such an incredible, full life?

Lear: I do have a good memory. *(A woman comes into the room with a cake)* There are so many things that I've forgotten totally. Only I would know how much I've forgotten, while others wonder at how much I remembered.

There's a woman standing there with a cake and candles? That's Monica.



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Zimmerman: We know that your birthday is coming up this month, so we had to do a little birthday celebration.

(Zimmerman and Jewell sing Happy Birthday. Lear grabs a piece of the birthday cheesecake with his hand and shoves it into his mouth.)

Lear: The man will do anything for a laugh. Thank you. Oh God, it's good, too!

Zimmerman: I remember you talking about Lindy's cheesecake, and I got as close to that as possible: Canter's cheesecake.

Jewell: Did you make a wish, Norman? Because we can bring it back again.

Lear: You know, something? I've made the same wish since I was nine years old. You can't tell what the wish is, can you?

Jewell: No, you can't. Or it won't come true.

Lear: That's a good question—if I should ever express that. I thought about it when I was writing the book.

Zimmerman: Right. But you want to keep something for yourself.

Lear: But there's some unwritten rule about you keeping that wish to yourself.

Zimmerman: I understand that. You're so open in your book. There are so many rollercoaster rides. It's like the man is revealing everything. But it's good to have that little something for yourself, I think.

Lear: I know. I'm wrestling with it at the moment, but you don't disclose that. But it's the same wish always.

Jewell: Well, I was flattered that you acknowledged me in your book. I didn't expect that at all, and I was blown away. Geri Jewell in Norman Lear's book? Oh my God.

Lear: I wish I were writing that chapter again, because I'd expand it. There's so much for all of us in you, in your story, and the way you've handled your life.

Zimmerman: I have to say, Geri, you have brought me so much joy. And one of the things in my life that I live for is to see moments like this. I love to see love and connection. When we walked in today and the hug? It's just the whole connection. It makes my life worth living for, seeing others happy. One of my happiest moments in life is to see people smile.

Lear: I think it's wonderful that you express it. I think that represents what most people feel. They can't think to say it, and they don't have the ability to speak it, but it's there. That we all matter and do little things that we don't understand why we're doing that pleases the next person. We all do that.

Jewell: And we're all connected, and life is magical if

you let it be. You know, we're connected in another way, through Ed Simmons, a writer that you worked with. Your writing partner, correct?

Lear: And you and his daughter, Erica, are great friends.

Jewell: Yes. What are the odds?

Lear: The odds are 6,247 to a third…

Jewell: She beats the crap out of me in Scrabble once in awhile.

Zimmerman: Did she do it this morning? In the car, she was playing Scrabble.

Jewell: I did make a move with Erica this morning!

Zimmerman: Did you? That's funny. Yeah, we were waiting, before we came into your house, and I look down and she's playing Scrabble, and I said, "Oh, is that your morning meditation?"

Jewell: I didn't even think about it. I was playing Erica. Oh, how funny.

Jewell: (Looking at Norman) *I love this man.*

Lear: That schmuck you were married to—

(laughter)

Jewell: Yeah, the schmuck. Well, nobody's perfect.

Lear: Is he still in your life?

Jewell: He's living in another state. I haven't seen him in years.

Lear: And that's in the state of what?

Jewell: No, but you know, the schmuck kept me on my toes. Seriously, even schmucks, because he challenged me. He kept challenging me not to be intimidated and to respect my own intellect. I think my biggest disability in life has been the low intellectual expectations that so many people place upon me. They don't think I'm capable of having this intellectual, perceptive mind. I'm very well read and I'm intelligent, but I don't get that from—

Lear: You are?

Jewell: I know it's hard to believe. Because I have dealt with such low expectations my entire life, a part of me believed it too. He challenged me, because he pushed me. "Geri, you can walk away from it, or you can show them how bright you are. It's your choice." The lessons that I learned about self-esteem were the silver lining that I may not have learned otherwise.

Lear: I'll never call him a schmuck again.

Jewell: Yes, so when I speak in public, giving keynote speeches, his voice comes into my head. "Geri, show them what you're about. Show them who you are." The reminder is a gift from the schmuck!

Lear: I love you. I hope the camera caught all of that. There's a message in that for the world.

Jewell: But YOU always believed in me. You never had low expectations of me, because if you did, you would have never put me in I Love Liberty. He believed in me from day one. And I just heard my father's voice. My dad has tears in his eyes. I can feel his presence. He loves you, too. His name was Jack. He just said he was so thrilled when you took my hand. Wow. That's my dad.

Lear: Write another book.

Jewell: And you never got to meet him. I don't think you met my father.

Lear: No.

Jewell: You met my sister Gloria, but I don't think you met my parents.

Lear: I never met your parents.

Jewell: Bummer, both ways.

Lear: Are they still with you?

Jewell: No. My Mom's a killer whale now.

(laughter)

Lear: My wife just swam with her. She swam with a whale.

Jewell: Oh, how funny. I bet she was swimming with Mom! Thank you, Norman.

Zimmerman: Thank you all.

Lear: Thank you. That was really nice. And you know, all truth. No bullshit. No exaggeration at all.

Zimmerman: (Looking at Geri's shirt) *I'm going to always see that shirt as—"Define Norman."*

Jewell: If you could define Norman in three words?

Lear: Just another version. ■ ABILITY

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DANIMATION

In a few short years, Dani Bowman has created an animation empire. She's the chief creative officer, animator, illustrator, and graphic artist at Powerlight Studios, which she first dreamed up at 11. Recently, *ABILITY Magazine*'s David Zimmerman chatted with Bowman; her aunt, Sandra Vielma; and uncle, Patrick Eidemiller, over a scrumptious Mediterranean lunch in Los Angeles.

David Zimmerman: You've been busy.

Dani Bowman: I had four animated shorts premiere at the recent San Diego Comic Con, and I'm working on a fifth animated short, which is going to premiere later this year. It's called *The Adventures of Pelican Pete: A Bird is Born* [based on a book by Frances and Hugh Keiser].

Zimmerman: You founded your own studio at the age of 14.

Bowman: I actually came up with the concept of Powerlight Animation Studios when I was 11, and launched it at 14.









Sandra Vielma: When she was 10, she started to draw everything. She used to do animation with books—

Patrick Eidemiller: Stop motion—

Vielma: And one day she came to me with a little flip-book, and said, "I want to publish this. I want to sell this. I want to make money." It was perfect. Even though the whole thing was handwritten, it was perfect from beginning to end. It had a dedication, it had everything. She stapled it together. I was like, "This is great, Dani, but we can't publish this." She turns around and goes, "Nobody ever listens to me." … My heart broke, and I said, "No, Dani, come here, let's look at that book. We'll figure out how to do this."

Bowman: My original career was illustrating books. Aunt Sandy thought I was kidding when I said I wanted to start my own company.

Vielma: Now she's got five published books.

Bowman: My company is named after my Nintendo DS user name. It was originally called Volt Girl because I was into the character, Nine Volt, from Nintendo. But then I got bored, and the flashlight commercial just got in my head, so I renamed the company Powerlight.

Eidemiller: She would start with Microsoft Paint and Pixel. She would do simple PowerPoint animation. She'd grab a camera and do stop motion when she was 5 years old.

Bowman: They were originally just my Dani doodles, tiny simplistic stick figures. You don't need backgrounds or any complicated character design. All you need is a good story.

Eidemiller: She would do the characters, the dialogue, the story in a six-panel format.

Bowman: Usually graphic novel style.

Zimmerman: I was looking on your website, and discovered all these characters that you created.

Bowman: There's Fleen the Alien, Gemstar, and Hydro the Mako. So far there are 10 different series I'm working on. *Gemstar and Friends* is one of my animated shorts that was recently released on DVD. Also *The Namazu* is out on DVD; it has [section on it with] the information about what I've done over the years, including Tom Kenny. Do you know Tom Kenny?

Zimmerman: He voices SpongeBob!

Bowman: Right. I also have some videos of Tom doing his *SpongeBob Squarepants* voice on YouTube in the



behind-the-scenes part of *The Namazu*.

Zimmerman: Do you do any voices for your shorts?

Bowman: Typically for the minor roles, except for *AirBurst: The Soda of Doom,* where I did some of the major roles.

Zimmerman: So you do it all—direct, animate, voice, etc?

Bowman: For some projects. For *Mr. Raindrop*, *The Namazu*, and *Hannah Lost Her Smile*, I did the animation. Ray Martino from Inclusion Films directed Hannah. It's about a little girl who lost her tooth. When I was teaching animation at HEAL Foundation in Jacksonville, FL, he gave me the script.

Zimmerman: I cast the short film Spud *for Joey Travolta and Ray Martino years ago. In fact, I saw a picture on your website, and the* Spud *poster was behind you, and I thought: "Small world!"*

Vielma: *Mr. Raindrop* was a story by a woman who wrote it at 15, but it didn't get made until she was almost 80. So *Mr. Raindrop* is meant to look like an old animated short from way back when; it's done really well and has won a lot of awards. The woman wanted a girl to animate her; that was Dani's first animated short, from when she was about 15 or 16.

Bowman: *The Namazu* is based on the 2011 Japanese Tohoku earthquake; it's also one of my first animated shorts.

Vielma: Dani started animating when she was little; she [was inspired by] playing Airburst, a video game.

Bowman: When I was, like, 11, my uncle downloaded Airburst Extreme, the sequel. The Airburst designers, Aaron and Adam Fothergill, are two brothers from England. I got to meet them there.

Vielma: They had become friends on Facebook a couple years before, when Dani did a fan page for Airburst. They liked it, contacted Dani, and said, "Can we put it on our website?"

Zimmerman: Wow!

Vielma: So last year, she emailed them and asked: "Is it okay if I do this animation, and gave them the whole pitch. And they gave her the rights.

Mostly everybody involved, including the voice actors, is in the autism community. Every time Dani meets a big actor, she says, "Would you ever do a voice for me?" They always say "yes," and she always records it. (*laughs*)

Zimmerman: How long is The Adventures of Pelican Pete*?*



Bowman: My animated shorts typically last about six minutes, and it takes about four or five months to make them.

Eidemiller: But when she did *The Namazu*, she did it in three weeks.

Vielma: She had some help.

Zimmerman: I have a friend who animates for Disney, and he did his own five-minute short. It took him three years, mostly because he was animating for major films, and could only work on his project when he had a week off or day off. He drew everything by hand.

Eidemiller: That's time-intensive.

Bowman: CG animation is not so time-intensive as 2D. It also conserves trees.

Zimmerman: You teach for Inclusion Films?

Bowman: I teach animation at their camp. So far I've been to five of them.

Zimmerman: Do you animate on your computer?

Bowman: Typically on my tablet. I use Toon Boom Studio to do most of it. I know a little bit of Autodesk Maya, but it uses a lot of data, so when I get a better computer, then I can use it to do models. Someday I'll include 3D effects in my 2D animation.

Zimmerman: So this is one of your novels?

Vielma: Yeah, these are all hers.

Bowman: All the books I illustrated are published.

Eidemiller: That's her adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*, which she did when she was 15 or 16. She did it in a couple of weeks with her original characters.

Zimmerman: You wrote the text?

Bowman: More like dialogue.

Eidemiller: It has Dani-isms in it.

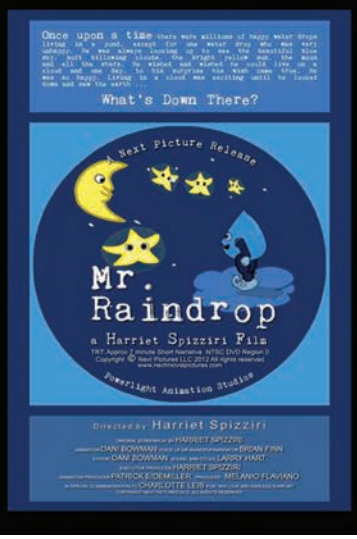
Bowman: A Dani-ism is a word that's considered to be incorrect—

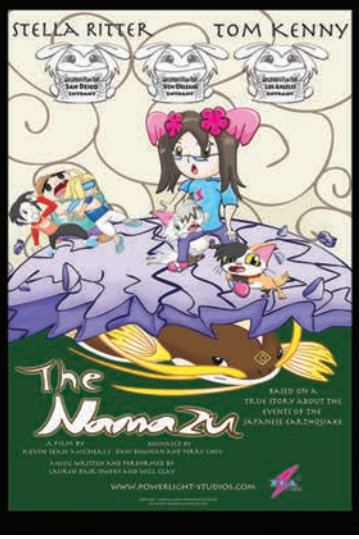
Zimmerman: Yet by putting your own stamp on it, it becomes correct for you?

Bowman: That's right.The first actual book I published was *Danny and Goliath*, which took six hours.

Vielma: She didn't do the dialogue or layout on that one, but she did all the art.











Zimmerman: Beautiful. Were you at Inclusion Films at that time?

Vielma: Not at that point.

Zimmerman: So he just found you?

Vielma: After we realized how talented she was, we wanted to tell everybody, and then one of Patrick's friends—

Eidemiller: was at a dinner party and he said, "What do you do?" At that point I'd left the company I was working for, and was focused on getting Dani going. When I told him about her, he said, "You've got to talk to Joey."

And we were like, "Joey Who?" He said, "Joey Travolta. He and I grew up in the same neighborhood. Here's his phone number."

Vielma: So we set up a meeting and Dani did a presentation for Joey.

Bowman: I got to show him my whole portfolio.

Eidemiller: I have a friend from college and he had a friend named, Robert Kirkland, who has a production company in LA. In World War II England, Kirkland's aunt helped facilitate The Underground. So my friend was talking to him about trying to get his aunt's story produced, and with Kirkland it was the same old, "What do you do?" "What do you do?" thing, and he said, "Well, I'm just starting up an animation production group. I'm bringing in a guy from Chicago."

Eidemiller: So we started thinking about doing something together.

Bowman: I did a pitch for my animation company.

Vielma: And we took her to Joey, who was blown away. He goes, "Well, I don't think there's anything that I could do for you, because you guys have everything." And Dani goes, "Yeah, I know, but what can we do for you?" (*laughs*) So he started giving her little projects to do. Then he asked her to teach animation.

Zimmerman: Do you enjoy it?

Bowman: I do.

Zimmerman: What do you like about it?

Bowman: My students and the way they express themselves through animation.

Vielma: She tells them: "If I could do it, then you guys can do it."

Eidemiller: These are her original scripts, and each one of has a little storyboard about what the series is. She



has 640 original characters. Each one of those series has about 10 major characters, and about 20 to 30 characters total.

For many years, Dani was mostly non-communicative. Yet you would pick up a piece of paper with all this art on it and say, "What's this?" and she would go, "This is Fleen's world. This is Fleen's planet. This is the atmosphere. This is all the life forms." She'd go on for 30 minutes.

Vielma: And there was no hesitation, no speech delay, none of the communication struggles. All gone when she was telling her stories. It's one of these really weird dichotomies of autism. Some kids with autism who are nonverbal can sing. Dani has a friend who's mute but writes beautiful poetry.

Zimmerman: So how do you focus?

Bowman: When a series gets into my head, I write things down, and come up with characters. I collect them all together and recombine.

Eidemiller: She's able to really focus. *Gnomeo and Juliet* is an example. It was a CG film that she had. It's about two gnomes—basically Romeo and Juliet—except with the white gnomes and—

Bowman: I threw in the red gnomes.

Eidemiller: She wrote 45 pages of the sequel in two hours. Just sat down and started banging the thing out.

Zimmerman: Does anything get in your way ever?

Bowman: School stuff.

*Zimmerman: (*laughs*) Define "school stuff."*

Bowman: High school, college. I graduated high school with a 4.0.

Zimmerman: Wow!

Vielma: We always stress, "School, school, school, that's the most important thing..." And Dani says, "But school's getting in the way of my career!"

Bowman: I'm finishing my sophomore year at Glendale Community College. I just finished a Design 2 class, and now I'm waiting for the finals of a web design, composition and reading classes. I'm transferring to Woodbury University in Burbank during my junior year.

Vielma: It's a really good school for animation and business. She's been working with the chair of animation, Dori Littell-Herrick, who took Dani under her wing.

Zimmerman: I love it! When I say Dani Bowman, what comes up for you?

Bowman: I think: highly optimistic animator who lives in an enchanted world that I create and it's still expanding.

Zimmerman: I love that! Listening to you makes me feel empowered. I have a few projects in my head and



sometimes I run into roadblocks. So I'm thankful to be here with you because you're teaching me… I notice that you also do some public speaking. How do you like that?

Bowman: I like it. It's people's worst fear, but I wasn't afraid of it.

Vielma: Dani's taken a lot of public-speaking classes in college and so on. She practices and has it down.

Bowman: I was a keynote speaker back at the last year's OCALICON formed by the Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence in Columbus, OH.

Zimmerman: So you give speeches around the country?

Bowman: And outside the country, too: I did the runway and autism event in London.

Anna Kennedy nominated me as one of the first American adults with autism to represent the US. They flew us out during London Fashion Week, and there was a fundraiser to raise awareness for people with autism.

Zimmerman: How was it to be at the Temple Grandin and Friends benefit in LA recently?

Bowman: It was wonderful. I first had lunch with Dr. Grandin at the Arts of Autism event.

Zimmerman: For some people, years go by while they say, "I want to do this or that," but you pick up the pen and do it now.

Bowman: That's right.

Vielma: Most kids on the autism spectrum are fearless. They don't understand that there are normal blocks in the world. It's like when she told me she wanted to start her own company. And I was like, "People don't start their own company." I had just retired from my own company. Patrick had his own company.

I used to own a travel agency [booking trips] for Patrick's company at that time. So Dani thought, "You guys have your own companies, it's natural for people to have their own companies, and I want a company, too." She doesn't understand the "why not." She's just like, "This is what I want and I'm gonna get it."

Zimmerman: I'm gonna throw another word out, and you tell me what your first thought: "Autism."

Bowman: I think of it as a disability, but there's also the positive side, the ability. Unfortunately, most adults on the autism spectrum are underemployed and many live in poverty.

Zimmerman: You're doing a lot better than most people I know, with or without autism.

Bowman: The most important thing is social skills. Nobody succeeds with academics alone. They must also have the social skills to have people work with them on their projects.

Zimmerman: Do you compose the scores for your projects?

Bowman: I've done some musical scores. I did the original score for my recent PSA, "Autism, We Are One."

Vielma: It's about the different groups within the autism community, including Autism Speaks, the Vaxxers (those against vaccination), the advocates... The PSA said, "Stop it. We just need jobs. Stop it."

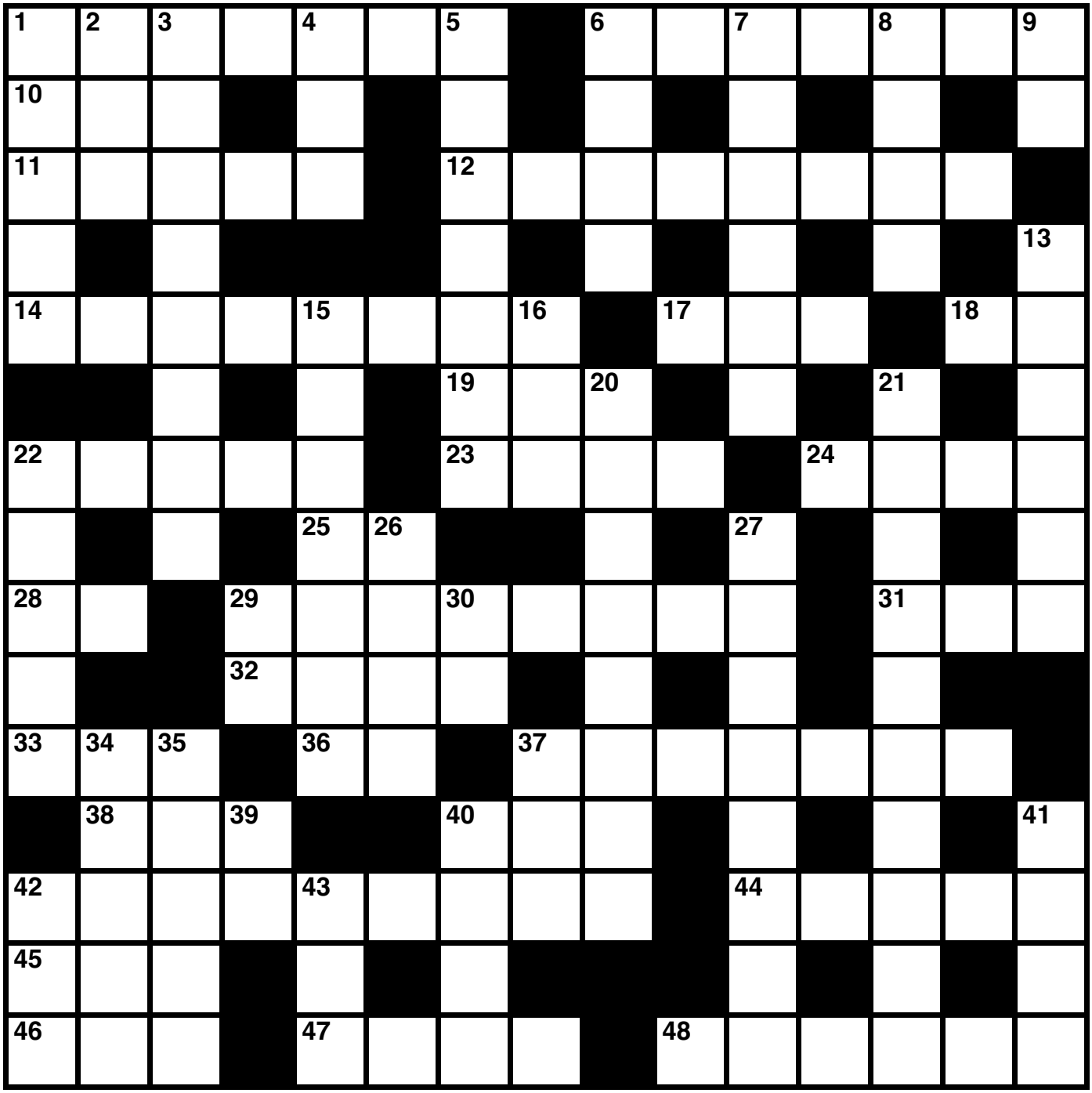
Eidemiller: If you look at each person with a disability, it's how do you enable them to get whatever they need? Support them as they go forward, and help them be successful. At the end of the day, people need a fulfilling life, and a fulfilling career. The rest is immaterial.

Zimmerman: What's your biggest dream?

Bowman: To have a husband and kids, to be as successful as I can be, and to change the world's perception of autism. ■ ABILITY

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ABILITY's



Crossword Puzzle



ACROSS

1. Celebrity who played Lou Grant and promotes the cause of Autism Speaks, 2 words
6. Famous singer who started R.O.C.K.S. to help young people with serious illnesses or disabilities, Avril ____
10. Picnic invader
11. Tech billionaire who has pledged to give the majority of his wealth to charitable causes, Bill ____
12. Actor who won an Emmy for his performance playing a little person on "Game of Thrones," Peter ____
14. Got excited about
17. Means good, in slang
18. Multinational body formed to bring peace to the world
19. Type of sandwich
22. "Golden" song
23. ".... now the ___ is on the other foot..."
24. Lasting mark
25. Musical note
28. Football score, for short
29. Won back
31. "Medium" perception
32. School reunion attendee
33. "The Big Bang Theory" character
36. Poe's initials
37. Painter of "Guernica"
38. Type of neckline
40. Vereen of "Roots"
42. Chinese boxer who overcame CP to fight in an international boxing match, 2 words
44. Inspire, as with feelings
45. Bordeaux perhaps
46. Thriller in Manila
47. Part of a birthday celebration
48. Character in "Friday Night Lights" who became a paraplegic after a football accident and helped his old team win, Jason ____

DOWN

1. Bird that is an American symbol
2. Evidence on "Law and Order"
3. _____ Live, web platform delivering documentaries of Paralympic sport, as well as video and blogs created by people with disabilities
4. Discouraging words
5. Relief from a wrong
6. Connect
7. Spock was one
8. Jokes
9. Medical TV show
13. Open a present
15. Stringed instrument played on Iz Kamakawiwo'ole's version of "Over the Rainbow"
16. "Obviously!"
20. Recovering after a setback, goes with 40 down
21. Keyword in the fight for rights of disabled people
22. Friend of Mole and Water Rat
26. Spanish for water
27. Someone who works for a better world
29. Military term: right arm, abbr.
30. Sunrise time
34. Be of use
35. First name of the Finnish artist and activist working for civil rights for people with disabilities
37. It's mightier than the sword
39. For example, abbr.
40. See 20 down
41. Christopher Reeve character's aka
42. "Take Me Home, Country Roads" state
43. Big initials in home shopping

Crossword Puzzle

answers on page 62

SEE BETTER AT ANY AGE

AUTHOR
- The Miracle of Pi in Eye
- LASIK in the 21st Century
- Cure for Keratoconus

VOTED BEST
- Newsweek Showcase Top Doctor
- LA Daily News Readers
- VC Star Readers
- Consumer Research Council

DOCTOR'S DOCTOR
- Surgeons & Physicians
- Chiropractors & Dentists

SURGEON TO STARS
- Actors & Celebrities
- Olympic Athletes

FOR PATIENTS 18-45
- Thin Flap Lasik
- ICL

FOR PATIENTS 45-65
- Superlasik
- Pi in Eye

FOR PATIENTS ABOVE 65
- Pi in Eye
- Laser Cataract Surgery

OTHER THAN LASIK
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- Intacs & Cross-linking (CXL) for Keratoconus

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Crossword Puzzle


Body language can tell you all sorts of things.
Like someone is having a stroke.
F
FACE DROOPING
A
ARM WEAKNESS
S
SPEECH DIFFICULTY
T
911
TIME TO CALL 911
American Heart Association
American Stroke Association
Together to End Stroke™
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- Providing scientific experience in the fields of hearing, communication and swallowing.
- Coping up with modern trends of evaluation, rehabilitation and training.
- Achieving the SSSPA's objectives of qualifying hearing and communication specialists and improving health and living standards for those with such disorders.

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CME

Sectors which should participate:

- Autism centers.
- Hospitals and specialized clinics.
- Medical devices companies.
- Hearing and speech centers.
- Public sector organization.
- Medical Advisory bodies.
- Special educational universities & specialized colleges.
- Sociologists and psychologists associations.
- International companies specialized in the field of hearing and speech.
- accredited training bodies.
- Charitable association Supporting hearing and Speech.

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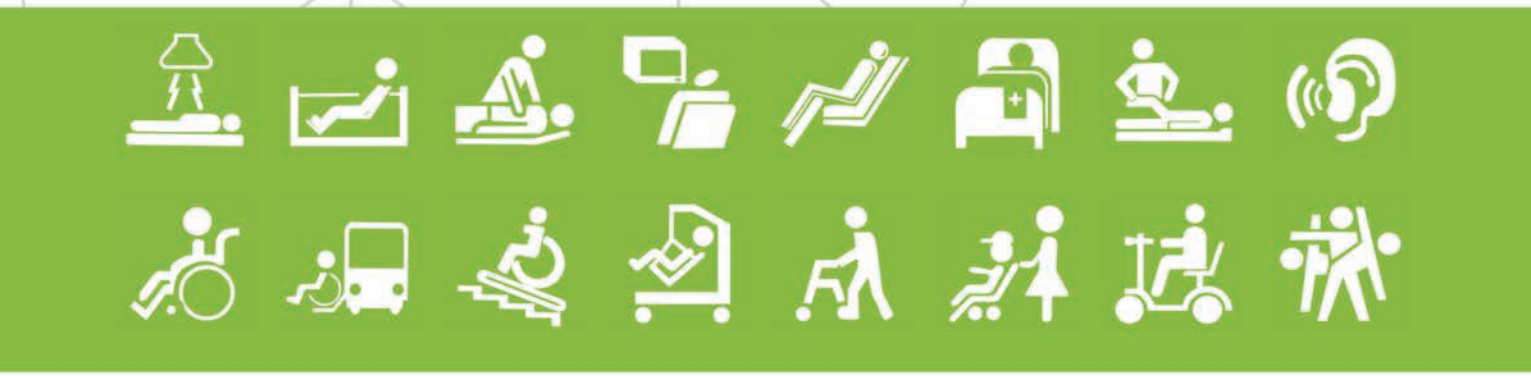
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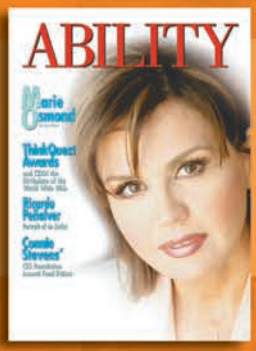
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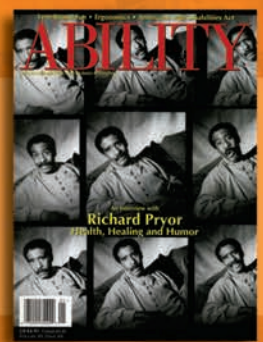
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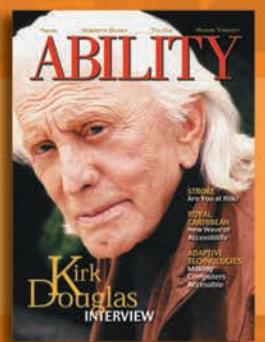
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