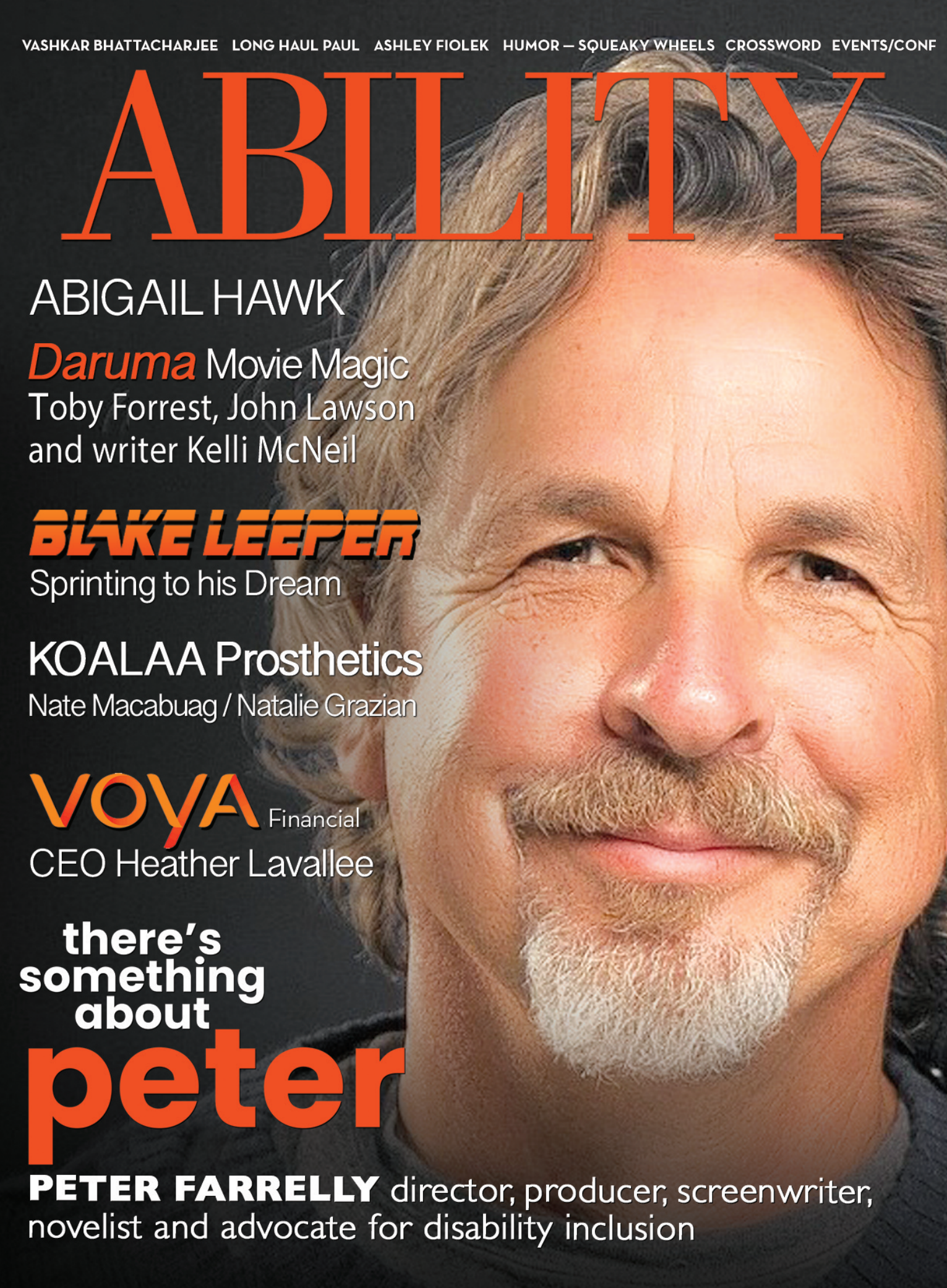
VASHKAR BHATTACHARJEE LONG HAUL PAUL ASHLEY FIOLEK HUMOR – SQUEAKY WHEELS CROSSWORD EVENTS/CONF

ABILITY



ABIGAIL HAWK

Daruma Movie Magic
Toby Forrest, John Lawson and writer Kelli McNeil

BLAKE LEEPER
Sprinting to his Dream

KOALAA Prosthetics
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there's something about

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PETER FARRELLY director, producer, screenwriter, novelist and advocate for disability inclusion



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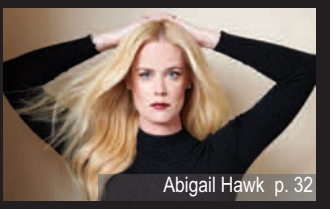
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This publication was financially assisted by the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES)

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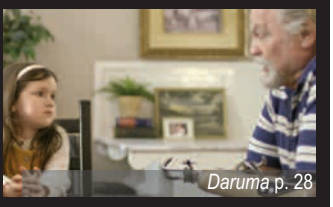
Koalaa p. 20



Abigail Hawk p. 32



Voya p. 44



Daruma p. 28

CONTENTS

6 **ASHLEY FIOLEK — Am I Old?**

8 **HUMOR — The Squeaky Wheel Youtubers**

10 **LONG HAUL PAUL — I've Fallen, but I do get Up!**

14 **BLAKE LEEPER — Sprinting to his Dreams**

20 **KOALAA — Life-Changing Soft Prosthetics**

28 ***DARUMA* — A Movie Breaking the Inclusion Barrier**

32 **ABIGAIL HAWK — Views on Authentic Representation and Life**

38 **PETER FARRELLY — There is Something About Him**

44 **HEATHER LAVALLEE — CEO of Voya Financial**

52 **VASHKAR BHATTACHARJEE — Blind Advances in Bangladesh**

66 **CROSSWORD — *ABILITY*'s Puzzle**

70 **MARKETPLACE — Products & Services**

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ABILITY Magazine is published bimonthly
8941 Atlanta Ave. HB, CA 92646 (ISSN 1062-5321) All Rights Reserved

Send address changes to *ABILITY Magazine*, Attention: Subscriptions Manager
PO Box 10878, Costa Mesa, CA 92627; Peter Farrelly Issue Aug/Sep 2023

Published in USA

DISTRIBUTION
Faxon-RoweCom Library Services
Ebsco - Library Services
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The views expressed in this issue may not be those of *ABILITY Magazine*

Library of Congress
Washington D.C. ISSN 1062-5321

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Ashley and Chet riding at Lake Elsinore MX park

It has been crazy for me the last few months. I qualified for the Loretta Lynn National championship so I'm very excited about that! My last time racing there was in 2006 so it should be pretty fun to come back and do it all again. I will be racing on my stock 125 and it was just a goal of mine this year to make it in and to see if I could still race since I'm an old woman of 32 now!



I have been traveling all over to ride at different tracks which has been really fun. There were some private tracks and the owners let me come and ride. It was so thoughtful and sweet of them to open up their tracks and to let me ride.

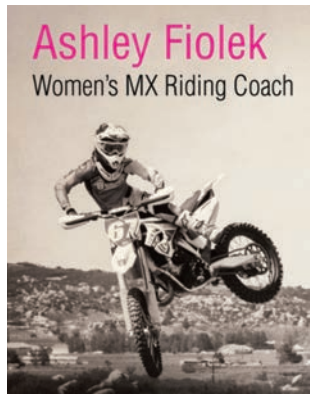


My family all went to the RedBud national race to watch and to hang out. After the race my dad told me that he would stay with me in his motorhome so that he can bring me to the tracks to ride and to work on my bike for me. I am very blessed that he can do this, his job lets him work remotely so he gets up at 4 am to work and then I ride then he has to do some more work then he can work on my bike. Poor dad. It has been great for me to have my dad here so I can just focus on riding and not working on my bike because I really have no idea what I am doing haha….

During this time that I've been riding and practicing I also had two photoshoots with Alpinestars gear. The first one was in LA and the second one I just finished out in Washougal Washington after the men's national race. They are a great group to hang out with and I had a lot of fun. It's so nice to be back riding on the Astars team again.

Well I am off to practice again I have a couple more days before we drive down to Hurricane Mills to set up camp for a week of great racing. If you happen to be there stop on by and say hi, I will be on my Yamaha 125 rocking number 67!

■ ABILITY



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the SQUEAKY WHEEL



We Cured 1,000 Ableist YouTubers of Their Chronic Ableism

Hey guys!

The unfortunate truth is that every day thousands of viral YouTubers are living with chronic ableism. While ableism is extremely preventable — and even curable if caught early — many YouTubers lack the education and common sense necessary to realize they are living with this terrible affliction.

After seeing Mr. Beast's "I cured 1,000 blind people" video, we were so inspired by his pathetic lack of self-awareness that we decided to take the crisis into our own hands by curing him and 999 others of their chronic ableism. To ensure it would personally benefit us, we chose to cure these YouTubers in a cute video that we could monetize with ads.

You may be thinking, "How did you even find 1,000 ableist YouTubers?" But honestly it was pretty easy. Many online groups are affected by chronic ableism at disproportionately high rates, including beauty influencers, fitness influencers, big-hat smoothie girls, tiny-bun latte girls and guys who wear suits when they livestream from their basements. To find those suffering from the condition, we searched keywords like "hustle grindset," "summer body," "gym goals" and even just "inspiring."

Once we found our 1,000 ableist YouTubers, we had to ask ourselves some really difficult questions. Questions like: "How can we best exploit this group for our own monetary gain?" and "Which thumbnail image makes it clear that we want to be seen as gods?" We thought about the moral implications of our actions for a solid forty seconds, but it made us sad and, even worse, bored, so we decided to move ahead with our plan.

To cure these suffering "people with YouTube accounts" (we decided at this point it would be better to refer to them using people-first language whether that's their preference or not), we gave each of them a zine about how to be an ally. We also gave them links to a great resource to learn about ableism (our website) and a little button they can wear that says "#IWasCured." We then cured them three or four more times from different angles until we got enough footage for our video, a follow-up video, a Patreon exclusive behind-the-scenes video, sixteen TikToks and a Netflix docuseries.

When the video was first published, we did wonder if people would see through our transparent manipulation and overall slimy behavior. Fortunately for us (which is all that matters), many YouTube viewers also suffer from chronic ableism, so they disregarded our blatant exploitation and simply smashed that "like" button.

■ ABILITY

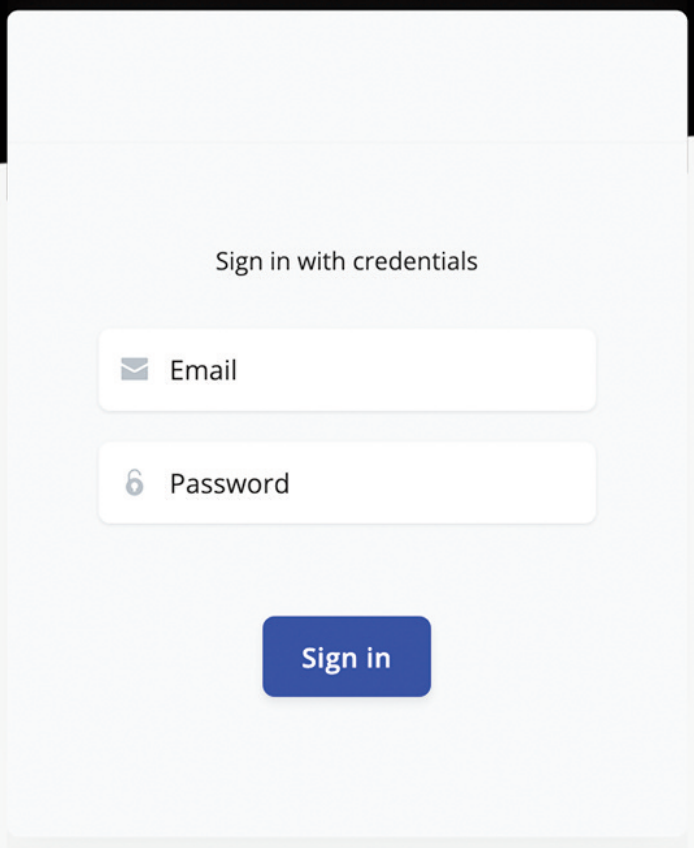
by Steven Verdile

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ABILITY Job Fair Portal

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Rut Roh!

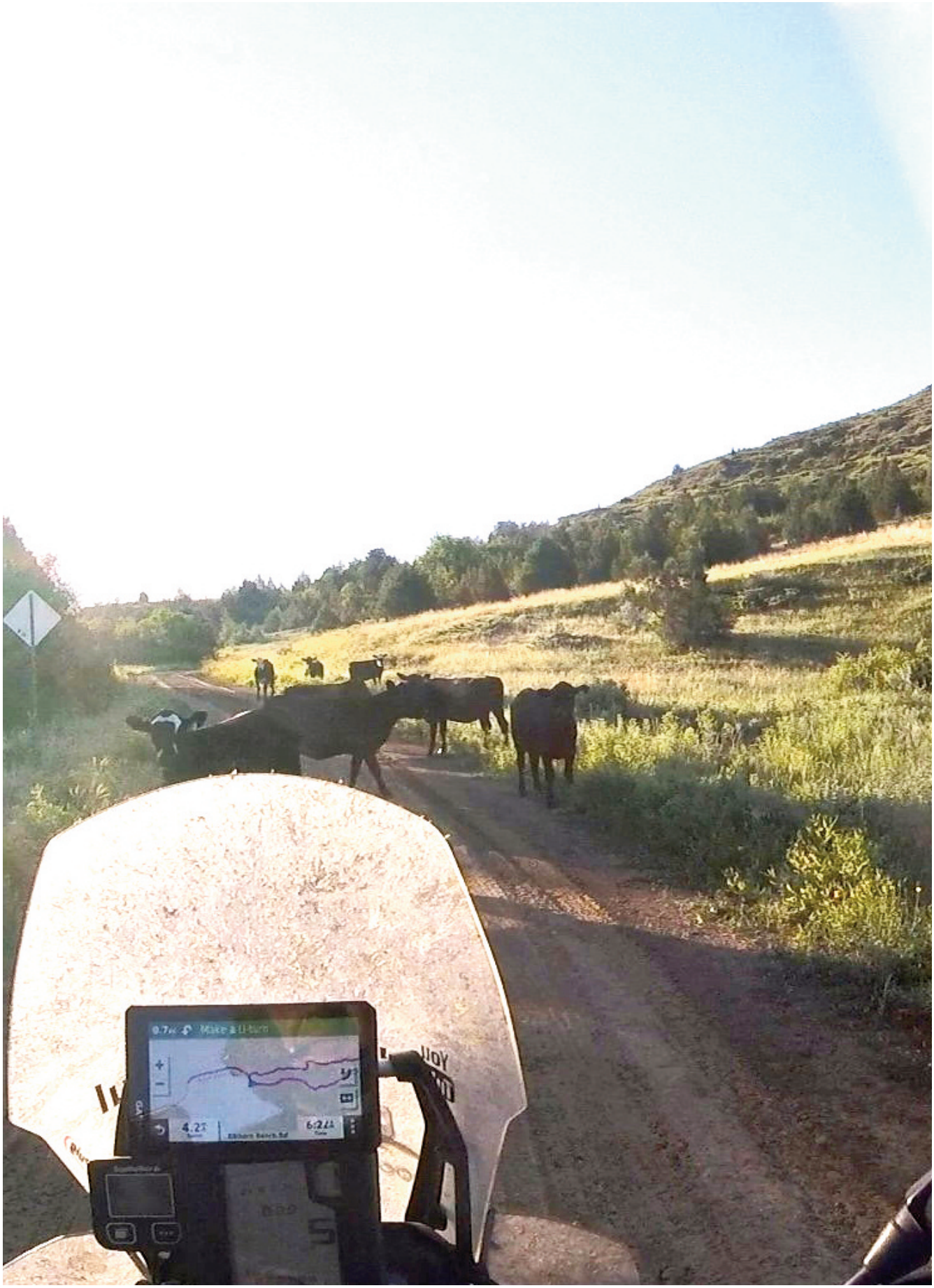
by Long Haul Paul

Riding a motorcycle across the country certainly offers many opportunities to experience the potholes riddled across our roads and interstates. I often use these asphalt craters as a metaphor of dealing with the often sudden changes living with a disease such as Multiple Sclerosis can bring. Just as hitting a foot deep black hole that appeared out of nowhere while traveling at 80 miles an hour, symptoms of chronic illness can appear without warning and create an ugly dent in our daily lives.

I travel the freeways because I am on a schedule needing to be somewhere to share my story or promote my fundraisers. Although my Yamaha Tenere 700 is an adventure bike capable of off-road and trail riding, I have it set up for long distance touring. I do enjoy riding off-road, I just don't get much opportunity because my days are long trying to put down the miles to the next gig. I ride because I am on a mission, not a vacation!

My motorcycle weighed just 450 pounds when new, but after adding all the crash bars, hard luggage and tons of accessories, it's much heavier. Put me in full riding gear and my luggage and we are over 800 pounds rolling down the freeway! Adventure bikes come stock with tires that have lugs designed for dirt and gravel, but would not last long enough for a trip across the country, so I use street tires. All motorcycle tires are soft compounds so they flex and grip in the corners and street tires usually last me around 7000 miles, or just over a week of long travel days.

I had the opportunity on a recent trip home from the Touratech Rally in Plain Washington to include a few hours





out of the way and off the highway to revisit a gravel road I found by accident a few years ago. East River Road runs along the river all the way down to the southern Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota. Incredible views and nothing but cows and wild horses along the way. No mail boxes, no telephone poles and best of all, no interstate potholes!

I stayed in Williston ND and mapped my way south to the start of the scenic dirt road. It was 5:00 am and I did not have much time to waste, as the plan was to ride the 100 mile dirt road and then hit the highway hard for 800 miles to make Chicago by nightfall. From Chicago, I could make it home in one day saving the expense of another day and night on the road.

It looked like about 150 miles to get to where I wanted to start, but my mapping app on my phone and my GPS unit were in disagreement of the best way to get there. I tried to zoom in on both devices to see the actual route, but finally had to make a decision while moving and chose to trust the GPS which said I could save 30 miles and reach the road I wanted from the west side of the river through a series of very small roads. ROADS, not goat paths or trails or a river crossing, actual roads!

The first road started off beautiful, with the sun cresting on the horizon stirring up feelings of new opportunities that only a fresh day can bring. The state had just laid fresh crushed stone and oil or "fresh chip seal" as they like to caution drivers. It was actually not as slippery as I have experienced in the past and I enjoyed the crunchy sucking sound as my tires rolled through the coat of damp oil. I turned onto the first of many gravel roads. It was well groomed and I was able to maintain freeway speeds. The views were getting better, but more remote and the roads were getting narrower. After 100 miles or so, the one lane road began to get a bit rough, with ruts from the tires of trucks and farm equipment getting deeper and deeper. A week earlier, it was all mud, and would have been impossible for any street vehicle to travel.

Despite the wrong tread on my tires and being overweight, I knew keeping my speed up and trying to get the weight rearward with my body was important to keep from crashing. Of course there was no cell service or ability to get help should I have an incident, so I concentrated on staying upright and going forward as my favorite road was just a few miles ahead. It began to get hot. The ruts got deeper and once I got stuck riding in one, I was there for ever, unable to get out! My bike has a seat height of 33" and my inseam is 28". Duck walking the bike at slow speeds wasn't even a possibility, so 20-30 mph was my best chance of getting through the miles and miles of ruts.

By the time I reached a stop sign, I knew I was in trouble. It wasn't octagon shaped, it was a herd of cows grazing on the road refusing to get out of my way! I had enough time to look at my GPS and realized it said I had passed the



turn about a mile back, but I was certain there had not been a turn for dozens of miles! I was able to find a clearing where I could turn around without having to bounce over foot deep ruts and went back the mile. There wasn't even a path between the trees where a rat could crawl, never mind a legal roadway! Now my GPS was insisting ahead was the way I needed to get across the river. Again, it led me a few miles deeper and to another non existing road. The entire two hours I was riding in the ruts, my mapping app on my phone was screaming at me to turn around and go back the other way.

As I realized I could not get to East River Road continuing on the goat path I was riding, I understood I would need to back track the entire way and would then have to hit the freeway to make Chicago. Riding one of my favorite roads was out of the equation. I turned around and backtracked a couple of hours, feeling depressed and defeated. The rutted section of the road seemed tougher and much longer the second time around. At one point I slowed to take a photo, but couldn't get my kickstand to swing out as it was hitting the edge of the ruts. By the time I needed to pee, I decided to just stop and let the bike fall over on it's side so I could get off of



it! I had a good laugh and suddenly a huge sense of relief. (Not just my bladder!)

Was it such a big deal? I rode a few hours in the wrong direction, orchestrating my overloaded camel through a rutted, muddied dirt road. Sure, but actually, it was a really awesome scenic side trip. Accepting I wasn't going to make Chicago unless I rode straight till midnight, I decided to finally listen to my phone's directions and go the other way to ride the entire route that I had originally planned. East River Road to Teddy Roosevelt National Park. I didn't care how long it took me, I was already adding an extra hotel night to my ride home.

I was finally out of the rut!

Sure, I ended up riding about 7 hours in the gravel and dirt without getting any closer to Chicago or home, dropping the bike and getting myself a bit overheated, but I'm so grateful I did not skip one of the most scenic backroads I have ever travelled.

Getting ourselves out of rut that seems to get deeper and deeper isn't easy. Sometimes in life, we get so fixated on the outcome, we don't realize we are drowning or burying ourselves deeper and deeper, riding in a rut that seems impossible to get out of.

A rut can be a routine or course of action that we follow blindly without listening to the voice of reason or accepting the obvious signs that we have screwed up!

Just like that pothole that we can steer around, we can get out of a rut and recalculate our life's road to take us we want to go. Sometimes we just need to pay attention to the advice from the second voice in our head to get there!

■ ABILITY



BLAKE LEEPER

Sprinting towards his Dream

Blake Leeper, a champion Paralympian blade runner, overcame attitudes he faced since birth, thanks to his relentless drive and determination. From a young age, Leeper was encouraged to focus on his abilities and confront each barrier with the spirit of a true competitor, never giving up. As one of the fastest men in both the Paralympics and the world, Leeper spoke with *ABILITY*'s George Kaplan about his life and aspirations as well as the new documentary titled "Abled: The Blake Leeper Story." From pushing through the pain of training to the discrimination he faced while fighting to compete in the Olympics, Leeper shared his joys and struggles in sport.

George Kaplan: You were born without the use of both of your legs. With were some of the challenges you faced growing up as a double amputee?

Blake Leeper: I was born with a congenital birth defect, fibular hemimelia. The doctors told me I would never be able to play sports, never be able to really run. And those challenges as a kid, being bullied, laughed at, picked on. There were times I would play baseball as a kid, I'm running around the bases and my leg will fall off. Really questioning, "Why am I going through this? Why me? Why am I the one born without both of his legs?"

But the more trials and tribulations that I faced and I went through, I realized that I was meant to go through this. I have a story to not only tell, but I have to live my life to the fullest, even with my disability. Now I look at my life and I've won medals, won Paralympic medals, broken records, and all those moments when I questioned—especially as a child I questioned because I was the only one who looked like this. I was the only one who had to deal with this. And now, I realize I was meant for this. I was meant to go through this. And not only to go through this, but to go through it to get to the other side of this and then to tell my story to other people. And hopefully it gives them maybe just a little ounce of hope and inspiration to keep moving forward.

Kaplan: What drew you to sports and track and field?

Leeper: What I loved about sports was, because of my disability, people always wanted to label me, put me inside a certain box. "You're missing your legs! You need to go over there." They would make certain assumptions about me. And when I got into sports and playing bas-





photo by Saman Assefi



Scene from the film "Abled":The Blake Leeper Story

ketball, baseball and, later on, track and field, I realized that when it comes to sport, sport is sometimes in its purest form, it doesn't matter if you have a disability. It doesn't matter if you're missing your legs or you have your legs. It doesn't matter your race, creed, or color. The only thing you want to do in that moment is to win for your team. And that's it. And I can remember, I was playing a basketball game, it was fourth quarter, 15 seconds left, and I was dribbling the basketball and the kid on the other side was playing the hardest defense that I've ever seen anybody play at that point in my life. I found it interesting. He didn't feel sorry for me in that moment. He didn't take it easy on me because I had a disability. He gave me his best. I got to truly see his best! Not only truly see my opponent's best, but I got to be my best and use all my talents and my skills to score this basket, to score the win on my team. And he did everything that he possibly could to stop me from scoring.

I love that feeling! I love that aspect of not being judged or not being taken easy upon. That's when I realized that, man, I could use sports to gain respect amongst my community. I could use sports to show people that I'm no different than they are. I might look different. and I might have a disability, but it doesn't define who I am as an individual. If I can go out there and drop 20 points or if I go out there and break world records on the track, that's how I'm going to get 'em.

Kaplan: Awesome! Like you said, you've shattered multiple records. To what do you credit your tenacity on the track?

Leeper: My tenacity comes from the mindset that my mother, my father, my immediate family, my brother instilled in me at a very early age. I can remember a time when my dad pulled me to the side–I was only 9 or 10 years old and I had a new basketball coach. And before we went to the practice, he said, "Blake, there's going to be a time where you guys will be running, doing sprints back and forth or doing something in practice, and the coach is going to let you take it off because you're missing both of your legs. And when the coach does that and they give you a way out, don't take it. Do not take it. You finish every rep and every round."

And lo and behold, at the end of the practice, we were running sprints, we got to the last two or three sprints, and the coach says, "Blake, you don't have to run these two or three sprints." That's when it was a realization for me that, "Wow, people do view me as different! They do see me as a different individual." I remembered that conversation that my father had with me, saying, "You finish every rep and every round just like everybody else." Having that mindset. My mother would always tell me, "You have one disability, but you have a thousand other abilities that make you a special person. So, having that mindset of always focusing on my abilities and what I do have, I would have to definitely credit that to my family.

Kaplan: That's great! What was the pathway to becoming one of the fastest men in the world?

Leeper: The pathway to become one of the fastest men

in the world was a lot of hard work, a lot of dedication, a lot of sacrifice. There was a moment, a point in my life when I was struggling off the track, hanging around the wrong people. I had to sacrifice years on the track and turn my life around. I was out partying, out drinking every night. I had to stop all of that in my life to create a healthy environment and a lifestyle so I could be one of the fastest men in the world. It was a lot of sleepless nights and early mornings where my stumps were bleeding or they were swollen or sore because I'd trained so hard the night before. It was hard for me to even walk to the bathroom, but I fought through just to get to the track so I could get one more rep or one more round or one more training session in.

The biggest one for me to become the fastest man in the world was my belief system. Once I truly believed deep down with conviction that I can be one of the fastest men in the world, I could really do this, I could break world records, I kept that optimism throughout my life, saying that I could figure this out, speak that out into the universe. That's when I started seeing the biggest change in my life.

Kaplan: You've found so much success as a Paralympian. What led you to want to compete in the Olympics?

Leeper: I wanted to run in the Olympics, but I wouldn't be here if I hadn't started in the Paralympics. It kind of gave me the platform to run in the Olympic Games, just even to run in general. I remember in the 2012 Paralympic Games, I was running the 200. If you remember Oscar Pistorius was running in that 200-meter race, and I remember the status that he had because he ran in both the Olympics and Paralympics. And what I did not like was so many untold stories in the Paralympic Games that should be told. People would focus on the Olympics but not so much on the Paralympics. I felt like I could do my job if I could go out there and run against the fastest runners in the world in both Olympics and Paralympics. I could show that light back to the Paralympics, show that, yes, we are Paralympians, but we're some of the fastest runners in the world, some of the best athletes in the world.

If you ask me, we're the better athletes in the world because we not only compete at a high level, but we deal with our disability on top of that as well. So, the mindset that it takes to become a high-level Paralympian will put you in the range of being the fastest or the best athlete in the world. I wanted to be one form of that, to prove to the world that though I do have a disability, that I can be the best in the world.

Kaplan: What do you say to those who discount your training and your ability and say that it's the blades that give you an advantage? I know you come across this question all the time and it's very contentious. What do you say to those people?

Leeper: It's so funny, because I do hear that a lot. "If I had the blades, if I had that type of technology, I could do what he did, what he does." Honestly, I'm like, I'd love to say, "Walk a mile in my shoes." I say that, but I say, "Walk a mile in my blades." You don't see people amputating their legs off and running to the prosthetics shop to get set for the blades. It's not easy. This is not an easy journey. Try to understand what I go through on a daily basis. I have to worry about infections, my posture, I have back problems, I have open wounds. All these things I have to deal with because I'm an amputee. I have to get to the track to train at the highest levels as I possibly can. So yes, it might look easy, it might look simple, but there are not only me but a lot of amputees go through so much just to live a normal healthy life, on top of training.

Kaplan: How were you approached to do the "Abled" documentary?

Leeper: It was interesting. I knew that I wanted to tell my story, and I knew how important it was, and I wanted to find the right individuals and the right people to tell my story. I didn't know what route or what journey this was going to do, how deep it was going to go, especially with my fight with the Olympics and the Court of Arbitration of Sport. But when I first walked in with my manager and my weight room coach and he knew a guy who was an editor and wanted to get into the documentary filmmaking union editorial, he set up a meeting. "You tell him the story, we'll see if there's any connection or any interest."

And I walk into their offices and I tell them what I knew at the time, like, "I'm in hopes of running in the Olympics. It might be a little battle but not too much. There's a guy before me who did, so there's be a precedent set. It should be good to go." And they were like, "We like this." And the connection that that had with Einar [Thorsteinsson] was just truly amazing. That's what's truly important, especially when it comes to shooting a documentary. You've got to be able to trust the people on the other side of the camera to tell your story in the proper way. I had an immediate connection with the union team. I was very vulnerable for five years, opening up my life, traveling all around the world, to different places throughout the States. I'm so thankful that I was able to meet them and trusted them to tell the right story for me and for the world as well.

Kaplan: How did you feel when you were found ineligible to compete in the Tokyo Olympics?

Leeper: I was heartbroken. I'm not going to lie. All the blood, sweat, and tears and everything I fought for, and I thought I was barred from running in the Tokyo Olympics unjustly. For them to say that I was too tall,



my running legs, for the population of people they studied to determine my height didn't represent me. There were no Black men in the study at all. I thought that was unfair. I had to drop my height by six inches. They said I had an unfair advantage because I was too tall. As I was watching the Tokyo Olympics, I'm watching guys who were running in the Olympics who I was beating leading up to the Olympics. Physically I had raced them and beat them. I had to watch them go on to the Olympic stage. I just knew deep down that if I quit now, and I probably have every right to quit, then they win. So, I cannot quit. I've got to keep fighting. I've got to keep pushing through.

So, in a weird way, it was motivation for me to figure out whatever it is. You say I'm too tall? OK, let's drop the legs six inches. You don't want my story to get out there into the world, I'll tell my story in a different way. I'll shed my light on a different platform. That's what I've been doing, focusing on, to continue that fight, that battle to prove to the world that I'm not done yet.

Kaplan: Do you believe that the IAAF (World Athletics federation) has a bias against disabled athletes?

Leeper: Honestly, I do. Yes. I think that's the view on disabled individuals. If you look back at my court case– It's talked about it a little bit in the documentary. – In fact, the burden of proof was on the disabled athlete at the beginning of my court case. In any other situation where you're going up against a court of sport with the IAAF the burden of proof is on the federation. Only with disabled athletes, the burden of proof is on me. I think that's something that really needs to be looked at and changed. We need to be seen as human, not "disabled athletes," but athletes that just so happen to have a disability. I think once they understand that, that we're athletes first, I think we'll see the biggest change in that.

Kaplan: In the documentary, like you said, your burden of proof is placed on your camp to prove that you don't have an advantage with your blades. Can you talk more about the process behind the scientific testing?

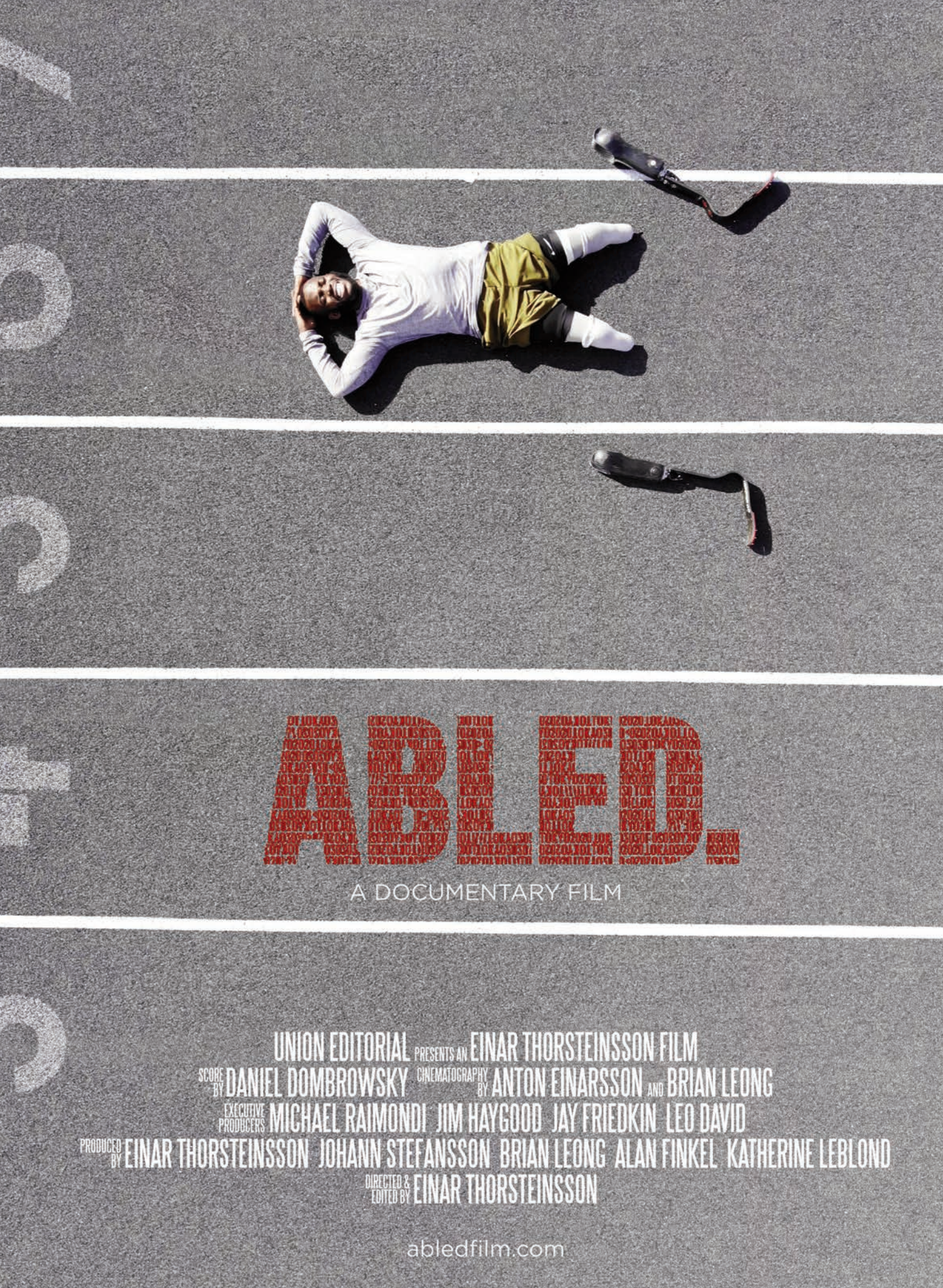
Leeper: Yeah! It's very interesting, because it's called the Max Allowable Standing Height, the MASH rule. That means that's the tallest I possibly could be to run in the Olympics and Paralympic Games. They take different points of my body, even though my wingspan is about 6'1", that's what dictated how tall I should be, roughly about 6'2" if I were to run on my toes. But they took different points of my body from my sitting height, my fibula, all these things, but then they implemented it into a formula that they created, and in that formula, the test population only included, if I'm not mistaken, 50 white Australian men and then tested against 15 Japanese Asian men. I wasn't a demographic. They're using science against me that does not represent me. I think that's dangerous when you're doing something like that. We see this in the healthcare industry all the time. When you base it in science that doesn't have representation, when you implement me as a Black man to this test population of white Australian men and Japanese Asian men, the numbers will be off a little bit. It's not going to dictate how I might have a short torso and maybe longer limbs. That's why when I started at 6'2", I had to drop down to 5'8", and I fought it for so long because that was something that I truly don't believe in. I don't feel like I would be 5'8" in my tippy-toes in my sprinting height. I feel like I would be taller given the limbs that I do have.

But these are the rules that are set in place for me right now. And I'm trying to figure out how to become the fastest I possibly can be at this height.

Kaplan: Is it true that the team you're working with found that you had more disadvantages than benefits?

Leeper: That was the interesting part. Working with Dr. Grabowski in the Boulder, Colorado, test, once they dove into the research and realized all different parts of the 400 meter race that I run, from block starts to curve running to running back into the curve. They were like, "Blake actually has a disadvantage against able-bodied runners. He starts off slower because he has to. He's starting off in the curve." So, if you really look at it, he's at a disadvantage more than an advantage, but people only see the blades. They only see when I'm winning. They see my strategy and they say it's the blades because he becomes faster at the end. That's not true. I'm not faster at the end, I'm just strategically running a different race than everybody else because I have to.

Kaplan: What advice do you give to other disabled athletes who are coming up?


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Leeper: The advice I love to give to other disabled athletes who are coming up is one, the only true disability in life is a bad attitude. Yes, we're labeled as disabled individuals, but people who have a bad attitude have it way worse than we do. Set your goals so high, there's nothing impossible. If you want to run in the Olympics, run in the Olympics. If you want to play in the NBA, play in the NBA. If you want to play in the MLB, if you want to be—whatever you set your goals and set out what you want to do, do it to be the best in the world. Not just the best disabled athlete in the world, but the best in the world because you can be the best in the world.

Kaplan: What do you think needs to change in the world of sports for disabled athletes?

Leeper: It's to understand that we're athletes and we deserve a fair chance just like everybody else, not to box us in, to put us all on the other side. If you ask me, the Olympics and the Paralympics should run together. We could run simultaneously in the same event. Why are they separate events. I know we're working better for inclusivity and inclusion, but we need more inclusivity, more inclusion. We have some of the best stories in the Paralympics and within the disabled athletes that need to be highlighted, not only just my story. I'm one of many, many stories. I'm thankful that I found the right team to tell my story, but there are so many amazing stories out there in the world that other individuals need to hear.

If we just took the time to highlight these stories, put these disabled athletes on the proper platform, man, we would all win. We would all win.

Kaplan: You are also pursuing motivational speaking and acting. Can you tell me more about that? What actors do you model yourself after?

Leeper: Man, oh, that's a tough one! Motivational speaking has been something that's been a passion of mine for years. I've really been diving deep because I feel like I have a very impactful story to tell to motivate not only the next generation, but companies, business opportunities, I can go in there to share my story of my personal experience trying to be the best in the world, whether it's on or off the track. Just having that mindset of being the best in the world and that process that it takes to be the best in the world, I really enjoy that.

And I've been really finding my peace in acting. I like to model myself, that's a tough one, a little of Michael B [Jordan], I guess, or Omar Epps. I know people say I kind of look like Omar Epps a little bit. I love obviously Denzel Washington's mindset of honing in your talents and your skills and being the best at what you do. These are some of the Mount Rushmore of individuals I've seen. Idris Elba, the Mount Rushmores of actors that I consider to be the best in the game that I hope one day, with more time and more practice and more experiences and more opportunities, I could be there and be just as good.

Kaplan: At the close of the documentary, you quote Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "If you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. And if you can't walk, then crawl. But whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward." How are you moving forward?

Leeper: Man, that's one of my favorite quotes that I love to say. There are some days I wake up and I can barely even walk to the bathroom. Some days I wake up and it's hard for me to get to my car to get to practice. I say this to myself daily because that's what I remind myself. Some days I can't run. Some days I can't even walk. If I've got to crawl to practice, to my next meeting, to my next opportunity, I'm going to crawl. Whatever I'm going to do, I'm not going to stop. That's what I want to pass along to the next generation.

How I do it? I wake up and I plan out my day and I go and attack that day. Whether it's on the track to get ready for the next Paralympic Games, it's how I'm going to make a statement. It's going on stage sharing my story to motivate the next generation. That's how I'm going to make my statement. Shooting an audition hopefully to book a movie role or a commercial role. That's how I'm going make my statement. But whatever I do, I going to keep moving forward and look for the next opportunity that's presented in front of my life.

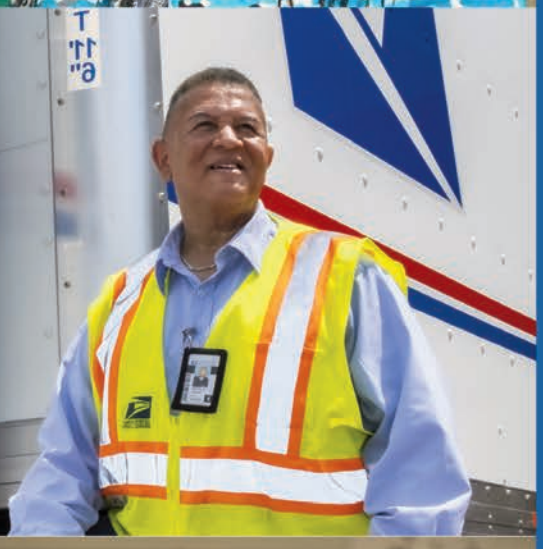
Kaplan: What do you want people to take away from your story?

Leeper: From my story and even from the documentary, I want people to walk away and say, "Wow! He's a fighter!" In this day and age we always try to tell these nice, beautiful pieces that make you feel good, and the reality of it is, sometimes life hits you hard. It doesn't matter how hard you try or if it's fair or not, sometimes you get dealt a bad hand. But the most important part is how you respond to that and how you wake up each and every day and continue to keep fighting and pushing. As people are watching my journey and my process, even though I maybe was dealt a bad or unfair hand going through this process, they see me and figure out how I picked the pieces up and how I continue to keep fighting for my life.

I would encourage everybody to go watch the documentary when it comes out. Not only me but the whole team union team put their blood, sweat, and tears, their heart into this documentary. It's meant to be shared. Whatever you gain from it, I hope you use it in your life. I think people will really enjoy this.

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Koalaa Soft Prosthetic

Koalaa designs lightweight and usable prosthetics for people with limb difference. Their goal is to make prosthetics that are affordable, comfortable and readily available. Koalaa's focus, from its start, has been to find out what people with limb difference really want and need by actually talking to and working with them. *ABILITY*'s George Kaplan met with Koalaa's founder, Nate Macabuag, and consultant, Natalie Grazian, to talk about Koalaa's history, innovations and what's coming next. Grazian, an occupational therapist with below the arm limb difference, shares her experience of doing yoga and consulting with Koalaa on the prosthesis she uses.

George Kaplan: What inspired the need for Koalaa [Soft Prosthetics]?

Nate Macabuag: Oh, gosh! It generally was a complete accident. It was not the plan to start a company. I wanted an easy life,

George. (laughter)

Macabuag: I was in uni (university) doing a mechanical engineering degree. And as per your degree, you get into a team of students, and you work on a project for a whole year. We basically got rejected for the projects we applied for as a team of students. So, we had a choice. We could either pick the dregs of the projects no one else wanted to pick, or we could compose our own one. I went, "This is a great opportunity to basically get the uni to pay us,"–because you get a thousand pounds funding– "to do whatever the hell we want for a year. Let's just build an ironman suit and trick them



Nate Macabuag holding a Koalaa prosthetic

into doing that, and that'll be great."

So, we go into it on a whim. But my supervisor had the foresight to introduce me to another student, Alex Lewis, who's an amputee and he's also a designer. So, we could talk on that level about robotic prosthetics. He used prosthetics. He lost both his arms and both his legs. Surprisingly, he wasn't the bionic man. He wasn't walking in on bionic legs. He didn't have these singing and dancing hands. He was in a wheelchair. He had a very simple look and he had nothing on his left-hand side.

What he was asking for was so different to what I thought, as an outsider, than what I think the industry seemed to think was needed from prosthetics. He wasn't asking for higher tech or more exotic materials or stuff like that. He was just like, "I just wear these to make me really comfy. Make them really easy to use, don't have to train for months to just do simple things. And just make them easy to get, so I don't have to fundraise or beg my clinician to give me the ones I want."

We thought that sounded really simple. That made sense. We started doing that, looking at them like other things that we wear that are functional, like clothes and shoes. We were like "We can use these things to make a prosthetic." We didn't know how to make proper ones. We got to the end of the project and had this terrible, really, really bad prototype, and Alex went, "I love this. This is really cool." We were like, man, four students can do something that's even a little bit useful. We fell in love with that, trying to make stuff that people actually can use in life and actually can do stuff with, fell in love with Alex, fell in love with the community, wanted to carry on doing it. We need more resources; we need a plan. That's how our company was formed. We fell into it. And thus, Koalaa was born.

Kaplan: That's great! So, Natalie, you discovered Koalaa. How did you find out about them? How did you end up joining and helping work on one of their newer prostheses?

Natalie Grazian: So, I found out about Koala on Instagram. At the time, I had been pursuing getting a traditional workout prosthesis for about a year, and that was going to be made from an old passive prosthesis with the hand cut off so that I had the socket remaining. Oh, I was born with a limb difference, by the way. It's the right-hand, below elbow limb difference. So this was taking a long time. It was going to be more expensive than I had initially thought. Activity specific prostheses are not covered by insurance. I wanted one because I've always loved movement. I've always loved working out, and I found my own ways to do them. But I knew that I was probably doing something that wasn't great



for my body in the process. When I wasn't able to bear weight evenly on both sides of my shoulder, I would find ways to do these moves but getting a little wonky on the right side. And we can go down that tangent. Anyways, I was on Instagram. I was frustrated with the process of going through a clinic, and I saw this company that just seemed to be such a fresh slate almost.

It was new. It was really centered on the users and was looking at prostheses in a new way that I hadn't seen them being looked at before, without the baggage of the traditional model. For example, they're made of really lightweight material, not plastic, not silicone, but something that's really lightweight and breathable. That was kind of revolutionary, that it could be comfortable. Yeah, there it is. I have mine right here. It's super-lightweight.

Grazian: You don't have to be fit for one. You do some measurements at home, almost like you're getting some custom tennis shoes. You send them your measurements and they send back a small, medium, or large and you can make some adjustments from there and tighten it up with Velcro. The results seemed just as good as what I was going to get through this long and expensive process. And I could return it if I didn't like it. I felt like a human, like any customer out there. I loved the process. I could go on.

Kaplan: I understood that. I'm an amputee myself, so I understand how suffocating traditional prostheses can be. This sounds very interesting, an interesting take on a prosthesis.

Grazian: And something else, it comes with the social support that is missing in a prosthetic clinic. They have limb buddies, somebody with a limb difference or amputation. They check in on you. I don't know if you've been able to connect with—of course you are, you work at ABILITY Magazine! I think I came to the community a little bit late in my life, so it was really—I was just kind of and still am starved for interactions with other people who look like me and have that same experience and can really truly get it. That's such a breath of fresh air.

Macabuag: It's interesting what you said, like a fresh take of prosthetics. I should be clear, it wasn't my idea. Actually, it's just an exemplary example of that, but it all came from talking to Alex. I went to Imperial College, which fancies itself—don't tell them I'd say this—but it would fancy itself one of the world's preeminent institutions for prosthetics, you know, breaking ground, leading the forefront. If I had gone and asked, which I did, my supervisors, leaders in their field, "How do I make a better prosthetic? What do people need?" They would have said, "You need better sensors to control the limbs. You need more sophisticated composite materials



Koalaa prosthetic team

to make the hand lighter," and all these kinds of things. I went to ask Alex, who wore prosthetics, and he said, "I don't want a hand. I don't need a hand. I'm a designer. I just want to draw, to hold a pen." And he was saying things that were so different, dimensionally different from what I was hearing from TV, if I Googled it, from asking those in the field. It was kind of like, when we spoke to people, especially like prosthetists, who'd been doing it the same way for a long time and were heavily trained and highly skilled, they'd say, "What you're suggesting doesn't make sense, it's not right."

I was always like, "I believe you, because you've been doing this longer than I've been alive." But I keep hearing, "We've just got to keep trying," and we kept trying, and it just kept not working. And so it's funny that if you just listen to what people are asking for, you get these interesting things that shouldn't be novel. More companies should just do that. That shouldn't be a unique take on thing, should it? But it's fun to uncover these things and this one's no exception.

Kaplan: Yeah, it's like, people expect us to want something that's one-to-one, something for us to fit in when we just want something that's practical, that works.

Macabuag: That's the thing. It depends where you get people in their journey. I'm was on a call earlier with people who are designing a project in Uganda. There the function that people want is, they just want to be able to go outside without being literally verbally and sometimes physically attacked by the community. They just want cosmetics. It still has function, ultimately it took them a long time to get out of the mindset of the traditional "replace the limb" into the mindset of "it's a tool to do stuff." That's how we connected. We had a tool that was for surfing, and then I started hearing that someone seemed to have been using it for yoga. I went, "That's mad!" I didn't even know who it was. "That's cool!" And then they came across you, Natalie, doing all these cool things and we had the opportunity to go to Seattle and meet. We just chatted all day and decided there was something here we could do together. Because you're so into it. It makes our job quite simple. We just need to listen to what you say or what you like, and I know we'll get something really cool, and I think we have.

Grazian: Yeah, yeah. Like what you said, just wanting something useful. And I agree, it's totally contextual.



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That's so interesting because in Uganda, that's a time and place where there needs are different than my needs. Culture demands fitting in. That's so interesting. And I saw that you actually did help create some prosthetics to help with that. Where I was, in this time and place where I was living, I didn't want something that approximated a hand. Something like, we're not there yet to create something that looks like a hand and actually functions like a hand. So, when it comes to—and I don't think that everyone understands that. I do have a myoelectronic hand that I use for a lot of stuff. But even friends who I knew very well assumed that I use that for yoga, which is just laughable. No, it does really specific things, and it has specific grips. That's not going to do anything for yoga.

But then we have this, which is so elegant because I looks like—I mean, it looks like a hoof, but you can rock back into downward dog with it, and you can do push-ups and there's rocking back from side to side. There's this compression on the bottom so you can do things like burpees and more high-impact things and mountain climbers. It's very human-centered, with all the engineering knowhow behind it. I was super-flattered and honored to be able to be part of this. I never expected to be part of creating something that could potentially go to people all over the world. I got to be part of it alongside other folks with limb differences here in the U.S. and the UK and I think even in Scotland. We all have slightly different anatomy, different limb differences. There's such a broad range.

With all of our input, Koalaa was able to create something that could work for as many people as possible. That's such a beautiful thing. We were brought together by the shared interest in yoga and, of course, limb difference. I've really enjoyed it.

Kaplan: That's great! As you were suggesting, having a limb difference or being an amputee, either of those, is not a monolith. There's not one way to be one.

Grazian: Absolutely.

Kaplan: And there are so many different ways. I know I'm different from a lot of other amputees. I know you must have a lot of different experiences than a lot of others with limb difference. Could I ask, what's the model you use and you have worked with on?

Grazian: This guy? (gesturing to her prosthesis) This is the Nicole Pro.

Kaplan: How does the Nicole address the problems that amputees face when doing yoga? How would you say that?



Grazian: I would say that we need to have a wide base of support on this side, something that approximates a hand on the other side, so a wide-curved base really helps. It also needed to have this oval shape because some other products on the market, to be specific, have more of a circular, all-the-way-around-similar shape, which could present a problem if you're going down on your elbows. It would push up—it's hard to explain, but it would push up the distal part of the hand and put pressure on the elbow. Essentially, what we need is to be able to bear weight evenly on both sides and to keep the shoulder in alignment with the other shoulder. I think that kind of gets to your question a little bit more. And I think about that a lot because we're already at a much higher risk of getting these muscular-skeletal injuries and overuse syndrome over time. Something like yoga is supposed to help strengthen our joints, keep us as symmetrical as possible, stay flexible and strong, which helps us in everyday activities. But if the yoga, itself, is hurting us in a way because we're twisting ourselves out of alignment, that's a bigger problem. So, creating something that is keeping us in alignment as we're trying to keep our joints healthy. That's where it solves some problems.

Macabuag: I don't know if it's helpful, George. Have you seen the full sleeve at all?

Kaplan: I haven't, no.

Macabuag: It's basically in a nutshell—we have different—they're all soft prosthetics. They're all built like shoes. They've got the structural rigidity to support weight and distribute loads, but they're flexible, ultimately. So, you can tighten them on like an item of clothing, which just seems to make sense because you wear them. And we have ones with different areas of limb difference, but this one that's really popular is the ALX. So, the whole thing is the ALX. And it's essentially modular. So, what Natalie talked about is the fact that this tool on the end is called the Nicole Pro. You can have lots of different ones that clip in and clip out. And that's the fun part because all these ideas come from people. But you were very humble about that point

about the ovalness. That wasn't obvious. When we were talking about it and you sketched it out, actually, when it's symmetrical, it'd be better if it's like this so I could get down. It also makes it look nice. We never would have come up with that. But the fact that you used it and you said, "That would make sense." That was where the beauty came from.

So, you get these designs; they can clip on. But then what we also had to do was.–So, we had different covers. This is what locks you into the sleeve, and this is the blank sleeve itself. It opens up and your arm goes in there. These covers, our original ones, weren't strong enough to keep you in when you were weight-bearing. Your arm would slip out. We developed these extra sports bands, which I know you've got a bunch of.

Grazian: I do. I'm not going anywhere. (laughs)

Macabuag: No, they're cool. So I like that. It's like a skelaton, right? That's how I would have it. I think it's quite cool. So we had to develop those. And the other thing we had to do was we have internal foam, which supports your limbs, like a foam mattress. Which actually, funny enough, you know a lot about as well. And when we came to your house, you've been experimenting with different foams.

Grazian: (laughs) Yeah. Denser foams because I was finding that, even when I should be even, I was sinking into the foam. And so, you can really go down a foam rabbit hole. And I actually worked at a mattress company for a while. There're so many foams. There's density and pressure relieving. My husband and I actually created a little cylindrical support of really dense foam made of the stuff that's like wall insulation, and that worked really well. And then for some more pressure relieving, we popped on a little thing that Koalaa sent, a little coin of foam on top of that so that I could have the pressure relief, but also the support and density. But that was before they created the new one.

Macabuag: And that was our starting point, from what you had. How could we recreate that? I went through thousands of foam. We had to tweak the internal density of the foam. Essentially it's like a package that's modular. You can use each individually. You can tweak the density there and do all these kinds of things. I think it's so—the process I thought was quite fun. As an engineer, I quite enjoyed it, working with you to try this, tweak this. And you end up on something that's a little bit unique and has a personality because the people behind it are not in a lab somewhere. It's actually got a heart.

Grazian: I like that! (laughter) It does have a heart!

Macabuag: I like it!

Kaplan: That's pretty cool. Has Koalaa always been foam-based? Were there other attempts you worked through, like suction, other kinds of ways to get into Koalaa?

Macabuag: All of the above. Two things. I'm a very simple person. I'm not super-smart, so I have to try things over and over to iterate something. We also realized really early on that I don't wear prosthetics, so my opinion just doesn't really matter. You just have to make prototypes and give them to someone to use and just listen humbly to the feedback. And most of the time, the longest time, the feedback was, "This is crap. It just doesn't work." And that's fine, that's fun because you get to iterate it. We went through all kinds of things.

At first, we didn't make arms longer than someone's arm. We always ended the sleeve where someone's arms ended because we thought that gave you better control over whatever you were doing. Then when we were faced with yoga, you have to be balanced. How will we do that? We had to extend the sleeve. And if we extend it, what will we fill it with? We tried rigid stuff that's uncomfortable. We tried soft stuff, but then it's too squishy. We had to try all kinds of things. We've never properly done suction, yet, because it's fabric. We have tried with those kind of suction liners, the ones you roll on. We've tried with those. They have the pin locks in the end. But because this is kind of fabric-y itself, it kind of in a way acts as its own liner. So, we're always trying stuff. We're always iterating. If you check back in a year, it will be different. (laughs) It'll be a little bit better.

Kaplan: So, you're always trying to work on it. What are the plans for the future of Koalaa?

Macabuag: Basically, what we've realized is that around the world, there are about 21 million people with upper limb differences of some sort. And 93% of those people get nothing at all. They don't get something and then decide it sucks, they just get nothing. So, there's a massive challenge to just make as many of these available to as many people as possible. Not to prescribe them, not to make them necessary, but to make them available so if they want to engage in an activity, they can. It's about scale and reaching as many people as possible. This is why generally it's really helpful to ask for all of us together. It's awareness of letting people know we exist because for a very long time prosthetics have been a stigmatized medical device. I think we think it'd be nicer if it moved into something that's more like—well, actually like this. It's just part of your gym equipment. It's just a thing that you wear to do a certain thing, to move into a sort of health fitness kind of space. So, that's what we're going to do. We're going to be doing loads more sports, loads more activities, and in loads more parts of the world. And we want to work with anyone and everyone, including you, George, to just do that



Natalie Grazian with her Koalaa prosthetic

because there's a lot of opportunity to make neat little things out there.

Kaplan: I'm a leg amputee, and if you ever extend to that, let me know.

Macabuag: Maybe! I can neither confirm nor deny it. When we first started ALX, it was designed just for holding a pen, very lightweight stuff. It was designed like a slipper, more like your traditional dress shoe, for example. But as the community grew and there were more and more people using it, we suddenly had people saying, "Oh, yeah, I'm just weight-bearing on it, it's fine." So you realize it can actually do a lot of stuff. I see no reason why we couldn't do all areas of limb difference, eventually. I heard you, George. I will be taking you up on that. If you want to try some, I'll work with you.

Kaplan: That would be awesome! Yeah, I'm super-down! Anything you want to add, Natalie?

Grazian: I could probably talk more about the benefits of yoga for people with limb differences.

Kaplan: That'd be great!

Grazian: When we don't use one side of our body a lot, the bones will get more fragile. If you don't bear weight or put a load on something, it will deteriorate over time. Yoga is going to strengthen bones and, of course, strengthen muscles. Twisting ourselves out of shape, when it comes to typing or pushing a cart or putting our hair up or tying shoes, all of those things.

We're reaching forward to get uneven in some way. The muscles in the front will shorten, those in the back will lengthen. Essentially, we're setting ourselves up for a secondary disability. It's super-common. We need more research on it. We know that we're twice as likely, upper-limb amputees or people with limb differences will have— are twice as likely to have musculoskeletal complaints. It will help in a lot of those ways.

There's also the mental health aspect. I have to say that it's helped me enormously to put everything aside for an hour and just be out of your head and in your body. I think that's something everyone should have the opportunity to try if they want to. And I mean, flexibility as well, yoga helps with that. And just in order to do the thing, to operate in a two-handed world–If I'm going to tie my shoes, I have to be flexible. If I lose that, then everyday activities become harder. Strengthening core. When you think about, let's say you're on the bus and the bus starts moving before you're sitting down and you want to reach out and grab something but maybe you're holding onto something with this hand, essentially you need to use balance a lot more because you don't have another hand to stabilize with or to grasp hold of something with.

Pushing up from the ground, those kinds of things. It all comes back to your core. Yoga is almost purpose-built to help with these things that limb-different people could benefit from. But unfortunately, it's inaccessible, even though it's so accessible as a sport. You're really encouraged to adapt. It's a really kind community that welcomes all kinds of bodies and all kinds of differences. But the fact remains that it's much harder if you don't have two hands to evenly balance on. I guess Koalaa is bridging that gap for a lot of people.

Kaplan: Fantastic!

Macabuag: I want to follow up on that. You're kind of in a unique position. Because your studying as an OT, you've got a unique perspective.

Grazian: Thank you.

Macabuag: Which is quite exciting. In terms of as a tool, because OT is a fantastic place to select the right tools to get people to do whatever they want to do, how do you think something like the yoga tools, like the ALX, fit into that system? How should OTs engage with that?

Grazian: OTs will look at the whole person, their body, their mind, their family, their culture, everything about the person, their value and priorities, and the environment they're in, the things they want to do. We feel that if there's something that's preventing them from doing what they want to do, what in the person or in their environment or the thing that they want to do can be changed? If the thing someone wants to do is working out, then there you go. You change something in their environment. You give them a tool that helps them do it. It's such a neat, simple solution.

And working out and doing yoga, those could also be interventions that an occupational therapist uses for someone because maybe if the fact that they're not flexibly or they don't have the core strength or they need help with emotional regulation, those are all things yoga helps with, so the OT can help them integrate that into their life as the intervention itself. And to do that in the case of people with limb differences, it helps to have a tool that lets you will help you do the thing. (laughs) Does that make sense?

Macabuag: Yeah, I think that's an interesting place that we haven't really touched on before because we've always done stuff directly with wearers and with users. I think there's a lot of opportunity to do stuff with clinicians and with the OTs and the physios. I think I just want to do more of that. I think it could be a cool way to bridge that gap we'd like to.

Grazian: I think also we should talk! (laughs)

Macabuag: Oh, we should talk? Fantastic!

Grazian: I have a cool community of OTs and prosthetists here at University of Washington that are– I've talked about you and they're interested.

Macabuag: I recently decided, as in this morning, that Chelsea and I will come over to the West Coast again this year.

Grazian: Yes!

Macabuag: So I'm on my way!

Grazian: Incredible! All right! Let me know when and where!

Kaplan: Awesome! Making things happen! All right! If there isn't any more, it was nice talking to both of you. I think this is super-informative

Grazian: That's so exciting!

Kaplan: Yeah, this is a life-changing device.

Grazian: I have to say, it's been such a fun conversation that it's easy to forget that we're doing this for *ABILITY Magazine*! That's it, this is so exciting! Thank you, George! ■ ABILITY

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DARUMA

A Landmark Film for Authentic Disability Representation



In 2019, *ABILITY Magazine* learned of a concept film that would star two disabled leading men who happen to be friends of ABILITY. Today, our friends, Tobias (Toby) Forrest and John W. Lawson, star in "Daruma," a masterfully acted and produced film praised by top names in the industry. This independent feature film was the brainchild of Kelli McNeil and directed by her husband, Alexander Yellen, who set out to cast authentic actors with disabilities and also hire crew with disabilities.

Years after that *ABILITY Magazine* article, "Daruma" debuted in front of a capacity crowd at the *Dances with Films Film Festival* at the iconic TCL Chinese Theatre in Hollywood.

Loosely inspired by a family member's life experience, the film has been a labor of love for McNeil. Together with Yellen, a veteran director of both television and film, the two have worked for years to write, cast, produce, film and ink a distribution deal for "Daruma."

The film was truly years in the making. When their original studio pressured them to fill at least one of the leading roles with an actor pretending to be disabled, McNeil and Yellen opted to produce the film independently. They selected Forrest, a quadriplegic, for the leading role of "Patrick", who is a



"Daruma" - Toby Forrest and John Lawson

paraplegic. Lawson, a double-hand amputee, was their choice to play the role of Patrick's grouchy neighbor and friend, "Robert", a character who shares the same disability as Lawson. Daruma brings to life the story of these two unlikely friends, who set out on a cross-country road trip to reunite Patrick's 4-year-old daughter, Camilla, with her maternal grandparents.

With many roadblocks along the production path, "Daruma" was shot over the course of 15 days during the pandemic. McNeil is understandably thrilled with the current version of the film and its recent reception at Dances with Films film festival.

"We had a sold-out screening, and we really tried so hard to make that screening as accessible as possible for as many people across the disability spectrum as possible. In the end, I believe we had about 30 wheelchair-users in attendance. We worked with the theater programmers who knew how important this was, and we made space for everybody. We also had open captions for our deaf audience members, and we had audio visual descriptions provided to us free of charge by Audio Eyes," McNeil said.

The screening also gave the cast and crew an opportunity to experience their film in front of a live audience. John Lawson said, "Watching it with everybody was great. When you're filming, it's hard to predict if the audience is going to laugh because some of its dark humor. At the screening, they laughed at all of the right times, and they all cried at the right time, too."

Lawson was particularly interested to see if a particular line of his would land with laughter as intended. He explained that there's a scene where Patrick's in the wheelchair trying to lean in and secure a new car seat. As he struggles to reach it, Robert leans in and says, 'Hey, you need a hand?' John was relieved when he heard the audience laugh enthusiastically. "We weren't sure how everybody would take that joke, but everybody laughed. And that was what we hoped."

Forrest is among those grateful for the steadfast leadership of McNeil and Yellen during the film's long road.

"Even though there were hurdles along the way filming *Daruma*, Kelli and Alex just went around the hurdle. That was so great. We didn't even go over them. We just went around the hurdles," Forrest said.

About six years ago, the writer and director duo completed *Daruma's* proof of concept film, which is the vehicle typically used to garner interest from studios and distribution companies to secure funding.



Scene from "Daruma" - Tobias Forrest (Patrick), Victoria Scott (Camilla) and John Lawson (Robert)

Forrest and Lawson have been involved in the project since the concept's filming, patiently hoping the film would eventually get made. The film's compelling writing and vivid characters resonated with studio executives, and it looked like the film was on its way to mainstream production.

"Kelli and Alex stuck with us through the whole thing. And they originally shot the script with studio funding and had interest for it. But the studio said, 'Well, we need to replace these disabled people. We'll put an able-bodied person in it'," John Lawson recalls. "Then, the studio said, 'Well, you can keep the amputee guy, but we'll put an A-list actor in a wheelchair and let him pretend to be the paraplegic'."

McNeil and Yellen made the decision to walk away and produce the film on their own rather than submit to the studio casting directives. "Daruma" entered the realm of independent films where funding can be difficult to find. For *Daruma*, McNeil and Yellen used their own resources along with a crowd funding campaign to raise the necessary funds.

McNeil is thrilled with the current version of the movie and feels good about the prospects of securing a distribution deal soon. She's also grateful that "Daruma" has already succeeded in bringing attention to the issue of disability inclusion in the industry.

"The community we have built and developed with this project has been astounding. And I can't even tell you what it was like coming out of that screening. Alex and I were just surrounded by hundreds of people wanting to shake our hand and tell us how much they loved the film. It was incredible. I'll never forget it," McNeil said. "I don't know where this film is going to land yet, but I have a feeling that the team we go with is going to see its value and help us get "Daruma" in front of as wide an audience as possible."

John Lawson remembers vividly when he heard about the "Daruma" casting call. It was memorable because with 40 years in the business, Lawson had never seen a notice for a double arm amputee. Despite the fact they were looking for a younger man, John decided to audition for the role.

"I figured I might as well go. I mean, from my experience I was the only true double hand amputee around. At least as far as I could tell from all of the auditions I'd been on over the years," Lawson said, with a laugh.

When Lawson learned the other lead role was a paraplegic, he immediately suggested his good friend and fellow actor, Toby Forrest audition. Lawson and Forrest



"Daruma" - Toby Forrest with unique wheelchair camera mount

live just a mile apart and often help each other with audition prep.

Forrest was resistant to auditioning, saying "The role is for a paraplegic. I'm a quadriplegic. But John kept pushing me to do it anyway. I said, I've done these things where they bring me in, and then I can't do any of the stuff the character can do."

Lawson wouldn't take no for an answer. So, Forrest auditioned for the lead role in "Daruma." At the call back, he remembers expressing his concerns to McNeil and Yellen.

"I said, 'I really appreciate this, but there's a lot that I cannot do that this character can.' And they were like, 'It's no problem, we'll figure out a way around that if we have to.' And I told them it's not like I wouldn't really love to star in a movie, but that's *my* dream. I didn't want to ruin *their* dream of creating a movie. But they were so insistent that I was their only choice to play the lead," Forrest said.

John Lawson thinks that he and Forrest brought more to the audition than just their authentic disabilities. He explained that their 'authentic' friendship probably also helped during their joint audition.

"At the time of our audition Toby and I had been friends for, I don't know, 10, 15 years. It's easy to portray anger. But we also had to do this scene that demonstrated the characters were really close friends. I think that our actual friendship that existed came through in the audition scene, and that's why they ended up casting both of us," John said.

Forrest was especially happy to secure the "Daruma" role when he realized McNeil and Yellen planned to portray Patrick's disability much differently. They dismissed the temptation of some filmmakers to focus on and sometimes even exaggerate disabilities to elicit an emotional response from the audience.

"For *Daruma*, they took a chance and actually made me more able bodied than I am in real life, which is pretty remarkable," Forrest said.

Elaborating, Forrest explained that Patrick does a number of things in the film that he is not physically able to do in real life. McNeil and Yellen also chose not to focus on other aspects of Patrick's disability, preferring instead to keep the focus on the central plot line and characters.

For example, in the film Patrick picks up a bottle and throws it through a window, something Forest cannot do. And, conversely, they elected not to focus on the process of Patrick getting in and out of cars or getting out of bed into the wheelchair. In *Daruma,* the decision to exclude some of the physical aspects that go along with disability helps shift focus onto Patrick, not his disability.

McNeil and Yellen said that they were not interested in what this character can and can't do. They were interested in what this character can and can't feel. They didn't need to film (someone) getting in and out of the car.

"And after watching the movie, they were right. Those details were not important to the story being told," Toby said. "It's because the story is so well-written and the characters are just so connected. So, you're able to forget about the disability part–and the mechanics of it– and really focus on the emotional life of these people. I think it's so important that the disability not be focused on, to have roles that are separate, really from any disability."

The idea is that "Daruma" is really a father daughter drama about forgiveness. The "Daruma" production team knows that viewers will go into the movie thinking it's going to be a movie about two guys with disabilities because it's the first movie to star two guys with disabilities, authentically. But with skillful story-telling and beautiful imagery, the cast and crew have worked hard to create a different narrative than expected.

Forrest said, "I hope everyone realizes this film is not about disability. Patrick is not broken because of his disability or depressed because of that or any of those things. You find out that he's just not a great guy. And he finds out that he's got a daughter and he thinks there might be an advantage to taking custody of her, but realizes he's a terrible father in the process."

During the recent screening, the audience appreciated and understood that message. John Lawson heard many such observations afterwards.

"As people came out of the theater, everyone was commenting that disability was never mentioned. The closest thing was my joke about, 'Can I give you a hand?' And so that was a big takeaway for people who saw the film," John said. "I mean, the number one thing is that it's a good story. We go to the movies to feel something. And this is a movie that makes you feel. It's not a moral lesson movie at all. So, I think it will attract a wide range of people who will enjoy it."

"This film starts, like any good film, with good writing. And good writing comes from personal emotional investment and a commitment to the authenticity of the characters in the story. John and I were blessed with all of that for *Daruma*," Forrest said.

The film comes alive with a talented production crew. Yellen and the "Daruma" production crew used their ingenuity to create a beautiful film, despite a short shooting schedule and limited budget. A New Film Makers Grant from Panavision provided an extensive camera package for Yellen to use at no cost. He and the crew built creative camera set-ups to get the shots Yellen envisioned.

"We shot this, believe it or not, the whole film in 15 days. When people see the finished product, they will not believe it," Lawson said.

With no budget for a process trailer, an expensive piece of equipment that tows a car while cameras film the actors as they simulate driving scenes, the crew used the Panavision cameras to capture the glorious golden hour moments, beautiful sunsets, in the middle of rural California. They then projected that footage onto an enormous LED screen in the studio. It allowed the crew to replay that sunset over and over. That helped take the pressure off Forrest and Lawson as they sat in the stationary car, playing out the scenes.

"You could get as many takes as you wanted. Rewind the golden hour background and start over. So that really, I think, helped the performances. It was a turning point in the film, so it was important that it be the best performance we could give," Lawson said. "It just came out phenomenal. If you didn't know that we were sitting still in a studio. Nobody would ever believe it."

Because the film is not about disability, the filmmakers chose not to focus much on the main character's wheelchair to tell the story, but they did want to capture the character's viewpoint. Yellen wanted some really close shots to highlight a few emotional moments. Yellen and crew built an elaborate rigging onto Patrick's wheelchair, using one of Panavision's state-of-the-art cameras.

Forrest had concerns when the camera rig idea was first explained to him. "They were essentially planning to put me in an exoskeleton, in a sense. And it would be on my chair, and it needs to fit and needs to work, and there wasn't a lot of time to figure it out." Forrest said,

"Truthfully, my initial concern was whether I would get a pressure sore. Because I am a quadriplegic, if my muscle tissue is pressed up against a piece of metal, and it's like that for an hour or two, that could be the beginning of a pressure sore or another type of injury. And, I may not be aware of it because I don't have feeling in my legs."

As it turned out, Yellen had already thought to ensure Forrest's safety while shooting with the rig. They mounted the rig onto the front of the wheelchair, allowing some really tight, up-close shots of Forrest during a couple of key scenes.

"It was right in my face. And I was able to roll around with the camera in front of me. So, the camera became part of my chair at that point," Forrest explained. He continued, "It's not like they just threw a GoPro on the front of my chair. Instead, they decided to mount an extremely incredible, expensive camera in such a way that the audience is right there with me in some really important moments."

The end result was well worth the extra time and attention the rig required. "That was one of the most incredible shots that we did in the film," writer and creator Kelly McNeil said, "Alex, my husband, and our grip, Dan Misner did a fabulous job. Dan is a master key grip, and he built that rig on Toby's wheelchair to give it a very subjective first person POV (point of view) in two different scenes."

Dan Misner, a seasoned film professional in various roles since the late 1980's, explained, "The rig we built in "Daruma" is one of many in my career. However, it was my very first reverse POV type of rigs mounted on a wheelchair, especially one that required complete 360-degree motion while being strong enough to enable the chair to tip over with Toby in it and still keep the camera stable."

"The biggest challenge in building the rig around Toby was holding all the pieces in place and getting the camera framed, which is a trick within itself. It took a few extra hands, but we ended up with a quite solid rig," Misner said.

Yellen discussed this shot and sequence with him, and Misner liked the idea and was very happy with the end result, "In my opinion, it created a kind of surreal, chaotic, helpless feel to the scene."

The cast and crew of "Daruma" hope to show the industry that film productions with actors and crew with authentic disabilities can and will resonate with audiences.

"Everyone knows that money is a great motivator," Kelli McNeil said, "Somebody once told me the only reason anybody ever makes a movie is for the bottom line. So, I guess if that's what it takes to incentivize people, then at least we have the numbers and the statistics to back it up."

John Lawson has been acting for decades and is cautiously optimistic that authentic representation will eventually be accepted as the norm, not something that is cause for celebration.

"In the past 25 years the number of roles out there just haven't changed much, except now there are more people becoming disabled who want to see themselves in the content they invite into their homes on a daily basis," Lawson said.

25% of people identify with some form of disability and representation remains at less than 2 % in film and television.

Lawson said, "We are denying 25% of the population the right to self- representation in entertainment We wouldn't do that with females or any other race. But yet, we do it with people with disabilities."

Looking back over his legacy of advocacy, Lawson recalls his repeated efforts to educate industry decision-makers that there is a market for more inclusive content and authentic representation. He has spoken at every major studio from Apple to Disney to Warner Brothers and all those in between.

"I've been to every one of them speaking to producers and writers and directors to try and educate them about representation. That's one of the lofty goals that we have with "Daruma." The hope is that it can prove that there is a market out there," Lawson said.

There are some familiar faces in the cast of "Daruma". Abigail Hawk, known primarily for her role as Lt. Abigail Baker on long-running CBS series, "Blue Bloods," plays Anna, the leading lady and love-interest in "Daruma."

Barry Bostwick takes on the role of 'Horace' in the film. Bostwick's storied acting career includes the iconic character "Brad" in the cult-classic "Rocky Horror Picture Show," and his role as Mayor Winston on the seven seasons of CBS sitcom "Spin City," where he appeared alongside Michael J. Fox.

As the first U.S. feature film, with its two leading roles portrayed authentically by actors with disabilities, there is some early buzz in the disability community surrounding "Daruma". Some believe the film offers reason to hope that it will finally usher in a brighter future for authentic representation in the entertainment industry. The film has generated interest from several distribution companies—McNeil and Yellen are currently fielding offers and expect to have good news soon. ■ ABILITY

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abigail HAWK

Abigail Hawk, known for her roles in "Blue Bloods", "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" and Distemper recently appeared in the new independent film, "Daruma." Hawk plays Anna who is a supporting role to two authentically cast disabled leading men. Tobias (Toby) Forrest plays "Patrick", a paraplegic, and John Lawson plays the grouchy neighbor "Robert" who is a double hand amputee. They play two unlikely friends, who set out on a cross-country road trip to reunite Patrick's 4-year-old daughter, Camilla, with her maternal grandparents. ABILITY's Jennifer Goga interviewed Hawk about her character and work on the film as well as her thoughts about this groundbreaking film.

Jennifer Goga: What was different about your experience filming "Daruma" compared to other films and TV shows you've worked on?

Abigail Hawk: "Daruma" worked at its own pace, which allowed us to accommodate not only John and Toby, but the entire cast and crew during the height of the Omicron (COVID-19) surge and on a shoestring budget! We were extraordinarily cautious for everyone's safety. The health of the whole team was paramount, and that extreme care resulted in a lovely variety of shots. Some were filmed quickly and with abandon of formulaic camera- and scene-work; others were addressed in minute emotional and physical detail. It was a singular, exquisite experience. The Herculean "Daruma" could only have been accomplished as a true independent feature, and even then, only under the capable eyes of the Yellens (Writer, Kelli McNeil and Director, Alexander Yellen).

Goga: What did you learn about disability and inclusion after working with John Lawson and Toby Forrest on this film?

Hawk: I learned that the industry has been depriving audiences of two of the funniest and most heartbreaking actors I have ever worked with. I also learned that including John and Toby required minimal additional effort to accommodate their disabilities. Questions were raised; problems were solved when they arose; the team worked seamlessly, creatively, and with that gorgeous shorthand only seasoned crew members possess. Authentically casting this project was easy, enlightening, and elevating.







Abigail Hawk as Anna from *Daruma*

Goga: Tell me a little bit about the character you play in "Daruma."

Hawk: Anna. Bold, unapologetic Anna, who somehow embodies the notion of "yes, and" while simultaneously embracing the power of "no." She frequently uses the word "sure," subconsciously perhaps, but it suits her. That's who she is "sure" of herself, her needs, her desires. Some vulnerability peeks through, but settling into the mind of a woman who has the fortitude to push past her trauma and grab life and love by the horns is, in a word, empowering. And, well, honest. Love rarely arrives wrapped up all nice and tied with a pretty bow. It's messy; it's been kicked around, lost in the mail; it shows up late or even broken. But we seek it anyway. We seek it anyway. We seek the good and keep on rising. Fall down seven times, get up eight.

Goga: Do you have any "behind the camera" stories about the shooting of this film?

Hawk: I could gush about John and Toby 'til the cows come home! John has never met a dad joke he didn't like. He kept everyone on set very well lit with his pure sunshine disposition. He's genuine, kind, and a speed demon on the 405! I barely wrapped my scenes in time to make my flight back home to NYC, and he got me to LAX with time to spare and a huge grin on my face!

Tobias brought his A game to the role of "Patrick" and is a flawless and trusting scene partner. He listens reflexively and throws his whole heart into the work. He is brave and true. And, hot damn, does he have an enviable knack for remembering punch lines! I absolutely loved reconnecting with both men at our world premiere at Dances With Films in Hollywood in June and I look forward to watching the expansion of their careers.

Goga: What are your thoughts about authentic representation in entertainment?

Hawk: Art remains humanity's mirror, and it is estimated that 1 in 6 of us has a disability. That is a significant number, and one that is severely underrepresented on screen and stage. I, for one, eagerly embrace exposure to the diversity of humanity–the more, the merrier! I think everyone deserves to see themselves, or at least some facet of themselves, represented on screen. I love when my boys are watching a show and notice someone is "different," and they immediately (and unabashedly) ask my husband and I questions. We learn the answers together and, in turn, learn to process the world a bit more fully than before. We all learn differently, communicate differently, move differently and having that diversity reflected on screen is just another golden opportunity to see someone else's truth. As it should be.

Goga: What are your feelings about how the movie included disability without making disability the focus of the plot?

Hawk: I am clearly thrilled to be part of such a revolutionary project, but, to be blunt, I think this concept is long overdue and I am honestly a bit flummoxed that we made this film in 2022 and we are considered "pioneers."

Goga: Do you think there is room for more movies like "Daruma"?

Hawk: Movies like "Daruma" are the very reason the greatest dining room tables have leaves. There is always, always room at the table. I am so excited about what the future holds. ■ ABILITY

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there's something about peter

Known for his cinematic hits such as "Dumb and Dumber," "There's Something About Mary," and the Oscar-winning "Green Book," Farrelly has consistently transcended the status quo by authentically representing people with disabilities in his films. His commitment to inclusivity not only reflects the realities of life but also enriches his work by offering audiences a more diverse and genuine experience.

ABILITY Magazine's Chet Cooper caught up with Farrelly while he was crawling through LA's traffic. He shares details of his life choices and journey toward being a writer, director and producer, as well as his current work and motivation for inclusion.

Chet Cooper: I was googling to see your recent work when I came across an article about the Media Access Awards that mentioned you and how impressed the writer was with who you are and how you listened to the stories of all the people who attended. Turns out, it was our article that we ran several years ago by Hope Allen in 2003!

Peter Farrelly: Oh, yeah!

Cooper: Anyway, I want to start with "Champions," if we could talk a little bit about that movie. I saw it originally when it came out, the French version.

Farrelly: I think it was a Spanish version.

Cooper: Spanish? You know what? It might have been Spanish. Yes, I get those two countries confused.

Farrelly: (laughs) Actually, I didn't do "Champions," my brother Bobby did.

Cooper: Oh, OK.

Farrelly: Yeah, Bobby made "Champions." It was a movie that Woody Harrelson had wanted to



Peter Farrelly with John Brawley

make, and Woody's an old friend of ours. We've known him ever since I got to LA. We'd met him before he was known, before he was the famous Woody Harrelson. But in any case, he wanted to make it. I was busy making a movie, so Bobby did it. I love that movie. I thought Bobby did an excellent job and Woody, too. A really great movie.

Cooper: Speaking about Hope Allen and talking with you, when we were over at your place in Santa Monica, Conundrum, Woody was there playing foosball.

Farrelly: Yeah. Woody, there's an old saying, I think Goethe said it, something to the effect of, "Once you follow your heart, divine providence will help you in ways you couldn't possibly have foreseen." When I came out here to become a writer–which was a hard thing to do, but it's something you can easily fail at–the doors that opened for me were weird. First of all, meeting Woody before Woody was on "Cheers" and then getting my first agent, Richard Lovett, who if you Google today "best agent in Hollywood," his name comes up, meeting my wife—there are a million things like that. So, Woody and I and Bobby have been friends for 30, going toward 40 years.

Cooper: Oh, yes, definitely leaning toward 40.

Farrelly: Yeah. I was at the first episode he ever did of "Cheers." I was scared to death for him. He hadn't really done much. He had played a small role in a movie called "Wildcats," where Goldie Hawn coached a football team.

Cooper: Oh, yeah.

Farrelly: He was one of the players. And he had also been an understudy on Broadway. I was nervous for him. But I went there, and he crushed it. And, of course, he never looked back.

Cooper: You and your brother came out to Los Angeles together, I would think?

Farrelly: No, I came out a little ahead of my brother. At the time, he had majored in geological engineering, and he was kind of doing some kind of sales thing at that time, bopping around. But then, every time I wrote a script–I was out here with my friend. And whenever we wrote a script, we'd give it to Bobby. And he would edit it and punch it up, say, "This stinks. This is good." He had good instincts. Eventually we pulled him in. We said, "Come on, join the party."

Cooper: (laughs) And what was your background education-wise?

Farrelly: Accounting.

Cooper: (laughs) I'm sorry, I didn't mean to laugh.

Farrelly: (laughs) That's okay. 2.0. Four years accounting at Providence College. I didn't really start writing until I was about 24, and before that—that's just one of those things. These kids who have to make up their mind what they'll be when they're 17, 18, I had no clue. When I started college, I remember my advisor said, "What's your major?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "Well, you have pretty good math boards, how about accounting?" I said, "okay," And that was it. That was all the thought that went into it.

Cooper: That sounds just like me. I asked the counselor when I was getting out of high school, "What's the toughest thing you have." They said, "Probably medicine." I said, "What does that mean?" They said, "Biology, probably." I said, "okay." So, I got my degree in biology just because I had no idea what I was doing.

Farrelly: At least you were ambitious, to go for the toughest thing.

Cooper: So, you're up in Ojai?

Farrelly: I do live in Ojai, but I'm going toward LA right now. I'm going back East tomorrow. I'm from the East Coast, so I'm going back for a couple of weeks.

Cooper: You're from Massachusetts, right?

Farrelly: Rhode Island.

Cooper: I'm sorry, is that a negative thing to say?

Farrelly: No. I have a lot of asshole friends. Rhode Island and Massachusetts are not that different. We always went to Cape Cod in summer, which is Massachusetts. I definitely feel connected to both.

Cooper: Are you going back for vacation or work?

Farrelly: Vacation. 4th of July and also my mother's—We're having a 90th birthday party for my mother. She's 90 goin' on, like, 50. 90 is the new 50; for her it is. She still plays golf two or three days a week. She plays bridge two or three days a week. She teaches bridge. Every night I call her and if it's after 5:00, she's either at or on her way to a cocktail party.

Cooper: (laughs)

Farrelly: When we do her 90th birthday, we're like, "Mom, do you want to invite some friends? Give us a list." 120 people.

Cooper: (laughs)

Cooper: Is your father still alive?

Farrelly: No, he passed away about 10 years ago. He was unfortunately a smoker. That's what got him. He smoked three to four packs a day, as a doctor, by the way.

Cooper: Isn't it something? Back in the day when the doctors would say—a tobacco company would use a doctor to say, "They're the best, Camel is the best doctor-preferred."

Farrelly: My father smoked all day. Every year for the holidays, at Christmas, I'd make him an ashtray when I was a kid. That was what we gave him every year. He had ashtrays at work, on the kitchen table, next to his chair. He was always smoking. He never stopped, even while he was eating dinner, he'd have a cigarette going.

Cooper: Wow! Such a strong addiction.

Farrelly: Yeah. I have friends who were heroin addicts and were addicted to cigarettes, and they said quitting cigarettes was way harder.

Cooper: It's so difficult when you have an addictive personality.

Farrelly: I have a friend who was a bad alcoholic, and one day he woke up in his 40s and he'd had enough of that experience, something had happened, and he quit cold turkey, cigarettes and booze, the same day, never went back. Now he's 78 years old. Never went to a meeting, just said, "That's it." Done. Boom.

Cooper: Wouldn't it be nice if everyone had that capability?

Farrelly: Yeah, that's rare.

Cooper: I just pictured him looking outside the window, it was wintertime and there was a turkey looking in at him going, "Why?"

Farrelly: (laughs) And by the way, just for anybody, he became smashingly successful after he quit all that stuff. It does help your brain and your focus.

Cooper: Did you ever get in trouble with too much or abuse?

Farrelly: Not really. I never smoked cigarettes. I didn't do it because I had younger brothers and sisters and I thought if I smoke, they would see me and they would smoke. It didn't matter, they all smoked anyway. They got off it eventually. No, I never—it's in my family, though, there's a lot of alcoholism and all sorts of things. I don't think I have an addictive personality. Like, for instance, I pretty much don't think of weed, marijuana at all. If I'm at a party somewhere and someone passes me a joint, I'll always take a hit off it, but I don't think of it in between.

Cooper: But you were around Woody for years.



Farrelly: I know. When I'm around Woody, I smoke a lot of weed. But he's not a big drinker. He's got a balance. Woody smokes weed all day long, but he's never really—he's got a balance in his lifestyle. He does yoga, he works out. He's always working on his brain in one way or another. He's not just a degenerate weed smoker. He's the healthy kind.

Cooper: You can't be at that level. There's a number of people who are doing very well, in whatever industry they're in, who smoke regularly.

Farrelly: It's one of those things. Weed's a slippery slope, too. When I write a script, after I'm done with it, I could never write a script stoned. But after I'm done with it, I will smoke a joint and read it, and I kind of see things. I think that weed basically just affects your memory. That's why everything seems cool or different. You see the sunset high, and you're like, "Oh, my God! It's incredible." You don't remember the thousands of sunsets you've seen before. Whatever it is, it's all better. But when you see a script that you've written, when I smoke a joint and read it, I kind of forget things, and I can see it better. But like I said, I could only do it after I've written it.

I know some writers who smoke joints all the time and try to write, and I think it dulls your skills a little.

Cooper: I saw recently how you just wrote something and sold it? Rick—what's the name?

Farrelly: "Ricky Stanicky" is a project I've been working on for many years. It's a big comedy. It was just floating around. People don't realize—I mean, I'm sure they do realize, that it doesn't matter what you've done, it's very hard to get any movie made. Even if you're coming off a big hit, the next one isn't guaranteed. There're a million questions. What's the budget? Who are the people? What's the thing? It's just never easy.

No matter who you are–I'm sure there are movies that Tom Hanks couldn't get made at some point.–There are so many things that go into a movie, and this is one of those that we just couldn't get made for a long time. And finally, we did. And we've got John Cena and Zac Efron and William H. Macy and Andrew Santino and Jermaine Fowler—just a bunch of good people. It's a big, broad, balls-to-the-wall comedy.

Cooper: The way I read this article, it said that you sold

all the rights. I don't know what that means.

Farrelly: This movie was the brainchild of a couple guys, John Jacobs and Zack Unterman. They came up with the idea, I want to say, 15 years ago. They brought in different writers here and there. We developed it for many years. I always wanted to make it because it's really funny after all those years. You make a deal. I get paid to write and direct it. You'd have to call my agent to find out how it all went down.

Cooper: Oh, so you're directing it.

Farrelly: Yeah, I directed it. I directed it and wrote it with a couple of other guys, Jim Freeman and Brian Jarvis and Jeff Bushell. We spent years working on it. In the meantime, of course, you're doing other projects. I always have four or five irons in the fire at the same time because, like I said, it's impossible to get a movie made. So, you'd better have a bunch going on. If you put all your eggs in one basket, you could end up with a very unhappy Easter.

Cooper: (laughs) I know from your past work you bring in some casting with actors with authentic disabilities. Were you able to do that with Ricky?

Farrelly: Oh, yeah. I always do that, and for a few reasons. Number one, because that's the real world. And if you don't have actors with disabilities in there, you're making a fake world. I always see it. I'll see a movie where there's a thousand people, and I don't see one person with a disability. It annoys me, but I also feel like it's bullshit. That's one reason why I do it. Another reason is because they've been overlooked. It's a part of society that's been completely overlooked, disabled actors. They've been out there forever. They never get seen, and it's not right. I think they should get a step up. I want to bring them in. I bring them in for lots of roles, because despite what the Supreme Court just did to affirmative action, I'm for giving people who have been historically held back a leg up. I want to—they deserve a little extra attention because they've been overlooked since the film began.

Cooper: Have you ever gone to abilityE.com?

Farrelly: I don't think I have.

Cooper: Just to give you a brief update, our nonprofit, which is ABILITY Corps, created during COVID—actually just before COVID, the first robust platform that included a database and much more of thousands of actors who authentically have a disability it's not only there for the taking for any part, but if you specifically need a left-handed amputee because it's a story line that needs that, then you'd go in and put those parameters in and find the talent.

Farrelly: Wow! I tell the story of how about five or six years ago I was up in Vancouver and I wanted to cast a little person in a movie. And I asked a casting agent–who's really probably the biggest casting agent in Vancouver–I said, "I'd like to see some little people." And she said, "Oh, we don't have any little people actors." I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "We don't." I said, "In Canada?"

Cooper: (laughs)

Farrelly: "Yeah." "Yeah, you do! You just don't know about them. Are you kidding?" She said, "Oh, I'm sorry." And we put out a thing and I had every little person actor in Canada reaching out to us, but nobody knew about them.

Cooper: Exactly.

Farrelly: It was horrifying. She was embarrassed, and she changed immediately. I remember she came to me a couple times and said, "I'm really embarrassed about that thing. That's just such an oversight." But it shouldn't just be little people, it should be people—there are so many people you're overlooking if you're just looking for what people have been casting through history.

Cooper: Yeah. It's very difficult to sometimes get it through the head of some of these people that there is talent out there. Just because they haven't seen it doesn't mean it's not there. Like you said, historically, it's been so bad. When we talk to Screen Actors Guild, all of the major organizations connected to the entertainment industry and even KMR, you know Gail.

Farrelly: Oh, yeah.

Cooper: They love what we're doing because it actually will enhance their portfolio because most of the people who are signing up with us don't have agents, they're not members of SAG yet, so they'll just get more business because they'll need to find an agent at one point once they get a gig.

Farrelly: By the way, also the agent–And this is something I've said a million times, but I'll say it again– is that for the casting agents, a big part of the problem is that they're not (seeing it that) way. That 20 years ago if you saw "girlfriend, 24, pretty, walks into the room," they see a white woman. And now they don't. Now things have changed. We have some diversity in that way. But they're not thinking about disability. Nowhere does it say, "great hearing," "perfect eyesight," describing that woman. Just because it just says "woman, 24," doesn't mean that there's not a disability, just like it doesn't mean that the woman's not black.

Cooper: Exactly. I don't know if you caught what I was saying. The idea for our database would be not just because you need to find a specific character who has that specific disability because that's the way that particular



Daniel Monks and Peter Farrelly on the set of Ricky Stanicky

story line's going, but that you could tap into that database for any project, whether you're calling it out as a disability or not. Just exactly what you said. There might be talent in there that happens to be an amputee or happens to be blind and you know what? That's a young, attractive woman coming into a room. That's our hope, that it gets picked up beyond just the disability factor.

Farrelly: The disability shouldn't just be—let me rephrase this. You shouldn't just think of disability when you have a role for somebody who's disabled. They could play any role.

Cooper: That's what I see you do in your movies.

Farrelly: I try to. Sometimes we fail, and we did fail, like, on our first movie, "Dumb and Dumber." We never had anybody with a disability in it. And I got a lot of shit from my friend Danny Murphy, who was a quadriplegic friend of mine. At the premier I came out and I was embarrassed. He said, "You didn't have one person in that entire movie with a disability, except for the kid, who's disabled, the kid in the wheelchair." And I was really embarrassed. I said, "I'm never doing that again." And we didn't. All I was thinking was that I was trying to get a movie made for nine years, and I didn't think straight. But in any case, I would never make that mistake again. And, by the way, as I said, because it's a better movie if there are people with disabilities because that's the world. And I want people to be in a real world, not a fake world.

Cooper: Yeah, I remember the first—it might have been Eddie Murphy's first role where he was in that pissed-off moving-that-furniture scene.

Farrelly: Yeah, that was in "There's Something About Mary." I started putting him in—after her gave me shit, I said, "First of all, we'll start with you next movie," and that was "Kingpin." And then we started expanding. I saw a movie the other night, "Daruma." Are you familiar with this?

Cooper: Oh, sure.

Farrelly: I saw it the other night, and Tobias Forrest is the lead, and John Lawson. And that's the kind of movie that will move the needle. It stars people with disabilities, but it's not about that.

Cooper: I didn't get to go to the premier.

Farrelly: Fantastic!

Cooper: I'm looking forward to seeing it. We wrote about them back in 2019 as they were trying to get the film produced and all the challenges, as you would imagine, getting that made. I've known John for a long time and Toby for a long, long time. He's in that system

I told you about, abilityE.com. I don't know if you've ever seen him perform. He's a rocker. He's had a band. He's just a great singer. The way he performs, it's incredible. He's an interesting guy.

Farrelly: I've not seen him, I'd seen him in smaller roles, but to see him in the leading of a movie will open doors for him because he's really good in it. I always knew he was OK, because I'd seen him in things, but now I know he's on another level. He really does a lot with a little. I'm talking about his acting style.

Cooper: I get it, yeah.

Farrelly: It's a very smart way of acting. I'm so impressed by it.

Cooper: He'll be happy to hear you say that.

Farrelly: I really enjoyed the movie. But more than that, no matter what happens in a movie, if people can find him and say, "Oh, yeah, that guy's spectacular,"– It's hard to see somebody when you have a minute here and there, but when you see somebody in a 90-minute movie, whatever it is, and you see how he holds it, he carries that movie, along with John, by the way. John was spectacular, too. But Tobias was—he had a lot going on in there.

Cooper: I don't know if you saw the article we did with John, that starts off with him being a person who's a scuba diver, an instructor, it goes down this whole of things that he is, a pilot, he's has all these things that he does that the general public would not expect a dual amputee to have.

Farrelly: How did he become an amputee?

Cooper: He was doing something, I think it was maybe painting on a water tower and somehow something was electrical and both hands got caught in the accident. But he's also a talented guy.

Farrelly: Oh, yeah. He's great in it. He plays a grouchy, grumpy neighbor, and they had taken a road trip together with this little girl. There's a five-year-old actress in it who's as good as any actress I've seen, young actor, kid actor, I've seen since the little girl in "The Florida Project." That little girl was superstar. I have not seen somebody as good as her since, until this movie. And this little girl kills. It's fantastic. It makes the movie because we have three really good actors in there, and if one of them was weak, it wouldn't be that good. But it is good, it particularly helps that the five-year-old knows what she's doing. That's very rare.

But that also says a lot to the director. The director is Alex Yellen. He just directed her perfectly. She didn't have a bad moment. That's hard to do with a five-year-old.

Cooper: But we don't know, she might be six playing five, you know?

Farrelly: No, I actually do know.

Cooper: I'm kidding with you!

Farrelly: I'm dead serious. She's supposed to be four in the movie, and I was like, "How old is she, nine?" They said, "She turned five the week we were opening." I was like, "Oh, my God!"

Cooper: That's great! I've seen pictures of her because of that article we did. But that was in 2019 when it was filmed?

Farrelly: I'm not sure.

Cooper: She's probably in her twenties now? (laughs)

Farrelly: (laughs) Yeah, she's getting out of college. I told you, it's hard to get movies made.

Cooper: (laughs) Exactly! I was going to make a joke that I did with I think it was Jim Abrahams. Who's the guy who did "Airplane"?

Farrelly: The Zucker brothers and Jim Abrahams. The three of them, David, Jerry, and Jim.

Cooper: I'm talking to Abrahams. He's on the phone. I said, "Where are you?" He said LA. He asked me where I was and I said, "I'm in Orange County, so what time is it there?" And he stopped and said, "Oh, man, you got me! I love to be gotten!" (laughs)

Farrelly: (laughs)

Cooper: I almost did that with you, but I've done that joke before.

Farrelly: I'm actually in Portugal.

Cooper: (laughs)

Farrelly: It is going on 1 a.m. here right now.

Cooper: (laughs) Once I was visiting in NJ driving in one of the worst storms I've ever experienced, and the windshield wipers are going at the highest speed, it's pouring down and I can barely see where I'm going on the road, get a phone call, take the call, and it's a friend of mine from CA saying, "Hey, I'm going surfing, you want to go?" I'm like, "I can't right now." With cell phones, you have no idea where people are.

Farrelly: I'm on the 101 right now into LA from Ojai. I'm going by Del Norte Boulevard.

Cooper: I've got the tracking system on you. What is it



William H. Macy and Peter Farrelly

like living up there in Ojai now?

Farrelly: I love it. I've always loved it. We've been there 17 years, I think. I love it on many levels. First of all, I love the great town. They have great schools. It's a small town, only like 7,500 people. But it feels like a bigger town because of the Ojai Valley Inn and a few other nice motels and hotels. People come up on the weekend, so on the weekend you get a lot more people, and because of that, you have a bunch of good restaurants and bars and bands, there's a lot to do for a little town. It's not missing anything.

Cooper: How old are your kids now?

Farrelly: 22 and 24.

Cooper: Oh, wow! I saw the pictures that were in the first article with you and they were just small children.

Farrelly: Yeah, they're grown up.

Cooper: What are they doing now?

Farrelly: My daughter has been in little movies, she's had small parts in movies, but she just had a big role in "Ricky Stanicky."

Cooper: Oh, good!

Farrelly: Yeah, she knocked it out of the park.

Cooper: I love that!

Farrelly: She's of course terrified about the nepo baby shit, but she's talented. She's great. She's just naturally good at it, so what's she going to do? She really does knock it out of the park. My son, who's also acting a bit, he's involved with a blockchain company that he and his buddies from Tulane started. They're just banging their heads against the wall trying to start with this start-up. I'm impressed. When I was 24, I didn't even know you could start a company. They're working at it. So, he's learning a lot, no matter what happens.

Cooper: Are they using the blockchain for anything beyond NFTs?

Farrelly: Yes. They're developing it—the more I speak of it, the less you're going to understand because I don't know what I'm talking about.

Cooper: I get you.

Farrelly: It has something to do with mortgages. They're trying to do it so it protects your mortgages better than—see?

Cooper: I have a friend who's got dual Ph.D.'s in physics and whatever, and we actually did an article with him about blockchains and all that, and it started to go over my head. He was talking about being able to use certain things for utility purposes and safety and this and that. I can imagine what they're doing is bringing state-of-the-art technology to some systems that have been around before the Internet.

Farrelly: Their brains are so different than ours or mine because they grew up in the computer age and we didn't. And plus they played video games all day long as kids. I think that's like doing push-ups for your brain. I remember when I was teaching them how to drive. We're at a red light, he's driving, I'm in the passenger seat, and he says, "Hey, Dad, do I need to pay attention to the lights facing me, or do I have to know the ones going left and right?" I looked at him, "What are you, a fucking idiot? The ones facing you!" And then we drove down the street about a quarter mile and I realized, "Oh! He sees things three dimensional, and I'm one dimensional. I just see what's in front of me, but his brain is way more evolved." So he's a better thinking than me. It was a very good question. I just couldn't even see it.

Cooper: And we're looking at it pretty linear, and he's kind of in this, "There must be something more complicated than just this red light in front of me." (laughs)

Farrelly: Yeah. I was thinking, "What is wrong with you?" And then as we drove off, I thought, "How could he even—oh, OK, yeah." Because when you go in a video game, you don't go straight ahead, you go left, right, backwards, you're looking everywhere. I don't play those games. Just "Asteroids." That's all I know.

Cooper: I know Pacman, that's about it.

Farrelly: Yeah, the little doggie. That was it. That was my ___.

Cooper: In the way you have these irons in the fire, is there any methodology to you choosing projects?

Farrelly: No. I've said this before, it's not well-thought-out. It's what the universe brings me. Certain things, I read a lot of things, I get things, and then one day something really appeals to me, and that's the one. I always look at Rob Reiner's career and I think, "Wow, he's so smart, he did 'Spinal Tap,'" you know? And then the next thing he did was "Sure Thing," a romantic comedy, and then he did "Stand By Me." And then he did "A Few Good Men." And all of a sudden after four movies, you realize that that guy can do anything.

I did comedy after comedy after comedy. It never even occurred to me not to do a comedy. I like them; that's what was common to me. But one day, when "Green Book" came along, there was a friend of mine, Brian Currie, who told me the story and he wanted to write it, and I was like, "I love it! Let's do it!" Again, the universe just brought it to me, it wasn't intentional to go off the comedy track. It was just, that's what came.

When the strike's over, I intend to do a movie called "Balls Up." It's still coming together, so I don't have enough to tell you about it because of the strike. I'm a big union guy. There's zero progress being made right now because we're on strike. I look forward to the strike ending and getting back to work.

Cooper: I get you. Did you know I used to publish "National Lampoon."

Farrelly: That rings a bell. How long ago?

Cooper: I was the last publisher when the magazine was still being printed. I took it over from Jim Jimirro.

Farrelly: Were you there when the guy who took it over ended up going to prison?

Cooper: That might have been the guy after me.

Farrelly: You meet a lot of funny writers at a place like that.

Cooper: The reality was, it wasn't as fun as it could have been because several of the writers were introverts, and they did better going home and coming up with humor, which was always frustrating for me. I would have liked to just knock it out all the time right there.

Farrelly: By the way, most comedy writers are introverts. They're not like the class clowns. They work better alone. In fact, in a room they freeze up.

Cooper: I was pretty friendly, so they weren't that frozen, but they definitely 100% did better going away and doing their thing.

Farrelly: When you were working with Jim Abrahams, talking to him, did that have something to do with—because he has a son with a disability.

Cooper: Right, that's why we were talking to him.

Farrelly: How's his son doing?

Cooper: I don't know. I need to get hold of him again. It's been a long time.

Farrelly: I heard they're making another "Naked Gun." They're going to do a remake.

Cooper: I wonder what the title will be. I love "33 1/3."

Farrelly: They'll come up with something. I love those guys. They're the best. They're the first guys I worked with.

Cooper: I didn't know you'd worked with them.

Farrelly: Yeah, (with) them and Eddy Murphy at the same time, when I first came out here. I was in awe of them. First of all, they're so talented, but great, great guys. And Eddy was great, too. I was lucky, I started with really nice people. It was great.

Cooper: Anything you could say, advice-wise to any people reading this who might be in their home in Rhode Island or wherever thinking they're a good writer and they want to come out to LA?

Farrelly: Wow! That's a tough one. I'll say this. If it's in you and you really want to do it, it's the only thing you want to do, like it was for me at some point, but not until I was in my 20s, you've just got to do it. If you fail, it's like Jim Carey said, his father he said could have been a great comedy writer or comic, but he didn't. He took the safe way. He was an accountant. And he ended up getting fired from his accounting job, and he said he realized, "If I'm going to fail, I wanted to fail at something I love because you can also fail at something you don't love."

Cooper: That's great. And that's funny, that you were going to be an accountant.

Farrelly: I don't think it ever crossed my mind that I wouldn't be an accountant. There was nothing else I was trying to be. I think my brain grew late, when I was in my 20s, I started getting some clarity.

Cooper: I think it's hard for most people. I know there are some people who say, "I was always going to be a doctor," or "I was always going to be whatever," but I think the majority of us wander around for many years if not for our whole life.

Farrelly: My father told me that he was a doctor, and when he was seven, he knew he wanted to be one and he became one. I remember when I was 22, he said, "So what are you going to do?" And I said, "I don't know." He said, "God damn it! You have to have an idea! You're 22!"

Cooper: (laughs)

Farrelly: Most of my friends, honestly, they really didn't figure it out until almost 30, if not 30. It takes time to find what you want. Not many people know when they're seven or even 18, or even 22.

Cooper: Or 81.

Farrelly: That's right!

Cooper: It sounds like your mother's figured things out, though.

Farrelly: Yes, she's got her shit together, more than anybody I know.

Cooper: Was she working? Was she a housewife?

Farrelly: When my father met her, she was in nursing school, and then she was a housewife when we were growing up. Then she went back to school and became a nurse practitioner, and she worked until really very recently. I think it was a year ago she stopped—she was only working for the last 10 years like one day a week. She'd go in and give shots and do this and that. They finally asked her to leave them alone. (laughs)

Cooper: (laughs) That's pretty impressive. Nurse practitioner today is not the easiest thing to get.

Farrelly: No, she was great. She was really good.

Cooper: How does it work with you and Bobby? How do you make a decision on what projects to work on?

Farrelly: Again, same system. It just kind of comes. If we like it, we send it to him. He either likes it or doesn't like it. When we both like something, you know.

We're at the point now where we're going off doing our own separate things. Life's been too complicated to be having us both work on the same thing. Plus, it's annoying after 30 years to have to listen to the other guy's ideas. Both of us would rather do it ourselves.

Cooper: But you still go on tour?

Farrelly: On tour?

Cooper: It sounded like you were in a band. That's where my mind went.

Farrelly: (laughs) We still make things together; it's just different. Like, I just wrote the script that he just directed. But rather than both of us doing everything, we kind of split it up a little better. I'm now pulling up. My daughter, believe it or not, I'm taking her to an eyelash store. So, I'll have to be pulling off here.

Cooper: Is there any way you could pick up some lashes for me while you're in the store?

Farrelly: (laughs) Yeah, I'll mail them to you. I know where you are. I'll send them to the golf course.

Cooper: Hey, it was great talking to you.

Farrelly: Yeah, really fun! Great talking to you, too, as always. ■ ABILITY

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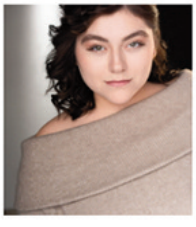
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VOYA
CEO

heather LAVALLEE

After 15 years of holding multiple roles at Voya Financial Inc. (Voya), including executive sponsor of Voya Cares, Heather Lavallee became CEO on January 1, 2023. ABILITY's Jennifer Goga spoke with Lavallee to discuss her leadership and Voya's culture of inclusion. Lavallee shared her personal career journey, discussed the value of mentorship,curiosity and listening to the people you serve. She illustrated the transformative effect disability inclusion initiatives had on Voya's employees as well as business results. Lavallee also described the Voya Cares initiative and its expansive commitment to community education, advocacy and collaboration with not-for-profit organizations, like Easterseals, The Harkin Institute, and the National Down Syndrome Society.

Jennifer Goga: It's great that we're able to meet today. I know you have a busy schedule.

Heather Lavallee: We all do. But this is a pleasure, and it's a super important topic. I was actually just down in Washington, DC yesterday with one of our not-for-profit partners, National Down Syndrome Society and Easterseals, and we were lobbying for disability advocacy, so the timing of this discussion is perfect.

Goga: That's great. To start off, I just wanted to hear about your background and your career trajectory. Did you always want to be in the financial world?

Lavallee: It's a little bit of a funny story. When I was little, starting at six years old, I wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to be a doctor for probably 15 years. And when I was in college, somebody had a medical event in our dining hall, and I did not react particularly well. And after 15 years of ambition, I switched my major to psychology. And that sort of opened the door for me to ask myself what do I want to do? And so graduated with a degree in psychology, and I got into sales in financial services. So, I stumbled into the industry. But it was really perfect for me because I realized that I loved how financial services help people when they need it most. And so, I quickly got a passion for the



industry and what we do. It was something where I could see the immediacy of a family going through something very difficult and how, whether it's insurance or planning, helps them in a really meaningful way. So that's a little bit of how I got into financial services. But if I fast forward through my 15 years with Voya, I went through a sort of logical progression of sales, sales management, et cetera.

But in the last 15 years, I've had the ability to run two different business units inside the firm, served as the executive sponsor of our Voya Cares program. And for me, a lot of it's just been about kind of raising my hand and taking on new assignments. And so, I didn't necessarily aspire to be in the chair that I'm in today. It's been kind of a logical trajectory, but passion for the customers and a passion for what we do every day and a curiosity to learn, I think, kind of got me to the seat I'm in today.[fl_builder_insert_layout id= "210612"]

Goga: That's good advice on how to keep moving forward. Along those same lines, what advice would you give other people, women in particular, about their career progression? Did you face hurdles or was it pretty much smooth sailing?

Lavallee: No, I faced a lot of hurdles. I think that's quite normal. So, there are a couple of things that I would say and advice that I tend to give people at different levels or tenure within their careers. I tell them that the path that I chose was not linear, it was not necessarily logical. I tried different things, I switched businesses, I raised my hand for different enterprise opportunities. One of the most important pieces of advice I can offer is to just be curious, exercise learning agility and raise your hand for different things. And so that has always been something that's driven me, is just this desire to continuously learn.

I often talk about a neat quote I heard about 17 years ago, and it was just this idea of doing something that makes you uncomfortable every day. Do something that kind of gets that 'butterflies in your stomach' feeling. And so, I do try to show up and do that. And that's something that I recommend to people, if you're nervous to spend time in front of the client, or to spend time presenting or to spend time learning on the financial side, whatever it is, that to me is where growth really comes from.

Goga: And any other obstacles you faced?

Lavallee: One major obstacle is I always wanted to be the Head of Sales in my career, and it took me four different times to get it. I was rejected for different opportunities, and it sort of became just this challenge that I thought at some point in time I'm going to have an opportunity. So, I think that just being really persistent and believing in yourself is super important.

The final two things that I'll mention in regard to people in their career is the importance of mentorship and company culture. I have been so fortunate at different times in my career to have some amazing mentors and they

really give you a chance to see a true vision of yourself, true reflection. Oftentimes, it was a mentor who saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. They saw what I could take on and do, and they pushed me. So that's important. I've often talked about Rod Martin, who is my predecessor as CEO of Voya and our current executive chairman. He has been an amazing mentor for me.

And the final bit is company culture. It's important that you make sure that the culture of the organization you work for aligns with your internal compass. It is so important because when those are aligned, and a person is fully accepted for who they are and it aligns with the company culture, then I think the sky's the limit for what anybody can do.

Goga: Very well said. Does Voya have ABLE 529 accounts?

Lavallee: As a matter of fact, we do not have an ABLE plan. But, more broadly, it's really the trajectory of how we got into disability inclusion advocacy and started our "Voya Cares" program about seven years ago. At the end of 2015, we decided to form a task force. We believed that disability inclusion was the perfect intersection of our culture, which was all about full inclusion and our business expertise.

We initially started to focus on the special needs community, on addressing the unmet financial need within the special needs community and education. So, really helping our clients and distribution partners and other folks understand the $2,000 asset limitation that could push somebody off means tested benefits (public assistance). It started with making sure we understood the need and how we could address that. And then it broadened into looking at our solutions, at our accessibility, and even beyond how we are ensuring that we are addressing the unmet financial planning needs in everything that we do. Then it was moving into advocacy and then really a focus on competitive workplace inclusion and using our corporate voice to advocate for other employers to also lean in on that.

So, it really became a bit of a movement. So, we don't necessarily have ABLE 529 accounts, but we do a lot of education around them. We work with many of the different state ABLE programs, and we educate employers on how offering ABLE plans into their benefits program will help them make sure they're providing full equity into their workforce. Because, as you certainly know, people with disabilities oftentimes don't contribute to their 401K or don't accept a match because it could hurt their benefits. So that's really the way we approach it. Hopefully, that gives you kind of a snapshot into our viewpoint around ABLE accounts.

Goga: Absolutely. I was reading about your involvement with the Harkin Institute Disability Summit earlier this year and I wasn't clear on whether Voya administered ABLE accounts. So, Voya was focused on educating people about the benefits of an ABLE account, is that right?

Lavallee: Yes, and we do sometimes get the question, "What's in it for Voya? Why do you do this? Aren't you selling your own products?" We started this advocacy work and this inclusion work because we thought it was the right thing to do. Now, what we found is, as we talk about that when we're marketing to different populations, being fully inclusive of the disability community in everything we do, whether it's in our television advertisements and our marketing and our solutions and our client experience. When we talk about all of our inclusion efforts in client meetings and final presentations, it made such a difference, and it's actually driven business results. It's driven a higher level of engagement from our own employees. And so, it was not why we started it, but it's had this amazing impact and it's something that we didn't necessarily anticipate. But we think if we can serve all Americans, including those with disabilities and their caregivers, that's one of the reasons we exist as a company.

Goga: A win-win. Would you mind telling me a little bit about the Voya Cares program?

Lavallee: We formed a Disability Inclusion Task Force at the end of 2015 into 2016. We started that first by learning. We wanted to make sure we got into it in the most authentic way possible. And that started by talking to our own employees. We had a People with Disabilities and Caregiver employee Resource group. We use them as very much of a sounding board on how we're approaching the community, how we're embedding people first language. We have mandatory people first language training across our organization, in addition to Allyship, which 99% of our employees partake in Allyship training. So that was really how we started.

Then we also formed partnerships with different not-for-profit organizations. We thought it was so important to learn from those who are already in the disability space. We sought their help to teach us how we should do this right. We worked with organizations like the National Down Syndrome Society. We've got a new partnership with Easterseals, and we work with The Harkin Institute. So, everybody has a different level of expertise, whether it's on legislative fronts, whether it's on workplace inclusion, helping employers understand how you're doing more integrated work, and teaching our recruiters and managers to hire, and then, frankly, creating a forum where we can also learn from other employers who are leaders in this disability inclusion space. So that was really how we started, and then I think we formally branded it as Voya Cares in 2017.

Goga: What advice would you give other CEOs on the benefits of the disability inclusion initiatives that you've



Heather Lavallee, Voya CEO with Ted Kennedy Jr. and Rod Martin, former Voya CEO

developed? Why is it important to do all the things you are describing and how does it help the company, in a broader sense?

Lavallee: Well, for me it's important for CEOs because they're going to drive incredible employee engagement. If I can share with you a bit of a story, when we decided to do this, we had a smaller group of leaders. We all agreed this was something very important. And we decided that if we're going to do it, we're going to do it right. So, we knew we were going to look at our marketing, at our advertisement, our products or solutions, our technology, our not-for-profit partnerships. We wanted to fully embed it in the culture, so we knew it had to get full top-down support.

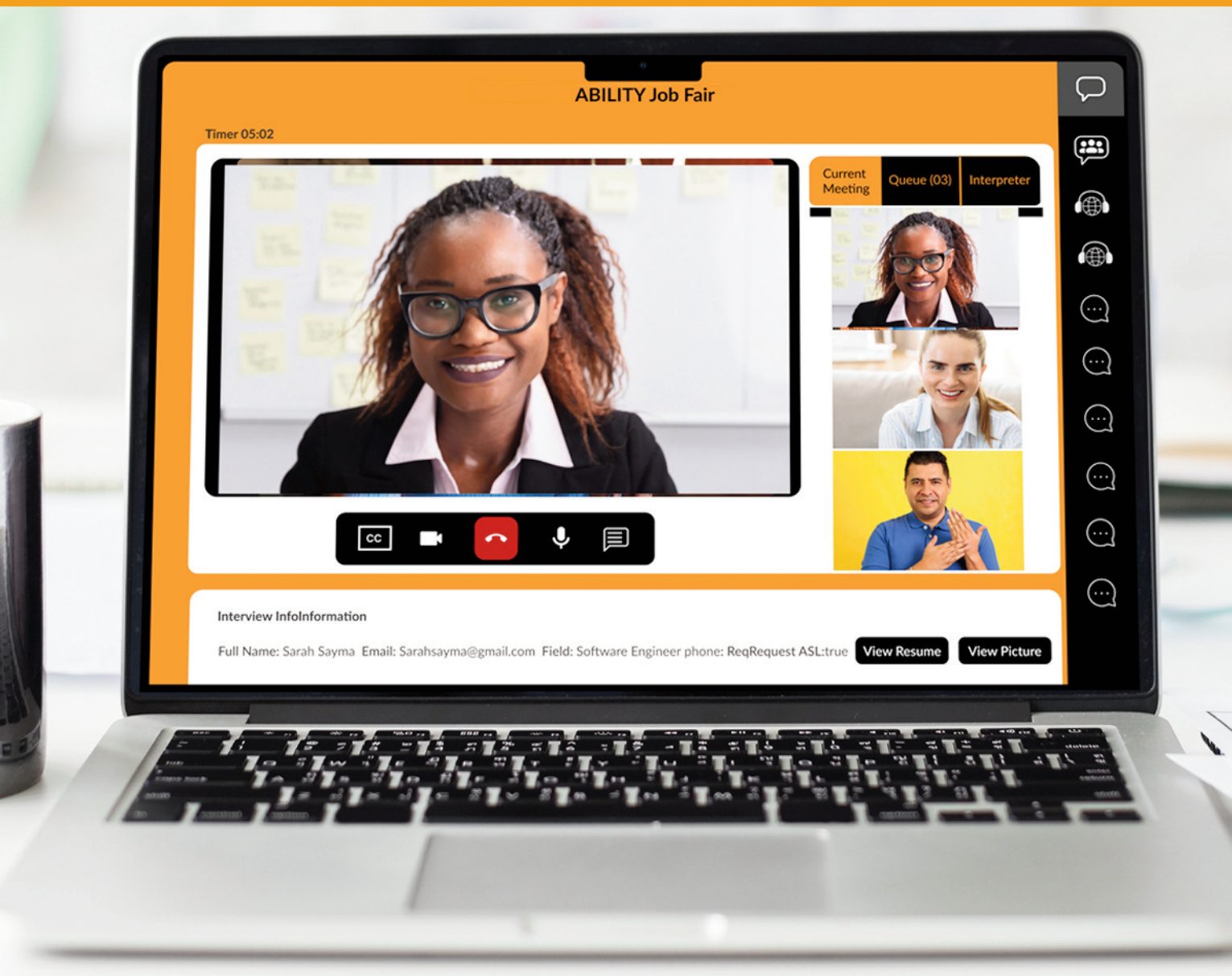
When we launched this disability inclusion initiative for our top 100 leaders in 2016, we got up and started sharing that people with disabilities represent the largest minority that anybody can join at any point in their lives. We talked about how 1 in 2 households are impacted by disability. We did this to just kind of raise awareness. And we broke up into different groups–It became a watershed moment for our company because we had leaders who we had worked alongside for years, who began sharing their own personal stories surrounding disability. And they said, I never knew I could share this at work.

Those leaders started sharing, "I have an adult sister with intellectual disabilities, and this is the struggle we're going through." And another, "I have a son…" You name it, and we heard it. I started to get emails from people sharing their situation. The launch of Voya Cares (as it was later branded) opened up this unbelievable era of authenticity within our organization. Our employees showed up differently, our leaders showed up differently. It just created this sense of inclusion and acceptance. The best way I would describe it is our people felt they didn't need to hide anymore.

And I can talk about this from a leadership perspective. I think our efforts with disability inclusion have driven employee engagement in a massive way. When you start talking about inclusion with your customers and figure out new ways to lean in, it drives business opportunities.

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For all of those reasons, disability inclusion is the right thing to do. If you think from the perspective of a CEO, of course you exist to drive financial performance, but we also have bigger responsibilities. And that's something that I think any CEO understands.

At Voya we talk about serving three constituents: our clients, our colleagues, and our communities. And this work to me is something that allows a CEO to lean in and really do right by the communities in which they live and work, their colleagues and the clients that they serve, as well as all other stakeholders.

Personally, I think it's just something that is a "no-regret" move for any company to lean in on full inclusion of people with disabilities and being a vocal supporter of the disability community.

Goga: Awesome. I don't know how much you know about *ABILITY Magazine*, but we've been around for over 30 years. We've been chronicling disability issues for decades, sharing the amazing spectrum of people's abilities. Our in-depth interviews with stakeholders include a long list of celebrities, elected officials, CEOs like you, and so many others who have shared fascinating stories with us.

Over the years, we've had a front row seat to the evolving disability landscape. With our distinct vantage point, we identified additional ways we could help the community. So, we've expanded our services to include abilityJOBS, a disability job board with thousands of job postings from employers committed to hiring people with disabilities.

We have developed an online virtual career fair platform that offers job seekers with disabilities the chance to meet one on one with recruiters. The platform has accessibility features, including an option for live video meetings, real-time captions, ASL interpreters when requested, screen-reader compatibility, etc. It's a really user-friendly platform. It does way more than other video meeting platforms can do. I'm so encouraged to hear about your workforce inclusion efforts, and just want to let you know that we're out here.

Lavallee: That is fabulous, thank you for sharing that. Early on, we realized that if we wanted to be leaders in inclusion, particularly on the hiring front, we had to have our recruiters train differently. Even pre-pandemic, when we were together in a room, we asked the question, "How do we make sure we have full accessibility? How do we really think through all of the potential barriers? How do we conduct accessible interviews? And if

we were talking to an interviewee with a neurodiverse background, do our recruiters know how to ask the right questions?

So frankly, it's organizations like yours that help companies like Voya and all of the others really figure out how do we move forward? As you well know, just because you get somebody into the workforce doesn't mean you've necessarily created an environment where they can succeed and be fully included. It is a work effort on both sides. I just feel so fortunate to have organizations like yours, like The Harkin Institute and Easteseals that bring all of this know-how to the table. It makes me think about the saying, "A rising tide raises all boats," and that's what we can do collectively to drive greater disability inclusion.

Goga: That's so true.

Lavallee: And knowing the statistics today, that 20 million Americans with disabilities who could be employed but are not employed today. We know there is still a lot of work to do, and Voya wants to absolutely play our part in that effort.

Goga: That's so great to hear. If I may just briefly share my own background. I am legally blind and was out of the workforce for a good while. I could no longer drive, and I started to put a lot of limits on myself that weren't really there. But, I participated in one of the ABILITY virtual job fairs, and they hired me. It's been great. I haven't looked back since. And I feel like I have value again. Knowing that there are organizations like ABILITY and like Voya that are willing to give people like me a chance is wonderful.

Lavallee: Thank you for sharing your story. For me, this is a personal passion. My father-in-law, who has since passed away, was hit by a car overseas and spent the next 23 years in a wheelchair. The accident happened when he was probably in his late 50s, early 60s. Everybody has different journeys. I just think that it's a little bit of the more you know and seek to understand, the more you can help with appropriate modifications, to create an amazing work environment for somebody. And I often feel like every individual with disability I meet often has the desire to work and the fulfillment and the commitment. I'm always thinking, jeez, I wish we had so many more individuals like that who just couldn't be happier to be in the workforce.

Goga: Yes, I never thought of it specifically about myself, but now being sort of immersed in the disability support and representation space, I've heard people describe people with disabilities as usually being great problem solvers. After all, we face challenges every day that people who are fully able do not have to. And it hit me that I'm often not even really aware of my own problem-solving skills. I make adjustments and create new solutions every day to compensate for my low vision. Those problem-solving skills can be applied to a lot of different areas. I can't help but think that companies and organizations would benefit from the kind of creative thinking and resilience that many people with disabilities could bring to their new job.

Lavallee: I couldn't agree more.

Goga: You mentioned your recent trip to DC for disability advocacy, and I know that Voya was a sponsor of The Harkin Institute Disability Summit event earlier this year. Do you do those regularly throughout the year with different nonprofits or I'm just curious how you got involved with that particular event?

Lavallee: Yeah, that's a great question. I was actually with the president and CEO of Easterseals yesterday. At Voya, we try to focus on building deeper partnerships with a smaller number of organizations in the space. We feel like we can go more deeply with them, but it doesn't mean as we come across other organizations that we won't have more partnerships.

With the Harkin Institute, of course how can you not be mesmerized by Senator Harkin and his long history of advocacy, being at the forefront of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act? And so that was an opportunity that came to us a few years ago, starting with a white paper on disability inclusion and really focusing on the investor community and why it should matter to investors. So, after we engaged with them, my predecessor, Rod Martin spoke at a conference in Ireland a year or two ago with Senator Harkin. And so, like many of these, they develop a personal relationship, and then we look for other opportunities to come together and partner.

We're also working with Easterseals now. We did a white paper on employment extenders, we were really looking at older workers and different challenges they face. We may also lean in with a focus on the veteran community.

Our not-for-profit partnerships involve a very strategic perspective. We're asking, "What are the goals we're trying to accomplish? What's the reach? How are we going to do it? What's the goal of that not-for-profit organization? How do we partner together and advance an initiative?"

Easterseals is really the largest not-for-profit with on-the-ground assistance for individuals with disabilities and veterans. As a 100-year-old organization, we know we can spend a little bit of time and we brainstorm on where we could go with this partnership. It really depends on what the priorities are, is it workforce inclusion? What legislative priorities they may have? Are there things that we are trying to advance, like a specific group like veterans, people with intellectual disabilities, etc.



Lavallee, left, with Sen. Tom Harkin, and guests of Voya and the CEO Commission for Disability Employment ring the closing bell NYSE Aug 2022

That's really how we tend to think about partnerships. And the last thing I'll say is we actually have a team, a center of excellence, our "Voya Cares" team, a small but very mighty team. They really manage those not-for-profit partnerships and put together strategic plans with them that are usually six to 18 months out. And we're just very thoughtful around what are they trying to accomplish, how does it align with what we're trying to do? And we put together very thoughtful plans.

As a matter of fact, when I was in DC, we were a founding partner of something called the CEO Commission. And it was a partnership started with NDSS, SHRM (the Society for Human Resource Management) and Voya to bring in other like-minded partner organizations, whether they're not-for-profits, whether they're employers, to focus on workplace inclusion and competitive wages. We started that a few years ago, and sometimes it's an amalgamation of different partners.

So, when I was on the Hill, we were focused on a few legislative priorities, but some of the partner organizations were The Harkin Institute and Easterseals. So that's a little bit and I apologize, I'm kind of going on a little bit, but we think there's a great opportunity for collaboration between different organizations and different not-for-profits.

Goga: I agree. And I neglected to mention that Senator Harkin had been a contributor to *ABILITY Magazine* for over 14 years. He's been a great resource and friend to our organization.

Lavallee: That's very cool. Organizations like yours help us to all understand.

Goga: So true.

Lavallee: We make sure we're looking at the world through the most comprehensive lens as possible. And as you said with your online job fair, there's a lot of things that, again, when we first started, we didn't know what we didn't know. And we needed help from organizations like yours and others to really challenge our thinking and advance it to make sure we were as inclusive as possible. And we're not done. It's a journey. There's still a lot more that we as an organization continue to learn and lean into as the world evolves. ■ ABILITY

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Vashkar Bhattacharjee of YPSA and Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina

An Accessible Revolution:

Vashkar Bhattacharjee, the Birth of Inclusive Digital Bangladesh

Perhaps no other person has done more to build an inclusive digital Bangladesh than Vashkar Bhattacharjee. Working directly with the Aspire to Innovate (a2i) program, initiated by the Prime Minister's Office, as a national consultant for the Digital Bangladesh Initiative, Vashkar spearheaded a massive overhaul of the country's sprawling digital infrastructure. "Our government runs the largest web portal in the world," he told *ABILITY Magazine*, "with more than 33,000 websites connected to a single central hub." Thanks to Vashkar and his team, all 33,000 websites are now accessible for persons with disabilities, as are more than 200 government e-services.

With such robust online infrastructure comes an equally substantive digital divide. "For persons with access to technology," Vashkar explained, "Bangladesh has almost everything. But many persons don't have access, especially persons with disabilities. They might not have computers in their homes, or smartphones, or even electricity. This is something we must work to change."

Vashkar, who served as an accessibility consultant for the United Nations Development Programme, Bangladesh in 2013, has since drafted Bangladesh's National Web Accessibility Guidelines in accordance with the international W3C 2.0 Standard, led a tremendous, country-wide push to convert written materials to accessible formats, and pioneered a disability-inclusive education initiative that's responsible for making one of Bangladesh's top universities inclusive for persons with disabilities. All these achievements have been tied to personal experience, of course, but none more so than the last. The University of Chittagong, now Bangladesh's first disability-inclusive institution of higher learning, is Vashkar's alma mater, despite once denying him admission because he is blind.

To be fair to the University of Chittagong, they weren't the only ones to stonewall Vashkar. "I tried to enter many universities," he said, "but they all refused my application. Some other visually impaired applicants and I began a hunger strike. Suddenly, the University of Chittagong decided to let us in!"

Getting through the door was but the first of many hurdles. The faculty had never taught students with visual impairments, and many still labored under the impression that persons with disabilities are nothing but a burden on society, unable to become productive citizens. "One day," recalled Vashkar, "I was taking notes on my Braille slate, and the professor thought I was playing games. He told me to stand up and leave the room. I complained to the head of the department, who called the professor to his office. He was shocked when I read my Braille notes back to him. He thought it was magic!"

Even before arriving at the university, Vashkar had grown accustomed to navigating disabling attitudes. Born in 1979 in the remote, southeastern village of Bagdondi, Chittagong, he'd gone to a primary school for children with visual impairments, but attended junior high and high school with his sighted peers. "My family was very frustrated by the lack of resources," he remembered. "My father was a civil servant, my mother is a housewife, and both are well educated. When I was two years old and they discovered I was blind, they resolved to do everything in their power to support me. But this idea was rare."

In those days, Bagdondi didn't even have physicians or hospitals, much less accessible education facilities. After an extended period of searching, Vashkar's father finally met an eye doctor who told him of a primary school for blind children in Chittagong. For junior high, however, he had no choice but to attend the mainstream school. "There were no Braille books and very few Braille papers or writing frames," he said. "The teachers didn't know how to teach me." High school brought more of the same. Because of these experiences, Vashkar entered the University of Chittagong with his armor on.

Now, thanks to his efforts, the university has introduced a quota system, removing barriers to enrollment and reserving places for students with disabilities. Accessible reading materials are available, as are fellowships for students with disabilities and over 300 free online courses, which students can access through MuktoPaath, a self-directed digital learning platform. Students with disabilities can also avail themselves of university computers and smartphones and receive training on how to use them.

In addition to policy changes and material resources, Vashkar also provides guidance and education to the Association of Students with Disabilities, a student group active on the University of Chittagong campus. The group has received training on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)—"Bangladesh," Vashkar noted proudly, "was the first country to sign and ratify the treaty with all the optional protocols"—as well as the Bangladeshi Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protections Act of 2013. In addi-

tion to these legal tools, training underscores effective methods of advocacy and activism.

"Today," said Vashkar, "no student should go through what I went through at the university. This is very important to me."

Vashkar's difficulties didn't end with graduation. "I finished my MA in general history," he said, "and then, for some time, I was unemployed." Few Bangladeshis with disabilities have access to education, fewer still enter the workforce—"Most," Vashkar noted, "end up begging on the street"—and even those who do find jobs tend to get relegated to specific roles and sectors. Those with visual impairments, for example, usually become instructors in schools for the blind, or else work with international NGOs. This dynamic breeds a vicious cycle of ignorance and exclusion. Most domestic employers have no experience hiring or supervising persons with disabilities, and hence no reason to question the stereotype that persons with disabilities cannot work. Even as Bangladesh makes massive strides toward legal protection and digital inclusion for persons with disabilities, the job market remains supersaturated with disabling attitudes.

Eventually, Vashkar realized that simply having a degree wouldn't land him a job. For that, he would need technological skills. He began researching opportunities and, in 2002, secured a place in the Duskin Leadership Training Program, a Japan-based initiative that serves young persons with disabilities in Asia and the Pacific who aspire to leadership roles. "That was a turning point in my life," said Vashkar. "I came to understand my purpose: in a nutshell, to make services inclusive and accessible for persons with disabilities."

After finishing the program in 2003, he began volunteering with Young People in Social Action (YPSA), an organization based in Chittagong, developing computerized Braille production and enabling more efficient printing and distribution of Braille materials. In 2005, he was introduced to the Digital Accessible Information System (DAISY) Consortium and became an international trainer, teaching others how to the use digital assistive technologies. He brought DAISY to Bangladesh and, with support from the national Service Innovation Fund of a2i, per the Prime Minister's Office, began converting textbooks to multimedia digital talking books. From this format, they can be converted to accessible e-books or digital Braille books, which in turn can be printed and distributed with relative ease.

"When my elder daughter was in grade one," he said, "she would come to me asking for help with her reading. She was getting only printed books from the school, so of course I couldn't help her. Now, we have books that we can read together."

Because of this initiative, all Bangladeshi textbooks used in classes one through 12 have now been converted to accessible formats. Bangla-language e-reading software has also been developed, as has the country's first accessible dictionary—critical infrastructure for Bangladeshis who don't speak English and are visually impaired. For this work, Vashkar has received no shortage of accolades and media attention, racking up approximately one national or international award per year between 2014 and 2021. "Search my name in Bangla or in English on any search engine, and you will find hundreds, maybe thousands of articles," he said. "Even, I'm the first person with a disability to serve in an advisory capacity to the Bangladeshi Prime Minister's Office. This makes a big difference. Having access to policymakers enables us to do a great deal more."

In recent years, Vashkar has continued his efforts to build out Bangladesh's digital infrastructure and make more resources available for persons with disabilities. "We must have accessible platforms for knowledge exchange so we can learn from one another," he said. To this end, he's currently developing e-commerce platforms, enabling thousands of entrepreneurs with disabilities to connect with each other and build partnerships across national borders.

Since the advent of COVID-19, Vashkar has helped make health-related information and services accessible for persons with disabilities in the form of a national helpline. "It's been very difficult for us," he reflected. "Many students with disabilities only can access technology at the university, and now we're confined to our homes. People used to happily help us cross the road, but these days, nobody approaches anybody. Persons with disabilities sometimes don't know where to go in case of illness, or which medical professionals will treat us well. Now, though," he added, "we are feeling more confident as more people are vaccinated."

Vashkar still works with YPSA in an advisory capacity, a responsibility he balances with many other roles and affiliations, as well as family life. He's happily married with "two lovely daughters," who are six and 14, and the Bhattacharjee family lives in Chittagong District, in the bustling coastal city of the same name. Vashkar continues to conduct accessibility audits and publish reports, research and articles on national and international platforms, and he's passing on his passion for disability advocacy to his daughters. "She loves to help my colleagues with disabilities however she can," he said proudly of his elder daughter. "At school, she's befriended all the children with disabilities. We celebrate her birthdays with people from the disabled community. The children see that I'm blind, that I do all these things, that it's normal. This is how we build a better future in which persons with disabilities enjoy the same rights as every other human being." ■ ABILITY

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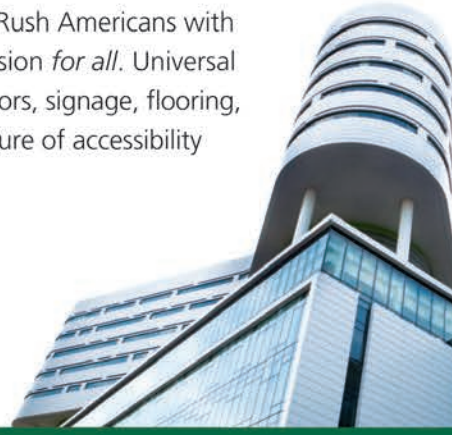
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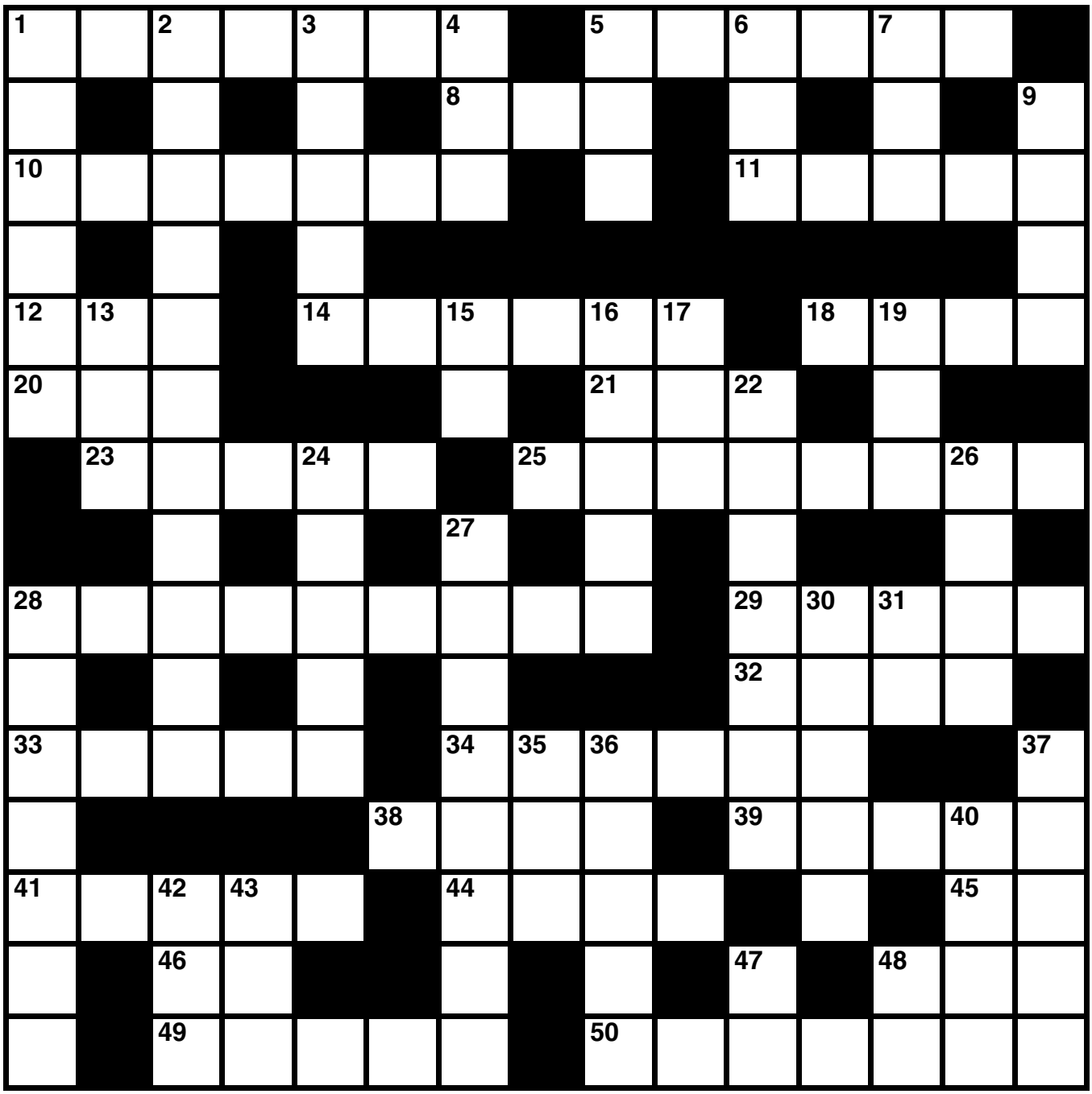
When helping to design the new hospital, leadership and members of the Rush Americans with Disabilities Act Task Force had as a guiding principle: accessibility and inclusion *for all*. Universal design was applied to every detail, including elevators, entrances, ramps, doors, signage, flooring, tables, chairs, lifts, equipment, bathrooms and much more. It's how the future of accessibility should be. To learn more, visit **transforming.rush.edu/universal**.

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ACROSS

1. Actress, model and influencer fighting ALS, Lauren _____
5. Motocross rider who is deaf, _____ Fiolek
8. Big coffee pot
10. Determination
11. Actress who played in NBC's "The Good Place" who is renowned advocate for disability rights, Jameela _____
12. Cool down
14. Key concern in rights for people with disabilities
18. "Rocket Man" singer, last name
20. Road cover
21. Umpire's cry
23. Detective comedy drama starring James Rodriquez
25. Film directors who regularly include disabled actors and actresses in their films, Peter and Bobby ____
28. 2023 sports comedy drama based on a basketball team consisting only of people with disabilities
29. She won Best Actress in Million Dollar Baby, Hilary ____
32. Part of a deck
33. Pondered deeply
34. U.S. Surgeon General who really cares about people's health and wellbeing, Vice Admiral Vivek _____
38. At this place
39. Emotion that may need "management"
41. Paraplegic actor who won a Primetime Emmy Award in Out standing Informational Special for his film "Without Pity: A Film about Abilities"
44. Number of cat lives
45. Italian river
46. Nickel, abbreviation
48. Kitten sound
49. English actor, TV presenter, writer, comedian and producer who is co-founder of Little People UK
50. Global Down Syndrome CEO Michelle Sie ____

DOWN

1. Singer of "All my Ex's live in Texas" George _____
2. Organization dedicated to ensuring the needs of children and adults with disabilities, 2 words
3. Champion and reviver of the Media Access Awards, Deborah ____ (Chair of the Diversity Committee of the Producers Guild of America)
4. Remorse
5. "No Time to Die" actress, ___ de Armas
6. Uris novel, with "The"
7. Freddy Krueger's street
9. German Sesame Street's first muppet with a disability
13. Baseball headgear
15. Commanding Officer, for short
16. Flies high
17. Big ___, Calif.
19. Lubricate
22. One of the most successful paralympic athletes of all time. _____ Zorn
24. Cherubic archer of love
26. Touch down
27. Issues an appreciation to
28. Director of the Avatar series of films, James _____
30. Batman's alter ego
31. Mena's state
35. Spoon bender
36. Revive
37. Millie ___: partially deaf actress awarded for her role as Eleven in Netflix's "Stranger Things"
40. Fencing sport
42. Finale
43. By way of
47. 50th state, abbr.
48. Mountain, for short

answers on page 74

Crossword Puzzle

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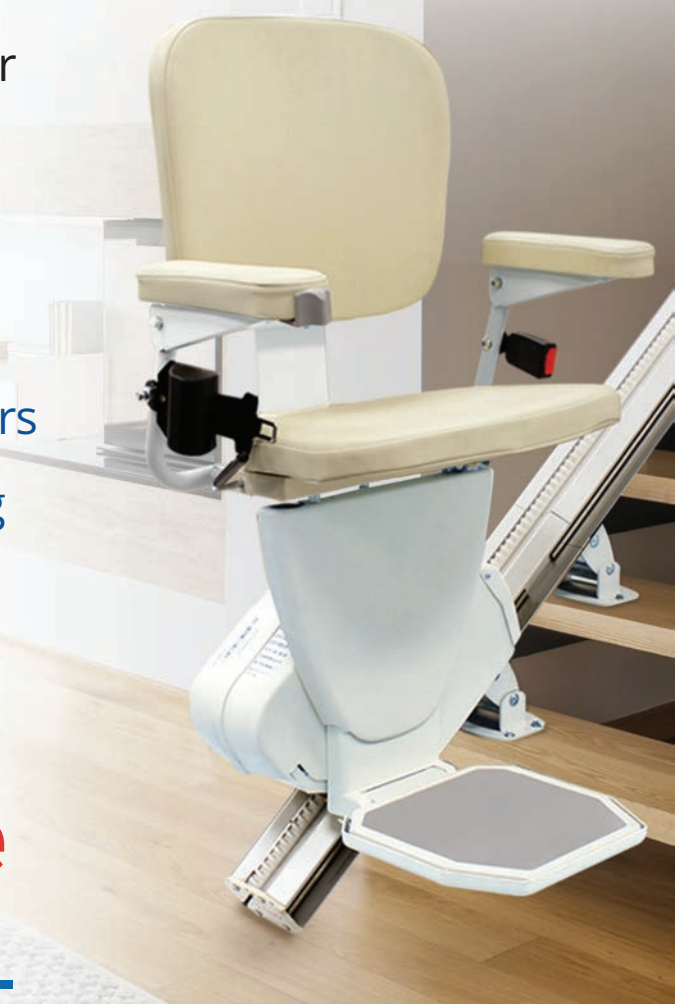
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- For the tenth consecutive year, readers of ***CAREERS & the disABLED*** magazine recognized Wells Fargo as one of 2021's Top 50 Employers of people with disabilities.
- ***Equal Opportunity*** magazine ranks Wells Fargo No. 15 on the 30th Annual Top 50 Employers 2021 list.



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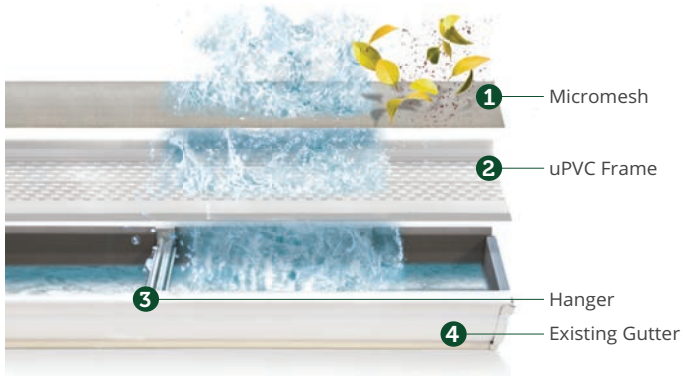
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