

[Audio episode](#)

[00:00:19.940] - Christina Raia

Hey, I'm Christina Raia. Welcome to Breaking Out of Breaking In, a practical filmmaking podcast about taking your creative career into your own hands and making great work to get seen without playing the Hollywood game.

[00:00:29.030] - Bri Castellini

Or at least, well, changing the rules. Hi, I'm Bri Castellini, your other co-host. Today, we are launching our Representation Matters mini-series, talking to writers about how better on and off-screen diversity and inclusion matters to artists and audiences alike. We start with our largest episode yet with guest David Radcliff, Shea Mirzai, Jamey Perry of the WGA Disabled Writers Committee.

[00:00:50.630] - Bri Castellini

Before we dive in, we do want to remind you that we have a free monthly creative inspiration newsletter which you can sign up for and find at the bottom of our website, breakingoutpod.com. But with our biggest episode yet, I don't want to waste any more time. Welcome to the WGA Disabled Writers Committee. Who are you and what are you currently writing on, everyone? We'll start with Jamey.

[00:01:14.480] - Jamey Perry

Sure. My name is Jamey Perry. I'm a TV writer. I'm not currently on a show. I sold two shows to NBC last year that I'm just wrapping up the development of and waiting to hear decisions on. Just trying to maybe come up with something to pitch for development season this year.

[00:01:33.660] - Bri Castellini

Amazing. We'll do Shea next and then end with David. I know when we have multiple people, sometimes everyone gets awkward about who goes first. It's my decision. Shea you're up.

[00:01:44.250] - Shea Mirzai

That's all right. Cool. Thanks so much for that sweet spot. All right. I'm Shea Mirzai. I happen to be a person who stutters. But I also am a feature and TV writer as well. I think if I had to pick between them, I would say I'm more of a feature writer, but I have staffed before. I think that's definitely a goal of mine to get back in another room.

[00:02:13.440] - Shea Mirzai

Right now, I'm currently out with a feature adaptation of a book, which is actually a really exciting thing for me because I've never actually done a novel adaptation before, so I'm very excited about that one. I'm also currently executive producing a one-hour drama with an ace PI writer set in Hawaii. I'm really excited about that whole process right now.

[00:02:44.550] - Bri Castellini

Very cool. David, what about you?

[00:02:47.220] - David Radcliff

David Radcliff, Co-chair of the Disabled Writers Committee. I'm also a steering committee member for the Think Tank for Inclusion and Equity; shout out to those folks. I was an alum of the Disney Writing Program and wrote on *The Rookie* during its first season and then wrote on *Waffles and Mochi* on Netflix, *Puppet Food Show* with Michelle Obama in it.

[00:03:07.710] - David Radcliff

I'm developing a couple different things, but I don't know what I can say about them. Then most recently, I wrote on an animated show on Disney Junior that's coming soon. That was a really special experience that I think is going to address maybe some of the things that we're talking about in this conversation today, so very excited to be here.

[00:03:25.050] - Jamey Perry

Also, I will just say, as the only one of us who has children, it is really fun to talk to my kids and be like, "My friend David wrote that episode you're watching." They're much more impressed by anything David has done than anything I have done.

[00:03:41.370] - Bri Castellini

I've heard that's common; kids are never impressed by their parents, even if they're extremely famous, but they're impressed by their parents' famous friends, which is lovely. Keeps you modest.

[00:03:52.710] - Jamey Perry

That's right.

[00:03:53.880] - Bri Castellini

You are all here as a group because you're all either the co-chairs in Shea and David's case or the vice... Or no, vice chairs?

[00:04:01.920] - Jamey Perry

You're correct.

[00:04:02.520] - Bri Castellini

Please talk to me about the Disabled Writers Committee. What is it? What is its function? How do the three of you approach your role? What distinguishes what the three of you do for the committee?

[00:04:15.180] - Shea Mirzai

I'll start off by this. Both myself and Jamey were recently elected in our past term. We join our former incumbent chair who's now currently co-chair, I guess, in David Radcliff. I really think he might be best at explaining this, but I would like to hammer home that in spite of our different titles, I think we all operate as a cohesive group and I think all of our opinions have equal weight. I would like to say that I wouldn't make a move without either of them because I think they're fantastic, except for David.

[00:04:57.690] - Bri Castellini

He's the old man. Who cares what David think? I guess he could do [crosstalk 00:05:01].

[00:05:01.110] - Jamey Perry

He's the status quo. We're the hot, young new thing, me and Shea.

[00:05:10.250] - Bri Castellini

Yeah, he's the old [crosstalk 00:05:06].

[00:05:10.400] - David Radcliff

Just took one year and I'm done.

[00:05:10.890] - Jamey Perry

No, but in reality, David has done an excellent job. He took over from a long-term chairman of the committee who did great work but was... David has come on and he's done a great job in the last year. Then Shea and I just came on to leadership in the past couple of months. David, do you want to do what our committee is?

[00:05:30.420] - David Radcliff

Sure. But first of all, I was going to say essentially the same thing, that I feel hopefully we have a nice balance between the three of us and it's been so exciting to have Shea and Jamey sharing leadership decisions and somebody to swap emails around with and decide, "Is this good messaging or is this a good idea to meet with so-and-so," and to have conversations like this is extra exciting.

[00:05:55.560] - David Radcliff

I came into the Guild, as Jamey said, after Allen Rucker had been chair of the committee for quite a while and had really helped birth what it was. In the past year, with COVID and everything, all of our meetings have been in Zoom, and one of the things that we miss is that in-person interaction, even though we also recognize that Zoom makes things, in some ways, a lot more equitable and a lot safer for disabled people, especially during COVID, but also in terms of writers rooms and everything like that.

[00:06:24.780] - David Radcliff

Equity is really at the center of a lot of what we talk about in the committee and across a lot of the DEI committees of the Guild, as you'll discover when you talk with other folks. One of the cool things about our group is that it really touches a lot of different facets of life and a lot of different experiences.

[00:06:39.890] - David Radcliff

What is accessible to me might not be fully accessible to Shea or Jamey or to a deaf member of our community. Keeping all those things top of mind is really very educational and exciting and, I think, a great benefit for the industry at large when we get them to a place where they're able to embrace all these different aspects of life.

[00:07:01.700] - David Radcliff

That's a big part of what we do, is have those tough discussions, bring in cool guests who are either very strong allies of the disabled community in different areas of the industry or are themselves disabled and are making change within the industry. This past year we had Jim Lebrecht come in, who was the Oscar-nominated co-director of *Crip Camp*, Kiera Allen, who starred in *Run*, DMA from the Disney Writing Program. We're trying to expose people to as many different voices as possible on both ends of the conversation, and also hopefully inculcate a culture where disability becomes a fuller part of the DEI spectrum. I want to thank both of you for having us in this conversation at all because usually, DEI doesn't extend to talk about ableism in any full way. Thank you so much.

[00:07:49.640] - Jamey Perry

I'll also say too, one of the great things about having Shea come on board too is that Shea is also part of the Middle Eastern Writers Committee and the LGBTQ+ Committee. We already know that the identity of disability is at the intersection of so many others. It's been nice to have Shea's input and also the connections that Shea has with those other communities.

[00:08:08.580] - Shea Mirzai

[inaudible 00:08:08], Jamey. I feel like that's a very valid point as well too because I think what's so special, for lack of a better word, about our group is that being disabled, it doesn't really exist in a bubble per se. I feel everyone who has a disability is already an inherently intersectional person as well.

[00:08:34.280] - Jamey Perry

Yeah, totally.

[00:08:35.840] - David Radcliff

Disability is so much a function of environment more than anything else. The disability itself, often for many of us that have lived with our disabilities for years and have grown in many cases to a sense of comfort with our disability-

[00:08:48.320] - Shea Mirzai

No.

[00:08:48.320] - David Radcliff

-sometimes the most-

[00:08:50.660] - Jamey Perry

But you're not comfortable with David's disability. That's different, Shea.

[00:08:53.720] - Shea Mirzai

[inaudible 00:08:53] my disability. [crosstalk 00:08:53].

[00:08:53.720] - Jamey Perry

It's so uncomfortable.

[00:09:01.730] - David Radcliff

Sometimes the most disabling thing is the perception of disability, not the disability itself. One of the strengths of having a committee where so many people have so many different types of disability is that it causes us all to check our own assumptions and privilege. The things that I might try to set up in a meeting, for example, as someone who can hear it might take half a second for me to think about, "Well,

what about our members who can't hear or who have low vision or something like that? How can we make..."

[00:09:31.700] - David Radcliff

That's why when we set up this interview, I asked about transcripts for podcast and that sort of thing because we do have deaf members that would love to jump on... You folks have to remind me that service that folks are using, that's basically like you get on a call in the industry and everybody chats.

[00:09:50.180] - Jamey Perry

Oh, Clubhouse?

[00:09:51.320] - Bri Castellini

Clubhouse.

[00:09:52.490] - Jamey Perry

Now it's Twitter Spaces.

[00:09:53.510] - David Radcliff

Clubhouse, yes. The thing with Clubhouse was we started to see all these people get on and learn the inside secrets of the business, but if you're deaf... Clubhouse doesn't transcribe any of its stuff, so that's just another barrier of entry for somebody who's deaf or has low hearing. These are the kind of things we think about.

[00:10:12.200] - Bri Castellini

No, that's great.

[00:10:13.190] - Jamey Perry

I'll also say, I'm the millionth person to make this observation, but it's always important, our community is the only marginalized community that any one of you could join at any moment. Maybe you're not disabled right now, but you could be in an hour or someone you really love could be. To me, it's so silly and self-sabotaging not to care about disability and the way that disability is represented because you live long enough and you will become disabled. That's a threat.

[00:10:48.110] - Bri Castellini

[crosstalk 00:10:48]. It's a very aggressive connotation.

[00:10:49.640] - Jamey Perry

Yes, I will disable you.

[00:10:55.700] - David Radcliff

That's part of the mindset shift too, and I think it's a mindset shift that all of us go through, whether born with your disability or acquiring it later, is thinking about the areas in which it becomes a positive thing in your life. For example, there's a low likelihood that I would have met anyone on this call if I weren't a disabled person, and there are a lot of valuable relationships in my life that are a function of me speaking up about something disability-related or looking out for someone else who needs assistance.

[00:11:26.210] - David Radcliff

It really does open up a whole other area of your life that ultimately leads to other stories too, and we don't see many of those stories on TV or in film. Or if we do, they're often written by non-disabled people who may think disability is still a sad thing.

[00:11:40.670] - Jamey Perry

Temporarily-able bodied [inaudible 00:11:42].

[00:11:45.950] - Shea Mirzai

I think David also makes a fantastic point there too, because there are a number of benefits as well, because, speaking for myself, I've always considered myself a person with a high level of patience and especially a high level of empathy because I really couldn't imagine who I would be if I didn't have a speech impediment like this, because it really informs a worldview.

[00:12:19.580] - Jamey Perry

Well, and that's interesting, too, because of the three of us, I'm the only one with an acquired disability. I wasn't disabled until about six years ago. I'm a paraplegic, but one of my first experiences when I landed in a wheelchair was getting to know a fellow disabled writer friend of ours, a woman named Katherine Beattie, who currently she's writing on NCIS. She took me out to the skate park and taught me WCMX, which is like skateboarding but for wheelchairs. My entry into the world of disability was blessedly without the taboo of looking at my wheelchair as a prison or I'm bound to it or... What I got to see it as pretty much immediately was wheels on my ass that could make me go really, really fast and provide a lot of fun and thrill at a time in my life where I was looking for that, looking for a chance to live again.

[00:13:14.630] - Jamey Perry

I know a lot of people who haven't had that experience and I feel bad for them. Or they go 10 years, 20 years before they have an experience of the freedom, the joy, the positive aspects of it. To me, aside from WCMX and all those things, the number one boon of being disabled is the disabled community, being part of a family, and realizing that we are a culture unto ourselves.

[00:13:39.350] - Jamey Perry

Just like any other sort of marginalized group, we have shared values and norms and language, and being embraced by that family of disabled people was something that was really magical and special for me. It was not something that I was born with or grew up with. That's been lovely.

[00:13:57.050] - Bri Castellini

Very found family trope. [crosstalk 00:13:59] talking to writers here.

[00:14:02.600] - David Radcliff

I was just going to say, hopefully, the committee itself also provides some of that in the sense that, I think, at last count, we are openly disabled people because there are a lot of disabled people who don't have these candid conversations. Some of whom are executives who I've met who've said, "Between us, I have X, Y, Z condition, and if I disclose it, it could harm my career. Should I disclose it or not?" That's some overlap that we see in solidarity with the LGBTQ community, is that question of disclosure.

[00:14:32.780] - Shea Mirzai

Yes, exactly. I wanted to talk about that, too.

[00:14:34.580] - David Radcliff

Hopefully, the committee is a place of empathy because at last count, openly disabled people are only 0.6% of the Guild, which doesn't mean that there are very few disabled people who want the write. It means that there are sometimes visibly physical barriers of entry and sometimes systemically bias-driven barriers of entry.

[00:14:59.000] - David Radcliff

We get hit from both sides because you might get past some of the bias barriers to get into the business at first, and then you get on set and you realize, "Oh, wow! Nothing here is set up the way that I maybe prefer. Who are my allies in this space to figure out the best way to be my best self?"

[00:15:16.190] - David Radcliff

Also, on the other end of that, I think there's a lot of framing around disability as a deficit, and I think that carries over into production. People think about hiring a disabled person and they think about, "Well, this is going to add more time," or the patience question that Shea brought up. But what my friend, Caitlin Young, who is in a power chair and she runs her own post-production company, and she's found that when she's on set and they put ramps everywhere where their post-production [inaudible 00:15:45], the crew saves two hours because the crew is using those ramps too. It's actually a net benefit to have more disabled people and more disability accommodation in these spaces. But nobody talks about that except disabled people.

[00:16:02.410] - Bri Castellini

That's absolutely interesting.

[00:16:05.000] - Shea Mirzai

I think there were also two extremely good points that my friend David has brought up here. I think the first being that the population numbers in our Guild, which is 0.6% or something like that. I would like to also add that in our Middle Eastern committee that's also been established, it's around a figure of 0.3%. It really is small numbers on both sides, but it also does speak to the fact that in our general population numbers, about one in four people have a disability themselves.

[00:16:47.540] - Shea Mirzai

I think we've already discussed how there are multiple ways for this to happen, whether it's a congenital disability issue or a later-in-life event, an accident or an inborn just health issues, or something like that. I think my final point here is that while as much of our committees are actively working on this, our overall employment numbers still are absolutely abysmal. But it does seem that they are at least getting better.

[00:17:24.050] - Jamey Perry

I will say too, I think, what I always explain to people as the most galling aspect of that underrepresentation is that it's not as though Hollywood doesn't like our stories. It's not as if they're not always giving themselves Oscars for telling such a great story about disabled people. It's like you like the content, you just don't like... It's like, you like the disabled story, but you don't like disabled people.

[00:17:48.920] - Jamey Perry

You don't want to cast a disabled person, you don't want to have a disabled writer, you certainly don't want to have disabled crew. That to me, like I said, is the most galling aspect that we're 25% of the population, we're 0.6% of the Writers Guild. But there's really wild statistics about how often you are likely to win an Oscar if you play someone with a disability. Of course, if you are not also disabled yourself because they don't like that.

[00:18:19.670] - Bri Castellini

Sure. Well, let's talk about that because that's obviously a big part of conversations, about like #representationmatters. But can the three of you talk about either specific examples or observations that you've made about why it is so important to have actual people who have lived experience, not only portray disabled people, in this example, but also write for them?

[00:18:43.790] - Jamey Perry

David, you had a great tweet about this this morning.

[00:18:48.170] - David Radcliff

I did. I won't share the specifics of the conversation I had, but I had a pretty extensive conversation with an actor recently who had been in this scenario many times before. It's a scenario that a lot of disabled people in this industry experience where they're brought on to consult, meaning, "Hey, tell us about your experience with your disability. What was it like growing up? Tell us the horror stories of how X, Y, Z, or the great stories." They soak all that up and maybe give you a little check, no credits-

[00:19:19.790] - Jamey Perry

Of course not.

[00:19:20.110] - David Radcliff

-necessarily. Credits, as I'm sure everybody here knows, credits are how you build other opportunities in the business. A lot of disabled writers on the writer's side of things are still lower-level writers, including the co-chair of the Disabled Writers Committee. I have to walk a line of being deferential and keeping my head down but also speaking up.

[00:19:41.360] - David Radcliff

But anyway, so I had this interesting conversation with this actor, and it's some variation of conversation I'd had a bunch before, and it's frustrating because it doesn't lead to further opportunities for that actor. If that actor is just there to tell me your story, we'll repackage it in some other form, and see you later.

[00:20:00.950] - Jamey Perry

Specifically, David, what you were saying about... It's not a topic you would want you want...

[00:20:07.850] - David Radcliff

Oh, sorry.

[00:20:10.130] - Jamey Perry

No, the other part was good, too.

[00:20:13.940] - David Radcliff

I always say it's not a technical skill. Disability is not a technical skill. If you want to call someone that wrote on a cop show... I know how the cop side of things in this business works. They have someone on set who's a technical consultant for like, "This is how you clear a room, or hold your gun this way, or approach the car this way." Lots of cool things that you learn. That's technical consulting.

[00:20:34.880] - David Radcliff

That is not what the disability experience needs because disability in ways similar to race, or gender, or sexuality is a lived experience with all that that entails. To Jamey's earlier point, there is a certain culture of disability. Even within the broader disability culture, there's deaf culture. I wouldn't expect to be an expert on deaf... Don't call me in to be an expert on deaf culture.

[00:21:02.210] - David Radcliff

I think the industry needs to move away from the idea that disability is a technical skill and more to think of it as the underrepresented community, lived community that it is. That way we can get more people into more spaces to do impactful work and then gain credits and credibility and rights, so we don't have so many disabled writers and actors just scrambling for like, "Maybe I can be an extra in the background of something somewhere sometime."

[00:21:33.560] - Shea Mirzai

I think I want to take a little bit of a step back here, because what we're talking about here actually has a name. This is a practice called doing a sensitivity read. I very much feel that that's just a nice way of saying, "Hey, if we're able to put a disabled person's name on this, then obviously, the show is all good."

[00:21:59.660] - Bri Castellini

The professional equivalent of, "I have a Black friend, that's why I can say the N-word."

[00:22:05.530] - Shea Mirzai

I think a better way to stop these is essentially hire a person who's able to write this story from the ground up. You wouldn't even have to have a sensitivity read because it already starts off as a very authentic piece of work.

[00:22:24.290] - Bri Castellini

I also think that sensitivity reading is such a tricky concept, in general, because, obviously, even within any lived experience, there is so much diversity. How one person experiences a true thing and feel something is sensitive or not is going to be completely different.

[00:22:40.610] - Jamey Perry

You see it on Twitter. You see it when people get upset about something on Twitter and the showrunner or whomever producer gets on and says, "Well, we had so-and-so consult on it, and they said it was fine." It's so frustrating when it's working at odds with what the larger disabled community or the disabled activists are... The line that they're pushing.

[00:23:01.460] - David Radcliff

Also, you have to wonder why they're saying it's fine. They might be saying it's fine because they want to foster a strong relationship with you for the next opportunity. They're not going to tell you... If they're a lower-level writer who's just trying to break in or sustain momentum in the industry, they're not going to say, "Actually, you got a lot wrong here."

[00:23:19.790] - David Radcliff

Also, part of the reason that they might not do that is because the process has moved so far down the track already that they're really only coming to you shortly before they go into production. They want this they want you to say it's okay, and so sometimes people do.

[00:23:34.160] - Jamey Perry

You could say, "Oh, it's a quadriplegic, not a paraplegic," changing a line of dialog. But you can't say, "Why have this character have a miracle cure?" But the entire project is based on this arc of a miracle cure. It's baked in at that point.

[00:23:49.880] - Jamey Perry

I also will say, on the positive side of it, I have found, at least when you do have disabled people writing on something, working on a project, we can go to more exciting and interesting places, places where, if I was writing a character of a different race, I'm not going to leap into the hot button parts of that. It's not my experience. I want to be respectful, and I don't want to speak out of turn.

[00:24:14.300] - Jamey Perry

But when you actually have people who live that identity, who own that identity working on something, you can get into trickier, more interesting things because it's coming from the person who holds that identity

themselves. Certainly, there can be lots of debate and there always is within these communities, and certainly, the disabled community is no exception. But being able to have real conversations is something that is valuable when you actually have disabled people writing for you.

[00:24:43.370] - Shea Mirzai

Yes. I think there is also a final part of this as well because I think David had mentioned that with regard to a sensitivity read that there's a lot of writers or whoever who actually can't speak their mind in fear of not being able to get the next job. But I have heard stories just from my elder Middle Eastern writer friends who have been asked to consult and have spoken their mind and said that this stuff is not working. Then eventually, they are never heard from again.

[00:25:22.310] - Jamey Perry

Did you call the cops, Shea?

[00:25:23.410] - Shea Mirzai

They spoke a little bit about this. I meant that their notes are never heard from again. It's basically, "Okay, a writer was brought in, our sensitivity read is done. It obviously didn't go great. But hey, at least we tried."

[00:25:42.170] - Bri Castellini

We had one.

[00:25:43.100] - Jamey Perry

Hand the notes to legal so that we crossed our T's and dotted our I's.

[00:25:49.490] - David Radcliff

As is the case for a lot of underrepresented communities, there's the "We couldn't find the right person. We gave it a good college try. We just couldn't find a talented disabled writer." The interesting thing now from where I'm sitting in the Guild is I know when I hear that stuff. I know whether that place has reached out.

[00:26:08.780] - David Radcliff

Obviously, if you're making a good-faith effort to look for a disabled writer, one place you might check is the Disabled Writers Committee at the Writers Guild of America West.

[00:26:15.770] - Bri Castellini

It's almost like [inaudible 00:26:15].

[00:26:19.880] - David Radcliff

There's an easy way to find out if they actually check things out. I also want to emphasize I don't think anyone in our community is interested in dragging a particular project. We're actually there to help. We also understand, as working writers, the precariousness of various projects and all the notes that come in and studio and network or development execs, and so on.

[00:26:48.710] - David Radcliff

I think there's a difference between talking to disabled people who really want to break in but haven't versus those that have broken in and done the work. Because once you are on the other side of these conversations, you start to see why people get... Everyone retreats to what they know already and what has been safe and what has been proven. We're all going to work with the same people we've worked with before, so on, and so forth.

[00:27:09.440] - David Radcliff

Our committee is full of professional writers with disabilities that are available to help and work.

[00:27:16.820] - Shea Mirzai

I think a final thought there is that I don't think any of us are in the business of shaming other people. I will certainly say that there are a few things out there that actually must be shamed, sure. But I think we're very interested in having much more of an open approach, where these executives or people who are making these other shows and films, it serves everyone. It's a lot better if there is an open-door policy.

[00:27:50.960] - Bri Castellini

I think that's important. I'm curious because, obviously, your committee has so many wide-reaching implications and has so many members with very different experiences. Even the three of you have wildly different experiences, have different needs in a room and on set. How are you making sure that you are balancing all of the disparate needs of a allegedly single community when, obviously, you could probably all agree that there's a wider diversity even within your community than in probably many of the other Guild committees?

[00:28:25.310] - Shea Mirzai

First of all, I think David would probably be able to make a better answer to this question. But a major point that I really want to hammer home is that having a fully accessible room or making sure that a writer's accommodations are met. A lot of these asks are very tiny. It's like having a way to get upstairs or having a showrunner, in my case, it was actually just wanting to hear me pitch all my ideas that it actually

might take a bit longer, but I basically just really only needed extra levels of patience and maybe for people to think that I make funny jokes. It's basically it.

[00:29:11.030] - Jamey Perry

It's all we want is validation for our funny jokes and a little bit of patience.

[00:29:16.130] - David Radcliff

In terms of balancing the community for everybody, to be totally candid, it's always a work in progress. There are times when we'll be in the middle of holding a Zoom meeting, and I get a message from someone that... As you can see on this video call, the lighting in my apartment is not ideal. Sometimes for meetings, I'll bring in more lights because I'll get a message from someone saying, "I can't read your lips," someone who has low hearing. Those are things that I have to be aware of and adjust to.

[00:29:47.390] - David Radcliff

It goes back to the empathy point that Shea made earlier. I think by bringing more disabled people into these spaces... I don't think disabled people... This is at risk of massive generalization, but I think that there's a stronger aptitude to figuring out how can I be helpful? Am I going to take offense at the fact that you need something?

[00:30:10.580] - David Radcliff

I think that a lot of non-disabled people, their initial trigger is "Well, I tried," or "Why are you mad at me?" Whereas if you're someone talking to a disabled person, hopefully, that pivot is a little bit quicker because at least for me, I feel like it takes more to offend my delicate sensibilities if someone needs a little help. That's fine.

[00:30:38.240] - David Radcliff

But it's a conscious decision to make spaces equitable. But it's a necessary one, especially as COVID is going to change a lot of people's lives in rapid time. People are going to come around with disabilities that didn't have them before. We're all going to need to be a little bit more empathetic of each other and towards ourselves.

[00:30:55.790] - Jamey Perry

I never want to get into super cripp territory, but I will say that because I was able-bodied most of my life and then I became disabled about six years ago, I have seen how my approach to life entirely has changed. I've seen the benefits of a new way of thinking about things. When you are in a situation where your body is suddenly outside of the norm that it used to be within, you didn't have to think about, "How am I going to grocery shop? How am I going to drive a car?" You didn't have to think about those things

because they were just givens. Then you find yourself in the situation where you no longer know how to do anything, and you've got to rebuild that.

[00:31:39.430] - Jamey Perry

For me, and David talks about this a lot as well, singing the praises of disabled writers, we are people who know how to do that. Like I said, literally, I feel my brain has become more elastic and more flexible. It's a skill that transforms over from, "By the way, grocery shopping is not a problem. I thought I was going to problem. It's not a problem." Just know that you can push a cart with your one hand and push your wheel with the other. I learned from a disabled friend that you can do this serpentine motion and you can move the cart. Things that seemed impossible, or I guess I'm going to have to get my groceries delivered forever, and realizing, "Oh my gosh, the fix was so easy, but no one ever forced me to think of it before." That absolutely translates to my writing.

[00:32:24.580] - Jamey Perry

There are moments, where it's like, "I don't see how I can make this work." I'm like, "Well, I figured out grocery shopping. I know that there's an answer here, and I've just got to figure it out." I think, too, when a member of the committee says, "Hey, we need this." You're like, "Okay, great. Let's make it happen." I'm always so much more...

[00:32:40.690] - Jamey Perry

I think there's two types of people, and this is... I don't know. There's more than two types of people. This is one of those things. But I've noticed there are two distinct kinds of people when you come to them.

[00:32:52.930] - Jamey Perry

A few years ago, I wanted to go horseback riding. I have friends who do hippotherapy and do adaptive dressage. I've seen it all over the place. But I started calling these horse ranches up in Malibu. They were like, "What? What? Wait. Wait." They were so baffled by what I was asking. "Can I ride a horse at your stable?" They were like, "Oh, I don't know. The liability..." And then we end the call. Then I took a trip to Yellowstone later that year. The people in Montana, I was like, "Hey, I'm in a wheelchair. Can I ride your horse?" They were like, "Well, shoot. We never done that before. We might as well try." Those are my favorite kinds of people, and that's who I aspire to be. I think that's how my disability has changed me, that I'm one of those people who goes, "All right, let's figure it out." By the way, are we allowed to swear on this podcast because [crosstalk 00:33:48].

[00:33:48.850] - Christina Raia

Oh yeah.

[00:33:49.160] - Bri Castellini

Oh yeah, [crosstalk 00:33:49].

[00:33:50.890] - Jamey Perry

Oh God. Oh my God, here it comes. Here it comes. [crosstalk 00:33:52].

[00:33:56.560] - Bri Castellini

[crosstalk 00:33:53] part of our probably top-of-show thing, Chrisy and I. We got explicit tag on Apple Podcasts for sure.

[00:33:59.890] - David Radcliff

Nice.

[00:33:59.980] - Jamey Perry

That's fucking great.

[00:34:01.390] - David Radcliff

I want to start over. Can we start over from the top? Because I have a lot of things to add.

[00:34:05.620] - Jamey Perry

Oh, David, separately, just add all your cuss words right here like fuck, cunt. [crosstalk 00:34:10].

[00:34:13.030] - Bri Castellini

[crosstalk 00:34:13] recording with all of the words.

[00:34:12.910] - Jamey Perry

Then the editor will go back in and splice it into...

[00:34:16.870] - David Radcliff

[inaudible 00:34:16], sounds great.

[00:34:18.040] - Bri Castellini

We're a full-service production company.

[00:34:20.080] - Shea Mirzai

I love that. I wanted to piggyback off of all those excellent points because I maybe can't say this as well as Jamey just explained. But I think it goes back to a very basic thing about how necessity is the mother of invention. I would like to think that a lot of people who have a disability are always forced to work extra hard.

[00:34:51.940] - Shea Mirzai

I'll use myself as a personal example. As I speak with a stutter like this, I constantly have a stream of running words in my head, where if I anticipate a stutter or a silent block, I automatically have to think of a switch word I can use. I think that it actually is a huge part of the reason why I'd like to think that I developed a really large vocabulary because-

[00:35:23.080] - Jamey Perry

Yeah, you're a walking thesaurus.

[00:35:24.400] - Shea Mirzai

That's exactly what I am. But I have to be basically. I think that speaks to a much larger point as well, and this is based in stigmas and stereotypes. But a lot of able-bodied people always assume that a person with a disability is not as capable, or perhaps is not as smart. It's just a running stereotype about people who stutter are that they're dumb, or perhaps they're not as smart as the average person.

[00:35:57.160] - Shea Mirzai

I worked my ass off where I eventually became a straight-A student. I was on a master's degree at one point. I feel that the fact that we constantly have had to work a lot harder, it makes us extremely qualified for these jobs.

[00:36:17.180] - Bri Castellini

100%. Whenever I have these kinds of conversations, I always think of that *Modern Family* episode, where Christina Vergara... I don't know why I said Christina. Sofia Vergara, whose character gets upset about like, "Do you know how smart I sound in Spanish?" Because second-language speakers are constantly assumed to be less than. It's like, "Because I have to translate everything in my head from my native tongue." When you think two seconds, you're like, "Oh, wow. You're probably genius-level compared to most people."

[00:36:48.310] - Jamey Perry

Which especially the disdain coming from Americans who speak one language.

[00:36:52.450] - Bri Castellini

And barely that. Let's be honest. We're all on Twitter. We've seen the shit people are posting.

[00:37:00.140] - David Radcliff

To Shea's his point, which I think is great, there is a way to frame disability, as we have throughout this conversation for all these positive benefits. I think it's useful for writers when they interview for jobs. I've two quick thoughts on that. One is that when I interviewed for *The Rookie*, a lot of the conversation that I had with the showrunner, Alexi Hawley, was I don't know anything about police work. All I've learned from about police work, I've seen from other TV shows.

[00:37:28.910] - Jamey Perry

Colombo.

[00:37:29.560] - David Radcliff

Colombo mostly. But as I understand, this pilot, it's about someone who has to work twice as hard to get half as far because he's older than the other rookies. People wonder if he's up to the job, and so on, and so forth. He has to keep a smile on and keep his head down and whatever. I said, I have felt some version of that. As someone with cerebral palsy all my life, walking on my crutches with a group of friends, and suddenly, most of the group is eight feet ahead because they've found their own rhythm and their own conversation. Now I'm back with whoever decided to straggle behind.

[00:38:06.370] - Jamey Perry

Especially when you're in a pack of wheelchairs.

[00:38:11.410] - David Radcliff

The nice thing about moving with other folks in wheelchairs is we're all at the same height. I was at a film festival with a friend of mine who's a little person, and we were at the same height. We were able to have a conversation without me straining my neck to look up. Lots of benefits there.

[00:38:26.110] - David Radcliff

Also, I used to do some work with a brand strategy company, and there was an experience that I have that I've never forgotten, where I was doing some research of an HR message board for various corporations. Someone on this HR message board said, "Why would I hire someone with a disability when I can hire someone without one?" That's like, the cat's out of the bag. [crosstalk 00:38:52].

[00:38:52.590] - Bri Castellini

Mask off.

[00:38:55.650] - Jamey Perry

I will have to disable that person, though. I will.

[00:39:00.910] - Bri Castellini

We're building our criteria of when Jamey will come after you.

[00:39:03.790] - Jamey Perry

Exactly. I've got a list. I've got a list.

[00:39:06.190] - Bri Castellini

You better be taking notes, everyone.

[00:39:08.770] - David Radcliff

In some sense, you live for those moments because it's like you thought the frog was singing and dancing, but nobody else was seeing it. Now someone else just flat out says the frog is singing and dancing.

[00:39:21.150] - Jamey Perry

Saying a quiet fart out loud.

[00:39:24.400] - David Radcliff

But I remember that because... I mean, I didn't bother to write a response, but the response to that is, you don't know that the person who has the disability doesn't have extraordinary skill in one of the areas that you actually need. The fact that I can't walk doesn't impede my ability to write, or collaborate, or any of the things that we're discussing here today. All that it does is put me in positions where environments tend not to think about people me. That's a problem with the environment, not a problem with me.

[00:39:58.330] - Jamey Perry

I think that's like that's the... I know that the term has been associated with so many negative things, but that is the red pill moment for disability when you realize, "Oh, I'm not the problem. The built world around

me is the problem." These things are built by human beings and it would have been just as easy to make it an inclusive space as it is to make it inaccessible.

[00:40:26.080] - Jamey Perry

I also think disability is so contextual. To birds, all humans are very sad, inspirational, little disabled people because we can't fly. If you are hanging out with a bunch of bird friends and they're on the second floor and they're like, "Oh, sad, there's no stairs. Oh, sad he can't fly." I always think of that too, like when I'm at the skate park. I'll be at the skate park for a couple of hours, dropping in and shredding, doing some cool stuff. Then I go back to my car and I'm loading back into my car and a little old man will come up and say, "Missy, do you need some help?" I always think like, "Oh, man, I wish you'd seen me two minutes ago. You would never have asked me if I needed any help."

[00:41:09.490] - Jamey Perry

I even think about with my friends or Christina and Bri, okay, so if we're in a grocery store and I need something off a high shelf, then you're able-bodied and I'm disabled, but come with me to the skate park and we'll figure out who's disabled.

[00:41:26.560] - Bri Castellini

Also both Christina and I are very short, so I think people would actually [crosstalk 00:41:29].

[00:41:32.500] - Jamey Perry

Right. Well, we'll have to think of something else, then.

[00:41:36.910] - Jamey Perry

When we're talking about sets and things like that, again, that is built-world stuff and it is just as easy to not do it a crappy way. It's a little bit hard to take when a UPM says, "Oh, sorry, we can't accommodate a wheelchair." Oh, you mean in the replica in New York City that you built in the Iowa prairie, you couldn't possibly have put in a ramp? It's absurd on its face. It's just that you don't want to, and you don't see a need to. You're not getting any pressure from someone who might influence you to do it. Gosh, that's part of what we do with the Disabled Writers Committee. It's part of what Ty does, the Think Tank for Inclusion and equity and just reminding people... And the Inevitable Foundation has done some really great work in the space. They have an ad campaign right now that you may have seen. It's all over LA. It's at the Grove with the simple message that there is no diversity, equity, and inclusion without disability. Yeah, just reminding people that we're here.

[00:42:40.990] - David Radcliff

They also have the cost of accommodations report, which speaks directly to this. To Jamey's point, it doesn't cost... First of all, it's ideal to get it right from the beginning so you just build equal spaces from the start because retrofitting is-

[00:42:55.680] - Bri Castellini

That's probably where most of the cost comes from.

[00:42:58.870] - David Radcliff

-not as ideal as actually... Yeah, and it's not as ideal as doing it right the first time. But this cost of accommodations report from The Inevitable Foundation is the first of its kind report to basically go through the line item of how much would it cost to have someone with this particular disability. I wish I had the exact numbers in front of me, but the cost is very marginal.

[00:43:19.930] - Bri Castellini

I wrote it down. I'll make sure that we have a link to that.

[00:43:22.210] - David Radcliff

It's just the perception, and ironically, the perception is fed by the media we consume. If you don't see us in newsrooms and on TV and in writers' rooms and so on or characters on shows, then, of course, it feeds this perception as it did to me, as a disabled kid growing up, like, "Oh, well, maybe having a career or a family or traveling or any of these... Where am I supposed to go? What do I do? I guess I just sit in the dark and rock back and forth."

[00:43:50.260] - Bri Castellini

You can't be it if you can't see it [inaudible 00:43:51] brought up a lot in these conversations.

[00:43:55.660] - Jamey Perry

Well, and also, I think it's important to point out one of the reasons why disabled people get left out of the diversity, equity, and inclusion conversation, which, David, you and I were in a conversation with a friend of ours who had this brilliant thought where she said capitalism has a lot to do with this. That capitalism relies and is built on the oppression of Black and Brown bodies and LGBTQ. But that capitalism considers disabled people irrelevant.

[00:44:27.490] - Jamey Perry

Why talk about us? We can't contribute, we can't produce, we can't be effective members of society. I believe that most of the time, it is ignorance or an oversight or an accident. But it bears mentioning that it is sometimes not an accident and it is sometimes not an oversight.

[00:44:47.230] - Jamey Perry

That has been one of the less pleasant parts about coming on to leadership in the Disabled Writers Committee is that I'm now privy to confidential stories from disabled writers of horrific ableism, just outright naked ableism.

[00:45:05.410] - Jamey Perry

There are many people in this industry, and it pains me to think about it. I don't like to think about it because, again, I like to assume people are well-intentioned and just ignorant. There are people in this industry who sincerely believe that disabled people are fine, but they have no business writing TV and film, that we can't do the job and so we shouldn't... That it's charity to give us the job and that will just be a hindrance to production. We're just looking to get on the show so we can sue everyone. Just assumptions that are just wildly untrue.

[00:45:38.470] - Jamey Perry

Like I said, that's been one of the least pleasant parts. I think that's one of the reasons why disability doesn't get the attention because people don't realize... They don't want to imagine that people like that exist. They certainly do. They are at work. They're making decisions in this industry. Sometimes when you're a disabled person and you don't get the job, it's because someone was out for you.

[00:46:02.320] - Shea Mirzai

I think that's a fantastic point to make. A lot of that actually has to do with the fact that there is a huge stigma around having a disability. I speak for myself. I grew up with a lot of inborn shame, which is in the fact that I wasn't able to speak properly, and it was especially bad back then.

[00:46:22.540] - Shea Mirzai

I like to think of this as well through the lens of being a gay man, too. I realized I was gay, too, from a very young age. But I was so ashamed of what that would mean for me. If I were to be able to have a family, or how people would think of me. If my family or friends would just eventually find something wrong with me. But I say this with 100%, it's just a belief that when I originally came out about 13 years ago that it made my life much better across the board.

[00:47:06.520] - Shea Mirzai

This has actually been a huge part of the LGBTQ movement is putting a human face to this because we are, like your friends and families and coworkers, basically just regular people who have our own thoughts and emotions and everything like that.

[00:47:24.430] - Shea Mirzai

I realize that this is very much a personal choice, but I think that there is power for us actually speaking about our experiences. I think the more of us could step up and actually own it. It works very much in our favor because if people are really aware of just how many of us are out there, it's hard to keep a stigma going about that.

[00:47:51.970] - Bri Castellini

I think a lot of listeners will probably be surprised by the one-in-four stat and hopefully, it causes everyone to be thinking about it. This is bringing it back to why representation matters so much is so that you know that you're not alone, so that you know that you need to be more thoughtful, even if you're not disabled yourself, or the knowledge that you may become disabled and wanting to be aware of how there are so many things in your life that you shouldn't be taking for granted. It is important to be told stories by people from that community in order to do it thoughtfully and complexly rather than constantly being a tear-jerking Oscar bait for an able-bodied person. It's not a prop. Disability is not a prop. Disability is not a technical skill [crosstalk 00:48:37] talking about earlier.

[00:48:37.630] - Jamey Perry

It's not a costume.

[00:48:39.400] - Bri Castellini

It's not a costume.

[00:48:43.240] - Jamey Perry

Yes, representation matters. It matters for, well, baby David. I've seen pictures of David as a child and he's a little cutie pie [inaudible 00:48:49] little baby David. I'm watching it. I could be this or that. It's also to reduce harm. There are some really terrible memes out there regarding disability. One I can think of off the top of my head that's incredibly damaging is the one of the suicidal quadriplegic.

[00:49:10.390] - Jamey Perry

In TV, film, books, it's a given. The first thing the character thinks about when they become disabled is, "I guess I better die." But that's actually not that common among disabled people. There may be these moments, particularly with an acquired disability going from becoming regular or the neutral default human to being something other than that, but that's not the overwhelming sentiment and that most

quadriplegics don't kill themselves. They actually realize that they can have a rich, wonderful life with family and people who love them, and they can actually do a lot of the same things that used to bring them joy in a different way. We don't see that enough.

[00:49:55.080] - Jamey Perry

That's probably part of why a person who wakes up in the hospital and is told that they have quadriplegia, their first thought might be like, "Oh, I better die." It's because they've seen it on TV and in movies and in books. They've not seen the opposite story being told, which is actually what it is really more like to live with a disability long-term is that I don't constantly think about the fact that I can't walk, that my life is rich and full.

[00:50:21.630] - Jamey Perry

I, at times, I feel like I'm an evangelist for that. People will come up to me and say, "Oh, I just feel so bad for you." Sometimes I get a little manic. I'm like, "No, my life is great. No, it's really great. I promise. I promise. I'm fine. I don't want you to pray over me. No. No, thank you. My life is probably better than yours." Just because you see a wheelchair doesn't mean that, oh, automatically, they're better off than me. That's the experience of the disabled people I know, the human beings that I know who are in my community that we're having a great time, except for these barriers that we run into in the built world and in people's attitudes.

[00:51:03.000] - Jamey Perry

Those are our problems. The fact that my legs don't work is not my actual issue. My actual issue is the assumptions that the world around me puts on me because of that and the fact that nobody builds fucking ramps.

[00:51:16.350] - David Radcliff

Or a lot of places... I mean, ableism can be so structural that if you think about where you live, and I don't know whether you folks are in apartments or what, but pretty much every apartment or house has steps in front of it. But you don't think about the fact that most houses have two steps in front of it for no real reason other than this is just the way we've always built houses.

[00:51:40.380] - David Radcliff

That's how deeply baked a lot of the stuff is, is that people don't think about that till it's pointed out. Jamey's point about how often people come and ask about, in her case and mine, our legs. It's way more often than people think. It used to really upset me and make me self-conscious. Now that I've more fully embraced the opportunities behind storytelling or connecting with other people, now it's just stuff that I share on my Facebook just so people can see. You'll never believe the weird conversation I just had with somebody passing by.

[00:52:18.240] - Jamey Perry

I love David's tales from public transit in LA.

[00:52:22.830] - David Radcliff

But it used to be that I just would hold that stuff inside myself and feel frustrated for the day that some random stranger asked about my penis on the subway. But now it's more something that you share with others so that they don't feel so isolated to this larger point.

[00:52:50.760] - Jamey Perry

A very, very informal thing that David and a couple of other disabled TV writer friends and I and Shea soon because he's assured me he's very good at trivia is that we play trivia together.

[00:53:03.450] - Shea Mirzai

I am a wiz.

[00:53:05.230] - Jamey Perry

We play trivia together. Just very casual. It's not a big organized thing for the committee. It's just as friends, we've gotten together and those are the most healing times. We can sit and bitch and commiserate. I always leave feeling so much lighter than I did before, even if my circumstance didn't change. Just getting to share it with people in my community who understand it. Again, going back to that, if there's one thing I can wish for most disabled people in the world is that they would look around and realize they're part of a family, they're part of a community, and that that is actually a huge strength for us.

[00:53:41.550] - Jamey Perry

I also just wanted to make a point when we're talking about accessibility and stuff, and Shea you can share whatever you want here, but someone when we're talking about a writer's room... Shea can charge up five flights of stairs. But in a writer's room, and I don't want to share anything that you're not interested in sharing, Shea, but that hasn't been-

[00:54:05.400] - Shea Mirzai

Go for it.

[00:54:05.400] - Jamey Perry

Someone might say, "Oh, I can have a person in the room in a wheelchair but not a person with a stutter," which again that those contextual things. And also it's the tiny... I'm friends with Shea, it's worth the wait. It's worth the wait.

[00:54:20.510] - Shea Mirzai

Thank you.

[00:54:23.010] - Jamey Perry

You can wait five seconds and hear the inner workings of his cool mind and that he brings that to the table in a writer's room. There's no reason why we can't take five minutes and be patient.

[00:54:38.580] - Bri Castellini

None of those things have to do with writing skills, being able to go up the stairs or saying things as fast as other people.

[00:54:44.100] - Shea Mirzai

I happen to be a fantastic writer, so, hey.

[00:54:49.290] - Jamey Perry

The other thing, so we talked about deaf writers. It's on an individual basis whether or not a deaf person considers themselves disabled. I never put that label on anyone because some deaf people are very clear in that they are they're not disabled, they're deaf. But talking with some of our members who are deaf, they have an unbelievably tall hill to climb to get into a writer's room, just for want of an interpreter, and that's it. But because they have this barrier to communication, even though, like I said, they don't have any issues on set, they could charge up and downstairs. They don't need any of that, but they just need an interpreter. For the money that production spends on lunch, you can fork over... I'm not calling out-

[00:55:35.320] - Shea Mirzai

The snack budget alone.

[00:55:36.330] - Jamey Perry

Exactly, in network XYZ, you can afford to hire an interpreter for the room, but they don't see the value in it. That feels like charity to them. They'll do it if they feel like it, if they have a chance. But it's not an imperative to them. They don't understand all the treasure they're leaving behind by not tapping into the resources of disabled writers.

[00:55:58.080] - Bri Castellini

I think that's really important. So zooming back out to representation matters on a consumer point of view, this is always a rough question to ask, but sometimes lovely question to ask is, have you ever seen yourself represented? If so, do you remember the first time you ever saw yourself on TV or film, or have you yet? Because that, unfortunately for a lot of us, yourself included, happens where you haven't yet.

[00:56:26.100] - Jamey Perry

Well, there's tons of gay Persian stutterers on TV.

[00:56:34.200] - Bri Castellini

We contain multitudes. But when was the first time you felt you saw yourself or something in yourself represented in a way that you were like, "Oh, my gosh, #mood?"

[00:56:43.830] - Shea Mirzai

All right. I think this is going to be a very gay answer, but I am a huge fan of Romi and Michele's High School Reunion. At the very end of the movie, and it's just a really sexy cameo from Justin Theroux. He basically comes out and he was a character who had a weird back-and-forth thing with Janeane Garofalo where he essentially stalked her back in high school, but he would never speak to her. At the very end of the movie, I think he says, "Oh, it's because I had a very bad stutter." One, I finally saw somebody else who actually said the word stutter out loud, but then at the same time, it instilled me with a false level of hope, and that he was like, "Oh, now that I'm a grown-up man, I was back at a high school reunion, I finally beat that stutter." It's great hearing [crosstalk 00:57:37]-

[00:57:40.590] - Jamey Perry

Now, I can get the girl.

[00:57:44.520] - Bri Castellini

I'm also thinking of Bridgerton, the first season of Bridgerton. That's a major plot point is that the male lead had a stutter as a child, but overcame it.

[00:57:53.010] - Jamey Perry

Oh, God. Overcoming it.

[00:57:55.140] - Shea Mirzai

Well, it's a fun fact about stuttering. It really is just a small minority of people that keep stuttering as they grow up. I think I'm one of the smaller number of special people out there, I guess. But it's made me who I am. I don't think that I have to have hope that I'll finally stop stuttering someday, because that's exactly how Jamey said, I have a really kick-ass life as it is.

[00:58:31.590] - Jamey Perry

I will say, mostly as far as representation go, I mean, some of my heroes are Madison Cawthorn, Greg Abbott.

[00:58:43.890] - David Radcliff

They're not going to think you're [crosstalk 00:58:44].

[00:58:46.320] - Bri Castellini

Wait, no. Jamey, I think you mistook the people that you're going to disable after this conversation. We're on a different part of the conversation.

[00:58:54.240] - Jamey Perry

No, I mean, the fact of the matter is I have not seen myself represented, but I'm also like, wah, poor little white lady. I got represented for the first several decades of my life. But I think for me, what I really don't see, what I really, really don't see is disabled parents being portrayed on television and in film where it's not about like their injury or whatever. It's just a mom who has a kid because people are just always so shocked when they see me out with my kids. They're always like, "Oh, they're so wonderful to help you." I'm holding my daughter's things, my son is crying. I'm like, "They're not helping me. I'm helping them. They are an impediment to me."

[00:59:45.540] - Jamey Perry

But I don't see that. I see even playgrounds that are accessible. They're built for disabled kids, not for disabled parents to bring their non-disabled children to. I also think as I get long in the tooth, I don't see disabled women who are athletic, who are doing extreme sports. I don't see any of that. I don't see people who are proud of their disability, proud of their standing in the disability community, proud to be a part of this family. I don't see people embracing that.

[01:00:20.730] - Jamey Perry

The two shows that I sold last year, at least one of them was intensely about that. It's about a group of disabled friends who are in their late 20s and they're just making life happen. I wrote that because I had never seen it.

[01:00:35.730] - David Radcliff

Those are both such great answers that I'm-

[01:00:38.790] - Jamey Perry

You're going to really shit the bed on this one, David.

[01:00:43.020] - Shea Mirzai

David, beat that.

[01:00:43.540] - David Radcliff

That's tricky. At risk of dating myself, I grew up watching a lot of *The Wonder Years* and *Quantum Leap*, and *Columbo*. These were not shows, where... Admittedly, *Columbo* was an older show. I was a weird little kid. But anyway, these were not shows where disability was part of the even conversations that characters were having. But I do remember I did feel a kinship with Kevin Arnold, except I was much more of a Paul than a Kevin for those that watched the show.

[01:01:13.500] - Shea Mirzai

Who was Paul?

[01:01:15.480] - Bri Castellini

I'm way too young for this conversation, David. I'm so sorry.

[01:01:19.140] - David Radcliff

That's all right. They're rebooting it, so maybe-

[01:01:22.230] - Bri Castellini

I am a baby. It's all right. I'll understand it then I'll call you back.

[01:01:23.940] - Jamey Perry

Is it comfortable to podcast in your swaddle like that, or do you want your arms free?

[01:01:27.990] - Bri Castellini

It's really not [crosstalk 01:01:28].

[01:01:32.940] - David Radcliff

It took a long time. I remember feeling like there were Kevin Arnold elements of life that I experienced and understood, but he still wasn't touching on the areas of life that I was uniquely experiencing as a disabled person. To be totally frank, I didn't know how to contextualize disability in my own life. I remember being on a baseball team with a bunch of kids with different disabilities and thinking, "Well, I'm not as disabled as this other kid." You're always framing against... As if to be disabled is something to be avoided.

[01:02:07.540] - David Radcliff

It was a long time. Then when *Breaking Bad* came around, people... I was already a big Vince Gilligan fan from *The X-Files*, which was another very formative show for me. People were like, "Did you check out this *Breaking Bad* show?" They were coming to me not because of Vince Gilligan, but because there was a kid with cerebral palsy on it. Who really doesn't-

[01:02:24.750] - Jamey Perry

RJ Mitte.

[01:02:25.470] - David Radcliff

He's not driving the story, but just to have him there was something that people were bringing up. I remember being at a sandwich place, standing on my crutches, and people ask me questions all the time, or just stare and ask and wonder. This teenager came over and said, "What happened to your legs, man?" I told them, and I used to have this little brief TV guide response explaining what cerebral palsy was in case anybody cared. But instead, I said, "Do you watch *Breaking Bad*?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "I have what Walt Junior has." He says, "Oh, cool," and he walked away. I was like, "That was the easiest conversation I've ever had about my disability."

[01:03:07.630] - Jamey Perry

Oh my God.

[01:03:08.730] - David Radcliff

It was because there was a direct thing to point to, to say, it's not exactly this, but this. Then that's all they needed to hear, and then it demystified the whole thing.

[01:03:19.200] - Jamey Perry

I will start saying, "You know Madison Cawthorn?"

[01:03:21.870] - Shea Mirzai

[crosstalk 01:03:21].

[01:03:21.870] - Jamey Perry

I have what he has.

[01:03:23.270] - Shea Mirzai

[inaudible 01:03:23] Here's something funny, too, that I think just popped into my head. I think it's a funny story, but for both me and David as well about us, how Jimmy Valmer on *South Park* not only walks with a set of crutches, but he also has a stutter, and he's still a very solid standup comic. I always find that extremely inspiring. The fact that he got up on stage and just went and shoot his shot.

[01:03:57.510] - David Radcliff

I hadn't thought of that. But it opens up a conversation I've had quite a bit, which is animation is much more open to us than live action is, I think, both on screen and in writers' rooms. Because there's not all these production things that people have built up in their head about what production is going to look like. But also, sadly, in animation, you can toggle between whether someone is disabled or not.

[01:04:22.770] - David Radcliff

Because I know on *Family Guy*, they had a joke, where Joe, who's in the wheelchair, gets hit. He's suddenly unparalyzed for a second, and then he's re-paralyzed again [crosstalk 01:04:33] do in live action. But sometimes the coolest representation actually comes through animation, sadly, because so many folks in production are so uninformed about what disabled people can do and be.

[01:04:45.230] - David Radcliff

But that's also a benefit, though, to a lot of kids programing, I think, is really great with disability-related things because in those spaces, hopefully, if you're lucky, you're in a space where people are really explicitly and intentionally conscious of what is the message that we're sending with this material? How is this going to affect a kid watching this at home or their parents, or the conversations they have? Those aren't always conversations that happen in writers' rooms for legal, police, dramas, or that sort of thing, adult TV.

[01:05:19.420] - Bri Castellini

That's so funny that you bring that up, David, because as I'm thinking about it, half of all major asexual representation on TV is animated and-

[01:05:27.920] - David Radcliff

Oh, wow.

[01:05:28.480] - Bri Castellini

There's six or seven from the last decade. Because I'm asexual, so I know these numbers. Half of them are animated, and most of them are Todd from *BoJack Horseman*, and that's it.

[01:05:40.400] - David Radcliff

That was the first one I thought of when you said that.

[01:05:43.630] - Bri Castellini

It's the first most people think of. If you make YouTube videos about asexuality and look at your YouTube analytics, I would guarantee you, I would bet money on the fact that one of the search terms that got to your video was Todd from *BoJack Horseman*. It's a very strange thing, but also a bummer that that's the only one. But anyways.

[01:06:04.810] - Shea Mirzai

Quite a rabbit hole to go down.

[01:06:07.870] - Bri Castellini

For sure. There were some things that you all mentioned in your introductions that I just wanted to touch on, just about the three of your careers. But before we wrap up the big conversation that we're having, I wanted to make sure the three of you had any initial final thoughts before we wrap this up, just talking about you three cool kids to bring up.

[01:06:28.540] - Shea Mirzai

I think a final thought that I have is that I originally got my start out here at the very end of '08, where I was able to land an unpaid internship at a mini major studio. I spent about six and a half years there. It was a really great experience. I wound up moving from a story analyst to head of our story department. I worked with a team of really great people.

[01:06:57.940] - Shea Mirzai

But now that I have been here, if we're going honest, about 14 years now. God, I'm old. But I really have seen a seismic shift in how the industry is operating. I would highly encourage anyone out there to absolutely lean hard into what makes you different. You don't necessarily have to have a full intersectional identity, but I say be proud of who you are because there's absolutely a market out there and a hunger. I

think that we are definitely operating under an age of specificity. Absolutely. Be proud of who you are because I think the ship's finally sailing. I probably could have better, but still.

[01:07:47.740] - Jamey Perry

I think it was perfect.

[01:07:49.000] - David Radcliff

You had mentioned something at the top of this, Bri, literally in the introduction, something about the theme of the show around working outside of the power structure of Hollywood. That might be part of your gear opener.

[01:08:01.260] - Bri Castellini

Making great work that gets seen without playing the Hollywood game or at least while changing the rules.

[01:08:07.720] - David Radcliff

I think that is really key for a lot of disabled artists is finding ways to... Zach Anner got hired as the first disabled writer on *Speechless* because they had a whole season before they brought in a disabled writer. Part of what you hear in those circumstances is, "You know what? We couldn't find somebody." Well, they found him because he had a YouTube channel that was gaining popularity. Then later, he put a book out and all that sort of thing. I think that those sorts of avenues are going to continue to be very important for disabled artists because there is still a lot of work to do within the traditional industry structure to make it a little bit more open. We're trying to do a lot of that work within our committee. But as in all things in Hollywood, it's slow.

[01:08:55.270] - David Radcliff

I would just encourage as many people as possible to really explore your different skill sets and network as much as you can. But don't let it feel like networking. Actually, try to build real friendships and relationships without thinking about what you're going to get from it. To Shea's point, just be as authentically you as you can, and then maybe not rely necessarily on a specific network or something to open a door for you. You might have to-

[01:09:22.270] - Jamey Perry

Play the field.

[01:09:22.630] - David Radcliff

You might have to crowbar it open from some other...

[01:09:26.260] - Shea Mirzai

Absolutely.

[01:09:27.260] - Jamey Perry

A crutch is good for that.

[01:09:31.340] - David Radcliff

I applied to the Disney Writing Program a couple of times before I had gotten in. Even after solving that initial hurdle, there's immediately seven other hurdles that you hadn't thought of before. I would also encourage people not to put all their eggs in one basket of thinking like, "Once I get staffed on a show, everything's going to be great."

[01:09:51.290] - Shea Mirzai

It's always a struggle.

[01:09:52.310] - David Radcliff

Keep trying to work on something new. All of us are just re-breaking in all the time.

[01:09:59.900] - Jamey Perry

For every person out there, who might be actively hostile to disabled people... Because there's a whole swath of people in the middle who are neutral, haven't taken the side. But then there's a small cohort of people who are actively hostile to us. There is also a cohort on the other end of the spectrum where I have found mentors who are champions for me and who take special care of me because they know that I am in the historically marginalized group, and so they are willing to fight for me at every level. I know that I can text them or email them or call them whenever I need, and they will call whomever. They'll put in a good word for me wherever. That is the positive side of it.

[01:10:41.540] - Jamey Perry

Then the first script I sold was I had sat down to write an unsellable script. I joked. I was like, "I'm going to write myself an unsellable pilot because I'm going to have four disabled leads, and they're just me doing disabled people stuff." I just wanted a strong drama sample, and I hadn't seen that. When I presented it to my producers as my LOL, unsellable script, they were like, "We don't think it's unsellable." That's the one that sold.

[01:11:11.690] - Jamey Perry

Always, always, always writing from your heart and writing what you want to see. Particularly if you are a member of a historically marginalized group, leaning into that, even though it is scary. None of us here can promise you that someone won't take your disclosure and use it against you. It happens. But you can't find those allies and those champions as well on the other end of the spectrum until you do that.

[01:11:34.660] - Bri Castellini

I think that's wonderful.

[01:11:36.530] - David Radcliff

In the spirit of allyship, this is a great time to mention that recently, Gloria Calderón Kellett tweeted something about having an amazing time working with a disabled person that she had hired, and in the process of working with that person, realizing how many areas of marginalization exist for disabled people that Gloria hadn't fully considered before. It was this most amazing Twitter thread that she put up.

[01:12:02.480] - David Radcliff

Those are the kind of folks that we need more of, I think, across all intersections. I say this with awareness that I have privileges myself as a straight White man, and those are areas where I have to check myself to think about, "What am I missing in this conversation? Who's missing in this space?" To see that also include ableism from a non-disabled person who is herself marginalized in other ways and to see her articulate that and support us is really all that we all hope for.

[01:12:37.700] - Jamey Perry

You made me think about it. Our girl Lizzo-

[01:12:39.900] - Bri Castellini

Go, please.

[01:12:40.490] - Jamey Perry

Our girl Lizzo-

[01:12:43.910] - Shea Mirzai

That's all about solidarity.

[01:12:43.910] - Jamey Perry

-she recently put out a song that had an ableist slur in it, and there was a lot of hubbub on Twitter and a lot of Lizzo fans were shouting down disabled people and being like, "Shut up. Leave her alone. It's not important." There was silence from Lizzo's camp for just a minute.

[01:13:02.600] - Jamey Perry

But all the criticism I saw against her from disabled people was very respectful and very much like, "We love you. Can you change this?" Then she sure enough, she put out a statement saying, "I understand the power of words." She said from her perspective as a... These are her words, she said, "As a fat, Black woman, I understand how words can be turned into weapons and used against you, and that is never my desire, so I re-released the song without the slur in it." I just about died. It's just amazing when you see things like that. I also do feel like a lot of times Black women have our back in a way that a lot of other people don't. I think there's a kinship. I think they're aware of oppression in a way that a lot of people aren't. I am a White woman, so I'm right in the same boat with David. White ladies, we're taking our lumps now, and it's deserved. I'm always wanting to check my privilege in that way.

[01:13:59.270] - Jamey Perry

But it's just so amazing when someone just gives a masterclass in how to be an ally. It's something that I am learning towards other groups as well. I don't have everything figured out, and I make mistakes in my allyship with other groups. It's just really cool when someone puts on a masterclass like that on how to do it right.

[01:14:16.250] - Shea Mirzai

I will say in the words of the inimitable [inaudible 01:14:18] it's about that time. I'll find it better, but it was right there. It was right there.

[01:14:34.340] - Bri Castellini

Once again, absolutely worth the wait. The timing actually was perfect. I wanted to close this out just by talking about the three of you as writers, because all of you have, obviously, storied careers in a variety of different ways and specifically things that you mentioned in the intro. I wanted to just really quickly dig into, give you a second to shout yourself out, and teach people a little bit about your industry and your craft. First, a question for Jamey, so you mentioned that currently-

[01:14:59.390] - Jamey Perry

I went first last time.

[01:15:03.410] - Bri Castellini

I'm so sorry. I can't apologize enough. [crosstalk 01:15:05].

[01:15:06.570] - Jamey Perry

No. Just David and Shea are far more accomplished than I am.

[01:15:11.930] - Bri Castellini

This is not a competition. You are all equally untouchable to me.

[01:15:16.430] - David Radcliff

Selling to pilots in a year is good [crosstalk 01:15:18].

[01:15:18.800] - Bri Castellini

It's great.

[01:15:18.810] - Shea Mirzai

It's a huge accomplishment, Perry. Come on. What?

[01:15:22.700] - Bri Castellini

That's actually what I wanted to hear about Jamey. You used the phrase, "I just wrapped up development." For folks who maybe are a little bit further outside of industry jargon, what does that mean? What does it mean to be done with development? Done might be not the right word [crosstalk 01:15:36].

[01:15:37.430] - Jamey Perry

It's [crosstalk 01:15:37].

[01:15:39.740] - Bri Castellini

Exactly. In practical terms, what does that mean to you at this moment in time to be wrapped up in development?

[01:15:45.110] - Jamey Perry

Sure. A studio might hear a thousand pitches a year. These numbers, they're not correct. It's just an idea, a pitch. You go you develop a pitch, which is 20-30-minute presentation. Generally, it's memorized. In the age of Zoom, we get to have teleprompters on our screen, so that is amazing. You say, "Here's the show that I want to make. Here are the characters. Here are the themes we'll be exploring. This is the world.

These are their arcs for the first season. These are sample episodes of the first season and we're going to go after the first season." If they like it, they might buy it. In that amazing, wonderful circumstance, they pay you a lot of money, and say, "Go write the pilot." Maybe they hear a thousand pitches a year, maybe they buy a hundred. That means they've got a hundred writers or writing teams out there, writing a hundred separate pilots.

[01:16:41.030] - Jamey Perry

Then once all those pilots come in... It's also an endlessly iterative process with lots and lots of notes from lots of different stakeholders. Strap in for that if you want to be a writer. You're constantly being told, "You didn't do it good enough." But it is a collaborative process. I'd been lucky to feel like all my projects ended up in a better place after all the notes than they did before, even though the process itself is painful. But then after they get those hundred scripts, they might say, "Great, we're going to produce 10 of them. We're going to actually put them up on their feet. We're going to shoot them."

[01:17:19.200] - Jamey Perry

Then when they get those 10 pilots that were made, maybe they choose one, two, three, four to go to series, you're going for a thousand to four. The odds are forever not in your favor. You go into it knowing that, but basically, you'll be in conversation with your producers, with the studio, with the network, constantly getting notes, revising.

[01:17:41.370] - Jamey Perry

For me, what I mean when I say I'm wrapping up development is that I've wrapped up the writing portion of these two things. Now it's filtering through different processes at these two separate places. We'll see.

[01:17:55.830] - Jamey Perry

It's hard because when I'm out in the world and someone asks what I do, I say, "I'm a TV writer," and they go, "Oh, what show are you writing on?" But most TV writers are not writing on a show right now just in terms of numbers. There's 2,000 jobs on TV shows and 200,000 writers who want them.

[01:18:15.720] - Jamey Perry

People are always like, "Oh, wait." They go, "Oh, development. What's development? What does that mean you sold a show? When do I get to see it?" It's like, "Well, there's a lot more to it than that."

[01:18:25.560] - Bri Castellini

[crosstalk 01:18:25] eight asterisks after, "I'm a TV writer."

[01:18:27.630] - Jamey Perry

Exactly, and a little cross, those little cross, if they run out of asterisks.

[01:18:34.620] - Bri Castellini

A footnote.

[01:18:34.620] - Jamey Perry

But internally, when I talk to writers, they understand what a big deal it is. I put my career on a different level, and I'm trying to get staffed. That is my goal. But if not, then... Development season, now, they'll tell you it's year-round. But it has traditionally been late summer into the fall is when studios are buying the projects, and then they want them written by January so that they can go into pilot season in February, and so that they can go to upfronts in May, which is when they announce all the shows that they have bought or that they're putting on the air. That is a-

[01:19:07.710] - Shea Mirzai

Staffing season in March, right?

[01:19:09.120] - Jamey Perry

Yes, exactly right. I forgot staffing season.

[01:19:12.480] - Shea Mirzai

There you go.

[01:19:13.650] - Jamey Perry

It's in there somewhere. That's where I'm at right now. It's a little bit hard because I've spent so long on these two projects that now it's like, "Great, what else do you have?"

[01:19:29.610] - Jamey Perry

I was out at trivia the other night. David couldn't make it. Shea couldn't make it. They were both invited and talking with my disabled TV writer friends and just commiserating over that. Writers are just such neurotic creatures, and so that moment when you don't have an idea and you think, "Well, that means I'm a loser. I don't have stories. I'll never write again." Then that usually comes right before you come up with your next great idea. I'm about to go with my next great idea.

[01:19:57.390] - Bri Castellini

I hope that for all of us.

[01:19:59.520] - Jamey Perry

Thank you.

[01:20:00.600] - Bri Castellini

Okay, cool. So for Shea, the question I have for you is you were talking about your... You're working on an adaptation right now, the novel. You don't have to give details if you aren't able to.

[01:20:09.240] - Shea Mirzai

Yeah, I can't right now.

[01:20:09.240] - Bri Castellini

I'm curious because we... Yeah, I figured. But we recently had a conversation in our Craft mini-series about adaptations. I'm curious for you, especially given this is your first time, what are things that are striking to you about the... What is your process for that, especially given it's your first time? What's the adaptation thing like?

[01:20:27.510] - Shea Mirzai

All right. Yeah. First, I think it's a fantastic question. I think it might help if I'm able to add a little bit of context around that. I think I mentioned that I spent about six and a half years where I worked in, and I ran a studio story department. For people who aren't aware, a story department is the script house of a studio or a production company where all the incoming scripts are sent from a series of managers or agents or producers around town. It's basically up to us. I read and write up a coverage report for all of the executives who honestly aren't able to read. It's just all the scripts that are sent to them.

[01:21:26.040] - Shea Mirzai

I had always wanted to be a working screenwriter myself, but I had never read a script and I had never even attempted to write a script until I moved out here. I very much credit that whole experience with helping me understand what makes a good script, and perhaps most importantly, what makes a bad script.

[01:21:54.630] - Shea Mirzai

I figured out how to write, and then I'm very much more of a feature person. But I think, Jamey, who's basically already explained how rigorous the development process is. I would say it's even a bit worse in features because it moves much, much slower. It's super crazy times.

[01:22:21.930] - Shea Mirzai

But I use all that knowledge to find my own original voice. I have sold scripts on pitch, I've sold scripts on spec. I saw the writing on the wall at every Guild meeting that I showed up for because it seemed like I was outnumbered by just a bunch of TV writers, like a one to nine out of 10. I figured I should definitely start writing pilots. I was able to get a couple of those sold, and I most recently staffed on a half-hour series at HBO Max this past fall.

[01:23:01.180] - Shea Mirzai

Now, I think I can finally get back to the original question. I'm so sorry for that huge encyclopedia that I just dump on everybody.

[01:23:11.770] - Bri Castellini

No, it's all interesting.

[01:23:12.370] - Shea Mirzai

But I think, at least in my own experience, it made the whole scriptwriting process a bit easier, but also a bit harder as well. I think with a feature adaptation, a huge part of the problem it's basically already solved for you because I wouldn't necessarily have to break out a whole story. A lot of the beats are already in place, I already know who all the main characters are. It absolutely cuts down on a brainstorming session. I felt super happy that I wouldn't have to do everything from a very slow, ground-up approach.

[01:23:56.860] - Shea Mirzai

But I think a flip side to that is that you still want to stay as accurate as you can to the original book itself, especially if it's a popular novel or a popular series of IP because there is a loyal fan base involved. It's basically walking a tightrope where I have to give it as much of my voice as possible, but I have to stay in a certain zone that actually stays true to the original work.

[01:24:33.490] - Shea Mirzai

It becomes doubly harder if the original writer's voice is a lot different than yours. Here in this case, because I'm also an action and a high-stakes thriller writer, and that was the same space that the book already exists in. I didn't feel as if I was far out of my original element. I felt very at home. But it still involves a super concise balancing act in order to make everybody happy. Especially myself because this is my work I'm putting out there, too.

[01:25:07.770] - Bri Castellini

Yeah, no, that's really interesting. I would love to talk more about that. But for the purposes of this one podcast, we are going to leave it there, everybody. But hey, maybe [crosstalk 01:25:16] Shea.

[01:25:16.480] - Shea Mirzai

Absolutely. I've said too much anyway.

[01:25:18.330] - Bri Castellini

No. Something we like about this podcast is showcasing how many different paths to success there are and how many different ways people break in. We're trying to break out of what it means. But anyways, enough about us, David, about you.

[01:25:32.980] - Bri Castellini

Obviously, you brought this up a couple of times about being a part of the Disney Writers Program, and we have had a number of people on our podcast from a variety of different fellowship programs who have won different contests. I'm curious for you, especially since you mentioned that it took you a couple of times to get in. What can you share about that experience in terms of what you learned was more or less successful? How did it specifically help, or not, you along the path of your career?

[01:26:02.320] - David Radcliff

Oh, it definitely helps. In terms of what I learned, the first time I applied for it was at the advice of a teacher that I had because I think he knew that especially back then, breaking into television as a disabled person, you just weren't likely to get assistant jobs back then. This was before people were talking about disability much at all.

[01:26:23.710] - David Radcliff

In fact, when I finished film school, I sent a message to folks at different networks saying, "Where's my Shonda Rhimes that I can chart a path behind?" This was pre-Ryan O'Connell and everything else. But I applied out of school and I got to the finals and that was an illuminating experience. It's a challenging gauntlet of activities. Everything was very new to me. I hadn't had a pitch meeting before. I didn't know about studio work before. I mean, I had gone to film school, but that's a very academic way of looking at things.

[01:27:03.250] - David Radcliff

I got to the finals and I thought, "Oh, man, this is going to be so cool. I finished film school and then maybe I'll be working on a TV show next year," and then I didn't get it. I ended up re-routing and working for magazines for a bit, did a lot of journalism stuff, etc.

[01:27:16.420] - David Radcliff

Later on, the Disney program took in a writer in a wheelchair whose name is David Renaud. He's on the Good Doctor. He is both a medical doctor in real life and a disabled television writer, who is from Vancouver. He probably adds so much value to what they're doing over there and a great guy.

[01:27:35.470] - Bri Castellini

Overachiever much?

[01:27:35.980] - David Radcliff

He said, "You should take another run at the Disney program because it worked out pretty well for me." Again, this goes back to we all want somebody to follow behind or learn more about the business through, who's going to see the business specifically through the eyes of a wheelchair user. I thought, "Well, maybe I'll take another run at it." Then I applied again. I think that was the year I got to the semifinals. Then I applied a third time. Then by the third time, that was when I got in. I think it was the third go.

[01:28:08.710] - David Radcliff

It's not a program designed to teach you how to write because they assume that you already are there. We all read each other's scripts. It's more a program built around what is your personal trajectory that you can then quickly and effectively convey to a room when you go into meetings. There's a lot of work around that, and it's a very diverse group.

[01:28:30.970] - David Radcliff

It's an interesting space to be in, though, because even in those spaces where diversity and inclusion are so central, I was the only disabled person there. There were certain venues that we would go visit where the fact of having me there in that space made other people in the group aware of, "Oh, this isn't really... This must be a little bit more challenging for you."

[01:28:51.610] - David Radcliff

That is sort of a microcosm of what you will then experience as a disabled person on a television set is a lot of those moments of, "Okay, everybody else is doing it this way. Let me see how I can figure out doing it this way without, quote-unquote, being a 'problem'." A lot of the things that a lot of underrepresented groups have to navigate.

[01:29:12.460] - David Radcliff

It was a valuable program for me, helped me connect with various shows within the ABC, Freeform, Disney Channel family. Then I got staffed on *The Rookie* because of that, and through *The Rookie*

learned a lot about... I mean, A, there were very few wheelchair users writing on television shows; and B, a network show that does 20 episodes and has such a big launch like *The Rookie* did—it was a big thing for ABC even then—it really taught me quite a bit about how things really work once you get behind the scenes.

[01:29:46.930] - David Radcliff

I'm incredibly grateful for that. Now I'm in a position where when other disabled people reach out to me to ask me about what's it like in these programs or what's it like on these shows, I can have a pretty informed answer. But also respecting that I'm not an upper-level writer, so the showrunner is going to give you a different level of insight than a staff writer would.

[01:30:09.080] - Jamey Perry

Also, I think just because we're talking about fellowships and all that stuff, I think I need to say most fellowships do not consider disability to be a metric of diversity, so we are not considered eligible for many fellowships. I don't know if any that outright ban us from applying, but we are not given any sort of extra... Someone like me, they would say, "Oh, you're a woman." Not that I'm a woman in a wheelchair. I'm just a white woman.

[01:30:46.280] - Jamey Perry

That is really frustrating because, at times, it feels like the industry is actually set up to keep us out. The three ways that I hear most commonly of people breaking in are either through a fellowship, which, as I've already mentioned, most are not for us. Or you have situations... I understand that the diversity hire programs can be a dumpster fire, and there's a lot of conversation to be had about the utility of those. But the fact of the matter is disabled people are not eligible for those, so another way in that other marginalized communities have that we don't, that are shut off to us.

[01:31:23.270] - Jamey Perry

Then the most common way I think that writers get staffed is that they... Of course, I'm talking from the TV writer perspective, and it's important always to have Shea's feature writer perspective, that's another thing that he brings to the table in leadership and in our committee. But coming up the assistant route. I have actually worked as a PA and I think I was probably the only PA in a wheelchair in Los Angeles, just judging from people's reactions to me.

[01:31:48.440] - Jamey Perry

"Whoa," they would say. I could do the job. Like I said, drawing from these deep reserves of flexibility and resourcefulness that I have developed since becoming disabled, people look at me, but they won't ask, "Okay, how are you going to get lunch for everyone?" They'll just assume I can't, and I won't even get the interview.

[01:32:14.030] - Jamey Perry

All those things happen. Maybe you have the interview, you do the Zoom interview, and then maybe they want you to come in, and then you realize that the writer's room is on the fourth floor of a building with no elevator. Sometimes it feels like it's an insurmountable obstacle. Not only do we face all of the same issues as other historically marginalized groups, but there's also all the things that are built to help historically marginalized groups, we don't count for them.

[01:32:43.370] - Jamey Perry

All that being said, you're sitting here talking to three disabled writers who are in the WGA, and that in itself is a huge accomplishment. It absolutely can be done. But just like in other areas of life, usually disabled people have to find our own little quirky niche way in.

[01:33:01.100] - Shea Mirzai

Yeah, because I think it's basically that exact same experiences also happen to me. Back when I was getting started because I moved out here, I didn't know anyone in town. I didn't understand how things work. I was applying for these unpaid internships. I would get word back to me like, "Oh, well, I don't think that we can bring Shea on because he can't work phones." That, right there, it basically, automatically just put a stop to me being able to pursue an assistant career path because that's how people actually make it up in this business.

[01:33:43.810] - Shea Mirzai

I threw myself into establishing myself as a script reader and a story analyst, and I was able to eventually prove that even if I wasn't answering phones all day, I still eventually became the head of a department. I guess my best advice is if there's a door shut in front of you, just keep finding another one.

[01:34:04.970] - Jamey Perry

Yep. Just keep going.

[01:34:06.440] - David Radcliff

I think that's something that disabled people are really good at because we have to do that all the time. Without going into detail, I had had a frustrating experience in a meeting with a very reputable media company. It caused me to reflect on most disabled people that I know. Most openly disabled people that I know fit into one of three buckets or maybe two of three buckets in professional life.

[01:34:33.860] - David Radcliff

Once you reach adulthood and get out of the school system and are looking for work, they're either accepting government benefits which is absurdly, egregiously low and forces people into poverty, but they have to stay at that level of poverty in order to get their medical care. So they, quote-unquote, "can't work" because they have to stay at low income.

[01:34:56.530] - Jamey Perry

They often can't get married.

[01:34:59.350] - David Radcliff

Yeah. Because if you get married, you push your net worth over the limit.

[01:35:03.700] - Bri Castellini

You can't save. You can't have a savings account [crosstalk 01:35:06].

[01:35:07.750] - David Radcliff

Or they work explicitly for government offices or disability organizations. Or they... I think this is what a lot of disabled people in entertainment do, they kind of become their own shingle, like Shea just described. You just find your own...

[01:35:22.900] - David Radcliff

I have been bucket three most of my adult life. I was doing writing for magazines, teaching writing classes. Now I've written for a lot of different non-profits, speeches, corporate stuff. You just sort of patch all this stuff together. Now, what that tells me is those are the kind of people that you would want, I would think, in a writer's space where people are always drawing from ideas or collaborating with other people.

[01:35:47.710] - David Radcliff

But I think this is also a very... I think this is really a fear-based business and I think that disability takes a lot of the brunt of the fear of what people expect in a professional space because they're just not used to working with disabled people because they haven't had those opportunities before.

[01:36:04.720] - David Radcliff

On a show that I worked on, one of my favorite people on the job mentioned to me at one point that they'd never worked with a disabled person before, at least as far as they knew, could have been somebody that wasn't open about it. This is someone that had worked in TV for 11 years. I remember having two thoughts at the same time. One was like, "Wow, good for me for breaking through, this is amazing." The second one was like, "Wow, that's really shitty." I mean, it's not her fault, she's just telling me.

[01:36:29.200] - Jamey Perry

You closed the door behind you, David.

[01:36:32.980] - David Radcliff

But how can you thrive professionally in a space for 11 years and never run into someone that's part of one of the largest underrepresented communities in the world? [crosstalk 01:36:44].

[01:36:44.200] - Bri Castellini

Never run into a quarter of the population.

[01:36:47.390] - Jamey Perry

That tells you more about the industry than it does about any individual person.

[01:36:53.390] - Bri Castellini

Hopefully, we're changing that every day. What I'm taking away from this conversation is to be fearless, be thoughtful, be empathetic, and be accountable for the ways that you fail and can succeed in the future.

[01:37:06.080] - Jamey Perry

Yes.

[01:37:06.770] - David Radcliff

Yeah, I love that.

[01:37:07.610] - Bri Castellini

Well, thank you. Thank you, all of you, so much for joining us today. Obviously, we could be having a four-hour conversation.

[01:37:12.440] - Shea Mirzai

Thanks for having us.

[01:37:13.940] - Jamey Perry

We could keep going.

[01:37:15.890] - Bri Castellini

We're going to cut it here for now. Thank you so much.

[01:37:18.360] - David Radcliff

Yeah. Thanks so much, and thanks for taking an interest in this topic [crosstalk 01:37:22] because it's-

[01:37:22.380] - Shea Mirzai

Of course, we can't thank you enough.

[01:37:24.140] - Jamey Perry

Yeah, I just always want to kiss the feet of anyone who's like, "By the way, disability. What is it?" Yay. They've mentioned us. We appreciate you guys being really intentional about having us on and speaking about this community. It means the world.

[01:37:41.180] - Christina Raia

Thanks so much to Kelsey Rauber for our theme music, Kailee Brown for our podcast art, Ezra Li for editing this episode, and to all of you for listening. Links to learn more about them and our guests are in our episode description.

[01:37:53.000] - Bri Castellini

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[01:38:17.150] - Christina Raia

Or join our free newsletter, where we share a new creative prompt each month. Next episode, we chat with Sav Rodgers of the Trans Film Center. Be sure to tune in.