

Stories from the brainreels transcript

October 1, 2014

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Introduction

CHERYL: Welcome to Stories from the brainreels. I'm your host, Cheryl Green, from StoryMinders up in sunny Portland, Oregon. This is a monthly podcast about brain injury and disability with a focus on art, culture, and disability pride. Contact me at info@storyminders.com with questions or topics and guests you want to hear on an upcoming show.

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CHERYL: Today I have a great guest who I'd been wanting to meet for a pretty long time. This is William Greer, Coordinator of the [Cinema Touching Disability Film Festival](#) in Austin, TX, my old hometown. I first emailed with William several years ago when I submitted a film to the festival. The film didn't get in, but I was just so happy to find out that he also is in the traumatic brain injury community. Fast forward a few years, and William called me a few months ago to talk about brain injury film. As things sometimes align in that magical way you just can't plan, I was at my sister's house. In Austin. A 10 minute drive from his office. So I went and had the distinct pleasure of meeting William in person to talk about film and disability activism through the media.

Maybe it was the black laptop with a sticker of enormous cat eyes on the top, or maybe it was the crocheted tuxedo cat on the bookshelf, but I had a really good feeling right away at our meeting. Of course, William is much more than a fellow cat lover. And like all people who have had a traumatic brain injury, he is so much more than that label or that experience.

Join us for a great conversation about running marathons, disability assumptions and humor, and the excellent work that the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities does around advocacy, passing legislation on increasing access and independent living opportunities, accessible media, and some great stories on the history of the Cinema Touching Disability Film Festival. You'll also hear about a fabulous guest at this year's festival, actress Teal Shearer of "[My Gimp Life](#)."

The festival is October 17th and 18th, 6:30 - 9:30 pm at the Alamo Drafthouse on South Lamar. Friday night has a real treat: My beloved disability arts organization [VSA Texas](#) will be providing a pre-show. Also a ridiculous little PSA about movie theater etiquette that I'm making will screen at the beginning. Check it out.

The interview

CHERYL: Well, thank you so much for wanting to be on my podcast today.

WILLIAM: I really look forward to it.

CHERYL: Great. So I'd like to have you introduce yourself and talk a little bit about the work that you do.

WILLIAM: William Greer, Coordinator of the Cinema Touching Disability Film Festival at the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities. I do a lot of work on this festival: putting it together, bringing in the films, setting up guest speakers. But there's always something else to do at a non-profit organization. So sometimes I testify on disability legislation at the State or City level. I, like everyone else in the office, help out with our annual convention. In addition to everything else that I do, I do some long distance running. And I've been trying to set up a team or running groups with other people who have disabilities. So we've got me with a brain injury and legally blind. And I've run with a deaf runner. And I run with a group of students from the Texas School for the Blind together. And I like doing that for public awareness more than anything. And that's the nuts and bolts of what I do.

Running in the Boston Marathon

CHERYL: Great. And I know you were in the Boston Marathon. [And you were running with Peter Sagal](#) from "Wait Wait...Don't Tell Me," right?

WILLIAM: Yes. My plan was that I was going to beat my person record, my best time. Well, that didn't happen.

CHERYL: Yeah.

WILLIAM: But I finished the marathon four or five minutes before the bomb went off. So that was really good.

CHERYL: Yeah, yeah.

WILLIAM: And it was also nice to be running with a celebrity.

CHERYL: Right. What's funny is that I listen to "Wait Wait...Don't Tell Me" sometimes. And I like to know what these radio personalities look like. I hear their voices, and I imagine them. And I'm usually wrong. So I looked up Peter Sagal some time ago. And I saw a picture of him at the Boston Marathon, running with somebody. And there was something about you know, a legally blind runner. And I thought oh, that's really cool. I didn't know that Peter Sagal had any relationship to disability. How interesting. And I moved on. And then I met you just a couple months ago. And I was reading about different things that you do, online. And I came across that picture. And I thought well, what a small world!

WILLIAM: It was really something to run with him. The scariest thing is that my wife could not find me for one hour after the bomb went off.

CHERYL: Mm.

WILLIAM: Of course none of the phones were working. So no cell phones were working, we couldn't get in contact, couldn't find each other for an hour. And we'd video-taped an interview with him before the marathon. And one of the things that he told a newspaper reporter or an NPR reporter was that yeah, a marathon's a long time. And sometimes you just make up stories to make time go faster. So what I'll do

is I'll invent stories. And I'll tell William that there's a herd of rogue lobsters crossing the street. And during the interview, I brought this up. And he said, "Well, you know, I wish you hadn't found out about this. Now my big fear is that something traumatic does happen, you won't believe me."

CHERYL: Oh, wow.

WILLIAM: And then something really traumatic happened.

CHERYL: Wow. You were not expecting that.

WILLIAM: No, not at all.

CHERYL: Well, I'm glad you were safe. An hour would probably feel like it lasted a lifetime. But I'm glad it was only an hour before you and your wife found each other.

WILLIAM: Yes.

CHERYL: And I didn't hear any reports. So I should ask: were there actually any lobsters there?

WILLIAM: [giggles] Well, as far as we know, there were no lobsters. That's just complete fiction.

CHERYL: [giggles] OK.

Brain injury humor

CHERYL: Sometimes I hear people say that folks who've had a traumatic brain injury don't have a sense of humor anymore. And I think that can happen. But I think what's more likely is that other people don't get our sense of humor. Or even we don't always get it.

WILLIAM: Yes, don't get our sense of humor. And a lot of times, people who do not have a brain injury do not understand some of the specific needs and adaptive mechanisms that we have.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

WILLIAM: I get verbal reminders all of the time. Well, I say that doesn't work. If it's not written down, I'm not gonna remember it. It's a short-term memory issue.

CHERYL: Uh-huh.

WILLIAM: And sometimes that just slips people's mind.

CHERYL: Mmhmm. So do you use humor to try to give them that reminder?

WILLIAM: No, because sometimes people get my jokes. And sometimes it's just a miss. And if I try to make a point with humor, they're just not going to get it. I've found that I have to be really direct and say, "This is what I need," and just come out very straightforwardly with it. Oddly enough, my wife is even better about being direct sometimes when we're at restaurants because I don't see well enough to

read the menu. So she has to read the menu for me. And sometimes the waiters or waitresses will ask her what I want.

CHERYL: Right.

WILLIAM: And she will say, "Well, why don't you ask him? He knows what he wants better than me."

CHERYL: Right! "I just read the menu to him. He knows exactly what you have here." Yep. I have heard that story many times from other friends who have totally different disabilities from you that folks just "Wah! I can't talk to that person! I'm scared of that person. I don't know the etiquette rules." But I feel like they don't have to be separate etiquette rules. If there's somebody sitting at the table, and you're a waitperson, just ask them what they want to eat. [laughs]

WILLIAM: People will sometimes assume that since I'm blind Ellen must also be blind.

CHERYL: [laughs] That's bizarre.

WILLIAM: [giggles] Yeah. And there is no malicious intent. But it is just an assumption.

CHERYL: Right, right. I'm used to hearing people say things like, well, if they find out you have a disability, then obviously your partner wouldn't because they have to take care of you all the time. Which also isn't true. But that's another stereotype people assume when they see someone, and they perceive a disability. Does anybody ever tell Ellen that she's so wonderful and so brave, and you're so lucky to have her?

WILLIAM: No, I haven't heard anything like that yet.

CHERYL: Good!

WILLIAM: But you notice I say "yet."

CHERYL: I did notice that. [giggles] Well, I'm glad you haven't come across that. I certainly have been told that Andy, my partner of nine years, is an admirable person and a wonderful individual for sticking with me. And I think, "Well, you're kind of insulting me when you compliment him like that. Like, do you really think I'm that terrible to be around?" I don't know. Well, you've met me once. Am I that terrible?

WILLIAM: No. I mean, it's just--

CHERYL: It's an interesting one when people get so nervous around disability. And just the oddest things just come outta people's faces. And then we have to turn around and make them feel better for having said something odd. Or we can just sort of talk about them here. [both giggle]

Coalition of Texans with Disabilities

CHERYL: But I do wanna, rather than turn into a gossip hour, do wanna get back to the work that you do. I'm familiar with your work on the film festival, Cinema Touching Disability. But you mentioned that you also testify. And I wanna talk quickly about the Coalition where you work. So the Coalition of Texans

with Disabilities, I'm just gonna read out their mission, although you know it. But my listeners don't. "The Coalition is a 501(c)(3) working to ensure that persons with disabilities may work, live, learn, play, and participate fully in the community of their choice. We focus on the areas of governmental advocacy, public awareness activities, and professional disability consulting to fulfill our mission. The Coalition is the largest and oldest member-driven, cross-disability organization in the state." I love it! What a great mission.

WILLIAM: Yes, and some of the things that I've testified on include accessible voting machines. And before these machines came along, I would need to have someone read the ballot to me and ask who I wanted to vote for. The accessible voting machines are set up to be accessible cross-disability. So you could use them if you're blind, if you're partially sighted, if you have difficulty using your hands. It's just all across the way accessible so people can vote independently. And I've testified for the importance of these machines and how it ensures that people with disabilities can vote independently. I voted on a law requiring bicycle helmets. I had an open skull wound because I was 17, riding a bicycle, not wearing a helmet, thinking, "I don't need one." Well, it turns out I really did need one!

CHERYL: Yes.

WILLIAM: And especially for younger people, and definitely for some adults that are not gonna put on a helmet unless there's a law saying you've got to do this, it is dangerous and irresponsible not to do that.

CHERYL: I'm happy for bike helmets.

WILLIAM: Very good things.

CHERYL: Yes.

WILLIAM: I testified on the importance of accessible cell phones. Now, that might sound small. But if there's not a screen reader on my cell phone, sure I could make a call with it. But I couldn't use the contacts or the address book because I can't read them. Thanks to this legislation, every cell phone sold in Texas has to have a built-in screen reader with it--

CHERYL: Wow.

WILLIAM: --so that all parts of it are accessible.

CHERYL: Yeah.

WILLIAM: One of the things the Coalition is working on is the closure of state-supported living centers. Those are institutions where people with disabilities live. It's supposed to set up a supportive living environment for people who need help living because of their disabilities. In reality, those are really abusive places. People are forced to fight each other. They're forced to go in halls and literally attack each other. Some people are given really bad medical treatment. Someone was supposed to go in for a dental exam, and the mouth was washed with acid. Horrible things, including sexual assaults on people in these institutions. And the worst thing of all is that it is more expensive to keep people living in a

state-supported living center than it is in a community organization like the Mary Lee Foundation. So we're saying close these institutions. Their time has passed. It's important for people with disabilities to live in the community.

CHERYL: Right.

WILLIAM: And those are just a couple of the examples of some of our public priorities and policies.

CHERYL: Those are fantastic ones. A lotta people will say, "Uh, that doesn't relate to me. I'm not going to worry about that. I don't need Closed Captions. I don't need a screen reader." But I think that kind of attitude comes from the fact that people with disabilities have been institutionalized and marginalized so much that it's a group of people who are not noticed very often. And maybe you don't need Closed Captions. Maybe you don't need them yet. But even if you don't, I like the idea of Universal Design. Let's just make things accessible from the beginning so that people don't have to get up and, "Hey! What about me? I need something else." No, just make it accessible from the start so that people can just access it.

WILLIAM: And the key word is "yet," because disability is the one group that everybody can join.

CHERYL: That's right. That's right.

WILLIAM: Last year, we were scheduled to have an interview with Lucy Walker, the Director of one of our films, "The Crash Reel."

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

WILLIAM: And as I was taking the bus to go to the office of the CTD that morning, I got a text message from her saying, "Well, I won't be able to do this because of the film I'm directing. Let me try to put you in touch with someone else." Now, if I did not have a screen reader on my phone, I wouldn't have been aware of that. And we would've just totally missed it and not had a speaker via Skype that night. Because the text message is accessible--thanks to the screen reader--we were able to come up with an alternate for the Skype interview.

CHERYL: Oh, that's great.

WILLIAM: And you know, that's the sort of thing that, like you're mentioning, it's in daily life. And sometimes it's just for fun. But sometimes it is a serious business matter.

CHERYL: Yeah.

Overcoming assumptions about disability

WILLIAM: People with disabilities do have the same abilities and capacities as people who do not have disabilities. But the problem is, we have to not only work as well, we have to overcome the assumption that we don't work as well.

CHERYL: [giggles] Right.

WILLIAM: So you know, we have to do the job twice as well to show people that we are not worse than anybody else.

CHERYL: Yeah. I'm so glad that you said "overcome the assumption" that you can't do the job because I hear a lotta people say that the important thing is to overcome your disability. But I don't actually understand how that's possible or why that's so desirable.

WILLIAM: So are you gonna tell an amputee that he has to grow his arm back?

CHERYL: [laughs] Sure, why not?

WILLIAM: Someone who's paralyzed, well, let's just fix your broken spine.

CHERYL: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

WILLIAM: OK, how are you gonna cure my brain injury?

CHERYL: Right. And the assumption that everything is just negative. Well, that's just a terrible life story. I hope you overcome your problems. Well, you know, not everything about having a disability is bad. And so why is there this imperative that we overcome these things? Ask us whether we like it or not?

CHERYL: So I wanted to go back to the advocacy work. And I noticed, just in my experience, that there aren't a lot of people living with brain injuries who are involved in cross-disability organizations or involved in governmental advocacy. There certainly are some. And you're one of them. But I don't see a lot of that. Have you also noticed that our community's not widely represented there?

WILLIAM: I've also seen that. I've got no idea why that's true.

CHERYL: I mean, the truth is, I don't know why either.

Cinema Touching Disability Film Festival and media representation

CHERYL: So one of the big things that you do at the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities is run the Cinema Touching Disability Film Festival. And I would love to hear the history of that festival and why you started it.

WILLIAM: Oh, I was volunteering at the Coalition in 2003. And I was coming back from the annual convention in Houston. I was riding back with the Executive Director. And we were talking about fundraising because non-profits are always interested in bringing in money and raising funds. And we were talking about a few things. And I said, "Well, what about a disability film festival? Because there are some great representations of disability on film. And there are some awful ones. It would be really great if we could have a festival, feature movies that have really good representations of disability, and that is something that people would enjoy. You like going to the movies. Sure, I'll give to this film festival. That year, before I started at the Coalition, they'd finished a Team Everest '03, which was a group of people with disabilities. All of them reached Base Camp. And one of them became the first man with one arm to reach the top of Mt. Everest. And among other things, they filmed Team Everest '03. So

for the first film festival we showed that film. We showed "The Fake Beggar," which was the first representation of disability ever put on film, put on in 1897 by Thomas Edison.

CHERYL: Wow.

WILLIAM: So that's how old it goes.

CHERYL: Yeah.

WILLIAM: And we showed a couple of other films. "Children of a Lesser God" with Marlee Matlin, and the Todd Browning film, "Freaks," which really has a good disability message. If you're not familiar with it, it's about a Little Person in a circus. He's in the freak show, which was at that point in time, that was the only way a lot of people with disabilities could get employment was in the circus. The beautiful lady was trying to seduce him because she wanted to marry him so she could get his family inheritance. And she wanted to poison him. When his friends found out what was going on, they took their revenge on this beautiful lady and turned her into a not-so-beautiful person.

CHERYL: [laughs] My gosh.

WILLIAM: After that, we showed different sorts of films. I guess in the 3rd or 4th year, we started to include a short film competition where people could submit their own 3-20 minute disability film, and the top three winners would have their movies screened at our festival. We started to shift using films. We weren't just using the older, really good disability films. But we started to look for more recent films, more recent releases or maybe movies that people hadn't heard about or seen in a long time. So we show a mix of films that way now. The competition is also pretty remarkable. We get a really wide range of films in the competition.

CHERYL: Yeah, that's wonderful. I've heard people say, "Well, there's all sorts of characters with disabilities on TV and movies now. You should just be happy that you're being represented at all." But why is it important that it's good representation, and what does that mean?

WILLIAM: What we want is accurate, interesting, and entertaining. Lots of times, the representations are just like inaccurate, way off, completely false. Well, there's lots of ways you can do bad representation of disability. One of them is called the Super Gimp Syndrome.

CHERYL: [giggles]

WILLIAM: This is someone with a disability, but he's overcome it by developing incredible super abilities. Look how much stronger or better he is with his other senses to compensate for the disability. Or he's a blind person. So he has super sensitive hearing. He can hear all sorts of things that other people couldn't hear. Oh, he's in a wheelchair. So he's an incredible wheelchair athlete. Or the other thing is anger. He's so angry because of his disability and so angry at his disability that that's the center of his being.

CHERYL: Mm.

WILLIAM: And there's also the pitiable or mercy disability story. We feel so sorry for this person. Look how sad and tragic it is that he has a disability. The Jerry Lewis telethon is notorious. You've got to donate because look at the miserable lives these people have because of their disabilities.

CHERYL: Boo! Boo to Jerry Lewis telethons.

WILLIAM: Look how sad and horrible it is.

CHERYL: Yeah.

WILLIAM: One of the movies that won first place several years ago was called "No Pity"--

CHERYL: Mm.

WILLIAM: --made by someone who has a severe disability. I believe he has Autism. And he talks about how horrible the historic use of pity is for people with disabilities. We wanna show movies where someone has a disability, but no big deal. It doesn't prevent him or her from doing the same thing that anybody else could do.

Portrayals of brain injury in the movies

CHERYL: So I wanna know your thoughts about how the media shows people with brain injury. And you can talk about documentaries or fiction movies.

WILLIAM: You know, I can't think of anything on TV talking about brain injury. But three movies come to mind: "Memento," "The Crash Reel," and "The Lookout." "The Lookout" lost money. "The Crash Reel" did fairly well. I don't think it did as well as they wanted it to do. I think it should've done better. It was nominated for an Oscar but didn't get it. And "Memento," incredibly popular. Lots of people loved it. And "Memento" is my least favorite brain injury film I've ever seen. And I think that it shows brain injury in the least accurate way that you can. Now, it's an innovative way of telling a mystery, and it's a really good mystery story on the one hand. So that's good. And I understand that. But they really twist and exaggerate small things about brain injury, take them way out of context and just show stuff in a way that is the polar opposite of the way that it actually is. It's just I really do not like that movie from the disability angle.

CHERYL: Yeah.

WILLIAM: I often think about it. It's like "Avatar." Really great movie if you look on it as a movie: interesting story. With "Avatar" it's the special effects. With "Memento" it's the way the story is told.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

WILLIAM: But if you analyze the presentation of disability, it's just bad and negative and painful.

CHERYL: Yeah!

WILLIAM: "The Crash Reel": I could understand a lot of people with brain injuries finding that a really painful movie to watch because it documents what happens to someone, a snow boarder after a serious brain injury. And it shows some of the things that are gone through with rehabilitation. But it captures them extremely well, extremely accurately and very engaging.

CHERYL: Yes.

WILLIAM: Now, if I'd tried to watch that two or three years after my head injury, I don't think I would've been able to.

CHERYL: Yeah.

WILLIAM: "The Lookout" is really a great film. I mean someone who's on the hockey team in high school gets a head injury. And he finishes high school, doesn't go on to college. He gets a part-time job at a bank. He can't go any further than that. Then a couple of people who want to rob the bank try to recruit him to help them rob the bank. And he eventually sees what they're trying to do. And he finds a way to stop them from robbing the bank. But one of the things I love about it is the way that it shows him dealing with head injury. It shows how his father thinks--in some ways--he's the same person. Like in one scene, his father is trying to play chess with him. And he's saying, "I can't do this anymore. I don't have the ability to do this." It shows some of the tricks that he uses for short-term memory. He sets up things as memory triggers so he can remind himself how to take care of stuff. I heard an interview with Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who played this character. What Levitt said gave me a lot of respect for him because he said, "I wanted to learn how to play someone with a head injury. So what I had to do was spend a lot of time around people with head injuries to learn what their mannerisms are like, see how they go through life, see what happens on a daily basis." One of the best things he said is that he learned some things about people who've had head injuries. And now when he meets someone who's had a head injury, he often gets a sense of that after speaking with them for a while just because of the way the person talks or acts or behaves. You know, it's the personal mannerisms that he picked up or developed. And I think that really comes across in the way that character is shown on screen. So there are some good representations of it and some bad ones. Unfortunately, it seems like the worse the representation is, the more popular it becomes.

CHERYL: Yeah! Cuz you said "The Lookout" lost money, and people love "Memento." And frankly, I loved "The Lookout." I think I watched it three times in one weekend because I was so mesmerized by how well he played someone with a brain injury. I was really taken by it. And I'll tell you, my favorite thing about "The Lookout" is actually that it wasn't a film about oh, poor pitiful guy who can't remember anything and blah blah blah. It was a film about when you are a person with a disability, if someone senses that and senses your vulnerability, people could abuse you and take advantage of you. And that's what they did. And the film really kind of, it shows these other people in a really bad light for taking advantage of him. So it's not about the fact that he's weak but that people in society are responding to him in a really terrible way because they see him as potentially a sucker. Which, it turns out, he's not. But his character was genuinely confused about what was going on. But I just appreciate seeing a movie

where the person with a disability isn't a loser. It's the non-disabled people who are taking advantage of him. I really like that.

WILLIAM: This brings one more thing to me. His employer at the bank, the supervisor kept on saying, "Well, no, I don't think you can handle more than this. We'll just keep you on this low-level duty."

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

WILLIAM: So he's like being under-estimated by his own boss. And then, at one point, the person finally says, "Well, maybe I was wrong about this."

CHERYL: Uh-huh.

WILLIAM: I like seeing that.

CHERYL: Oh yeah, yeah. I mean, talk about accurate. His character looked fine just like most people with a brain injury disability look fine, whatever fine means. But they don't look like they have a disability. But you hear that label, and people's expectations just go in the toilet. And so that was a great thing to show that boss who under-estimated his abilities and his potential and his desires to make a good life for himself. What are you supposed to do when everyone around you either thinks that you're exactly like you were before, or they think you're worthless? He was kind of trapped around that.

WILLIAM: Yes, and it doesn't show him staying trapped. It shows him moving out of that spot, breaking people's expectations.

CHERYL: Yep, yep. I love it. To me, for a brain injury film, I can't think of a better--Well, there aren't that many. But I can't think of a better one. You know, "50 First Dates" comes pretty close. [both laugh] I just hope and pray that everyone could hear the sarcasm in my voice. I think that one is so much worse than "Memento." I won't argue with you over which is worse. But my personal least favorite for disgusting brain injury representations would be "50 First Dates." And partly that's because everyone around Drew Barrymore's character lies to her, manipulates her, prevents her from finding out reality, keeps her separated from her friends. And if you did that to a non-disabled person, that would be called abuse. But in this film, it was totally fine to manipulate her and keep her living in a lie without her consent. It was OK cuz she's just, you know, she's just crippled. She's just got a crippled brain. It's fine. We can treat her however we want.

WILLIAM: Well, I admit, I have not seen "50 First Dates" because it looks so bad that I said, "No, I'm not gonna watch that movie!"

CHERYL: Good for you. There's absolutely no reason to watch "50 First Dates" unless you want to be able to speak from personal experience about how awful it is. It is one of the least valuable pieces of cinema ever made. It's homophobic, it's racist, it's sexist, misogynistic, ableist, classist. It is really, really disgusting. Yeah.

My Gimpy Life, "Murderball," and learning about accessibility

CHERYL: On that note, on that happy note, I do actually have a lovely segue into a very, very happy note. And that is that for your Cinema Touching Disability festival in 2014, the phenomenal and engaging--and accurate!--Teal Shearer is going to be Skyped in and is gonna do a talk. So she's the star and one of the creators of "[My Gimpy Life](#)." So go ahead and tell me what's going on with Teal Shearer this year?

WILLIAM: Well, don't ask me how I ran across "My Gimpy Life," but I found it. And I thought wow, this is great. It's about an actress struggling to navigate through Hollywood in a wheelchair. She portrays some of the barriers and problems that people with disabilities run across all the time. And I thought wow, I'd love to show this at the festival. So I sent a request to her by email. And she said, "Oh, I'd love that." And she's happy to introduce it through Skype. So we're going to show the first two episodes of the series and have a personal introduction of it. And I love it because she shows some of the misconceptions that people have.

CHERYL: Yes!

WILLIAM: And it's really funny. And it's not saying, "Well, this is wrong. We need to change it." It's just showing how ridiculous these ideas are.

CHERYL: Yeah.

WILLIAM: And one of my favorites is when she buzzes at a door. And the person says, "Oh, come on in." Of course, there are steps. And so she buzzes again. And the person says, "Is there a problem with the door?" "Well, no. There's a problem with the stairs cuz I'm in a wheelchair." "Oh." [both giggle]

CHERYL: Yeah. It's great because all the people working on the show do such a wonderful job of showing how the larger society, non-disabled world doesn't even notice this stuff. Oh, there must be a problem with the door or else she would've come up. Like it doesn't cross someone's mind that there might actually be an actress showing up for an audition who uses a wheelchair. It's just so impossible. But then, she shows it to you. It's a lovely show. I absolutely adore "My Gimpy Life." And I'm so glad she's interested in the festival and is gonna Skype in. That's really cool.

WILLIAM: I will admit that before I started working in a cross-disability organization, I knew about the accessibility that I need. That made perfect sense to me. But I had no idea about some of the architectural barriers faced by people in wheelchairs. I thought oh, you just need a ramp. No problem.

CHERYL: Uh-huh.

WILLIAM: I didn't realize how important the angle of the ramp could be. And sometimes the ramps are too short, too steep an angle, and it doesn't work. And I didn't understand that doors need to be a certain width. Otherwise a wheelchair won't fit through it, especially if it's a motorized wheelchair. And it taught me that well, it's like you mentioned earlier: there needs to be Universal Design. And you need to think not only what works for me but what's it going to be like if the person is in a wheelchair. What if the person cannot grasp a doorknob in his or her hand to turn it? Well, you need a door lever. It's taught

me a lot about thinking not only about accessibility but what sorts of accessibility people who have a different disability than me might need.

CHERYL: I think that's wonderful. And you know, we can't know all these things until they come up. I mean, I think I knew about angle and length of wheelchair ramps well before I knew anything about Audio Description, Closed Captioning. Different accessibility things that I need now, I didn't know about those. I knew about ramps and Braille and raised letters. I knew about those things first. So we come to each one of these things, sometimes one at a time. And what I like about "My Gimpy Life" is she points out yeah, people are not prepared for this and not ready for it. She uses humor to say it's time to move forward and get ready for this. It's time to start making these changes. And she's not in your face about it. And she's not rude about it. But she just points out all these instances where oh look, here's another place where people have not considered people with disabilities. So now you need to consider it cuz I'm here. And I have to come up the stairs. [giggles]

WILLIAM: That's one of the reasons we like to show all sorts of different disabilities in our films. Because people need to learn about it. And if you don't show this to them, people won't learn.

CHERYL: That's right.

WILLIAM: I'm trying to set this up: it turns out that Teal's favorite disability movie is "[Murderball](#)."

CHERYL: Oh, I love that film!

WILLIAM: And Chase knows Mark Zupan. So I'm trying to see if I can set up a meeting on the internet between the two of them.

CHERYL: I saw that film in the theater years ago with a friend of mine who has disabilities. And every time the players would fall down, we would laugh because it was kinda funny. These big, super macho dudes would fall over, and they couldn't get up by themselves. And it was cracking up. And people kept giving us the dirtiest looks. But you know, these players, these Murderball players know they're going to fall down sometimes. They know that. And they know they look ridiculous because they're just stuck there. And they've got wheels that are spinning. And they have to wait for someone to come give assistance. They know. They're not so fragile. It's OK to laugh, you know? I mean, we weren't laughing at their pain. We were just laughing that wow, this is so unexpected and so great that this huge, macho guy just fell over and can't get up.

WILLIAM: From what she's told me, they are really aggressive, not only with each other, but they're also aggressive towards the referees. So they're not polite.

CHERYL: Yeah! Yeah! So it's OK to laugh at them every now and again. But you know, my friend and I, you couldn't tell that maybe we were in the disability community ourselves. People just thought, "Oh! How dare you laugh at crippled people!" But it's like you know, if you think that they're so fragile and so pitiable that you would never, ever laugh at them, I don't know who's being worse here. And in addition to learning about disability experiences by watching the films and by appreciating filmmakers who have disabilities, there's another side to things, which would be film access. So my friend, Lavaun, is legally

blind. I made a documentary about her. And when I was filming it, I would get her opinion about what she wanted me to film or how she wanted me to film it so that she could enjoy watching it. Because why would I make a completely inaccessible film that the star of the film can't even watch and enjoy? And so one of the things she told me was she really hates this current trend of showing blurry footage on purpose, like having it blurred out because she panics. And she's like, "Oh my gosh, my retina detached! Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh!" And then the footage goes into focus. It's a deliberate style choice. But in the moment, she's scared she's gotta run to the emergency room and miss the movie. And it was just sort of a trick. And I think that one of the reasons this is a trend is because filmmakers don't consider things like Lavaun's experience. They're just considering the way they see films and the way the biggest audience is going to see films. Lavaun has also said she prefers a lot of close ups because she can access the subject matter and access the characters better. So I tried to do that a lot in the film with her. And some people were like, "Why didn't you ever pull the camera out? There's so many close ups." I'm like, "Well, that's what Lavaun asked for so that she could enjoy the film about herself." But I'm wondering, with all of your experience in disability film, what are other things that filmmakers can consider in how to make their movies more accessible?

WILLIAM: The thing that I've liked best showing the viewpoint of blind people--and I've seen this in a couple of films, including the 1942 movie I told you about--was when they wanted to show it from the blind person's point of view, they just made the screen go black. And it was interesting because when that happened, you heard the person say, "Ah, now we're on equal footing. Now you can see as much as I can."

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

WILLIAM: And I like that because if the person is totally blind, OK, let's just remove vision period, take care of that. The one thing that I really like when they're showing people in wheelchairs is they shoot it from the wheelchair point of view. So the camera is at the same level that the person in the wheelchair would be in. Or if they're shooting from a Little Person's point of view, they will shoot it from that individual's point of view. Beyond that, if you have to use a special trick to show the disability, you're thinking about it wrong. You wanna cut out the sound to show the viewpoint of someone who's deaf? That doesn't work most of the time. Years ago, Sylvester Stallone was in a movie called "Cop Land" about a police officer who was partially retired because he was deaf in one ear. And he eventually found out there was some corruption going on. And at one point, one of the criminals said, "OK, I'm gonna make sure you can't hear anything at all." And he fired off a gun right next to his ear so that the sound would temporarily knock out his hearing. And for a short period of time, it showed things where there was really muffled sound. And I thought that was interesting because it was trying to show his perspective. But I don't know if that was accurate or if that's playing into the bias of people who do not have hearing impairments.

CHERYL: Oh, yeah. Mmhmm.

WILLIAM: It sort of made sense to me. But what would someone who is Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing say about that?

CHERYL: Yeah. What a great question because we're here. We can be asked. I think a lot of people without disabilities like to make movies about disability or about people with disabilities without including us in the process either as actors or consultants or as the actual filmmakers. And I like that your festival includes a lotta filmmakers with disabilities so that you know that accuracy is there. And you know that non-disabled bias isn't there in making the film.

WILLIAM: It makes a really big difference.

CHERYL: Yeah.

Disability access in movies

CHERYL: We were both talking about access in terms of how you portray characters with disabilities kind of in an accurate way. Can you talk a little bit about access in terms of things like Audio Description or Captions? Or what are other pieces of access?

WILLIAM: Captions are really important. And I did not understand this until I started working on the film festival. But there's a difference between subtitles and Closed Captions.

CHERYL: Yes, yes.

WILLIAM: I didn't realize it. Oh, Closed Captions, it's not just the words. It's all of the sounds.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

WILLIAM: And Audio Description is fairly new, relatively speaking. Those are the only things really that I've heard about in terms of accessibility. Dr. Temple Grandin, most famous person in the world with Autism, was talking about her college roommate because here's a person with Autism going to college. Well, we better be careful about the roommate we give her. So of course she gets the roommate who is blind.

CHERYL: [giggles]

WILLIAM: They turned out to be really great friends. But she said that one of the things they enjoyed doing was watching television together. And I think she said they would watch "Star Trek" together. And Temple Grandin would describe what was going on onscreen to her roommate. And she said that it made watching the movie a lot more fun for her.

CHERYL: Mm.

WILLIAM: And sometimes accessibility can be using Audio Description or Closed Captions. Or sometimes it can be a friend sitting next to you, describing what's happening in the film. And so it goes from the very high tech to the very low tech.

CHERYL: Mmhmm. Yeah, it's stuff that, again, a lot of people don't think about. I went to an opera once that had supertitles projected on a screen way up at the top of the stage, way above the actors' heads. But you could read the lyrics. It wasn't for disability access. It was because the opera was in a different

language. And I thought this is just the bees' knees. I love this. There are all the lyrics right there for me. I can look at them or not look at them whenever I need. And I wish I saw more of that. I wish I saw more theaters that just always have Audio Describers available and Captions. But it's getting a foothold. People are starting to recognize it. I do run into a lotta people who get defensive when I insist that a film or a video have Captions or at least subtitles. There's a lot of defensiveness: "Well, I don't think there's really a demand for that." OK, just yes there really is. There really is. You may not have heard it. But it really is there.

Wrap up

Would you let people know the best ways to find the Coalition either online or in the non-online world?
[both giggle]

WILLIAM: Well, the film festival is CTDfilmfest.org. And the Coalition is TXDisabilities.org.

CHERYL: Great. And they're both on Facebook as well.

WILLIAM: Yes, and the easiest way to find our Facebook page is go to TXDisabilities.org and click our Facebook logo. If you go there, you'll also see some of the really cool and interesting things we're doing.

CHERYL: All right. I would like to really thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today and to talk about disability representation in the movies, talk about your festival. And for me personally, it's so great to talk to another person in the brain injury community who's super engaged in cross-disability work and media representation. I had a wonderful time speaking with you today.

WILLIAM: Well, thank you very much. I really enjoyed it.

[music]

CHERYL: Thanks for joining me for another episode of Stories from the brainreels. Find more handy info on brain injury and disability art and culture on my disability arts blog, WhoAmItoStopIt.com.

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