



Easterseals Disability Film Challenge Celebrates 11 Years of Leadership and Advocacy for Diversity, Equity + Inclusion in Entertainment

Announces 10 \$15,000 Adobe Foundation Seed Fund/Film Finishing Grants

2024 Registration Opened Jan. 20th at DisabilityFilmChallenge.com
Challenge Dates: April 2-7

LOS ANGELES — January 2024 — For Immediate Release — Celebrating more than a decade of leadership advocating for diversity, equity and inclusion in the entertainment industry, the 2024 Easterseals Disability Film Challenge (EDFC) opened for registration Jan. 20, with the competition to be held April 2-- April 7. The awards ceremony will be held May 9 at Sony Pictures Studios.

This year—in addition to the traditional Film Challenge awards of cash, goods, subscriptions, mentorships and screening opportunities—the EDFC will be awarding 10 \$15,000 seed fund/film finishing grants. Made possible by a grant provided by the Adobe Foundation, as part of the Adobe Film & TV Fund, the EDFC grants will be presented to the winners of Best Film, Best Director, Best Writer, Best Actor and Best Editor to further develop the winning short film and/or to accelerate the development of their projects into feature films or episodic series. Additionally, grants will also be made available to five past EDFC participants who may submit their previous Film Challenge submissions for consideration by a review committee, with winners announced at the EDFC awards ceremony. The grant will also fund EDFC workshops and other activities throughout the year.

The featured genre for the 11th annual Film Challenge is “Buddy Comedy,” which was revealed at this year’s Sundance Film Festival, during IMDbPro and Prime Video’s Intentionally Intersectional panel, which featured a discussion between community leaders who are paving the way for authentic and inclusive productions. Participating on the panel was actor, comedian, producer and disability advocate Nic Novicki, a board member of Easterseals Southern California and founder and director of the Film Challenge.

Since the Film Challenge was launched in 2013, aspiring filmmakers have created and submitted more than 600 short films (a record 115 last year) from nearly every state and from around the globe, including submissions from Austria, Bolivia, Canada, England, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Israel, Timor Leste and The Netherlands.

According to the CDC, 25% of U.S. residents, more than 61 million people, have a disability, making it today’s largest minority population. Yet, according to a study released last summer by USC’s Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, the number of speaking characters with a disability in a major film was just 1.9% in 2022¹. GLAAD also published a report in 2022 which found that only 2.8% of series regulars on

primetime broadcast TV (22 of 775) were characters with disabilities². And per the most-recent Ruderman Family Foundation study, about 95% of characters with disabilities in Hollywood's top films and TV shows are played by able-bodied actors³.

"As we continue to strive to build a more diverse and inclusive workplace in Hollywood, we have made advancements, but there is still much work to be done," said Novicki, who was most recently seen in Columbia Pictures/Sony Pictures Animation's award-winning film *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*. "Disability continues to be frequently overlooked in D&I discussions and we need to be part of that conversation. I created the Easterseals Disability Film Challenge to help accelerate change and to showcase talented filmmakers and actors, providing them with an opportunity to overcome barriers and to achieve their dreams. We are proud of the outstanding films produced over the past 11 years and I am grateful that the Challenge has provided a high-profile platform that has enabled many of our participants to go on to such prominent success."

Previous Film Challenge winners and participants have gone on to land roles or direct segments of such popular films and TV shows as *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*, *New Amsterdam*, *Superstore*, *The Good Doctor*, *Loudermilk*, *Dahmer*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Marry Me*, *Moxie*, *Special*, *Good Trouble*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *One Day at a Time*, *Dollface*, *So Help Me Todd*, *NCIS: Hawai'i*, *NCIS: New Orleans*, *Dragons: The Nine Realms*, *Pupstruction*, *Not Quite Narwhal*, *Interview With the Vampire*, *Best Foot Forward*, *As We See It*, *Growing Up and Lucky Hank*, among others. Additionally, Challenge films have gone on to win awards at an array of other film festivals; and participants have earned accolades and grants from prestigious organizations around the world (including the AT&T Underrepresented Award), given Ted Talks and lectured about the experience at Harvard.

"Saying yes to my first Easterseals Disability Film Challenge and facing my fear of the unknown literally put me on the path that I was meant to be on," said actor Danny Gomez, a wheelchair user who will be participating in the Film Challenge for the seventh time this year. "It showed me that anything is possible for disabled actors. There is a place for us in this industry. It also led to me signing with my first agent and to my first guest star on NBC's *New Amsterdam*. It was life changing."

Commented Mark Whitley, President and CEO of Easterseals Southern California, "Hollywood has only begun to tap into the power of inclusion and to showcase this significant segment of our society. The Easterseals Disability Film Challenge gives filmmakers, actors and their crews an opportunity to change the way we all experience and understand disability."

During the Film Challenge, registered filmmakers are given a span of five days over the designated timeframe to write and produce short films (one-to-five minutes), based on the year's announced genre, which promote disability inclusion. Submitted films are judged in six award categories: Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Writer, Best Editor and Best Awareness Campaign.

Winners receive invaluable access to entertainment leaders and resources, opening the door to an industry notoriously difficult to enter, as well receive as a variety of prizes to help them achieve their career goals, including:

- \$2,000 cash prize awards to each winner.
- \$15,000 seed fund/film finishing grant provided by the Adobe Foundation to winners of Best Film, Best Director, Best Writer, Best Actor and Best Editor to further develop the winning short film and/or to accelerate the development of their projects into feature films or episodic series.
- Dell Technologies computers.

- One-year premium membership to IMDbPro, the essential resource for entertainment industry professionals.
- Screenings at Academy Award-qualifying festivals, including the Heartland Film Festival, HollyShorts Film Festival and NewFilmmakers LA.
- One-year subscription to Adobe Creative Cloud, the world's best platform of creative apps and services, empowering you to make anything you can imagine, wherever you're inspired.
- Mentorship meetings with entertainment industry executives and talent, including Emmy-nominated actor Ryan O'Connell (Special, Queer as Folk); Ivana Lombardi, Director of Film, Netflix; Karen Noble, Senior Manager, Creative Talent and Content, Global Talent Development & Inclusion, Universal Filmed Entertainment Group; Steven O'Dell, President, Sony Pictures Releasing International; and Tiffany Smith-Anoa'i, Executive VP, Entertainment Diversity & Inclusion, West Coast, Paramount Global, among others to be announced.

The 2024 Film Challenge will be judged by a diverse group of influential entertainment industry talent, including: Nicole Castro, Managing Director, Hollyshorts Film Festival; director Kat Coiro (She Hulk, Dead to Me, Marry Me); Jerome Core, head of U.S. & Worldwide DEIA Content at Amazon MGM Studios & Prime Video; director and activist Jenni Gold (CinemAbility: The Art of Inclusion); Tim Gray, Executive Vice President of the Golden Globes; Stacey Wilson Hunt, Contributing Editor, The Hollywood Reporter; Andraéa LaVant, disability inclusion expert and founder of LaVant Consulting; model/actress Jillian Mercado (The L Word: Generation Q); filmmaker and activist Jim LeBrecht (Crip Cramp, Battlefield Earth, Pitch Black); Col Needham, founder & CEO of IMDb; three-time Emmy nominated journalist Allison Norlian; actor Mark Povinelli, President, Little People of America; journalist Richard Propp, The Independent Critic; journalist Cara Reedy (CNN, NPR, The Guardian); Gil Robertson, President, African-American Film Critics Association; actor, dancer and Deaf advocate Shaheem Sanchez (Sound of Metal); journalist Lindzi Scharf (Los Angeles Times, Entertainment Weekly, WWD); Film Independent Nominations Director Jennifer Wilson; and actor and comedian Danny Woodburn (Mirror Mirror, Jingle All the Way, Seinfeld).

For rules + regulations and to register: www.DisabilityFilmChallenge.com

Questions? Email us at: Info@DisabilityFilmChallenge.com

The Easterseals Disability Film Challenge is made possible by the generous support of its supporters: Adobe Foundation, Amazon MGM Studios, Dell Technologies, Golden Globe Foundation, IMDbPro, Intel, NBCUniversal, Netflix, Paramount Global, Sony Pictures Entertainment and The Walt Disney Studios.

About the Easterseals Disability Film Challenge:

As someone with a disability, actor, comedian and producer Nic Novicki launched the Disability Film Challenge in 2013 in response to the under-representation of talent with disabilities both in front of and behind the camera. Novicki created the challenge to give aspiring filmmakers the opportunity to showcase their work and provide them with meaningful exposure. In 2017, Novicki joined forces with Easterseals Southern California – the nation's leading nonprofit supporting people and families with disabilities – to expand the event, now known as the Easterseals Disability Film Challenge. Learn more at www.DisabilityFilmChallenge.com

About Easterseals Southern California:

Easterseals is leading the way to full equity, inclusion and access through life-changing disability and community services. For more than 100 years, we have worked tirelessly with our partners to enhance quality of life and expand local access to healthcare, education and employment opportunities. Easterseals Southern California provides essential services and on-the-ground supports to

more than 18,000 people each year—from early childhood programs for the critical first five years, to autism services, daily and independent living services for adults, employment programs and more. Our public education, policy and advocacy initiatives positively shape perceptions and address the urgent and evolving needs of the one in four Americans with disabilities today. Together, we’re empowering people with disabilities, families and communities to be full and equal participants in society. Learn more at: <https://www.easterseals.com/southernca>

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Join the Inclusion Conversation ...

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YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCd0PQTVAsQpJCPOm4_QYqqQ

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Sources:

¹ <https://annenberg.usc.edu/news/research-and-impact/progress-what-progress-inclusion-hollywood-limited-and-lacking#:~:text=The%20report%20also%20explored%20the,when%20the%20percentage%20was%202.4%25.>

² <https://glaad.org/glaads-2021-2022-where-we-are-tv-report-lgbtq-representation-reaches-new-record-highs/#:~:text=Series%20regular%20characters%20with%20disabilities,disabilities%20in%20the%20United%20States.>

³ chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcapglefindmkaj/https://rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TV-White-Paper_7-1-003.pdf