



Easterseals Disability Film Challenge Announces 2023 Winners at Orange-Carpet Event at Sony Pictures Studios

Celebrating 10 Years of Leadership and Advocacy for Diversity, Equity + Inclusion in Entertainment With a Record 115 Submissions From Around the World

Presenters Included Peter Farrelly, Phil Lord, Chris Miller & Kat Coiro +

DisabilityFilmChallenge.com

LOS ANGELES — May 4, 2023 — For Immediate Release — Easterseals Southern California (ESSC) announced the winners today of the 2023 Easterseals Disability Film Challenge (EDFC) at an orange-carpet awards ceremony and reception at Sony Pictures Studios. EDFC is celebrating a decade of leadership this year of advocating for diversity, equity and inclusion in the entertainment industry.

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The featured genre for the 10th anniversary Challenge was romance, which was revealed at this year's Sundance Film Festival. The film challenge has received a record-breaking number of entries every year since its inception, with 115 films submitted in 2023 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.

Celebrity Presenters/Attendees Included: Two-time Oscar-winning writer/producer/director Peter Farrelly (the upcoming Ricky Stanicky, Loudermilk, Greenbook, Something About Mary, Dumb and Dumber), Academy Award-winning filmmaking team Phil Lord & Chris Miller (Cocaine Bear, Spider-Man™: Into the Spider-Verse, the Lego movies, The Last Man on Earth, 21/22 Jump Street), actress, host and activist Jameela Jamil (She-Hulk: Attorney at Law, DC League of Super-Pets, Marry Me, Pitch Perfect: Bumper in Berlin, The Good Place), director Kat Coiro (the upcoming CBS Matlock reboot starring Kathy Bates, She Hulk, Dead to Me, Marry Me), actress and founder of Pepita Productions Stephanie Noguerras (Killing It, Switched at Birth), actress Jamie Brewer (American Horror Story), actress Naomi Rubin (As We See It, Atypical, Dear Evan Hansen), actress Madison McLaughlin (Arrow, Chicago P.D., Supernatural), actor Ryan Lane (Switched at Birth), Top-10 charting, Grammy-nominated singer and actress Shanice (currently portraying Michelle Obama in 44 at the Bourbon Room in Hollywood), actress, author and lifestyle influencer Lolo Spencer (The Sex Lives of College Girls, Give Me Liberty, Firebuds), actor Danny J. Gomez (New Amsterdam, NCIS: Hawai'i) and actress Sue Ann Pien (As We See It).

Finalists were announced at the NewFilmmakers Los Angeles April film festival, which had an infocus on disability, and were selected in each of the following categories: Best Film presented by Warner Bros. Discovery, Best Director presented by NBCUniversal, Best Editor presented by Adobe, Best Actor presented by IMDb, Best Writer presented by Netflix and Best Awareness Campaign Award presented by Prime Video.

The winners are ...

Watch the films at: <https://www.youtube.com/thedisabilityfilmchallenge>

Best Film presented by Warner Bros. Discovery

Kryptonite – Penni Wilson

Rain in My Head – Chrissy Marshall

Smash or Pass – Cory Reeder

Unlucky in Love – Rachel Handler

Best Director presented by NBCUniversal

Rain in My Head – Chrissy Marshall

Smash or Pass – Cory Reeder

To Be Loved by Elliott – Samantha Bartow & Carmen Flood

Unlucky in Love – Catriona Rubenis-Stevens

Best Actor presented by IMDb

A Stupid Man – Shannon Devido

Kryptonite – Ryan Lane

Rain in My Head – Layne Apffel

Smash or Pass – Joci Scott

Best Editor presented by Adobe

Rain in My Head – Mario Fierro

Reverie – Chase Chambers

Smash or Pass – Nathan Cox

Unlucky in Love – Crystal Arnette

Best Writer presented by Netflix

Kryptonite – Joshua Friedman, Penni Wilson, Cameron S. Mitchell & David S. Zimmerman

Rain in My Head – Chrissy Marshall

Say What?! – Sarah Beth Budd, Grant Cleaveland, & Lee Cleaveland

Unlucky in Love – Rachel Handler

Best Awareness Campaign Award presented by Prime Video

Cripfished – Anna Pakman

Leap of Love – Judith Rubin

Reverie – Justin Jackerson

Safe Place – Scott Klumb

They – Allison Friedman

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 Nielsen study released in 2022, about 95% of characters with disabilities in Hollywood's top TV shows are played by non-disabled actors and, during the 2019 Oscars—a year when disability inclusion was reported at its highest to date—only two of the 61 nominees and 27 winners who played disabled characters were actually disabled.

“As the entertainment industry strives to build a more diverse and inclusive workplace, we must keep disability in the conversation,” said actor, comedian, producer and disability advocate Nic Novicki,

founder of the Challenge. “I created the Easterseals Disability Film Challenge to help accelerate change within Hollywood and to provide filmmakers and actors with tangible work experience and with an opportunity to tell authentic stories—and once again, I am humbled by the overwhelming response. We are proud of the amazing films produced this year and over the past 10 years—which have been viewed around the world—and the successes our participants have gone on to achieve.”

Since the Film Challenge was launched in 2013, aspiring filmmakers have created and submitted more than 600 short films. Previous winners and participants have gone on to achieve great success within the industry, landing roles in or directing segments of such popular films and TV shows as *New Amsterdam*, *Superstore*, *The Good Doctor*, *Loudermilk*, *Dahmer*, *Marry Me*, *Moxie*, *Special*, *Good Trouble*, *So Help Me Todd*, *Best Foot Forward*, *As We See It*, *Growing Up* and *Lucky Hank*. 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), as well as given Ted Talks and lectured about their experience at Harvard.

“Hollywood has only begun to tap into the power of inclusion and to showcase this significant segment of our society,” said Mark Whitley, President and CEO of Easterseals Southern California. “The Easterseals Disability Film Challenge gives filmmakers, actors and their crews invaluable entertainment experience and a chance to network with industry professionals. Likewise, it’s an opportunity for studios, networks, guilds, talent agencies and people working in entertainment to get involved 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 (three-to-five minutes), based on the year’s announced genre, which promote disability inclusion.

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

- \$2,000 grants provided by NBCUniversal.
- Dell Technologies computers.
- One-year standard membership to IMDbPro, the essential resource for entertainment industry professionals.
- The winning films will be highlighted in a video playlist on the homepage of IMDb, the world's most popular and authoritative source for information on movies, TV shows and celebrities.
- 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 Academy Award-winning filmmaking team Phil Lord & Chris Miller (*Cocaine Bear*, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, the *Lego* movies, *21/22 Jump Street*), Gena Desclos, EVP, HBO & HBO Max Post Production, Karen Noble, Senior Manager, Creative Talent & Content, Global Talent Development & Inclusion, Universal Filmed Entertainment Group; Emmy-nominated actor Ryan O’Connell (*Special*, *Queer as Folk*); a Netflix executive; and Tiffany Smith-Anoa’i, EVP, Entertainment Diversity & Inclusion, West Coast, Paramount Global, among others to be announced.

The 2023 Film Challenge was judged by a diverse group of influential entertainment industry talent, including: Nicole Castro, Managing Director, Hollyshorts Film Festival; director Kat Coiro (the upcoming

CBS Matlock reboot starring Kathy Bates, She Hulk, Dead to Me, Marry Me); Jerome Core, head of U.S. & Worldwide DEIA Content at Amazon Studios & Prime Video; director and activist Jenni Gold (CinemAbility: The Art of Inclusion); Tim Gray, Sr. VP, Variety; Stacey Wilson Hunt, Contributing Editor, The Hollywood Reporter; filmmaker and activist Jim LeBrecht (Crip Cramp, Battlefield Earth, Pitch Black); actor, producer and activist Lawrence Carter Long (The Projected Image: A History of Disability on Film on Turner Classic Movies); Col Needham, founder and 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; journalist Lindzi Scharf (Los Angeles Times, Entertainment Weekly, WWD); Nigel Smith, News Editor, Movies, People magazine; fashion stylist and author Stephanie Thomas; Film Independent Nominations Director Jennifer Wilson; and actor and comedian Danny Woodburn (Mirror Mirror, Jingle All the Way, Seinfeld).

The Easterseals Disability Film Challenge is made possible by the generous support of: Adobe, Dell Technologies, Golden Globe Awards, IMDb, Intel, Microsoft Teams, NBCUniversal, Netflix, Paramount, Prime Video, SAG-AFTRA, Sony Pictures Entertainment and Warner Bros. Discovery.

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 15,000 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, veterans’ services 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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