

NORMALIZING THE NORMAL

THE GEORGE SUNGA AWARD CELEBRATES PRODUCERS WHO CREATE A MORE DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE PRODUCTION LANDSCAPE.

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Hollywood's gradual progress in portraying diversity and depicting disabled characters can in part be attributed to the spirit of the Media Access Awards (MAA), which include the PGA award named for the late George Sunga. The awards were originally established in 1979 by Norman Lear and Fern Field to honor actors, writers, directors, casting directors and producers who strive to create accurate portrayals of people with disabilities. The PGA's George Sunga Award specifically honors producers who personify that commitment.

Sunga, who passed away last November, was a Filipino American television producer who worked on a string of hit shows in the 1970s, including *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons* and *Three's Company*. Sunga was actively involved in the PGA for 20 years, serving on the board of directors and as founding chair of the Guild's Diversity Committee. There he met Deborah Calla, who joined the committee in 2004.

"He really took me in," says Calla, a producer and writer with a long history of social activism. "He was very generous and committed. Along with others, we helped found the PGA's diversity workshop."

Then in 2010, Calla was asked to produce the Media Access Awards. She figured it was a one-time gig, but the experience proved too powerful to just quit. Together with Allen Rucker, she continued producing the MAA year after year.

"When I became executive producer, I petitioned the Guild to name the award given to producers for George Sunga," says Calla. "I'm in his debt, and this was a small way of paying him back." To this day, the Producers Guild of America George Sunga Award honors a television, film or documentary producer who features disabled characters, performers and storylines in their work.

The MAA has come a long way since 2010. The ceremony is now televised on PBS. It has attracted major talent as hosts, including Millicent Simmonds, Lauren Ridloff, Marlee Matlin, Troy Kotsur and Jimmy Kimmel. Winners of the George Sunga Award include producers Betsy Beers, Bruce Cohen, Shonda Rhimes and 2023 recipient Davis Guggenheim for his work on *Still: A Michael J. Fox Movie*.

All that visibility has had an impact. "I have had producers tell me that they are much more conscientious about including people with disabilities in their productions because of this award," says Calla.

Visibility is especially important, given that more than 13% of Americans self-identify as having a disability, according to a recent Pew Center poll. That number is likely an undercount,



Director and producer Davis Guggenheim accepts the 2024 PGA George Sunga Award for *Still: A Michael J. Fox Movie*.

COURTESY OF MEDIA ACCESS AWARDS

and the Centers for Disease Control estimates that the number is closer to one in four Americans. Representation creates an opportunity to bring fresh storylines to the screen and to tap new audiences.

Andrea Warren, a producer at Pixar, won the Producers Guild of America George Sunga Award in 2021 for the feature film *Luca*, about an unlikely friendship between a boy and a sea monster (disguised as a boy) on the Italian Riviera. Integral to the story was Massimo, a one-armed fisherman determined to slay a sea monster.

"We wanted Massimo to be just as strong as someone with two arms," says Warren. "His missing an arm isn't a big story. It just 'is.'"

What was more, Massimo resonated with people. "I had the honor of going on the road with the director and speaking to media and fans," says Warren. "There is nothing more rewarding than to hear from people that they related to a character in the film, and that happened quite a bit with Massimo."

That gets back to the point of the George Sunga Award: to represent the disabled with integrity. Warren puts it best: "It's about normalizing the normal." ■