



Access FOR ALL

BY PRIORITIZING AUTHENTIC CASTING, ACCESSIBILITY, AND
COLLABORATION WITH DEAF AND DISABLED ARTISTS, FILMS LIKE
BEING HEUMANN ARE SETTING A NEW STANDARD FOR ON-SET
UPGRADES THAT BENEFIT EVERYONE ON THE SET.

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In 1946, nonactor Harold Russell, a World War II veteran who lost both hands during his military service, was cast in one of the lead roles in William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives*. No on-set accommodations were made for Russell's disability during production. Despite those barriers, Russell won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his portrayal of Homer Parrish, a veteran with the same disability, as well as an honorary Oscar "for bringing hope and courage to his fellow veterans through his appearance."

Russell's experience reflected a broader reality. For much of Hollywood's history, disabled performers and filmmakers were expected to adapt to inaccessible workplaces rather than have those workplaces adapt to them. That's assuming they were hired at all, rather than having their roles given to nondisabled people.

Hollywood's relationship with disability evolved unevenly. Early films such as *Freaks* offered rare visibility while often emphasizing spectacle. Later, acclaimed films including *My Left Foot*, *Rain Man*, *Temple Grandin*, and *The Theory of Everything* brought disabled characters into the cultural mainstream, sparking conversations about disability while also raising persistent questions about authenticity and representation. *Children of a Lesser God* made Marlee Matlin the first Deaf actor to win an Academy Award. Yet most of the era's most celebrated portrayals of disability featured nondisabled actors, frequently earning them Oscars.

In recent years, filmmakers have increasingly embraced collaboration with disabled artists both on and off screen. *Being Heumann*, the upcoming Apple Original film inspired by Judith Heumann's 2020 memoir of the same name, builds on that momentum while pushing it further. Rather than focusing solely on authentic casting, the production approached accessibility as an essential part of the filmmaking process itself.

From preproduction through post, the goal was to create a set where disabled cast and crew members had the accommodations, communication tools, and support they needed to do their best work.

"Not only did this production change my opinion of what can be done, but it also changed my opinion of what should be done," says the film's costume designer, Danny Glicker.

Daniel Durant, who has been deaf since birth and has been acting professionally since 2012, was impressed by the production's commitment to accessibility for all.

"While it was a massive learning experience for everyone involved, the production team listened to our needs and worked everything out," Durant says, through an ASL interpreter hired by the production. "I've never had an experience like that before, and I'm very grateful to have

been part of a production that increased on-set accessibility awareness for everyone."

TOTAL REPRESENTATION

It's rare for a biographical film to be shaped by the very person it portrays, but in the case of *Being Heumann*, the disability activist's vision molded the production from the start. Heumann's 2019 Ford Foundation report, *Road Map for Inclusion: Changing the Face of Disability in Media*, provided a blueprint for authentic disability representation both on screen and behind the camera.

"Disabled people are a part of every other group in society, and we are the one group that anyone can join at any age," wrote Heumann, who contracted polio as a toddler and used a wheelchair most of her life. "The time has come to seriously and comprehensively take steps that will move us from the margins to the main stage."

True to the spirit of Heumann, who died in 2023 while the film was in preproduction, the production hired predominantly disabled leads, hundreds of disabled background actors, and a number of disabled crew members.

Not every crew member with a disability chose to self-identify, and many disabilities are non-visible. However, crew members on set who publicly identified as disabled represent a range of lived experiences, including physical disabilities, limb differences, dwarfism, neurodivergence, Tourette's syndrome and deafness.

"We did a worldwide search to find disabled actors who most of the time don't have the opportunity to star in a major motion picture," says veteran producer David Permut, known for both big-budget Hollywood hits such as *Face/Off* and smaller Sundance favorites such as 2025's *Twinless*. It's a rare film where most of the leads are disabled, and below-the-line positions went to disabled crew members "whenever possible," says Permut.

Being Heumann stars Ruth Madeley, an actress who was born with spina bifida and uses a wheelchair, as Heumann, alongside Mark Ruffalo and Dylan O'Brien, with whom Permut recently worked on *Twinless*. The cast also includes CODA's Durant, wheelchair athlete/model Madeline Delp and Deaf actor Russell Howard.

THE REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVIST

Set in 1977, *Being Heumann* follows Heumann, already an accomplished civil rights activist, as she leads a 26-day sit-in along with more than 100 people with disabilities in a federal building in San Francisco. The demonstration became a turning point in the disability rights movement, helping secure enforcement of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

and expanding accessibility nationwide, and a precursor to the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Even though she is widely considered the “mother of the disability rights movement,” Heumann never became a household name. Permut first learned of her while watching the Sundance Award-winning documentary *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution*, about a sleepaway camp for people with disabilities, in which Heumann plays a key role.

“I never knew who Judy was, and after seeing *Crip Camp*, I wanted to know more,” Permut recalls. “So I read *Being Heumann*, and literally the next day I was on the phone with the people who represent Judy.”

Despite learning that other filmmakers were already interested in buying Judy’s life rights and developing her memoir, Permut arranged a Zoom meeting with Heumann. It turned out that she was a fan of his work too, especially his films about overlooked activists and unlikely heroes, including *Hacksaw Ridge*, about World War II medic Desmond Doss, and *Prayers for Bobby*, about LGBTQ rights activist Mary Griffith.

“It was my passion for telling these kinds of stories that made Judy trust me to tell hers,” says Permut. The following day, he recalls, her team called to say, “Congratulations—you’re the producer!”

A SHARED VISION

Permut had been tracking director Siân Heder since her first feature, *Tallulah*, premiered at Sundance in 2015, and was looking forward to her next film, *CODA*, which was still in production. Believing Heder would be the best person to direct *Being Heumann*, Permut introduced her to Heumann, and the three of them “connected around a shared vision for the film,” according to Permut.

The creative team developed a pitch deck and began taking *Being Heumann* out to buyers. After a few rejections, they paused their search and continued developing the script while waiting



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to see if *CODA*, a family drama with a predominantly Deaf cast, got into film festivals, which would strengthen their sales pitch for *Being Heumann*.

CODA ended up being selected for the opening night at Sundance 2021, where it became the first film in the festival’s history to win all three top prizes in the U.S. Dramatic competition. Following an intense bidding war, Apple acquired *CODA*, paying a record-breaking \$25 million.

Suddenly, *Being Heumann* was in quite a different negotiating position.

“Every streamer, every studio, everybody who lost a bid on *CODA*, really wanted Siân’s next picture,” says Permut. With a number of offers on the table, the team decided to go with Apple because of the company’s enthusiasm for the project and its relationship with Heder, who had by then signed a multipicture deal with the studio.

CODA went on to win three Academy Awards, making it the first film with

a predominantly Deaf cast in leading roles to win Best Picture; Troy Kotsur became the first Deaf male actor to win Best Supporting Actor; and Heder earned her first Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay.

Heder brought the same inclusive approach to *Being Heumann* that she had on *CODA*, prioritizing lived experience, authentic casting, accessibility, and meaningful collaboration with Deaf and disabled artists. In order to authentically adapt Heumann’s memoir, Heder cowrote the screenplay with Rebecca Taussig, author of *Sitting Pretty: The View from My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body*.

“She read my memoir and sought out my perspective as a storyteller with the lived experience of moving through the world in a wheelchair since childhood,” says Taussig, who considers Heumann a personal inspiration.

Ashley Eakin, a disabled writer-director and a founding member of

the DGA's Disability Committee, met Heder in 2024 at the committee's first event highlighting the contributions of members with disabilities.

"I let her know I was totally open to helping recommend disabled crew members for *Being Heumann*, because I know the community pretty well," says Eakin, whose film *Forgive Us Our Trespasses*, based on a screenplay she wrote with her husband and writing partner, Shawn Lovering, was developed as part of Netflix's Emerging Filmmaker Initiative. The production eventually hired the pair as field producers to shoot behind-the-scenes documentary footage of *Being Heumann*.

SPIRIT OF OPENNESS

"Ashley and I have been a part of enough productions where things are rigid, and there's an attitude like, 'This is just how we do things in the business,'" says Lovering. "The producers on *Being Heumann* had a spirit of learning and openness because a movie with this big a disabled ensemble cast had never been made before at this scale. We witnessed a true spirit of trial and error to get it just right."

Shooting in Toronto became a key decision that made the film feasible, thanks to strong tax incentives, experienced crews, and access to large studio spaces. "That made it possible to build detailed recreations of San Francisco on soundstages, which was especially important because many of the real locations now have full accessibility and would have required extensive digital modification if we had shot on site," says Permut.

The Toronto base also helped support the production's large-scale logistical demands, from assembling hundreds of disabled performers to coordinating the accommodations required to ensure a fully accessible set.

Diana Pokorny, the film's line producer, says that fostering genuine disability inclusion meant ensuring that everyone involved

in the production understood what was needed to create a barrier-free set.

"As much as the team researched and consulted disability experts, the process involved continual learning and adaptation. It's a bespoke process," Pokorny explains. "You can't apply accessibility guidelines from a corporate 9-to-5 setting to what happens on a movie set, which often involves changing locations, shifting schedules and occasionally very long hours."

Realizing that accessibility isn't a one-size-fits-all situation, the producers completed intake forms with disabled cast and crew before production so they could understand and anticipate needs.

Pokorny's advice for other producers? "Don't assume you know what someone's needs are. Wait until you find out who that particular cast or crew member is, and then listen to what they need you to do so they can do their best job," she says.

When the production learned that many wheelchair users need regular breaks from sitting, for example, it created an off-set area where performers could lie down and rest or get a massage. Another actor was provided with a "hang bar" to stretch between takes.

Some on-set adjustments had to be made. The production originally tried using a manual hand-crank lift to provide access to individual trailers while they were on stages, for example, but after realizing it was too slow, they built individual ramps to each trailer that needed one.

A TEAM EFFORT

The film established a new standard for collaboration by prioritizing the comfort and well-being of everyone on set, allowing them to fully focus on their work. Accessibility coordinators managed a team exclusively dedicated to supporting the production's disabled cast and crew. It included medics, transfer assistants for wheelchair users, a massage therapist, ASL interpreters, and a dedicated PA for individuals with

specific needs. The production built fully accessible trailers, a rarity in the business. The hair and makeup trailer was fitted with a hydraulic lift to make it wheelchair accessible.

"Overall, we worked to educate the crew about what sort of language to use when speaking about disability, and there were also department meetings that focused on specific requirements," says Pokorny. Signs were clearly posted on set stating that there were Deaf people at work, and the electrical department had to be extra careful about covering cables.

On other sets, Glicker has worked in costume shops so cramped that they couldn't fit a costume rack through the door, let alone fit a wheelchair. Not so on *Being Heumann*.

"There needed to be a foundation of accessibility as infrastructure for the entire costume department, which was an incredible undertaking and something that I wish all productions had," says Glicker, who was nominated for an Academy Award for his work on Gus Van Sant's *Milk*. "It made our entire job make more sense. It was more ergonomically functional in all ways."

For Deaf actor Daniel Durant, the changes have been tangible. "We really brought our best foot forward, because this is based on a true story," Durant says. "I'm extremely proud of how we did that."

Permut hopes *Being Heumann* will set a new standard for disability representation both on screen and behind the scenes. "Any film that gets made is a miracle. This one, more exceptionally so," says Permut. "What we achieved with this film will pave the way for others to be very conscientious and open-minded about inclusivity, knowing that this can be achieved, this can be done."

Most of all, Permut is pleased that the production has lived up to the values set by Heumann herself: "I think we all know that we made something that is as special as Judy was." ■