

# MAKING a DIFFERENCE

REAL HOMES. REAL CAREERS. REAL LEARNING. REAL INFLUENCE. REAL SUPPORTS.



**NEWS  
FOR YOU:**

**DISABILITY IN THE MEDIA:** Changing for the Better?

Get Ready for the **2017 LEGISLATIVE SESSION**

**2ND TAKE YOUR LEGISLATOR TO WORK DAY** Kicks Off



On the Cover:

Senator John Albers (R-District 56) visited freshman Jacob Moore (right) at Milton High School during GCDD's second annual Take Your Legislator to Work Days. (See story on page 18.)

The Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities, a federally funded state agency, works to bring about social and policy changes that promote opportunities for persons with developmental disabilities and their families to live, learn, work, play and worship in Georgia communities.



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On the Back Cover:

Register for GCDD 2017 Advocacy Days and make your voice heard. Receive advocacy training then meet Georgia legislators at the State Capitol. (See story on page 15.)

# MAKING a DIFFERENCE

A quarterly magazine of the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities VOLUME 17, ISSUE 3

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There is no denying that the representation of people with disabilities in the media has risen in recent times. But what does this increased representation of people with disabilities in the media signify?

## Get Ready for the 2017 Legislative Session ..... page 11

GCDD's legislative priorities focus on the five goals of the new strategic plan including employment, education, real communities, formal/informal supports and self-advocacy.

## Georgia Evolution Conference Reimagines Opportunities for People with Disabilities ..... page 16

This inaugural conference concentrated on giving providers the tools they need to advance employment support for all people with disabilities in careers and in the community.

## GCDD Kicks off Second Take Your Legislator to Work Day (TYLTWD) ..... page 18

TYLTWD aims to raise awareness about the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities and the belief that employment should be the expected and preferred outcome of all publicly funded services.

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It is important that these shows are understood as public

# CONVERSATION STARTERS, and we pay attention to the VERY FACT that DISABILITY

is in there.



Actor Daryl "Chill" Mitchell (right) is one of a small minority of people with disabilities actually portraying a person with a disability on the TV show *NCIS: New Orleans*.

# 1.7%

PERCENTAGE OF CHARACTERS WITH DISABILITIES OF ALL SERIES REGULARS ON NETWORK SHOWS FOR THE 2016-2017 SEASON

Source: GLAAD Annual Report 2016

## Disability in the Media – Changing for the Better?

By Ruksana Hussain

There is no denying that the representation of people with disabilities in the media has risen in recent times. Especially in visual media where shows like HBO's *Game of Thrones* and ABC's *Speechless* have cast actors with disabilities in roles that may or may not be related to their particular type of disability.

And the onslaught of reality TV has its own loyal audience – A&E's *Born This Way* has been renewed for a third season. In recent news, a 15-month-old Georgia boy with Down syndrome was to be featured in holiday campaigns by children's clothing company OshKosh B'Gosh.

Media advocacy organization GLAAD (formerly the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) released its annual report assessing representation of minority groups on television, including people with disabilities, with findings showing that characters with disabilities account for 1.7% of all series regulars on network shows for the 2016-2017 season, the highest percentage recorded since GLAAD started tracking disability representation on TV in 2010.

But what does this increased representation of people with disabilities in the media signify? Is the media moving in the right direction in terms of portraying characters with disabilities accurately? How are we as a society engaging with its media products?

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, co-director, Emory Disability Studies Initiative, provides some insight on the matter. "It is important that these shows are understood as public conversation starters, and we pay attention to the very fact that disability is in there. It is a political and cultural issue. People with disabilities have traditionally been represented in the media in stereotypical and often discriminatory ways. There

are several expected cultural scripts that get mobilized when media makes stories about disability. So we need to see what is the cultural work of these stories."

One disability story that's embedded everywhere and is inherited is the sentimental or "inspirational" story, which we see repeatedly, as with any kind of stereotypical narrative received in culture. The concern is whether such media products reinforce the kinds of stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes that people with disabilities experience, in an era of understanding disability as a social and cultural identity. For a group that has historically been excluded, disadvantaged and often been discriminated against, this is a completely new understanding of what it means to be identified as a person with disability.

"Is the media moving in the right direction in terms of portraying characters with disabilities accurately?"

Case in point being the book by Jojo Moyes adapted to a feature film, *Me Before You*, where disability was a central theme of the storyline. While the movie begins as a formulaic romance, it ends with the quadriplegic male character opting for euthanasia (chemical killing or physician

assisted suicide). There is a great deal of activism in the disability community around issues of quality of life for people with disabilities and the logic of people with disabilities using euthanasia. There were huge protests on social media and at movie theaters internationally surrounding the movie.

A professor of English at Emory University, where her fields of study are disability studies, American literature and culture, feminist theory and bioethics, Garland-Thomson addresses the different conversations that such media representation of people with disabilities enables. “There are useful conversations in the disability advocacy, activism and rights communities. There is public conversation through op-eds and blogs, such as the Disability Visibility project by Alice Wong. There is also conversation about employing actors without disabilities to play characters with disabilities. There is a long history of this.”

“One disability story that’s embedded everywhere and is inherited is the sentimental or “inspirational” story, which we see repeatedly, as with any kind of stereotypical narrative received in culture.”

But now, in *Speechless*, Micah Fowler, the actor who plays JJ, has cerebral palsy in real life and so does his character. Christopher Joseph “Chris” Burke played Charles “Corky” Thatcher in ABC’s *Life Goes On*, making him portray the first character in a network television series with Down syndrome. Lauren Potter portrayed the recurring character Becky Jackson, a cheerleader with Down syndrome, in all six seasons of the Fox TV show *Glee*.

Kayla Brown, counselor/coordinator of Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology (DO-IT) at University of Washington expresses similar sentiments. “*Speechless* spins a different narrative than we are used to seeing for people with disabilities. JJ’s character has cerebral palsy and it

“There is a great deal of activism in the disability community around issues of quality of life for people with disabilities and the logic of people with disabilities using euthanasia.”

prevents him from speaking out loud so he has assisted technology to do that for him. The idea of other people speaking for him and on his behalf was worrisome, but the show demonstrates that assisted technology is empowering and though JJ has other people speak out loud for him, he certainly does not accept misrepresentation of that.”

Brown works with high school and college students at DO-IT and disability in the media is part of her focus as she tries to integrate a more social justice lens for people she works with. “One of my tests in looking at media and looking at characters specifically, is that I look to see if I took away their disability or anything related to their disability to the storyline or in their characteristics, what would be left. I look for relationships, hobbies, interests and when we look at JJ, it is apparent he is much like a typical teenager.”

One of the most prominent actors with disabilities to have made a mark in cinema worldwide is Peter Dinklage, who plays the role of Lord Tyrion Lannister in *Game of Thrones*. In fact, *The New York Times* Op-Ed columnist Maureen Dowd calls him the first dwarf heartthrob in her article in the Sunday Review dated April 2016. “In my view, he has been appropriately glamorized like any other celebrity or actor,” says Garland-Thomson, whose work develops the field of critical disability studies in the health humanities to bring forward disability access, inclusion and identity to communities inside and outside of the academy. “That is a benefit, a kind of inclusion. The plot knits in his disability, but it is not the only element of his character. A lot of people probably love the show and his character, watching without any idea

## TV SERIES REGULARS WITH DISABILITIES



**ON THE RISE:** Among series regulars appearing this season on scripted prime-time programs on ABC, CBS, The CW, Fox and NBC, 15 are expected to have disabilities.

By contrast, there were just eight portrayals of disability on network shows last season.

Source: GLAAD Annual Report 2016

“**WHAT WE ARE SEEING** is more

characters written in a

**WAY THAT’S APPROPRIATE**

and not objectified as an inspiration for others,

which, **90%**

**OF THE TIME,**

that’s what they are there for.





that the fact that he is there is significant in terms of the politics of social justice.”

According to Garland-Thomson, who is also the author of *Staring: How We Look* and several other books, the inclusion of people with disabilities, even if the plot is filled with expected stereotypes and discriminatory narrative, is a good thing because it keeps the conversation about disability going. “There are very few media products that do unequivocal positive political social work, in part because of the very nature of media products. Ads that have people with disabilities in them are great, but that is where disability is an incidental aspect. It can be included as one of the characters, but it is harder to do that in narrative.”

The FX horror anthology television series *American Horror Story: Freak Show* cast Mat Fraser as a person with a disability. Jamie Brewer, an actress with Down syndrome, was also cast in several seasons of the show. Adds Brown, “Every character Brewer played was integrated like a normal character. It felt so natural, and that was a shining moment. What we are seeing is more characters written in a way that’s appropriate and not objectified as an inspiration for others, which, 90% of the time, that’s what they are there for.”

But reality television can be deceiving because a lot of it is scripted and has the power to harm or benefit communities. “Rather than telling a narrative of a person with a disability through a depiction or having it acted out by somebody without a disability, these characters are in relationships, working and having businesses so in a lot of ways, it might be a good first step as long as we are always being critical with it because a lot of times it is not through an intersectional lens which is the main problem with media,” says Brown.

“Sundance TV’s show *Push Girls* starred women in wheelchairs overcoming disabilities. The narrative was people with disabilities could be beautiful too. But what message does that send when you are promoting mainstream beauty standards not representative of community? On one hand, seeing these women being comfortable with their sexuality is great, but instead of

“So where is this conversation headed? Where I try to head it, and a lot of people do, is not to make a judgment about a particular show or narrative as terrible and boycott it, or great because of unequivocal political and social work.”

having a separate show, integrating them into mainstream type media would be better.”

So where is this conversation headed? “Where I try to head it, and a lot of people do, is not to make a judgment about a particular show or narrative as terrible and boycott it, or great because of unequivocal political and social work. It is best to continue having conversation about disability, as long as it is a theme and people with disabilities are in these various media narratives. If there is too much policing, it is not very productive because every cultural representation does certain kinds of work. We can’t always have control over what work it does, and we can’t predict what the reception will be.”

Brown, the author of a multi-part series on disability representation and the media, says, “It is important to be careful and critical of the trend because there is a very fine line. The ‘inspiration’ storyline is not a true representation, and we need endings of plotlines besides the ‘they get cured’ or ‘they die’ scenarios. Visual media is symbolic and influential, and we need that in all forms of media because it is crucial to how we perceive people and groups.”

“But reality television can be deceiving because a lot of it is scripted and has the power to harm or benefit communities.”



It is **BEST TO CONTINUE** having conversation about disability, as long as it is a theme and **PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES** are in these various media narratives.

## RESOURCES

<http://www.foxnews.com/health/2016/11/01/georgia-boy-with-down-syndrome-to-be-featured-in-oshkosh-holiday-ads.html>

<http://www.washington.edu/doit/dis-course-disability-representation-and-media-part-one>

<https://www.disabilitycoop.com/2016/11/07/disability-portrayals-tv-record/22991/>

We are making many  
**CHANGES  
IN LAW** driven by  
changes in possibility.  
**MORE IS  
POSSIBLE**  
for people than we  
used to know.



Sean Casey, executive director of GVRA, Ruby Moore of GAO, and Zephine Smith-Dixon of the Department of Education spoke on the state agency leaders panel at the Georgia Evolution Conference.

## CONFERENCE RESOURCES:

All related material from the Georgia Evolution Conference is now available at:

[http://www.cvent.com/  
events/the-georgia-evolution-  
conference-re-imagining-  
opportunity-for-individuals-with-  
disabilities/custom-17-6eaeacc  
42210434f84fcb122f4e0e36a.aspx](http://www.cvent.com/events/the-georgia-evolution-conference-re-imagining-opportunity-for-individuals-with-disabilities/custom-17-6eaeacc42210434f84fcb122f4e0e36a.aspx)

## Georgia Evolution Conference Reimagines Opportunities for People with Disabilities

By Ruksana Hussain

Organized jointly by the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA), Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD), Georgia Association of People Supporting Employment First (GAPSE) and Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD), over 375 attendees came together at the conference center at the Wyndham Hotel in Peachtree City, GA for the first ever Georgia Evolution Conference in November 2016.

The day and a half long conference comprised mostly of primary service providers/direct support professionals also catered to individuals with disabilities and their families in keeping with the conference theme: Reimagining Opportunities for Georgians with Disabilities.

In fact, apart from the opening presentations that were attended by all, many of the sessions were also geared toward different attendee categories based on their roles – executive directors and board members, middle managers and supervisors, service providers and direct support staff and individuals with disabilities and their families.

Fifteen additional sessions covered relevant and timely topics such as networking to community partnerships, learning how to provide employment services to maintaining friendships.

The conference aimed at giving providers the tools they need to support all people with disabilities in careers and in the community, including follow-up technical assistance; educating and empowering families and individuals with disabilities and engaging them as active partners in this time of change; and building critical partnerships and collaboration between all players in Georgia's disability community.

“There is a lot that is changing in the world of disability and employment right now and a lot of it is exciting, but with any change people need to learn how to operate under that new change,” says conference planner D’Arcy Robb, special projects coordinator at Vocational Rehabilitation Program, a division of GVRA.

To support this, conference speaker David Hoff, national public policy expert at the Institute for Community Inclusion at University of Massachusetts at Boston presented a State of the Nation: Disability and Employment Policy session.

Specializing in disability employment policy, Hoff addressed important yet complex issues in the disability arena. At the conference, he discussed the Home and Community-Based Services settings rule; the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act; and the Employment First movement by simplifying those topics and how they pertained to Georgia. Hoff also offered a “user friendly” approach to understanding what the critical pieces of each of these game-changing policies are and what they mean for people with disabilities and the community.

Other presenters included providers who have evolved from traditional service models to integrated, innovative

employment; national subject matter experts on employment for people with disabilities; and individuals and families who have made a transition from facility-based services to integrated employment.

To expand its reach, the team behind the conference kept the registration cost at only \$50 per person – unheard of for a conference of this caliber. “We did that very deliberately because we know that it takes a lot to come to a conference, to travel and take time off work,” says Robb. “That part was intentional, to be affordable and accessible to as many people as possible.”

Robb credits Ed James, director of Capability Development at GVRA, for initiating discussions with DBHDD Assistant Director Frank Kirkland, GCDD Executive Director Eric Jacobson and GAPSE President Phil Chase, on hosting a conference together. “I had the pleasure of being the main conference organizer, but a lot of people were involved in making it such a great success. This really was a ‘how’ conference ... not an end in and of itself, but a piece on this path that we are all on.”

“It is a well-known fact now in the developmental disabilities community that it is possible for all interested people with disabilities to work and federal laws are in place to promote this.”

It is a well-known fact now in the developmental disabilities community that it is possible for all interested people with disabilities to work and federal laws are in place to promote this. But, many people don't know how to go about it. To assist, the conference focused on giving service providers the tools to support everyone interested in self-employment or working in an integrated job in the community regardless of the significance of their disability. The other important audience that the conference was geared toward was people with disabilities and their family members.

“This really was a ‘how’ conference ... not an end in and of itself, but a piece on this path that we are all on.”

“It is about their lives and the many changes taking place but people can only take advantage of it if they understand what the changes are and the opportunities for them,” shares Robb. “We are making many changes in law driven by changes in possibility. More is possible for people than we used to know. Fifty years ago, it was cutting edge and revolutionary for people with significant disabilities to live in the community instead of an institution, but now we know people don't need to be in day programs or sheltered workshops.”

Speaking to that very sentiment were Joshua Wells and his father John Wells who welcomed attendees to the conference. Joshua has been employed at Red Robin, a restaurant chain, for the past 11 years; and, he recently began working a second job at Kentucky Fried Chicken. Earlier in his life, Joshua attended a facility-based program for people with disabilities. His was a story of successfully making the leap to community employment, clearly demonstrating the opportunities and lifestyle that individuals with disabilities can strive to achieve today.

As for next steps, GVRA, in collaboration with DBHDD, DCH and Workforce Development has applied for Vision Quest under the Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program (EFSLMP) federal grant. In order to apply, there must be partnership between major state agencies demonstrating commitment toward making the local system more employment friendly. If approved, the grant will pay for national subject matter experts, like the speakers that were presenters at the conference, to work with state agencies in providing further technical assistance and support to all parties involved, in truly reimagining and affecting the employment opportunities available for individuals with disabilities in Georgia.



Doug Crandell leads a supervisor session at the Georgia Evolution Conference in Peachtree City, GA.

There is a lot that is changing in the **WORLD OF DISABILITY and EMPLOYMENT** right now and a lot of it **IS EXCITING,** but with any change people need to **LEARN HOW** to operate under that new change.

Conference attendees get updates about the changes in disability employment.





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# 2017 ADVOCACY DAYS

**REGISTER TODAY!**



**MAKE YOUR VOICES HEARD!**

**Meet GA Legislators at the State Capitol**

## SCHEDULE OVERVIEW

- February 1: DD Waivers Day 1 & Inclusive Post-Secondary Education Day
- February 7: DD Waivers Day 2
- February 23: Employment Day
- February 28: Enable Work and Families Day
- March 9: Home & Community Day

