>> Lauren Appelbaum: Well, welcome today! My name is Lauren Appelbaum and I am RespectAbility's VP of entertainment and news media. In 2020, we ran a series examining best practices in deaf and ASL representation in children's animation. We're really happy to bring the conversation back to Dreamworks Animation's "Madagascar: A Little Wild", which continues to break barriers. Myself -- as an individual with an acquired non-visible disability called reflex sympathetic dystrophy, I have had the privilege along with my colleagues and several of the individuals here, including our board member Delbert Whetter, of consulting on a variety of projects, helping executives ensure that their representation is authentic, and to avoid any pitfalls in the process. So this conversation will include a clip from "Madagascar: A Little Wild". It will last one hour and have time for participant Q&A at the end. If you would like to view the ASL interpreter in a larger screen, you could pin her video but I want to let you know that we're going to be switching interpreters, and three of our panelists will be communicating via ASL themselves. In addition we have live captioning that is available in the Zoom app by clicking on the CC button or via web. My colleague Lesley is going to post that link in the chat box. We'll also be taking questions from you during the second half of the panel. Please add your questions to the Q&A box to do so. So as I mentioned, for today's webinar we are highlighting "Madagascar: A Little Wild". All six seasons are available on Hulu and Peacock TV. This series includes a deaf character who uses sign language. The character's sister also signs. Chimpanzee siblings Dave and Pickles are really breaking barriers and are part of a movement changing the landscape of disability representation in children's television and streaming content. Dave and Pickles have a meaningful story arc throughout the entire series, and Dave is not defined by his deafness. New this season, a little girl named and modeled after deaf actress Shaylee Mansfield trades cards with Dave at the zoo. She was animated by using a video reference of her performing the role. In what is possibly a first for deaf performers, she is credited alongside the audible voice actors for her sign-over performance in the episode "Gloria's Got 'Em All." RespectAbility board member Delbert Whetter, who is a deaf film producer and consultant, along with deaf actor, filmmaker and ASL dialogue coach Jevon Whetter, and Justin Maurer, an ASL interpreter who is a CODA - a child of a deaf adult - consulted as part of a deaf-led consulting team on this series. Today we'll learn from this team's ASL consultants, as well as executive producer Johanna Stein and actress Shaylee Mansfield on how these teams work together to bring about dynamic deaf characters. Before we bring these panelists on, let's take a look at a behind the scenes video to learn more about how this was brought about.

VIDEO PLAYS

>> Lauren Appelbaum: All right. Hope everyone enjoyed that video with a little sneak peek of how this episode came to be. So I'm now going to invite all five of our panelists to turn your video on. Welcome all. So Johanna, I'm going to start with you. As the executive producer, six seasons ago you made the decision to have an inclusive show. Why did you decide to incorporate a deaf character and why was it important to bring in this team of ASL consultants?

>> Johanna Stein: First of all I just do want to say thank you so much Lauren for this opportunity to talk about our show. This has been such an amazing journey for all of us so thank you very much for that. So when I was brought onto the show it was just about to go into production -- actually didn't develop it, it was developed by Dana Starfield. She's our co-ep on the show. And when she developed it, you know, on the one hand we knew it was going to take place in New York City, arguably one of the most diverse cities in the world. She also included these two characters, these chimps based on characters who were seen in the movies -- I think their names were Phil and Mason, they were the -- you know -- the chimps. And they communicated with sign language, or perhaps one of them did. And she made the decision to make one of them a girl to, you know, balance out a little bit the gender diversity in our show. And so right from the very beginning we knew -- well, and I will speak from my own place of ignorance -- I knew, well we're gonna need to have somebody help to translate just the mechanics of, you know, ASL, again, coming from a place of having no experience. And I reached out -- I think Justin, I had seen you -- you were translating during the LAUSD strike, I believe that was when it happened. And I somehow made the connection between you and a common friend of ours on Facebook, and I -- and we -- we talked, and one of the first things you said was, yes, this sounds wonderful, but you really need to involve, you know, this should be a deaf-led team of consultants. You said you were happy to be involved. And you know, that was sort of the the tip of my iceberg of education in this area. Because that, of course, would never have occurred to me. So that was when I think the next step was we had you and -- rather, Justin and Del and Jevon came in, and we had a conversation about the -- about the project. And it's, you know, and here we are. [Chuckles]

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Wonderful, I'm gonna jump over to Delbert now. So you -- so Johanna mentioned bringing this lovely team on. And Delbert, you have more than two decades of experience working on animated feature films, from the business affairs side of the industry, to executive producer. What has your experience been like working with the "Madagascar: A Little Wild" team and how has it evolved over the course of your collaboration over six seasons?

>> Delbert Whetter: Delbert speaking. So really honestly, everything that we have done has been very new. It's a very new creative process to do things in that way. So we kind of made it up as we went along. So as we started out -- but then we evolved through the six seasons. And so -- it's -- I had animation experience from being in the industry, and I knew various requirements of what animation needs, which helped a lot. And I had been through the process early on in the conceptual stage and the collaboration and looking at rough animation and through the final animation. And so going back and forth, and that communication was just great. It was fantastic. We really helped each other a lot, and it helped to make sure that authenticity was there, and also that we would catch mistakes very early on in the sign language, before it became much more expensive to fix. And that's extremely important with sign language because sometimes where the placement of the hands is could absolutely make the difference between the correct sign or even something that could look insulting. And there is just one or two inches of movement, which could completely change an innocent sign into something that could possibly be offensive. So we were like, hey, move the hands a little bit over. And the team was very grateful for that feedback and made the necessary adjustments. And I'm so impressed with Dreamworks, because they involved us all the way through, all six seasons all the way through the process. And also, another way that we evolved was developing technique improvements in our approach. So we would have Jevon and Justin in the beginning side by side in person at Dreamworks in Glendale. And then of course the pandemic hit, and we did things over Zoom, and so that made things a little bit complicated. So we had to make technological adjustments. And we decided to have Jevon take over signing the lines of dialogue for ASL reference for both Dave and Pickles, and Justin could do the voiceover to know where the signing should match up in the script and so on, to make sure the syncing is natural and so on. And so we went through the process that way. And by the sixth season, and by the time that was over, we felt like finally, we became skilled at that process and how to hit all of these points when we needed to. And so we could keep doing this forever to be honest.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Well - oh --

>> Jevon Whetter: And this is Jevon. If I could chime in, I'd like to add that a lot of people don't realize that as deaf people, sure, we have a disability in that we can't hear. People do know that. And we have a language, which is sign language. But third, most importantly, is culture -- our culture, deaf culture. And so we would notice something and say, hey, deaf people wouldn't do that. The way that our eyes would look, the way that the deaf character's behavior would be. There is a cultural aspect that we wanted to make sure was also accurate, and that played into having an authentic portrayal on screen.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: And something that Delbert said you know, going on forever it would -- it would be nice. This is such a lovely show that I get to watch with my six-year-old. And it's -- I'm gonna echo that sentiment. And one thing that I really like is how we can see the expression in Dave and Pickles' eyes when they're signing. Jevon, you kind of alluded to this, but can you talk about the guidance that you provided to Dreamworks, specifically kind of on eyebrows and facial expressions and why is this aspect so important for all audiences, but really specifically for young audiences?

>> Jevon Whetter: This is Jevon speaking. I have to take my glasses off so you can see my face better. So for a question you would have a facial expression like this. For what? There are two different ways. So with a question -- you can have a question or you can make a statement, okay, and so another situation might be where Pickles is signing but Dave's eyes aren't looking at Pickles. So how would Dave get that information? He's deaf and he gains his information visually. Is -- does he have ESP or something? Oh no, he doesn't, so we need to make those adjustments. So at the very beginning of the process we made those adjustments. And after a few seasons the team became extremely knowledgeable, and they picked up some signs and -- were able to understand, and so on. And we started to recognize that improvement. So it was really cool that everyone grew together throughout the process.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Excellent. Oh, Del?

>> Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert. There's one thing that I really loved over time, and it was that the questions became much more specific. And we got extremely intelligent questions that said, hey, should this character be standing here? Would they be able to see each other? And so both Dave and Pickles would have to make eye contact and be placed in an area where they could do that. And hey, how about signing with one hand if there's an object being held? And so Jevon would explain how that could be done and how the signs could be done one-handed.

>> Jevon Whetter: This is Jevon. So I'm holding this water bottle but I can also sign with my other hand, or I can stick it underneath my arm and sign with both hands. So that's one thing that's really cool about chimps is they can use their feet to sign with also, almost like their hands. And so we really took advantage of that and we had a new layer that we could add with -- to the chimps, which is really excellent.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: So many -- so many things that you can do when you're using sign language versus just the spoken speech. It really -- it opens up a whole other area of storytelling. So now that we've kind of examined how deafness was originally brought to the show, let's take a look at season six. So we know that there had been talk in the writers room of kind of figuring out how to bring a human character into this world in a way where the animals could communicate with the human. So Johanna -- how did Shaylee coming to you help solve that problem?

>> Johanna Stein: Well it was a -- you know, we've been looking at Dave's deafness in a lot of ways as kind of his -- superpower that he has, the fact that -- and the fact that when he signs, he and Pickles, his sister, are really the only two animals in our world who could conceivably communicate with humans. So we were -- we really were like this is an awesome opportunity, because in the show -- I don't know if everyone's seen it, you know, there's that -- there's that border between animals and humans. And so this was this beautiful little bridge. And we've been talking how -- how are we going to do this -- also in a way, in such a way that, how do I put this, that we weren't writing the very special episode about Dave's deafness or about a person who -- you know, we wanted it to just be, you know, to help further the plot. And so -- and also, given the fact that Dave and Pickles are our agents of chaos on the show, they literally -- without their approval and agreement, our main four characters would never have a story every episode. They can't get into the city. So you know, we've been talking about these ideas and Sam Bissonnette -- I'm gonna shout her out, she's one of the writers on our show, and she's a Pokemon genius. So she brought up the idea of, you know, perhaps it -- you know -- maybe there's a card tournament. And so this is -- that got became exciting too. It was like, oh yeah, what about if it -- what if it was a kid who was a, you know, a Pokemon type card shark, again, giving them -- a quality that has nothing to do with their deafness. And so initially, actually, the kid was going to be a boy. And then, you know, some interesting things happened, one of which was I'd heard from Shaylee, through -- I think through her mom maybe. We had done a panel like this, and I heard from Shaylee. She was really interested in talking about our show. And I think maybe also Del or Jevon, you had communicated with her as well. And so we -- I said yeah, sure, let's -- I would love to meet you. And I invited our head of casting, Ania O'Hare, to meet this interesting sounding girl who's also a professional actress. So we had a Zoom call with Shaylee. And Ania and I were both just so blown away -- well, you can see her, she's a wonderful charming person, and you'll -- find out more about her. And so meeting her, we thought we must involve her in some way. And then we also happen to have this episode that we were actively working on. And we, you know, we got very excited about figuring out how to do it. And I will say -- and Delbert, please feel free to chime in, this is an idea that you had proposed earlier on in the process. So again, this is -- these were all of these factors that were coming together to create this beautiful opportunity.

>> Delbert Whetter: Delbert. If I can chime in. So that was actually always my dream, for the past 20 years in animation and in the animation industry. My dream was that I worked with so many actors who were voice -- who were doing voiceover for all of our animated films through the years. And so I would go and see these voiceover recordings, and I was like, you know, it would be great if a deaf person could sign and we could somehow include that in animation. And it's when I started working with this Dreamworks team, I made the comment that, you know what, we could bring in a deaf actor that would sign. Really early on I put it out there. And we went through a few seasons, and it was still in the back of my mind. It was a hope of mine that one day it could be possible. And so I jumped for joy when this happened with Shaylee. And I think when Shaylee's parents got in touch it was a RespectAbility panel actually, I believe it was. And so anyway, now we've come full circle.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: So Shaylee, I'd love to turn to you now. What does this role mean to you?

>> Shaylee Mansfield: Well, this role obviously means so much to me because growing up, I very much enjoyed watching animated shows, TV --especially with my sister, we would watch animation all day if we could, but my parents would say no, you know, so we didn't have a choice to watch TV all day. But one thing in the back of my mind always was where is a deaf character or where's a character that can represent the deaf experience? And there really wasn't any, until Johanna and the team from Dreamworks contacted me. And we had this great conversation over Zoom, and immediately after that, they wrote me this role. And there I was on the show. This was a very exciting time for me and really unbelievable, because it's a dream that I had had since I was a little girl that there would be a deaf animated character like me, and then it became me! So it was shocking and also very exciting. And if you think about it, there's so many deaf children out there who are now seeing that character on "Madagascar: A Little Wild" and thinking that they can do that someday. Also, hearing children are seeing this character and being exposed to deaf people in a positive way with a positive representation. So I am so thrilled to have made history with this team. Thank you so much.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: So let's stay with Shaylee for a moment. You've talked about how joining the production was different than other projects that you either auditioned for or then was working on. What was different in this scenario?

>> Shaylee Mansfield: Well, I've auditioned for many roles. Some of them were a deaf character, some of them I got and some of them I didn't. Other roles I auditioned for were for hearing characters, and many of those I was not offered the role. And like I said before, when I met with this team from Dreamworks, it was amazing. And when I was on the set, it was a completely different experience, because this was the first time I was doing an animated project as opposed to a live action role. And there was a huge difference between live action and animation, because in my experience with live action, you're on a set, there's props, you're in person, and most often, that project -- I would be the only deaf person on set, which was kind of frustrating. Now we have to take into consideration that doing animation, there's no props, and it was COVID and a pandemic, so I was at home on Zoom where I am right now. And I was not the only deaf person involved. We had two other deaf consultants, Jevon and Delbert. And this was just so great because it was the first time I had experienced that. The other thing that I learned through this production that was different from live action was I would have to sign at different angles, I would have to adjust the way I signed and signed a little bit slower, and I would also say that I had to use my imagination differently than I have done in other roles, because I wasn't on a set, I was in my own house. But I did not worry about any of those things because I have such a great imagination and was able to use it to my fullest potential. Even when I watch television shows or movies, right, I'm using my imagination. So I took all those things and put them into play when I presented this character Shaylee.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you. Johanna?

>> Johanna Stein: Thank you I just wanted to add what's so wonderful about Shaylee she's so -- she's a wonderful actress. She's very expressive, that was one of the things that, when we met her, we were just kind of blown away by her. You know, she's charismatic and charming and a little bit sassy and funny. And all of those things translated into this the animated character of Shaylee. And that's I think what was -- such a -- I don't want to say a surprise to me, but the fact that we brought her in to play this specific character that her mannerisms, her -- you know, her facial expressions -- all of those things are in the animated character of Shaylee. And I think -- my -- previous to this experience I would have thought, well, anybody can sign for this particular character. And that was what was so instructive and just, you know, wonderful to realize is how much the way that Shaylee signs is the way that she speaks. And so -- I'm just -- every time I see this episode, and I have seen it many many many many many times, I am just struck at when I see that character, I am looking at you, Shaylee, so yeah just --

>> Lauren Appelbaum: That's great. Delbert?

>> Delbert Whetter: [audio issues for interpreter] Chime in. I think it's a very important point that when folks think of voiceover dialogue, it shows the personality of the actor, the tone of voice. But it's just the same with sign language and physical movement and expressiveness. You can show a unique personality with sign language. It's theatrical, it's dramatic. I don't think people realize that sign language can show personality and have a unique specific personality and animation -- in this animation, it shows so clearly Shaylee's personality and her performance.

>> Jevon Whetter: And this is Jevon, if I can chime in. So there can be angry signing. It signs faster and bigger. That's a way of showing anger in sign language. And that's just one example of different emotions would affect the signing space too.

>> Shaylee Mansfield: I'd like to chime in also. I used to attend a mainstream school with mostly hearing students, and they would think that my sign language would be the same as all other deaf people's sign language. There were a lot of misconceptions that they had. So then I transferred to a state school for the deaf that I used to attend, and there you can see all the different signing styles and emotions. There were some deaf children who had deaf families who used more stylized sign language, and just like Jevon was saying, that you can show a range of emotions and that will change how you sign, not just the signs you make with your hands, but how you use your face and facial expressions. There are some deaf people who have no mouth movements. There are some deaf people that if you were to watch it would put you to sleep, they're so boring the way they sign. Just like hearing people, right? We are one big world of diverse deaf people, just like the rest of the world.

>> Jevon Whetter: Jevon, if I can chime in. Some hearing people have accents, you know, like a southern accent or a New York accent or a Boston accent. And so you have these regional accents and people think that you don't in sign language, but we do in ASL, absolutely. We have regional signs and some signs are completely different. And there are variations and there's little adjustments made regionally in the way that folks sign things. So we do have our own ASL accents regionally, and slang as well. There's east coast and west coast styles, and sometimes -- I grew up on the west coast, and I go "what is that?" And it's a new sign that has just caught on. And so we pick up on that over here. And it's fascinating.

>> Delbert Whetter: And this is Delbert. That's extremely important, because translation of English to ASL -- there are many of those choices that would influence our translation. So Dave and Pickles, they're young. They're young in age. So we have to keep that in mind with our ASL translations, and how would a deaf child actually sign this? It would be different than a deaf adult would. And people don't think about that. And we would have to choose signs that were very clear, that wouldn't be so complex for the animators. And so we would have to pick really specific clear signs, so signing animation on screen -- sometimes it might be hard to catch or follow. And so we decided that, hey, maybe this is a much better choice, it would be much easier to understand when seen through animation.

>> Jevon Whetter: And this is Jevon. It's extremely important to keep in mind what the target audience is, as well, and what age group, and what demographic are they that are watching? And so it's a very young demographic here watching the show, so we had to make sure to choose signs that they may already be familiar with.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: One thing that I really like about the show is that we see all different types of ASL represented, and Justin, I know you've been voicing for Delbert and Jevon, but I'm going to turn and ask you a question. You know, you offer a different perspective in that you are hearing and a child of deaf adults, which led you to a career as an ASL interpreter. In this series, we see Dave's sister Pickles kind of becomes his interpreter at times and partner in mischief, and they communicate using ASL. Can you talk about the role of hearing siblings and children in real life, and why is it so important that this is represented on screen as well?

>> Justin Maurer: When -- I'm a CODA, which is the acronym for child of a deaf adult. And -- like the movie CODA. And a sibling of a deaf adult is sometimes called a SODA, s-o-d-a. And so the SODA, especially in this -- in the real life and in this show, plays the role of keeping their deaf sibling engaged and involved in the conversation. So SODA or even CODA kind of does that naturally because they're always -- they're quite often around both hearing and deaf people. So you're in a position of privilege or a position of power in that you can control the means of communication, but really, I think CODAs and SODAs make a lot of sacrifices, because they're there to bridge the communication between these two worlds, to make sure that their their deaf counterparts are always involved in the conversation. And so I think -- I was actually really touched when I saw Shaylee's episode, because her brother plays a SODA, much like Pickles plays the SODA to Dave, and it's very touching to see Shaylee's brother's character, and the way that they interact on screen. To me, that was realistic. I have not really seen that before, and -- every so often it comes up, like, as a one-off. Even in the show of Berlin Babylon on Netflix, there's an episode where there's deaf parents and the child is interpreting -- and you see this pop up every once in a while, but I haven't seen the SODA yet, I don't think -- a sibling of -- now I'm getting screwed up with these acronyms [laughs]. But yeah, they did a great job and Shaylee was amazing. I mean, when you see animated Shaylee, you're like yep, that's Shaylee. I mean she is bubbly, she has a great personality, and I think this episode was probably my favorite, I think, out of the six seasons. I think Delbert and Jevon really probably feel the same way too.

>> Delbert Whetter: This is Delbert. Without question it's my favorite.

>> Jevon Whetter: This is Jevon. Me too.

>> Delbert Whetter: And this is Delbert. I'd also like to add that, early on during the show in development and our discussions, Dave and Pickles, if I remember correctly, it wasn't very clear what their relationship were. Are they family members? Are they brother/sister? It wasn't very specific in the script. And we discussed that internally with the creative team. And we felt that it was a family relationship. It felt right for them to be siblings, because typically the interpreter role -- you have to draw a line and a code of ethics, and you wouldn't involve yourself in arguments or playing around -- an interpreter would be more professional, and that would be customary. But it feels like their relationship is close, it's loving, it's playful, they play with each other, they're mischievous together, they argue with each other -- it feels like a brother/sister familial type relationship. And so we said hey, does brother and sister feel right? It does feel right because they have that type of relationship. And so I think at some point that decision was made that they were brother and sister, and that really helps understand their dynamic. They live together, they play together, they fight together and so on. And it all started to make sense.

>> Jevon Whetter: This is Jevon. I remember early on when we started on the first season, it made sense with Pickles interpreting. But then later on, we had a discussion and -- we threw something out there that all of these animals are baby animals. They're very young. But if you hang out long enough, at what point would these other animals start to pick up some signs themselves? And so Pickles began to interpret a little bit less. And it was an interesting thought. And that episode with Shaylee, it comes up that one of the other characters is able to show the sign language that they have learned, because they've been interacting so long with Dave and Pickles, so it feels like the arc of the story just became so touching in that way. And when I saw other -- the other animals in the zoo begin to communicate in sign language, they didn't reject the deaf character. They were inclusive and included the deaf character even more.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: So now I would love if anyone in the audience wants to add a question -- to ask a question, you can add your questions to the Q&A box on this platform. We'll be -- I'll be monitoring that and asking questions. As we give time for people to type up their questions, I would love to throw out a question to anyone who would like to answer. It seems like children's media is really forward thinking, you know, in comparison to any other type of media when it comes to all types of inclusion. What about this genre makes it so effective in telling these stories? Johanna?

>> Johanna Stein: Well from my perspective, I mean I find that people who work in children's media, specifically animation, we're a very optimistic bunch [chuckles] you know? And often I'll say like in the writers room, when we started working on this show, you know, we had this wonderful world of "Madagascar" -- we had a wonderful set of parameters. We knew we had comedy to work with and music and these beloved characters. But we began talking from the very beginning about, you know, shows that were important to us as kids, that really impacted us. Like, we went [snaps] we went for emotion and theme immediately, because we do resonate so strongly with the shows that touched us as children. And you know, I don't want to speak for everybody, that's -- that was my experience. And that we also, you know, as a team, very much felt responsibility -- to put good things out into the world. And of course, you know, diversity, inclusion, representation, all of those were so -- you know, themes that just continually kept coming up for us. And you know, thankfully Dreamworks was like, yeah! Look, bring it on. We're on board. So that's -- you know, from my tiny little -- from my perspective that's -- one area but please, anyone else?

>> Delbert Whetter: Let me chime in. The animation industry -- it feels like they can and should lead as far as disability representation, including inclusion, portrayals. And really in animation, there's no limitation there. There's no barriers to do accurate portrayals. You can do just about anything. As far as that state of -- that way of thinking that deaf people can't do voice over, of course we can, and we prove them wrong. And so in animation, as far as children's content, it is really a perfect place to show the rest of the industry how to include this talent and disabled talent on screen.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Shaylee?

>> Shaylee Mansfield: Well one thing that I want to add, and I would say one of my biggest dreams is to have more deaf people involved in the entertainment industry, and entertainment for children, because children are so -- open-minded and whatever they're exposed to, they can learn. Like, my sister's friends who are pretty young -- they're age 10 and 11 maybe even 9 years old -- they are so open and they're eager to learn sign language, which is just so cool, you know? They'll say, well, how do you sign this, and how can you do that? And they have so many interesting questions. And one thing that's been frustrating to me as an actor and as just a human being, like, if my family goes out to a restaurant or if we're shopping in the mall or in public, we have a lot of hearing people who will stare at us when we talk in sign language, as if it's this strange thing, as if it's not normal. Where I just want to say move on folks, we are normal! We're human beings just like you. And many times I'll look back at them to, you know, not have a stare off, but let them know that I see them and let them know to mind their own business. So it's really important to include American Sign Language and deaf people especially in children's programming, because children are being exposed every day. And when they see deaf children on the screen, then they won't think of them as not normal when they see them in public, or maybe they would even walk up and say hi because they saw it on TV.

>> Justin Maurer: Justin -- hold on a second Jevon. You wouldn't mind signing for me, Rory? One sec. Oh okay, me first or you first? Shaylee, when I grew up, everybody stared at my family when we were signing in, like, the one pizza place in town or whatever. And I think at that time, the only deaf person on TV was Linda Bove on Sesame Street, and I think that is the only deaf person I can remember at that time that was on TV, ever. Her and maybe Marlee Matlin once in a while. And so there's only two deaf people that were ever on screen. And so I think, to see you out there and as active as you are, I think you are actively contributing to less of that happening. And maybe when they're staring, people are actually eavesdropping and listening into the conversation, rather than just being rude.

>> Shaylee Mansfield: Right, right.

>> Jevon Whetter: This is Jevon. There's more and more folks out there. All over the United States, there's ASL classes being offered. And ASL is now the fourth most popular language in high school and college levels. And research has proven that that's a fact these days. So it's really great that there's more exposure and more people are seeing ASL in the media and how deaf people are being represented positively, and they're more open-minded and more accepting. Because when I was younger, we got stared at all the time. My whole family is deaf, so my parents would say hey, keep your signs smaller, so it doesn't look too obvious in public when you're signing. And so it was a different time back then, and everyone stared, and that was their reaction. We were actually embarrassed by how often so many people stared at us as odd. We were the -- you know, like space aliens that just came down from a UFO or something. And now more people are aware and -- but I can't really have a private conversation in a restaurant anymore because waiters know sign language, and so you have to -- I have to be careful what I say now. [Laughs]

>> Justin Maurer: Delbert, when you went skiing -- I'm voicing Delbert --

>> Delbert Whetter: When you went skiing to Big Bear you were saying that the ski instructors knew sign language, right, because in Big Bear they teach it in the high school there or something?

>> Justin Maurer: Oh, sorry -- Big Bear's a mountain that is near Los Angeles, I screwed up. Go ahead.

>> Delbert Whetter: And so we went there recently, my family and I. And there's a very popular ASL teacher at the high school out there in Big Bear. And so I didn't know that. And everywhere I went -- we went as a family in Big Bear, someone knew sign language. And it was like, I've been going there for a few years, and every single time I go, any business or restaurant or anywhere we go in Big Bear, there's always at least one person who signs. And so now I'm in the habit, when I say thank you, they just respond "you're welcome," or they ask "hey, what would you like to order" in sign language. And it's been awkward. It's so powerful -- this ASL class and what a great ASL program they must have out there in Big Bear that everyone is picking up sign language. And you see it more and more in the media, and you -- see that ASL is just being perceived as a language that anyone can learn.

>> Jevon Whetter: This is Jevon. There's a true story, and this actually happened last weekend. Okay, this is last weekend, keep in mind. In 2022. Okay? All right so my wife flew -- okay so she's in the airplane, was in the airplane already and she let them know that we're deaf. And one of the flight attendants gave me a pamphlet and it was had braille on it. Okay, so it was braille on this pamphlet. And I said hey, I'm deaf, and I can see just fine. Thumbs up, I can see, my eyes are working. And so the plane took off and I told my wife wouldn't it be funny if they had a wheelchair with my name on it when we land? And we were just laughing. And it's happened to a few deaf people out there. And guess what? We landed, my wife and I got out of the plane, and guess what I saw?

>> Shaylee Mansfield: There were wheelchairs with your name on it?

>> Jevon Whetter: It was a wheelchair with my name on it! And so the guy rolling out, I was like -- I did like a little jig, a little dance, and I said no, I don't need that, I can walk just fine right now. And I walked off. So obviously people are still a bit ignorant, and you have to be patient. We have to be extra patient as deaf people with this ignorance, and people need education.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Johanna and then we're going to go to audience questions.

>> Johanna Stein: Oh yeah, just a quick thing -- that is the reason why -- and I'm sorry that happened to you Jevon, and you're such a funny person and I love that you could spin it into a humorous anecdote, but that's why -- that's why this representation is so important. And particularly in animation, I think, Del, you've touched on this, we are literally creating the worlds as we go. And there -- there really is no excuse for not, you know, being -- for not representing the world in all of its diversity. So that -- I just encourage any creators, hear that story please and let's go to questions, Lauren, go ahead.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: And we have a note in here in the chat from someone who -- Helen, who identifies as low vision and says that often when she requests audio narration, she'll receive a listening device and then people will talk louder to her, so that -- which is clearly not, you know, it's not looking at what the correct disability is and what the correct accommodation would be. So I want to go to an anonymous attendee -- wanna make sure, was Jevon signing -- okay -- who asked if an idea like this were to have started from the casting perspective -- so let's say casting would have found someone who was deaf and suggest it -- how could casting -- and they weren't working with a team like Johanna and her team of people who get it and care about this issue. Any advice for someone in casting to kind of make that strong point to include deaf and hard of hearing actors in sign overs to creative executives in production? What would be selling points that someone in casting could use?

>> Jevon Whetter: This is Jevon. So really, there's no one right way. There's not one right approach. I think it's important that you do some research and you see who has been involved in other productions out there, and there are people who are familiar with that specific area, and feel free to ask questions. And the worst thing you can do is avoid it, and not take any responsibility. It's important to ask questions. And maybe you can get a referral, because of course in Hollywood, there's so many referrals and people know other people. And just ask around, and get some advice. And so I really encourage you not to be afraid.

>> Johanna Stein: May I Del? I'll make it quick. I want to say that our -- so in animation, you know it takes -- it literally takes a village. No one person can do this alone and characters are created by you know, by the voice actor, the board artist, the director, the writers -- well our incredible ASL team is a crucial aspect -- part of the character of Dave, and of Pickles. Their -- you know, all of the work that Del and Jevon and Justin have been doing on this -- has been towards creating the character of Dave. And some of the funniest moments in our show are because of their work. So I would say it is 100 percent additive. It's you know -- involving them as a team has enriched the show, has enriched the experience, there's literally no downside to it. So that's -- what I would say is do you want to add some superstars to your team? Yes, thank you, I do. Here you go. So we have a question from Kat asking a process question. How long did the animation take for season six and how many animators are typically involved in such a process? Is that a question, Johanna, you could answer?

>> Johanna Stein: It is but I think Del -- did you have something you wanted to say previously?

>> Delbert Whetter: Yes, thank you Johanna. I wanted to add something to the previous question. I think that the advice that I would give -- as far as casting goes and the approach is look at deaf actors the same way that you would look at hearing actors. Deaf actors can -- can absolutely play hearing roles, there's no change needed. You can just cast them. And as far as a vision in having an actor who maybe -- you're thinking one way, but then look at another actor that comes from a different culture, a different background, a different gender, you know, and -- if it's a good fit, it's a good fit, right? And so you don't really -- the only thing is that you need to add that cultural addition. You need to add that background. You need to make those small adjustments. And it's a similar idea with a hearing -- a hearing character where you cast a deaf actor. It'll just become more colorful and add so much more to that character. Just like advice related to writing in the writer's room. You know, writers -- sometimes I've noticed that there's consultants on projects because the writers struggle with writing for a deaf character, and they don't know what the character is -- the character is deaf, what would they say, what would they do -- don't overthink it! Just write! Just write just like you would for any other character. And the deaf consultants and the deaf dialogue coach, their job is to help add that bit to make sure that it's believable and it's authentic and appropriate. But really, it's just the same as -- writing a deaf character is just like writing a hearing character. Just go ahead and there's no difference, and consultants are there to help you.

>> Justin Maurer: And this is Justin, if I can throw in one more thing. I have seen hearing actors being cast for roles that really should be played by deaf people, and I think what's really important is to have a deaf set of eyes in the audition. You know, a lot of people say, oh, this this particular actor fits the correct age, it's kind of what we're looking for, it has the right vibe, but the folks in the room have no idea how high the bar is as far as their quality of sign language goes. But a deaf person could tell right away, like, hey, this is garbage, or hey, this is great. And so unfortunately, a lot of the inauthentic portrayals on screen are because there was no deaf set of eyes in the in the room when the auditions were happening, and then it's too late, and then you get all the blow back on social media from, like, what is this crap? [laughs] And so if there were deaf people in the first place saying, hey, you know, this signer -- you probably could find somebody who can sign much better, and actually why not cast a deaf person? Sign language is their natural language and they're the ones who have native level fluency, and they're the ones who can best portray their own language, just like, you know, you probably shouldn't cast me for a role in Mandarin, because the odds are that my mandarin isn't as good as a native Mandarin speaker. So I think to think of deaf people as a linguistic minority, you need someone who's fluent in that language in the audition room in order to know if it's good or not. That's my two cents.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: We're gonna go back to Kat's question about how long the animation took for season six and how many animators were involved in the process. And I'd love to add one other thing for Johanna, and then I saw Shaylee had her hand up, so we'll go to you Shaylee after, while we're with Johanna, you know, I often receive a lot of claims that it's like too expensive or challenging to animate ASL. And so, since you've been working on this across six seasons, if you could also just mention, you know, was this process markedly more challenging or more costly, and you know, should that ever be a factor for producers developing animated content?

>> Johanna Stein: Well I will say I am not the line producer. I'm happy to say. [laughs] I do not hold the purse strings. And you know, I would just say, it was just another factor of this show. Truly, you know, it's a musical so we have -- an incredible songwriter, and we have a choreographer. It's a very snappy style of animation, so we spend a lot of time and energy making sure the animation works in that way. We have to spend extra time and energy making -- sure the lip flap, which is, you know, assigning the lip movements when there's a song happening -- ensuring that the ASL was accurate is just another part of this show. There was never any -- it -- it just was never a question that we wouldn't do this authentically, truly. Just -- you know, we just wanted to make sure this show was as good in all areas as we could make it with the time and money that we had. I hope that answers it, but it just was never -- you know, we were never gonna skimp in any of those areas, and so we didn't. And everybody worked incredibly hard but had a great time working on it. And I'm sorry, what was the other question?

>> Lauren Appelbaum: How long --

>> Johanna Stein: It takes a year, about a year. Many many many steps an episode, and really -- we're assembling episodes, it's kind of like an assembly line. Every two weeks we're starting a new episode. And you know, we were showing these episodes, you know, consulting with Del, Jevon and Justin throughout -- throughout the steps. Because you know, heaven forbid we get to, like, we're almost done and we have one of those boo-boos where we changed a line of dialogue. And again I'm -- you know, I am not deaf so it could absolutely slip my mind to --oh my gosh, we have to address you know, Pickles is in the background translating for Dave -- so yeah. Just another -- it really is just another line item in our budget.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you. We're coming up.

>> Justin Maurer: Did Shaylee have something to add to the question before that? I saw Shaylee -- she had something she wanted to say, did you -- oh no.

>> Shaylee Mansfield: I forgot!

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Oh no, I'm sorry. Well what I was going to say is we're coming up to the end of time, but I wanted to -- I wanted to jump over to Shaylee, if you remember what you were saying, but I also -- I'm going to give you a question that you can react to as well. So you can do both. We actually had two different questions come in directly for you. Hillary asks, "if you were to have your own show, what would your character be?" And Annalisa asks "what roles would you like to do in the future?" So very similar questions, but we're going to end with you if you want to address either of those topics, and if there was something else you wanted to bring up from earlier in the panel, I welcome you to do so as well.

>> Shaylee Mansfield: Okay that's a tough question. If I were to have my own show, I think I'd want a humorous show, because I love making jokes. I get that from my dad, he's a jokester, I'm a lot like him. So something that would be funny. What was the second question Lauren, I forgot? Oh okay, what roles would I want in the future? Hmm, okay. I don't know. Let me say. I would say no thank you to -- I do not like scary movies or romantic movies. It's a big no. I'm not that type of person, none of that romance or dramas, even if you gave me a million dollars I would turn it down. Now in terms of scary movies, it depends on what level of scariness. You know? If somebody's angry or upset, maybe that would be fine, but nothing too frightening.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Well I'll be sure to --

>> Shaylee Mansfield: Well if I could pick one role, let me think, a role that I would really want. I think I would want to be a superhero or something along those lines. Like Rey from Star Wars, she's one of my favorite. One of those type of tough badass women or badass characters. I would also like to be in an animated show where I could play a princess, a princess or a villain, either one of those characters I'd definitely be into.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Well I want to --

>> Delbert Whetter: This is Del. I'd just like to add a quick comment to what Johanna mentioned is -- many people don't realize that the animation industry tends to use video references. And so they've used -- they use video references for everything, not just sign language, but they use it for how a character would walk, or they would video themselves walking and then animate it in that specific way, or -- or there would be ASL video references, which is actually nothing new to animation, to be honest. It's just a bit more complex because you have to add facial expression and hand placement, but that's already a part of the toolbox and the toolkit that animators have is using those video references as an example to animate from. And so it's not all in the script and the writing, there's a lot of examples -- visual examples that the animators use to do their craft. And there are many people who might have noticed that this particular episode with Shaylee has sign language, and it's great to have ASL in this, but maybe they didn't -- many of them didn't realize that ASL is in every single episode of this show, over six seasons in every single episode. And so I encourage everyone out there to watch all six seasons. You won't be disappointed.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Yep. And all six seasons are available on Peacock TV and Hulu, and so I recommend checking them out. I know I enjoy watching them with my daughter. And so I really want to thank everyone for joining us today for this panel. To Johanna and Justin and Shaylee and Delbert and Jevon, and our team of interpreters Allison and Rory, thank you so much for all joining us today. As Lesley is putting in the chat -- there are links that if you would like to sign up for our weekly Hollywood inclusion newsletter, you can do so. That is sent out once a week on either Thursday or Friday, honestly depending on how busy I am if we can get it out on Thursday or not. And then I also welcome you to check out other upcoming events. We really enjoy doing events like this where we highlight examples of best practice. If you are working on content that you think we should be highlighting, please feel free to reach out, because while we try to do our best to watch everything, we can't. So we love learning about content that's being created out there that's really great, and that we can help shine the spotlight on as well. And so I know there's a lot of things being put in the chat. If you asked a question and we didn't get a chance to ask it and you -- you really want to know, feel free to email back to -- your Zoom RSVP, but please note that RespectAbility's email system has been down since yesterday at 4 p.m pacific time, so there will be a delay in responding to you, but I promise you that we will take a look at your question, and if either we can answer it or reach out to one of the panelists to get you an answer, we will be glad to do so. Hope everyone enjoys the rest of your Thursday and we'll be sure to follow up with future events. Thank you everyone!