

# dis-Abilities Celebration Connection

WINTER 2012

## Rethinking “Normal”

When I was in middle school in the late 1960s, I read *Flowers for Algernon* and watched the movie, *Charly*, which was based on the book. If you don't know the story, it can be summarized that an experimental surgery is performed on Charlie, a “retardate” (word from the movie), which transforms him into a “genius.” But the results aren't permanent and gradually, Charlie's IQ returns to its “below normal” state. Perhaps because I had a brother with profound cerebral palsy, my perception was different from those of my schoolmates. I remember that the discussions at school focused on the efforts of the “noble” doctors who were trying to “help” Charlie and the feelings of pity for Charlie when the experiment failed. But I remember having feelings of contempt for the scientists and doctors, and thinking that Charlie was fine the way he was, and they should have left him alone.

In preparation for this editorial, I considered rewatching *Charly* and thereby attaining a more adult perspective, but decided against it, preferring to keep my 12-year-old memories intact. I did take a quick look at the Netflix reviews and maybe not surprisingly, found no one who shared my point of view.

Since those days, my “disability” radar perks up when the subject comes up in a movie, either parenthetically, or as the primary focus. I watch *Rain Man* whenever it comes up on the movie channel; it always seems to me that the growth of the devotion that the Tom Cruise character feels toward his brother, is a symbolic turning point in the evolving attitudes about what constitutes “normal.” On the other hand, Ron Howard's movie,

*Parenthood*, from a year later, never fails to piss me off during the scene in which the school officials suggest, not so gently, to Gil (Steve Martin) and Karen Buckman (Mary Steenburgen) that the school system shouldn't be required to accommodate their son, who has an unspecified disability.

And then one Sunday morning I came across the movie, *At First Sight*. It actually is not a great movie, but the concept continues to fascinate me and I find myself grinning whenever I watch it. The main character, Virgil (shades of Dante), has been blind from a very young age. He enters into a relationship with a woman who convinces him to have an experimental surgery to restore his sight. He has an incredibly difficult time learning how to be a “seeing” person, and is never entirely convinced that this new “normal way of being” is better than his former “normal reality.” Ultimately, the surgery doesn't work and Virgil goes back to being blind. Which. . . guess what?—is fine with him! I just love the idea that “normal” people think they have all the answers and all the right ways of perceiving reality; but, in fact, normal viewpoints can be shallow and it takes someone like Virgil to remind us that the world is incredibly complex with a myriad of appropriate ways to interact with reality. *Sorry for the all quotation marks, but I felt the need for the emphasis!*

See Gregg Donaldson's story on page 9 for more discussion on this matter. And see you in the spring!

*Laura Nelson*  
Editor

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## News From The Wrightslaw Website



### ALERT! Keeping All Students Safe Act (S.2020)

#### Editor's note:

*My thanks to the Wrightslaw website for The Special Ed Advocate Newsletter which I receive in my inbox on a regular basis. Wrightslaw, based in Virginia, is a leading website with thousands of articles, cases, and free resources about special education law and advocacy. The message below is reprinted with thanks. For more information, visit [www.wrightslaw.com](http://www.wrightslaw.com).*

#### **Please email your Senators and ask them to cosponsor the Keeping All Students Safe Act (S.2020)**

This bill will protect children nationwide from restraint and seclusion in schools. The need for this legislation is exemplified yet again in a horrific situation in Middletown, CT regarding the use of school seclusion rooms.

The situation described by parents and students in this report is horrific and abusive. Aptly termed "scream rooms" in this media report, such seclusion rooms are exactly what the Federal bill, S. 2020, pending in the Senate seeks to eliminate.

Senator Tom Harkin (Chair, Health Education Labor and Pension Committee) introduced S. 2020 in December. The bill would ban physical restraint except in emergency situations when there is an immediate threat of serious bodily injury.

The bill bans seclusion (confinement) of children in locked rooms or rooms from which they cannot exit. It bans life-threatening restraint that interferes with breathing or the ability to communicate, and mechanical and chemical restraints. It requires schools to notify parents within 24 hours of restraint.

Ask your Senator to cosponsor this important bill. National, State and Local groups are urged to sign on in support of the Act at <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/KeepingAllStudentsSafeAct>

#### **Ask your friends, family members, and colleagues to send emails.**

The Senate needs to get emails from many, many parents, self-advocates, advocates, family, friends, and the wider community. Every person is a voter. Be sure you ask them to "cosponsor" the bill.

You can email your Senators through their Senate website forms. Go to: <http://1.usa.gov/Senat> or [http://www.senate.gov/general/contact\\_information/senators\\_cfm.cfm](http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm)

You can find your State's Senators by choosing your state at the top. Every State has two Senators. PLEASE EMAIL BOTH OF YOUR SENATORS.

Please do not call or fax unless you absolutely need to. Letters mailed through regular mail to the U.S. Congress are delayed for anthrax screening. So, please use email.

Link to this Action Alert - <http://www.wrightslaw.com/nltr/12/al.0124.s2020.htm>

#### **Your Message: Sample Email**

COPAA- [www.copaa.org/public-policy/urge-your-senators-to-co-sponsor-s-2020-keeping-all-students-safe-act](http://www.copaa.org/public-policy/urge-your-senators-to-co-sponsor-s-2020-keeping-all-students-safe-act) provides a sample email you can send your Senators. Feel free to change it as you like.

If your child or a family member / friend / fellow student was restrained or secluded, please include that in your email and briefly tell their story. But please email even if you have not been personally affected. The Senate must hear from many, many people.

# The 39th Annual Ms. Wheelchair Maryland

By Gregg J. Donaldson

On Saturday evening, November 5, 2011, The 39th Annual Ms. Wheelchair Maryland Pageant was held at the Hilton by Doubletree in Rockville, Maryland.

## Background

The pageant first began in 1973 for ladies who were quadriplegics and paraplegics. Since then, the pageant has expanded to include those with developmental disabilities, such as Cerebral Palsy and Spina Bifida.

Ms. Wheelchair Maryland (MW-MD) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization managed under the auspices of Dateable, Inc. The goal of the Ms. Wheelchair Maryland, and Junior Miss Wheelchair Maryland, is to select two spokeswomen to represent the disability community at large.

As Ms. and Junior Miss Wheelchair Maryland, she leads by example. During her reign, she will strengthen public perception toward disability, serve as a mentor to others, and demonstrate how the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) benefits all Americans.

Whoever wears the Ms. Wheelchair Maryland crown will also shine on a national stage as she contends for the title of Ms. Wheelchair America. Contestants must meet the following criteria:

1. A Maryland Resident between the ages of 21 and 60\*
2. Utilize a wheelchair for 100% daily community mobility
3. Marital status is not a factor

*\*Or between ages 14-20 for Junior Miss*

Entry fees are charged for each contestant. Fees may be paid by the contestant or by sponsors a contestant may solicit.

The four contestants were:

Ms. Annette Ingram, from Catonsville;  
Ms. Eric Henderson, from Frederick  
Ms. Courtney Wallace, from Havre de Grace,  
Ms Sheila Whitaker, from Glen Burnie.

## The Judging

Yours truly, Gregg Donaldson, along with two lovely and accomplished past queens, Ms. Shannon Minnick, Ms. Wheelchair Maryland 2010 and Ms. Deborah Barnes, Ms Wheelchair, District of Columbia 2008, judged this year's competition.

It was a daunting task to judge the ladies on their accomplishments, self-perception, communication and projection skills through personal interviews, and platform speech presentations, during the day as well as very spirited fishbowl questions that evening, in front of an audience. We scored the ladies on a scale from 1-10. We judges had to ask several sets of questions, ranging from serious to funny. Here's an example of each:

**Serious:** *If you had five minutes with President Obama, what would you ask him?*

This was Courtney Wallace's fishbowl question and she answered: "I would ask him. 'How many disabled people are in his Cabinet?' Then I would tell him, (depending on answer), how important it is for people with disabilities to have jobs."

**Funny:** *What is your favorite cartoon character's car to drive and why?*

Ms. Sheila Whitaker responded quickly, "It would have to be Tweedy Bird's, because of his trademark line of 'I tought I taw a puddy cat' and his car being Canary Yellow."

Ms. Annette Ingram's platform was **Impacting Your Community Through Political Awareness and Advocacy**. She's also been active with Maryland Special Olympics. Her disability is Cerebral Palsy.

Ms. Erica Henderson's platform was **Making People Aware of Assistive Technology**. Ms. Henderson uses a computer as her voice, due to her Spastic Cerebral Palsy.

Ms. Courtney Wallace's platform was **The Experience**. She told of becoming disabled due to a spinal cord while giving birth to her daughter. She also spoke

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photograph courtesy of  
[www.ms-wheelchair-md.com](http://www.ms-wheelchair-md.com)

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of her growth and changes in attitude. "Before being disabled, I didn't give people with disabilities much thought; now I try to see everyone's situation from their shoes," she said.

Ms Sheila Whitaker's platform was **Researching Companies on Disability** particularly those that deal with transportation and travel. Her disability is Cerebral Palsy.

## **Ms. Courtney Wallace Crowned Ms. Wheelchair Maryland 2012**

The judges named Ms Sheila Whitaker as 1st Runner-Up and Ms. Courtney Wallace was crowned Ms. Wheelchair Maryland 2012.

After the event, this Judge/Journalist asked: What was your favorite experience in participating in this year's pageant? Ms. Erica Henderson stated, "My favorite part was doing something different and challenging."

Ms. Annette Ingram also enjoyed the challenge of it. She said, "I've been in pageants before, so I have gotten use to "Expecting the Unexpected."

The New Queen said,

"My favorite experience about this year's pageant were the people. I had so many preconceived ideas on what people with spinal cord injuries, other than mine would be like, sad to say. There was one woman in particular, Erica, in who changed my mind, and life for that matter. She's 24 and although I'm not sure of her exact diagnosis she is unable to communicate with her voice. She does all or most of her communicating through a computer. She types in what she wants to say and the computer reads it aloud. This girl is so funny and so intelligent. It blew my mind that all of that was trapped inside her body. She's amazing.

Also Ms Deborah. She won Ms DC in 2008, I believe. This women's story is incredible. Growing up she integrated schools, from elementary to college. And she did it as a black woman with a disability. Incredible. These women and who they are and what they have gone through changed my mentality on what someone in a wheelchair could and could not do...and I've been in one for 10 years!

It was an motivating, eye opening, exhilarating, humbling experience to meet everyone and I hope to meet more who will have that same impact on me during my reign."

Then I asked her: What do you want to accomplish as Ms. Wheelchair Maryland?

Ms Wallace said, "I am hoping to increase awareness and participation in the Ms Wheelchair pageant. "As Ms Wheelchair Maryland I will accomplish bridging the gap between the disabled and able bodied community in our state. There are a lot of great organizations, fundraisers, etc., out there that if our two communities would meet in the middle, we could get a lot accomplished. I hope to bridge the gap and create awareness to the able-bodied community about spinal cord injuries as well as all disabilities to the able bodied community. I would also love to create more partnerships and opportunities for disabled persons to work with our able bodied community in order to make our efforts better."

She continued, "This is an exciting opportunity for women to get involved in an arena they might not thought was possible to voice their concerns, and represent females who are in wheelchairs. We all have been put in different positions in life some like myself have found there current position is in a wheelchair. Ms. Wheelchair Maryland affords us women the opportunity to be the best we can be in the position we are in. Something that special needs more recognition and many more participants."

Ms. Courtney Wallace will go on to compete in the Ms. Wheelchair America Pageant, which will be held in Providence, Rode Island, in August 2012. ■

**Side notes:** Ms. Wheelchair DC (District of Columbia) was also crowned a week later, November 13. Ms. Dawn Jennings is the new Ms. Wheelchair DC. She will also compete in the Ms. Wheelchair America Pageant, which will be held in Providence, Rode Island in August.

Ms. Sharonda Johnson-Wilkes, Ms. Wheelchair Maryland 2011, will stay with the organization, as the Government Liaison.

For more information: <http://www.ms-wheelchair-md.com/>

Look for the next issue of *dis-Abilities Celebration Connection* to be posted during the month of April, 2012. . Remember to send us story ideas, interesting links, and events. We can't do it without you!

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Questions? Comments? Please  
use the **CONTACT US** form at

[www.celebratingspecialchildren.org](http://www.celebratingspecialchildren.org)

# Links I Love~



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**Editor's Note:** My thanks to Barbara Hayes who sent this note to me. The site she indicates is a commercial site but has some wonderful links and so is included here.

*"I work at an after school program and your resources have been very helpful; we have a few kids here with allergies. I've also been working on (with the help of the kids of course) a new section of our website which has health links. I plan to add a few of your links in there for the kids and their parents to check out, so thanks!*

*To show our appreciation, I wanted to share another resource that might be a good fit for your website. It has allergy resource for school nurses and child care professionals, it might make a nice addition: "Allergy Resources for School Nurses" - [www.pulseuniform.com/allergy-resources.asp](http://www.pulseuniform.com/allergy-resources.asp).*

*I hope you like it, thanks again! Oh, and if you decide to include it and don't mind giving me a shout back, that'd be great. I'd like to show the students if you put it up :-)*

Best Wishes,

*Barbara Hayes*

<http://afterskoolkids.org/index.html>

## Allergy Resources for School Nurses [www.pulseuniform.com/allergy-resources.asp](http://www.pulseuniform.com/allergy-resources.asp)

### Editor's Note-

Rather than posting the individual links here, please visit  
[www.pulseuniform.com/allergy-resources.asp](http://www.pulseuniform.com/allergy-resources.asp) to get to the page that interests you.

- Kids with Food Allergies Foundation: Food Allergy Support and Recipes
- Food Intolerances: Causes, Symptoms, and Treatments
- Food Allergies
  - Causes of a Food Allergy
  - Teens Health: Food Allergies
  - The Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network
  - General Information on Food Allergies and Sensitivities
  - Food Intolerance and Celiac Disease
  - Fact Sheet: Pediatric Food Allergies
  - Food Allergy: An Overview
  - Food Allergy: Disease Information
  - Children's Food Allergies: Food Allergies
  - Food Allergy or Food Intolerance?
  - Food Allergy and Intolerance
  - Common Food Allergies
  - Manifestations of Food Allergy: Evaluation and Management
  - Understanding Food Allergies
  - University of Maryland Medical Center: Food Allergy
  - Managing Food Allergies
- Lactose Intolerance
- It's Time to Bee Aware
- Wasp and Insect Sting Allergy
- Allergy to Honey: Relation to Pollen and Honey Bee Allergy
- Diseases and Conditions: Insect Sting Allergies
- Common Allergy Treatments
- Calgary Allergy Network: Tree Nut Allergies
- Allergic Contact Dermatitis
- Peanut Allergy: Symptoms
- Q & A: Peanut Allergies
- Peanut Allergy: An Overview
- Lactose Intolerance in Infants, Children, and Adolescents
- Kids Health Info: Lactose Intolerance
- Lactose Intolerance & Milk Allergy
- Lactose Intolerance in Children
- Milk for Kids with Lactose Intolerance
- The University of Chicago: Celiac Disease Center--Symptoms
- Celiac Disease Symptoms can be Elusive
- Celiac Disease Foundation: Celiac Disease Symptoms
- Celiac Canada: Celiac Child
- Celiac Disease Tests: The Test

# Living in My Skin— Even if it's Purple

By Carrie Smoot

Regardless of genre, every writer needs support and critique of their work. Some years ago, I discovered an online writing group on Yahoo! called Working Writers Critique Group. Debbie Fox, also a nonfiction writer, joined sometime after I did. All members enjoyed sharing their work and offering constructive feedback.

Eventually, Debbie had to leave the group, but we all knew she would continue writing essays, memoir, and creative nonfiction. In 2011, her first book, *Living in My Skin, Even if it's Purple* was published. It was a pleasure to revisit some of the stories that I remembered from the critique group.

*Living in My Skin* is the story of a woman who maintains a positive outlook on life, despite its many challenges, and that attitude rubs off on other people. She was born with a port wine stain birthmark, which, she learned many years later, is a symptom of a rare genetic disorder called Klippel-Trenaunay Syndrome (K-T), which would cause numerous health challenges for her down the road.

While Debbie was growing up, her family and friends never noticed her difference or thought it was a big deal, but some people did tease or ignore her. Although the teasing hurt, she didn't let it get her down for long. Readers are caught up in her Midwestern upbringing and family life, her many school activities, such as band and baton twirling, teaching swimming, working on school floats, and playing the guitar—an activity she still loves.

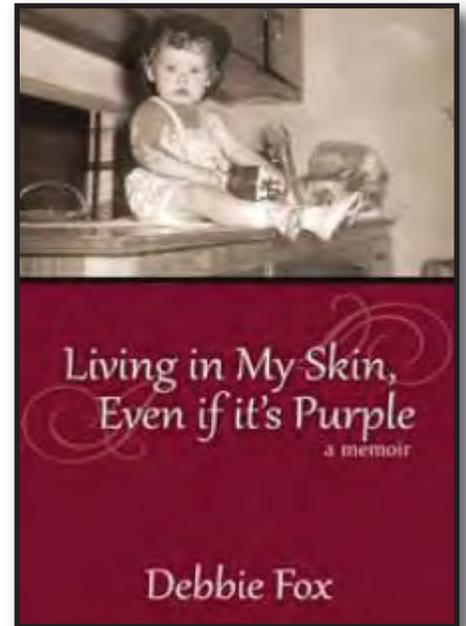
We also see Debbie struggle with having to undergo leg-lengthening surgery while still in high school to prevent the advancement of scoliosis, and having to give up favorite activities. She doesn't really like the hospital much, but that led to wonderful changes in her life. We follow her career as an RN (she's now retired), her marriage, and the necessity of moving to new places. Readers celebrate as she and her husband welcomed their new daughter.

As Debbie says to readers: "I hope that *Living in My Skin* will resonate with anyone who has felt different, will inspire self-acceptance, and serve as a stimulus to others to move beyond our differences."

In a recent email interview, I caught up with Debbie about her current projects, and what it was like to work on the book. Here are her responses

## **1) What inspired you to write *Living in My Skin, Even if it's Purple*? How did you come up with the idea?**

I began writing after the death of my only child in 1994, mainly to banish the demons. I ended up with an encyclopedic-sized autobiography, too unstructured for a book. After studying creative nonfiction writing, I learned to narrow my focus for memoir writing. Although I wanted to write about my daughter, Christie, I thought it reasonable to begin at the beginning with my paralysis during pregnancy, which was caused by my birthmark. From there I had to include my early life with a birthmark and soon a theme



developed—differences.

## **2) How have people responded to the book? What projects are you working on now?**

I haven't heard one negative comment. Everyone has gone the extra mile to call or email me to tell me how much they [all] liked the book.

I'm working on a second memoir, "Something About Rainbows," an account of the circumstances that led to the bizarre discovery [that] my only child, a seven-year-old daughter, had AIDS. I also find time to write essays, which I submit to various contests or anthologies.

## **3) What advice would you give to people about managing their disabilities and feeling positive about their differences?**

First, without differences, this world would be a dull place. Second, people need to see beyond differences. We are all God's creatures, and those who have more challenges than others also have more rewards. I hope those who are challenged never lose sight of the awe many feel for their accomplishments. And those who are challenged should feel good about themselves because they are truly special. Each one has

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something to contribute, to teach, to share, to love. They shouldn't look at what they can't do but what they can do.

**4) You say on your website that crying and screaming, while normal reactions to certain situations, never helped solve anything or helped you cope. What are the best ways to cope with crises? Do you think fortitude is something people are born with? If not, how do you develop it?**

I lean on my Savior, Jesus Christ, to lead me through any crisis. I learned that people want to help, so allow them to do so, to take some of the burden from you. Also, staying calm leads to rational thinking and good decision-making. Fortitude, I believe, is learned. Perhaps we emulate our parents, teachers, or sports hero. But until we are confronted with adversity will we know how we will react to the situation. We must find that "something" within us that makes us press on and overcome the challenge. When circumstances present [themselves], parents must allow their children some time to work through the crisis or problem, instead of handing the child a quick, easy solution. Failure is good if we learn lessons.

**5) What have been your favorite life experiences, both now and in the past?**

Besides being a mother, the greatest thrill of my life, my favorite life experiences would involve boating. Each year my family and two or three other families went on vacation to the Lake of the Ozarks, where we boated, waterskied, and fished. I wrote a story about those vacations for HeartLand Boating [http://www.debbiefox.com/files/Aug\\_2010\\_Transformations.pdf](http://www.debbiefox.com/files/Aug_2010_Transformations.pdf) Those vacations extended into my marriage, so I have many years of memories.

Currently, writing energizes me. When I won second place in the Tom Howard/John H. Reid Short Story Contest on Winning Writers in 2009 for "Attachments," I orbited the planet. [http://www.winning-writers.com/contests/tomstory/2009/ts09\\_pastwinners.php](http://www.winning-writers.com/contests/tomstory/2009/ts09_pastwinners.php)

And my family and friends enrich my daily life, every experience a treasure to hold close.

**6) You talk about your teen years a lot in the book. How would you advise young people today to get through those years?**

Develop true friendships based on mutual respect. Be greedy about learning. Try new things—foods, music, books, etc. to expand your world. Naturally, I would hope that God is a part of every teen's life, for He instills balance in this fallen world. And stay true to your authentic self.

**7) The way some of your classmates used to tease you about your birthmark must have been very difficult, but you seem to have handled it well. A lot of people are concerned about so much teasing and bullying in schools today. Would you say it's still better to handle teasing and bullying the way you did—by speaking up and getting involved in things that interest you?**

I hope no one has to endure bullying because it cuts deep, and no one should have to suffer alone.

Speaking up is necessary. And move on with your life. Don't be hung up on what happened or what might happen. Take charge of your life. Don't allow someone else to dictate to you how you should behave. Many comics speak about being teased, and they learned to laugh at themselves. That might be one way to handle it, but don't let someone else rob you of a normal life.

**8) I noticed that your parents didn't make a huge deal of your birthmark. Is this the wisest action for all disabilities and conditions? I noticed that at the end of the book, your mom seemed almost apologetic for that, which surprised me. Was a lot known about K-T when you were growing up?**

Nothing was known about K-T when I was born. (I was diagnosed with it when I was forty-three.) My parents never saw my difference, nor did many of my friends. I don't advocate ignoring differences for others with disabilities and conditions. Consideration is important but independence should also be encouraged. Focus should be on strengths, not weaknesses.

**9) How does K-T Syndrome affect you today? What is the simplest way to explain it to others?**

It is a syndrome that might consist of a port wine stain, vascular malformations, lymphatic problems, and boney hypertrophy (leg length discrepancy). Not every aspect is present in each person. I, of course, still have my port wine stain. My leg-length discrepancy was corrected, and the vascular malformation around my spinal cord was irradiated. Results of those treatments performed to correct my problems still plague me today. I am having more back surgery soon.

**10) In what ways did the support group help you, other than giving your condition a name?**

It provided information about the syndrome and put me in touch with other people who had similar problems. While I was living in California, I met with the West Coast K-T group for a picnic. I am one of the oldest members, so I can share my experiences with others.

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**11) Is the K-T Foundation still around? Are there other groups about K-T Syndrome?**

Yes. [http://k-t.org/?page\\_id=28](http://k-t.org/?page_id=28) I don't know of any other support groups.

**12) You've obviously spent a lot of time in hospitals—both personally and professionally, over the years. What are your tips for advocating for good health care and managing a hospital stay?**

Do your research on your doctors and hospitals. Ask questions and get plenty of information to decide the best course of treatment. And be kind to the nurses—it's a tough job.

**13) Besides writing, what else do you enjoy doing? I noticed that you wrote a story for a boating magazine. Do you have a boat now that you go out on?**

Church activities occupy much of my time. I belong to the St. Louis Writers Guild, attend events and workshops to hone my craft and interact with other writers. Playing the guitar is my soothing influence. Also, I'm a loyal Lakers fan.

I've been a contributor to *HeartLand Boating* magazine since 2008, although I don't own a boat. When I was growing up, my family boated, and I had a boat early in my marriage. My sister and her family have a Sundancer 500 on Lake of the Ozarks, which I've been on and do miss the boating life.

**14) Where do you live now—Missouri or Illinois, and what is it like?**

Illinois is my home, a little village called Smithton, twenty miles from St. Louis, Missouri. My village has one gas station, one small grocery

store, Subway, three taverns, a florist, three restaurants, takeout Chinese food, a post office, hair salon, a gift boutique, an auto repair business, one doctor and lab, a fitness center, three churches, a police department, a volunteer fire department, the village hall, and a tiny library. What more could one want? The grocery store accepts clothes to send out for dry cleaning and stocks the latest DVDs. It is definitely that small-town feel. I know all my neighbors, and my parents and brother live down the street from me. The big commercial areas are within twenty miles, so I'm not totally at the mercy of the village. Illinois is flat, and our weather is erratic; for example, yesterday we had ice rain, today we have clouds and a high temperature of 34, but tomorrow the temp should climb to 52. They say, "If you don't like the weather, wait a day."

**15) How did you learn about creative nonfiction as a genre? Is it fairly new? Why does it appeal to you more than other forms of writing?**

*"Speaking up is necessary. And move on with your life. Don't be hung up on what happened or what might happen. Take charge of your life. Don't allow someone else to dictate to you how you should behave. "*

I suppose I learned about the genre by reading writing magazines. It is a fairly new genre that I studied at a local college in California. My first publication was actually a five-paragraph essay I wrote for an English class that was published in a college textbook. Since my life has been anything but normal, I found writing what I know works for me. I love to figure out a theme in my story, a universal truth, and the les-

sons I learned that I can impart to my readers. Sadly, I don't have much of an imagination, but one day I aspire to write fiction.

**16) I admired some of the website photos. Who are the people pictured? Did you also take the one of the red flower? What kind is it? Also admired Kobe ...**

On my home page are photos from my book launch featuring two women who helped me plan and stage the event as well as photos of my parents, sister, brother, friends, and writer friends. Yes, I took all the flower photographs. The red one is a Hibiscus.

Kobe is the love of my life. He weighs nine and a half pounds and is three years old, and he was named after Kobe Bryant of the Lakers, who was 2008 MVP, the year Kobe was born. Yes, I know it's ironic that I named a small, white dog after a tall, black man.

**17) Also, please share some of your memories of your daughter, Christie. Will you be writing about her at some point?**

Although Christie lived a short life, she touched many and lived each day to its fullest. She loved rainbows and painting, reading, Nintendo, and dancing to Madonna songs. She loved unconditionally and bravely endured her suffering. The book I am working on now is about her. The essay on *Winning Writers* I wrote is about her and includes book excerpts. [http://www.winningwriters.com/contests/tomstory/2009/ts09\\_pastwinners.php](http://www.winningwriters.com/contests/tomstory/2009/ts09_pastwinners.php)

Learn more about Debbie Fox and her work at [www.debbiefox.com](http://www.debbiefox.com). *Living in My Skin, Even if it's Purple* was published in 2011 by Infinity Publishing. ■

*Carrie Smoot is a Northern Virginia freelance writer.*



# BEING PART OF THE FILM COMMUNITY IN DC

By Gregg J. Donaldson

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## RIFE AWARDS · OCTOBER 23, 2011

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I did two fun movie things this past autumn. The first began in September. A friend, Francis Abbey, asked several friends including me, to be judges for the 2nd Annual Reel Independent Film Extravaganza (RIFE), held October 22-23 at the Arc Theater in Washington, DC. Francis is a local independent filmmaker from Silver Spring, Maryland.

We jurors were split into three groups of five; there were about fifteen jurors altogether. The independent films were both Short and Features and varied in many subjects and categories. This year's festival also included international films. Each film category was scored on a scale of 1-5: 1 - Poor 2 - Fair 3 - Good (Neutral) 4 - Very Good 5 - Excellent, with emphasis on:

- **Cinematography, Editing:** (*Costumes, props, sets, etc.*) Did the graphics fit the film? If there were VFX, were they well done?
- **Sound:** Did it adhere or ingeniously bend its chosen genre conventions? Was the story well thought out? Was the dialogue natural for the genre?
- **Directing:** Was the acting natural for the genre? Did the music fit the film?

We also scored in the areas of Acting, Genre/Originality, Graphics/VFX, Music, Production, Design and Writing

Additionally, we commented on such aspects as: Were the shots well composed and well lit? Did the elements of the film come together successfully? Did the cuts and shot selection support the film's pacing and tone? Were the sound design, music, sound effects, and dialogue well done?

We judged in two rounds. In the first, we were given copies of the movies to view. In the second, we viewed them online, at <http://vimeo.com>

We did both rounds in September, which was fun, but hectic.

I had a chance to interview some of the film-makers. Those questions and answers follow here.

### BEST FEATURE FILM

*Butterfly Crush* by Alan Clay

This feature was a cross between *Fame* and George Orwell's *1984*, about an Australian-New Zealand girl singing duo.

**Donaldson:** What prompted you to make your feature *Butterfly Crush*? How long did it take to make?

**Clay:** *Butterfly Crush* is an adaptation of my novel, 'Dance Sisters.' Since the publication of the book there has been lots of interest in turning it into a movie, but when none of these possibilities bore fruit, I wrote and directed the film myself. It took a year to write with a year in development. We shot it in 28 days, with a four-month post-production.

### BEST DOCUMENTARY

*Question One* by Joe Fox

This documentary is about the political battle of over gay marriage.

### BEST SHORT

*Mine* by Greg Thompson

This short film is a cross between *Duel* and *No Country for Old Men*.

### BEST SCREENPLAY

*Dynamite Swine* by Mark Poisella

This feature is a dark comedy about gambling. In it a mobster-like character becomes disabled.

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Local winners included:

- Best Feature Film DMV (District, Maryland and Virginia) - *Bright Lights and Promises* by Tom Basham.

- Best Documentary DMV

*Breaking Through the Clouds* by Heather Taylor

- Best Short DMV

*One Punch at a Time* by Larry Dortch

Other winners included:

Emerging Artist, Yuri Alves, *Broken Clouds* and Best Foreign Language Film, *Odd One Out* by Pawel Wendorff.

*End of Occupation* by Michael McMullin won Best Audience Film. This feature is a dark comedy about telemarketers. I spoke to Mr. McMullin about his film:

**Donaldson:** Who or what inspired you to be a filmmaker? How long have you been one?

**McMullin:** I've been an artist since the teen years. I studied fine art and have made a living off of graphics and fine art painting for 30 years.

I've always been interested in movies but was afraid to try. In my early 40's I had a inspiration to just go for it, the common person isn't interested in paintings anymore, the masses stand in lines every Friday night to see pictures that move and speak, the movies, so me being an artist that wants to be viewed decided it was time if not now then never to jump in.

So I began with my first film, *Inside Straight*, (35 min). It took two years to complete. My second film, *3 Wish Alley* (45 min), took about the same so you could say I've been a filmmaker in the making for about 14 years.

The completion of *End of Occupation* reveals me as a real filmmaker now, meaning that I feel as if I can say that now with confidence. So, in reality about two weeks, that was after the response I received at RIFE.

**Donaldson:** What prompted you to make your feature *End of Occupation*? How long did it take to make?

**McMullin:** The script was designed in mind to create many roles for actors, roles that only need a day

or two to complete, then stitched together make a feature length film. The many stories allowed me as a writer to touch upon several social issues with humor, in a digestible way without coming off as being preachy. Yet I have topics I want to get out, and the movies allow me a platform on which to speak my mind through characters.

The film took five years to complete, mostly due to a break up at home, causing the film to sit for almost 11 years untouched, but it was reengaged and finished thanks to my assistant director, Nick Dobson.

**Donaldson:** What has been the reaction to your film since RIFE and what's next for the film?

**McMullin:** Left handed compliment like "it was better than I expected" and "The audience needed to hear that," I really find it funny and topical", the response was very encouraging. What's next is marketing on line and entering more festivals. I will be giving an cast and public showing at the Old Greenbelt Theater; the screen is much larger and the sound is better. Unfortunately, many of my cast members from all backgrounds were reluctant to come to S.E., but luckily we still had a nice crowd and they laughed, that the ultimate goal. Laughter

**Donaldson:** What's next for you?

**McMullin:** I've been picking up acting roles myself in order to learn more about the art form. I've written my first and only horror script and will begin in the winter as all the scene are to be shot in the falling snow. Its working title is *The Horror*.

**Donaldson:** You mentioned that you're dyslexic. Does that present any special challenges for you as a filmmaker? If so, how do you deal with it?

**McMullin:** Well as you may have caught in my response, my spelling is a source of entertainment to many. I see it as a handicap that is freeing, meaning if my meaning is conveyed then spelling is elementary. It has been a hurdle in the sense that many people consider the inability to read well or spell is a reflection of intelligence. I've been judged as a slow person by first impressions many times throughout my life. But no worries, I keep on pushing the limits.

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Then in November, I co-led a discussion on Movies and People with Disabilities for a monthly film discussion group called The Cinema Lounge, which is an outgrowth of the DC Film Society. Here are some of the movies we discussed, plus many others:

- *Wait Until Dark*
- *Charly*
- *Diving Bell and the Butterfly*
- *Shine*
- *A Child Is Waiting*
- *The Other Side of the Mountain/A Window to the Sky*
- *Johnny Belinda*
- *Rain Man*
- *A Beautiful Mind*
- *The Spiral Staircase*
- *The King's Speech*
- *My Left Foot*

We traced the history of people with disabilities, first portrayed in the movies as villains, then as characters to be pitied, as heroic characters; and finally, as people to be accepted.

But I asked the nagging question: Why aren't there more actors with disabilities in movies? As a group, we came to the consensus that actors need to get to know directors and filmmakers; with social media such as Facebook and Kickstarter, it's fairly easy to do. For more information and links, visit: [www.dcfilmsociety.org/links.htm#referenceandreviews](http://www.dcfilmsociety.org/links.htm#referenceandreviews)

Then just for fun, I asked some of my Facebook friends what their favorite movies were; here are their responses:

- John W. Quinn—Author

As far as movies with people with disabilities - there is a movie called *Inside Moves* made in 1980 starring John Savage. It's the story of a man who tries unsuccessfully to kill himself by jumping off a building and winds up in a wheelchair. The movie shows how this man's life changes after his accident and how the people around him treat him

differently because of his being in a chair. Very powerful movie and very well acted.

- Robert Watson –CP Community Activist top 3
  1. *My Left Foot*
  2. *Rory O'Shea Was Here*
  3. *Gabby*

While there doesn't seem to be much movement in terms of actors with disabilities getting parts in movies in recent years, television has been a bit more active. There is the long running original series, *CSI: (Crime Scene Investigation)*, who has as its Chief Medical Examiner, Doc Robbins, who is wonderfully played by Robert David Hall. He is a double amputee, having lost both legs in a car accident. He wears prosthetic legs so you cannot tell he is disabled. But his character, Doc Robbins does use a walking cane.

Also Zach Anner, a young stand-up comic from Austin, Texas who has Cerebral Palsy, briefly had a four week travel show on the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN) this past December.

All the filmmakers I spoke with agreed on one thing: "Never give up on your dreams!" ■

*Gregg J. Donaldson is a freelance writer/editor based in Washington, D.C., who has Cerebral Palsy. His articles have ranged from disability, entertainment profiles, technology to author profiles. He is also a published poet.*

**Editor's note:**

*When I was writing my editor's letter, I googled this phrase*

**"movies that have characters with disability"**

*and came away with some very interesting links, including a link to the movie, **Avatar** - which I have to admit, I haven't seen. I'll let you do that search for yourself; I'd be interested to know what you found. Use the CONTACT US link on the website to tell us about your opinions about people with disabilities in the movies.*

**Laura**

*p.s. As we were going to press, Gregg sent along another link and I have included it here.*

<http://www.reelabilities.org/about-us>

# Learning How to Cook

By Carrie Smoot

Cooking is an important life skill, and people with disabilities want to do it as independently as possible. The goal is not to become the next Julia Child or Emeril, but to prepare simple and healthful meals without depending entirely on convenience foods and eating out.

I wanted to hear from people with disabilities about how they managed with cooking. Here are their responses.

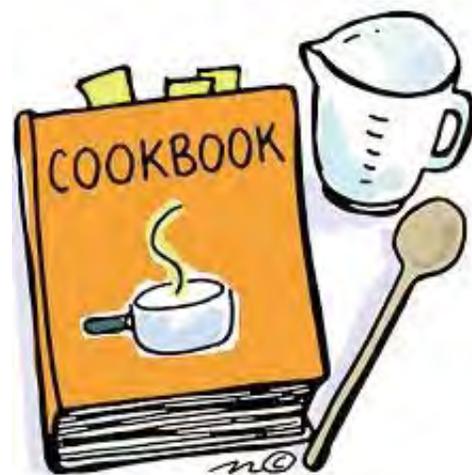
• Neil Leslie of Marion, South Carolina, says kitchen gadgets make his life easier. The layout of his apartment prevents him from maneuvering his motorized wheelchair to use his oven and stove, even though the knobs are in the front. So he uses the microwave and toaster oven, a George Foreman grill, and a Crock-Pot—his favorite item. Phyllis Good's *Fix-It and Forget It Crock Pot Recipes* (Intercourse, PA, 2000) has been a lifesaver. Visit <http://fix-itandforget-it.com/blog>. He says *A Man a Can, a Microwave* by David Joachim published in 2004, has given him more recipe ideas. ([www.davejoachim.com](http://www.davejoachim.com))

"If somebody like me can make a decent meal in a Crock-Pot, anybody can," he says. The Crock-Pot was a gift from his sister the first year he lived on his own, but he didn't use it right away. When his sister visited later on, they fixed minestrone, which turned out to be very tasty. The experience converted him. "I was like,

wow—how did I miss this? This is so great!" Leslie recalls. "All you need to do is put some non-stick spray in the dish, dump the ingredients, cook them, and eat the meal. It's impossible to mess up. It's very easy to use—only two controls, and one button to press. Since it's a slow cooker, just remember to start early in the day, such as noon, or before." He says it's very easy to freeze leftovers to have throughout the week. Other soups and stews followed, along with macaroni and cheese, and meat and potatoes dishes. For a church event, he prepared turkey with cranberry sauce, which was a hit.

Leslie, who has cerebral palsy, also uses pre-cut vegetables and fruit and bagged salads when they are available. He learns by trial and error and has made his share of mistakes. "Once, I put too much pepper on a meat dish I was preparing. Unfortunately, I had to throw it away." He urges people to be careful when heating or reheating in the microwave. "Let it cool some first," he says. "I spilled hot broth on myself once. My skin blistered, and I had to go to the emergency room." He also recommends a good kitchen knife, because regular silverware doesn't cut well. But still exercise the same safety precautions, he says.

"The taste of something that you make yourself is better," Leslie says. "When I make something for myself, I like to think that I'm carrying on the tradition that my mother started.



She was a good cook, and she appreciated good food."

• An Online Resource. Anna Moyer is a freshman at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. Majoring in biology, she plans to enter the field of medical science once she graduates. Growing up in State College, Pennsylvania, she says that practically all her life, she has volunteered with children who have disabilities, often teaching in life-skills classrooms. She has helped out in Best Buddies, Easter Seals, and Special Olympics programs. Her teenage brother has Down syndrome, and they have worked together on cooking. She recalls their experiences:

"My brother has Downs, and like many with the syndrome he has developmental delays as well as fine motor difficulties. In beginning to cook with him, it was important for me to address both the mental and physical challenges of his disabilities. A couple [of] days before cooking, I would read the recipe to him, and do my best to explain each step of the process. Before cooking, I would have him explain the recipe to me and prompt him with questions when necessary. In the course of cooking, we would almost always run into some sort of problem that we would then address together. Some issues were easily solved, such as placing items he used often in lower cabinets

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to avoid standing on a stepstool. Others, like his difficulty opening zipped bags and sealed containers, required more creative solutions, such as transferring the ingredients he would need from the containers he could not open to screw and snap-top jars. He probably most enjoyed knowing he created the finished product by himself, and was very proud of his newfound cooking skills! He still...lives at home, and will probably never live completely independently—but he does cook his own quesadillas and other snacks for himself now, which is a huge improvement for him."

With her dad's help, Moyer developed the website, "Your Special Chef" (see website listing at the end of this article). while she was in middle school volunteering in a life-skills classroom. As she continued teaching and volunteering, the site became her senior project. As interest and improvement grew, she wanted to make the recipes available globally to anyone who could use them. "In the disability awareness assignment on my website, I do provide the opportunity for others to create recipes using my templates, and any recipes sent to me in the future will be uploaded to the site," Moyer says.

She continues: "Although originally my recipes were aimed at the middle school students I was teaching, since the website went online, I've received numerous emails from teachers, parents, and organizations who are using these recipes in various settings, and not just in the classroom with school-aged children. Additionally, I've found that the recipes are useful for teaching skills in addition to just cooking, such as strengthening pre-reading by scanning from left to right, introducing new foods and encouraging sensory processing skills, and developing social skills by cooking and sharing a

meal or snack. As far as using the recipes with teens and adults, I've also received positive emails from therapists who work in rehabilitation centers and have implemented cooking with these recipes."

Here are more of Anna's ideas for cooking when you have a disability: Encouraging advice. I would tell a beginning cook with a disability to stay motivated and to keep trying! At first, it might be difficult or impossible to complete a task, but by thinking creatively and finding unique solutions it is possible to circumvent most problems in the kitchen. My recipes are primarily aimed at those with developmental disabilities, and honestly in most cases, I would recommend not self-assessing one's skills in the kitchen to ensure safety. At the same time, a caregiver, teacher, parent or someone who knows the individual well can typically give an initial assessment of skill level as a baseline for which recipes to try first. Important questions to ask are whether the individual knows which side of a knife is sharp, that an oven and stovetop are hot, when oven mitts are necessary, et cetera. If in doubt, substitute the difficult task with an equivalent but less dangerous one; for example, removing cookie sheets from a cold oven, using marbles in warm water to simulate boiling water, and using a plastic chef's knife instead of a metal one. The picture recipes I created are blocked into sections that break down meal prep tasks, but for other recipes I would recommend doing a "dry run" of each task necessary, including finding all ingredients and tools, and knowing and understanding each step of the process. Marking time sensitive steps and where it is okay to take a break may also help some individuals.

*When assisting someone with a disability in the kitchen, what teaching strategies are best?*

If a task is new, I would recommend demonstrating and explaining how to carry out the task, and then if the individual seems to understand, asking him or her to copy you. If a process is complicated, it can be split up in very small steps for increased simplicity. If the individual is physically unsure or unable to complete the task, it is sometimes good to work through the process hand-over-hand until they are able to carry out the steps independently. Once the task is mastered in a session, it is important to remember that the individual may regress a bit, even within in the day. As such, it is a good idea to keep practicing and applying the skill until she or he can consistently and accurately complete the task.

*If someone's kitchen isn't already adapted, what do you suggest doing in the short term to streamline the process and make it a bit faster?*

In many cases, having adapted tools in the kitchen is almost as important as having an adapted kitchen. For example, if an individual can't reach the counter or has difficulty standing for long periods of time, much of the prep work necessary for cooking can be completed sitting down at a kitchen or dining room table, and not necessarily in the kitchen itself. It really varies from person to person, but once the individual begins cooking it often becomes obvious what kind of adjustments need to be made.



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**What tips for kitchen safety do you have, including handling knives, the stove, opening canned foods, coping with hot surfaces, and dealing with hot items?**

Before using a sharp knife, individuals can practice by using a plastic lettuce knife, which looks and acts similar to a chef's knife, but without a dangerous blade. It might be helpful to place colorful tape over the blade of a knife, and instruct the individual to avoid touching the tape while cutting soft objects, such as clay. Then, when he or she can successfully maneuver the knife without touching the tape, it can be removed and the exercise repeated. When using the stove, hot items, and other hot surfaces, it is a good idea to practice while the items are cold until the skill is mastered and then progress to practicing with heat. For example, if there is concern over whether a student can remove a bowl from the microwave without spilling, he or she can practice using oven mitts to remove a bowl of warm water from the microwave. That way, if the

individual does spill, they won't be in danger of burns. In all cases, it is absolutely necessary that he or she knows what surfaces and objects will be hot; otherwise, not even the best safety measures or practices can keep the individual from danger.

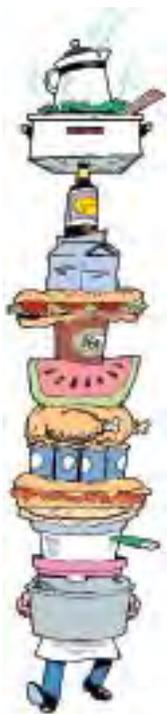
**If someone isn't able to work on several tasks at once, what are some good ways to get around this barrier?**

This barrier can to a degree be avoided by completing steps in sections that are not time sensitive, so that only one task needs to be focused on at a time. For example, sauces can be made ahead of time and stored until they are needed in a recipe, to avoid the necessity of cooking the dish and its sauce at the same time. Some recipes may absolutely require that two or more tasks are completed simultaneously, and in these cases it is a good idea to know what absolutely must be done at certain times. It may be more important to remove a dish from the oven at the right time than to continue stirring a simmering pot on the stove.

**Should people be using the microwave all the time?**

In the recipes on "Your Special Chef," I decided to use the microwave for cooking many foods that would usually be cooked on the stovetop or in the oven. Microwaves are easier and safer for many individuals to use, and if the choice is between not cooking at all or cooking in the microwave, I personally think it is better to use a microwave. Current research suggests that there are not health risks associated with using standard kitchen microwaves as directed. However, I have found that microwaves can cook food unevenly, and avoided using the microwave in any recipe on "Your Special Chef" in which the raw food would be unsafe to eat, such as the roasted chicken. Additionally, the cook must understand which plastics are safe to use in the microwave, and that metals cannot be used in the microwave. On the whole, microwaves are generally safe and efficient for cooking, but as with any kitchen tool, must be used with caution. ■

*Carrie Smoot is a Northern Virginia freelance writer.*



## **Resources and Websites**

### **Your Special Chef**

[www.yourspecialchef.com/ysc\\_production/\\_design/app/\\_show/static/Home](http://www.yourspecialchef.com/ysc_production/_design/app/_show/static/Home)

### **Phyllis Good's Fix-It and Forget It Crock Pot Recipes**

<http://fix-itandforget-it.com/blog>

### **A Man a Can, a Microwave** by David Joachim

[www.davejoachim.com](http://www.davejoachim.com)