



# Picture This:

## *Intellectual Disabilities*



Entertainment  
Industries Council, Inc.



**Special Olympics**



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## *Intellectual Disabilities*

Picture This is a guide to the key issues impacting people with intellectual disabilities, as identified by experts, advocates, policy-makers and others working to improve public awareness and reduce stigma surrounding the largest disability population in the world. Picture This is a publication of the Entertainment Industries Council, Inc., in partnership with Special Olympics.

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

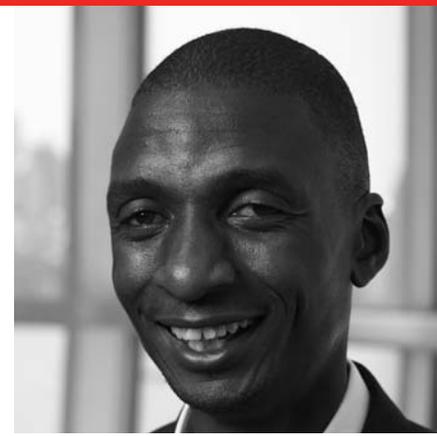
  
**Special Olympics**  
[www.specialolympics.org](http://www.specialolympics.org)

*Photos by Richard Corman, who, for more than 15 years, has donated his services to Special Olympics, recording the strength, the pride and the potential of its athletes. Corman's work has appeared in Vanity Fair, Rolling Stone, Sports Illustrated and Vogue. Glory, a book of Corman's photographs of athletes, was published in 1999, and I am Proud: The Athletes of Special Olympics was published in 2003.*



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## Introduction

Can the entertainment industry, particularly television and film, depict people with intellectual disabilities realistically without perpetuating common stereotypes and prejudices? Can our industry present characters with intellectual disabilities who are fully participating members of society and whose lives possess depth and complexity? Are audiences ready for honest portrayals of people with intellectual disabilities as multi-faceted human beings who can be funny, compassionate, sensitive, angry, frustrated and sometimes even the object of humor? And are we fully open to the idea of hiring actors with intellectual disabilities to play characters with intellectual disabilities?

The answer to all of these questions should be “yes.” With your help, this can become a reality.

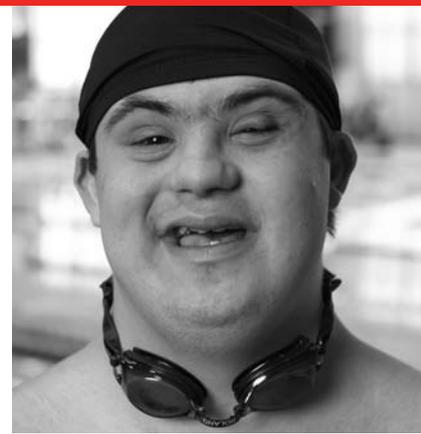
The impact of television and film on our society can be enormous--not only does entertainment reflect what is happening in the world, it can shape attitudes and break down barriers to acceptance and create understanding about people who are perceived as different.

Picture This: Intellectual Disabilities is the result of a day-long forum in which people from the entertainment community spoke and listened to people with intellectual disabilities and their families and advocates. The result is a resource designed not only to provide guidance and recommendations for entertainment professionals seeking to learn more about people with intellectual disabilities, but also to inspire creative thinking and help it flourish in new directions.

Actress and Special Olympics International Board Member Vanessa Williams says the time is right for “telling people about depicting intellectual disabilities, using actors who have intellectual disabilities: It’s doable. It’s totally doable, and it’s important to do it.”

## DID YOU KNOW...

an independent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that more Americans get health information from the media, including television and feature films, than from any other source—including their own doctors!



## A call to action to the entertainment industry...

In February 2007, the Entertainment Industries Council, Inc. (EIC), in partnership with Special Olympics, held a Picture This forum in Washington, D.C., for experts in the field of intellectual disabilities to share ideas and identify issues and priorities for writers, directors and producers from New York and Hollywood. In turn, the panel of entertainment writers, producers and directors explained the many challenges and opportunities for depicting people with intellectual disabilities onscreen.

This publication is the result of that meeting. It is intended to encourage the creative process, not inhibit it.

Within these pages you'll find information about intellectual disabilities that may surprise you, along with personal stories of those living with intellectual disabilities, including several Special Olympics athletes and actors with intellectual disabilities. We encourage you to read through this publication now and hold onto it for future reference. When the time comes to address intellectual disability in your production, we hope this publication will serve as a valuable resource, providing important information that will enhance your knowledge and aid you in creating authentic and accurate portrayals.

In these pages, you'll hear from actress/singer Vanessa Williams, who serves on the Special Olympics Board of Directors, and writer/director/producer Peter Farrelly, who produced "The Ringer," a comedy starring Johnny Knoxville that broke new ground in its depiction of people with intellectual disabilities. Also included are writer/director Anthony Lover and writers, directors and producers from "Criminal Minds," "Guiding Light," "Without a Trace" and other productions, all of whom have in one way or another dealt with intellectual disabilities in a creative capacity.

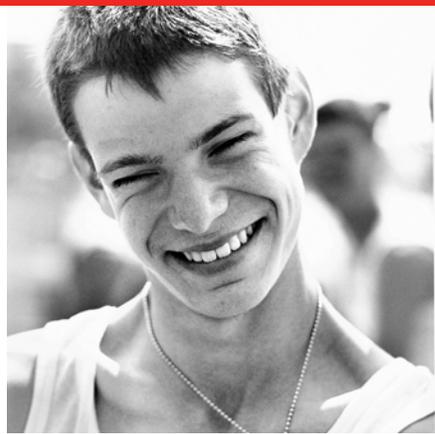
A 2004 report from the President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities emphasized the importance of focusing on the elimination of barriers to learning, working and full participation in community life for this population. The report further noted that "in changing people's attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities, we need to change how they think about such people, by demonstrating all that they are capable of. Attitudes and expectations of the public, in part, determine the degree to which children, adolescents and adults with intellectual disabilities are able to learn, work and live alongside their peers without disabilities."

More than perhaps any other group of people in the world, the entertainment industry has the opportunity to inform audiences and shape public attitudes. EIC and Special Olympics invite you to use your unparalleled creative powers to lead the public in challenging misconceptions about intellectual disabilities—to make a difference, just by doing your job and being creative!

Sincerely,

Brian Dyak  
President and CEO  
Entertainment Industries Council, Inc.

Timothy Shriver, Ph.D.  
Chairman  
Special Olympics



## Overview

### *“Picture This: Intellectual Disabilities” Event*

The “Picture This: Intellectual Disabilities” one-day forum, co-sponsored by the EIC and Special Olympics, was held at the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) Foundation in Washington, D.C.

NAB Foundation President Marcellus Alexander welcomed the “Picture This” participants, including more than 40 leaders and constituents of the intellectual disability community. EIC Executive Vice President Marie Gallo Dyak and EIC President and CEO Brian Dyak set the tone for the day by making a collective wish for the entertainment industry to use its clout and power to unmask the concern about the portrayal of people with intellectual disabilities and bring real-life situations to the screen. The goal of the “Picture This” forum was to develop priorities that achieve accurate on-screen depictions of people living with intellectual disabilities.

Williams, who stars in a recently released independent film, “My Brother,” as a dying mother whose son has an intellectual disability, spoke of her dedication to portraying people with intellectual disabilities accurately by casting people with intellectual disabilities in a film or on TV. She said that incorporating actors with intellectual disabilities into “My Brother” did not add to the production time or budget and did not create direction difficulties. She said the difference that an actor with an intellectual disability can make is like “a light that shines from someone that doesn’t have to put on a mask – it is a celebration of humanity.”

Special Olympics Chairman Tim Shriver spoke about making the challenges of people with intellectual disabilities relevant to all people. He highlighted positive changes on the screen, such as the young son with an intellectual disability depicted in “My Brother,” as compelling, significant and true to the nature of the subject matter. Shriver emphasized that, “public attitudes will only change when people on the screen are treated humanely and stories are told with dignity, not pity.” Shriver urged the entertainment industry to “seize the opportunity to give the audience a slice of humanity that is forceful and entertaining.”

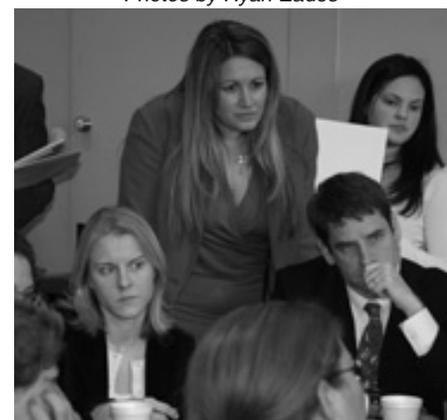
A panel of entertainment professionals shared their experiences in depicting various health and social issues of people with intellectual disabilities onscreen and participated in discussions by visiting expert roundtables during the event. The panel included Andi Bushell, Supervising Producer/Writer of CBS’s “Criminal Minds,” Sue Castle, Executive Producer, PBS series “In the Mix,” Maria Macina, Producer of ABC’s “Guiding Light,” and Rosemary Rodriguez, Director of CBS’s “Without a Trace.”

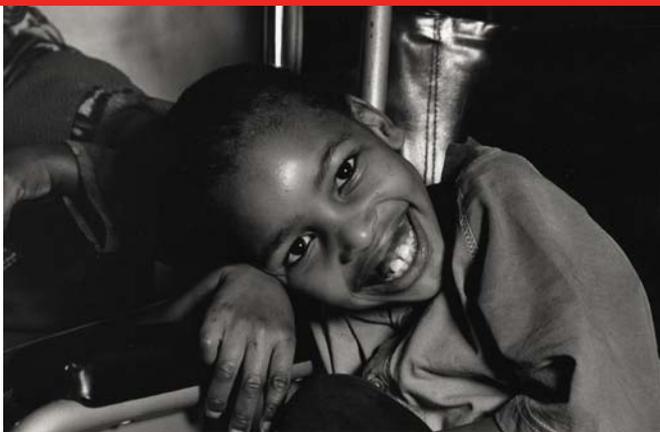
Picture This panelists (from left) Sue Castle, Andi Bushell, Rosemary Rodriguez and Maria Macina engaged in conversation before the event.

Special Olympics athletes and contributors to the Picture This event pose with Special Olympics Board Director Vanessa Williams. From left: Garrett Barnes, David Egan, Vanessa Williams, Blair Williamson

Picture This panelist Maria Macina listens intently to one group’s discussion during the Picture This event.

*Photos by Ryan Eades*





## Panel Comments

**Andi Bushell**

**Supervising Producer/Writer, “Criminal Minds”**

*“As a volunteer for Special Olympics I knew many of the issues facing people with intellectual disabilities beforehand. After this forum, I feel better educated and motivated to tell a story that can humanize a person with ID [intellectual disabilities] and bring important issues to the forefront of the public eye.”*

Bushell is currently a Supervising Producer on “Criminal Minds” for Touchstone/CBS. Prior to that, she was a Supervising Producer on “Alias” for Bad Robot/Touchstone/ABC. Beginning her career writing teen angst and relationship dramas such as “Ally McBeal,” “Wasteland,” “Young Americans” and “Keen Eddie,” Bushell slowly transitioned into her first love, writing more suspenseful, character-based thrillers on shows like “Glory Days,” “Alias,” “Crossing Jordan” and, currently, “Criminal Minds.” She grew up in Boston, and went to school at NYU where she studied drama at Tisch School of the Arts.

**Sue Castle**

**Executive Producer, PBS series, In the Mix**

*“I learned a lot about ID and the issues that impact the lives of people living with ID. This information and the contacts I’ve made are valuable to future programming.”*

For many years Castle has been incorporating difficult issues facing teenagers in her PBS series “In the Mix.” Her 30-minute programs focus on topics such as substance abuse prevention, self-esteem and diversity in order to raise awareness, dispel stereotypes and overcome obstacles. Teens have a significant voice in what gets produced and most of the programming ideas come directly from them. At the core of the writing and development are personal stories.

**Maria Macina**

**Producer, Guiding Light**

*“This forum will help me to depict people with ID more positively, removing the image of negative stereotypes. I have also learned to watch the language, especially descriptive words to characterize people with ID.”*

Celebrating 70 years in television and radio, “Guiding Light” is the longest-running show in broadcast history. With 250 episodes a year, it takes an enormous effort to keep the show

fresh and engaging, while maintaining a socially relevant impact on daytime television. Having won a PRISM Award for the show’s two-decade depiction of the struggle with alcoholism, Macina has learned that a socially serious issue doesn’t have to be at the core of the storyline to be significant and leave a lasting impression. She believes that there are endless possibilities in daytime television to create awareness. With Macina serving as Producer, “Guiding Light” received 13 Daytime Emmy Award nominations in 2005 and 14 nominations in 2006.

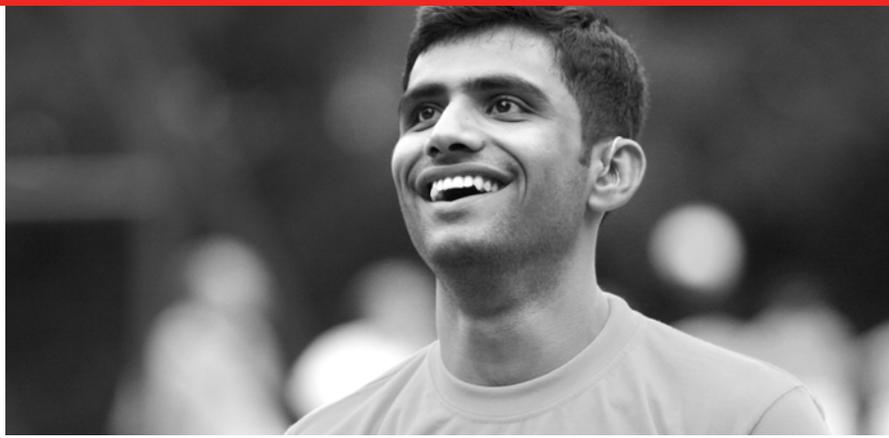
Before joining “Guiding Light,” Macina spent four years working on the television and radio program, “Christopher Closeup.” She was responsible for producing, script writing and all of the pre- and post-production. Soon after, Macina served as Producer and Script Editor for the experimental pilot, “Waterfront.”

**Rosemary Rodriguez**

**Director, “Without a Trace”**

*“Breaking stereotypes is a challenge in television. Television is all about camera shots and angles and delivering the storyline in a short period of time. While shows are looking to do relevant stories, the research is limited as everything happens very quickly.” Rodriguez encouraged bringing educational information to the studio by holding an expert forum on the lot. “This is a topic with a strong emotional component, now there has to be a push to get the story out.”*

Since making her feature film directorial debut in 2002, Rodriguez is quickly becoming a “go-to” director for the gritty television drama series genre. Her first feature, which she wrote as well as directed, was “Acts of Worship.” The impressive debut premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and went on to screen at numerous festivals before going on to win a PRISM Award, a nomination for the John Cassavetes Award from the Independent Spirit Awards, and awards from several festivals including the prestigious Santa Barbara Film Festival. The film eventually was featured on the Sundance Channel as part of its New Voices series. Since then, Rodriguez has directed episodes of several hit television series, such as “Third Watch,” “Law and Order” and “Without a Trace.” She completed the Minority and Women’s Directing Program for John Wells Productions in 2004.



# Priorities & Recommendations

## 1. Dispell fears, stereotypes and offensive and hurtful slurs

- Attempt to portray intellectual disability clearly, directly, boldly and informatively; try not to shy away or treat it with “kid gloves.”
- Avoid depicting people with intellectual disabilities as victims or objects of pity.
- Where possible, show that people with intellectual disabilities have many of the same issues as others in their age groups. They are not “perpetual children.”
- Try to choose language wisely and sensitively. Understand the damaging and demeaning impact of words like “retard” and “retarded.” To many people with intellectual disabilities and their families, “the R word” is as offensive as “the N word.” Try to limit such language to only when necessary to a story line.

## 2. Promote subtle inclusion and seamless integration of people with intellectual disabilities in film and TV

- Consider showing people with intellectual disabilities living in society, participating in every facet of life—at home, at work, shopping at the mall, hanging out with friends at a coffee shop, simply being part of the population.
- Think about portraying the full life “arc” of people with intellectual disabilities. Consider, for example, showing people with intellectual disabilities at work, taking in both their feelings of accomplishment and their frustrations. Or consider such issues as: What happens to people with intellectual disabilities as they move from home into the community? As they age?
- On the other hand, remember that focusing too heavily on a person’s disability can often present a false, “flat” character, as people with intellectual disabilities have both capabilities and difficulties. (Of course, there are exceptions when the disability is crucial to the story line.)
- Try to show the extent to which the character’s personality impacts the story, making sure that there is a distinction between the personality and the disability.

- Consider incorporating characters with intellectual disabilities into comedic scenes and storylines where appropriate. Showing a person with an intellectual disability laughing and making others laugh can humanize everyone involved.
- Keep in mind that people with intellectual disabilities, far from being shy or embarrassed about their disabilities, are often highly confident and can be just as successful on their own as people who don’t have intellectual disabilities.
- Consider employing actors with intellectual disabilities in all types of roles, from extras to leads, to create more realistic portrayals. While actors who don’t have intellectual disabilities can reasonably impersonate characters with intellectual disabilities, at times it may be more effective and affecting to use accomplished actors who have intellectual disabilities— there are thousands—in your production.

## 3. Expand the definition of diversity beyond race and culture to include intellectual disabilities

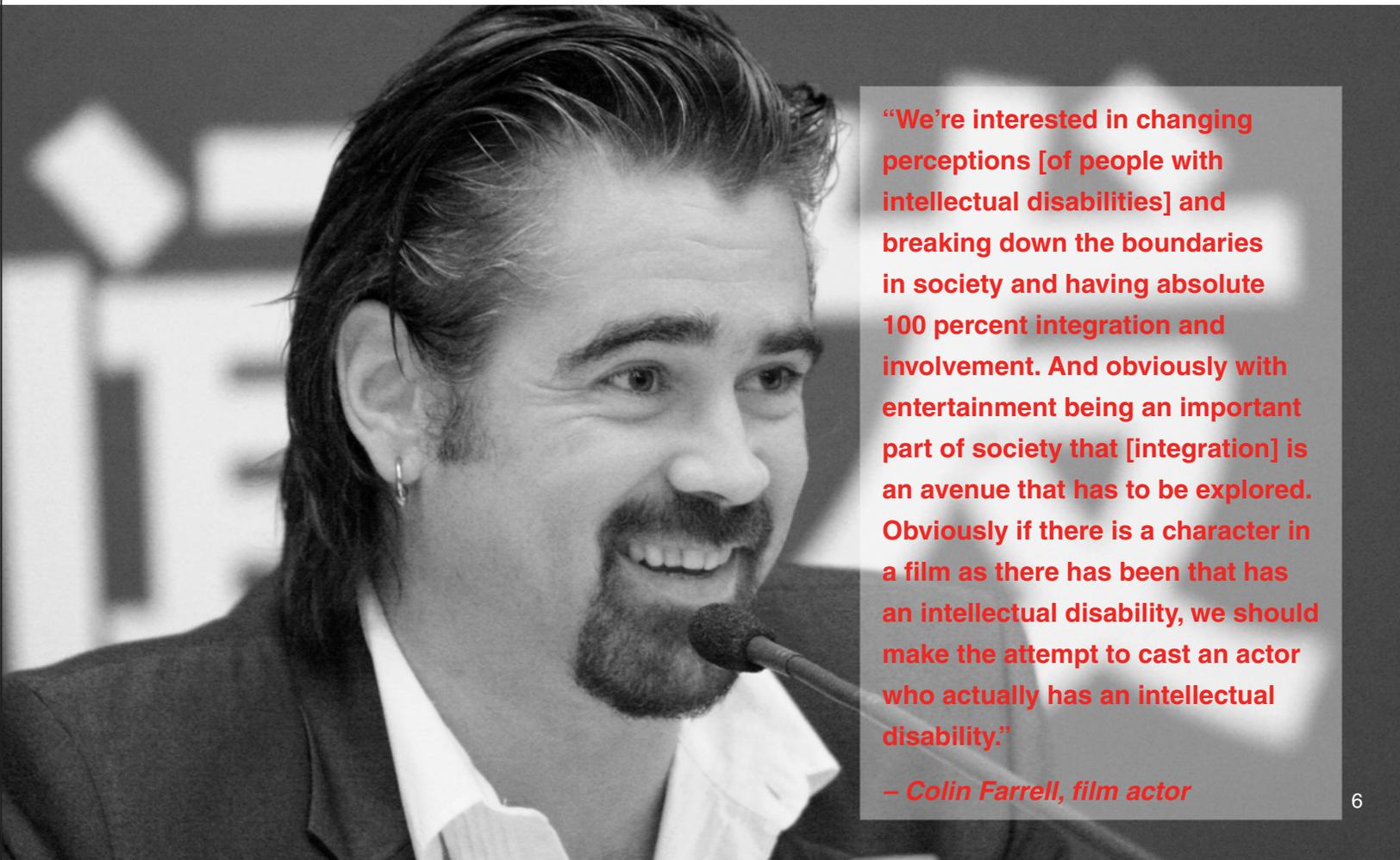
- Consider opportunities to show people with intellectual disabilities claiming their identities and standing up for their rights, just as other groups seeking civil rights and fair treatment have done. Look for opportunities to talk more about a wide range of intellectual disability— not just Down syndrome, but autism and cerebral palsy.
- Keep in mind that people with intellectual disabilities often face even greater prejudices than the more often depicted racial, ethnic, gender or sexual discrimination cases. Day-to-day experiences for people with intellectual disabilities can be harrowing—and people with intellectual disabilities can be shown to suffer depression because of this discrimination, but they can also be shown to rise above it.
- Most importantly, consider that people with intellectual disabilities live among everyone else, and can be found out and about on every street in America.

# *Creative Vision Through Stories*

If the thousands of writers, producers and directors of television and feature films show people with intellectual disabilities accurately and fully, with all their strengths, struggles and achievements, public awareness will increase tremendously. Moreover, doing so represents an opportunity as well as a socially important stride, because multidimensional characters are more interesting for those who create them, act them and watch them. Consider, for example, the successful 1993 film, “What’s Eating Gilbert Grape?,” in which a major character had an intellectual disability.

Below are stories about Misty and Kevin, two people with intellectual disabilities that are inspiring, interesting, sensitive and fully-drawn character-driven tales of people who are functioning successfully, who are assets to their communities, but who sometimes face obstacles that are still thrown in the paths of people with intellectual disabilities.

*Photo by Ryan Eades*



**“We’re interested in changing perceptions [of people with intellectual disabilities] and breaking down the boundaries in society and having absolute 100 percent integration and involvement. And obviously with entertainment being an important part of society that [integration] is an avenue that has to be explored. Obviously if there is a character in a film as there has been that has an intellectual disability, we should make the attempt to cast an actor who actually has an intellectual disability.”**

**– Colin Farrell, film actor**

# Picture This: Intellectual Disabilities

## PICTURE THIS:

*Kevin is born with a brain tumor. Surgeons remove it when he is just four months old, but they also have to remove one-third of Kevin's brain—the part that affects speech and motor skills. This means he will always be in special-needs classes. As a young boy, Kevin often visits his grandmother. To occupy him and help his coordination, she gives him a golf club and a laundry basket full of golf balls. Kevin, it turns out, has a gift for golf. He joins Special Olympics, improves, excels. In high school, he tries out for the golf team against 60 regular-education students, and gets one of the 16 coveted spots. At 18 he suffers a setback when he is diagnosed with sinus cancer. The treatments are difficult, but the promise of more golf helps Kevin pull through. Two years after his diagnosis, he wins the Special Olympics U.S. Golf National Invitational Tournament, and in the process gets a hole-in-one.*

## PICTURE THIS:

*Misty is a young woman who lives a pleasant, low-key life in Oklahoma. She and her boyfriend like to go to the movies and play in a weekly bowling league. She has a full-time factory job. But Misty's life is shaken when doctors determine she needs a kidney transplant. The worst problem is not the severity of her condition or the agonizing wait for an available kidney. It's that the University of Oklahoma Medical Center turns her down as a prospective transplant recipient. They say that Misty—who, because of a mild intellectual disability, lives in a group home—is unable to give informed consent, though her own physician says otherwise. The state could step in as medical guardian but refuses. Why? Because they say Misty is fully competent to make her own decisions. The wrangling continues. Misty's health hangs in the balance.*

These are compelling stories, but they are not mere stories. They are lives and like all of us, Kevin and Misty experience successes and obstacles, health and illness, people who love them and people who hinder them. They also deal with the particular problems, prejudices and stigmas that sting people with intellectual disabilities—the largest disability group in the world. But they are not one-dimensional. Their disabilities do not define them.

There is nothing preventing people with intellectual disabilities from being leading characters. On the other hand, feature films and television shows need not be about intellectual disability in order to include people who have intellectual disabilities. They can be part of the fabric of TV shows and films, just as they are part of the fabric of life. And actors with intellectual disabilities can play these characters.

People with intellectual disabilities live among everyone else. Consider showing people with intellectual disabilities in the background in scenes, especially utilizing actual actors with intellectual disabilities (there are many!). Vanessa Williams reminds us that employing actors with intellectual disabilities does not increase production time or costs and lends to authenticity. Consider weaving in a subplot about intellectual disabilities, or showing a person with an intellectual disability as a family member, a witness to a crime or some similar secondary character if principal roles are not appropriate.

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Actors with intellectual disabilities “start training at birth to be actors,” according to Gail Williamson, a Hollywood talent agent and mother of Blair, an actor with Down syndrome.

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Gail Williamson explained that young people with intellectual disabilities often are taught to “act normal” in public situations, and find ways to repress their real personalities when away from family and close friends. She says that because so many people with intellectual disabilities are used to effectively becoming different people in different situations, these behaviors contribute to relating to a fictional character and their portrayals of characters.

# Information about Intellectual Disability

## What is intellectual disability?

Intellectual disability, often referred to as mental retardation, is characterized by significantly below-average intellectual functioning (generally regarded as an IQ below 70) combined with impairment in carrying out varying aspects of daily life and adapting to the normal social environment. Both of those factors must be present for a diagnosis of intellectual disability to take place. According to the World Health Organization's definition, intellectual disability can occur with or without any other physical or mental disorders. Intellectual disabilities can range from mild to profound; mildly and moderately-impaired people can often learn to live independently.

## What causes intellectual disability?

Intellectual disability is not a disease. You can't catch it from anyone. Intellectual disability is also not a type of mental illness, like depression. There is no cure for intellectual disability. However, most people with intellectual disabilities can learn to do many things. It just takes them more time and effort than others.

Appearing at any time before birth or during childhood (up to 18 years of age), intellectual disability can be caused by single causes or combinations of genetics, abnormal brain development, injury, infection or disease.

The term intellectual disability is considered an umbrella term which covers many diagnoses including birth defect, Down syndrome, Fragile X, Williams syndrome and fetal alcohol syndrome. However, the cause of most intellectual disability is unknown.

Causes of intellectual disability are numerous, but a specific reason for the disability is determined in only 25 percent of the cases.

Failure to adapt (adjust to new situations) normally and grow intellectually may become apparent early in life. In the case of mild retardation, these failures may not become recognizable until school age or later. An assessment of age-appropriate adaptive behaviors can be made by the use of developmental screening tests. The failure to achieve developmental milestones is suggestive of intellectual disability.

A family may suspect intellectual disability if motor skills, language skills, and self-help skills do not seem to be developing in a child, or are developing at a far slower rate than the child's peers.

The degree of impairment from intellectual disability has a wide range, from profoundly impaired to mild or borderline retardation. Less emphasis is now placed on degree of retardation and more on the amount of intervention and care required for daily life.

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Many organizations and individuals have adopted "intellectual disabilities" as a widely accepted synonym for "mental retardation." For many people the term "mental retardation" evokes the word "retard," bringing up painful memories of rejection and ridicule.

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**Risk factors are related to the causes. Causes of intellectual disability can be roughly broken down into several categories:**

- Genetic or chromosomal conditions. Sometimes intellectual disability is caused by abnormal genes inherited from parents, errors when genes combine or other reasons. Examples of genetic conditions are Down syndrome, fragile X syndrome, and phenylketonuria (PKU).
- Problems during pregnancy. Intellectual disabilities can result when the baby does not develop inside the mother properly. For example, there may be a problem with the way the baby's cells divide as it grows. A woman who drinks alcohol or gets an infection like rubella during pregnancy may also have a baby with an intellectual disability.
- Trauma. If a baby has problems during labor and birth, such as not getting enough oxygen, he or she may have an intellectual disability. Or if a child (under the age of 18) obtains a severe head injury, intellectual disability can occur.
- Health problems. Diseases like congenital rubella, meningitis, encephalitis, HIV infection, whooping cough, the measles or meningitis can cause intellectual disability. Intellectual disability can also be caused by extreme malnutrition (not eating right), not getting enough medical care or by being exposed to poisons like lead or mercury.
- Environmental or Toxins. Babies exposed prenatally or perinatally to alcohol, drugs, methylmercury poisoning or lead poisoning may have intellectual disability. In addition, poverty, low socioeconomic status or deprivation can cause intellectual disability.

# Types of Intellectual Disabilities

## Down Syndrome<sup>1</sup>

*Also called: Trisomy 21*

Down syndrome is a set of mental and physical symptoms that result from having an extra copy of chromosome 21. Even though people with Down syndrome may have some physical and mental features in common, symptoms of Down syndrome can range from mild to severe. Usually, mental development and physical development are slower in people with Down syndrome than in those without it.

People with the syndrome may also have other health problems. They may be born with heart disease. They may have dementia. They may have hearing problems and problems with the intestines, eyes, thyroid and skeleton.

The chance of having a baby with Down syndrome increases as a woman gets older. Down syndrome cannot be cured. However, many people with Down syndrome live productive lives well into adulthood.

## Fragile X Syndrome<sup>2</sup>

*Also called: FRAXA*

Fragile X syndrome is the most common form of inherited mental retardation. A problem with a specific gene causes the disease. Normally, the gene makes a protein you need for brain development. But the mutation causes a person to make little or none of the protein, which results in the symptoms of Fragile X.

People with only a small change in the gene might not show any signs of Fragile X. People with bigger changes can have severe symptoms. These might include

- Intelligence problems, ranging from learning disabilities to severe mental retardation
- Social and emotional problems, such as aggression in boys or shyness in girls
- Speech and language problems, especially in boys

Fragile X has no cure. You can treat some symptoms with educational, behavioral or physical therapy, and with medicines. Getting treatment early for Fragile X can help.

## Williams Syndrome<sup>3</sup>

Williams Syndrome is a rare genetic disorder characterized by mild to moderate mental retardation or learning difficulties, a distinctive facial appearance, and a unique personality that combines overfriendliness and high levels of empathy with anxiety. The most significant medical problem associated with Williams Syndrome is cardiovascular disease caused by narrowed arteries. The syndrome is also associated with elevated blood calcium levels in infancy. A random genetic mutation (deletion of a small piece of chromosome 7), rather than inheritance, most often causes the disorder. However,

individuals who have Williams Syndrome have a 50 percent chance of passing it on if they decide to have children. The characteristic facial features of Williams Syndrome include puffiness around the eyes, a short nose with a broad nasal tip, wide mouth, full cheeks, full lips and a small chin. People with Williams Syndrome are also likely to have a long neck, sloping shoulders, short stature, limited mobility in their joints and curvature of the spine. Some individuals with the syndrome have a star-like pattern in the iris of their eyes. Infants with Williams Syndrome are often irritable and colicky, with feeding problems that keep them from gaining weight. Chronic abdominal pain is common in adolescents and adults. By age 30, the majority of individuals with Williams Syndrome have diabetes or pre-diabetes and mild to moderate sensorineural hearing loss (a form of deafness due to disturbed function of the auditory nerve). For some people, hearing loss may begin as early as late childhood. Williams Syndrome also is associated with a characteristic “cognitive profile” of mental strengths and weaknesses composed of strengths in verbal short-term memory and language, combined with severe weakness in visuospatial construction (the skills used to copy patterns, draw or write). Within language, the strongest skills are typically in concrete, practical vocabulary, which in many cases is in the low average to average range for the general population. Abstract or conceptual-relational vocabulary is much more limited. Most older children and adults with Williams Syndrome speak fluently and use good grammar. More than 50 percent of children with the syndrome have attention deficit disorders (ADD or ADHD), and about 50 percent have specific phobias, such as a fear of loud noises. The majority of individuals with Williams Syndrome worry excessively.

## Fetal Alcohol Syndrome<sup>4</sup>

*Also called: FAS*

If you are pregnant and drink alcohol, so does your baby. This can hurt your baby’s growth and cause life-long physical and behavioral problems. One of the most severe effects of drinking during pregnancy is fetal alcohol syndrome. Fetal alcohol syndrome is a group of problems that can include

- Mental retardation
- Birth defects
- Abnormal facial features
- Growth problems
- Problems with the central nervous system
- Trouble remembering and/or learning
- Vision or hearing problems
- Behavior problems

Fetal alcohol syndrome lasts a lifetime. There is no cure. Special school services can help with learning problems. Routines and consistency at home may help with behavior problems. Women can prevent fetal alcohol syndrome and other problems related to alcohol use by not drinking when they are pregnant or might get pregnant.

### Autism<sup>5</sup>

Autism is a disorder that is usually first diagnosed in early childhood. The main signs and symptoms of autism involve communication, social interactions and repetitive behaviors

Children with autism might have problems talking with you, or they might not look you in the eye when you talk to them. They may have to line up their pencils before they can pay attention, or they may say the same sentence again and again to calm themselves down. They may flap their arms to tell you they are happy, or they might hurt themselves to tell you they are not. Some people with autism never learn how to talk.

1. Medline Plus, a service of the National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health. "Down Syndrome." Available at: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/downsyndrome.html>. Accessed May 30, 2007.
2. National Institute of Human Development on Medline Plus. "Fragile X Syndrome." Available at: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/fragilexsyndrome.html>. Accessed May 30, 2007.
3. National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. "NINDS Williams Syndrome Information Page." Available at: <http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/williams/williams.htm>. Accessed May 30, 2007.
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Medline Plus. "Fetal Alcohol Syndrome." Available at: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/fetalalcoholsyndrome.html>. Accessed May 30, 2007.
5. U.S. National Library of Medicine Available at <http://vsearch.nlm.nih.gov/vivisimo/cgi-bin/query-meta?v:project.nlm-main-website&query=autism>

# Intellectual Disability FACTS

There are more than 190 million people in the world with intellectual disabilities.

Intellectual disability is present in all countries, communities, races and social classes.

The prevalence of intellectual disability ranges from 1 percent to 3 percent with pockets higher than 5 percent.

97 percent of people with intellectual disabilities fall into the categories of mild or moderate.

According to Special Olympics research, people who are exposed to and have experience with individuals with intellectual disabilities think people with intellectual disabilities are more capable and competent.

Children with intellectual disabilities are bullied in school at four times the rate of other children.

Individuals with intellectual disabilities are at greatly elevated risk of sexual abuse.

People with intellectual disabilities have a 40 percent greater risk of preventable secondary health conditions than the general population.

**Though the following statistics specifically refer to Special Olympics athletes, it is fair to say that they apply generally to people with intellectual disabilities.**

- One-third cannot see well and need new or different glasses; 6 percent have serious untreated eye diseases.
- More than 30 fail hearing tests – six times the rate of the general population.
- 35 percent have obvious tooth decay in their molar teeth, up to 50 percent have obvious gum infections, 12 percent report being in pain at the time of the exam, and 15 percent require urgent care.
- One in five has evidence of osteoporosis or osteopenia (weakened bones).
- More than 50 percent are overweight or obese.
- Half of Special Olympics athletes have one or more preventable or treatable foot diseases/conditions.
- Fewer than 10 percent of people with intellectual disabilities in the United States are employed, while 50 percent of Special Olympics athletes in the United States are employed.

## How prevalent are intellectual disabilities?

According to the World Health Organization, 1 percent–3 percent of the world’s population, more than 190 million people, have intellectual disabilities—this is the largest disability population in the world.

In addition, as the Trust for America’s Health noted in a July 2005 report, *“Birth Defects and Development Disabilities: The Search for Causes and Cures,”* intellectual disabilities are the most common developmental disorder, affecting roughly three in 100 people.

There are an estimated 7.5 million people with intellectual disabilities in the United States. One out of 10 families are affected, representing 2.5 to 3 percent of the U.S. population.

Intellectual disabilities have no boundaries and affect all racial, ethnic, educational, social, and economical backgrounds. Intellectual disabilities are:

- 15 times more prevalent than cerebral palsy
- 30 times more prevalent than neural tube defects such as spina bifida
- 36 times more prevalent than total blindness
- 50 times more prevalent than total deafness

## Can intellectual disabilities be prevented?

During the past 30 years significant advances in research have prevented many cases of intellectual disability. For example, according to a 2005 publication by The Arc, every year in the United States we prevent 250 cases of intellectual disability due to phenylketonuria (PKU) by newborn screening and dietary treatment; 1,000 cases of intellectual disability due to congenital hypothyroidism by newborn screening and thyroid hormone replacement therapy; 2,000 cases of intellectual disability by use of anti-Rh immune globulin to prevent Rh disease and severe jaundice in newborn infants; 5,000 cases of intellectual disability caused by Hib diseases by using the Hib vaccine; 4,000 cases of intellectual disability due to measles encephalitis through measles vaccination; and significant numbers of cases of intellectual disability caused by rubella during pregnancy through rubella vaccination.

Other interventions have also reduced the chance of intellectual disability. Removing lead from the environment reduces brain damage in children. Preventive interventions such as child safety seats and bicycle helmets reduce head trauma. Early intervention programs with high-risk infants and toddlers have shown positive effects on intellectual functioning. Finally, early comprehensive prenatal care and preventative measures prior to and during pregnancy increase the chances of preventing intellectual disability. Dietary supplementation with folic acid, taken before and during pregnancy, reduces the risk of neural tube defects.

## “People First” and Other Terminology Suggestions

Words matter. Words can open doors to cultivate the understanding and respect that enable people with disabilities to lead fuller, more independent lives. Conversely, words can create barriers or stereotypes that not only denigrate people with disabilities, but also rob them of their individuality.

To ensure that all people are portrayed with individuality and dignity, experts have developed the following terminology suggestions for anyone writing or speaking about people with intellectual disabilities.

### Positive Terminology

- Use “people-first language.” Refer to individuals or people with intellectual disabilities rather than “intellectually disabled people” or “the intellectually disabled.” Remember that the disability does not define the person.
- Avoid perpetuating the pejoratives “retard” or “retarded” by replacing “mental retardation” with “intellectual disabilities,” “mentally challenged” or “mental disabilities.”
- People “have” intellectual disabilities, rather than are “suffering from,” “afflicted with” or “a victim of” intellectual disabilities.
- Seek to distinguish between adults and children with intellectual disabilities. Where possible, refer specifically to adults or children, or in the case of Special Olympics, to older or younger athletes. Like everyone else, people with intellectual disabilities are adults once they turn 18.

- A person “uses” a wheelchair, rather than is “confined to” or “restricted to” a wheelchair or “wheelchair-bound.”
- “Down syndrome” has replaced “Down’s Syndrome” and “mongoloid” in common language.
- When writing, try to refer to persons with a disability in the same style as you would persons without a disability: full name on first reference and last name on subsequent references.
- Unless your story is a period piece or your character speaking is designed to appear insensitive, a person is “physically challenged” or “disabled” rather than “crippled.”

### Terminology to Avoid

- Avoid using the adjective “unfortunate” when talking about people with intellectual disabilities. Disabling conditions do not have to be life-defining in a negative way.
- Try not to sensationalize the accomplishments of persons with disabilities. While these accomplishments should be recognized and applauded, people in the disability rights movement have tried to make the public aware of the negative impact of referring to the achievements of people with physical or intellectual disabilities with excessive hyperbole.
- Use the word “special” with extreme care when talking about people with intellectual disabilities. The term, if used excessively, can become a cliché.

# Challenges

- The majority of countries do not have special laws to support the rights and opportunities of people with intellectual disabilities; in the United States, people with intellectual disabilities are not even considered a “medically underserved” population, despite evidence to the contrary.
- The public greatly underestimates the capabilities of people with intellectual disabilities and overestimates the severity of their condition; up to 75 percent of adults believe that children with intellectual disabilities should not be educated alongside children without intellectual disabilities.
- According to Special Olympics research, previous exposure to people with intellectual disabilities is a major factor in youth perception about the competence of students with intellectual disabilities.
- Over 80 percent of U.S. adults feel that media portrayals are an obstacle to the acceptance and inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities.
- 71 percent of U.S. youth without intellectual disabilities do not have social relationships with youth with intellectual disabilities and have no intent to establish such relationships outside of school.
- In many parts of the world, children with intellectual disabilities are warehoused in institutions or allowed to die in infancy; in developed countries, children with intellectual disabilities increasingly are being aborted based on prenatal testing.
- Doctors commonly and inaccurately advise new parents of children with intellectual disabilities that their children will never be able to do anything and would be better off in an institution.
- Special Olympics’ “Multinational Study of Attitudes toward Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities” shows that the public thinks that the majority of individuals with intellectual disabilities receive equal or better health care than the general public, when in reality people with intellectual disabilities have poorer health and access to health care when compared to the general public.
- Over seven in 10 U.S. medical students are interested in treating people with intellectual disabilities as part of their career, but eight in 10 say they aren’t getting any clinical experience in school for this subject matter.
- 100 percent of the U.S. medical school deans surveyed are interested in implementing a curriculum regarding people with intellectual disabilities, but four out of five deans cite “lack of curriculum time” as the primary reason for not training students.
- On average, in the United States, a person with intellectual disabilities would have to contact 50 doctors before finding one who had specific training and experience in treating people with intellectual disabilities; it is likely worse everywhere else in the world.
- People with intellectual disabilities are living significantly longer in many parts of the world than previously, but the health care system has not addressed their age-specific health needs.

*Photo by Ryan Eades*

**“People with intellectual disabilities are first and foremost people; people with a full range of emotions, hopes and dreams. One of the most important responsibilities of the President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities is to communicate the very real facts that people with intellectual disabilities can be educated, can work and can play an important part in our society. We must dispel the myths, which hold back a large segment of our citizenry, to the detriment of us all.”**

**– Kim Porter-Hoppe  
Former Chair, PCPID  
Subcommittee on Public Awareness**



# ACTING SPEAKS LOUDER THAN WORDS

## Vanessa Williams helps shed light on Intellectual Disabilities in “My Brother”

*By Jennifer Stratton*

“My message to you today is that it is doable,” actress Vanessa Williams stated at the Entertainment Industries Council (EIC) February 28 *PICTURE THIS Intellectual Disabilities* meeting. By “it,” Williams was talking about promoting the use of actors with intellectual disabilities in film and television. Williams not only verbalized her message, but also had the evidence to support it. This evidence comes in the form of the recently released film, “My Brother.”

“My Brother” is the story of two boys in an impoverished environment, one of whom has an intellectual disability, and how they manage to overcome obstacles together. Vanessa Williams plays the boys’ mother. The part of James is played by two first-time actors with intellectual disabilities—Donovon Jennings and Christopher Scott. Their performances in the film are powerful and a strong testament

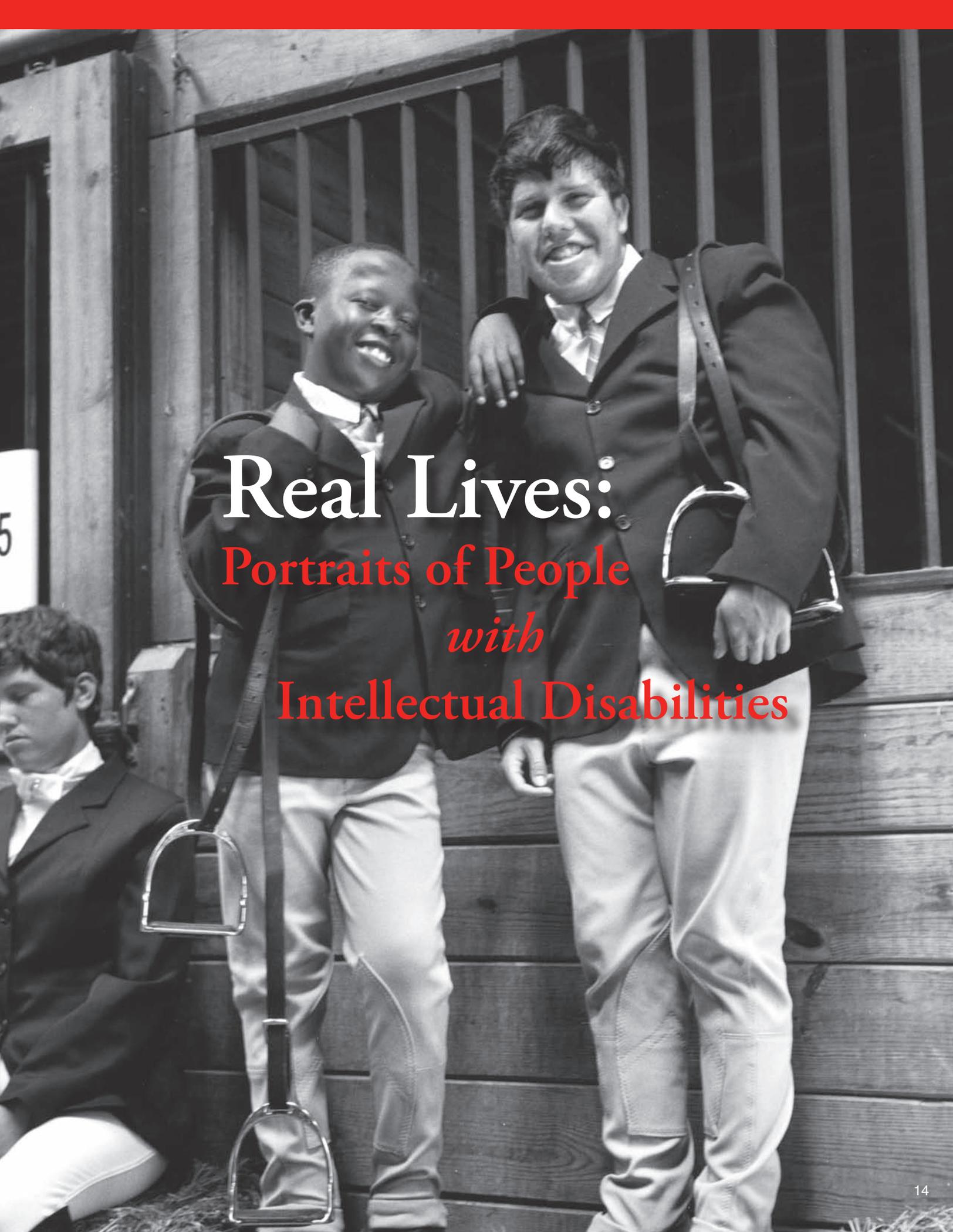
to the special gifts people with intellectual disabilities have to offer to the entertainment industry. Both have won praise from critics and awards for their performances. Williams plays the mother of the two boys and has won multiple awards for her performance, including the Best Actress award at the Santa Barbara African Heritage Festival. The film also swept this year’s Harlem Film Festival and the American Black Film Festival, including the award for Best Picture.

However, for Williams all of this would not have been possible without the movie’s Director and Producer, Tony Lover. When others in the business told Lover that the film would never be made and that there was no interest in the subject matter, he refused to give up and even invested his own money into the movie’s production. The struggles Lover faced pitching “My Brother” and its current critical acclaim show that the “impossible” can be achieved in Hollywood - with amazing results.

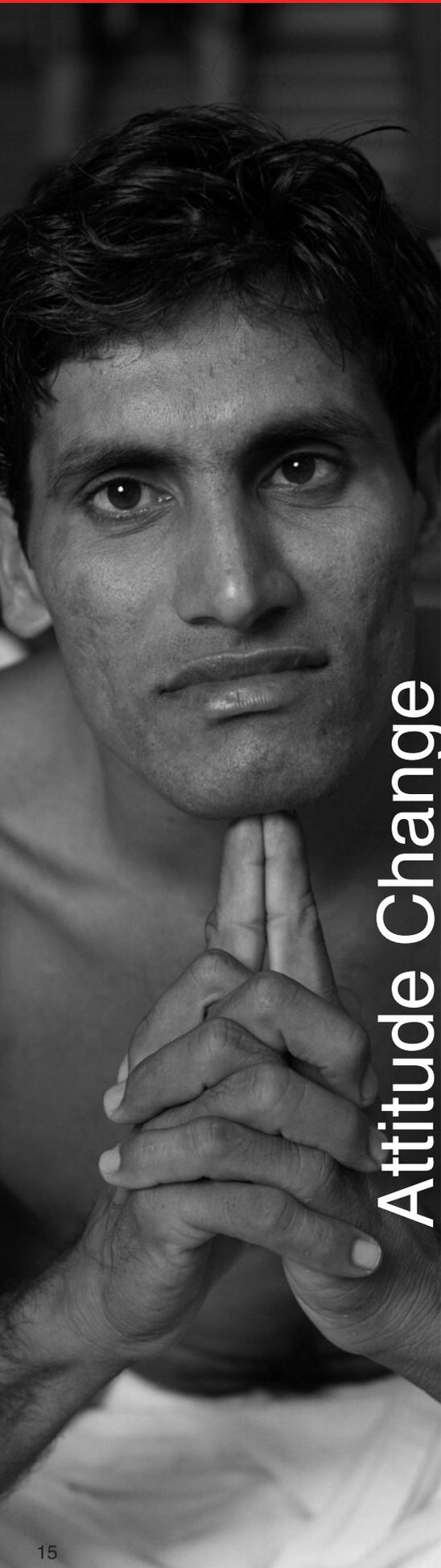
While casting, Lover had only Williams in mind for the role of L’Tisha Morton. Surprisingly, he did not have prior knowledge of her affiliation with Special Olympics and passion for supporting people with intellectual disabilities. Williams first became affiliated with Special Olympics in 1992, when she recorded “What Child Is This?” for “A Very Special Christmas 4,” one in a series of holiday music albums, the sales of which raise money for Special Olympics. When a slot became open on the Special Olympics International Board of Directors in 2000 she became the newest Board member. Williams expressed how prior to acting in “My Brother” she was frustrated with how she could contribute besides attending board meetings. She said the movie gave her a conduit to communicate her passion for the issue.

At the Picture This meeting Vanessa was introduced by Special Olympics Chairman Tim Shriver, who praised her as “a person that’s put her life on the line for our movement.” Williams shared with those in attendance her experience working with actors with intellectual disabilities. She praised their abilities as actors and dispelled fears that employing people with intellectual disabilities would increase production time and/or costs. She said that filming did not take any longer than any other production schedule.

At the event Williams conveyed her message with a voice of experience. She strongly concluded, “The fear that you [people in the entertainment business] have to have an actor who does not have an intellectual disability portray a special needs person is a fallacy. As a Board member and friend knowing the difference an actor with intellectual disabilities can make in a movie or television program, there is no reason not to employ them.”



Real Lives:  
Portraits of People  
*with*  
Intellectual Disabilities



## Attitude Change

### Attitude Change

**Ryan Atkinson**

*Anchorage, Alaska, USA*

Is it possible to start out as someone who's so afraid of school that you regularly fake illness so you can stay home, and become someone who thrives in school and is the most popular kid in your class?

It's possible if you have Ryan Atkinson's strength and determination. "I would play sick sometimes because I'd be worried about being made fun of. [Other students would] come around calling me 'fish lips,' and other names. I just used to cry because I was so worried about what people would say to me," says Atkinson.

Frequently the brunt of peers' jokes and negative stereotypes because of his intellectual disability, Atkinson developed a number of tactics to dodge harassment, ultimately leading to less time in the classroom and jeopardizing his opportunity to obtain an education. Atkinson describes these years as the unhappiest years of his life.

So what changed? Atkinson decided to give Special Olympics a try. When he won a gold medal in his first bowling competition, he was motivated to become more involved.

"Special Olympics helped change my outlook," Atkinson says. "It started to help me build friendships with people who respected me."

Atkinson's involvement in Special Olympics spurred personal growth that helped change his attitude. After participating in a Global Youth Summit in Dublin, Ireland, as part of the 2003 Special Olympics World Summer Games, Atkinson took to heart a lesson that he learned there from Nelson Mandela.

"He told us that we could change ourselves," Atkinson recalls. "After I came back to Alaska, I made a way bigger change in my life."

Atkinson decided that it wasn't enough to change his own attitude—he had to implement attitude changes in others around him. Soon enough Atkinson was making new friends, forging new relationships, building new self-confidence and becoming well-known in his community.

Atkinson delivered a number of speeches to schools and local community groups. Eventually, at the school that he'd feared, the mockery faded away. Teachers and students began acknowledging him as "the guy [we've] seen talking about Special Olympics." He was becoming known for something he was doing and for who he was—instead of for a disability that he has.

"People at school know that I'm different, but now I'm helping people realize that they can learn something from me, too," says Atkinson.

"I hear people telling me, 'you're changing attitudes,' and that's better than anything I can imagine," Atkinson explains. "I want people all around the world to know that it's not OK to tease people."

## Overcoming the Odds

### Cindy Bentley

Wisconsin, USA

*"I'm a fighter. I am a determined person. If I can't do something right the first time, I try until I get it. I never quit, and I never say I can't."*  
 – Cindy Bentley

Cindy Bentley was never supposed to have a chance at life. She was born with a condition that was later diagnosed as fetal alcohol syndrome, which resulted in her having both cerebral palsy and an intellectual disability. She was abandoned as a baby and shuffled through foster care. In one home, Bentley suffered severe burns causing physical damage and painful scarring for which she required multiple surgeries. Later, she was placed in a center for individuals with developmental disabilities and had no reason to think she'd ever leave.

It was only within herself that she found the drive to demand more out of life despite the mountainous obstacles she faced. While in the institution she worked with the staff to set, reach and exceed personal goals during Special Olympics competitions. She won dozens of medals and was selected the 1991 United States Female Special Olympics athlete of the year. Serving as a role model for all athletes, Bentley was selected on the basis of her athletic performance, character, leadership and community involvement. At the 1995 Special Olympics World Summer Games, Bentley earned a silver medal in singles tennis and a sixth-place finish in women's doubles.

As Bentley's successes continued to pile as high as the obstacles she had long been overcoming, one large obstacle remained. Bentley made the difficult transition from institutional life to a group home and finally to living independently in her own apartment. With a counselor's assistance, Bentley

now does all her own housekeeping and manages her finances. Since leaving the institution, she has worked at The Arc, a YMCA daycare facility caring for young children, McDonald's, Marshall Fields (now Macy's) and People First, an advocacy organization. She is also an appointee to the Wisconsin Council for Developmental Disabilities.

In 2001, Bentley testified before the U.S. Senate Appropriations committee about poor health care for people with intellectual disabilities. Later that year, while attending an event at the White House, Bentley presented President George W. Bush with one of her own Special Olympics gold medals to honor him for his bravery during the September 11 attacks on the United States.

## Dreams

### Jamie Lazaroff

Connecticut, USA

Jamie Lazaroff has made it clear that he and others with intellectual disabilities are the same as other people in some very fundamental ways: "We have dreams and hopes that we need to believe in and see come true." Lazaroff has spent his life working to make his dreams come true and helping others do the same along the way. His dream is to be a television sports reporter for ESPN. Appropriately, he has adopted the mantra of the late North Carolina State basketball coach Jim Valvano: "Don't give up. Don't ever give up!"

True to Valvano's inspirational watchword, Lazaroff has never given up for one minute of his nearly 30 years. He did not give up when it was found that he was born with a rare chromosome deletion, 18q. He did not give up when his parents were told he would never walk and that he was blind and hard of hearing. He did not



## Friendship

give up as the first 12 years of his life were spent in and out of the hospital. He did not give up through any of the nine surgeries performed on his legs and feet, the surgery on his eyes, the surgery on his kidneys or the removal of a brain tumor at the age of 5.

Lazaroff's perseverance has been paying off now for years. He has pioneered a path never traveled by becoming the first person with an intellectual disability to be hired as a television reporter—and he has not stopped since.

Lazaroff has worked for WTNH News Channel 8, an ABC affiliate. He has received a New England Emmy Nomination for his work as the reporter of a half-hour special about the 1995 Special Olympics World Summer Games, and has co-hosted regular shows on Cox Cable, Adelphia Cable and Public Television.

As an Athlete Leadership Programs Assistant for Special Olympics Connecticut, Lazaroff helps other athletes realize their dreams. Through the Global Messenger program, he helps to train them in public speaking and organizes speaking engagements for them.

Lazaroff lives in his own apartment, continues to play soccer and floor hockey as an athlete with Special Olympics Connecticut and has recently been trained as a coach.

While he lives his dream every day, Lazaroff still strives for more and inspires others around him. As his dad once said, "If you hold on to his coattail, he will take you for a wonderful ride!"

## Friendship

**Sarah Maddox and Andrew Lytle**  
*Georgia, USA*

Special Olympics athlete Sarah Maddox and Andrew Lytle first met at an equestrian event for Special Olympics Georgia when Lytle volunteered and, as he put it, "Never did I guess I would meet such a cool girl and make such a good friend."

The pair became close through several more events in which Lytle volunteered over the next couple of years. Lytle and Maddox spent time together through skating competitions, Special Olympics Georgia State Summer Games, and many other projects and events.

Said Lytle, "If you want to be inspired and be happy, just meet Sarah. She is one special girl. She has inspired me to be a better person and have a better outlook on life. She has taught me that volunteering is not just work, it is a job with a special purpose. You realize when you volunteer that you can't stop smiling and you are always in a good mood. I will volunteer for anyone that can do that!"

Lytle was so impressed with Maddox's amazing energy and enthusiasm that only after working with her for several hours did he realize that she is blind. Lytle and Maddox were able to bond when he informed her that he too suffers from disabilities, as he has both epilepsy and Tourette syndrome, in addition to painful juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. Through Maddox, Lytle was able to feel the joy and excitement of many sporting events that he would have otherwise never experienced because his arthritis limits his physical mobility and stamina.

"She inspires me," said Lytle. "She doesn't know the words 'I can't,' 'I don't want to' or 'I quit.' She has made a big difference in my life."

## Education

### Tim Taggart

*Texas, USA*

What if you had to relearn everything you once knew in your life? How to walk. How to talk. How to eat. What if you did not remember any of your family members or friends? What would you do?

This was exactly the scenario that Tim Taggart, a onetime high school scholar and Pop Warner football and Little League baseball athlete, faced at age 15 in 1986. A car crash had caused a brain injury that left him in a coma with little hope of survival.

Six weeks after the crash, Taggart awoke from the coma and began the slow process of figuring out his place in life. “It didn’t happen like on TV,” says Taggart’s mom, Gwenda. “He didn’t wake up, jump out of bed and start talking. He was like a baby in a man’s body. He had to relearn how to walk, talk, eat, hold up his head, and who his family was. He didn’t remember anything.”

After months of therapy and outpatient treatment, Taggart started to repeat his junior year of high school. But he couldn’t recall facts or take tests. He didn’t even know what a test was anymore. He was placed in special education.

“That was a big shock to the family,” says Gwenda. “Not much was known about brain injuries in 1987. He was very disoriented to his surroundings and he would get turned around easily and lose his way at school. They had to watch him closely so he would not get lost.”

Taggart managed to graduate from the special education classes and began looking for employment. Holding down a job was difficult. He worked for Sea World, Fiesta Texas, a health care agency, Goodwill and Special Olympics Texas.

“It is very hard to have a job where you employer has to tell you the same thing every day because you don’t remember what to do,” says Gwenda. “So now he does a lot of volunteer work and it keeps him busy.”

But even with all the difficulties, there have been some extraordinary developments. As Taggart’s mom recalls the shy boy that he was before the accident, she speaks with amazement about the son who now has an intellectual disability. “He is very outgoing and never meets a stranger. He won’t remember your name, but he recognizes faces. He is always happy and upbeat and very funny. He is the opposite of what he was before.”

So, is it possible to relearn how to live life? The Taggarts certainly think so. “At our house, we don’t dwell on what we have lost, we build on what we have been given,” says Gwenda Taggart. “Tim is alive and with us today. The story does not end here.”

## Employment

### Kyler Prunty

*Iowa, USA*

Kyler Prunty’s life is an exceptional and inspiring story of success, social inclusion and determination by a young man with an intellectual disability. He not only graduated from Marshalltown High School in 2006 but also competed on their swim team and works 20 hours a week at the local Best Western Hotel. On top of all that, Prunty is eager to do even more, and he has shown the drive and willingness to go after it by championing his cause all the way to the United States Senate.

But he faces a conundrum. While able to live on his own, drive a car and work a job, Prunty still needs the support of disability benefits. Yet if he clocks too many hours, he will no



# Health

longer qualify for disability benefits. So even though he wants to work more hours as a bellman at the Best Western, and feels he is capable of doing the job, he does not.

“I just want to work and be alive,” said Prunty, 19. “If I work too much, I lose my benefits, but if I work too little, I can’t pay for my car that I need to get to work.”

Prunty does not think this makes sense. He feels that he should be able to work as much as he is capable of working and still receive the disability benefits. Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) agrees.

Prunty testified at a Senate Field Hearing chaired by Sen. Harkin in July 2006 in Ames, Iowa, in conjunction with the Special Olympics USA National Games. Sen. Harkin was a chief sponsor of the Americans with Disabilities Act and has written a number of other laws to increase the independence of Americans with disabilities.

For now, Prunty will continue to work his hardest for as many hours a week that the law allows.

## Health

### **Dustin Plunkett**

*California, USA*

Ever since he was a boy, Dustin Plunkett has thrived in the spotlight. When he speaks before a group, whether large or small, his natural charm shines through and his honesty engages audiences in a way that is unique to truly gifted speakers. When Plunkett was in the fourth grade, he was assigned to give a speech in school for his class. His speech was so impressive that he was asked to present it to the entire school. He delivered it with clarity and confidence, and received a rousing ovation from his schoolmates and teachers—no easy

task for a fourth-grade boy with a speech impediment and a cleft palate in addition to his intellectual disability.

As Plunkett grew up and his speaking engagements as a Special Olympics California Global Messenger expanded, so did the physical problems he faced within his mouth. Plunkett remembers his gums swelling up at least once a month.

Then, during the 2003 Special Olympics Southern California Summer Games, Plunkett and his coach visited Special Smiles®, part of the Special Olympics initiative known as Healthy Athletes®, which provides a range of health screenings for athletes at Games. Plunkett had a dental screening and was told that he should make an appointment with a dentist right away because of some serious problems with his teeth. His coach referred Plunkett to his own dentist, who took X-rays and did a thorough exam, which revealed the start of gum cancer. Plunkett underwent a difficult surgery to remove a tooth and an inch of gum where the cancer had spread.

Plunkett is now cancer-free. He has gone on to become a Sargent Shriver International Special Olympics Global Messenger, representing Special Olympics and its athletes by speaking around the world and, as he says, by “showing my million-dollar smile every time I give a speech!”

## Summing It Up: In Peter Farrelly's Words

On July 2, 2006, director, producer and writer Peter Farrelly, who had recently made "The Ringer," submitted written testimony to a Field Hearing of the U.S. Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies. Presided over by Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), the hearing was entitled "Crossing the Finish Line: A Better Future for People with Intellectual Disabilities." The following are compelling excerpts of what Farrelly had to say:

I wanted to make this movie [The Ringer] from the moment I heard the idea. Not just because it was funny, but because of the truth it revealed. There were nine or 10 Special athletes that the story focused on, and they were all different. Some were talkative, some were quiet, a couple were funny, others were boring. They were real, and they all had distinctive personalities, just like everyone else in the world. But I'd never seen that in a movie of this type. Usually these things were about sad people living sad lives. Those movies were about pity. I saw what we could do. We could show the fun side of these guys, the joy of spending time with them; make a movie about them without anyone shedding a tear. I'd been involved in the Best Buddies program for 10 or 15 years and I'd never cried, nor had my buddy Scott. It had been fun. All fun.

"The Ringer" is my favorite film of ours, for several reasons. I got to work with over a hundred Special Olympics athletes for three months, and there were huge laughs and a

lot of hugs and nobody was stressed. I saw how it changed my crew and myself and the athletes, and bonding was something I'd never experienced on a movie set before. And when it came out last Christmas [2005], it was a dream come true. Because it did exactly what we wanted: It entertained people, made them laugh, but, most importantly, it introduced millions of movie-goers to people with intellectual differences. And it made them more human. More fun. Less scary. It made them accessible.

Several people told me after seeing "The Ringer" that they were nervous during the first 20 minutes because they'd never spent any time around special athletes, but by the end they wanted these guys to be their friends. And that's it in a nutshell. That's what we're doing here. We're trying to build a bridge that will bring people with intellectual difference into our world, and us into theirs. And we're not there yet. We're not even close. My 7-year-old son actually asked me, after watching "The Ringer," why it had been so hard to get made. And I couldn't answer him. He was right. "The Ringer" should not be a groundbreaking film in the year 2006. It's not that crazy. It's just about treating people with respect.

So I'm asking you to be the ones to help drive a concerted public awareness campaign linked to solid programs—like Best Buddies and Special Olympics, as well as others—that will provide young people with opportunities to get to know and make friends with the 8 million people with intellectual differences in our country. And then maybe someday there won't be an R-word [retard] or "special-this" or "intellectual-that" or any other term for them. Maybe they'll just be, you know – people.



# A poem written by Actor and Special Olympics athlete

## Eddie Barbanell

*Barbanell starred in "The Ringer."*



Involvement in Special Olympics  
Has been an inspiration to me  
Our gratitude goes out  
To the Shriver family!  
I've made great friends,  
Learned new skills,  
And many sports I've tried,  
All of this has given me,  
Fulfillment and Pride!  
I'm please to be here with all of you  
Where the corn is high and the sky is blue  
I'll talk about my experiences in making of "The Ringer"  
Please sit back and don't point a finger.  
They should showcase our talents in many ways,  
TV, film, and Broadway plays.  
We can sing, we can dance, and do what you do,  
We interact well with the cast and crew.  
The Ringer doesn't mock people with disabilities,  
It praises their talents and shows their humility.  
We have the same needs as all of you,  
Love, respect, and camaraderie, too!  
The Farrelly brothers took a big chance,  
They produced "The Ringer" and the steamroom dance!  
They involved special athletes to change attitudes,  
All in good taste—nothing is crude!  
We must dispel negative stereotypes,  
We belong in the mainstream – the mainstream of life!  
Special athletes are simply the best,  
They should be in commercials for Charmin and Crest.  
The people on the set were filled with apprehension,  
We gathered together and laughter eased the tension.

The special people in "The Ringer" were an integral part,  
They touched everyone's soul and heart!  
"The Ringer" was the greatest movie attraction,  
I learned about "lights, camera and action."  
I bonded, I blended, I learned to take cues,  
They said I acted better than Tom Cruise.  
People with special needs are the best,  
They can rise to all occasions and beat the rest.  
No one should discriminate against race, color, or creed,  
Why do people think we're a different breed?  
"The Ringer" enlightens and made many a fan  
Of people with special needs who proudly say "I CAN."  
I can succeed at whatever I do,  
Just give me a chance, I'll show you too!  
"The Ringer" does not show pathos or pity,  
The special athletes are wise-cracking and witty.  
The reactions I get from people I meet,  
Are positive, sincere and very upbeat.  
Making "The Ringer" has helped my self-esteem  
It's been an experience – I achieved my dream!  
I plan to raise awareness and let everyone know,  
We need to be acknowledged wherever we go.  
We must erase the stigma when people say "retarded"  
We HATE that word – it has to be discarded.  
They speak from the heart, and tell it as it is,  
They want recognition – be it TV or showbiz.  
The true American idols are the special athletes,  
They play to win, but can accept defeat.  
I thank you very much, I really have to go,  
You scratched my CD you know!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Researching health issues can be as basic as finding research papers on the Internet or as complex as delving into public policy and the philosophical positions of interest groups. Most important is the perspective of people who, for one reason or another, make a deep commitment and dedicate their time to a cause.

This document is a publication resulting from a formal meeting of experts in the field of intellectual disabilities as well as five key entertainment professionals at the National Association of Broadcasters in Washington, D.C. Numerous individuals and organizations provided insight into the complex issues surrounding intellectual disabilities and related concerns as we created *Picture This: Intellectual Disabilities*.

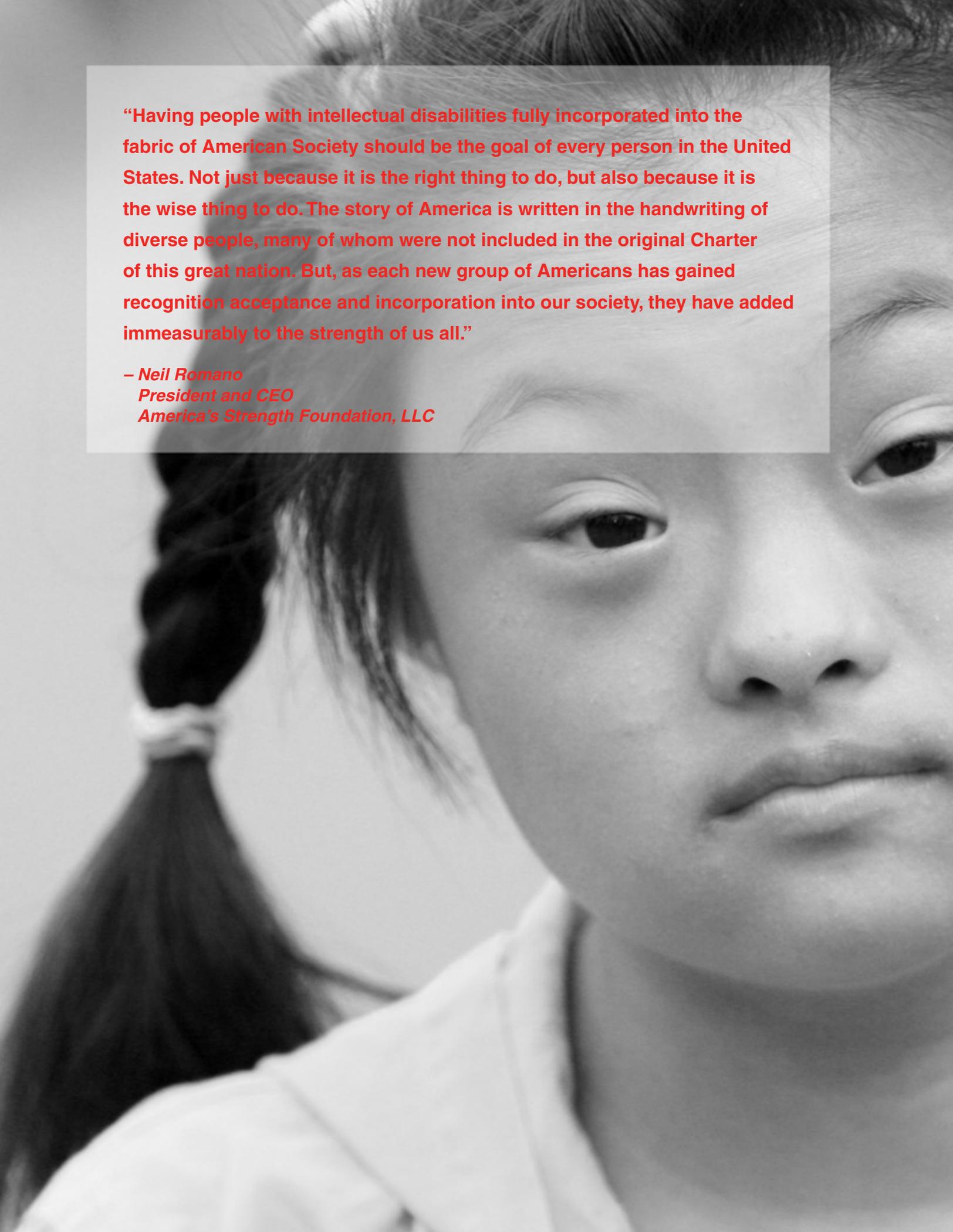
### Special Thanks to:

American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities  
Adele Lebowitz Center for Youth & Families (Washington School of Psychiatry)  
American Academy for Cerebral Palsy and Developmental Medicine (AACPDM)  
American Academy of Nurse Practitioners Foundation  
American Association for the Disabled  
American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)  
American College of Sports Medicine  
American Dental Association Foundation (ADAF)  
American Medical Association  
The Arc of the United States  
Association of University Centers on Disabilities  
Association on Health and Disability  
Autism Society of America  
Client Assistance Program  
Coleman Institute for Cognitive Disabilities  
Commonwealth Autism Service  
Council for Exceptional Children  
DC Public Schools  
Developmental Disabilities Nurses Association  
Joseph P. Kennedy Foundation  
Maryland State Department of Education  
MCH Bureau Div. of Services for Children with Special Health Needs  
National Association for Sport and Physical Education  
National Center on Physical Activity and Disability (NCPAD)  
National Down Syndrome Society National Policy Center  
President's Committee on Intellectual Disabilities (PCID)  
Programs for Children with Special Health Care Needs Protection and Advocacy Agency  
Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Recreational Technology and Exercise Physiology (RecTech)  
Special Care Dentistry  
State Department of Education: Special Education  
The Association for the Severely Handicapped (TASH)  
The Kennedy-Krieger Institute  
The National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services (NASDDDS)  
Virginia Autism Resource Center  
Virginia Federation of Families

Extra special thanks to the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) for hosting Picture This: Intellectual Disabilities. Special thanks also to NAB President and CEO David Rehr and NAB Foundation President Marcellus Alexander; Special Olympics Chairman Tim Shriver and Special Olympics International Board Director Vanessa Williams; and to our Picture This entertainment industry panel, Andi Bushell, Sue Castle, Maria Macina and Rosemary Rodriguez.

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**“Having people with intellectual disabilities fully incorporated into the fabric of American Society should be the goal of every person in the United States. Not just because it is the right thing to do, but also because it is the wise thing to do. The story of America is written in the handwriting of diverse people, many of whom were not included in the original Charter of this great nation. But, as each new group of Americans has gained recognition acceptance and incorporation into our society, they have added immeasurably to the strength of us all.”**

**– Neil Romano  
President and CEO  
America's Strength Foundation, LLC**



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