AbleNews

The Viscardi Center

THE NEWSPAPER FOR, BY, AND ABOUT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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Frozen Out: How Winter Storms Isolated Disabled New Yorkers

By Christopher Alvarez and Joie Tyrrell

The harsh winter weather has caused severe mobility issues on city streets with snow and ice blocking curb cuts and other access points. Photo courtesy: New York City Comptroller's Office.

The frigid and snowy winter iced in disabled New Yorkers for weeks as the city struggled to clear sidewalks and curb cuts.

And while sidewalk paths were finally cleared for the most part weeks after a late January snowstorm, disabled residents in the city faced yet another test in late February as historic blizzard dumped 16 to 19 inches of snow throughout the city including up to 24 inches on Staten Island.

The widespread storm led to postponement of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's committee meetings and a New York City Council meeting on pedestrian and transit accessibility during winter weather events.

For Jean Ryan, president of disability activist group Disabled In Action, it's like ''being stuck inside like COVID without the disease.'' She's concerned that residents who are wheelchair users will be unable to make it to the rescheduled meetings.

In a press conference held in late February, just prior to the second major snowstorm since he took office, New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani said that agency teams ''have been working around the clock to ready … for the storm'' with thousands of Department of Sanitation workers and emergency snow shovelers being brought in to keep sidewalks and curb cuts clear.

''Additional operational agencies will be clearing fire hydrants, crosswalks and bus stops on or around their property as well to aid New Yorkers with disabilities throughout this period,'' he said, adding that ''four-foot-wide paths must be cleared across all sidewalks to accommodate wheelchairs and other mobility devices.

''This is an existing mandate – it is your responsibility,'' he told property owners, adding that city workers will step in to clear access if needed.

The afternoon after the storm first hit, the mayor said, ''We know the importance of ensuring that theses crosswalks, these sidewalks, are not just passable in a technical sense, but also passable … so that New Yorkers who are using a wheelchair or with a stroller can get around.''

New York's Department of Sanitation Acting Commissioner Javier Lojan reported that more than 1,400 emergency snow shovelers were deployed throughout the city meaning that pedestrian areas will be cleared ''far sooner than in previous storms.'' The city has also employed new tracking mechanisms to oversee clearance of bus stops, crosswalks and fire hydrants, city officials said.

''While these areas are the responsibility of the property owner, we know that the safety of all who use our sidewalks is paramount and we are prepared to step in immediately to clear more of the city than ever before,'' Lojan said. Property owners must maintain a four-foot path to allow a stroller or wheelchair to pass and those who don't may face a summons.

Mamdani's first month in office has been met with a series of challenges for the administration as the city was bombarded with its first blanket of snow in late January that stuck around as temperatures dipped below freezing.

For those without an all-terrain adaptation built onto their mobility device to ram into mountains of snow, it was tough crossing the street or boarding an accessible vehicle.

''Rolling down the street is impossible. Intersections are no man's land, and no one clears a curb cut,'' a wheelchair-using government employee told *Able News* after the first storm.

Ryan said that she had to cancel the group's first advocacy event on February 1st at their new Wall Street area headquarters because the streets were not cleared and members would have trouble getting there.

''For decades, nothing much has changed for access for people with disabilities after a big snowstorm,'' Ryan said. ''Our needs are not a priority even though what benefits us benefits many people who have no disability.''

Blocked curbs forced the disabled community to cancel appointments. Ryan got lucky– when two neighbors were shoveling out their car, they voluntarily shoveled the curb cut closest to her residence.

''If you manage to get on a bus, how can you know you will be able to get off at your destination?'' she said. ''It is so cold, it is dangerous to risk getting stuck outside in the snow.''

The city had witnessed the longest streak of below-freezing temperatures since 1961 – which made it harder for the Mamdani administration to take down and clean up tall mounds of snow and ice dumped onto the curbs after the January storm in a timely manner. Mamdani said the forecast after this latest storm offers more favorable weather conditions for snow clearing.

After the January storm, New York City Department of Sanitation's Press Secretary Vincent Gragnani told *Able News* in an email statement that, ''We have hauled and melted well over 310 million pounds of snow.''

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New York Disability News

Nisha Argarwal to Lead NYC Disability Office

By Christopher Alvarez

Nisha Agarwal has been appointed by New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani to lead the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. Photo courtesy: NYC Mayor's Office.

Enthusiasm sparked within the disabled community when New York City's then Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani gave *Able News* staff writer Christopher Alvarez an exclusive interview before taking office.

The December conversation on housing, employment and transportation was seen as a first-of-its-kind opportunity where people with disabilities were given a seat at the table in political conversations.

Since then, disability activists and advocacy groups have been eagerly awaiting the youngest mayor's choice for who will work across city government and with the disability community to make sure that every New Yorker can access the city's spaces, services, and resources.

The wait is over…

Nisha Agarwal was named as the new Commissioner of the New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD), the mayor's office exclusively told *Able News* in early February in a statement that highlighted her long "career dedicated to empowering vulnerable New Yorkers."

A child of Indian immigrants, Agarwal served as the Senior Advisor to the Deputy Mayor for Strategic Policy Initiatives under the Bill de Blasio administration, where she worked to boost civic engagement among New Yorkers and build DemocracyNYC's efforts on immigration, people with disabilities, and justice-involved communities.

"I am honored to be the commissioner of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. All of the priorities that Mayor Mamdani supports are critical for people with disabilities: affordable housing and food, access to health and mental health, free transportation, education equity, and employment opportunities," MOPD Commissioner Agarwal said in a statement.

She also led the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs under de Blasio, building landmark initiatives like IDNYC, the city's municipal identification card, and Cities for Action, a national advocacy coalition of local elected officials.

Mayor Mamdani's office called Agarwal "an accomplished public interest attorney as well as public servant."

"It's not enough for New York City to be affordable for everyone — it must be accessible to everyone, too. With decades of experience in public service, Commissioner Agarwal will help our administration deliver on that mission and build a city where every New Yorker can succeed," he said.

Most recently, the Executive Director for Policy and Communications at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Division of Mental Hygiene, Agarwal's resume also includes her as a prior Deputy Executive Director for Impact and Senior Advisor at International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), a global legal aid and advocacy organization.

Agarwal will be replacing Commissioner Christina Curry, a partially blind and deaf disabled woman of color, who held the position for four years under Mayor Eric Adams.

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ABLE NEWS
201 I. U. Willets Road
Albertson, NY 11507
ablenews@viscardicenter.org
516-465-1416
ablenews.com

Published By
The Viscardi Center

Managing Editor
Kim Brussell

Editor
Joie Tyrrell

Designer
Neil Esposito

Staff Writer
Christopher Alvarez

Contributors
Dawn Colclasure
Kieran Kern
Ava Lefkowitz
Marcus Johnson
Gregory Moomjy
Emily Sauchelli
Warren Shaw
James Weisman, Esq.
Lan Zhan

Publisher Emerita
Angela Miele Melledy

Advertising Sales Representative
Wendy Kates

The Viscardi Center

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Sensory Rooms Provide Specialized Care to Students

By Dawn Colclasure

In the past, students with conditions such as autism and anxiety would try to get through the school day in spite of any sensory dysregulation. Nowadays, many schools are providing a sensory room or space to accommodate these students.

''We created a sensory space for all children to use last year,'' explained Tom Burke, principal of Forest Lake Elementary School in Wantagh. ''We saw that there was a need for children to use a space to calm down and escape some of the anxieties that they might face during the school day.''

Thanks to federal grants and private funding, schools can now offer students struggling with sensory overload somewhere to go for relief.

Susan Randazzo, Executive Director of Pupil Personnel Services in the Rocky Point School District, and Megan McGuire, a behavioral specialist, also of Rocky Point, noted that their schools have a sensory room and that it was ''created to provide a calm, supportive space for students who may become overwhelmed by noise, lights, or other sensory input during the school day. The sensory room allows students, especially those with sensory processing needs, to take a short break, regulate their emotions, and refocus before returning to class.'' They added, ''The goal of the space is to help students manage stress, improve concentration, and support their emotional well-being, ultimately making the school environment more inclusive and accessible for everyone.''

The sensory room at Frank J. Carasiti Elementary School in Rocky Point. Photo courtesy: Rocky Point School District.

In both cases, school staff and members of the school district are instrumental in proposing the idea for sensory space or room, as well as creating it.

In Rocky Point, features of the rooms include: ''a lighted ball pit, interactive lighted wall panels, crash mats, trampoline, swings, climbing equipment, canoe-style pressure vessels for deep pressure input, tactile wall tiles, gel floor tiles, and a sound wall,'' according to the district.

While all students are allowed access to the sensory rooms in these schools, teachers have been trained to notice when a student may benefit from spending time in such a space. ''This room is open to all. The students are in there regularly,'' Burke, of Forest Lake Elementary, explained. ''They use the occupied/vacant signs to indicate the use of the room. Typically, they spend about ten to fifteen minutes in the room. Sometimes, students have specific scheduled time in the sensory room. Some students are given the choice, many request it as needed, and many of the adults are trained to recognize whether the sensory room is an important place to visit at the time.''

A sensory room at Forest Lake Elementary School in Wantagh. Photo courtesy: Wantagh School District.

In Rocky Point, both Randazzo and McGuire have shared the guidelines for using the sensory rooms which are in place. ''Students access the sensory room based on individual need rather than open or unstructured use. Some students attend on a scheduled basis, typically prior to instructional periods that require sustained sitting, attention, or regulation,'' they said. ''Others access the space responsively, as part of a regulated support plan. The typical duration is approximately 8–10 minutes per session. Access times are generally predetermined and individualized, rather than student-selected, to maintain the therapeutic and instructional purpose of the space.''

They added, ''Students do not have unrestricted or on-demand access to the sensory room. However, staff may offer access when signs of sensory dysregulation are observed, and some students are taught to appropriately request sensory input as part of their self-regulation or communication goals. All access is staff-directed, supervised, and goal-oriented, and the sensory room is not used as a means of avoiding instruction.''

The sensory rooms at both schools have been stocked with items for the exact purpose of sensory dysregulation. At the Forest Lake School, Burke provides the following description: ''The room is dimly lit (if that is what a student prefers). There is a small rock-climbing wall, flexible furniture, Legos, sensory tools and more that helps the students regulate themselves. We use student input as needed. Students can suggest items that we can add to our sensory room.''

Such rooms have not only sent the message to neurodiverse students that they are seen and recognized, but it has also resulted in positive outcomes. ''I have heard nothing but the best things about the sensory room,'' Burke reported. At Rocky Point, Randazzo and McGuire agree the rooms have helped improve student performance. ''Students typically return to the classroom calmer, more organized, and better able to engage in instruction especially when the sensory room is used as part of a broader regulation plan,'' the district officials said.

Observed Outcomes of Students Who Have Used Sensory Rooms and Spaces

- Improved self-regulation and emotional control
- Increased readiness to learn following use
- Decreased intensity and frequency of sensory-driven behaviors
- Improved transitions, particularly when the room is used proactively

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Expanding Access Beyond the Paved Path

By Kieran Kern

Writer Kieran Kern and her family enjoy camping. Photo courtesy: Kieran Kern

After an endless winter, spring is peeking over the horizon, like crocuses in the snow. As a wheelchair user, spring historically offers the promise of getting out with ease. The light half of the year offers fair temperatures and a plethora of sunshine that makes our bodies (or at least my body) function better.

While I encourage everyone to hop a train, bus, or Uber, and get outside, the upcoming seasons have always motivated me to roll a bit beyond the paved path.

A new proposal from the New York Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) intends to expand the scope of mobility devices that are welcome on DEC managed land. The goal of this proposal is to increase access to the wide variety of outdoor activities ranging from hiking to hunting across almost five million acres.

DEC Commissioner Amanda Lefton explained, ''Forest and natural areas provide physical and mental health benefits to millions of New Yorkers, and this proposed policy would improve transparency and help ensure that those benefits are available to people of all abilities.''

While our community has always been welcomed on state lands, the devices we use to locomote might not be based on how a wheelchair is defined. According to weconservepa.com, the United States Department of Justice defines a wheelchair as ''A manually operated or power-driven device primarily for use by an individual with a mobility disability for the main purpose of indoor or both indoor and outdoor locomotion.''

However, the DOJ's definition of Other Power- Driven Mobility Devices (OPDMDs) is broad enough to encompass any vehicle with a motor from golf carts to large trucks. More specifically they are defined as any mobility device powered by batteries, fuel, or other engines they may or may not be designed for a disabled population but are used by us for locomotion.

Opening pedestrian areas to disabled people who use OPDMDs ensures that we will both feel welcome and not worry about having our right to access challenged if our mobility devices don't fit the look of a traditional manual or power chair.

Up until recently, I was exclusively a scooter user from the age of 14. The features of my various scooters have supported my mobility needs and life goals. But I have also received pushback when out in the community in regard to my scooters, looking more like a go-kart or electric bike and less like a wheelchair. Last October, while visiting a large park in New Jersey my scooter was mistaken for an e-bike and I had to argue my way out of being barred from entering the event I wanted to go to. That being said, overall, my wheels have taken me through a variety of experiences and terrains in nature.

Growing up, I always dreamed of camping and hiking, but it wasn't until I had the right equipment and right partner to adventure with that I really got a chance to ''rough it'' outside staying in a hotel that didn't have room service.

My wheels have seen their fair share of mud, sticks, and sand. We've scooted through hiking paths and fairy and nature trails both as a couple and as a family hiked around Eagle Lake in Acadia

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Camps for All

An Inclusive Summer Experience for All

By Ava Lefkowitz

Sud & Splash foam party at Camp Kehilla in Wheatley Heights. Photo courtesy: Sid Jacobson JCC.

Aristotle famously said, "Man is by nature a social animal."

And one of the best ways to foster that human connection can be found in summer camp – especially for children and adults with developmental disabilities.

Camps provide structured activities where campers can practice interpersonal skills, celebrate their differences and develop meaningful relationships at their own pace.

Judy Heumann, a central figure in the disability rights movement and a leader behind the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, frequently traced her sense of identity to Camp Jened, a summer camp for teenagers with disabilities in New York State. The camp functioned not only as a recreational space but as a training ground for leadership and social change.

The camps profiled in this article are but a few in the Long Island and greater NYC area that offer inclusive programs to enable the disability community – kids and adults alike – to partake in communal lived experience and its benefits.

SLEEPAWAY CAMPS

Southampton Fresh Air Home

"We're the fresh air home, the mighty, mighty fresh air home!" can be heard echoing through an unassuming Southampton, NY neighborhood every summer. Founded in 1901, SFAH's mission has grown over the last 124 years, from serving children with bone tuberculosis in the early part of the 20th century to its current clientele of children with physical disabilities ages 8-18 (occasionally accepting older campers for special programs). Though SFAH now operates as a year-round center for children and teens with physical disabilities, its flagship program is still summer camp.

Rising Treetops at Oakhurst

Rising Treetops at Oakhurst, located in New Jersey, (formerly Camp Oakhurst) was founded in 1906 as a summer home for children who attended The Crippled Children's East Side Free School in Manhattan. Similarly to SFAH, it now serves children all year-round. Rising Treetops at Oakhurst serves a more general population of children and adults with disabilities, including autism-specific sessions.

Camp Pa-Qua-Tuck

Another long-running New York camp, Camp Pa-Qua-Tuck, has been around since the 1940s. Like many of the camps on our list, it now serves children and adults with disabilities ages 6-60. Pa-Qua-Tuck allows campers to choose between day camp and sleepaway. Their slate of activities includes arts and crafts, music, swimming, boating, campfires, dances, talent shows, races, scavenger hunts, BBQ's, movie nights and a petting zoo.

DAY CAMPS

Camp ANCHOR

If you live in the Town of Hempstead on Long Island, chances are you or someone you know attends Camp ANCHOR as a camper or volunteer. Their six-week summer program is available for town residents with disabilities ages 6 and up. Each camper is assigned to a group with others of similar ages and abilities. Camp runs from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm weekdays at Lido Beach Town Park and includes opportunities like horseback riding and surfing. ANCHOR also offers activities throughout the year.

Summer Camp at the Cross Island YMCA

The YMCA camp at the Cross Island YMCA in Jamaica, Queens boasts an inclusive environment. Geared towards children with developmental disabilities, Y Camp includes swimming, arts and crafts, field trips, and more.

Hofstra University REACH Program

The fully inclusive REACH program offers campers with special needs an opportunity to participate in all activities in small peer groups of campers of similar age and grade level. Located on the campus of Hofstra University on Long Island, the REACH Program provides a positive environment for campers to play games, complete projects and engage in peer interactions.

Camp Loyaltown

Located in Hunter, Camp Loyaltown offers several summer sessions for ages 18 and older, who may require support with daily living activities. With staffing ratios of 1:1, 1:2, and 1:3, Camp Loyaltown ensures individualized attention through a person-centered approach, providing assistance during daily camp activities while promoting independence. The camp also has a session for ages five and up.

NEURODIVERGENT-FOCUSED CAMPS

Camp Kehilla

Located at Henry Kaufmann Campgrounds in Wheatley Heights on Long Island, Camp Kehilla is Sid Jacobson JCC's dedicated summer camp for neurodivergent children, teens, and young adults, ages 5-21, with a core focus on building social skills, friendships, independence, and self-esteem.

This summer, Camp Kehilla will be expanding its adaptive adventure course to include four new bridges, and will introduce Jurassic Park Day, featuring a moving animatronic Tyrannosaurus rex, interactive inflatables, and a live reptile program. This is in addition to other popular offerings such as Superhero Day and their Sud & Splash foam party.

Ari Shapiro, Manager of Camp Kehilla, describes camp as a "place where individuals are free to be their most authentic selves. It gives them the chance to try new experiences, take risks, and discover strengths they may not even know they have."

Ava Lefkowitz is a freelance student journalist interested in advocacy for disability rights.

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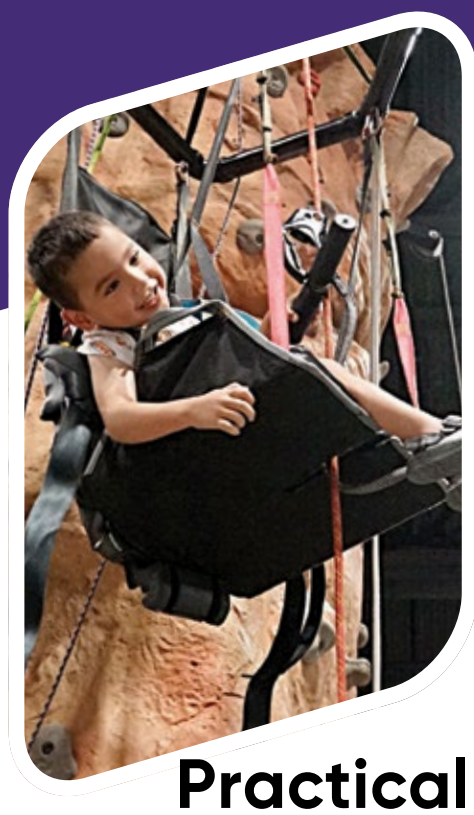

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Disability History

Jason DaSilva: Art, Access, and Adversity

By Warren Shaw

Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Jason DaSilva. Photo courtesy: Jason DaSilva.

From his apartment in Long Island City, an Emmy Award-winning filmmaker quietly pursues his life's ambition. His work combines documentary information, animation, and recreated real-life scenes to tell stories about ethnic identity, the legal system, and disability.

Especially disability.

Because he is a disabled man himself. Living with primary progressive multiple sclerosis (or PPMS).

At the age of 47, Jason DaSilva is quadriplegic. He creates his art almost entirely through assistants, who realize his ideas by following Jason's verbal directions. It is a painstaking process, and his projects take many years to reach completion. But Jason is nothing if not persistent, and his seventh movie is now nearing final form.

Jason is the oldest of three boys born to Goan parents of Indian extraction and African heritage. The family bounced between Ohio and Florida before settling in British Columbia in Canada.

Jason was a creative, artistic child. After earning an undergrad degree in multi-media, he moved to New York City late in 2001. The move was part of his artistic process: "I came here right after September 11th," he told me. "I wanted to follow the repercussions of that day for South Asians, Arabs, and Muslims. Sadly, everything I presumed could happen in the wake of the terrorist attacks actually did happen. I filmed the racial backlash and interviewed people all the way up into the war against Iraq, in 2004." The result was the documentary film *Lest We Forget.*

Jason was a very busy man in those years. His student film, *Olivia's Puzzle*, was accepted into the *Sundance Film Festival* in 2003, and by 2005 he'd completed four more movies. Several of them addressed what Jason calls ethic identity retention: "I compared an Indian girl who grew up there with one who grew up in North America, then I did similar projects involving boys from Iraq, then girls from Africa," he said. "I wanted to show how ethnic identity and culture is affected by transplantation to a different social environment." Like all of his work, the seed for these projects can be traced to Jason's own story, as the child of immigrants. "My work stems directly or indirectly from an autobiographical angle. That personal connection is the only way for me to really get invested in a project. Call it 'write what you know,' I suppose."

Disability Becomes Subject and Method

By this point, Jason was having trouble with his vision and his ability to walk. The diagnosis of PPMS followed. True to his pattern of making art with a personal tie-in, Jason decided to document his challenges as a filmmaker living with a degenerative neurological disease. The result was the film *When I Walk*, a portrait of Jason's struggles with multiple sclerosis and day-to-day life while losing the ability to walk, over a seven-year period.

When I Walk premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2013, and was a Critics Pick in The *New York Times, Los Angeles Times*, and *Village Voice*. It was released theatrically and broadcast as the opening film for the 2014 season of the PBS series *POV*. In 2015, *When I Walk* won an Emmy Award. It is available for viewing on Amazon Prime.

Meanwhile, Jason got married, to a woman he met at a multiple sclerosis support group, and in 2013, his son Jase was born.

> **"My work stems directly or indirectly from an autobiographical angle."**
>
> – Jason DaSilva

Jason's artistic output continued, including a short film that should be dear to the heart of any disabled New Yorker, *The Long Wait*. Subtitled: *Experiment: Wheelchair vs. No Wheelchair*. It compared how long it took a nondisabled man to travel by subway from Williamsburg to a coffee shop in downtown Manhattan (13 minutes), versus the time Jason needed to get there by public transportation, using a motorized wheelchair (1 hour 43 minutes).

But even this, by any definition a full life, was insufficient for him.

Thirty years ago, while still a student, Jason started a not-for-profit organization known as AXS Lab, to elevate underrepresented voices in film. After getting the PPMS diagnosis, he adapted the organization and began several new initiatives. Among these is an accessibility mapping project called AXS Map, which he describes as "a crowd-sourced platform that allows users to rate and review the accessibility of public spaces like restaurants, transit stops, and businesses." AXS maps are underway in dozens of locations in several continents, and the organization has reached its 30th anniversary.

The Next Chapter

Sadly, along the way, Jason's marriage dissolved. His ex moved to Austin, Texas and took their son with her.

Jason was determined to remain close with Jase, so he looked into moving to Texas too. Because of his disability-related service needs, he even stayed briefly in a local nursing home. But disability benefits in that deeply red, western state were so far inferior to their New York equivalents that he had to abandon the effort and return to New York City. Heartbreakingly, "being with my son would have forced me to give up everything else and spend my life in an institution." Jason wrote about this experience for *The New York Times*, in a piece entitled "The Disability Trap."

Jason's efforts to use the court system to maintain his rights as a parent have fared little better. "People living with disabilities need to know about how the family court system treats us," he said. "Even in New York, we are almost entirely dismissed, often practically assumed to be incompetent as parents. And because court cases move slowly, we can get severed from our children for years on end. They grow up without us, even though we're fighting to be with them. That has got to change."

Jason continues to create his art. A seventh film is nearing completion. Like his other work, it will have autobiographical resonances in service of issues that nondisabled audiences may not be aware of. A feature film—a story, not a documentary—is in the early stages too.

"For me, being disabled is no kind of gift," Jason concluded. "Making films this way pisses me off. But I have to do it. I just have to."

For more of Warren Shaw's work in disability history, please go to www.DisabilityHistoryNYC.com

Connect, Learn, and Advocate

State Seeking Input on Streamlining Regulations

Response deadline April 3

Officials with New York's Office of the Chief Disability Officer are encouraging participation in a statewide effort led by Gov. Kathy Hochul to make government work better by tackling outdated and burdensome state regulations, policies, and practices.

Chief Disability Officer Kim Hill Ridley has shared the launch of EXPRESS NY – a portal where the governor has asked for ideas from stakeholders on opportunities to improve government efficiency and cut red tape.

Ridley called on members of the state's disability community and key partners to submit ideas and recommendations through the online portal by its deadline of April 3.

In October, Hochul directed state agencies to identify obsolete regulations and outdated policies. Agencies have already found nearly 100 potential practices and regulations in need of elimination, reform or modernization. Specific areas of focus include housing and infrastructure development, access to services and small business development.

Disabled In Action of Metropolitan New York Monthly Meeting

March 1: 1:30 pm to 4 pm
(In-person)

This grassroots civil rights organization committed to ending discrimination against people with disabilities holds its monthly meeting at Positive Exposure Gallery, 83 Maiden Lane, 4th Floor in Manhattan.

Visit here for more information.

NASSAU COUNTY GAMES FOR THE PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED

Registration Open for the Nassau County Games for the Physically Challenged

March to May

The 40th Annual Nassau County Games for the Physically Challenged will take place May 29–30 at Mitchel Field Athletic Complex and Nassau Community College, Uniondale. Athlete and volunteer registration is now open! Visit here or email victorychallenge@nassaucountyny.gov for details.

Disability Day of Mourning

March 1 – all day
(In-person and virtual)

The disability community will gather virtually and across the nation to remember disabled victims of filicide – disabled people murdered by their family members or caregivers. Since 2012, ASAN (Autistic Self Advocacy Network) and other disability rights organizations have come together to send a clear message that disability is not a justification for violence. **To learn more, view the Anti-Filicide toolkit.**

To find a vigil, see here.

includenyc

Turning 18: Rights, Benefits, and Planning

March 4: noon to 1:30 pm
(Virtual)

IncludeNYC hosts a workshop about the benefits, application processes, and guardianship options available to young people with disabilities when they turn 18. (For parents of students with disabilities). Register here.

SANYS Statewide Unity Affinity Group

March 19: 6 pm
(Virtual)

The Self-Advocacy Association of New York State, Inc. hosts an online statewide unity affinity group meeting offering a safe space for people to feel comfortable in expressing their views as long as they are not harmful to others. The aim is for a place where people can have conversations and friendships can be made.

Join the meeting here.

Virtual Career Fair

March 24: 10:30 am to 1:30 pm
(Virtual)

The National Organization on Disability hosts a career fair offering personalized virtual training sessions where job seekers can receive hands-on coaching to strengthen resumes, interviewing skills, and self-advocacy, while employers learn best practices for inclusive hiring, accommodations, and workplace accessibility.

To attend participants must be:

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Around Our Towns

Museum of Disability History Officially Opens to All

Top: Willow Baer, commissioner of the state's Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, views an exhibit at the Museum of Disability History at The Viscardi Center's public opening in mid-February. **Bottom:** (Left to right back row) John Kornreich, benefactor, Dr. Timothy G. Lynch, president of the College of Staten Island, Willow Baer, commissioner of the state's Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, Natalie Reyes, museum director, Mazi Pilip, Nassau County legislator, Roy Danis, board chair The Viscardi Center. Front row: New York Chief Disability Officer Kimberly Hill Ridley and President & CEO The Viscardi Center Dr. Chris Rosa. Photo credit: Allan Prinstil/The Viscardi Center.

Frozen Out: How Winter Storms Isolated Disabled New Yorkers

Continued from page 1

''The 12 to 15 inches of snow we received followed by two weeks of mostly subfreezing temperatures is unprecedented in recent memory. There is a massive amount of snow that is not moving on its own – and we have been out there clearing it away, 24 hours a day, seven days a week since the flakes started to fall, with a commitment to pedestrian infrastructure so that people can move about the city safely,'' he continued

Still, The Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York (CIDNY) received more than 15 complaints from disabled New Yorkers about snow removal in the community's most populated areas, all of which were redirected to 311, the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities and the City Comptroller's office.

In some cases after the January storm, members of the disabled community have detailed moments when New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY) purposely shoveled snow piles in front of curb cuts and pedestrian ramps and refused to clear the way for mobility-impaired individuals.

Much to the Comptroller's office credit, they have actively been placing calls to 311 and local council members trying to help people get their streets cleared, but ''it's a nightmare,'' one representative said.

Though the New York City Department of Transportation owns all the streets and sidewalks, boarding islands had also been on the back burner for snow clearance, preventing buses and Access-A-Ride vehicles from deploying their ramps, another aspect DSNY said it is addressing.

In early February, the DSNY reported that, ''We have had 2,500 sanitation workers on every 12-hour shift, 500 emergency snow shovelers, and about 700 pieces of contracted specialized equipment working to get the city fully safe and clear. In addition to brining, salting and plowing all roads and bike lanes, we also cleared paths at all unsheltered bus stops, as well as more than 44,000 crosswalks citywide.''

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Artists from CP Unlimited celebrate the opening of *On the Street and In the Studio* exhibition in Manhattan. Photo courtesy: CP Unlimited.

Photo Exhibit Celebrates Expression and Inclusion

On the Street and In the Studio, a powerful photography exhibition celebrating creative expression and inclusion, opened February 7 at Positive Exposure Gallery, located at 83 Maiden Lane in New York City, and runs through March 7.

The exhibition features 25 photographs created by 13 photographers from CP Unlimited's Progressive Visions Photo Club and West Farms Photo Works. Together, the images reflect a wide range of perspectives—from candid moments in public spaces to thoughtfully composed studio work—highlighting the artists' unique voices and lived experiences, according to CP Unlimited.

"I am so happy that we are able to host this exhibition. This is their third show [at Positive Exposure Gallery]. It is a beautiful exhibition…we are so honored and it really celebrates the vision of these incredible artists," gallery founder and director Rick Guidotti said in a statement.

Both Progressive Visions Photo Club and West Farms Photo Works are dedicated to empowering people with disabilities through photography. Participants build technical skills, artistic confidence, and personal expression while learning to use a variety of tools, including digital and mirrorless cameras, as well as cameras with specialized shutters and adaptive mounting systems, the organization said.

Marta Colon, one of the photographers, said: "I am so happy to be here and to represent all the photographers."

Through guided instruction and hands-on practice, participants take part in photo outings that explore their own neighborhoods and the broader New York City area. See here for more information.

Expanding Access Beyond the Paved Path

Continued from page 5

National Park and tent and cabin camped in New York, New Jersey, Maine, and Pennsylvania.

The DEC is committed to making activities, programs, and services more accessible through physical design, alternate forms of communication, inclusive programs, and individual accommodations. Programs like Lifetime Liberty Pass and Access Pass give disabled vets, and disabled people who are not vets free access to the park system. Additionally, there are free and discounted hunting and fishing licenses available for blind and disabled patrons.

Much of the DEC managed lands feature accessible trails, campgrounds, fishing, piers, and boat launches. Reinstein Woods in upstate New York, Rogers Environmental Education Center and Five Rivers, New York offer mobility scooters to expand on the inclusive options. Five Rivers also features a wheelchair charging station for patrons who want to get energized for a longer hike.

While the proposal has the potential to open greater mobility options for our community, wheelchairs are welcome on DEC managed lands, and there are a plethora of inclusive opportunities to enjoy right now.

Ms. Wheelchair New York Now Has a Message for America

By Lan Zhan

Latavia Sturdivant was named Ms. Wheelchair America last year. Photo courtesy: Latavia Sturdivant.

When Latavia Sturdivant enters a room, she brings with her more than a title. She brings years of steadfast advocacy, professional expertise, and lived experience that compel society to reconsider its understanding of disability and leadership.

At 33, the Yonkers resident and Ms. Wheelchair America 2026, has built a career centered on education and service, using her platforms to advocate for greater access, equity, and inclusion throughout New York and beyond.

While the alumna of Henry Viscardi School at The Viscardi Center takes great pride in her educational background, her journey into activism was shaped by her experiences navigating the education system. Before attending Viscardi, she said she struggled in general education environments due to barriers related to access and belonging rather than academics. That experience helped shape the confidence and purpose that now guide her work. ''My experience at Viscardi was life-changing,'' she said.

Sturdivant joined the Ms. Wheelchair competition after also being named Ms. Wheelchair New York in 2025. As someone already involved in advocacy, particularly in the medical equipment industry, Sturdivant faced several barriers in engaging with state officials on a range of issues. On several occasions, she said she was told, 'you are not a constituent of mine.' But Sturdivant said that as a winner of the New York title, she was a ''constituent of everywhere.''

This momentum propelled her to the national scene. In August 2025, Sturdivant won Ms. Wheelchair America 2026 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Notably, Sturdivant was the first titleholder from New York.

This annual convention seeks candidates with good leadership and advocacy skills. It challenges participants to complete interviews and deliver a speech based on their platforms. Describing this moment, Sturdivant says that she felt a combination of shock and gratitude. ''This title gave legitimacy and reach to work I was already doing and opened doors for collective advocacy beyond my own experience,'' she said.

Over the last year, Sturdivant has advanced her advocacy by attending legislative lobby days, disability panels, community events such as Yonkers Comic Con, and public speaking engagements. She gave her TEDx talk and appeared on PIX11's *Monica Makes It Happen*. She explained that it had opened her eyes to how legislation, media, and education can all help advance the conversation on accessibility.

''The most urgent priorities are ensuring accurate reimbursement rates—many of which haven't been meaningfully updated since 1987 . . . the current system must be fixed so that everyone has equitable access to essential equipment. Durable medical equipment is not a luxury; it is a lifeline for people in the ably different community,'' she said.

Sturdivant, a licensed speech-language pathologist in the states of New York and Maine, has been offering speech-related services for more than 10 years in the New York City school system. In addition, Sturdivant is an adjunct professor at Lehman College in the Bronx, where she teaches aspiring clinicians about empathy, cultural sensitivity, and disability awareness. She is also a certified lead advocate for the Amputee Coalition.

''Professor Sturdivant brings to her teaching and clinical work a rare integration of lived experience, academic excellence, and advocacy,'' said Leslie Gruber, assistant professor in the Speech, Language & Hearing Sciences department, in a statement. ''Her journey in speech-language pathology, leadership in advancing accessibility, and role as Ms. Wheelchair America reflect both resilience and a deep responsibility to others. Our student clinicians, clients, and their families are fortunate to learn from and work alongside her, as her insight and compassion deepen our understanding of what it means to ensure every individual is seen, heard, and valued.''

Outside of her clinical and teaching work, Sturdivant produces a podcast, *Queens On A Roll*. This space is used to facilitate candid conversations on disability, identity, and resilience. Her personal mantra, ''Don't pay attention to what we roll in, pay attention to how we roll,'' expresses her desire that people be recognized for their leadership and character rather than for their mobility devices. '''How we roll' speaks to how we show up, how we lead, how we problem-solve, and how we contribute. It's about moving past assumptions and recognizing capability,'' she said.

> **"Don't pay attention to what we roll in, pay attention to how we roll."**
>
> – Latavia Sturdivant

As a reminder that mobility is not an option but a necessity, Sturdivant's work is especially significant in light of International Wheelchair Day on March 1, celebrated to recognize the positive impact of wheelchairs on lives and to highlight the global access gaps. She said she will continue her fight for change long after the crown is gone, through her business, Advocacy in Motion. She is also launching a new non-profit, Silent Voices Rising, and working on an upcoming book titled *The Illusion of Inclusion.*

''I hope my legacy is one of action, not just awareness. I want people to remember that I used my platform to open doors, challenge systems, and amplify voices that are often ignored,'' she said.

Lan Zhan is a reporter with The SBU Media Group, part of Stony Brook University's School of Communication and Journalism's Working Newsroom program for students and local media.

March 1 marks International Wheelchair Day.

A Trailblazing Opera Redefining Access

By Gregory Moomjy

Rehearsal for *Sensorium Ex*, a new opera featuring a large cast that includes performers with both apparent and not apparent disabilities. Photo credit: Jill Steinberg.

Last May, a major milestone in disability representation in opera occurred in the gym of the University of Nebraska at Omaha when it played host to the world premiere of *Sensorium Ex*. With music by Paola Prestini and a text by Brenda Shaughnessy, the piece explores questions of consent, individuality, caregiving, as well as the difference between humans and artificial intelligence in a post-apocalyptic setting.

However, what makes this opera truly noteworthy is its large cast featuring a majority of performers with apparent and not apparent disabilities. Several performers identify as being blind as well as having autism and ambulatory CP, among other disabilities. What makes this work truly remarkable is that the creative team was willing to think outside of the way opera is traditionally performed in order to give the performers what they needed to do their best work. Obviously, there is more work to be done and the production process for this world premiere leaves some room for improvement, but *Sensorium Ex* is nonetheless a trailblazing work. In the interest of full disclosure, I was involved in the production.

My role was to observe the production process, taking notes on the various accommodations for the disabled performers. Paying as much attention to what did not work as to what did, I recently sat down with Paola Prestini to fondly reminisce on the production. We fondly remembered the dinner on the eve of opening night that showed me just how many people with disabilities were involved in this production. Prestini then shared her thoughts as to what made this production possible and how *Sensorium Ex* serves as a bellwether for where the opera industry is in terms of disability inclusion and where it needs to go.

To begin with, the fact that the premiere took place at the Common Senses Festival in Omaha is telling. The festival, which explores the role disability plays across the many genres of the performing arts, is run by parents of a child with autism. Unfortunately, mainstream opera companies like the Metropolitan Opera, are still hesitant to showcase performers with disabilities because they don't know what accommodations can look like. According to Prestini, she learned rather quickly that if a performer requires a caregiver for their daily life then that caregiver should be on stage to be with the performer as the caregiver understands best how to make the performer comfortable so that they can do their best work.

Inherent in the need for out-of-the-box thinking is Prestini's belief that disability inclusive opera is not suited to the confines of the traditional opera house. This presents some difficulty because traditional performing arts institutions like New York City's Lincoln Center can provide branding and recognition for a new opera which is important in order to secure future performances. This is a question that the opera world will have to grapple with. Lastly, what makes *Sensorium Ex* unique is the addition of a codex which will provide open-source materials so that other companies will know how to perform *Sensorium Ex* and other operas with maximum input from the disability community. Documentation is of utmost importance in this kind of work. Not only to show that it can be done but to show how it can be accomplished in a way that's beneficial to everyone involved. Prestini believes that organizing the codex is the first step towards another production. After all, documentation will lead to greater representation, which in turn will foster greater empathy for the disability community. That is the power of opera.

See related story Page 16

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COMMENTARY AND OPINIONS

Civics Leagues Conversation

Saying No Is Disability Advocacy: Why People with Disabilities Must Stop Over Explaining and Start Setting Boundaries

By Marcus Johnson, Disability Activist, Co-leader Civics League for Disability Rights

Marcus Johnson

I have started saying no more often. Not softly. Not with an apology attached. Not with a medical file worth of explanation. Just no. For people with disabilities, no is not negativity. It is governance at the personal level. It is boundary-setting as a civil rights practice. It is how individual survival connects to collective accountability.

People with disabilities are routinely socialized to be grateful before they are supported. Grateful for partial access. Grateful for delayed accommodations. Grateful for inclusion after decisions are finalized. This is not courtesy. It is conditioning. It preserves institutional comfort while shifting the burden of adaptation onto the person who needs access.

Despite decades of disability rights law, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, access is still treated operationally as an exception rather than a baseline design requirement. Compliance frameworks exist, yet enforcement gaps and underinvestment mean people with disabilities are still negotiating entry, participation, and safety in spaces that claim to be inclusive. In that environment, saying yes too often becomes a survival reflex. Saying no becomes an act of policy-aligned resistance.

People with disabilities should say no to giving away lived experience, trauma, and expertise for free.

Across healthcare systems, research institutions, and corporate inclusion initiatives, lived experience is regularly extracted without compensation. Advisory input is requested. Personal narratives are showcased. Program credibility is strengthened through disability presence. Too often, this occurs without pay, authorship, or decision-making authority. That is not engagement. It is unpaid labor embedded in institutional workflows.

When disabled insight informs program design, staff training, service delivery, or public reputation, it meets the definition of professional contribution. Compensation is not a courtesy. It is an ethical standard.

Eligibility systems frequently rely on adversarial verification models that require people to document worst-case functioning rather than typical lived reality. Means-tested benefits, accommodation processes, and service authorizations often hinge on repeated disclosure and medicalization. The result is a gatekeeping structure that confuses scrutiny with stewardship.

People with disabilities must also say no to proving they are disabled enough.

Civil rights are not awarded based on persuasive suffering. Access is not a performance metric. Functional need, not diagnostic theater, should be sufficient. A rights-based framework demands proportional, relevant documentation, not ritualized disbelief.

We should say no to pushing through pain and exhaustion to protect institutional norms.

Many people with disabilities can point to participation that came at physical cost: inaccessible meetings attended anyway, uncompensated panels accepted for visibility, travel undertaken without adequate support. These decisions are frequently praised as dedication. In reality, they reflect design failure and risk transfer. The system benefits. The body absorbs the deficit.

Sustainable participation is a policy value, not a personal weakness. Without it, inclusion becomes symbolic and short-lived.

People with disabilities must reject respectability pressure that suppresses dissent.

There remains a persistent expectation that credible disability advocates will be patient, agreeable, and non-disruptive. This is reputation management disguised as collaboration. It protects institutions from urgency and reframes structural critique as interpersonal conflict.

Direct advocacy, boundary enforcement, and public challenge are not signs of ingratitude. They are core tools of civil rights movements. Disability policy has advanced historically not through quiet acceptance but through organized pressure, litigation, protest, and sustained narrative change.

We must also say no to opportunity structures built on extraction.

Offers framed as visibility, partnership, or future benefit often mask unfunded mandates and inaccessible workloads. For people with disabilities, these arrangements can destabilize health, income, and support systems. An opportunity that undermines medical stability or functional capacity is not advancement. It is displacement of risk onto the individual.

When people with disabilities are pressured into constant yeses, inequitable systems remain efficient and unchallenged. Free labor substitutes for budget lines. Personal stories substitute for structural reform. Token consultation substitutes for shared authority. Boundaries do not obstruct progress. They make accountability measurable. This is not only about individual limits. It is about collective disability power and policy integrity.

Every time a person with a disability sets and holds a boundary, it recalibrates expectations for the next person. Refusal, in this context, is not withdrawal from community. It is participation in it. Saying no is not disengagement. It is disability advocacy in practice.

Marcus Johnson, CRC-CVE, LMHC is co-leader of the Civics League for Disability Rights, an independent, volunteer-led group of New Yorkers with disabilities advocating for systemic change in healthcare, access, and disability-led policy. Contact: civicsleague@gmail.com

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COMMENTARY AND OPINIONS

Legal Lens

New York's Assisted Suicide Law Raises Serious Concerns Among the Disability Community

by James Weisman, Esq.

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul has made New York the 13th state to legalize physician-assisted suicide by signing the Medical Aid in Dying Act. The reasons that people with disabilities oppose assisted suicide are addressed in the new law. The safeguards built into the legislation—designed to ensure patient autonomy, prevent coercion, and confirm a truly terminal condition—are intended to respond to concerns from the disability community. Time will tell whether these measures are adequate.

Several disability groups including United Spinal Association, where, before retiring, I was General Counsel, as well as Not Dead Yet, and Patients' Rights Action Fund have actively opposed physician-assisted suicide statutes proposed by state legislatures and sued in California and Colorado to declare them discriminatory on the basis of disability. Some religious organizations oppose assisted suicide as well.

This is the first time it will be lawful for a physician in New York to prescribe medication intended to kill a patient.

The Safeguards – Will they be adequate to protect people with disabilities?

The patient must be determined to be terminally ill, i.e., have less than six months to live. This determination must be made, in person, by a physician. If a physician violates any of the provisions of the law, or the implementing State Health Department regulations, to be completed by September 2026, that doctor can be charged with professional misconduct pursuant to State Education Law.

An oral request by the patient for lethal medication must be witnessed by two people and recorded by video or audio. The witnesses cannot be people who would stand to benefit financially from the death of the person requesting medication.

There must be a mandatory five-day waiting period between when a prescription is written and when it is filled.

There is a mandatory mental health evaluation required by a psychiatrist or psychologist.

The Safeguards – Will they be adequate to protect people with disabilities?

Only New York residents can get the lethal prescriptions which will become available to terminally ill people.

The American Medical Association opposes physician-assisted suicide. The organization feels that it fundamentally changes the doctor-patient relationship. Sedation of the suffering is legal in all 50 states.

The fear is that doctors who underestimate the quality of life of people living with disabilities will help those who are depressed to kill themselves and wink an eye at the definition of "terminal." If a substantially impaired person requests lethal medication, a medical professional's bias about living with a disability may color the "terminal" determination. This is what the plaintiffs are claiming in the California litigation.

No opponents of assisted suicide want to protract suffering. However, witnessing exhausted family caregivers and using family resources to stay alive can make those who need personal care feel they are diminishing the quality of life of those around them. They may see no way out except suicide. Counselling and suicide diversion programs must be available to those requesting assisted suicide if they are not terminal. Adequate homecare must be available, as well.

Physician-assisted suicide, now referred to in New York as Medical Aid in Dying (MAID), is coming. While NY has the most safeguards to protect people with disabilities of any of the thirteen states and the District of Columbia which have legalized the practice, homecare shortages, patients' families and

James Weisman, Esq.

professional behavior in response to the new law have yet to be evaluated.

Canada's MAiD (Medical Assistance in Dying) law allows people who have not been rehabilitated to their own satisfaction to request lethal medication, i.e., Canada calls it medical aid in dying even though patients just have to be unsatisfied with the extent of their own rehabilitation able to request poison from a doctor. Physician-assisted suicide legalization sits atop a slippery slope of quality-of-life decisions made by depressed people with disabilities, their families and doctors.

Opinions expressed are solely those of the writer(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of *Able News* at The Viscardi Center and/or The Viscardi Center. Submissions should be on topics affecting the disability community, maximum 600 words, and must include the writer's name and phone number for verification. *Able News* reserves the right to edit for grammar, length, and factual accuracy. *Able News* cannot respond to all submissions and publication of submissions is not guaranteed. To submit an op-ed for consideration, please email a full draft to ablenews@viscardicenter.org.

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Conversations with *Able News*

Meet Jerron Herman – Performer, Choreographer and Activist for Disability Representation in Dance

By Emily Sauchelli

Jerron Herman has been selected as the National Dance Institute's 2025-2026 Artist in Residence.Photo credit: Maria Baranova.

Jerron Herman is a celebrated artist, choreographer, and director who has choreographed, written, and performed numerous works that center images of freedom and disabled perspectives, bringing his own lived experience as a dancer with cerebral palsy into prominent artistic spaces.

Recently selected as the National Dance Institute's 2025-2026 Artist in Residence, Herman is also the choreographer and co-director of ***Sensorium Ex***, a new opera that explores what it means for non-verbal artists to have a voice. He's developed a speaking series for the *Joyce Theater called Discourse: Disabled Artists at the Joyce.*

Herman has premiered works at Danspace Project and Performance Space New York, and produced responsive installations at The Whitney, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cooper Hewitt Design Museum, and The Guggenheim. Herman has received fellowships from United States Artists, NYU/Center for Ballet, Foundation for Contemporary Arts, The Jerome Foundation, among others. In 2020, Herman was awarded the Disability Futures Fellowship from the Ford Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

When you were a kid, did you always dream about becoming a dancer?

I came from a creative family. My older brother was an actor in high school and college. I really worshipped his way of being on the stage. I started writing as a way to be a part of the arts because no one was expecting for me to be a performer, so I thought I could do it from the background. I started writing plays and writing text and drama and that's how I got into the arts. I came to New York as a writer and that's how I got started. So, dance was not on my radar.

Being selected as the National Dance Institute's 2025-2026 Artist in Residence, what do you hope to achieve?

It feels very impactful, because I get to evolve as a choreographer and to set more work on more people. This will be a new commission, a new piece that I am creating. To do it on top of young people with/without disabilities feels very kindred to how I got started. I'm really excited to get more opportunities to build on top of my creativity and to also start to push the cannon a little bit too. Not only will I have a new piece in my repertoire, but National Dance Institute (NDI) will have its first piece by a disabled choreographer in its physically integrated youth company.

What is DREAM (Dancers Realize Excellence Through Arts and Movement) and its connection to the National Dance Institute?

The DREAM project is a peer-to-peer dance program for children with/without disabilities that is led by Kay Gayner and Agnes McConlogue Ferro. It seeks to establish pathways for collaboration and movement knowledge for different bodies for multiple folks with the emphasis on the integration of disabled people. They do that through an innovative approach to partnering with a similar age group. The disabled youth that come into the program have non-disabled peer participants that share the same choreography. DREAM really supports NDI's mission that the arts are an integral part of any child's education. Similarly the relationship to disability is something that shouldn't be shied away from and shouldn't be thought of as a deficit.

How does your family feel about the new avenue you have taken for your career?

My parents were healthfully skeptical about what this would look like. Every parent who engages with their child who says they want to be an artist, there will be some logistical questions about how to do that. On top of that, how can I, as a person with cerebral palsy, also sustain? I've taken them along the ride with me. My parents have actually been my costume designers for a couple of my pieces. So, they have been able to come with me, to see soup how to put on a production and specifically, one of my productions. They have seen them on tour.

Do you feel that it is difficult to get taken seriously, when there are people in society who don't respect those with disabilities in the dance world?

I don't put the insecurity of what I am supposed to do or how I am supposed to look on stage. Art is the idea of closely looking at something. I just take the time to closely look at something, such as how I move. It's interesting how my arm moves or stays static. It's interesting how my leg moves or stays static. Or, how I walk, how my gait is. I've just made that into an artistic image. I think there's a little bit of education that happens where I am teaching others how to see me or how to view me, how to view someone with cerebral palsy—and that's what my work has served to do. I try to give audiences new imagery to take on and move from the theatre to their own lives—with the hope that when they interact with someone on the street or in real life that they will have a different mentality around it.

To learn more about Jerron Herman, visit his **website**.

FUN FACT

A photo of Jerron Herman performing is part of the exhibition at the new **Museum of Disability History** at The Viscardi Center. For the full story with Jerron Herman, please see **AbleNews.com**.