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Celebrating Ability

The Reelabilities Film Festival brings Richmond's special-needs community together

BY ANNE DREYFUSS
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When their then-preschool-age daughter, Sarah, was diagnosed with multiple developmental disabilities about seven years ago, Cullen and Rosemary Seltzer remember feeling overwhelmed by a disjointed network of special-needs service providers in the area "When you first are confronted with it, you feel so helpless," Rosemary says. "You don't really know where to turn. Most of your friends are not going through this, so it's sort of trial and error."



Karin Korb, a wheelchair tennis champion, will be one of the speakers at the film festival. *Photo by Isaac Harrell.*

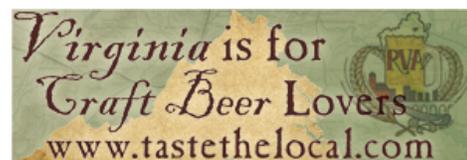
The Seltzers credit the special-needs program at the Weinstein JCC preschool with helping them find the right service providers for their daughter, but they say the process would have been easier if the Richmond special-needs community was more united.

Earlier this year, the Seltzers joined the Reelabilities Film Festival committee through the JCC. The New York City-based festival presents award-winning films by and about people with disabilities. The festival is making its debut in Richmond from May 14 to 20, showcasing seven films dedicated to promoting awareness and appreciation of the lives, stories and artistic expressions of people with different disabilities.

In addition to bringing attention to the lives of people with disabilities, the film festival has linked 17 community partners, including Special Olympics Virginia, the Faison School for Autism and Positive Vibe Café, representing an array of special-needs services in and around Richmond.

"The people we chose to partner with, we chose specifically for the purpose of trying to reach out to the entire community," says Melissa Bunce, special-needs director at the Weinstein JCC. "Different agencies with different interests are coming together for one goal, and that's a pretty big deal for the special-needs community here."

Rather than holding the weeklong film festival at the JCC, the committee chose to schedule screenings at various locations, including the Meadowdale Library in Chesterfield County, the VCU Student Commons Theatre downtown, the Byrd Theatre in Carytown and The Shop at



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Artspace in Manchester. “It was very important to us that we broaden our physical reach to other parts of the community,” Cullen Seltzer says. “So it’s not just a rhetorical collaboration, it’s a physical one.”

After each film, people with special needs will lead discussions. “The purpose with the talk-backs was to find people who are local and [who] can add their own perspective to the film and help the audience process what they saw,” Bunce says.

On May 18, wheelchair tennis champion Karin Korb will speak after the film *Warrior Champions*, a documentary that follows injured American soldiers as they get in shape for the 2008 Paralympic Games. Korb, who is the interim administrative director at Sportable, a local organization that provides sports-related activities for those with physical disabilities, will share her experiences and invite the audience to talk about resilience in the face of adversity.

She broke her back 29 years ago at age 17 while practicing a routine gymnastics vault, leaving her paralyzed from the waist down. She played wheelchair tennis professionally from 1999 to 2008, and was once the highest-ranked women’s wheelchair tennis player in the United States.

“We’re always looking to create that moment in time where someone’s life gets a little bit bigger as a result of recreational sports or some type of physical activity that they probably never have thought they were capable of doing,” Korb says.

In addition to the Richmond event, Reelabilities festivals will take place in 11 other states, including New York, where it will be shown in 23 locations.

“It’s a celebration of ability, rather than disability,” Rosemary Seltzer says. “And it’s a celebration of difference. I think that’s so empowering for individuals affected and their families as well.”

Event Details

Each film costs \$10 and tickets can be purchased at the door (except the film at The Shop at Artspace). Alternatively, tickets can be purchased by calling the Weinstein JCC at 285-6500 or by visiting weinsteinjcc.org. Weekly movie passes cost \$40. All of the proceeds will benefit the special-needs program at the Weinstein JCC.

Editor’s note: Melissa Bunce of the Weinstein JCC is the daughter of Richmond magazine’s publisher, and the magazine is one of the event’s sponsors.

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