



Hollywood's doors opening for actors with disabilities

Nick Daley, who has Prader-Willi Syndrome, guest starred on 'Saving Grace.' Blair Williamson, who has Down syndrome, got a nose job on 'Nip/Tuck.' They're among those with developmental disabilities who want to be stars — and are getting a shot at acting.

Photo of Chris Burke, right, and Michael Rankin in a 1991 episode of ABC's "Life Goes On." Burke, an actor with Down syndrome, played Corky, a child with the disability.

By Susan Brink, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

NICK DALEY, 28, has Prader-Willi Syndrome, a genetic disorder characterized by short stature, low muscle tone and mild retardation. He's also been in 17 films and 11 television shows, including a guest-starring role in last season's TNT series "Saving Grace."

"If I were a star, I would be on all over the world," he says. "I would be mobbed by fans. People would see my name and get my autograph."

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Blair Williamson, 28, is an actor with Down syndrome. He has been in clothing commercials for Macy's, was once murdered in a "CSI" episode and had a nose job on a "Nip/Tuck" episode.

"I love being an actor," he says. "It makes me feel good inside me."

Daley and Williamson are among a growing number of people with developmental disabilities -- including Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorders, mild retardation and seizure disorders -- who want to be in the movies, or on TV. They want to make records, or be in commercials. They want what a lot of people in this town want: to be stars.

And some of them are getting close.

Their aspirations are a small part of a sea change in thinking about adults with disabilities since 1973, when California passed landmark legislation known as the Lanterman Act (updated in 1977). It granted services (and funding for them) to people with disabilities to let them live as independent a life as possible.

Since that time, people with disabilities slowly and persistently have paved a new way for themselves, allowing society to grow accustomed to seeing them bagging groceries, running flower stands, serving coffee or stocking shelves. "Our constituents want to work, to be active members of society, to earn money," says Dr. Paula Pompa-Craven, vice president of Easter Seals Southern California.

And over the decades since the Lanterman Act was passed, people with developmental disabilities are not only coming out of hiding, they're also showing up on the big and small screens as casting directors discover the obvious: People with disabilities who have acting talent can actually play people with disabilities.

According to statistics from the Media Access Office, the state's liaison between performers with disabilities and the media, in 2001, the office submitted 1,087 performers' résumés, which resulted in 64 entertainment jobs. In 2002, the office submitted 961 résumés, resulting in 166 hires. Since then, says Gloria Castañeda, the office's program director, staff limitations have prevented updated statistics.

It's still a rough road for the 10% of Screen Actors Guild members who have a disability. But for talent agents such as Carmel Wynne, who places actors with developmental disabilities, this client pool is becoming an easier sell.

"Why shouldn't more people be able to turn on the TV and see people who look like them?" says Media Access Office volunteer Gail Williamson of North Hills, Blair Williamson's mother.

Keeping it real

Probably the easiest casting call is when the role is for a character with a unique physiognomy. "It's a slam dunk with Down syndrome," says Wynne, director of talent at Performing Arts Studio West, a state-funded acting, music, dance and production studio for people with developmental disabilities in Inglewood (see related story). She's referring to the classic facial features associated with the syndrome. "More nontraditional disabilities are harder," she says.

Although the viewing public has come to accept story lines about people with disabilities,

typically, non-disabled actors get the roles, as in "My Left Foot," "As Good As It Gets," and "Rain Man." The 1989 television series "Life Goes On" was a breakthrough -- a prime-time drama about a family with two children, one of whom had Down syndrome. In that show, Chris Burke, an actor with Down syndrome, played Corky Thatcher, the child with Down syndrome.

John Frank Levey, now senior vice president of casting for John Wells Productions, worked with Burke -- his first experience with an actor with a disability. "Chris Burke came into the network test, a dehumanizing experience for any actor," Levey says. "Rather than being disarmed, he disarmed everybody and went around the room giving hugs."

Over the years, Levey has cast actors who are deaf, blind, HIV-positive and developmentally disabled, with an eye on keeping it real. "Authenticity is an important part of good film and television," he says.

Levey cast Nick Weiland, 29, who has Down syndrome and is a Performing Arts Studio West client, in the role of Peter Fonda's son in an "ER" episode last season. Levey was impressed with the actor. "Nicholas was a delight on the set," he says. "He was prepared, open and flexible. He was an actor."

Just last week, another actor who trained at Performing Arts Studio West, Luke Zimmerman, 29, scored a coup -- four episodes in an as-yet-untitled ABC Family network project created by Brenda Hampton, creator and executive producer for the TV drama "7th Heaven." The new project auditioned non-disabled actors for the role of a disabled older brother in a drama about a family of teenagers but ended up casting Zimmerman, who has Down syndrome, for the recurring role soon after he read, according to John Paizis, founder and director of the acting studio.

For Nick Daley, acting has been a dream since he was a kid. He watched hundreds of TV shows and movies, imagining himself in countless roles. "When I was 10 or 11, I would imitate the people," he says. His goal was to become a professional actor, and his training at the studio, along with industry connections cultivated by Wynne, helped him snag his TV and movie roles.

"Nick was incredibly professional," says Liz Dean, casting director for the "Saving Grace" episode in which Daley worked with Oscar-winning actress Holly Hunter, the series' lead. "A lot of times actors will come in -- these are actors without disabilities -- who haven't memorized their lines, haven't made strong choices about the characters.

"Nick came with very strong choices about how the character was feeling at each moment. When I brought him in to read in front of the producers, he was even stronger. Rarely do you see someone get better for the producers. He's an actor who is well trained."

The ultimate goal for a casting director, Dean says, is finding the best actor for the role without regard to the performer's personal circumstances. Actors with disabilities have certain advantages in playing characters with similar disabilities. They don't have to worry about how to portray the actual physical or mental challenges. "They live it every day. So they can just act the role," she says. "It's always better to start with the actual disability. Otherwise, there's something that rings false."

In "Saving Grace" Daley played a mentally challenged young man with epilepsy who's suspected of murder. "I wasn't myself," he says. "I was a different person. It feels like you're on a different planet."

Paizis saw Daley's transformation into the character. "He was playing someone who was more low functioning than he actually is, someone more simplistic," Paizis says. On the set, he watched as Daley took a few minutes to concentrate. "He just put his head down. Paused. When he came up, he was a different guy," he says. "I had goose bumps."

Paizis finds it troubling when "normal" actors play a character with a developmental disability. "It's difficult for me to watch," he says. "Almost always, they take on childlike aspects. In reality, these guys [with intellectual disabilities] work very, very hard to maintain an adult persona."

People with a variety of disabilities continue to break new ground, sometimes in ways that startle as they illuminate. Marlee Matlin, a deaf actress who won an Academy Award in 1987 for her role in "Children of a Lesser God," is a contestant on this season's "Dancing With the Stars," waltzing and fox trotting to a silent, internal beat. But clearly there are limits to appropriate casting, and many performers with certain disabilities will likely play characters who have those disabilities. "It would be very hard to have the idea that Hamlet should be somebody with Down's," Levey says. "But within the realities of the disability, the authenticity moves the crew, moves the other actors and creates a great vibe for the audience."

It's tough for anyone to break into show business, as shown by a 2003 report by the Screen Actors Guild. About 1,200 of the guild's 120,000 members have a disability of any sort, mental or physical. About one-third of those actors with disabilities reported working in a theatrical or television production that year. That's worse than the 73% of white, non-disabled actors who found work, but better than the 23% of non-disabled actors of color.

Even if the clients at Performing Arts Studio West and other studios don't get their big break, the hard work can have other, very practical benefits, says Gail Williamson, who founded the website Down Syndrome in Arts and Media. Her son gets acting training at Born to Act Players, a Valley Glen theater company for performers with or without disabilities. She says he gained self-confidence and improved his speech through his acting career, which began with a Proctor & Gamble commercial when he was 10.

Self-confidence is a plus in any job market. "People with disabilities learn some amazing life skills through drama," Williamson says. "They learn body awareness. They learn to stay in the moment. They learn to listen so they respond appropriately. They use their speech. And all of these skills translate into any occupation, any social situation. They learn life skills to become employable people."

That's the goal. People who learn to listen, to show up on time and to speak up for themselves are more successful in jobs and in society, says Mike Danneker, executive director of the Westside Regional Center, part of the state system that funds programs for adults with autism, cerebral palsy and mental retardation. "Our push is to get people trained so they can take the next step to the real world, rather than keeping them in a workshop for 40 years," he says.

That might mean a program that concentrates on social skills or language skills. Or a more sheltered program in which people create jewelry or art to sell. Or it might mean a studio where people hone skills in acting, music and dance.

A few years ago, jobs for people with mental disabilities were largely limited to the fields of food or janitorial services. "Now they're in banks, hospitals, law firms," Danneker says. "We [social services professionals] used to be part of the problem. We thought they couldn't do much because they were, you know, 'retarded.' When we raised the bar, and changed our mentality, they took off. We're not going to have brain surgeons come out of our system. But our folks, even with very low IQs, can do a lot of stuff, if given half a chance."

And given a full chance, dreams soar. "Hopefully," Daley says, "I'll win an Academy Award some day."