

# ADVOCACY

*People First of Toledo Monthly Newsletter*

## Disability Representation in Media

*By Quinn Thomas*

With Halloween around the corner, now is the perfect time to remember that disability is not a horror story. Some parts can be scary, yes, but that does not make disabled people or disability itself something monstrous.

People with disabilities make up roughly 20% of the population. And yet, only 2% of mainstream media characters are disabled. When it comes to TV and movies, 95% of those disabled characters are played by able-bodied, neurotypical actors. This isn't fair-- not to disabled actors trying to make it in the entertainment industry, and not to the millions of disabled people at home who only ever see ourselves on screen or in books as stereotypes.

The media can affect how people view minority groups in real life. Sociologists have studied this a lot. It's not just disability-- this is a problem for people of color, feminists, and LGBTQ+ activists too.

Sometimes this effect is easy to see. The movie Rain Man impacts how people view autism to this day. While some autistic people could be like that character, most aren't. But because of the movie, too many people expect all autistic individuals to have high, obvious sensory needs and splinter skills.

### UPCOMING EVENTS

#### ADULT AUTISM GAME NIGHT

7:30 PM October 21st at the Toledo Game Room. Board games and tabletop roleplaying.

#### CONGRESSIONAL VISITS

2:00-4:00 PM October 24th at the Ability Center. Meet with your U.S. representatives to discuss disability issues.

#### HALLOWEEN PARTY

6:00-8:00 PM October 27th at Courageous Acres. Wear a costume.

#### ELECTION DAY

6:30 AM - 7:30 PM November 8th. Midterm and local elections.

#### SUPER SATURDAY DANCE

7:00-9:00 PM November 12th at the Five Lakes Church gym. For I/DD individuals.

People may not think that's a bad stereotype. But it hurts every autistic person who isn't like that and has to deal with those expectations from people. This is why even "good" stereotypes aren't really good.

Other famous examples include *Forrest Gump*, *Identity*, *Music*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and various superheroes like Charles Xavier, the Winter Soldier, and Cyborg. Some of these are more accurate portrayals than others. But specific characters or movies don't need to be famous to play into a popular theme. How often do you see the "scary" villain with obvious scars on their face? Why do only the villains ever have that? Why are fictional serial killers always mentally ill, when in real life, mentally ill people are more likely to be victims of violence than to commit it? Why do beloved characters become disabled only for it to be reversed or "overcome" within a few episodes, if not that very episode itself?

Other tropes in media include characters desperately trying to hide their disability, or pushing themselves past their limits for one reason or another. Characters with prosthetics can slip them on easily and they work as well as a biological limb-- or better, as a weapon.

Characters who are disabled long-term are sometimes given near-magical cures to undo all the real effects of their disability, like Barbara Gordon as Batgirl. Other times we are shown a tragedy where a character becomes disabled and can no longer do what they love most in life. The disability itself becomes the enemy in that plot.

## What can we do?

We can demand better. And beyond that, we can *do* better ourselves. Representation has been improving lately. People are more willing to listen. We can tell our own stories about what we are really like.

## OUR NEXT MEETING

October 20th, 6:00-7:30 PM

Unruly Arts Studio in the Toledo Botanical Garden

5403 Elmer Drive, Toledo, 43615

\$5 meeting due



**People First  
of  
Toledo**