Disability Deep Dive: Access, Not Applause, Sarah Todd Hammer on Moving Beyond Inspiration

Keith Casebonne (00:08):

What happens when real access, not just applause, becomes the standard? What does it take to move past feel-good stories, and actually build spaces, products and communities that work for everyone? That's where we're headed today on Disability Deep Dive. Hello, listeners. Welcome back. I'm Keith.

Jodi Beckstine (00:39):

And I'm Jodi. And this is Disability Deep Dive.

Keith Casebonne (00:42):

Today's episode is Access, Not Applause, Sarah Todd Hammer on Moving Beyond Inspiration. Sarah Todd is an author, speaker, and consultant whose work challenges how we think about disability, independence and design on the page in fashion and online.

Jodi Beckstine (00:58):

We talk about her journey with acute flaccid myelitis, how she's navigated the move from home to independent living and what practical access looks like for people with disabilities and companies alike.

Keith Casebonne (01:10):

You'll hear why she pushes back on "inspiration tropes", how everyday tools and choices matter, and what actually opens doors for people with disabilities.

Jodi Beckstine (01:20):

And after the interview, stick around for our Deep Cut. This week we're talking about Catwalk: From Glada Hudik to New York, a documentary that equates access and self-expression center stage.

Keith Casebonne (01:31):

Let's get started.

Jodi Beckstine (01:35):

Hello and welcome to Disability Deep Dive, Sarah Todd. Let's start at the beginning. For listeners meeting you for the first time, how do you like to introduce yourself and your work?

Sarah Todd Hammer (01:45):

Hi, thank you so much for having me. My name's Sarah Todd Hammer. I go by Sarah Todd as a double name or ST as a nickname. I'm named after my dad. Very common thing in the south to have a double name where I'm from, from Atlanta. And I am 23. Had a physical disability since I was eight years old, so a large part of my life and disability advocacy is also a great part of my life and my greatest passion, so I'm really excited to be here.

Keith Casebonne (02:19):

That's great. We're so happy to have you.

Jodi Beckstine (02:23):

Absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (02:24):

The disability that you mentioned is called the acute flaccid myelitis or AFM. So I guess a good way to start here is maybe in as simple way as you can say it, in as plain language as you can, can you share what that is and what it means for your daily routine and needs?

Sarah Todd Hammer (02:44):

Yeah, I'll give my disability story in as short of form as I can because it is a long one. So I mentioned that everything happened when I was eight years old, so I was not born with a disability. I was in second grade and everything happened to me, had gone to school like normal, and I was an avid dancer, so I loved ballet, that was my thing, and I'd gone to my ballet class after school. We were trying on our recital costume, so I was super excited. I was dancing around the room with my friend and then I all of a sudden got a really excruciating head and neck ache out of nowhere. So we paused and my mom came into the studio and we decided I was just going to go home and rest because it was so bad to the point that I was crying and couldn't continue class.

(03:38):

But on the way out of the dance studio, I sat down on a bench to adjust my tights and get my things ready and my arms and hands just stopped working out of nowhere. So obviously, I told my mom and we were like, we're not going home at this point. We were really far from a hospital, so we went to an urgent care that was really close. And by the time we got to the urgent care, I got out of the car and my legs were no longer able to hold me up to walk, but I could still move them. So they collapsed under me. My mom carried me inside, obviously distraught, and they decided to fly me via helicopter to the hospital. So I get to the emergency room. I was in the emergency room for six hours and was sent home after the six hours.

Jodi Beckstine (04:34):

Wow.

Sarah Todd Hammer (04:34):

Which is absolutely wild.

Keith Casebonne (04:36):

Without being seen? You were seen by someone or you waited six hours and then left?

Sarah Todd Hammer (04:40):

I was seen by a doctor. He gave me Motrin for my head and neck pain, which we did not need the ER for.

Keith Casebonne (04:49):

Talked about missing the point. Yeah. Okay.

Sarah Todd Hammer (04:51):

Yes. He talked with my parents because my dad at this point had arrived as well. He talked with them for hours. My parents, especially my mom, were asking him to run tests, asking him if I had a brain tumor, if I'd had a stroke, if I had MS, and he refused to run tests and kept saying I didn't have any of those diagnoses. And he told my parents that if I wasn't significantly better in the morning to bring me back, because by the time he essentially kicked me out of the ER, it was maybe 11:00 PM, late at night. And I remember my parents had to ask for a wheelchair for us to be able to leave.

Keith Casebonne (05:40):

Wow.

Sarah Todd Hammer (05:41):

They didn't even bring us a wheelchair. And I couldn't walk. So I'd been seeing a pediatrician my whole life. He was there the day I was born. We loved him so much. So my mom had later as I got older, shared with me that she had it in her head that she thought I had a brain tumor or something like that, and she was going to take me to see him first thing in the morning because she knew he would get everything done. But we go home. She slept with me that night to keep an eye on me. I doubt that she actually slept.

(06:11):

And I remember waking up in the morning and I, as an eight-year-old was so excited because I had taken the doctor's words to me that everything would be okay in the morning because he was like, "If she's not better, bring her back." So I woke up and I was like, oh, it's going to be okay. And then my legs were no longer working either. So I was completely paralyzed from the neck down within this matter of hours. So my parents called an ambulance. We went back to the same hospital and thankfully I was seen by a really good doctor that day. He did all the appropriate testing, MRI, lumbar puncture, all those things, and my MRI showed I had spinal cord damage from C-II to T-I.

Jodi Beckstine (06:56):

Wow.

Sarah Todd Hammer (06:59):

And I was diagnosed that day with transverse myelitis or TM. It's similar to AFM. So I was re-diagnosed with AFM in 2018, so eight years later. AFM in 2010 was not named. It was clearly a thing, but it didn't have a name.

Keith Casebonne (07:19):

Oh. Sure.

Sarah Todd Hammer (07:20):

So I was diagnosed with TM because it's similar, but they're different enough that diagnosis difference matters. So I was not in a car accident. It was not because of dancing. I just happened to be at ballet when it happened. That was just a coincidence. So this just happened. But AFM is a neuroimmunological disorder that's caused by a virus attacking the spinal cord. So I wasn't sick, I didn't have symptoms of being sick. A lot of kids with AFM do, honestly, most of them do. So they think I had probably an asymptomatic version of this virus, which is essentially a cold virus that does this and just for some reason, in kids who have a cold or have some type of illness, the virus sometimes weaves its way into the spinal cord and damages the spinal cord. So that is what happened in the beginning. There's a lot more I can share about how-

Keith Casebonne (08:20):

Sure, sure.

Sarah Todd Hammer (08:20):

... we got to where I'm today. But yeah, that's the initial story. And I stayed in the hospital for two months, did plasma freezes treatment in the ICU, which is what really helped me gain the movement back in my legs. So while I was in the hospital, did that and did inpatient rehab for five weeks of my hospital stay, and was able to regain some of my arm and hand movement, but not much. So I was able to walk out of the hospital with minimal assistance. Once I left the hospital, I didn't use a wheelchair, a walker cane ever again, but I have been left with partial paralysis in my arms and hands. So my left hand doesn't move at all. My right hand does, but it's super weak and I can't lift my shoulders up very high. So I have a very unusual disability, but that's what happened initially. And I can leave it for later to share more about how we got to where we're today.

Jodi Beckstine (09:25):

Sure.

Keith Casebonne (09:27):

It's an incredible story.

Jodi Beckstine (09:29):

Yes, definitely.

Sarah Todd Hammer (09:30):

Yes. Loaded story.

Jodi Beckstine (09:33):

I've been watching you on TikTok for a number of years, and I saw your film Pressing Buttons and it spotlights the transition from living at home to independent living. What support tools make the biggest difference for teens and young adults making that transition?

Sarah Todd Hammer (09:51):

I love that you watched my short film. Thank you. That means a lot. I'm super proud of that film.

Jodi Beckstine (09:57):

It's wonderful.

Sarah Todd Hammer (09:58):

Thank you. I would say it's interesting because I've had to work really hard to find different ways to do tasks for myself, whether that be finding a way to do something myself, like getting dressed. I put my right elbow on a surface so that I can lean over and get things over my head, or I rely on people for things. So it's a combination of finding different ways to do things for myself or asking for help from other people, whether that's a stranger, a friend or a family member. And I think from the outside looking in, a lot of people think the hardest part about supporting yourself as a disabled person is the finding ways to do things yourself and struggling with doing things yourself.

(10:43):

But what I personally have found more difficult is the relying on people for help. And so that's what inspired this short film. So honestly, I would say the best supports for teens and young adults transitioning to independent living is trying to be the best friend or support system that you can be for the disabled person you know. And that can honestly be as simple as saying to your friend or family member with a disability, "Just know that you're not bothering me. If you ask me for help, know that you're never inconveniencing me." And assuring them that if for some reason you can't help them, you'll let them know, "I'm sorry, I have an appointment or a class or work, and I can't make that work today."

(11:32):

And I think that really helps a lot, just hearing it from the person that you rely on, that you're not a burden, I will be there for you. And if for some reason I can't be like, I will tell you, and it has nothing to do with you. Because honestly, that is what I struggled with the most is relying on friends a lot for help because it has been difficult relying on my mom for help in some ways, but she's my mom and I know that she will do anything for me. So it's different than relying on friends who won't do anything for you because it's a different relationship and there's less obligation there, and so there's more guilt that can be put on the disabled person.

Jodi Beckstine (12:20):

Definitely. Definitely.

Keith Casebonne (12:23):

Well, I agree that the pressing button is amazing. But as someone who writes and speaks about disability as much as you do, what stories or truths did you feel were missing from the conversation out there? And how do you work to shift the focus from "inspiring" to talking about real access and real solutions?

Sarah Todd Hammer (12:48):

I would say I've noticed that when disability is talked about, which it rarely is, but when it is, it's either or. It's either this person is so inspiring and their life is so amazing. Look at all the amazing things they can do. They're a hero, blah, blah, blah. Or it's, this person's life sucks and this is miserable, and I would never want to live this way. And how sad. And they need to be cured type of narrative. And they're both very harmful for different reasons, some overlapping, and there's never a holistic view of the disability experience, or there rarely is. And that's one reason why I wanted to create my short film was because I was having a lot of honestly conflicting feelings about my disability or just complex feelings.

(13:40):

And so that's what I try to do with my social media content on TikTok and Scream YouTube and in my writing, and whenever I do a podcast like this, I want to share the challenges that I face because of my disability and be open about that and sit with those and allow myself to be annoyed and frustrated, but also let people know that that doesn't mean that I don't want to be disabled, that I'm comfortable this way now because it's been most of my life, so I don't know much different anymore, and it's informed so much of who I am. I would be a completely different person in ways I wouldn't even know if this hadn't happened to me.

(14:23):

So I think that there should be space held for both just because I might be really irritated or feel let down about relying on people for help or feel annoyed that I can't just throw my hair up into a bun or a braid and go on with my day. That doesn't mean that I'm not grateful for all the things that my disability has taught me, all the friends it's given me, all the experiences I've had. So that's what I want to show. And I feel like a lot of disabled feel that way too. We shouldn't reduce human beings no matter who they are to one specific story or one experience. Because we're so complex. We have complex emotions and feelings and experiences, so nobody, no matter who they are, should be reduced to just one story.

Jodi Beckstine (15:13):

Yeah, absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (15:14):

Disability is an aspect of you, but it's not you.

Sarah Todd Hammer (15:19):

Exactly.

Keith Casebonne (15:21):

We all have the same wants and needs and fears and yeah, it's a shame when that's what society does is just forget that all that exists and just, here you are, you have a disability, we're going to put you in this corner.

Sarah Todd Hammer (15:37):

Yeah, you're just that one thing.

Jodi Beckstine (15:40):

Yeah. I'm a little person, so I have a lot of explaining with my life is not the little women of LA. My life is not big little people, big world. Very different. Your consulting and modeling work, what is a practical design fix or adjustment you wish every brand or business would adopt to maybe boost independence or comfort for the user?

Sarah Todd Hammer (16:08):

So many things. So something that comes to mind instantly is thinking about shoes. Shoes are one of the most difficult clothing items for me personally. And I love fashion, I love clothing. My parents are in the fashion business and have been since I was baby, so I was raised to love clothing. And I really don't like the look of most slip on shoes. It's just like, I don't know, not the look for me, and I can't tie shoes because of my disability, but I really like how sneakers with laces look. That's just the look that I like. And I have been wearing every day. I was wearing them earlier today, my Kizik sneakers, they're a brand that created these sneakers that are hands free, so you can just put your foot in and they're on, and you can slide them off really easily, but they have laces, so you get the best of both worlds.

(17:12):

They have the look that I want and I can put them on and take them off. So thinking about things like that, I think Kizik shows that they're not compromising on style at all. They have a really cute look. They have different styles too, so you can find something that you like, but they're accessible and they understand that marketing too. And so that just is something that comes to mind. Thinking about not compromising on style for access, that's definitely possible. And for some reason, a lot of clothing brands I see that are trying to be accessible, they compromise on style, and I don't know why there's no reason to do that. I mean, a lot of them might be geared towards elderly people. I've noticed that. But elderly people might like to be stylish too.

Keith Casebonne (18:00):

Yeah, right. What is that? Yeah.

Sarah Todd Hammer (18:01):

My grandma's one of the most stylish people I knew. So I think that's also just a concept of ageism coming in there too. But yeah, not compromising on style for the sake of accessibility.

Jodi Beckstine (18:15):

Selena Gomez has lupus, and she was talking in another podcast about arthritis in her hands, and she was developing her makeup line and by accident it's very easily accessible and people with low dexterity in their hands, and it just led her into each thing that she created to keep that in mind. And I really love that about that line.

Sarah Todd Hammer (18:41):

Me too. It's like my favorite makeup brand because the makeup itself is good too.

Jodi Beckstine (18:45):

Absolutely. Absolutely. That's just a bonus.

Sarah Todd Hammer (18:48):

Yes.

Keith Casebonne (18:49):

And I'm just nodding my head because I unfortunately have no idea, but sure, I agree. Whatever you guys say, yeah. But I love that. I love that there's more and more... And I think social media has a lot to do with that too, and the fact that people can speak about these things, and you can have a celebrity who is, we've had celebrities in the past that do fashion and makeup and all that, of course. But now that we have celebrities with disability and they're on social media and everything is, oh, hey, they're just regular people and so on. I don't know. I feel like it's a good... If we could talk a lot of bad about social media, but I think one of the great things about social media is that we do open up a world of possibilities and awarenesses. I mean, that's what everything's about here is using social media for awareness.

Sarah Todd Hammer (19:40):

Absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (19:41):

But as far as products and things like that, I think it helps to, it is far from perfect, but it's nice to see when some of this stuff starts coming into fruition, like makeup that's easier to use for someone with low dexterity and so on. I don't know if that would've happened, let's say 15 or more years ago before-

Jodi Beckstine (20:00):

Absolutely.

Sarah Todd Hammer (20:00):

Probably not, because it's just now happening too.

Jodi Beckstine (20:04):

Yeah.

Keith Casebonne (20:04):

Yeah, exactly. Well, and speaking of social media, you've clearly built a strong following on TikTok. So what do creators and organizations need to know to make their content accessible and respectful for disabled viewers beyond just the basics, like captions?

Sarah Todd Hammer (20:29):

I am all about social media accessibility, and the difficult thing with it is that the platforms limit what you can actually do because of just the way they're built or the features they have or don't have. But what I try to do for my content personally is caption everything that has audio, whether that's a video on TikTok, a reel on Instagram, a short or a long form video on YouTube, an Instagram story. I caption everything. And that is the basic thing. So I feel like most people are familiar with captions because my generation is actually liking captions, whether they have a disability or not. I've noticed it's a common thing. So I do that. That's very basic.

(21:14):

And then I always try to put a video description or an image description for photos on all of my posts. So this is for blind or low vision people so that they can use their screen reader to have it read out loud to them so that they have context of what the image or the video is. So for my videos on TikTok, I put it in the caption below what my actual caption is, and I always keep it pretty basic and focused on the most important parts of the video. So it usually just briefly describes what I look like if I'm in the video, which I usually am. And any text boxes that might be on the screen, I put those in text because they wouldn't be able to see those necessarily. So I always do that. And then for my hashtags or any usernames or links, I capitalize the first letter of every word, and that's called Camel Case.

Keith Casebonne (22:09):

Camel. Yeah.

Sarah Todd Hammer (22:11):

So I usually do #DisabilityTikTok and #DisabilityAwareness. So I capitalize disability and TikTok, and then disability and awareness so that it's easier for everyone to read for one thing, but that's also, so screen readers can read them accurately. So those are the main things that I do to make sure my content's successful. If for some reason there's ever a flashing light or some type of effect, I also put a warning.

(22:39):

I try not to use stuff like that, but I maybe put a warning on videos like that just for people with photosensitivity. And then sometimes in my videos, I actually try to describe what I'm wearing, if it's applicable or if I have a screenshot behind me of something, if I can try to read the text on it, things like that. So those are all those basic things that I try to do, and I try to do that because my followers, a lot of them have disabilities, and there are a lot that don't too, but a lot of them do. And I want to practice what I preach. I feel like I cannot be asking places or people to be accessible to me if I'm not doing that for other people.

Keith Casebonne (23:26):

Yeah, excellent. Yeah, it's a beautiful approach.

Jodi Beckstine (23:31):

So for people designing products, we touched on that a little bit, services and spaces. What are your top three simple steps for making things accessible right away, and what's one common mistake you see that they leave behind?

Sarah Todd Hammer (23:44):

Ooh, accessible right away. I mean, okay, I'll start with the second part of that question first because I feel like it's something that I don't see talked about. A lot of the time there'll be a "accessible product", but it's impossible to open the packaging that it was shipped in. So if I order something online, I don't know, just some accessible makeup, no example specifically, but if I order an accessible makeup online and it comes in some bag or box that's super impossible to open. This happens all the time with PR I receive, brands will send me things. So for example, might get some makeup from not an accessible makeup brand, but the makeup itself might be easy to open, but the way they've packaged it is ridiculous and then makes it impossible for me to access. So just thinking about the packaging, not on the actual product, like the bag it's in, the box it's in, whatever PR it's sent in. That's super important. That's something I see missed.

(24:51):

Top three things that could be done right. I mean, the main thing for me is ease of accessing the product as a whole. For example, if it's a foundation, like a makeup foundation, I need to be able to open it. So being able to open the product, if it's a makeup, if it's... I feel like makeup's just an easy example for this. So if it's a makeup, being able to open it, being able to actually get the product out. How hard is it to squeeze? Because I've seen some products that I'm like, this is impossible. Even sometimes I try to squeeze with my legs, which have pretty good strength and it's difficult. So actually getting the product out like that, and then just ease of use, so somebody might be able to open it or actually get it out, but how easy is it to actually apply with a brush or a beauty blender or something like that. So that's what I would say. Just makeup's a good example.

Jodi Beckstine (26:00):

Yeah, definitely.

Keith Casebonne (26:02):

Well, and I feel like there's so many things this makes me think about things like universal design and that sort of thing where it helps everybody in a sense. I think packaging is a great example. As you were saying that I think of, there's a meme of someone buying scissors and they're in a pack that they can't open. They need scissors, but it's that forward-thinking about, so it's not a disability specific thing, but it's just that idea of not really considering-

Sarah Todd Hammer (26:27):

It's the same thing.

Keith Casebonne (26:28):

Yeah, the needs to-

Sarah Todd Hammer (26:30):

Yes.

Keith Casebonne (26:30):

Yeah, yeah.

Sarah Todd Hammer (26:30):

And it makes it less fun for me too. Sometimes I'm super excited about something I order and then it comes and I can't open the box that it was shipped in or the bag it was shipped in. And then once I get that open, if it's clothing, for example, and it's in a bag, sometimes I can't open the bag. And I'm like, well, this stinks, because sometimes I have to wait until someone is around to help and I'm like, oh my God, I've been so excited to open this, and then I'm less excited.

Keith Casebonne (26:55):

To bale it down.

Jodi Beckstine (26:57):

I've even found the problem with opening chip bags, they've gotten even harder because they're glued so tight and you're-

Sarah Todd Hammer (27:03):

Oh, they're so frustrating. I always cut them and then that's annoying because then they're harder to keep not stale.

Jodi Beckstine (27:10):

Yes, absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (27:13):

Now I want chips. Okay. Anyway.

Sarah Todd Hammer (27:15):

Sorry.

Keith Casebonne (27:16):

No, we're good. We're good. We're good. It's close to lunchtime when we're recording, so it's just for context. Well, so we do a segment on our show called Deep Cut, and what we do is we talk about some piece of media, a book, a song, a film that we feel relates or connects to the content of the episode. And so we also like to ask our guests if there's any book or film, show, song, again, any kind of media, it could be a video game, it could be anything that you would recommend to listeners who want to better understand access or even just something that just stands out for you, something that you just feel like you connect with and you'd like to share.

Sarah Todd Hammer (27:58):

A book immediately comes to mind. My friend Jessica Slice, she went to Davidson College, which is where I went to college before me, and we connected while I was there because she's an alum, and she has a disability herself, and she is a mom of two children, and she recently released a book called Unfit Parent, and it was incredible. I learned so much about her as my friend from reading it and just about being a disabled parent and the challenges that come from that that are not necessarily from her disability, but more so from how people view her as a parent and her capabilities as a parent. And as someone who's 23, almost 24, I'm not ready for kids right now, but I would love to be a mom in the future. And it really was great. Just to read that, I feel like I have so much knowledge that is important for me to have, to be able to advocate for myself as a hopefully future mom.

(29:06):

So that comes to mind. Her book, Unfit Parent, I purchased my copy from Amazon, so I know it's on Amazon, but definitely recommend her book. And she has other books, other writing. She's very prolific. I read her other book, Dateable. I was actually featured in that she and her co-author, Caroline Cupp, they interviewed a lot of different disabled people for that book. That came out last year, and it was about dating as a disabled person, and that was really good read too, especially as a young woman. So those two books come to mind.

Jodi Beckstine (29:45):

Those are great.

Keith Casebonne (29:45):

Awesome.

Jodi Beckstine (29:46):

Great recommendation.

Keith Casebonne (29:47):

Wonderful. Yeah, very cool. Awesome.

Sarah Todd Hammer (29:51):

Thank you.

Keith Casebonne (29:52):

Well, Sarah Todd, this has been a real pleasure. Thank you so much for sharing your time with us, and of course, your story.

Sarah Todd Hammer (30:01):

Thank you.

Keith Casebonne (30:02):

Yeah, we really appreciate you.

Sarah Todd Hammer (30:04):

Thank you. I loved this conversation, great questions, very thought-provoking questions as well, so I appreciate that.

Jodi Beckstine (30:11):

Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure meeting you. I've been watching you on TikTok. It's nice to actually have a conversation with you.

Sarah Todd Hammer (30:18):

Yes, yes. Thanks so much for supporting me too.

Jodi Beckstine (30:23):

We're not done yet. This week's Deep Cut is next.

Keith Casebonne (30:28):

This week's Deep Cut is Catwalk: From Glada Hudik to New York, a 2020 Swedish documentary that follows a group of models with intellectual disabilities as they set out to achieve their dream of walking the runway at New York Fashion Week. Released at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the film offered something the world was missing, genuine joy, connection, and hope without relying on tired inspiration cliches.

Jodi Beckstine (30:53):

What sets catwalk apart is its focus on respect, teamwork, facing your fears, and the brilliance of the cast, showing that everyone deserves to shine without labels or limits. Today, we'll break down what the film gets right, where it opens doors, and what it means for representation and access.

Keith Casebonne (31:12):

So how did your expectations going in compare to your feelings by the end? Did the film avoid the inspiration trap or fall into it at any point?

Jodi Beckstine (31:21):

Okay, going in, being honest, I was really braced for this inspirational treatment.

Keith Casebonne (31:28):

Me too, me too.

Jodi Beckstine (31:28):

Glossy, feel good documentary that flattens the people into this. I'm disabled, but courageous. Something sappy, but I was totally surprised in the best way. It had heart. I don't think it overreached, and it stayed grounded in their everyday lives. That's what I liked the most about it. We got little segments of each person, what their life is like, a little bit of their backstory, their quirks, their friendships, and even awkward and funny moments that had nothing to do with disability or anything. It was just real reactions.

(32:14):

So I felt like it really avoided that inspiration trap because it didn't try to convince you that these models were extraordinary because they were disabled. What was extraordinary about them is their drive and their dreams and their willingness to do what it takes to make them come true. Even with Emma's first step of contacting Pär about this whole thing, it took her drive to do that. Her, I want this dream and I'm going to do what it takes to make it happen. And by the end, I didn't feel inspired. I felt connected to them with my own dreams and fears and wanting to be heard and seen. So they were doing things on their own terms, and I think a lot of people like to do that, but aren't always successful at it. So seeing them do that was wonderful.

Keith Casebonne (33:24):

Yeah, I agree. When it first began, the first few minutes, I felt the same way. I was like, oh, go, no, I don't know that I'm going to enjoy this. I feel like this is going to go the wrong way. But it quickly righted itself, and I couldn't even put my finger on exactly what it was, at least not at this point. If I went back and rewatched, I probably could. But after seeing the whole thing and having a very different feeling by the end, I couldn't even tell you what it was, but just the first couple minutes there was something that made me pause and think, oh, it's going to be again, inspiration tropes and that trap. But it really turned out not to be, and it became something so much better. So yeah, yeah, for sure.

Jodi Beckstine (34:06):

So were the model's own stories and perspectives, did you feel like it was the heart of the film? Was there a balance between their experience and maybe that of Pär and the people that were helping, the designers that were helping with the show? Did you feel a balance with that?

Keith Casebonne (34:27):

I felt that there was a pretty good balance. I mean, I do feel like the stories of the models were the focus, but I am glad that we got to see a lot of the behind the scenes work that was done to help. And I think that's part of what made it feel just more like a documentary about here's what we're trying to accomplish versus the inspiration trope that could have been otherwise. So I think that actually it's good that they kept a balance. I think that's part of why it didn't come across that way.

(35:05):

But the model stories, they were the heart of the film for sure, but I was glad to see a lot of other aspects of that. It was really nice that we saw Emma's dad and their interaction, and he pops up here and there, and I thought that was really sweet. So yeah. But I do feel like we got a look into the eyes of the models and saw things from their perspective. It was with powerful content and behind the scenes stuff, the personal interviews, it all added to it. And I thought it was a very well-made documentary style film.

Jodi Beckstine (35:50):

I like the moments where the choreographer and it had a moment where she was worried about spinning because of her epilepsy and the way the choreographer, instead of like, oh, you'll be fine, just this placating forcing type of thing. She came up with the, "Well, reach for apples and just reach around the room for these apples." And Emma did it, and then she was like, "Do you know what you just did?" And Emma's like, "No." You spun in a circle. What you feared you just did, and you did it on your own, and you did it without even consciously thinking about it. And it was little moments that they peppered throughout that I really just, I loved because it was not necessarily about her disability, it was about the facing of fears and doing it on her own that I liked about it.

Keith Casebonne (36:46):

And I think that's a good point. It's a great example and a good point about facing fears. I think among the different models, everyone had a different fear level. Everyone looked at it very differently. And again, it's complexity. I mean, we're all different. You could box everyone together and say, "Oh, these are people with intellectual disabilities." And they're going to all be scared, or this or that. No, that's not true at all. Were some a little scared and nervous at times? Absolutely. I would be, if you told me to do this and go to catwalk and whatever. I mean, of course, nervousness is normal, but there was a range of emotion there. Everyone had ups and downs. Some people came into it with a different perspective. Some were really like, what? I can't do this. And others were just out there right off the bat, just strutting, just like, I'm owning this catwalk. And it was awesome. I loved all that. So yeah, I think you got to see that broad perspective, and everyone was a little different. It was just, yeah, it was great storytelling.

Jodi Beckstine (37:53):

Yep. I agree.

Keith Casebonne (37:55):

So did teamwork and community come through as a key to their journey?

Jodi Beckstine (38:00):

Yes. That's one thing I liked about it. They didn't just tell a story. There were these moments of teamwork that, I don't know if Pär put into the whole process of doing this, but it was, "We're going to do this together, then we're going to do this together. We're going to do that together." It was this growth plan that went into what they were doing. It wasn't just, "Okay, we're going to put these clothes on and we're going to go do a catwalk because that's what you want to do."

Keith Casebonne (38:30):

Sure.

Jodi Beckstine (38:30):

It was, "What can we all gain from this experience and this journey?" One of the scenes that really stuck with me was Ida and the dog sledding scene. She was scared to death. I mean, it was palpable and it was so raw, and I was just crying the whole time because I could feel her fear, and it just, it broke my heart to watch her, but she pushed through it. And everyone around her, they didn't force her, but it was this, "You're safe. We have you. We're here with you. You can do this." And that to me was courage, that she didn't just say, "Nope, I'm not doing this."

(39:19):

She was like, "I am falling apart here, but I'm going for it." And then she's cry laughing through the first few minutes of this sled ride and just the joy that she felt overcoming that fear, being on this dog sled, and then, excuse me, I'm joy crying. And so it was such a beautiful moment for me, and there were so many moments like that throughout the film where they would just take someone's hand or wrap their arm around them, and it wasn't a, "I'm going to fix this." It was, "I'm here. You can do this. It's okay." And that's what made that whole journey that they went on this collective, not this each individual story. They were a team. It was about this team. It was about these people coming together, and I just love that so much.

Keith Casebonne (40:15):

I totally, yeah, totally agree. It's a great example, and I do love at the end of that, where I think, I'm sure I'm paraphrasing a little bit, but she says, "Par, I'm not afraid anymore." And she just has this big grin, and like you said, she's cry laughing and just loving it. It was so touching. And it was a short scene, but it packed a lot. I mean, it so much happened in that scene that really set a stage for future things to come in the movie. It was really great.

Jodi Beckstine (40:48):

Definitely. Has the film sparked new conversations for you or new thoughts for you about what authentic inclusion looks like?

Keith Casebonne (41:02):

Yeah. Yeah, I think so. I think what they did, it was very authentic. I think the... Well, first of all, yes, they were modeling and they had outfits and they learned how to walk the catwalk, but there was more to it. There was an underlying theme to the show about overcoming the oppressiveness that many people with disabilities historically have faced. And so it almost became, I thought of it more of an art piece, like a performance art piece than just a fashion show experience. And so they theme it about how this is another step to overcoming and a step to awareness for some people who may not be aware of the oppression that many people in the world still, they make a specific mention to how there are many countries that this oppressiveness is still very much real.

(42:16):

I don't mean beyond insults and strange looks like being in an institution where you don't see light, really horrible, dark things still are happening in this world. And so it was to bring that up. So I felt like this authentic inclusion, I mean, this is something very unique to the world of people with disabilities, and they built it into this show, and so they sent a really strong message at the same time of having a lot of fun and presenting this show for people.

Jodi Beckstine (42:57):

One of the things that I noticed, you mentioned it, becoming an art piece, and they still put fashion into all of it. I don't know if you noticed in the beginning when they were talking about Ida starting the show in the straight jacket, and they brought a straight jacket and she put an actual straight jacket on. They were talking about it, but then in the show, the straight jacket, it wasn't the same one. It was actually a fashion piece where her hands went into two pockets.

(43:24):

It had the string, it had the tie-up in the back. It was still very straight jacket, but it had grown into a fashion piece, which it was those little details that it was professional. It was this beautiful piece, and it wasn't just this throwaway, well, yes, again, we'll just do this little fashion show because they want to do this little fashion show. And it went from, they were expected to be in their hometown to now they're in New York City, and this is this real show and this real audience and this real thing that they created together as a team, and it was amazing.

Keith Casebonne (44:06):

Yeah, yeah, yeah. What was another favorite moment of yours from the film and why?

Jodi Beckstine (44:13):

My absolute favorite moment, and I actually let out a sound when I saw it, was when Emma and Pär were on the rooftop in New York, and they're just having this conversation, and it's quiet and a simple moment, but she looks at Pär and she says, "Tomorrow, the town is ours." That was such a beautiful moment because it was her staking her claim. It wasn't like this inspiring big moment. It was this little quiet moment where she was reflecting about the confidence that she's gained, the mutual respect between her and Pär. And it wasn't like this coach talking to a student or the director to a model. It was two people sharing pride in what they created as equal individuals. For me, it flipped the stereotype that you have to ask to be included. She's declaring, I belong. I belong on the runway. I belong in this city. I belong in the spotlight. And that just summed up for me, the movie as a whole, that you step into it, claim it, and share it with the people that got you there.

Keith Casebonne (45:38):

Yeah, that was a very beautiful moment. I agree. That was wonderful. One that jumped out in my head is a very quick one. I'll add something else to it, but when they're on the... They don't really show much about the traveling of who's going to physically be there other than the models and Pär. Then of course, later you see that the crew is there too, but Emma's on the runway, and then they cut to her dad, and I was like, oh, her dad's there. That made me literally go, oh gosh, I have two daughters. And so I don't know, it was just like, that's what always gets me when I see father daughter and stuff like that.

(46:16):

And so he made the trip. He was there. They didn't ever allude to that he's going at all, and then suddenly there he is. So that was a very like, oh my gosh moment. But there's some really good behind the scenes moments that have nothing to do with the planning of the event itself, of the modeling and the show, but there's a scene where Pär is just having dinner. He's making dinner with one of the models, and I can't remember his name, but it's just the two of them, and I don't know the nature of their relationship, but it seems as if they've known each other for a while and they're cooking dinner together, and there's just this real just genuine conversation between the two of them. And it was just, I don't know. I just was watching and thinking just, I don't know. It was just so real. It was just real.

(47:14):

And it stuck in my head afterwards, and I don't have a lot of notes on it or much to say other than it just stuck with me. It just was very real, and I think it just goes more to the credit, the quality of the film and how well it was made. It's just little things like that. I mean, they're making dinner together, but there was just, I don't know, something about it really stuck.

Jodi Beckstine (47:41):

And Par, what I loved about his relationship is he wasn't this like director. He was doing a lot of things behind the scenes, and he made a lot of things happen, but it was a collaboration amongst all the people. It was a collaboration amongst the models and the designers. They sat there and talked about the designs and what they wanted to see in the designs. They talked about the choreography and what they wanted the choreography to be, so it was such a collaboration as opposed to these people helping these people, which I love, that usually you don't see it, that dynamic.

Keith Casebonne (48:14):

It was a real partnership.

Jodi Beckstine (48:15):

I love that.

Keith Casebonne (48:16):

Nothing was forced on anybody. It was like, everyone's voices were heard and they really worked together to make what became was really a beautiful show.

Jodi Beckstine (48:25):

Yes. I'd like to see more of that happening.

Keith Casebonne (48:28):

Me too. Well, you mentioned that real quick, and before we close, I wanted to mention that after when I was searching for the movie on my TV, apparently there's also a series that was made, look about the same time. The series seems like each episode focuses on one of the models.

Jodi Beckstine (48:46):

Oh, wow.

Keith Casebonne (48:47):

So there's an Emma episode and there's a so on and so on, and they're about 20 minutes each. The total run time of the, I can't remember if it's five or six episodes, I guess it's six episodes because they're about 20 minutes each, and it adds about two hours. Well, the movie's about an hour and a half.

Jodi Beckstine (49:01):

Wow.

Keith Casebonne (49:01):

So I'm not sure if it's all new footage or if it's a lot of overlap. I haven't seen it yet, but it's a way to go. I'm curious to go back and watch those at some point and learn a little more about the backstory of each individual model. And I think the sixth one may be Pär himself because it's five models.

Jodi Beckstine (49:19):

Oh, nice. Yeah.

Keith Casebonne (49:20):

Yeah. So I think the sixth might be about Pär. So yeah, I want to go back and watch that. But anyway, mentioning it for viewers and listeners here, if they end up watching the movie, there's that companion piece to it as well.

Jodi Beckstine (49:33):

Fantastic. I'm excited to go back and to look at it. Catwalk: From Glada Hudik to New York is more than a feel-good story. It's a powerful reminder that every person deserves to be seen, heard, and celebrated on their own terms.

Keith Casebonne (49:48):

If you've seen the film or want to share your thoughts, send us a message or tag us on social media. We're always looking for more stories to feature and discuss through the lens of disability, creativity, and access.

Jodi Beckstine (49:59):

Thanks for listening to our Deep Cut. That's it for this episode of Disability Deep Dive. A big thank you to Sarah Todd Hammer for sharing her insight and experience with us.

Keith Casebonne (50:12):

Sarah Todd reminds us that real access means more than applause. It's about agency, autonomy, and making space for every person in every part of life.

Jodi Beckstine (50:20):

If you found this episode helpful, please subscribe, leave a review, and share this episode with someone who cares about access.

Keith Casebonne (50:27):

And you can find Sarah Todd's books, her film, Pressing Buttons, and her latest work at saratoddhammer.com and on social media.

Jodi Beckstine (50:35):

Thanks for listening and see you next time. Disability Deep Dive is a podcast that is brought to you by Disability Rights Florida, where real conversations about life, culture, and ideas meet the lived disability experience. Follow us on YouTube, Spotify, and wherever you get your podcasts. You can also find us at disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast.