

NARRATOR:

The Disability & Philanthropy Forum presents Day Al-Mohamed, author, filmmaker, and disability policy expert.

DAY AL-MOHAMED:

Disability in the arts particularly when it is centered, has the ability to change culture. It has the ability to change the way we think about things. And so many things we may not even realize, if I go, may the force be with you, we all know whether you have seen the movies or not, it is part of the zeitgeist. And there's an expectation of what that story is, even if you don't know the details of it. If you see people with disabilities as heroic or as joyful, and that is what you're hearing, it actually creates this idea of what being disabled is.

And when the arts historically may have only showed folks as the angry, disabled person, the victim, the villain, the person who's cured, the metaphor for something else or somebody who basically has to die so the main character learns a good lesson, right? That's all you see. And that actually has real world ramifications too. If you see a disabled life as lesser, than what happens to you or a family member, or we can give examples from as recently as during this last pandemic, when they're talking about priority of care, who gets care in an overburdened hospital, and in real life, hospitals were putting people disabilities lower on the list for care. Not because they were less likely to survive COVID, but because of the perception of disability as less.

And the fact that arts can actually change that because the law actually, and yes, there actually was legal intervention to address that, because yes, it is illegal. But the law wasn't what the problem was so much, it's the perceptions that people have. And a law is cold and inflexible, and it's not something that's at top of people's minds. But that idea of film and television and arts, that's how you slowly change the way people view things. And so that's why I think having disability centered is so important. That's also why I think having disabled artists are centered. It's the part of any community, there's very nuanced storytelling. And one of the toughest things is to make sure you're supporting that.

I will put that out there specifically because in film, there have been films about disability. People with disabilities have had no rules of power in the creation of those films, which means they often follow stereotypes, those same tropes. They meet those same kinds of problematic ableist structures. And so that becomes an issue, and that I think is one that is more directly connected to philanthropy in so far as when funding, who are you funding and those projects who controls them? And in film in particular, it's real big on, we'll bring in a consultant, you can bring in a disabled consultant, but a disabled consultant on a film set does not have as much power as say the director or the producer.

It's one of those things where who controls makes such a big difference. And I think that's why centering not just of the content around disability, but as in who has the right to tell those stories. I'm not saying disabled people are the only ones, but I'm saying there should be a locus control that is recognized there. Otherwise you're missing some of the nuanced storytelling and the depth of what makes it actually meaningful.

NARRATOR:

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