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CBS Pledges To Increase Auditions For Actors With Disabilities



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Leadership Strategy



Daryl Mitchell plays a computer geek on CBS' NCIS: New Orleans. CBS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Just a little more than a week ago, Ali Stroker made headlines as the first person in a wheelchair to win a Tony Award. "This award is for every kid watching tonight who has disability, who has a limitation or a challenge, who has been waiting to see themselves represented in this arena," she said in her acceptance speech.

Now, thanks to CBS Entertainment and the Ruderman Family Foundation, those kids may soon see themselves represented in popular entertainment more frequently.

CBS Entertainment released a statement on Wednesday, pledging to increase auditions for actors with disabilities in each of its subsequent productions.

The announcement comes as a response to a request from the Ruderman Family Foundation, a nonprofit that specializes in disability inclusion. The Boston-based organization has advocated for disability representation in entertainment since 2016, when it criticized the film *Me Before You* for its casting of an able-bodied actor in a disabled role and for the character's eventual suicide — suggesting that death is a more desirable outcome than life with a disability, according to the foundation.

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That same year, the group published a white paper report titled “[Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television](#).” The data showed that fewer than 1% of TV characters have a disability, though nearly 20% of the U.S. population does. Of that percentage of characters with a disability, a mere 5% are played by actors who themselves have the disability.

The Ruderman Foundation published another [white paper](#) the following year that highlighted CBS as a leader in hiring actors with disabilities. At the time, the television network had 11 series or pilots featuring disabled performers.

Jay Ruderman, the president of the Ruderman Family Foundation, credits CBS' willingness for inclusion to the leadership of Tiffany Smith-Anoa'i, the executive vice president of entertainment diversity, inclusion and communications.

Ruderman hopes that other studios will soon commit to the pledge. “This is a very low bar,” he says. “We are talking about just auditioning.”

Hollywood has seen a demand for increased visibility of marginalized groups in recent years and people with disabilities are the next wave of this trend.

“The entertainment industry is looking for more authenticity, we see this in films like *Black Panther* or *Crazy Rich Asians*. Disability has been left out [of this surge in representation] and now it's coming into the conversation,” says Ruderman.

He envisions a future in which characters with a disability will be portrayed by an actor with said disability, “If a person of a different race plays someone of that race, it would seem inauthentic. I think in time it will seem inauthentic to see people without disabilities playing people with disabilities.”

For the 56.7 million people with disabilities in the U.S., hiring actors with disabilities is especially important from an employment standpoint, because it can reduce the stigma this community faces.

The unemployment rate for those with disabilities hovered around 8% in 2018, compared to 3.7% for those without disabilities, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Something as simple as on-screen representation can play a key role in shifting perceptions within the workforce, argues Ruderman. “The entertainment industry is very pivotal in shaping attitudes,” he says.



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