

MEDIA REVIEW: Tying Your Own Shoes One Film, Four Perspectives

By Ann Fudge Schormans

Released in 2009, *Tying Your Own Shoes* is a National Film Board (NFB) of Canada production, directed by award-winning filmmaker Shira Avni. As described on the NFB website (www.nfb.ca/tyingyourownshoes), this animated documentary “explores how it feels to be a little bit unusual,” and offers the viewer “an intimate glimpse into the exceptional mindsets and emotional lives of four adult artists with Down syndrome.” Combining the artworks of the four adults—Petra, Matthew, Katherine, and Daninah—with footage from interviews, the film is intended to disrupt taken-for-granted understandings and stereotypes about Down syndrome.

As a parent of two children with Down syndrome, my own interest in the film was shared by other parents of children with Down syndrome that I know. The promise of a film that might make visible the skills, talents, and abilities of our children with Down syndrome—a stark contrast to the more typical deficit-based representations that we are used to seeing—was one that was both welcomed and eagerly anticipated.

Approaching Adele Iannantuono, a parent of a young boy with Down syndrome, I asked her to consider writing a review of the film. A strong advocate for her son, Adele was excited by the opportunity to give a more public voice to her thoughts about the film. And, as is sometimes the way, Adele happened to know the sister of one of the artists in the film, Petra Tolley. One thing led to another and Petra accepted my invitation to contribute her own very important perspective on the film and the film-making process. Petra’s father, Chris Tolley, agreed to provide his own perspective as well. Over the course of making both *Tying Your Own Shoes* and an upcoming film entitled *Petra’s Poem*, Petra and her family have come to know the film’s director, Shira Avni, quite well and an invitation was extended—and happily accepted—by Shira to add her voice to this collection of reviews.

We begin with Shira’s voice. The original intention had been to begin with Petra’s piece—as one of the artists in the film I felt her voice should be at the forefront. The decision was made, however, to begin with Shira’s because, in her piece, Shira tells the story of the making of the film. Weaving in her own personal experiences with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, experiences that have influenced her film-making more generally and motivated the making of this film in particular, Shira’s piece provides background information and makes clear the extent, the importance, and the centrality of the work of the four artists in the film.

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Petra's voice follows. An actress and an artist, Petra was initially uncertain of what to write. At her request, I posed some questions to her and she has structured her piece around these questions. Petra articulates why she thinks the film is an important one. She writes of how being part of the film has been meaningful to her. But she also speaks to how it gives to non-disabled viewers a deeper understanding of people with Down syndrome. Written with much insight, humour, and care, Petra offers the reader of her piece many important and powerful messages. Both her writing and her work in the film serve to trouble common misunderstandings of people with Down syndrome.

In addition to being Petra's father, Chris Tolley is a volunteer at *Common Ground Co-operative*, an organization promoting sustainable self-employment for people with disabilities. He is also the past president of *Home in the Annex*, an organization promoting independence for people with disabilities. In his piece, Chris speaks to the power of the impression made by this film on non-disabled audiences; an impression created by an honest and dignified presentation of the humour, skills, and knowledge of the four adults with Down syndrome featured in the film.

We end with Adele Iannantuono. Adele speaks to her own reaction as a parent of a young child with Down syndrome. Engaging with the film from this vantage point, her viewing is rooted in her own recognition of the contrasts that exist between the way in which she and her family regard, value, and understand her son, and the ways that others often see him. Hers is an eloquent expression of her own dreams and worries for her son's future and a hopeful optimism that stems from her viewing of this film.

This collection of perspectives was, admittedly, deliberately solicited. As such, there is certainly room for others. We invite readers to view the film and, if they wish, to consider writing and submitting a review of their own.

Tying Your Own Shoes

By Shira Avni

The film *Tying Your Own Shoes* is a collaborative animated documentary portrait of four articulate, talented artists, all of whom have Down syndrome. *Tying Your Own Shoes* pro-

vides a forum for this group of artists with Down syndrome to portray themselves as they wish to be seen, through their own voices and artwork, rather than through the usual filters—family, caregivers, teachers, or the medical community. Combining live video interviews with each artist's beautiful animated self-portrait work and personal narration, the film provides an intimate window into the world of Down syndrome, as experienced from the inside.

I have been privileged in working with people with disabilities since the late 1980s, with my first summer job as a counsellor-in-training at a summer camp for people with disabilities in Ontario, where I worked for a number of years. This was one of the formative experiences of my life—I fell in love with the community and began volunteering at schools and group homes for kids and teenagers with disabilities.

Animation holds an exceptional array of possibilities for self-expression and discovery, often as much for the audience as for the creator. As a filmmaker and a spectator I am personally most attracted to films that make me feel something, learn something, reach out to me on a thematic, aesthetic, and especially on an emotional level. I've been fortunate in working within the artistic community at the National Film Board of Canada since 1997, where I was hired to work on a children's series celebrating Canadian multiculturalism. I directed one film, called *From Far Away*, and assisted on 5 others in the series. This was both my first professional film and also my first personal experience with social-issue filmmaking, and I was amazed at the impact it could create in allowing for unusual stories to be told in creative ways, and giving voice to those whose voices are not often heard.

Through the process of making my 2005 film *John and Michael*, an animated memoir of a love story between two men who have Down syndrome, I became deeply interested in working with people with Down syndrome as creators, as artists, as storytellers, educators, and collaborators, rather than simply subjects. *John and Michael* is loosely based upon the relationship between two men I had the privilege of working with many years ago at a summer camp for people with intellectual disabilities—two of the funniest, loveliest people I have ever met. They had an extremely intimate relationship and were

utterly inseparable. The technique is under-camera clay-on-glass animation, shot on 35 mm and 16 mm film and transferred to digital media, animated by sculpting a fine layer of clay on a glass surface and backlighting it to create the luminous effect of stained glass in motion.

I was working on an unrelated film when a friend informed me that the real-life John had died. I couldn't stop thinking about Michael and how he must be dealing with John's death, and found myself constantly sketching the two of them, wondering how Michael was coping with the loss of his intimate friend. The beautiful music, by the band *Ida*, which ended up comprising the film's soundtrack, was playing in the background of the café where I'd heard the sad news, and between my memories and the beautiful music I somehow ended up with a storyboard and rough script for the film.

The narrator, Brian Davis, is a young man with Down syndrome I met in Chicago. I'd interviewed several young men for the film, but he was by far the perfect narrator—bright, intuitive, and funny, with a contagious laugh and beautiful, deep, resonant voice. Brian profoundly understood the story and the emotion behind the relationship between John and Michael. As a musician, Brian was at ease with the microphone and clear on what precisely the recording was for. I was concerned about the issue of informed consent—the film deals with some fairly complex issues and I did not want to use his voice without being sure that he understood exactly where it would end up—but he made it very clear to me on several occasions that he had no doubts about the subject matter or the process. At one point he said, in reference to the same-sex relationship central to the film, “this person I love—this person is not—a FE-male! This person is—a MAN-male!”

Initially I'd brought Brian a script to read, but he was shy about his reading skills, so I showed him the storyboard and asked him to tell me the story of John and Michael, as he understood it from the drawings. His telling was so much more compelling and emotionally moving than my original script that I scrapped my writing completely! The film is used in group homes, workshops, and many other settings for people with disabilities as well as university students, teachers, staff training, and medical training—

often as a discussion starter or to address issues of love, sexuality, relationships, bereavement, and death within the Down syndrome and intellectual and developmental disability community.

Making Tying Your Own Shoes

The idea for *Tying Your Own Shoes* came while auditioning young men who had Down syndrome for the role of the narrator of the film *John and Michael*. When I met Matthew Brotherhood, who ended up being one of the artists in *Tying Your Own Shoes*, his father asked if I'd ever considered making a film where people with Down syndrome could be the driving creative force behind the project, and several of the parents I encountered echoed this question. A number of the young men interviewed were talented painters, sculptors, weavers, actors, and dancers, and the resounding message was that after the age of 21 their options for both employment and creative expression were severely limited. I began researching the subject and found that while there are several music videos, documentaries, and fiction films featuring people with Down syndrome, aside from the beautiful and funny animations by UK artist Lester Magoogan, there was no professional animation at all that I could find.

Inspired by the success of Tim Webb's groundbreaking film *A is for Autism*, I submitted a proposal to the National Film Board of Canada, but in order to secure funding, we were asked to demonstrate that someone with Down syndrome would be able to animate and tell their own story in a way which would be compelling for the viewer. Matthew came in to the NFB for 8 days for an intensive animation workshop, which introduced him to the basic concepts of animation, and he completed some tests and animation exercises. The NFB was deeply enthusiastic and impressed by the material Matthew had produced, and the proposal for *Tying Your Own Shoes* was accepted. The film took 3 years to make—1 year of pre-production, involving the application for funding, search for artists, test workshops, and preparation; one year of production, involving 2 months of an intensive animation workshop, several shorter follow-up animation workshops, monthly consultations with the artists during the editing process; and one year of post-production.

I sent out a package to all of the Toronto-area Down syndrome and disability-rights organizations, asking for submissions from adult artists with Down syndrome. The criteria were as follows—we were seeking adults who were:

- in the workforce and finished school
- involved in the visual arts on a professional or semi-professional level
- willing and able to be interviewed on tape
- submitted a portfolio of artwork, and a short bio

In May of 2007 we held a test animation workshop for the potential candidates, to determine their interest in the slow, painstaking animation process, and selected these four artists for the final film. In an effort to subvert the dominant paradigm of disability arts programs, all of the artists were paid a salary for their work, to reinforce the idea that they were professional artists contributing to a film, not beneficiaries of a special program. All of the artists rose to the occasion and were very professional in their work ethic and production.

Why Animation?

Animation provides the spectator with a unique window into an alternate reality, portraying difficult or taboo subjects in visual, poetic, and symbolic ways that get past the spectator's guard. Animation allows us to illustrate and experience memory, emotion, interior states, and first-person sensory experiences difficult to re-create as effectively in other forms of cinema. Animation gets "under the radar," so to speak, forcing the spectator to watch and listen attentively as their expectations are being subverted. For example, *John and Michael*, as a love story between two men with Down syndrome, plays to a far wider audience than it would as a live-action film. Animation uses symbols, metaphor, and visual imagery to communicate complex concepts or emotions, and can make direct visual links and connections using metamorphosis; adding a whole new layer of meaning to the imagery. As the animation process involves such an enormous amount of work, with 24 separate images projected for every second of film, the filmmaker is required to pare down to the essence of the story, of the

emotion, of the memory, the message, and this can be incredibly effective, informative, and moving. Animation allowed the artists to truly be the driving creative forces behind the film—they not only provided the visual and audio material, but were involved and consulted in every part of the editing and production process. I was very moved by the disability-rights movement's rallying cry, "Nothing about us without us", and I wanted to integrate that motto into the very structure of the project.

Workshop Process

Each participant was provided with their own animation lightbox, digital camera mounted on a stand, and computer with a colour-coded keypad so that they could each control their own camera and computer without assistance. We began with an introduction to various animation concepts and techniques, and each artist tried out and adopted the techniques that interested them. Petra and Matthew loved paint-on-glass, as well as traditional drawn animation; Daninah mastered cut-out animation, and Katherine created beautiful, rhythmic, shimmering abstract coloured grids in motion using ink on paper.

We conducted a series of 5 interviews with the artists—I had prepared some questions for them on basic themes—love, work, family, childhood, disability, Down syndrome, but we kept changing things depending on where they wanted to take the conversations. I did a rough edit of each interview in consultation with the artists, and they animated their segments based on the sound from the interviews. The "love" section particularly had sections of audio that the artists felt were too personal to have exposed publicly, though they were very comfortable and forthcoming during the interviews, and they ultimately requested that these segments be removed from the final edit. The artists in the film talk about many things, but particularly about their frustrations regarding communication—not being taken seriously, not being understood—and the film tries to provide them with an alternative, effective means of communication, causing the audience to really listen and comprehend in a deeper way.

The fine editing process with editor Carrie Haber took about a year, and I travelled to Toronto once a month to show each new ver-

sion to the group and get their feedback. Once the rough edit was complete, my assistant Lillian Chan and I started putting in the bridging pieces of animation, placing them where we had compelling audio, but not enough animation or usable video footage from the participants available. For example, the institution scene was animated by Lillian, in consultation with Petra. Petra is often very understated, discreet, and poetic when she speaks about difficult topics, and this sequence was part of a very intense discussion. I asked her afterwards to clarify what she meant in order to ensure that I'd correctly understood that she was talking about the fact that most people with Down syndrome even a few years older than she is had been institutionalized. She confirmed that yes, this is what she meant and that it's excruciatingly painful for her to think about that reality which she had escaped by virtue of being born into a progressive family right at the cusp of major reforms in disability-related policies.

One of the questions that came up was that test audiences didn't believe that the artists themselves were creating most of the animation—the assumption was that they had simply supplied the basic designs, and professional animators did all the rest. Once we edited in a couple of sequences of the teaching process, test audiences understood that the vast majority of the animation was done by the artists. Similarly, while the film was initially intended to feature only animation over documentary voices, we found that this approach was not as powerful. The feedback from test screenings indicated that the audience wanted to see and get acquainted with the artists producing the work. Documentary filmmaker Beverly Schaeffer explained that people with disabilities have often been hidden, and that by not showing the artists' faces we were unwittingly perpetuating that hiding. In the end, the video documentation which had been intended solely for "making-of" footage makes the film much more intimate and communicative.

Truth

Truth in documentary is kind of a fiction in itself, as documentary is always constructed to a degree—the editing process always about paring down, essentializing; every choice of camera angle, every shot selection reveals the bias of the filmmaker, and there is no such thing as

objectivity. *Tying Your Own Shoes* attempted to be as *subjective* as possible—the artists were involved in every editing decision and had full veto power to ensure that the film represented them as they wish to be seen. *Tying Your Own Shoes* involved an enormous amount of editing—over 40 hours of tape down to 16 minutes, which is not an uncommon amount for documentary film. This raised many ethical questions: what to cut? How much? Do we edit for clarity or for authenticity—i.e., do we leave the stuttering in or take it out for clarity? Every documentary edits out stammering, *er, um*, etc., and also rambling and tangents, but how much could we take out without compromising an essential aspect of the communication rhythms and patterns of the subjects? In the end we edited for time and clarity to an extent but left in as much of their speech rhythms as possible.

I am often asked which parts of the film were animated by the artists—it's easier to speak to what was *not* animated by them: Daninah's "in the pond" sequence was animated by Lillian Chan, though it was based on a series of layout drawings by Daninah, and all of the cut-out animation is animated by Daninah. Lillian also animated Daninah's "Love" sequence and Petra's "institution" sequence. I animated Petra's horse sequence, the roundtable sequence, and the birds flying away at the end (though the appearance of the 4-legged bird was animated by Matthew, as well as all of the beautiful animated colours filling the birds). The subtitles are all written in each artist's own handwriting, but the tracing was done by my assistant. The rest of the film was animated exclusively by the four artists themselves.

Generations

Working on *Tying Your Own Shoes* allowed me to see a cross-section of the recent societal and generational changes within the Down syndrome population. The world has changed enormously for people with Down syndrome in the past 40 years. The four artists portrayed in the film, Daninah, Petra, Katherine, and Matthew, represent significant generational and personal differences in terms of the way society has evolved in thinking about Down syndrome in every way. Their individual experiences reflect the recent changes in health, education, independence, employment, housing, and basic civil rights provisions for peo-

ple with Down syndrome. In earlier times, babies with Down syndrome were thought to be “uneducable,” and many were institutionalized and severely neglected. While interviewing potential candidates for the film, we met with several adults in their 50s who were very talented artistically but who were non-verbal due to having lived in institutions since birth and lacking any kind of stimulation, schooling, or expectations. We had to make the difficult decision to exclude these candidates as the interview and communication aspects of the project comprised an essential part of the piece.

The artists in *Tying Your Own Shoes* were thrilled to be able to portray themselves as they wish to be seen. All of their families and workers told us that there were marked changes in each of them after the film—that they are more confident, more talkative, more independent, and that all of their families got to know them more deeply through watching the film. We hope that *John and Michael*, *Tying Your Own Shoes* and an upcoming film, *Petra's Poem*, will open doors for other animation artists who have Down syndrome to produce and exhibit their work, telling their stories to a public who might be just that much more open to ideas of difference.

Tying Your Own Shoes: An Insider's Review

By Petra Tolley

I'm 39, and my name is Petra Tolley. My role is an actress in the film.

Title of the Film

The name of the film came from me. When I was a baby, a doctor said that I would never be tying my own shoes. I didn't know this until now. But the doctor was wrong about me. I can do everything in my own way. That's why the film is named *Tying Your Own Shoes*. This is painful memory for parents.

Importance of the Film

The film is important, because it has art. I love art; it's my passion and my favourite thing. My art is inside of me and it comes out in a very special way. Every person has their own thing, inside of themselves. Everybody has their own

talents. This helps their life grow, and gives different aspects in their life. It's good for people to know that.

And it's also important to know that it's hard for people who have Down syndrome to speak about that. We want to be like you guys in real life, we love doing the same things in life.

The Process: Involvement in the Film

From the beginning I got involved with Shira and the film, and my friends from my Film Board, with an interview. At the interview I sat with many other people at a wide-long table. Everyone was doing different things like art, clay, and acting.

During the summer I was working on the film in the National Film Board with Shira (the film director) and co-workers, and film actors, actresses. We were working on the film: on art, animation, and film clips of us. We learned about animation, and movements of things, using desk and art supplies and lights, up above us, and under too. This is special animation equipment in the Nation Film Board. All our work went into the film.

Favourite Things About the Film

One of my favourite things in this film is that I explain my own world of art. It's my world of wonder. This is inside of me, like a blossoming flower, that opens like a morning sun. I have a picture in the film, of a morning sun—it's how I feel when everybody smiles at me. My art comes out in a very special way. It comes from my heart and flows through my fingers, and I can see what I accomplished. I work hard at it, and it comes out beautifully when you watch it in the film.

What It Was Like to Work on the Film

Being in the film felt spectacular and very overwhelming in a good way. I learned about myself in many ways when I saw myself on video. I also liked when people from my regular work, *Common Ground*,¹ watched the film. They never knew that I can do this.

1 *Common Ground Co-operative* is an organization in Toronto, Ontario promoting sustainable self-employment for people with disabilities.

A great thing about being in the film is being with friends. These are the other actors and actresses, Matthew, Katherine, and Daninah, also the director Shira, and the people from the film board, like my old swim coach, Christine. I always like working with Shira, and everyone, too. They are so very funny, especially Matthew. The other actresses are always smiling in a great way. Daninah is a cute ballerina, and Katherine very silly, and very sweet when it comes to seeing food made from my work at *Common Ground*. She always likes chocolate chip cookies. *Common Ground* did a lot of catering for our film. Shira is very happy-go-lucky, and very free, and outspoken. Shira's work comes from her caring heart, which cares for us. She's the one who did everything for us, is beside us. Matthew and I agree with that. That explains Shira!

What's Next?

Now that the film is done, I have been to different events like film screenings and film festivals. For example, New York City, and some gatherings in Toronto. In the fall, after watching the film, I was on the panel answering many questions at U of T [the University of Toronto]. Right now I'm making a new film, with the same director. The film is about my own poem [*Petra's Poem*], and it is in 3D.

I'll keep on working at *Common Ground*. It's a place that has 3 businesses; New College [at the University of Toronto], Surrey Place, and JVS, where we sell a lot of baked foods and drinks, and caterings. I'm a competitor in swimming, in Special Olympics, for a very long time. I live in a house, with other roommates, and they are cheerful.

As I always say, is not too serious, and to have fun!

Tying Your Own Shoes: A Review

by Chris Tolley

The 16 minutes it takes to screen *Tying Your Own Shoes* can be considered short by some standards however, in this 16 minute screening of the experiences and art of four young adults with Down syndrome, more is effectively illu-

minated than in many longer, weighty treaties. The 16 minute screening is a beginning; the film once viewed creates an indelible impression. I'm trying to think of an analogy; my mind turns to impressions made by other visual arts and I wonder what causes these powerful visions to be retained? The most celebrated of Salvador Dali's works, *The Persistence of Memory*, only the size of this page, is an image that once seen is never forgotten: the same can be said of the image created by *Tying Your Own Shoes*. It is difficult to pin down, an intangible.

Tying Your Own Shoes creates questions, rather than provides answers, particularly for those professionals, medical and otherwise, advising parents and siblings affected by Down syndrome. I'm particularly concerned with the many stories from parents of the professional, and often negative, advice given to parents at the birth of their Down syndrome child. The story of the film's title, as told by my daughter Petra, illustrates this point. Salvador Dali's painting, *The Persistence of Time*, questions "What is time?" Time for these children runs at a different pace; they need space and time to grow and become adults with a meaningful place in the community.

The animation in *Tying Your Own* was difficult and time-consuming. Animation requires long-term concentration, small motor skills, and a technical ability with cameras and computer equipment. For those not familiar with animation, many hours were spent by the four adults in the film in a darkened room over a backlit glass plate with an overhead camera, drawing and painting on tracing paper, each individual frame photographed and recorded on a computer. The remarkable animation of the team of four, Daninah, Katherine, Petra & Matthew, with mentoring from Shira (the film's director) and others, can be viewed in the film. This speaks volumes of the so often hidden abilities of those with perceived disabilities, abilities that never see the light of day.

There are remarkable interviews and interactions that take place between Daninah, Katherine, Petra & Matthew in this film. One can see their humor, and particularly their depth of thought and personal insight into what Down syndrome means to them personally. I would summarize this as: it is tough

being perceived as not normal, there is so much I want to do and achieve, I want to belong but society objects.

Shira, the film's producer, treats the team of the four actors with dignity and humor, allows them to voice their opinions honestly and openly. The viewer gets the inside-track on what it feels like to live with a disability, and comes to empathize with Daninah, Katherine, Petra & Matthew. The impression I am left with is that this film is not condescending, it is not overly sympathetic, but leaves the viewer with an impression of the dignity of four individuals facing their life's challenges and succeeding.

Raising a Son with Down Syndrome: Drawing Inspiration from Four Artists and Their Expression of "Special Needs"²

By Adele Iannantuono

I am very grateful to the four artists in this film, Petra, Matthew, Katherine and Daninah, for sharing their artistic talent and their feelings in this film. I am also very grateful to the Director, Shira Avni, for pursuing this project. It means a great deal to me because my son has Down syndrome and I want him to grow up in a world where films like this are common place; specifically, where persons with Down syndrome have opportunities to live out their potential as artists or whatever their passion and interest may be. My review of this film is from the perspective of a parent and, as such, I need to share my context of what it has been like to raise a child with Down syndrome: to understand why the film means so much to me, you will need to understand my world and my views.

When my husband and I met with the genetics counsellor because our son was born with Down syndrome, she said to us that our son's extra chromosome 21, "is like putting an extra cup of sugar in a cake recipe" and that our child (the cake) "will be a little extra sweet but this in no way ruins the cake." At that moment and

now, 7 years later, I still agree with her. I was told many things in my son's first week of life but this was one of the few I want to remember forever! Like Petra's parents, we were also told a long laundry list of what my child would not be able to do (most of which so far have not proven true). The comment I make most to those who ask about how Down syndrome is affecting my son is "He has never read the book on Down syndrome so he just carries on growing up as any little boy should, guided by his own unique timetable of development." From dentists, doctors, teachers, therapists, and so on, this fact remains—our son simply carries on, learning, developing and growing according to his "own" chart. Interestingly, my two other children (without disability), have similarly followed a general path of development with their own special twist. From the medical and scientific community there is no discreet timetable of development that fits every child; there are only general guidelines for the order of development. From a parent's perspective, frankly, I don't really care when things are supposed to happen—like being able to tie one's shoes—what matters most to me is that at any given time in their life my children feel accepted for who they are and respected for their place in the world. I value them no matter their printing abilities, their speaking abilities, their walking abilities, and so on. These abilities will need to be worked on and, in my son's case, will require more effort and persistence than for most persons, but the level of effort is what is of importance, not the level of skill. My expectations for level of effort is high for all my children and, since neither they nor I know what they are capable of, putting restrictions or limits on what they can try to do seems unfair. I hope, too, that the world sees the beauty and value of life in those with or without disability. I want to help my own children by guiding them in their sense of independence, acceptance, confidence, security, compassion and pride. These are the attributes I felt strongly when watching this film.

I am lucky to be the parent of three wonderful children, ages 5, 7 and 11. It is my 7 year old son who has Down syndrome. Until I saw this film, it had never occurred to me that everything I have ever been told or read about Down syndrome has come from someone *without* Down syndrome. For seven years, I have been sur-

2 I use the term "special needs" as that is the language used by one of the actors in the film.

prised and disappointed by the overwhelming ignorance of many people in our society about disability; specifically about what disability and integration mean. The film also made me aware of the strong feelings I have always held that persons with Down syndrome not be limited in the pursuit of their life's passion (such as film animation and art) and that, like all persons, life feels good when you can live your passion and realize your hopes and dreams. This brings me to an interesting observation that I learned as a parent of a child with Down syndrome: for me, my son is just like all children with hopes, dreams, likes, dislikes, interests, love to give and receive, and so on. What has shocked me as my son is growing up is that to others he is a person of limitation and, as a result, his world may have more doors closed than open. Since my son began school, where the "system" is more concerned with identifying and focusing on his difference from others (in particular, his non-disabled classmates) than his similarity to them, I have come to understand that for my husband and I, our lives would be one of advocating on our son's behalf, trying to enlighten and help others to understand and appreciate that their ignorance and misconceptions are no longer acceptable and are a disservice to our society. The beauty and gift in difference, is that we can stand up to the hurtful judgments of others and come to value our own strengths to make our lives richer. I would rather live with this view than one of standing in judgment of difference as a weakness for this serves no one well.

I was both thrilled and deeply moved when watching this film. I felt joy, happiness, comfort, strength, and passion. I was thrilled because I had never heard adults with Down syndrome describe what it feels like to have Down syndrome. Since my son is not aware of his disability, I have often wondered what he will feel later in his life when he can better articulate his experiences. I was deeply moved by hearing the wisdom, expression of feelings, and observations by the artists in the film. I doubt that many persons without disability could express themselves so well and doubt, too, that many ever think about what it is like to be treated as "different" in a society. I believe persons with Down syndrome have a gift of perception that is strikingly clear and straight to the truth of a feeling. When Petra describes Croatia and how

one's feelings from and about the past can continue to hurt in the present, she has cut to the core of sadness for many who have witnessed war. Oftentimes I hear the assumption that persons with Down syndrome cannot 'know', let alone clearly communicate their knowledge. Yet Petra's awareness of and ability to communicate the depth of her own perceptions as to the power of feelings is very profound. I believe her expression of understanding and compassion is one that should be respected, just as it would if it were to come from a person without a disability. When Matthew says it is rude when non-disabled people stare at persons with special needs as if they have never seen one travelling alone, I immediately thought "yes of course, it is rude and judgmental!" He strikes at the core of the hurt for him, personally, to be treated like he does not have feelings or notice that others are staring. Petra very promptly tells the film's audience "Don't worry I'm fine" as if this is a question she is always asked and knows instinctually that non-disabled people seeing her will wonder if she is in good health because of her disability. Petra's statement that Down syndrome is "like having a special hero in your heart" brought tears to my eyes. Her ability to articulate things with such poetry is truly a gift. Katherine uses her Down syndrome as a reason for why she is such a good artist. In this film I felt that all the artists were able to understand and explain having Down syndrome in a positive way, as a special gift found in themselves that was not realized by themselves or others until they were adults. I was proud to hear them have such positive outlooks on what their personal talents and gifts could bring to their lives. This film, in and of itself, is proof that they are "full-fledged" artists (Katherine), doing exactly what "real" artists do, because they are in no way limited in their ability to develop their skills, technique, and craft and to showcase it.

It moved me to see the talent and beauty of Petra's, Matthew's, Daninah's, and Katherine's art, and the sense of professionalism they held for their skill. It moved me because in their words I could imagine my son's words and I hope for him to have a similar appreciation of something he loves to do. I know firsthand, through my son's struggles with speech and communication, how much effort and hard work was involved for the artists in the movie

to express themselves so clearly. What seems so effortless to most is a gift to be cherished. I thought the use of text throughout the film was effective however I, personally, did not have any trouble understanding any of the artists. I noticed a difference in levels of articulation from one to the other but felt all are extremely clear in expressing themselves. As a parent, the words of the artists highlighted the many worries I have for my son, such as not being understood, not being valued for his contribution to a field of work, not living in a world of compassion where difference is appreciated, and where his opinion is not valid because it is communicated differently. I was moved by the independence and confidence of all the artists in the film. To be employed, live independently, and find love covered the basis of how the artists define "being regular." Isn't this true for us all, and why would it (or should it) be any different for a person with a disability?

The artwork presented throughout this film was terrific: from Daninah's orange cat, Puff, to Katherine's extraordinary talent for the use of colour, to Matthew's attention to detail, and Petra's expression of what love is, expressed

through language and her use of the yellow flower. I was captivated by the fluid movement of the beautiful birds. I know firsthand how challenging film animation is because my daughter was inspired by this film to take a class at the National Film Board. Creating animation is not a simple skill; it is complicated, demands precision, many meticulous steps and, of course, creativity. Like any craft, film animation takes perseverance and passion to express. I am grateful that the Director felt compelled to allow these individuals the opportunity to showcase and develop their skill. I am relieved at the Director's ability to see past any disability and work effectively to help these persons to share their feelings and their passion for art with the world. For my son, I am inspired that this film has left one less door closed to him. Thank you for opening the door to accepting and providing opportunity to those with Down Syndrome to follow their passion and become "full-fledged" artists. From a parenting perspective, I can hold this film high as an example of why it is so important to advocate on behalf of our children with Down syndrome: there is so much to gain for our children and the world.