



For immediate release

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ReelAbilities Festival Brings Free Films to Edwards Greenway Grand Palace

Houston – (Dec. 1, 2015) ReelAbilities: Houston Film and Arts Festival, a free, city-wide festival that promotes inclusion and celebrates the lives, stories, and talents of people with disabilities, will screen 12 films beginning February 14 through February 18 at Edwards Greenway Grand Palace Stadium 24 and offer free admission and parking with advanced registration for evening and new matinee selections. The 2016 Festival promises a multi-faceted experience of art, music, speakers, and films that offer uplifting impressions for audiences about people living with disabilities.

The festival, in its fourth year in Houston, was founded in New York City in 2007 and is now presented in 15 U.S. cities. The Houston festival will include a total of 15 full-length, shorts, and international films at Edwards Greenway Grand Palace location, outreach to schools and at the George Bush International Airport. ReelAbilities Houston is hosted by the JFS Alexander Institute for Inclusion in collaboration with City of Houston Department of Neighborhoods Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities with lead sponsors, the Bristow Group and TIRR Memorial Hermann (Founding Partner).

"This is an all-access, free festival for the entire Houston community to enjoy. The festival's goal is to show our community that individuals with disabilities of all types are productive, inspirational, and that they often face many challenges. We want people to be moved, inspired, and be able to see individuals with disabilities in a new light—through compassion, admiration, and connection," stated Joanne Graf, 2016 ReelAbilities event chair.

Opening night on February 14, dubbed "All You Need is ReelLove," offers a double feature of love-oriented films, *Keep the Change* and *Mimi & Donna*. Both illustrate how love forges strong bonds between young lovers or between a mother and daughter when faced with mental disabilities.

Challenges of living with a genetic condition that causes developmental differences and the impact these challenges have on family dynamics are explored in *Coaching Colburn*. A father/son bonding theme is presented in the French film, *The Finishers*, during an Ironman® triathlon. *One Year Later* illuminates the meaning of "strength" with a rock-climber, now paralyzed from the waste-down, who earns a badge of resilience thanks to the advance in adaptive sports. The theme of empowerment takes another turn when a 10-year-old proves his father, who is deaf, can train his soccer team in *Hear This!* Sexuality, independence, and adventure are offered in the Dutch film, *Come as You Are*. A bi-polar diagnosis drives another man to seek the root cause of his breakdown in *Bi-polarized*.

Matinees will be screened starting Monday, February 15 with a family pleaser, *No Ordinary Hero: The Superdeafy Movie*, featuring Academy Award winner Marlee Matlin. This film explores a TV superhero's

impact on an eight-year-old when he learns that they both are deaf. Another matinee, *Autistic Like Me* features a fresh perspective on what it means to be a father of children who present unique challenges. A complete schedule of all films and times can be found at ReelAbilitiesHouston.org.

“As the most diverse city in the nation, we would like Houston to lead the conversation in including individuals with disabilities as a part of our diversity. The festival will expand your view about our shared human experiences and really what it means to be human,” commented Graf.

ReelAbilities Houston will kick off with several pre-events before the films including **ReelArt: *The Art of Celebration*** opens **Saturday, January 16** at the Nicole Longnecker Gallery; **ReelMusic: *An All-Inclusive Jazz and Blues Jam***, on **Saturday, January 23** at Houston Community College (Spring Branch); and **ReelPeople: *UP Abilities*** on **February 11** at Houston Community College (Southwest).

ReelArt: *The Art of Celebration* will feature visual art and photography from The Center of Art and Photography at Celebration Company, an entrepreneurial program for adults living with disabilities. The group is composed of 20 adults with disabilities who create art as an expressive outlet for both a leisure activity and a life skill. The full program focuses on personalized development to improve skills in the core areas of vocation, academics, wellness and socialization. The opening reception is at 7:00 p.m. on Saturday, January 16 at 2625 Colquitt Street. The exhibition runs through February 20, 2016. Family activities include *Peace of Art* Workshops to make your own paper works of art on January 24. Lunch with the Art-Makers is February 4. Tickets to both gallery activities support Celebration Company programs, available at ReelAbilitiesHouston.org.

ReelMusic: *An All-Inclusive Jazz and Blues Jam* will include jazz drummer and program emcee, **Sebastian “Bash” Whittaker** who has opened for Wynton Marsalis and performed with Freddie Hubbard, among others. Blind at an early age by retinal cancer, Bash began playing drums at age 3. Students and musicians with various abilities will join the jam. The line-up includes local high school music directors, **Kelly Dean** and **Warren Sneed**, along with musicians **Pamela York** on piano, **Art Fristoe** (featured on *TEDxHouston*) on keys and more. A public reception begins at 6:30 p.m. followed by the jam session at 7:30 p.m. at Houston Community College (Spring Branch), 1010 West Sam Houston Pkwy N. Refreshments and admission are free but registration is required at ReelAbilitiesHouston.org.

ReelPeople: *UP Abilities* will feature extraordinary thought leaders on mental and physical disabilities and topics of inclusion: *America’s Got Talent* star, **Drew Lynch**; British psychology researcher, **Eleanor Longden**; and Winter X snowboard medal winner, **Kevin Pearce**. In partnership with **The UP Experience**, **UP Abilities** is free to attendees this year (\$100 value) on Thursday, February 11 starting with a 6:15 p.m. reception and the program beginning at 7:00 p.m. at Houston Community College Southwest, 5600 West Loop South.

All access to the art exhibition, music and film events is free to the public; space is limited. For more information and to reserve tickets, visit ReelAbilitiesHouston.org.

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ABOUT REELABILITIES

ReelAbilities is the largest festival in the country dedicated to promoting inclusion for people with disabilities through the arts. The mission of ReelAbilities is to utilize the arts as a vehicle to both educate and change perceptions about individuals living with disabilities. Launched in New York in 2007, Houston is one of 15 cities expanding the festival throughout the country. JFS Alexander Institute for Inclusion, founded by Joan and Stanford Alexander and a division of the JFS Disability Services, is Houston's host organizer which seeks to foster a community that includes all individuals by eliminating the stigma associated with disabilities. Lead support is provided by The Bristow Group and TIRR Memorial Hermann (Founding Partner). The Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities is a key collaborator for the festival along with over 50 community organizations.

ABOUT CELEBRATION COMPANY

Celebration Company, is an entrepreneurial employment program for adults with disabilities, operated by JFS Houston's Disability Services program. **Celebration Company** redefines what it means to have a disability and to be a part of the community. The vision is based upon the Jewish principal of *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh leh zel* in Hebrew which means *We are all responsible for one another*. Celebration Company gives the individual an opportunity to grow their skills in a supportive, instructional environment that allows each participant to aspire to new heights and self-esteem.

ABOUT UP ABILITIES

The UP Experience – Unique Perspectives from Unique People – is an engaging and intellectually stimulating event that brings together 12 of the world's most extraordinary thought leaders, creators, and innovators for one exceptional day. These are the people behind the technologies, the trends, the ideas, and the global movements that shape our existence. The only event of its kind in Houston, UP is a learning opportunity, a creative conference, a think tank, and an entertainment event all in one. During 20-minute onstage presentations, each of our 12 speakers discusses his or her work, passion, and ideas for the future; offstage, attendees experience up close and personal Q&A sessions. Designed for both personal and professional application, UP is an infusion of exceptional people, exceptional thinking and exceptional advances.