

ReelAbilities Film Festival: Employing People is a Lott of Work



Panelists discuss accessible employment as part of the ReelAbilities Film Festival in Toronto.

Editor's note: Community Living Ontario had the pleasure of partnering with the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre on the ReelAbilities Film Festival, the first ever film festival in Canada dedicated to promoting awareness and appreciation of the lives, stories and art of people who have a disability and deaf people. The weeklong event, which took place in venues across the Greater Toronto Area, wrapped up last night. The following is a review by Daniel Share-Strom, who viewed two films on accessible employment and listened to a discussion with panelists closely connected to finding meaningful employment for people who have a disability.

The job market can be tricky these days

for all of us. On Sunday (May 15th), [Community Living Toronto](#) teamed up with Bloor Hot Docs to present two employment-focused films at the first annual [ReelAbilities Film Festival](#) in Toronto.

Upon viewing the two pieces, I found that they couldn't have been more different in their style, tone, and messaging. First up was a 13-minute scripted short film, titled The Interviewer. In it, a lawyer interviews for a job opportunity at a non-profit organization, after leaving a much-higher-paid position because he wants to make a difference. However, Mr. Dexter, the man interviewing him, is clearly not what he expected. The talk quickly encompasses Star Wars references and 'What's

better? Coke or water?' It is, in a word, hilarious, and an unexpected twist veered it toward 'heartwarming' as well.

The feature-length documentary *A Whole Lott More* painted a much bleaker picture. It told the story of Lott Industries, a car part manufacturer in Toledo, Ohio famous for employing people who have a disability almost exclusively - what's known as a sheltered workshop. The film chronicles the effect that real employment in suitable positions has on people before showing the devastating effect the auto industry crash had on Lott.

The film goes into detail on the steps Board members took to evade closure, including abandoning its government funding and going public, but these efforts were met with resistance. Everyone involved was clearly distraught as they attempted to figure out a way to make it work for the people they employed.

Wanda Huber, a 45-year-old woman who worked in manufacturing at Lott for nearly two decades, and described how the job allowed her to get her own apartment for the first time.

"I wish we had a miracle," she said in the film, discussing her plant's closure and the pending split of her peer group between two faraway facilities, "but [miracles] don't happen to people like us."

30-year-old **TJ Hawker** discussed how important his clerical job was to him, and how it made him feel like a contributing member of society. He was also able to use the money to be much more active and attend baseball games, and hoped

to have a child of his own one day. The thought of losing his job, as many people were about to, seemed to terrify him.

The situation wouldn't be so rough if general workplaces outside the sheltered workshops were more accommodating to people who have a disability. **Kevin Tyree**, a 19-year-old, had had trouble landing a steady job in shelf-stocking, even with steady job coaching. Though his mother was a manager at Lott, he wanted to make his own way.

When he temporarily landed a position at Best Buy, she told him, "Now people see what I've known all the time, and that's what a cool person and wonderful person you are."

After the screenings, a panel convened on the future of accessible employment, coordinated by Community Living Toronto. Panelists included [Community Living Sarnia-Lambton's](#) Manager of Employment Options **Bob Vansickle**, [Corbrook](#) Executive Director **Deepak Soni**, Community Living Toronto CEO **Brad Saunders**, Ministry of [Community and Social Services'](#) Assistant Deputy Minister of Community and Developmental Services **Karen Chan**, and **Julie Godfrey**, a Toronto resident who works as a barista at Surrey Place.

"We're trying to move away from a sheltered workshop environment," said Chan, "but that doesn't mean that sheltered workshops are going to close immediately. It really is one person at a time. It's thinking about all the alternatives. How do I make this a competitive job that involves more people?"

Soni, whose organization is dedicated to helping people who have a disability to secure employment and community involvement, presented one example. He admitted that sheltered workshops and social enterprises are expensive, and that the cash doesn't always flow. He shared that Corbrook had recently had its own contracts drop from \$1 million to \$125,000, which made it hard to pay wages. So, they had to change their business model.

"Fortunately," he said, "we hired some really great people to turn that around for us, so today we have a pretty strong social enterprise."

The business model now includes brands of trail mix and spices that are sold nationwide, which has allowed them to pay their staff minimum wage.

Vansickle was wary on the viability of sheltered workshops in general, preferring to help people supported to find work in the community.

"I think we, as community service agencies," he explained, "need to do what we do best, which is not operating businesses, in our case. We provide support for people, help them find employment, we employ people with disabilities ourselves, we're leaders in that area. [Instead of sheltered workshops], it's much better to rely on the community. [Sheltered workshops do] not have the capital, the capacity, the organizational structure to set up and run a competing business."

He also expressed concern that social enterprises, which are designed to be step-

ping stones to integrated employment, may not be experiencing much success.

All told, the event painted a rather disconcerting image of the employment landscape for people who have a disability, with a lot of restructuring and a lot of people out of work. Wanda Huber, one of the people featured in the documentary, though, remained as optimistic as Mr. Dexter from the opening short. No matter what life throws at you, she says, "There's always another dream at the end of the rainbow."

Daniel Share-Strom, Community Living Ontario