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RESILIENCE

A Lifestyle Magazine for People With Disabilities Who Want to Live More Fully



Lights, Camera, Action!

**Diversity, Equity
and Inclusion
in the Film Industry**

Zakiya Dalila Harris

From Bestselling Novelist
and Film Co-Writer to Ally
of People With Disabilities

Tameka Citchen-Spruce

Telling Our Stories
Through the Lens of Disability

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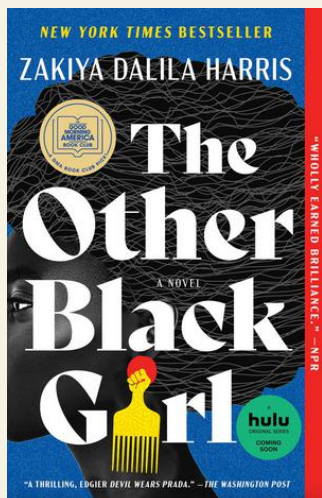
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Message From the Publisher and Editor

Welcome to our third issue of *RESILIENCE*.

In this issue, we talk about a topic that in some way impacts everyone with a disability—the topic of diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA).

It is an important topic for all areas of our lives, but in this issue we focus on its status in film—both in front of and behind the camera.

If people with disabilities aren't portrayed authentically and positively in film, our stories get lost, and we are basically ignored by a large part of the world we live in. It is therefore essential that real people with disabilities participate on both sides of the camera to ensure that we are not portrayed wrongly or forgotten completely.

With millions of people in the U.S. living with visible and invisible disabilities and millions more who have a relationship of some kind with a disabled person, we are part of the story and should not be left out.

In a 2019 article on *Medium*, Lauren Appelbaum, of RespectAbility, wrote: "With Hollywood striving to boost diversity and inclusion, opening the inclusion umbrella for America's largest minority—the one-in-five Americans with a disability—is the right thing to do as well as economically smart given that the disability market is valued at more than \$1 trillion."

Fortunately, some in the film industry are getting the message, and some are coming to realize that people with disabilities also spend money, which means advertisers should want to reach us. Therefore, there is hope for more efforts. Still, it has been slow to happen, and the research that we discuss in this issue proves it.

Our next steps are therefore to continue pushing for more diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility; developing and supporting actors and filmmakers who can tell the story; and showing the value of including people with disabilities. It is an effort that will take time, but it could dramatically affect our future.

The Divas With Disabilities Project, an organization that *RESILIENCE* has a close alliance with, has developed relationships with studios, agents, casting agents, and other to help supply them with people with disabilities for their projects.

This type of effort is at the forefront of helping to bring about change in the film industry and in people's perceptions about those living with disabilities.

If we want change, we must keep talking, writing, working, educating and protesting to make it happen.

We can't give up. Diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility is too important.

-Rick Bowers

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Your Dreams Are Our Business

Lights, Camera, Action!

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Film Industry: The Good News and the Bad

By Rick Bowers



Images on this page produced using Midjourney

Actress Aria Mia Loberti, who is legally blind, made her acting debut in 2023 in the four-part Netflix mini-series *All The Light We Cannot See*, which is set in World War II France. She was cast in the leading role as Marie-Laure Leblanc, a young blind woman.

Loberti, who was born with a very rare genetic eye condition called achromatopsia, was chosen from thousands of others vying for the role.

“I am completely color blind, am very nearsighted, and am quite light sensitive,” Loberti told the *Johnston SUNRISE*. “In bright lights like these, or in outdoor lighting, without my dark glasses, I am completely blinded.”

Interestingly, the series also cast a blind girl—7-year-old Nell Sutton—as the younger Marie-Laure Leblanc.

That’s two actresses with disabilities in a single show! But don’t get too excited just yet.

While this and shows such as *Best Summer Ever* and *CODA* are success stories for people who want to see authentic people with disabilities being chosen to portray characters that were written with disabilities rather than having able-bodied actors get the roles, they appear to be more the exception than the general rule.

More often, there are either no characters with disabilities included in a film, or the disabled roles are played by nondisabled actors.

Unfortunately, concerning the shows that are out there these days, we have some good news and more bad news.

A Little Progress, But ...

Isaac Zablocki, co-founder of the ReelAbilities Film Festival New York, which is dedicated to screening films by, for and about people with disabilities, described what he’s seeing in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* last year (April 27, 2023). According to Zablocki, there is actually a revolution in Hollywood and the media, and disability is definitely now on their agenda. He said they’re definitely more inclusive these days.

Still, even though one might agree that there’s been some improvement in some areas, there’s still a long way to go before there is anything near diversity, equity and inclusion in the industry.

Each year, the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative looks at how the film industry is doing regarding the inclusion of several groups. According to the initiative, it “conducts the most comprehensive, longitudinal investigation into inclusion on screen and behind the camera in film. ... The report now covers 16 years and 1,600 top-grossing films.”

The initiative’s most recent findings were published in August 2023 in *Inequality in 1,600 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ+ & Disability from 2007 to 2022*.

The findings are highly disappointing. They show that the situation is remaining stagnant from year to year.

“In 2022, 1.9% ... of all speaking characters were shown with a disability,” according to the report.

When talking about the period from 2015-2022, it says, “There was no meaningful difference in the percentage of speaking characters with a disability across the 800 films and 8-year timespan of the study.”

In 2022, 54 of the top100 movies “failed to feature at least one speaking character with a disability, which is higher than both 2021 (48 films) and 2015 (45 films),” the reports says. Out of the 800 movies looked at in the 2015-2022 period, only one “reached proportional representation of characters with disabilities in comparison to the U.S. population (27%).”

According to a 2019 report from GLAAD, “The amount of regular primetime broadcast characters counted who have a disability has increased to 3.1 percent, which is a record-high percentage, but that number still vastly underrepresents the actualities of Americans with disabilities.”

Moreover, Lauren Appelbaum of the nonprofit organization RespectAbility, noted in 2019 that approximately 95 percent of those types of roles were played by actors without disabilities (*Medium*, Nov. 17, 2019)

Maysoon Zayid, a comedian and actress with cerebral palsy, made a great point during her 2014 TED Talk. “If a wheelchair user can’t play Beyoncé,” she said, “then Beyoncé can’t play a wheelchair user.”

The bad news is that Hollywood and filmmakers often aren’t paying attention.

“We have offered these same solutions for years,” wrote Dr. Stacy L. Smith, one of the authors of the Annenberg study. “It’s clear that the industry is either not listening or not implementing the straightforward practices that would result in an influx of talented artists from a variety of backgrounds. Until the industry takes meaningful action, not only will companies miss out on these perspectives and stories, so will audiences.”

Reasons for Hope?

Perhaps there is some reason for hope, however, as the movie industry begins to realize the potential economic value of including people with disabilities.

As Appelbaum noted in the previously mentioned article on *Medium*, “Opening the inclusion umbrella for America’s largest minority—the one-in-five Americans with a disability—is the right thing to do as well as economically smart given that the disability market is valued at more than \$1 trillion.”

One of the missions of The Divas With Disabilities Project is to help ensure that black and brown women with disabilities are portrayed and represented throughout the media (in television, film, publications and advertising). As such, the organization provides a community and network that identifies opportunities for their inclusion in mass media and partners with organizations that have demonstrated a commitment to including them.

The founder of the organization, Donna R. Walton, EdD, who is a lower-limb amputee, has herself been involved in several projects in television, film, publications and advertising. Two of her recent roles were in *The Retreat* (2020) and the Hulu series *The Other Black Girl* (2023). Each of these shows chose to include a character with a disability and to have the character played by a real person with a disability instead of using a nondisabled actor.

The suspenseful series *The Retreat* features an all-black-women cast, including Walton as Pamela Hairston, one of the show’s main characters, who is prominently shown as an amputee. (To watch all eight episodes for free, visit [Crackle.com](https://www.crackle.com).)

In *The Other Black Girl*, a suspenseful dark comedy, Walton plays a disabled woman in a wheelchair—the mother of Hazel, one of the main characters. (To watch all 10 episodes, visit [Hulu.com](https://www.hulu.com).)

While it would have been possible to use nondisabled women in these roles, the movie’s leadership chose to use an actor with a disability—and that choice matters.

“While my role in the series was small,” Walton says, “it was monumental in the community that I serve and lead. ... Any time any of us gets a role, it’s major. ... It’s like when *The Ed Sullivan Show* had a black person, Diana Ross, on in 1964, and the whole black community was calling everybody and saying, ‘Turn on Ed Sullivan! Diana Ross is on!’ It was a big thing for black people to see ourselves, and that’s the way it’s becoming now for people with disabilities.”



Donna R. Walton

Writers, Directors and Producers:

The Keys to Change

It's important that people on the writing, directing and producing side of filmmaking either have a disability or at least understand and value the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion.

“Film continues to be a place that renders a quarter of the population invisible on screen,” according to the Annenberg report mentioned earlier. “These findings ... reflect that storytellers have a narrow and limited conception of who people with disabilities are and how prevalent this population is. People with disabilities fill the worlds of our workplaces, our families, and our public spaces—yet remain invisible in the imaginary worlds created by filmmakers.”

And, as mentioned, some in the industry, such as the writers and showrunners of *The Other Black Girl*, are taking steps in the right direction. The film is based on Zakiya Dalila Harris' bestselling novel of the same name, and Harris co-wrote Episode 9 of the series. Harris says that having the character of Deborah (Walton's role) played by someone with a disability was “absolutely” their conscious choice.

“Jordan said we want to make sure that Hazel's mom is played by someone who is disabled ... rather than casting someone who's not,” Harris says. “The producer, me, Jordan and Gus, as well as the director, all knew for sure that was what was going to happen.”

Walton and Harris got together online one afternoon to discuss people with disabilities in film, and Harris, being new to scriptwriting and filmmaking, was certainly open to learning more.

After speaking with Walton, Harris believes that she will consider disability even more consciously in her work.

“I think the advice I would give myself is just to research more and just really think about it more,” Harris says, “because even though I know a lot about representation of black people on screen, I don't know that much in terms of black people *with disabilities* on screen.”



Photograph by Nicole Mondestin

Zakiya Dalila Harris

More Than a Quota

Walton notes that when casting an actor with a disability, it's important that the actor is qualified and is prepared to win the role.

"Hollywood is not going to pick you just because you have a disability, and they've been clear about that," she says. "It's about being qualified, and then you happen to have a disability. We don't want Hollywood to only focus on hiring people with a disability for the sake of being able to say, 'We got one. We got one.' ... It's best to hire a person because you're hiring a qualified person to show up in the role you want them to play. We want Hollywood to hire disabled people who are qualified, not just tokens."

Walton is OK with hiring people with disabilities for background roles, and she's done some of those roles herself.

"It's important," she explains, "to see disabled people in various aspects of life, but we don't want that to be the standard, just so a company can say they hired a disabled person and met the quota."

She notes that it's important that people with disabilities are involved in front of and behind the camera.

"There are all kinds of spaces that we can work in," she says.

It's also important, she explains, that studios cast actors not just because they have a disability but rather as a nurse, a waitress, or some other role in the theme of the movie where their disability is just the experience that they live.

"They live as a person with cerebral palsy, or they live as an amputee," she says.

"That's the way you normalize the perception. When you see it, it's like, 'Oh, OK, that's Diane or that's Deborah.' It's not, 'Oh, she has a wheelchair.' People often see the disability first, but we want them to see the person first."

Winning Those Who Can Make an Impact

To realize the goals of diversity, equity and inclusion in the industry, Walton says that having people like Harris involved in the conversation is important.

Harris thinks the conversation will affect her. She says it's important to have more of those types of conversations and incorporate them into the writing discussions and on shows.

"Disability is part of so many lives, and we don't talk about it enough," she continues. "We're not there yet in terms of representation in general about people with disabilities," she says, "but especially black people's disabilities. ... It shouldn't even be a question in casting."

A Continuing Effort

“We don’t really think about disability in the spectrum of the lived experience of people,” Walton explains, “particularly black folk. ... That's why we show up,” Walton says. “We have to show up unapologetic. Because when we don’t, we perpetuate the same message that’s already out there—that we’re in the house, we're unmarried, uncoupled, unloved.”

It’s important, she says, that people with disabilities—especially black and brown women—represent something different from the stereotypes.

“My hope is that we’ll just keep getting more intentionality behind it and not include disability as just background,” Harris says. “My hope is that people will take it 10 steps further.”

People like Harris are a key in the possibility for bringing about this change. As a young and successful writer of books and for film, Harris will likely have the opportunity to implement these goals in her own work and may be able to influence others in the industry. And if she ever decides to direct or produce films, that would be a huge bonus.

“We’ve made some progress,” Walton says. “Have we reached the pinnacle? No, we still have a way to go, but we’re getting there.”

([Click here to read about Tameka Citchen-Spruce, a disabled filmmaker who makes films that often look at the world through the lens of disability.](#))

Zakiya Dalila Harris

**From Bestselling Novelist and Film Co-Writer
to Ally of People With Disabilities**

By Rick Bowers



Zakiya Dalila Harris *Photograph by Nicole Mondestin*

A few years ago, Zakiya Dalila Harris made a huge decision.

After three years working at a major publishing company and reaching the position of an assistant editor, she believed it was time to move on and start fulfilling her own dreams. In her editorial job, she'd been "helping bolster other writers' success," and now she felt she should take her own shot at it.

She had an idea for a book, and once she started writing it, she began to think, "Maybe I can just quit. I'll pick up some part-time jobs."

Fortunately, her partner at the time, who was not her husband, moved in with her and helped with the rent.

"It's New York," she says. "It's hard out here."

She then resigned her job to work on completing the book that would become her first novel, *The Other Black Girl*.

Although the novel ultimately became successful, it wasn't a sure thing in the beginning.

"Agents rejected my book, saying that publishing was not ready for it. One said, 'Why don't you write about fashion?'" she says, with a sigh.

Even after she found an agent and the book was published, its overwhelming success was still a surprise. It quickly became a *New York Times* bestseller and was also chosen to be adapted for a Hulu film series of the same name.

In this suspenseful 10-episode Hulu series, a young editorial assistant at a publishing company where she is the only black staff member is excited when a new black girl is hired. Then strange things begin happening, and she begins to suspect something isn't quite right about the new girl. As the story develops, the suspense and danger grow.

Within all of this drama and suspense, “the book is so much about black people being seen as a fad,” she says. “I sold the book in February 2020, and then George Floyd happened. Then the culture was even readier for that conversation, and so I think that’s part of why the book did so well when it came out.”

“Also publishing at the time was having a larger conversation about whose right it is to tell what story,” she says. Her being a black woman telling a story about black women was right on target.

Harris then got the opportunity to be a co-writer on the Hulu series and is now working on her second novel.

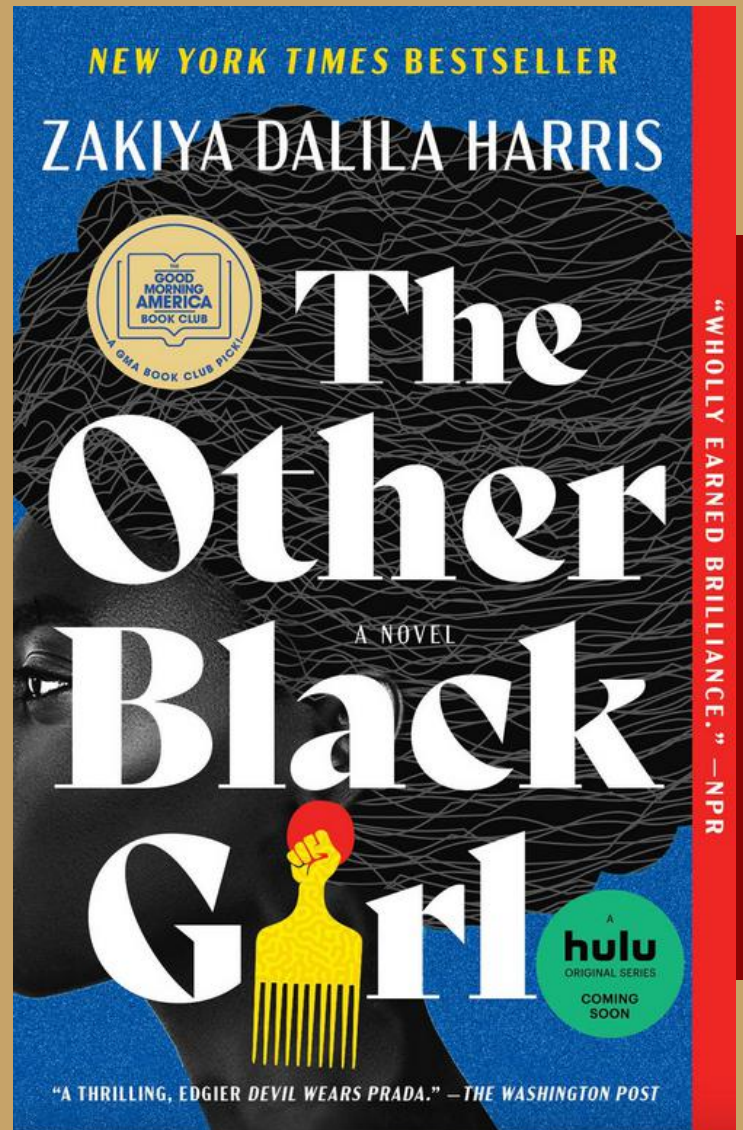
Her online conversation one afternoon with Donna R. Walton, EdD, who has a disability and portrayed a disabled black woman on the series, has given her some additional insight into the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion in film for not only blacks but also for people with disabilities.

While she and the writing team at *The Other Black Girl* had included Walton’s role before that conversation, Harris gained an even stronger understanding of why it’s so important to include people with disabilities in films, which will perhaps inform her future work and turn her into a greater advocate for actors with disabilities in the future.

“I think the advice I would give myself is just to research more and just really think about it more,” says Harris, “because even though I know a lot about representation of black people on screen, I don’t know that much in terms of black people *with disabilities* on screen.”

Even though Harris is not disabled herself, she is the kind of open-minded and caring professional the film industry needs to improve and be more inclusive of all people. As people with disabilities strive to gain more inclusion in the film industry, influencers and allies such as Harris will be an essential key to our success.

Check out The Other Black Girl on Hulu.com and don't miss Walton's character in Episode 9.



Shows to Watch That Include People With Disabilities

Echo

This new five-episode Marvel series stars Alaqua Cox, who is indigenous, deaf and an amputee, as the main character. The series offers several groups an opportunity to see someone like themselves in film.

“I have a lot of communities that I can advocate for, and most of them are underrepresented,” said Cox, who plays superhero Maya Lopez (abc7news.com, Jan. 8, 2024).

Cox originally played the role of Maya in 2021's *Hawkeye* and was then offered it as the focus of a standalone series.

Echo is directed by filmmaker Sydney Freeland, who is also indigenous, and the team includes deaf writers and consultants and other cast members who are indigenous and deaf.

You can watch Echo on Disney+ or Hulu and Hawkeye on Disney+.

All The Light We Cannot See

In this four-part Netflix mini-series, a young blind girl in World War II France hosts a radio show, which is forbidden by the Nazis and which she uses to send coded messages to the Allies. She is also sought by a ruthless Nazi who wants something of value her father left with her and which he will stop at nothing to get. In addition to the thriller aspect of the movie, it also includes a growing love story.

You can watch the series on Netflix.

Give Me Liberty

In this 2019 comedy drama, a medical transport driver gets a bit sidetracked through no fault of his own. Chaos follows as his scheduled clients are impacted by the unexpected turn of events.

Lauren “Lolo” Spencer portrays Tracy, a client with ALS who uses a wheelchair.

This film was nominated for and won various awards and accolades.

This movie is available for rent at YouTube.com.



Best Summer Ever

At a dance camp, Sage, who uses a wheelchair, and Tony fall in love. Although they have the “best summer ever,” they don’t expect to see each other for another year. However, something happens that causes Sage to transfer to Tony’s high school where they meet again. And then, the trouble starts.

This musical comedy includes a large cast and crew made up of people with and without disabilities.

This film is available on Hulu.com and other services.

Note that it includes some language and graphics that some might consider inappropriate for those under 18.

CODA

Seventeen-year-old Ruby is the only hearing member of a deaf family—a CODA, or child of deaf adults. Her life revolves around acting as an interpreter for her parents and working on the family’s struggling fishing boat. But when Ruby joins her high school’s choir club, she discovers a gift for singing. Encouraged by her enthusiastic choirmaster to apply to a prestigious music school, Ruby finds herself torn between the obligations she feels to her family and her own dreams.

CODA made history by landing three Academy Awards, with wins for Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Adapted Screenplay. It’s also the first motion picture starring a predominantly deaf cast in leading roles to win Best Picture. Troy Kotsur is the first deaf male actor to win Best Supporting Actor, and writer-director Siân Heder earned her first Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay.

In addition to Academy Award honors, the film and its team have received numerous history-making accolades and awards since its debut, including becoming the first motion picture with a predominantly deaf cast to receive a SAG Award for Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture.

You can *watch CODA on Apple TV+.*

The Retreat

At an all-black women's retreat, one of the guests tells a group of women a startling secret. This suspenseful eight-episode series follows the story as one of the participants prepares to publish a book that threatens to expose that secret to the world. Rumors follow, and the women are caught up in a dramatic conflict.

Follow along, and enjoy the drama that unfolds from episode to episode.

Donna R. Walton, a lower-limb amputee and the founder of The Divas With Disabilities Project, portrays Pamela Hairston, one of the main characters in the series.

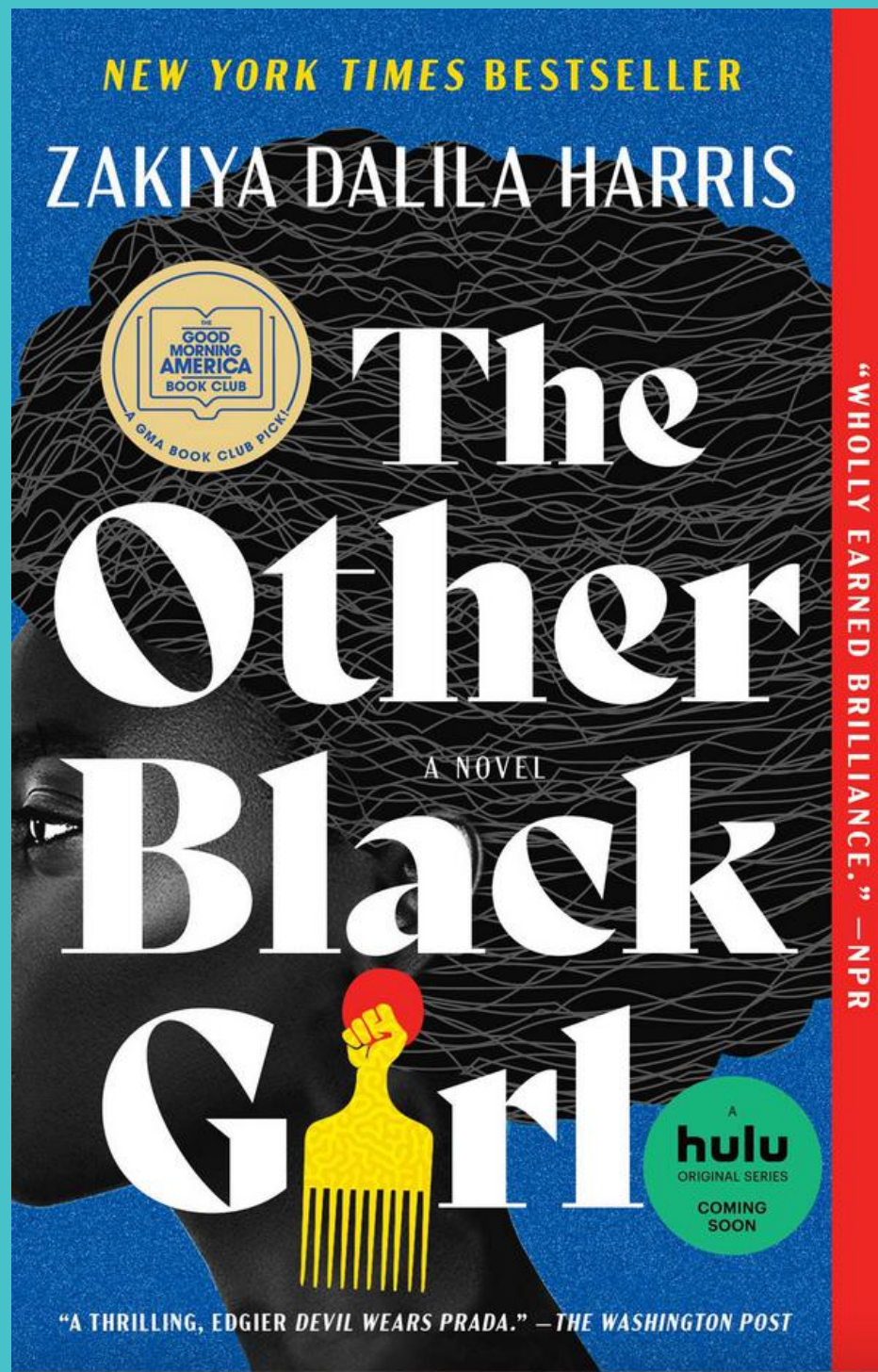
You can watch the series for free on Crackle.com.

The Other Black Girl

In this suspenseful 10-episode Hulu series, a young editorial assistant at a publishing company where she is the only black staff member is excited when a new black girl is hired. Then strange things begin happening, and she begins to suspect something isn't quite right about the new girl. As the story develops, the suspense and danger grow.

Donna R. Walton, a lower-limb amputee and the founder of The Divas With Disabilities Project, portrays the mother of one of the main characters in the series. Her character is disabled and uses a wheelchair.

You can watch The Other Black Girl on Hulu. Don't miss Donna Walton's character in Episode 9.





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Grant Provides Funds to Help Filmmaker Produce Digital Docuseries on Black Women With Disabilities

With support from the Craig H. Nielsen Foundation, the Center for Cultural Innovation (CCI) announced in October the Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Artist-Innovator Fund's 2023 grantees. One was filmmaker Tameka Citchen-Spruce.

This is the third round of the SCI Artist-Innovator Fund, which was first offered in 2019 and has since awarded \$150,000 to 20 grantees with SCI.

The 2023 funding round increased the total award amount to \$8,500 from \$7,500. In addition, CCI partnered with the Minneapolis College of Art & Design's (MCAD) Creative Entrepreneurship program to provide SCI Artist-Innovator Fund grantees with opportunities to test their ideas, build their networks, and seek guidance from practitioners and peers through individual and group online coaching sessions and project presentations.

For the 2023 round, the Fund awarded \$85,000 total in grants of \$8,500 each to 10 individual artist-entrepreneurs with spinal cord injuries who are inspired to innovate by opportunity-based entrepreneurship.

CCI recognizes that having an underserved perspective, living with challenging circumstances, and applying creative practice can yield important solutions for not only the innovator but for the benefit of society. This opportunity recognizes that the combination of SCI populations, craftsmanship, creative practice, and positive social impact can yield powerful results.

Citchen-Spruce received a grant to support a digital docuseries that will feature black women with disabilities taking their city by storm and striving to live their best life both professionally and personally. *(For more information, see the following article.)*



The SCI Artist-Innovator Fund celebrates the SCI experience as one that can impact one's life positively and helps cultivate creativity and problem-solving. The program's support is meant to boost confidence and nudge artists and innovators to move forward with ideas or projects that can change their careers and impact their communities.

"This was a banner year for the SCI Artist-Innovator Fund," said CCI Deputy Director Laura Poppiti. "Through the support of the Craig Nielsen Foundation and our partnership with MCAD, grantees were afforded increased funding and the opportunity to build their entrepreneurial knowledge and networks. We're excited to follow the work of the 2023 grantees—both their funded projects and their larger trajectories as artist-innovators."

[For more information about the SCI Artist-Innovator Fund, click her to visit cciarts.org.](https://cciarts.org)

Spotlight on Filmmaker Tameka Citchen-Spruce

Telling Our Stories Through the Lens of Disability

By Rick Bowers



“Lights, Camera, Action!”

Unfortunately, very few people with disabilities have had the opportunity to say this three-word phrase.

Not many people—especially black females with disabilities—have been on the producer/director side of the camera during the making of a movie. Filmmaker Tameka Citchen-Spruce is therefore a rare—and needed—talent indeed.

While it’s important to have people with disabilities acting in movies, the argument can be made that it’s even more important to have them making movies—to have them telling the stories that need to be told in the way they need to be told.

In a 2019 *Medium* article, Lauren Appelbaum of the nonprofit organization RespectAbility quoted Delbert Whetter, a RespectAbility board member who is deaf and a veteran film executive and producer, on the subject.

“Progress towards authentic disability representation on the screen begins behind the camera,” Whetter said. “Only by including people with disabilities in the spaces where creative and business decisions are made, will we begin to see concrete results on screen.” (*Medium*, Nov. 17, 2019)

Unfortunately, as important as it is for the progress of people with disabilities, filmmaking is no easy—or inexpensive—task. In fact, Citchen-Spruce says that raising money for her films is her greatest challenge as a filmmaker, just as it is for many other filmmakers.

“It’s hard to raise money for films,” she says, noting that creating great grant narratives, a clear pitch, and diverse fundraising strategies can make raising money easier.

A Boost From a Grant

In 2023, Citchen-Spruce got some important funding help when she became one of the year’s 10 Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Artist-Innovator Fund grantees. As such, she received an \$8,500 grant from the Center for Cultural Innovation (CCI) to pursue a digital docuseries that will feature several black women with disabilities taking their city by storm. She is working on that project now and has titled it *Divas in the City*.

“CCI recognizes that having an underserved perspective, living with challenging circumstances, and applying creative practice can yield important solutions for not only the innovator but for the benefit of society,” according to [CCI](#).

“I’m grateful for the grant opportunity because I can use the money to move *Divas in the City* further,” Citchen-Spruce says. “I can now pay for the sizzle reel and a portion of the startup for the digital series. The grant is a great help to start up the project, but me and the team will [need to] raise additional funds through brand partnership to complete the series.”

The Seeds of an Advocate

Citchen-Spruce’s path to filmmaking began with dealing with many challenges of living with a disability early in life.

When she was just 6 months old, she was in a car accident with her father that caused a C2 spinal cord injury. As she started school, being a disabled wheelchair user and the only black girl there, she often felt isolated. She describes these years as an emotionally difficult period because there was no one around her like her—either in school, outside school, or in the media.

Discrimination was certainly an issue in her early life and also contributed to her being rejected in her first attempt to enroll in a broadcasting school.

“Immediately after high school,” she says, “I attempted to enroll in a broadcasting school that covered video production and radio. However, they denied me access, citing my wheelchair use, stating that no one would be available to assist me with carrying cameras.”

When she was 21, she participated in the Ms. Wheelchair Michigan contest because she believed it would be a great opportunity to show her public speaking ability and meet new people.

Becoming Ms. Wheelchair Michigan 2006 gave her the opportunity to speak out in support of women with disabilities who were being abused and impacted her plans for the future.

“It inspired me to continue the work of disability advocacy, especially advocating the needs of women and girls with disabilities,” she says.

Her advocacy efforts include the following:

- Founding Women Empowered to help women with disabilities live their best lives
- Co-directing LEAD, a leadership development program for BIPOC-disabled individuals and their parents
- Working with the Michigan Disability Rights Coalition to develop leaders in Michigan’s disabled community
- Pursuing criminal justice reform for people with disabilities through her volunteer efforts with Warriors on Wheels of Metro Detroit
- Being a member of the National Black Disability Coalition.

Over the years, she has also won recognition and awards for her efforts. She was a Diversability 2022 D-30 Disability Impact List honoree, the 2022 Betty Williams Champion of Equal Opportunity Award recipient, a 2021 RespectAbility Entertainment Lab Fellow, and the 2021 ARC Detroit Advocate of the Year.

A Filmmaker Is Forged

After receiving her title as Ms. Wheelchair Michigan in 2006, she earned a college degree in 2010.

In going to college, she had refused to accept the opinion she'd received immediately after high school from the broadcasting school that rejected her.

“Despite [that earlier] setback,” she says, “I chose not to live out THEIR words. Instead, I pursued and earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from Oakland University.” She also developed her artistic skills at Henry Ford Community College.

During her time in college and the years since, she's completed several creative projects. In 2011, she produced a short film, *Seeded*, for The 48 Hour Film Project, which received an Official Selection award at the Trinity Film Festival. She then produced the short film *Justifiable Homicide*. In 2020, she released her short documentary, *My Girl Story*, which was mainly self-financed and dealt with the lives of two teenage girls in Detroit, one of whom was living with a disability. These partial examples of her work demonstrate that she's more than ready to produce a great film. On top of that, she also has experience as a playwright and actress.

“Through these experiences,” she says, “I've learned that when you have a passion, you must not let anyone extinguish it.”

Today, her company, Living Unapologetically Media, strives to give a voice to the unheard.

One of the main reasons she pursued filmmaking, she says, was the lack of representation of disabled stories when she was growing up. She can't recall seeing any disabled characters when she was a child.



As she works toward completing and releasing her docuseries *Divas in the City*, she will almost certainly be thinking about the things she has learned about living with a disability over the years and how to help improve the lives of other people with disabilities.

Finding a Purpose

Citchen-Spruce has noted that one of the main catalysts for her efforts is her strong belief that she has a purpose in life, which has given her the strength and resilience to overcome many barriers that might have prevented her success.

Among her main purposes are educating, advocating and creating media representation of the BIPOC (black, indigenous, people of color) and disability communities.

“My goal as a filmmaker is to tell stories full time from marginalized communities, BIPOC, women, girls and people with disabilities to mainstream America,” says Citchen-Spruce.

“What I hope to accomplish with the co-producer, Dr. Donna R. Walton, for *Divas in the City* are two things. First, I want to show women with disabilities can be bosses, set trends, and be girlfriends and mothers. Second, I want to change misconceptions of women with disabilities.”



Photos of Karneshia Shantel (above) and Zazel-Chavah O’Garra (left) provided by Tameka Citchen-Spruce from *Divas in the City* materials

“Tameka and I share our belief in the words often attributed to Mohandas Gandhi, “Be the change that you wish to see in the world,” says Walton. “Thus, if we want to see our stories reflected in Hollywood or elsewhere, then Tameka and I will have to be the ones who make it happen.”

For others out there who might consider working on the production side of the camera, Citchen-Spruce gives this advice: “Go after it. Breaking into the film industry isn't easy, but with passion, learning the craft and business, and determination, you can make a way. Also, don't wait for opportunities to come your way. You're more successful if you create your own film or content, and then people will come your way.”

Citchen-Spruce isn't just throwing out unsolicited advice that she doesn't follow; instead, she's actually also paving the way for others through her own actions. And there's more to come in 2024.



Images of young photographer (above) and filmmaker (below) produced using Midjourney



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and brown girls and women with visible disabilities.

Showing up *unapologetically*
to reshape what visible
disability looks like



DivasWithDisabilities.org

Want to Save More Money Without Losing Your Disability Benefits?

By Becca Wake

If you have a disability and are struggling to achieve your financial goals, an ABLE account could be part of your strategy to get there.

“Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) accounts are tax-advantaged savings accounts that are available to eligible individuals with disabilities,” according to the Social Security Administration (SSA). “By opening an ABLE account, you may be able to save more money each year to help you pay for disability-related expenses.”

These special tax-advantaged accounts offer several benefits for people with disabilities.

“If you receive SSDI [Social Security Disability Insurance], are working, and deposit part or all of your earnings into an ABLE Account, Social Security still considers this deposited money as ‘countable earnings’ and applies Work Incentives to determine if you're engaging in substantial gainful activity (SGA),” according to the SSA.

“However, deposits made into an ABLE account by others, such as your family members, friends, and employers are not considered countable income for determining SGA.”

Piggy banks are so last century. People with disabilities deserve a better way to save money.



“Importantly, for those who get SSI [Supplemental Security Income] benefits, “the first \$100,000 in your ABLE account would be exempted from the SSI \$2,000 individual resource limit,” according to the SSA.

Being able to save up to \$100,000 without losing their SSI is a huge benefit for people with disabilities and should not be easily ignored.

Eligibility and Other Considerations

Although at this time only those who had an onset of disability “before age 26” are eligible, that will rise to “before age 46” in 2026. Many states offer ABLE accounts, and individuals who meet the criteria can choose to open an account in any state, regardless of where they live.

While the money in your ABLE account may only be used for qualified disability-related expenses (QDEs), these expenses include almost any expenses beneficiaries have as a result of their disability. They include basic living expenses; healthcare expenses; prescriptions not covered by Medicare Part D; education expenses; employment training and support; personal support services; assistive and adaptive devices; housing; vehicle modifications and adaptive vehicles; transportation; prevention and wellness expenses; funeral and burial expenses; and other expenses that improve your independence, health and quality of life.

Real-World Examples

On its website at <https://www.ablenrc.org/able-ambassadors/account-owners>, the ABLE National Resource Center (which is not affiliated with the US federal government) provides the stories of several people who have benefited from ABLE accounts.

Sarah Perez, who has bipolar disorder, for example, is an artist and has used her ABLE account to help her purchase a computer and printer to use for her artwork, to establish a photography business, and to pay off medical bills and offset medication costs.

Nathan Turner, who has cerebral palsy, has used his account, which he opened in 2015, to purchase an accessible vehicle and to save up for a down payment on a house.

Before getting her ABLE account, Perez said she never had the money for anything because if she got more money than she was allowed to have with her government benefits, she’d have to spend it immediately. As a result, she couldn’t plan for the future.

She said her ABLE account has given her much more control over her financial situation and that she’s now more hopeful about her life and the future.

Their account have opened up a whole new world of opportunities for both Perez and Turner. Perhaps an ABLE account could do the same for you. It’s at least worth checking out.

Visit the Social Security Administration website at

<https://www.ssa.gov/ssi/spotlights/spot-able.html> and the ABLE National Resource Center website at <https://www.ablenrc.org> to learn more about ABLE accounts. They can help you understand the current rules and determine whether an account is right for you.

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Research-Based Information Related to Living With a Disability

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- Rick Bowers, *RESILIENCE* Editor

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Physicians Offer Acupuncture for Chronic Pain

When Catherine Harvey mentioned her chronic pain to a friend, they recommended she go to Kit Lee, MD, a family medicine physician at Loyola Medicine, for acupuncture treatments. Harvey was already familiar with acupuncture as a mode of treatment for chronic pain and knew it was an option for her ankle pain. There was only one problem.

"I'm terrified of needles," Harvey said. "To think that there's more than one you're going to put in? Oh no."

Acupuncture is a process in which very thin needles are painlessly inserted through the skin at strategic points on the body. This stimulates the nerves, muscles and connective tissue, boosting the body's immune response.

Lee is one of three family medicine physicians at Loyola certified in acupuncture, along with Aaron J. Michelfelder, MD, chair of family medicine, and Haemi Choi, MD, from the department of family medicine and sports medicine. Lee specializes in integrative medicine, an evidence-based approach to treating the whole person that integrates conventional approaches and complementary therapies, including acupuncture. She views it as a particularly helpful option for patients with chronic health conditions.

"There are some conditions where we've sort of reached the limits of what Western medicine can do," she said. "It's always nice to have a complementary technique to bring to bear. Even with the things that we do in traditional medicine, to look at something differently or have a non-pharmacologic option is nice."



Image made using Midjourney

Such was the case for Harvey, who had already seen doctors for her ankle pain and was diagnosed with arthritis.

After six years, during which she tried treatments such as massage therapy and wearing a brace, her condition worsened to the point where she couldn't put weight on her ankle. The pain was so great she was willing to overcome her fear of needles if it meant relief. She made an appointment to see Lee, who immediately put her at ease.

"The orientation lasted maybe an hour because I had so many questions," she said. "Dr. Lee listens to what you're saying, even if it's not directly related to the acupuncture treatment. She addresses issues and shares information with you."

A typical session usually lasts about an hour. After the treating physician positions the needles, she hooks them up to a machine that gives a small stimulus. Then a heat lamp is turned on, relaxing music fills the room, and a timer is set for when the session is completed. Then they re-enter the room, turn the lights up a little, and gently remove the needles one by one.

"The patient doesn't even feel it," said Michelfelder.

Then the physician double checks everywhere needles were placed to be sure they were all removed. Sometimes needles can be intentionally left in for days to weeks with medical tape over them to make the treatments stronger.

Nine years later, Harvey has continued her acupuncture treatment and found it has made an enormous difference.

"Before an appointment, I'm hobbling along," she said. "But after I feel like I can climb Machu Picchu, can walk the Great Wall of China."

The most common conditions for which people seek acupuncture are chronic pain, particularly lower back pain, neck pain and knee pain.

Harvey encourages anyone considering acupuncture to try it.

"You just need to bite that bullet about being afraid of needles. There is no pain, no discomfort. Dr. Lee tells you what she's doing and why she's doing it." she said.

Acupuncture has made a huge difference in Harvey's life and the lives of other patients.

"One of the things my primary care physician always asks me is if I'm still seeing my acupuncturist," Harvey said. "When I tell her yes, she says, 'Never stop.'"

This article was adapted from information provided by Loyola Medicine.

Many people want the same things as they get older: to stay in their own homes, to maintain independence for as long as possible, and to turn to family and friends for help when needed. Staying in your own home as you get older is called “aging in place.” - National Institute on Aging

Study Highlights Racial and Ethnic Disparities Among Older Adults in Relation to Their Potential for Aging in Place

Disability is one of various disparities highlighted in a 2023 study from the University of Michigan (U-M), which used data from the National Poll on Healthy Aging (NPHA) to examine the extent to which 50- to 80-year-olds were prepared to age in place and the racial and ethnic disparities that exist to that end.

Sheria Robinson-Lane, PhD, U-M assistant professor of nursing and principal investigator, said many of the disparities were related to “weathering”—stressors connected to environmental, economic or social factors that accelerate age. Researchers found that income, disability status and household composition emerged as factors that often negatively impact minority aging.

Robinson-Lane was struck by the high level of disability, especially among older African American adults. Roughly 40 percent of older black adults live with a disability compared to only one-third of older adults overall. Multiracial respondents fared slightly better than blacks with 36 percent reporting a disability.

“I knew there was disability among older adults, but I guess I didn't really consider the extent of it,” Robinson-Lane said. “So many communities are very inaccessible—I think that's what was so shocking to me. I think the main takeaway message is we need to create more accessible spaces. The population dynamics are shifting; there's not enough younger people to support the older adults that we have.”

“We're waiting too long to start to make some of these critical changes to (guarantee) basic levels of accessibility within our communities and public spaces.”

The study, which appears in *Geriatric Nursing*, also suggests that rural indigenous populations are the most prepared to age in place—a finding that challenges the conventional wisdom that the accessibility of city living over rural living is preferable for older adults.



Image made using Midjourney

Indigenous participants were the most confident that they could get the necessary help with daily living activities and that their home had the necessary features to age in place—a claim seemingly substantiated by the presence of specific accessible home features.

Rural health outcomes often focus on white populations and exclude indigenous peoples, even though they too often live in rural areas, Robinson-Lane said. The self-sufficiency reported by indigenous participants is likely a combination of culture and community, she said.

"(There is) a long history of really having to sort of figure it out on their own and to have to rely on community to get their needs met," Robinson-Lane said. "They're able to continue to do so as they age."

It's important to note that indigenous people have one of the lowest life expectancies, so while they may be more prepared to age in place, they aren't living as long as white people, she said.

Asian, black, Hispanic and multiracial respondents are more likely to belong to the "sandwich generation" and have one or more children living at home—another example of a weathering stressor, Robinson-Lane said.

Other Findings

- A quarter of all participants reported annual household income of \$30,000 or less compared to half of black respondents.
- More than 25 percent reported living alone, with the highest proportion among black (44 percent), indigenous (40 percent), and multiracial (36 percent).
- 23 percent of participants had a housemate with a disability compared to 36 percent of black respondents and 34 percent of multiracial respondents.
- 21 percent of respondents rated their health fair or poor compared to 37 percent of black respondents.

The NPHA is a recurring national household survey of adults ages 50-80 that examines their experiences and perspectives on a variety of health topics. The poll is based at the U-M Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation and supported by AARP and Michigan Medicine.

This article was adapted from information provided by the U-M Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation. [Click here to view the original article at https://ihpi.umich.edu/news/aging-place-u-m-study-highlights-racial-disparities-among-older-adults](https://ihpi.umich.edu/news/aging-place-u-m-study-highlights-racial-disparities-among-older-adults)

News & Stories You Might Have Missed

The following articles and stories come from press releases and media reports that might not have been widely publicized but that include information relevant to people with disabilities.

Clicking on the links will take you away from this publication to another website.

[CMS Provides Critical Tools to Help Improve Access for Millions Who Receive Medicaid Home- and Community-based Services](#)

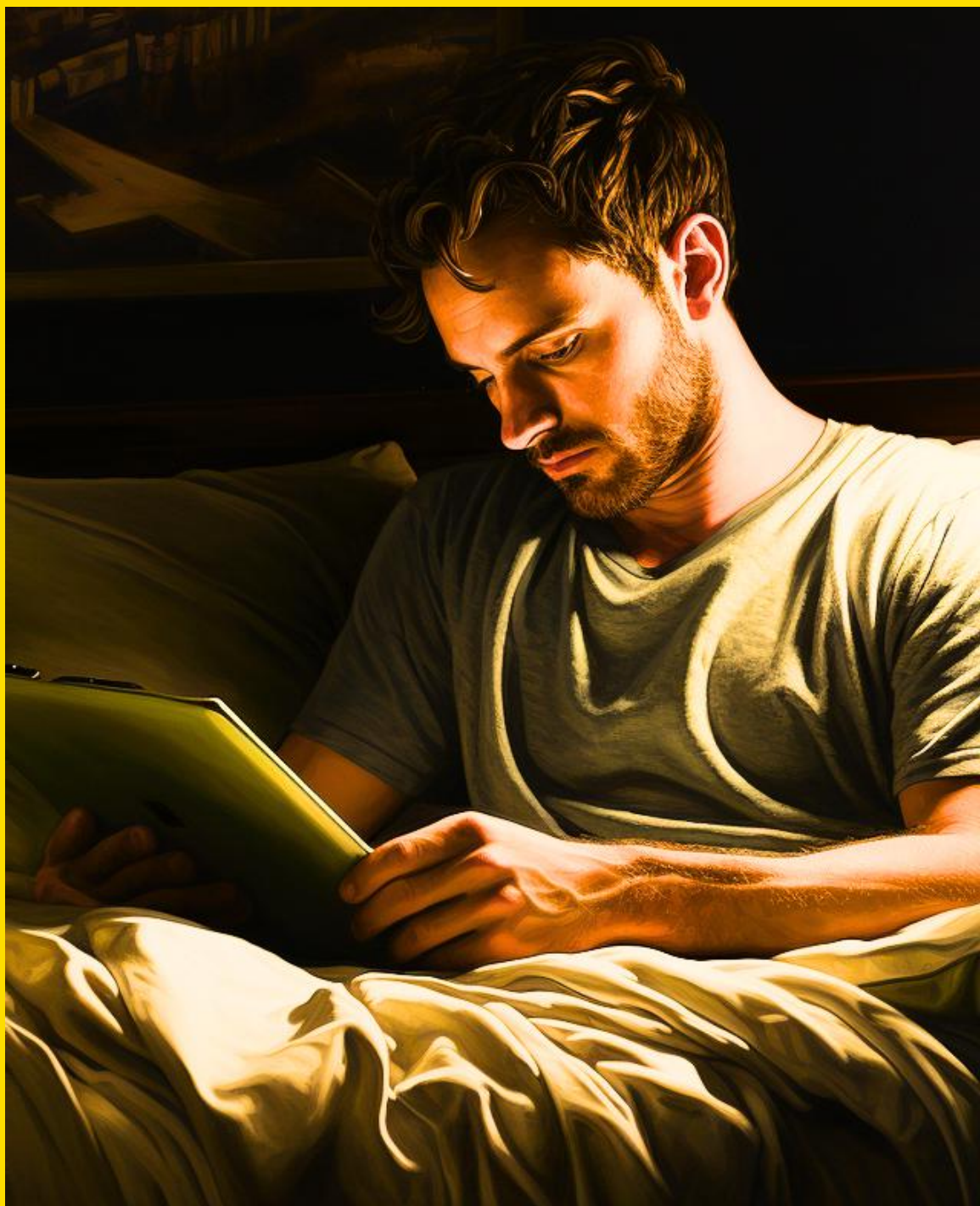
(December 12, 2023)

[Department of Labor Announces Selection of 12 States, District of Columbia to Join Initiative Expanding Opportunities for People With Disabilities](#)

(November 16, 2023)

[AAPD Calls on Department of Labor to End the Practice of Paying Disabled Workers Subminimum Wage](#)

(November 8, 2023)



Time to catch up on the news that could affect your life.
Image made using Midjourney

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