UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

December 18, 2024
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In the theater with Wendy Eley Jackson: ‘Facing the Falls’

When Wendy Eley Jackson first met Cara Yar Khan, she saw more than a disability advocate. She saw a story waiting to be told. Yar Khan’s rare genetic condition, hereditary inclusion body myopathy (HIBM), had not defined her — it had propelled her to live with purpose, adventure and strength. That narrative spark led to “Facing the Falls,” a documentary that follows Yar Khan’s pilgrimage through the Grand Canyon and her journey to amplify the voices of people with disabilities.

Jackson, a producer of “Facing the Falls” and a lecturer in UC Santa Barbara’s Department of Film and Media Studies and in the College of Creative Studies, felt an immediate connection to Yar Khan’s story. “As an African-American woman with physical disabilities myself, I understand the layers of being ‘othered’ in society,” she explained. “This film is a chance to share a narrative that both normalizes and celebrates these experiences.”

Directed by Celia Aniskovich,“Facing the Falls” delves into Yar Khan’s battle with HIBM, a disorder affecting fewer than 3,000 people worldwide. Despite its challenges, Yar Khan’s trek through the Grand Canyon becomes a metaphor for resilience and advocacy. The documentary was brought to life by a team of accomplished filmmakers, including Academy Award-nominated editor and director Sam Pollard and lead producer Liz Yale Marsh, who has worked on projects addressing global issues.

For Jackson, joining the project meant not only producing but also helping to shape the team. Collaborating with HiddenLight Productions, co-founded by Hillary Clinton, Chelsea Clinton and Sam Branson, who all worked to ensure the film would resonate with a wide audience.

“Additionally, the director, Celia Aniskovich, met Hillary and Chelsea Clinton at DOC NYC, and they joined the project, bringing their gravitas to ensure it achieved global reach,” said Jackson, who previously featured President Bill Clinton in her documentary “Maynard” (2017), highlighting his close friendship with her father-in-law, Mayor Maynard Jackson Jr., the first African American Mayor of Atlanta. Jackson said that having Hillary and Chelsea Clinton come on board “now feels like a full-circle moment.”

“HiddenLight recognized the importance of amplifying this story,” said Jackson. “Their support helped us frame the message of advocacy and awareness.” The film is available to stream for free on YouTube, following its Dec. 3 release on International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

Reflecting on the impact of “Facing the Falls,” Jackson emphasized the broader significance of the story. “This isn’t just about overcoming challenges,” she said. “It’s about embracing diversity and understanding the strength we all carry within us.

Beyond her work on the new documentary Jackson is committed to mentoring aspiring filmmakers. At UCSB, she teaches courses on screenwriting, creative writing and television production, guiding students to understand the evolving dynamics of storytelling. She is also working on a book exploring how audiences engage with binge-worthy media, examining the intersection of content consumption and storytelling.

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