

Disney  
**OUT OF MY  
MIND**



## **LOGLINE**

A sixth grader with cerebral palsy shows what she has to say is more important than how she says it.

## **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

Melody Brooks, a sixth grader with cerebral palsy, has a quick wit and a sharp mind, but because she is non-verbal and uses a wheelchair, she is not given the same opportunities as her classmates. When a young educator notices her student's untapped potential and Melody starts to participate in mainstream education, Melody shows that what she has to say is more important than how she says it.

## **LONG SYNOPSIS**

Melody Brooks, a sixth grader with cerebral palsy, has a quick wit and a sharp mind, but because she is non-verbal and uses a wheelchair, others often view her with pity and discomfort. Though she has fierce advocates in her parents, Melody yearns to be seen and heard by the world around her. When a young educator notices Melody's untapped potential, she encourages Melody to participate in mainstream education. Against numerous odds and challenges, Melody leads her school's quiz team to success. Along the way, Melody uses her newfound voice to inspire courage in her family, her principal and peers, an eccentric neighbor, and even the family goldfish.

## **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION**

### Chapter One: Origins

"Out of My Mind" originated as a popular young adult book by Sharon M. Draper about a spirited girl called Melody who had so much to say but didn't have the voice to say it. Published in 2010 and with a story set in the early 2000s, the book lived on The New York Times bestseller list for over 18 months and won numerous awards and accolades, hitting a chord with young readers, adults and educators alike. Draper is proud that the book is in schools all over the country and all over the world. In addition to the universal acclaim, fans of the book, which has been translated into 22 languages and is now part of many grade school curricula, clamored for the movie version. "Every time I talked to a school group, they all said, 'How come this book isn't a movie?' And I said, 'Well, I don't know anybody who does that yet,'" laughs Draper.

It wasn't long before producers Dan Angel and Peter Saraf approached her with the idea of a film adaptation. Saraf explains, "My daughter read 'Out of My Mind' when she was in the fourth grade. It was one of the first books that really sparked her imagination, and she told me she thought it would make a great movie. I agreed, but it took me a

little while to get it done. I dropped her off for her first year of college just as we wrapped shooting.”

## Chapter Two: Meeting of the Minds

It turns out the book wasn't the only reason that Saraf knew this story had to be told. As fate would have it, Saraf's children attended the Manhattan School for Children (MSC), a New York City public school that ran a pioneering inclusion program where children of differing abilities were integrated into one classroom. Through MSC, Saraf met the Ellensons, the family responsible for starting the inclusion program at the school. Their son, Thomas, has cerebral palsy, uses a wheelchair and is nonverbal. As the two fathers became friendly, it was the natural next step to join forces on Saraf's new project. Richard Ellenson explains, "When he decided to make this movie, he asked my son, Tom, if he would be involved in the movie, and then he asked me as well if I would help in terms of some of the work and the understanding of the technology and the world of disabilities." Richard and Tom Ellenson became an integral part of the development process and continued to work with the production team during the making of "Out of My Mind."

## Chapter Three: Representing the Community

When author Sharon Draper set out to write the book, she recognized the need in the YA literary space for stories centered around children with differing abilities, and drawing on her own experiences as the parent of a child with cerebral palsy, she strove to represent the community fairly and to bring authenticity to her work. Her exhaustive preparation involved researching the types of communication devices that would have been available at the time and what social services would have been on offer to families. She talked to many parents of children with differing abilities and read extensively on the subject so that she could honestly create the character of Melody. In addition, Draper, who started her professional career as a teacher, spent 26 years teaching in the Cincinnati public school system before retiring in 2000 to devote herself to writing full time. Her knowledge of how schools operate in regard to kids with different abilities informed the writing of "Out of My Mind."

Acknowledging the importance of bringing this story to the screen, the filmmakers recognized the need to expand the production team to include members of the cerebral palsy (CP) and disability communities. The filmmakers shared the script with people with CP, people who use wheelchairs, and people who are nonverbal and use AAC devices, taking their feedback and incorporating it into all aspects of the production. A team called the All Access Team was assembled, including Thomas and Richard

Ellenson and local disability experts in Toronto. They looked after the needs of the entire cast and crew from an accessibility perspective. Lawrence Carter-Long, a world-renowned leader, activist, and media curator and consultant, joined the team early to consult on the screenplay, production, post-production and release of the film. Maysoon Zayid, a comedian, actress, writer and disability advocate who has CP, came on to help Amber Sealey and Daniel Stiepleman bring authenticity to Melody's inner monologue, voiced by Jennifer Aniston. RespectAbility, a disability-led nonprofit organization that fights stigmas and advances opportunities for the full diversity of the disability community, was instrumental in helping with the process. "People with lived experience with CP and advocacy experience were an integral part of making this movie from beginning to end," says Saraf.

The subject matter in "Out of My Mind" was a perfect match for Disney's brand. Ayo Davis, president of Disney Branded Television, says, "There's a sense of exhilaration here as we embark with this very well-regarded creative team in adapting Sharon Draper's candid, beautiful and powerful book that tells a universally relatable story about both following your dreams and having an impact in this world. It's also a wonderful opportunity for us to center the lived experiences of people with disabilities."

#### Chapter Four: Creative Collaborations

Finding the right voice to write the screenplay of "Out of My Mind" was of the utmost importance as the book is told from inside Melody's head and is full of self-reflection, humor and the typical musings of a preteen girl. The filmmakers brought on Daniel Stiepleman, who had won the Humanitas Prize for his script "On the Basis of Sex." Besides his filmography, he brought his own unique experience to the job, as well as a dose of honest self-reflection. "My background is, before I was a screenwriter I was a teacher," he says. "And so I felt that I had a voice in the conversation of what the book was about, that as a teacher, I had students who were neurodivergent and who had varying abilities. At times, I thrived at doing that, and at times, I failed at doing that."

Stiepleman credits the genius of Sharon Draper's book with making his life easier as he sat down to tackle the screenplay, admitting that it was a challenge but also a joy to adapt the book. As a teacher and a parent, Stiepleman knew that "Out of My Mind" represented a universal coming-of-age story as well as a story particular to a 12-year-old girl trying to find her voice. He found Melody to be a great literary protagonist, adding, "She's sassy, and she's smart, and she's funny, and we love seeing the world from her point of view."

Finding the perfect director to bring the film to life was also hugely important. Filmmaker Amber Sealey immediately recognized the quality and power of the story when she read the script. As a filmmaker, writer and actress, Amber brought to the project a vision for making a coming-of-age story about a tween girl with a keen eye for performance and nuance. Saraf was confident that she was the right person for the job. “She came in with such a phenomenal vision for the movie,” he states. “She saw that this was not a movie about disability. She saw it as a coming-of-age story. And she saw it as a tween movie about a girl who needs to find her way in the world, just as we all have to find our way in the world.” For her part, Sealey recognized immediately that “Out of My Mind” needed to stand apart and differentiate itself by placing the story firmly from Melody’s point of view rather than from the people reacting to her. Sealey says, “What I loved was both how specific but also how universal the story was — we all know what it’s like to feel out of place in sixth grade, to want to be part of the cool group and to not know how to go about doing that. The specifics of what Melody is going through (being nonverbal or being a wheelchair user) may not be everyone’s story, but her desire to fit in, her crushes, her ambitions, all those things are relatable for anyone. I love that Melody’s relatability stems not from her uniqueness but from our shared commonalities.” Sealey concludes, “I’m thrilled to tell this sophisticated, coming-of-age story that is unlike any we’ve seen before and to have had such wonderful collaborators.”

Sealey and Stiepleman worked together to bring out the aspects of the story that highlighted Melody’s relatability, keen to make it both funny and heartwarming, as well as grounding the story in the specifics of what life is like for a tween girl. As a parent herself and as a filmmaker who has a special aptitude for working with children, Sealey felt both Melody’s experiences and her parent’s experiences needed to be authentic and nuanced.

Luke Kirby, who had worked with Sealey on her most recent film “No Man of God,” was happy to be reunited with his director. “I had such a tremendous experience working with her,” he notes. “I really appreciate her style and her approach to the work, and also, what I’ve seen her able to create through her process.”

Other cast members were equally effusive about Sealey. DeWitt raves about her ability to collaborate and points out how Sealey continued to expand what was possible in a young adult story while keeping it grounded in a lot of truth. “It feels like a movie adults would like, too,” she remarks. “I’m really enjoying getting to do grittier work in a movie that can also be for young people.”

Judith Light, who plays Melody’s eccentric next-door neighbor, Mrs. V., sees similarities between her character, the determined but loving neighbor, and Sealey. “Amber is like

Mrs. V. in a way. She will push you,” she says. “When you’re working with a director, you want that from them. You want them to be engaged with you, give you ideas.”

## Chapter Five: Casting

From the beginning, the filmmakers knew that they needed an exceptional young woman to play the part of Melody. The casting crew reached out to agents and managers in all the traditional ways and put out the word worldwide for people to send in audition tapes. The filmmakers reached out not only through traditional casting avenues but also through the CP community. Says Saraf, “Amber and I were committed from the get-go to casting an actress with cerebral palsy to play the role of Melody. And we just did a massive outreach and using some of our partners from the disability community, we spread as wide a net as we could.” Says Sealey, “It was so wonderful to get tapes from young actors around the world who had a personal connection to the book and to Melody. We knew this character and this film would be so important to so many people. Holding auditions for this role was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life.”

Ultimately, the filmmakers saw over 100 tapes, and most, if not all, of the auditions came from people who had never acted before. It was quickly clear that Phoebe-Rae Taylor stood out from the crowd, wowing the casting team and Sealey with her bright personality and quick intuition and exhibiting a screen magnetism and an ability to hold the center of the movie. Sealey and Saraf sent a video of Phoebe to Draper, saying, “I think we found our Melody.” Sealey knew that Phoebe’s wit, charm and brilliance would make the role sing. Draper wrote back immediately, advising the filmmakers to waste no time in making the movie before Phoebe got too old for the role! Draper couldn’t have been more sure of the decision, stating, “She brings that knowledge of what it’s like to struggle and have to learn and process information a little bit differently than other people. So she’s the perfect actor because she knows what it’s like, and she’s been there.”

The cast members were also exuberant in their praise of Phoebe-Rae Taylor. Rosemarie DeWitt, who plays Melody’s mother Diane, was in awe. “She just has this star-like quality and this face that, when expressions move through it, it’s so authentic,” she comments. “It’s a real honor, quite honestly, to be able to be alongside her on this journey, because she’s so vulnerable in sharing herself with the audience.”

Judith Light further compliments Phoebe, saying, “She has the humanity and the humor and the willingness to do anything to make something work. And her generosity and her graciousness toward everybody on the set ... she was and is the perfect person to play

this part.” And Sealey joins the chorus of admiration for her lead actor, “In Phoebe-Rae Taylor, we have found an amazing actress, and I can’t wait for the world to meet her.”

For Sealey, it was always crucial to have authenticity in casting. Says Sealey, “There was never any question about casting a lead actress with cerebral palsy; that was a must. But I also wanted to fill the cast with people who were representative of the world that we live in – that means neurodiversity, racial diversity, gender diversity. This cast and this crew are wildly varied, just like real life!” Saraf also acknowledges the team’s desire to cast equitably across all the roles in the screenplay, stating, “From the get-go, we always knew that our lead actor was going to be a person who uses a wheelchair and that other actors, and the other kids in her classroom, who have all sorts of different abilities, were going to be accommodated as part of our accessible production, alongside people who work on the film as well.”

As for Phoebe herself, she was thrilled to be cast in the role and remembers the moment she heard the good news. “We were sitting in my bedroom, me and my mum and my dad. I was in my pajamas,” she reminisces. “They told me I got the part of Melody, and my mum and dad, they were crying. I was so happy but my parents were crying and crying. It was so fun. That was the best day ever.” Phoebe was drawn to the character of Melody because of her strength and ability to come back even stronger after being knocked down, a trait she also shares, along with a need to be accepted for who she is. “I feel I’m very similar to Melody in many ways,” she admits. “She just wants to be heard, and she just wants to be like everyone else in her class. She’s one of the strongest people I’ve heard of.”

The director acknowledges that the rest of the casting process was really fun and that they are honored to have their ideal cast on board. Sealey had been a fan of DeWitt for years and was thrilled that she responded to the role with such enthusiasm and a deep understanding of the work. As for DeWitt, she embraced the complexity of her character, a protective mother with only her child’s best interests at heart. “Diane’s a relatable character because she is very much the ‘every mom,’” DeWitt says. “She still has a foot in the world of, like, why do things have to be like this? And, it kind of makes her, at times, not be able to hear her daughter, and it makes her mess up. She’s flawed, the way we all are. And like all parents, we mess up and have to go back in and try to make it right.”

In the role of Chuck, Melody’s father, both Sealey and DeWitt were taken with Luke Kirby, who had worked with Sealey on her previous film “No Man of God,” playing Ted Bundy no less, as well as appearing in the television series “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel.” However, DeWitt admits that his performance in “Out of My Mind” exceeded her

expectations. “Luke Kirby as Chuck is so fantastic,” she raves. “I was sort of surprised at how much he brings a really soft quality to the movie, like, a gentleness.” Sealey notes, “I knew Luke had the depth and full heart that was required of Chuck.” And she jokes, “We had such a good time working together on ‘No Man of God,’ and I felt I had to make it up to him somehow after playing Bundy by letting him play someone who wasn’t totally evil next!”

The nuances of the character of Chuck required an actor who not only could project absolute paternal love but would also stand in contrast to Diane as the two characters make a perfect team, with a distinct division of labor in caring for their daughter and initially a different reaction to the idea of the mainstream classroom. “Chuck and Diane are on very different pages,” clarifies DeWitt. “He’s really open to letting Melody fail. And she is trying to Bubble wrap the world and make sure that her daughter’s heart doesn’t get broken over and over again.”

Phoebe-Rae Taylor elaborates, “I think Diane and Chuck would go to the ends of impossible to fit Melody’s needs, exactly like my parents. Chuck is more the easygoing dad who lets his children do whatever they want. But my mom, in real life, is Diane, and she would be a bit more strict, a bit more overprotective of Melody in that whole class thing. That would be my mom.”

In discussing the roles of Chuck and Diane, screenwriter Stiepleman recognizes the delicate balance between protecting one’s child and not stifling their ability to learn and grow. “I think Melody comes to understand over the course of the movie that she’s going to grow up and she’s going to have CP for the rest of her life, and she’s going to have to learn how to fight those battles for herself,” he adds. “And she’s going to thrive.” DeWitt recognizes the issues facing many parents of children with differing abilities. “It’s the double whammy, I think, for parents who are raising kids with disabilities that you have to learn how to be a parent and then also become an advocate for your child,” she says. “Because, in this case, Melody can’t advocate for herself. But she finds her voice, and then she can.”

Other roles in the film were cast with equal attention to detail by Sealey. Beloved actor Judith Light was brought on to play the part of Mrs. V., the Brooks’ next-door neighbor who fiercely protects Phoebe while also pushing her to always reach for the stars. Light had personal reasons for wanting to be part of the production. “I was drawn to this project for a couple of reasons,” she says. “One of them is that my late manager, his niece, has cerebral palsy. So I was always connected to somebody with cerebral palsy.” And, on the subject of advocacy films, she adds, “There is something about a story that talks about how the world views disability and how important it is that we not discount



people for the way their outer presentation is. It is our responsibility to hold them and support them, and for those reasons, I wanted to do this film so we could talk about it.”

The role of Dr. Katherine Ray is a key character in the story. Underestimated for her youth and mistrusted for questioning the status quo, she is able to have empathy for Melody’s predicament and the keen insight to recognize her abilities. Says Sealey, “When Courtney Taylor came in, I knew right away she was right for the role. She had the warmth, intelligence, and charm that Dr. Ray needed. Courtney brought a wonderful relatability, an ease, and an insight that was so essential to the role. She really made Dr. Ray her own in a unique way.”

Finally, Sealey talks about the character of Mr. Dimming, Phoebe’s sixth grade teacher who doesn’t always choose the right path but who perhaps mirrors the experiences of many people in stumbling to know how to welcome people of differing abilities. “What’s so great about Mr. Dimming is that he’s not all evil. He’s a beloved teacher who makes some very grave mistakes. He cares about his students and their successes, but when confronted with something new, he fumbles and falters. In many ways, he’s representative of lots of us in the audience, learning about Melody’s abilities and our own prejudices in real-time.” Saraf recognizes Michael Chernus as one of the great New York stage and film actors and addresses the nuanced layers of the role, “It might be a little bit of a complex character,” he says. “But Michael Chernus brings enthusiasm, uniqueness and humanity to that role in a way that nobody else can.”

## Chapter Six: Practical Solutions

“Out of My Mind” is set in 2002, before smartphones, tablets and speech apps made assistive technology so much easier for nonverbal people to access. Director Amber Sealey and production designer Michael Fitzgerald researched the field extensively, ultimately inventing the look and functionality for a fictional device (an AAC) for the story, which Sharon M. Draper brilliantly dubbed in her book the Medi-Talker 6000. This device enables Melody to type in words, enter phrases, and use symbols to express herself, and the machine then speaks the words for her. Before Melody obtained this device, she used a picture-based communication board, physical gestures and some vocalizations to communicate. With the Medi-Talker, Melody is able to create more complex phrases, even tell jokes and communicate her emotions; a whole world of possibilities opens up to her.

During pre-production, Sealey and Fitzgerald turned to cerebral palsy consultant Richard Ellenson to help develop the design of the Medi-Talker for the movie. Ellenson has been involved in the field of assisted technology and augmentative communication

for a couple of decades, having created a device called The Tango with input from his son Tom and, more recently, an app called Talk Suite. He explains, “These devices are extraordinary because they give people a voice. Can you imagine living in a body where you have your brain moving as fast as Melody’s and not being able to express yourself? But the big problem, still, is getting people to listen. And that’s what we see in the movie.”

When screenwriter Daniel Stiepleman started doing his research for the film, he spent a lot of time with people with CP who used AAC devices and admitted to feeling nervous at the beginning. “I was worried about saying the wrong thing. It takes a while to type into a device what you want to say and have the machines talk for you. It was a learning process for me to learn to be comfortable, to learn to just sit and wait and be patient and just to care.”

Sealey notes, “The experience of speaking to someone who uses AAC can make one nervous if they’ve not done it before. The key is in learning how to wait and listen. It’s actually really beautiful because you start to pay more attention to other ways that people communicate, like using hands, eyes, breath, and more. And you learn that part of your job as a human is learning to adapt to all the various ways other humans communicate. Not everyone will speak or communicate just like you do.”

Phoebe-Rae Taylor acknowledges that her differences can cause her to feel isolated and that she has to push herself to keep going when her self-esteem gets low. Playing Melody and being part of the movie has given her added strength. “I’ve had, for all my life, the same experience as Melody in class. I’ve had experiences in my life which aren’t really acceptable,” she admits. “It really knocked my confidence. But this film has made me more confident in myself.”

From the earliest days of pre-production, the filmmakers brought on a team of people to help facilitate an inclusive set. The filmmakers called them the “All Access Team” and they were on board early on to make sure that all the locations were accessible for everyone. Some cast members were neurodivergent and needed different kinds of stimuli on set or specific equipment. A couple of the actors were deaf, so there was a sign language interpreter on set. The team made sure that there were always enough people to ensure everybody’s needs were met.

Phoebe agrees wholeheartedly, “They did everything possible to make everything accessible. They would put ramps over the wires. They were always making it so I could fit anywhere. If there was something in my way, they would move it within a split second. It was so helpful and so good.”

## Chapter Seven: Melody's Voice

Whereas the book was able to communicate Melody's thoughts on the page, the filmmakers felt that the film needed a voice-over to express Melody's innermost feelings and the humorous lists that are constantly running through her head ("Things I Love," "Things I Hate," "Things I Can Do That You Think I Can't"). The idea for the lists came from Sealey's own diaries when she was 12 years old, as well as the diaries of her tween daughter. Stiepleman came up with the idea to have Melody imagine her own inner voice, and the filmmakers went through various ideas and iterations of what the voice should be. Ultimately, Sealey noted that Phoebe was a huge "Friends" fan (she even has her bedroom door painted purple with the yellow frame) and was even named after a "Friends" character (Phoebe!). So, it made complete sense for the VO to be voiced by none other than "Friends" star Jennifer Aniston. Aniston was thrilled to become part of the movie, adding her recognizable voice and sense of humor to the mix.

Further setting the scene from Melody's point of view and anchoring the movie in 2002, Sealey wanted the eclectic soundtrack to be full of hits of the period, including tracks by Justin Timberlake, The Cranberries, Mary J. Blige and 10,000 Maniacs.

## Chapter Eight: Epilogue

The film serves as an entertaining, heart-warming story told with humor and sensitivity and also stands as a towering achievement in terms of casting, inclusion and positivity. Robert Kessel, executive vice president of Narrative Film at Participant, explains, "'Out of My Mind' advances Participant's mission of reaching audiences with incredible stories that celebrate difference and challenge preconceived notions about ability." Sealey concurs, "My hope is that this movie will be an important part of disability awareness and inclusion and will expand the conversation surrounding diversity and disability. We can't talk about diversity without including disability. But it's also a film that is hopefully entertaining and makes all of us feel closer to each other; it illustrates that while we might be different on the outside, inside, we are very similar."

Draper is often asked what children and families can take away from this story, and she is quick to point out that every reader comes away with something different. She is happy that so many people relate to Melody and her journey and hears from her fans that after reading the book, they learn to look at the world differently and appreciate people differently. She proudly notes, "It opened the minds of young people that this

world exists and that these young people are kids just like them who are longing for friends just like they are.”

Stiepleman found that his preconceptions about a film about cerebral palsy were quickly upended. “I think at the beginning of this process, I thought this was going to be a movie about a girl who is struggling because she has CP,” he admits. “What I learned, thanks to the generosity of so many families who let me spend time with them and schools that let me visit, is that cerebral palsy was never Melody’s obstacle. It’s the way people treat her because she has cerebral palsy.” He also celebrates the fact that children who have never seen themselves as the protagonist in a story are now going to see themselves on screen for the first time. “I think that’s going to be powerful,” he concludes. Judith Light’s final words are to compliment Phoebe as being an example to everyone, in her commitment to the part, her positive attitude and her professionalism on the set. “Every family should watch this movie together and talk about whatever challenges are going on in their families and how they can support each other and get outside support.”

As in the book, the film succeeds in showing all aspects of life in a loving family facing a learning curve with a child with differing abilities. Phoebe hopes that the film will open people’s minds so they come away from watching it with more understanding and openness toward someone with a disability and children with disabilities will feel more confident and accepted. “You really can do anything and everything you put your mind to. I didn’t expect to do this, and it shows you can do anything. And please, don’t let anyone knock you down,” she encourages. “One of the hardest things for me is people talk to my mom, not me. So, I want people to speak to people with disabilities and try to understand and talk to them. All we want is someone to just talk to us and treat us normally for who we are.”

#### DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT — AMBER SEALEY

Directing this film has had a profound impact on my life in so many ways — the most pronounced being that it has expanded my comprehension of humanity and our capacities for empathy, connection, and growth. I felt keenly that this was a story that was about a tween like any other — someone who longed for acceptance, love, friendship, and joy. Just like all of us do. What was special about Melody was that she was just like me, and my daughter, and other girls and women I know, despite our lives being so superficially disparate. I felt a strong pull to tell this story, despite knowing that I had a steep learning curve ahead of me in understanding disability, Augmentative and Alternative Communication, and disability portrayal on screen. I welcomed that process, and the evolution that followed.

It was really important to me to fill the cast with actors of all abilities and neurodiversities. We were going to explore in real time what it was like to make the first mainstream movie about a kid with a disability played by a kid with that same disability. We had actors who were hearing impaired, visually impaired, Autistic, had Down Syndrome, and more. Phoebe-Rae Taylor, who plays Melody, had never acted before and the experience of helping her see what she can do on screen was magical. We formed such a close bond, I would use an earwig and microphone to speak to her privately during takes and give direction. Her sharing with me that the TV show *Friends* held special significance in her life is what led me to putting that in the film. If Phoebe's safe space was watching *Friends*, then Melody's inner voice could be Jennifer Aniston.

It was important to me that each character in the film be fully human. There is no obvious antagonist. Sure, Mr. Dimming and the Principal act selfishly with ignorance and out of fear. But they are not all evil. Mr. Dimming is actually a teacher who cares and tries hard. And yet when faced with Melody he falters because he is outside of his comfort zone. That's understandable, but it doesn't mean he should be content to stay there. Similarly, Principal Antenucci is not wrong that if her school becomes known as a place where kids with disabilities will get treated fairly, others will flock to that school and that could impact her budget. But where the learning and growth happens is when these characters start to look at, and move past their own ignorance and preconceptions, the world becomes not only a fairer and more just place, but also a better place, and, dare I say, more interesting place as well. Will it take longer for a teacher to teach a child with dyslexia amongst other children who do not have dyslexia? Probably. But does that mean that the child with dyslexia should not be given the same standard of education and opportunities that the children without dyslexia are given? No.

We had the most generous consultants who let me into their homes and lives to gain a deeper understanding of what living with cerebral palsy was like, and what using AAC was like. It taught me so much about patience and listening. Taking the time to listen is actually the moral of the whole film. As the credits roll, I want people to feel and to value the concept of taking more time to listen. To ourselves. To others. And most definitely to people or things that we don't understand and maybe have prejudices about.

"Presume competence" is something I had Dr. Katherine Ray say in this film because it's one of the best things I carry with me from making this film — the opportunity to look at every person, child, and student in question as having the potential to develop their thinking, learning, and understanding. It also means valuing all people as whole individuals with the right to express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions. And that also means they have the right to communicate however works best for them. Sometimes it's with our words. Sometimes it's with our hands. Sometimes it's with an AAC device.

There are endless ways to communicate but we'll never get to better understanding until and unless we make the time to stop, wait, and listen — and value what we discover as a result.

## CAST BIOGRAPHIES

### PHOEBE-RAE TAYLOR

British-born Phoebe-Rae Taylor makes her acting debut in “Out of My Mind” after having submitted a homemade audition tape at her mother’s suggestion. She is thrilled to be starring in a Disney movie and hopes to continue acting in the future.

Taylor lives in Essex, England, with her mother and three sisters, Heidi, Farrah and Kiki. Like most teenagers, she loves listening to music, spending time on her phone, and playing with her labradoodle, Ludo, and her cat, Flur.

Taylor attends high school and is a passionate advocate on the topic of childhood bullying. Like her character Melody, she is the biggest fan of the TV show “Friends.”

### ROSEMARIE DEWITT

After a series of acclaimed turns in film, television and theater, Rosemarie DeWitt’s grace, style and charm are at the heart of several highly anticipated projects in which she collaborates with some of the industry’s most honored talent.

Next, DeWitt will be seen starring in Disney+’s film adaptation of the New York Times bestselling novel “Out of My Mind” by author Sharon M. Harper. Directed by Amber Sealey, “Out of My Mind” follows a young girl with cerebral palsy navigating sixth grade as a nonverbal wheelchair user. DeWitt will portray Diane, Melody’s mother and fiercest advocate.

Most recently, DeWitt appeared in the series finale of Apple TV+’s Golden Globe®-nominated series “Lessons in Chemistry.” She can also be seen starring opposite Toni Colette and Anna Faris in the 2022 black comedy “The Estate,” and opposite Colin Firth and Toni Collette in HBO Max’s Emmy® and Golden Globe Award-nominated series “The Staircase.” The true-crime drama tells the story of Michael Peterson, a crime novelist accused of killing his wife Kathleen after she is found dead at the bottom of a staircase in their home, and the 16-year judicial battle that followed.

DeWitt also featured in the 2021 drama “The Same Storm” alongside Sandra Oh and Mary-Louise Parker. In television, she had a recurring role in the Emmy-nominated Amazon Prime series “The Boys” and also featured in “And Just Like That...,” the “Sex and the City” revival.

In 2020, DeWitt starred in the critically acclaimed Hulu series “Little Fires Everywhere” alongside Kerry Washington and Reese Witherspoon. In 2018, she had lead roles in “Arizona,” “Song of Back and Neck” and “The Professor.” Prior to that, she starred in the season three premiere episode of the acclaimed British series “Black Mirror” for director Jodie Foster and in the 2017 indie-thriller “Sweet Virginia.”

In 2016, DeWitt appeared in Damien Chazelle’s Oscar®-winning musical romance “La La Land” for Lionsgate opposite Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone. Other film credits include Jason Reitman’s “Men, Women and Children,” Focus Features’ “Kill the Messenger” opposite Jeremy Renner, Gus Van Sant’s “Promised Land” opposite Matt Damon, “Your Sister’s Sister” opposite Emily Blunt and Mark Duplass, and Jonathan Demme’s “Rachel Getting Married.”

DeWitt was also seen in the third season of the Showtime comedy series, “The United States of Tara” alongside Toni Collette, as well as a recurring role in the critically acclaimed AMC series “Mad Men,” playing Don Draper’s (Jon Hamm) bohemian mistress in the show’s first season.

## LUKE KIRBY

Luke Kirby is an Emmy-winning actor from his portrayal of Lenny Bruce in “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel.” Kirby will soon start work as the series lead in “Etoile” for Amazon, the next show from Amy Sherman-Palladino and Dan Palladino. This past year, Kirby has appeared in the MGM film “Dark Harvest” directed by David Slade, as well as in a leading role in the second season of “Dr. Death” for Peacock. Kirby stars opposite Rosemarie DeWitt in the upcoming Disney+ film “Out of My Mind,” which will premiere at this year’s Sundance Film Festival. Kirby appears in the lead role of the Spectrum Originals series “Panhandle.” He starred in Amber Sealey’s “No Man of God” alongside Elijah Wood, which premiered at the 2021 Tribeca Film Festival.

On stage, he starred in Odon von Horvath’s critically acclaimed play “Judgement Day” at New York’s Park Avenue Armory. Kirby is also known for his role as Gene Goldman in “The Deuce” for HBO. He can be seen in M. Night Shyamalan’s “Glass,” Nia DaCosta’s “Little Woods” opposite Tessa Thompson, Netflix’s “Tales of the City” opposite Jen Richards, and on Facebook’s “Sorry for Your Loss” opposite Elizabeth Olsen.

Other credits include Dreamworks' "A Dog's Purpose," directed by Lasse Hallström, and "Take This Waltz" directed by Sarah Polley. Television credits include "Gossip Girl" (HBOMAX), "The Company You Keep" (ABC), "Little Voice" (Apple), "The Twilight Zone" (CBS All Access), "The Astronaut Wives Club" (ABC), "Rectify" (Sundance TV), "Show Me a Hero" (HBO) and "Slings & Arrows" (Sundance Channel). Kirby's stage credits include "Too Much, Too Much, Too Many" (director Sheryl Kaller, The Roundabout Theatre Company), "Defender Of The Faith" (director Ciaran O'Reilly, Irish Repertory Theatre), "Jump/Cut" (director Leigh Silverman, The Women's Project) and "Troilus and Cressida" (director Peter Hall, Theatre For A New Audience).

## JUDITH LIGHT

Judith Light is known for her extensive body of work onstage, as well as in television and film, recently receiving a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Her recent projects include Peter Hedge's film "The Same Storm"; "Julia," HBO Max's drama series on Julia Child; Starz' horror comedy "Shining Vale"; and Searchlight's dark comedy "The Menu," alongside Anya Taylor-Joy and Ralph Fiennes. The second seasons of both "Shining Vale" and "Julia" are currently being released. Light wrapped production on "The Young Wife" and "Down Low" for FilmNation, both of which premiered at SXSW, and "Out of My Mind" for Disney+. Her 2019 film "Ms. White Light" also premiered at SXSW. She can also be seen in the second season of "American Horror Stories" and Rian Johnson's series "Poker Face" for Peacock, for which she received an Emmy Award for Outstanding Guest Actress in a Comedy Series. Next up, she stars in the Apple TV+ series "Before" alongside Billy Crystal.

Additionally, she is working on a series of producing projects with her production company and Brillstein Creative Partners.

Light also co-starred in Ryan Murphy's "Impeachment: American Crime Story" on FX, appeared in Lin Manuel Miranda's film "tick, tick... Boom!" for Netflix, as well as "The Accidental Wolf," created by Arian Moyad and now streaming on Topic.

In addition to her current projects, Light starred in the anthology series "Manhunt: Deadly Games," which can currently be found on Netflix, as well as Ryan Murphy's Netflix series "The Politician," and in the musical finale series of "Transparent," Amazon Prime's Golden Globe-winning show created by Joey Soloway for which Light received a Golden Globe nomination and multiple Emmy and Critics' Choice nominations. Her



role in Ryan Murphy's "The Assassination of Gianni Versace: American Crime Story" garnered her an Emmy nomination and a Critics Choice nomination.

In 2012 and 2013, Light won two consecutive Tony® and Drama Desk Awards for her performances in "Other Desert Cities" and "The Assembled Parties." These two performances made her the first actress in nearly two decades to win consecutive Tony Awards. Light also received the 2019 Isabelle Stevenson Tony Award for her extensive philanthropy work. She was also recently awarded the Excellence in Media Award from GLAAD in May 2022. Light sits on the board of directors of the MCC Theater in New York.

## MICHAEL CHERNUS

Michael Chernus recently starred as Ricken on Apple's critically acclaimed "Severance." His impressive list of credits includes Netflix's "Easy" and "Orange is the New Black," Hulu's hit comedy "Ramy," CBS's "Tommy" opposite Edie Falco, Amazon's cult hit "Patriot," and the brilliant series "Manhattan." He will next be seen in Alice Birch's limited series "Dead Ringers" opposite Rachel Weisz for Amazon. Recent film credits include "The Courtroom," which premiered at Tribeca 2022, the horror-comedy "Werewolves Within" for director Josh Ruben and "Materna" for director David Gutnik, which both premiered at Tribeca 2021. Other varied film credits include Marvel's "Spiderman: Homecoming," "The Kindergarten Teacher" opposite Maggie Gyllenhaal, Noah Baumbach's "Mistress America" opposite Greta Gerwig, as well as the Oscar-nominated "Captain Phillips" opposite Tom Hanks and a comedic standout role in "Men in Black 3."

On stage, Chernus won the 2011 OBIE Award and was nominated for a Lucille Lortel Award for his work in Lisa Kron's "In the Wake" at The Public Theatre in New York City. Chernus's voice can often be heard on NPR's "This American Life."

## COURTNEY TAYLOR

Courtney Taylor is known for her breakout role as Issa Rae's assistant Quoia on HBO's "Insecure." Currently, she can be seen as one of the leads in Shea Serrano's Netflix series "Neon," which is streaming now. Taylor can be seen recurring on "Abbott Elementary" and "The Company You Keep," as well as in a series regular role on the ALLBLK series "Send Help." On the feature side, she recently starred opposite Nathalie Emmanuel in the Sony Screen Gems feature "The Invitation."

## CREW BIOGRAPHIES

## AMBER SEALEY, DIRECTOR

Amber Sealey is an award-winning filmmaker whose most recent film, “Out of My Mind” (Disney/ Participant/Big Beach), premiered at Sundance 2024 to multiple standing ovations. Based on the bestselling YA novel of the same name, it stars Rosemarie DeWitt, Luke Kirby and Judith Light, with Jennifer Aniston voicing the inner life of the lead. It will be released on Disney+ on Nov. 22.

Projects she has in development include two of her original scripts, the comedy feature “Coming of Age” and the romantic comedy “Bodice Ripper.” She’s also attached to the feature “Mulholland,” with Leonardo DiCaprio’s Appian Way producing; the comedy feature “Bat Shit,” with Counterbalance producing; “Russ & Roger Go Beyond,” with Sobini and Permut Pictures and Josh Gad attached to play Roger Ebert; and “Victoria,” with Nicky Weinstock producing. Her feature “No Man of God” (SpectreVision/Company X/XYZ Films/RLJ Entertainment), starring Elijah Wood and Luke Kirby, was theatrically released in 2021 to rave reviews.

She has been supported by Sundance, Film Independent and Women In Film. She is a fellow of the AFI Directing Workshop for Women and has written scripts for Duplass Brothers/Donut Productions. She was selected for Ryan Murphy’s Half Initiative, the NBCUniversal Directors Initiative, the WeForShe DirectHer program, and Film Independent’s Directing Lab and their Fast Track program.

Her short film “How Does It Start” world premiered at Sundance and (among other awards) won Best Narrative Short at the Sarasota Film Festival and is being turned into a feature film. Her feature “No Light and No Land Anywhere” was theatrically released by Factory 25 and won a Special Jury Award at the LA Film Festival. Her second feature, “How To Cheat,” won Best Performance at LAFF and both Best Narrative and Best Acting at BendFilm. Her first film, “A Plus D,” was released by IndiePix.

Sealey has a BA in theater arts and modern dance from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and an MA from The Central School of Speech and Drama in London. She studied Shakespeare at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London.

She was born in England and lives in Los Angeles with her family.

## SHARON M. DRAPER, AUTHOR

Sharon M. Draper is a New York Times bestselling author and a recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award, the Coretta Scott King Award (five times) and the

Charlotte Huck Award. “Out of My Mind” received an NAACP Image Award nomination, a Parents’ Choice Award Silver Medal, a Teacher’s Choice designation by The International Literacy Association (ILA) and a Notable Children’s Book in Language Arts designation by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). The sequel, “Out of My Heart,” is currently on the New York Times bestseller list.

#### DANIEL STIEPLEMAN, SCREENWRITER

Daniel Stiepleman (“On the Basis of Sex”) taught in a public school before becoming a screenwriter. He has been featured on the Black List, the Athena List and Variety’s “10 Screenwriters to Watch.” Currently, Stiepleman is adapting the memoir “Lost in the Cold War” for Starry Dome and the sci-fi novel “Planet of Exile” by Ursula K. LeGuin with Annapurna. He lives on an island with his objectively more impressive oncologist-wife and their two children — who are all most likely on a chairlift right now.

#### PETER SARAF, PRODUCER

For the better part of two decades, Peter Saraf ran the powerhouse indie producing and financing company Big Beach, which he co-founded in 2004. With that company, he produced a steady stream of hits, including “Little Miss Sunshine,” “The Farewell,” “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood,” “Safety Not Guaranteed,” “Everything Is Illuminated,” “Kings of Summer,” “Sunshine Cleaning” and the series “Vida” and “Sorry for Your Loss” as well as the docuseries “Nuclear Family.”

Saraf began his producing career working with Jonathan Demme and Edward Saxon at Clinica Estetico, where he worked on films including “Ulee’s Gold,” “Adaptation,” “Philadelphia,” “Beloved” and the documentaries “Mandela” and “The Agronomist.” An Oscar, Golden Globe and Tony nominee, he has won multiple Independent Spirit, Gotham and PGA Awards. In addition to “Out Of My Mind,” he is an executive producer of “Winner,” also premiering at Sundance 2024.

#### ROBERT KESSEL, PRODUCER

Robert Kessel is executive vice president of Narrative Film at Participant, the leading global media company dedicated to entertainment that stands at the intersection of art and activism, where he co-manages the development and production of narrative films.

Since joining Participant in 2013, Kessel has been integral to the production of the company’s most commercially successful films to date: “Wonder” and “Green Book,” overseeing production on both projects and serving as executive producer on “Wonder.” He was also an executive producer on the critically acclaimed Todd Haynes film “Dark

Waters” and oversaw production on “Spotlight,” “Deepwater Horizon,” “Beasts of No Nation” and “A Most Violent Year.” Kessel is an executive producer on the upcoming films “Rob Peace and White Bird,” the sequel to “Wonder,” and he is also a producer on the upcoming “Out of My Mind.”

Prior to Participant, Kessel held executive posts at Matt Tolmach Productions, Overture Films, Hart Sharp Entertainment and Miramax Films.

Kessel serves on the board of Students Run LA, a nonprofit organization that trains over 3000 at-risk kids to run the Los Angeles Marathon each year. He holds a BA in political science and film from Vassar College.

#### DAN ANGEL, PRODUCER

Dan Angel, a multiple Emmy, Peabody and WGA Award-winning writer and producer, has been creating and supervising quality film and television production for over 25 years. His broad range of experience includes an extensive background in many genres, from science fiction and horror to branded family entertainment in all formats. He has been responsible for some of the biggest successes in both family series and long-form movies over the past three decades. Among his other noteworthy accomplishments, Angel co-produced and co-wrote the No. 1 hit family series “Goosebumps” for the FOX Network, produced and co-wrote 76 episodes of the hit R.L. Stine series “The Haunting Hour,” executive produced the award-winning inspirational film “Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story” and “Door to Door,” the award-winning true story of Bill Porter. He has produced over 30 films for Lifetime and Hallmark, which were some of their highest-rated movies.

Recently, Angel launched a new Family Film and Television Studio, Fezziwig Studios, dedicated to high-quality branded family movies and series. In 2022, Fezziwig Studios produced “Rescued by Ruby” for Netflix. In 2024, Fezziwig Studios will produce the Netflix original series based on Jodi Thomas’ bestseller, “Ransom Canyon” and has closed deals on several Newbery-winning bestsellers, including the classic “Julie of the Wolves,” which was set up at Warner Brothers and hopes to go into production in 2024, as well as secured worldwide rights to the hit Tony-winning Broadway musical “Jekyll and Hyde.” “Jekyll and Hyde” was written by Academy Award® winner Alex Dinelaris and plans to go into production in 2024.

#### MICHAEL B. CLARK, PRODUCER

Michael B. Clark has been at Big Beach since 2006 when he joined as an assistant in the New York office, getting his start producing with “Safety Not Guaranteed” (2012). Soon after, he co-founded and ran Beachside, a sister company to Big Beach, focused on financing films from emerging talent. Beachside was a pioneer in the early days of streaming, producing and financing a number of the first independent Netflix Original Films, as well as “Strangers,” the very first scripted series for Facebook. Other achievements at Beachside include an Emmy win for Davy Rothbart’s “Medora” (2014) and Desiree Ahkavan’s “The Miseducation of Cameron Post,” which won the Sundance Grand Jury Prize in 2018.

In 2020, Clark moved into a partner role at Big Beach and has overseen the company’s film slate, including “Jules,” starring Ben Kingsley, and the upcoming “Out of My Mind” (Sundance, 2024), based on the popular YA novel by Sharon Draper and set to air on Disney+ in 2024. He is a graduate of the Department of Dramatic Writing at NYU’s Tisch School and an MBA candidate at Trium, a joint program of the London School of Economics, NYU Stern and HEC Paris.

#### EDDIE RUBIN, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

In 2008, while still in college, Eddie Rubin launched his producing career with his first feature film, “Art House,” starring Greta Gerwig and featuring rock legend Iggy Pop. Since then, Rubin has executive produced or produced multiple projects, including Lulu Wang’s Golden Globe-nominated “The Farewell”; Justin Chon’s film “Blue Bayou,” which premiered at Cannes 2021; and Robin Wright’s “Land,” which premiered at Sundance 2021. At the end of 2021, Rubin produced Antoine Fuqua’s “The Guilty” with Netflix and “Darby and the Dead” with Hulu. Most recently, he produced the adaptation of The New York Times bestselling book “Out of My Mind” for Disney+ with producing partner Peter Saraf.

#### ABOUT PARTICIPANT

Founded in 2004 by Chairman Jeff Skoll and under the leadership of CEO David Linde, Participant ([www.participant.com](http://www.participant.com)) is the leading global media company dedicated to content that unites art and activism to create positive change. Participant’s films have secured 86 Academy Award nominations, including “All the Beauty and the Bloodshed,” a 2023 nominee for Best Documentary Feature, and 21 wins, including Best Picture for “Spotlight” and “Green Book”; Best Documentary Feature for “An Inconvenient Truth,” “CITIZENFOUR,” “The Cove and American Factory”; and Best Foreign Language Film for “Roma” and “A Fantastic Woman.” Participant also has earned 62 Emmy Award

nominations and 18 wins, including two wins for the groundbreaking “When They See Us.”

A pioneer of socially conscious storytelling, Participant partners with key nonprofits and NGOs to drive real-world impact and awareness around today’s most vital issues on a global scale and is the only major US entertainment company whose social and environmental impact has earned a B Corp Certification. Participant believes that diversity is a source of strength, that inclusion is essential to progress, and that equity is an imperative for impact. Follow Participant on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

**OUT OF MY MIND END CREDITS**

A DISNEY ORIGINAL MOVIE

a BIG BEACH and PARTICIPANT PRODUCTION  
in ASSOCIATION with EVERYWHERE STUDIOS

STARRING

PHOEBE-RAE TAYLOR  
ROSEMARIE DeWITT  
LUKE KIRBY  
MICHAEL CHERNUS  
COURTNEY TAYLOR  
and JUDITH LIGHT

CASTING BY

KERRY BARDEN AND PAUL SCHNEE

MUSIC SUPERVISORS

SUSAN JACOBS  
AND JACKIE MULHEARN

SCORE BY

LINDA PERRY

COSTUME DESIGNER

MEGAN OPPENHEIMER

EDITOR

JACOB CRAYCROFT

PRODUCTION DESIGNER

MICHAEL FITZGERALD

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

NOAH GREENBERG

CO-PRODUCER

WENDY GREAN

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

JEFF SKOLL

EDDIE RUBIN

LEAH HOLZER

TOM MAZZA

DAVID CALVERT JONES

BRIAN GOTT

ALEX TURTLETAUB

PRODUCED BY

ROBERT KESSEL

DAN ANGEL

MICHAEL B. CLARK

PETER SARAF

BASED ON THE NOVEL

BY SHARON M. DRAPER

SCREENPLAY BY

DANIEL STIEPLEMAN

DIRECTED BY

AMBER SEALEY