**Defining Disability: Bryan Smith**

Harry 0:00

Hello, and welcome to episode four of our four part series promoting the new ability Co Op short film. I'm your host, Harry O'Brien. In this episode, I sat down with Brian Smith. Brian Smith is an actor, filmmaker, and the director/producer of this short film. In this episode, I spoke to him about his experience making this movie as someone with virtually no experience with disabilities. A bit of background for those of you that are new here, the Trinity ability quad is a cooperative movement led by students with disabilities towards radical inclusion on campus. This podcast series and short film were made possible by the Trinity Equality Fund, the Equality Fund is specially designed to facilitate in innovative and creative equality projects by staff and students across the university. Our project theme is inclusive Trinity, showing how Trinity fosters an inclusive environment and experience for all members of the Trinity community. So without further ado, here's the interview.

How did you first get involved the ability Co Op

Brian 0:57

I first got involved? Actually, Mary got onto me to a friend of a friend, which is usually a lot of things start, word of mouth. So she asked me, what they are interested in, she sent me on a little bit of information about the co op and just about what their vision is, and what wanted to highlight. So I was very interested, obviously, because it's a far cry from the sort of thing that I've been used to, and not having any kind of background with anybody with a disability really, I thought it was a great opportunity for me to learn something as well. So that's where it all began.

Harry 1:30

What was your background? Like, you're because you're a filmmaker, but what kind of filmmaker are you?

Brian 1:35

Yeah, before before I started recording films, I was actually acting. So I've spent a lot of time, I graduated from the Gaiety school of acting a couple of years ago, actually, just right before the pandemic hit hard. I finished the year in there, I suppose seeing it from that point of view, seeing it from the other side of the camera, really, I'm an electrical engineer as my day job. So getting to understand both sides of the coin was really something that I was very interested in, I started with photography, and that kind of branched out. So I got myself a camera and figured out how to use it. And then I started recording small videos and putting them into film festivals. And few of them started doing well. So it was like a gradual build up from there. And after that I wrote a couple of short films, and one of I am actually finishing editing at the moment which is quite nice. And it was all just a really natural build up from where I started and just wanted to immerse myself more in it, I've always loved documentaries. So it's where I'm veering towards at the moment.

Harry 2:43

Have you done any other documentaries similar to this one?

Brian 2:46

It's not similar to this one. But it's based on these guys called the Irish underwater search and recovery unit. It's really just showcasing what they do and drawing a little bit of awareness to them. Because when you think of anybody lifeguard or an ally or something like that these guys don't get the same kind of airtime. I thought it'd be lovely to make something that put them front and center and just showed how they were really involved in the community. I'm halfway through that one at the moment. But of course with lockdowns and restrictions, it'd be very difficult to actually get out with people, especially with like restrictions on traveling Dublin's kind of running along in the background, if you like, you know,

Harry 3:26

So you're making two movies at the same time while holding down and electrical engineering jobs?

Brian 3:31

I'm making two documentaries and a short film at the same time as holding to a job. Yeah, yeah, it's interesting. It's a lot of late nights and a lot of sitting in front of computers, editing but, I actually wouldn't have it any other way. Because I'm probably happier now, in the last two, three years then I have been ever just with a level of fulfillment and the level of you're just doing something you're interested in and they say, if you do something you love, you're never really working. There's some truth to that, like, obviously, you are working if you want to be good at it. It's been a good trip for me so far.

Harry 4:07

Yeah, that's interesting. You said you sit down from the computer editing. Are you the one that you edit it all yourself? Do you?

Brian 4:14

Oh, I do everything. I call myself a one man show. So I try to do as much as I possibly can. I think for me, I did work with a guy on the short film and with the way things are with lock downs and everything. When you're relying on somebody if they're not close to you, it's very difficult. I find that like you get half as much done for it. Like you're so much longer back and forward when you're not able to sit down together. So I've really started taking everything on myself. It's meant it's quite a steep learning curve as well because when it comes to editing, that's something that I'd have to just sit down and figure out and so with music and with sound and I early on, you'd make mistakes like little things like not pressing the record button when you're recording sound on something, that happens so often. So you get past all of these little problems. And you when you find out how to fix one thing, you come across another thing, and I quite like it, because I think it makes me respect the process more and respect to people who are really good at it. I know I can't get enough of it. I'm not really complaining too much.

Harry 5:23

So you would have been involved with every stage of the production of this movie. So would you?

Brian 5:28

So far, from the time the guys came to me with their idea of what they wanted to do. We sat down and obviously virtually sat down and spoke about how they wanted to make this versus how it can be made, and put my vision on it and all that kind of stuff. Yeah, I've been there since the start or close to it. So it's really quite nice. And because you're there so early on, it's more cohesive. It's more like a kind of family unit, really. I think we got on on quite well. I don't know if the guys would agree. But I think we get on quite well. Yeah, it's been a really good collaborative kind of process so far.

Harry 6:06

Walk me through when Mary reacheas out to you. And she's like look we've got this funding from the Equality Fund to make a short film talk me through from that point there when you were reached out to, to where we are now where like the filming has been done. And the movies more or less done.

Brian 6:19

Yeah, after she reached out to me, it was actually there was quite a delay, because she reached out to me before Christmas, I can't tell you when because everyday leads into one with way things were last year, but I hadn't heard anything from from her for quite a while. And then she got back to me and said that they're able to move forward with it. The restrictions had been eased a little bit, I think they have quite a lot. And then it was just basically a lot of meetings, I wanted them to tell me what they really wanted to be brought across because I had no background with anybody with a disability. So I wanted the film to be very inclusive, and not to really point a spotlight at anybody in a negative way, and just let them, so they were comfortable to tell their story. And to feel like they were being heard. But not almost like they were just there for our entertainment, that kind of way where it was a really it was really important for me that when this was recorded, it was tasteful, for want of a better term. So we talked about all of that. And then we picked the participants who ended up being Colette, Jessica and Scott. And then basically the guys went away, because they had more of an understanding, and they gathered a little bit of information about what each person's disability was, and like an overview of how that might affect them. So we were able to build a story based on that of how we wanted to shoot it and how we wanted to portray each person to it give you like a little bit of background, a bit of flavor, a bit of feeling for what it is like for them going through college, with these disabilities. Once that was all decided, once we were happy with that, we picked some shoot days, and we got the guys together. And we tried to make it as useful with that time as we possibly could. So we didn't want to really waste anybody's time, keep them waiting around because Colette, for example, had lots of issues with pain. So I was very conscious that I didn't want her waiting. Basically, when she was there, she was doing her interview, or she was doing her B roll or she's doing whatever she needed to do. And then she was able to go home. So it was all about choreographing everybody. So that time was used as wisely as possible. And then we shot us and it was great. And everybody was happy and lovely. So it's been very collaborative process. So far everybody's had a voice everybody's been able to say how they feel about it. And it's definitely been very cooperative, for sure.

Harry 8:52

And you said earlier that you didn't really have any experience one to one with the like of disabilities and all that. And did you learn much through the process of making the film?

Brian 9:01

Absolutely, absolutely. I remember sitting there when we did the three interviews, each interview, if you were to play them in their entirety, it was well over an hour over probably close to two hours with the three participants. And what I took away from it was that the guys just really want a level playing field. I don't think anybody wants anybody to wrap them up in cotton wool. And you notice like poor you kind of thing. Like really almost like people are looking down on them. They just wanted those hurdles removed, just to give them an opportunity to go and figure it out themselves to make life a little bit easier for really but, yeah, I learned a lot about I think I was quite ignorant to how difficult it is for them because I think Scott said he was like he had to think very long and hard because of COVID when it came you have to think very long and hard about how he even planned his interactions with people. And then you think about, more so than most, okay, they can't go out and work with people anymore. And then you have Colette with the pain, like how she had to plan exactly how she was getting from home to the college. And of course, she was on on campus all day. So how did she find somewhere to rest? How does she, how does she get around? And then Jessica, how does she find somewhere if she were to become overwhelmed? Like, how does she How did she get to that point. And there's a lot of what I found coming off the back of this is that society really isn't set up for anybody who's not like, perfectly able, like, when I think about my own college career, like I didn't have any real problems, the only thing I had to think about was where was I going on the weekends? And how was I gonna pass these exams, and how am I going to get a job after. And that's really, as far as your thinking goes, there was never any issue, like am I going to be able to physically get into the building? And am I going to get into my lecture hall? And is there going to be provisions for me to just go through my normal day. And another thing that I've learned from the guys is that they don't really want to broadcast that they have a disability, they don't want to go "come on, I'm disable look at me" kind of thing. It's all just a case of they'd rather not be in that position, they'd rather be in a position where things were a little bit easier for them, where life was a little bit easier for them. And I thought, as well, after listening to them, there are also eloquent, and they all had a story to tell. And they all told it quite well. And I think it was like, a lot of things is these stereotypes, able bodied people would put on someone who has a disability. And some people, they only change their attitude when they're told that someone has a disability. So you could look at someone, you look at the three guys and would never guess they had a disability. And then I think when people find out that there is an issue, there is a hurdle that they have to overcome. I think their attitudes automatically change, which I think is terrible, because they stopped treating them with the same level. So I learned quite a lot. And I came away from it feeling I was privileged to get that information firsthand, as well. And for the guys to sit down and be comfortable enough to talk to me about it. Like I had only met them virtually a couple of times beforehand. So yeah, I feel like I learned a lot like I could talk for hours about this. But yeah. There is quite an interesting perspective now drawn from what they've told me.

Harry 12:48

it is such a privilege to hear from them. And for them to be so vulnerable on camera, and especially like what you mentioned there, how they don't want to talk about it, because they'd rather not be disabled. And they all have invisible disabilities. So like they have this thing, they don't talk about it, it affects them. And no one would know otherwise, because you can't see it. So yeah, we're so lucky that they can speak so much on camera.

Brian 13:09

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that yeah, as I said, I think each interview was definitely an hour or half an hour long. So we're only really just scratching the surface on what it's like for them. And I think it's great that they have a platform that they can just say what it's like for because you know yourself, you never know what's going on behind the scenes of people. And everybody's got their own stuff, or whatever. Everybody's got their own stuff generally. But for them to be so frank and so honest, it's really something else. And it definitely comes across in the recordings of how it is for them.

Harry 13:45

And how would that compared to the other kind of short film documentaries you make? Because like the one the scuba divers, or the deep sea rescuers, for example. Like that wouldn't be something they'd be like, hesitant to talk about you know what I mean?

Brian 14:00

Yeah, I think, I think those guys are definitely not hesitant to talk for sure. And when you think about it there when you're talking about those other kind of documentaries those people aren't really talking about themselves that much. They're talking about what they do and what it means for the community and kind of things like that. But it's also like you're taking it for granted that where in something like this, I don't think it gets anywhere near enough time and I think there's a small bit of like a stigma attached to it in the way that people don't really know how to talk to somebody who's got a disability or they don't really know how to deal with somebody who has a disability and films like this and others that I have seen as well. It's just to bridge that gap , give the guys as I said a proper platform to feel normal, feel like everybody else take away those those issues. Why is it a problem with somebody who's got a disability. I think we've all got things going on, we're able to hide it completely. Whereas I think, definitely, Ireland needs to have these conversations. And let everybody kind of figure out how to get over it and just make it normal really.

Harry 15:20

what kind of impact do you hope that this has on Ireland?

Brian 15:23

I hope that the guys come out of it like feeling like they got a chance to speak and be heard and hope that not just for Trinity, but for other colleges and schools. And they look at how their set up works for their students or for kids on the way up, because one of the things about talking to our participants is that they're on a level now where they've been able to deal with it. They're all obviously adults. And it's something that over years and years of processing and working through, they've been able to come to terms with and managin everything else. When I lived in Australia for a long time, going to a therapist would be like going to a physio it was much more open. It was like there was no feeling that you're doing something wrong, or you can't talk about this, you can't talk about that. And I think these are the things that we just need to normalize, just take the whole problem away, it's not a problem. Okay, someone's got a disability, right? They don't want to be wrapped up, they don't want to be talked about they don't want a big song and dance made about it. All they want is just, if there's steps, give us a ramp, if I'm up two floors, give us a lift, if I need extra time, have that there maybe at a click of a button or on an app or so that it's easy for them to just be like everybody else. I think that's quite important.

Harry 16:48

Is there anything you'd like viewers to know before watching the film?

Brian 16:51

Anything I'd like them to know? I just hope they'll come in with an open mind and just listen to the guys. I think they're so smart, the three participants are so smart. And they're so clued in to exactly what it's like for them. And their perspectives are similar, but then again, quite different. And I think just yeah, let them have a chance to talk and let them tell you about themselves. They're very interesting people and they're very funny and and they're great characters. And I really love talking to them. I got a lot from them. I never thought before Mary asked me that I do something like this. And I never thought about it and now that I have this tiny bit more knowledge. I feel like it's important and I feel privileged to be part of it really. But yeah, just give them a chance and listen to their story. They're very interesting people.

Harry 17:53

That's perfect. Thanks a million Brian.

So that's it. That's the end of our four part series promoting the short film. Be sure to follow the ability Co Op on all of our socials to be notified as soon as the short film is released. September 3rd. It will also help you stay up to date on all the important work the ability Co Op is doing for students with disabilities across the country. You can find us on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, just by searching for the Trinity ability Co Op.