

Vision Statement DisABILITY Film Festival – Together Through Images

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Images play a powerful role in shaping how people perceive the world. What appears on screen influences our ideas about how people live, what is considered “normal,” and who belongs. For many, film is even the primary way they encounter people with disabilities. Yet these representations remain scarce and are too often one-dimensional. As a result, stereotypes persist: people with disabilities are portrayed as objects of pity, as heroes, or as sources of inspiration simply for doing “ordinary” things. Real lives, however, are far richer, more complex, and above all, profoundly human.

This imbalance in representation reflects a broader societal reality. People with and without disabilities still have limited contact with one another. Many children and adults know few people with disabilities in their daily lives, and their perceptions are therefore shaped largely by media portrayals, second-hand stories, or assumptions. What is unfamiliar is often interpreted through clichés or well-intended but misguided perspectives. Research consistently shows that a lack of meaningful contact is one of the key factors sustaining negative or uneasy attitudes.

The DisABILITY Film Festival seeks to contribute to a society that is more inclusive, open, and just. We do not aim merely to increase the number of images on screen, but to foster a fundamentally different way of seeing. Through carefully selected films and activities, we invite audiences to question their assumptions and to engage with the perspectives of others. Not by appealing to pity, but by sharing stories rooted in experience, pride, humour, doubt, love, and everyday life — stories that allow visitors to step, even briefly, into someone else’s world.

True change, however, does not emerge from film alone. While representation on screen matters, the encounters that take place around it are at least as powerful. Research shows that perceptions shift most meaningfully when people meet one another in contexts that encourage dialogue, curiosity, and mutual exchange. For this

reason, the DisABILITY Film Festival places encounter at the very heart of its mission. We create spaces — in Tweebronnen Library, in Cinema ZED, during lectures and workshops, in masterclasses and in our film café — where people with and without disabilities can engage in genuine dialogue. These are places where filmmakers, actors, students, families, care organisations, and film enthusiasts meet and collectively explore new perspectives.

Our work is grounded in a clear belief in togetherness: people grow and learn in relation to others. This principle applies not only to our audiences, but also to our own organisation. At every stage of the festival — from film selection to programming, from communication to practical coordination — people with disabilities are actively involved. Not as a target group, but as colleagues, experts, and advisors. “Nothing about us without us” is not a slogan, but a guiding practice that shapes our decisions and defines the way we build our festival.

The films we present strive for nuance. They depict people with disabilities not as exceptions or symbols, but as integral members of society. This approach reflects key insights from research: both children and adults develop more positive attitudes when they encounter diverse characters in everyday contexts, when representation focuses on possibilities rather than limitations, and when stories are told — or co-created — by people with disabilities themselves. Our short film competition embodies this vision by highlighting works in which people with disabilities are involved not only as subjects, but also as actors, directors, writers, and producers. Authentic representation means making space for authorship.

In addition, the festival invests in sustainable partnerships with schools, teachers, and students. Film is a powerful medium for bringing otherwise overlooked issues into the public conversation. Yet lasting change in perception takes place in dialogue beyond the screening: when participants search for language to express what they have experienced, when they realise that their views can evolve, and when they listen to voices shaped by different lived realities. Through workshops and lectures, we encourage students to engage with diversity not as an exception, but as an essential part of society.

The DisABILITY Film Festival contributes to building a society in which everyone can participate fully. This commitment also shapes the conditions under which we organise the festival. Accessibility is a core principle: Flemish Sign Language interpretation, audio description, clear signage, affordable ticketing, assistance where needed, and close cooperation with partner organisations are integral to our approach. We do not view accessibility as an additional service, but as a fundamental prerequisite for experiencing culture together in a diverse society.

We believe that culture — and film in particular — can be a space where people meet as equals. Not as clients and caregivers, not as students and experts, but as individuals who watch, reflect, doubt, laugh, and learn together. The festival therefore acts as a bridge between the cultural sector and the care sector — two worlds that do not always connect naturally. Through our collaboration with organisations in both fields, we demonstrate that culture can be accessible and meaningful for everyone, and that encounters between these sectors open up new possibilities for cooperation. With this festival, we take an important step in that direction and hope to inspire, challenge, and encourage change — in Leuven, in Flanders, and within the film world.

Our ambition is clear. Ultimately, we strive for a society in which people with and without disabilities live, learn, and create side by side as a matter of course. Perhaps one day the moment will come when a separate DisABILITY Film Festival is no longer needed. Until then, we remain fully committed to building this festival as a place where everyone is welcome, where everyone matters, and where everyone is invited to share their story.