

Film Review

Becoming Bulletproof

Reviewed by Dr. Yohai Hakak
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Director: Michael Barnett
Producer: Theodore James
Running time: 1h 20m

Becoming Bulletproof is a beautifully made and life-affirming documentary film about a mixed group of people, some with disabilities, some without. They meet for a few days during the summer once a year as part of the inclusive arts project Zeno Mountain Farm (<http://zenomountainfarm.com/>), in order to make a movie. The documentary follows the group after they decide to make a mini-western in the California desert called *Bulletproof*. The process of making this film (and the results) as captured by the documentary are unique and refreshing for several reasons.

Since people with disabilities are still vastly under-represented in front of the camera or behind it, this positive representation of people with disabilities acting in a film together with people without disabilities and in a wide range of roles, is refreshing. A range of disabilities are represented though many have Cerebral Palsy. But, the documentary does a much bigger service to the discussion about disabilities in the way that it portrays the relations between the different participants in the making of the movie.

Common stereotypes of people with disabilities often show them as passive recipients of services or support provided by “non-disabled” people. In *Becoming Bulletproof*, they are partners and collaborators in a joint effort to create together, and they bring into play unique talents and strengths. As described in the film by Peter Halbey, the co-founder of Zeno, “The mission of Zeno is to support life-long friendships between people with and without disabilities”. There’s no mention of “helping”, “supporting”, “assisting”, just creating friendships and having fun. The power of such an approach is unmistakable and grabs you as a viewer instantly. The long trail of awards the film has received so far is a good indication of that. The participants, both those with and those without identifiable disabilities are clearly having a great time. AJ Murray, the film’s hero who has Cerebral Palsy, sums it up when he thanks the organizers for enabling him to “feel significance, dignity and purpose” through participating in the film.

Becoming Bulletproof brings us into the lives of several young disabled people we get to know and love. The organizers and their warm, open and down-to-earth conduct are a joy to observe. After watching *Becoming Bulletproof* I was left wondering again about the artificiality of the distinctions between people with and without disabilities. Have I crossed it once I started wearing glasses? Or did my wife once she dislocated her knee and started using crutches?

As a lecturer in social work, I was left thinking about how can we develop such positive, warm and playful spirit in our students in the caring professions? How can we help them create interactions that are full of positive energy and creativity? Social Pedagogy scholars talk about

the “common third” as a shared area of activity which is external to the subjects involved in the interaction. Making *Becoming Bulletproof* fulfilled this exact role. Relationships that revolve around the common third are characterised by notions of equality and respect and the eradication of unequal power relations. “Through a common or joint activity the users and the professionals enter a subject –subject relation in which the professional is meant to “forget himself” and the things around him – and devote him/herself entirely to the process and activity...the pedagogical challenge is to be able to realise activities which don’t reflect the interests and needs of only one part, but instead seek to establish a *common* and *productive* activity” (Hatton, K, 2006). Judging by this unique documentary, such common third has an immense positive power we should seek to nourish.

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