



TYING YOUR OWN SHOES

EN LAÇANT MES SOULIERS

A film by | Un film de **Shira Avni**





Tying Your Own Shoes

SUMMARY

Tying Your Own Shoes is an animated documentary portrait of four talented artists, all of whom have Down syndrome. Combining video interviews with each artist's beautiful animated self-portrait and personal narration, the film provides a surprising window into the world of Down syndrome, as experienced from the inside.

FILMMAKER'S INTRODUCTION

There are a number of films about Down syndrome, but few that portray the subject entirely from the point of view of people with Down syndrome. I have been working with people with Down syndrome for many years, and for a previous project, I interviewed a number of people with Down syndrome. Many were talented painters, weavers, sculptors, dancers or puppeteers, and all had surprising, funny and moving stories to tell. ***Tying Your Own Shoes*** provides a forum for artists with Down syndrome to portray themselves as they wish to be seen.

Animation is uniquely suited to communicating complex topics and emotions in a short time frame, and it provides a gentle but efficient means to break down stereotypes and stimulate alternate ways of thinking. I hope that ***Tying Your Own Shoes*** provides an effective vehicle for examining disability, art and identity, and that it contributes to a positive discussion and a deeper understanding of these issues. I believe this film can open people's minds to difference.

– Shira Avni

CLASSROOM AND ART-RELATED ACTIVITIES

Classroom uses

Children 8 and over, adolescents, adults with special needs, parents, educators and workers in the field of special needs will understand and enjoy this film. It can be useful as a discussion starter, to educate children and teens about Down syndrome, to break down stereotypes and to address issues of diversity, disability, bullying and difference in the classroom.

This film can be used:

- in an art education course
- for courses on disability and diversity
- to stimulate discussions on independent living and education
- to stimulate discussions on love, relationships and friendships between people with disabilities

Assignments and Discussion Topics

1. Before (or after) viewing the film, have students read and discuss the filmmaker's account of how she came to make this film.
2. Talk about one topic each artist covers.
 - Why is each personal story worth telling?
 - How does each artist transform personal experiences into art?
 - How does each of the following play a part: technique, style, colour, movement, symbols?
 - Why do you think some sections are animated and others shown in live action (video)?
3. Find a self-portrait in a museum or art book that makes you feel as if you understand something about the artist who made it.
4. Research Down syndrome.
 - How does Down syndrome occur?
 - What are some common characteristics?
 - How has society's perception of people with Down syndrome changed?
5. Pair up with another participant and interview each other about your lives.
 - Option 1: Edit the written or videotaped interviews and present them to the class.
 - Option 2: Paint or draw self-portraits based upon the interviews.
6. Create a drawing, painting or comic strip of a moment from your childhood.
7. Does the artwork in the film remind you of work you've seen by any other artists?



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Study Questions

What is Down syndrome?

Do you have family or friends with Down syndrome?

Did you learn anything about Down syndrome from this film?

Was there anything in the film that surprised you about the four artists? Explain.

Do you know any artists?

Are you an artist? If so, what do you like most about being an artist?

What makes you special?

What do you like best about being you?

What does Katherine like best about having Down syndrome?

What does Daninah remember about her childhood?

Why does Matthew think people are sometimes “a bit rude”?

In the film, Petra describes Down syndrome as “a special kind of hero inside of you.” What does she mean by this?

What does Petra mean when she says “Not to be what you used to be”?

Petra says, “It’s kind of like an extra chromosome inside of you.” What does she mean?

What do you think Matthew’s four-legged bird represents?

What do the birds at the end of the film symbolize?

Research the artists Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, Marc Chagall, Henri Rousseau and Pablo Picasso. What do they have in common? Does their work remind you of artwork in the film?

Painter Paul Klee said, “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.” What does he mean? How is this quote relevant to the film?

Animation Activities

Some viewers of this film may want to try their hand at animation. Here are useful NFB storyboarding and animation hands-on workshop resources for teachers:

www3.nfb.ca/enclasse/handson/html/en/sb/index.html

www3.nfb.ca/enclasse/handson/html/en/ca/ac_tryt_intro.html

NFB Animation history, techniques, and key filmmakers:
www3.nfb.ca/animation/objanim/en/index.php

THE MAKING OF THE FILM

The Animation Workshop

The animation and interviews in *Tying Your Own Shoes* were created during an intensive, summer-long animation workshop at the National Film Board of Canada’s Mediatheque in Toronto, in 2007, with some follow-up animation and interviews completed in 2008. Animation combines elements of many different art forms – drawing, painting, puppetry, music, dance, acting, film and storytelling – with the magic of technology.

One question asked at the beginning of the project was: Will artists with Down syndrome be able to learn how to animate? All of the artists quickly and joyfully mastered the art of animation, learning to control their cameras and computers without assistance.

Tying Your Own Shoes was animated using different techniques: drawing, paint-on-glass, clay-on-glass and paper cut-out animation, and the images were captured using a digital camera. All of the animation was backlit, which means that the artists worked in a completely dark room where the only light came from a light box placed underneath the artwork. The artists tried out different animation techniques and chose the method they preferred.

The process of animation is long and complex. To create the illusion of movement, each artist had to draw or paint 12 frames (pictures) for every second of animation—that means they had to draw 720 pictures for every minute of film. Each frame is subtly different from the last one,



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so that when you project the frames one after the other, you create the illusion of life.

Narration

The four artists were interviewed about life, love, art, war, relationships, childhood and their experiences of Down syndrome. The interviews took place over multiple sessions and resulted in over 40 hours of video footage. The recordings were then edited together, with input from the artists, who went on to animate their self-portraits.

Subtitles

People with Down syndrome often have smaller mouth cavities and low muscle tone in their tongues, which sometimes makes their speech harder to understand. The artists expressed frustration at being misunderstood, especially since they all had a lot to say. We decided to subtitle the film so the audience could understand all of the subtleties in the narration. The artists' voices are subtitled in their own handwriting.

Additional animation and post-production

Once the summer workshop was done, the editing and bridging animation work began. With over 40 hours of video and sound to sift through, editor Carrie Haber cut the footage down to 16 minutes and brought a flowing structure to the film. Editing the film was a daunting task, but Haber managed to pull out the most evocative of the recordings. As there were so many beautiful interviews to work with, filmmaker Shira Avni and assistant animator Lillian Chan created a few short animations to fill in the gaps where there was not enough animation or video to accompany the narration. The majority of animation in the film, however, was created by Katherine, Matthew, Petra and Daninah.

Once all of the animation and editing was complete, it was time to animate the subtitles by tracing sentences five times, to make them shimmer, and placing them into the film. The final step was adding music and sound effects created by Luigi Allemano.

THE ARTISTS IN THE FILM

Petra Tolley

Petra is 36 years old. She is a member of the Common Ground Cooperative - a business partnership of people with intellectual disabilities who are using their talents to create employment for themselves. Highly articulate and independent, Petra lives on her own, attended college when she was younger, has a black belt in Karate and enjoys biking, rollerblading, swimming, travelling, music, writing, reading and drawing.

Matthew Brotherhood

Born in Nottingham, England, Mathew came to Canada at 18 months old. Matthew is 22 and lives in Montreal, where he volunteers at community cafés and attends the Concordia University Centre for the Arts in Human Development. He is active in Special Olympics, downhill skiing, swimming, and track and field; he also enjoys music, dancing, movies, drawing and browsing in bookstores. His artwork has been exhibited as part of a group show at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. His first animation, a precursor to this project, screened at the Sprout Film Festival in New York City.

Katherine Newton

Katherine, 22, works as a helper in a preschool/kindergarten for kids with special needs. She also plays piano, swims, rides horses, reads, works out at the gym, dances up a storm and fills sketchbook after sketchbook with her beautiful drawings. Since participating in **Tying Your Own Shows**, she has become a self-described "animation addict". Katherine creates extraordinary abstract works in markers that evoke the joyful paintings of Paul Klee.

Daninah Cummins

Daninah (Ninah) is 41. She loves to dance and be on stage; she also likes to paint and draw. At the North York Region Employment Training Services of Community Living Toronto, she creates artwork and jewellery for sale. Dinah dances and sings at ETS parties and events. She is social, independent, enthusiastic, energetic and always very positive. Her dream is to work for Famous People Players Theatre, a Toronto-based puppet theatre that stages shows by adults with special needs.



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DOWN SYNDROME: DIFFERENT GENERATIONS

The world has changed enormously for people with Down syndrome in the past 40 years. The four artists portrayed in the film, Daninah, Petra, Katherine and Matthew, represent significant generational differences that show how society has radically evolved in its thinking about Down syndrome. Their individual experiences reflect changes in health, education, employment, housing and basic civil rights provisions for people with Down syndrome. In earlier times, the medical profession, supported by state-run facilities, considered babies with Down syndrome “uneducable,” and many were institutionalized and neglected.

Daninah was born into a generation when most babies with Down syndrome were still sent to institutions at birth, as doctors commonly told parents that their children would never talk, walk, or communicate - a far cry from the reality of singing, dancing, engaging Daninah. Daninah’s parents raised her at home, despite the immense societal pressures of the day, but educational opportunities for children with Down syndrome were limited while Daninah was growing up. In an interview, she says people sometimes “don’t understand what I’m talking about,” but that “I am proud of myself and respect.”

Petra says when she was born, her parents didn’t know what to do with her because they thought she wouldn’t even be able to tie her shoes, but as she grew up, they saw that she could do everything. Petra, five years younger than Daninah, was born when the movement to educate children with Down syndrome was just beginning, and her parents fought hard to give her the opportunities that would allow her to develop into the amazing individual she is today. With her profound intelligence, black belt in Karate, partnership in a catering business and independent lifestyle, she truly defies stereotypical notions of disability - she is more accomplished and poised than many people who don’t have that extra chromosome!

Matthew and Katherine, who are the same age, were born into a world where parents had many more options, but still needed to push hard for their children to have full educational and artistic opportunities. Matthew travelled independently between Montreal and Toronto every week during the making of **Tying Your Own Shoes** and easily

negotiated a new city alone. He spoke thoughtfully about how people are not used to seeing a traveller with “special needs” alone and about some of the reactions he gets.

Katherine, the youngest of the group, attended high school and now has a job that she loves at a kindergarten/childcare centre for children with special needs, many of whom have Down syndrome as well. She is proud of her close relationship with the kids at the daycare and of her paycheque. Katherine is acutely aware that Down syndrome makes her feel different and says that while she sometimes wishes she could be regular girl,” having Down syndrome contributes to her creative process and inspires her gorgeous artwork.

People with Down syndrome now live much longer, fuller lives than previous generations did. Many talented artists – painters, sculptors, book illustrators, actors and puppeteers with Down syndrome – are attracting international recognition. A growing number of adults with Down syndrome live and work independently, drive cars, ride bicycles, go to college, participate in competitive sports and have fulfilling careers and relationships.

WHAT IS DOWN SYNDROME?

Here is a basic definition of Down syndrome, adapted from the Canadian Down Syndrome Society website (cdss.ca):

Down syndrome (Trisomy-21) is a naturally occurring chromosomal arrangement that has always been a part of the human condition. The occurrence of Down syndrome is universal across racial and gender lines and is present in approximately one in 800 births in Canada. Down syndrome is not a disease, disorder, defect or medical condition. Down syndrome itself requires neither treatment nor prevention. The sole characteristic shared by all persons with Down syndrome is the presence of extra genetic material associated with the 21st chromosome (commonly referred to as “having an extra 21st chromosome”). The effects of that extra genetic material vary greatly from individual to individual. Down syndrome commonly affects learning, although the differences in how it does so are highly variable, as are its effects on physical characteristics and health. The most significant challenge is to find the most effective and productive methods of teaching each individual.



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RESOURCES

Disability-Themed Films from the National Film Board

Arjuna

Arjuna is a surprising young man. When he was born in 1974, the doctors diagnosed him with Down syndrome, and told his parents that it was unlikely he would live to be six or seven. That was 35 years ago. Today, Arjuna is an artist with a love for life that inhabits the rich colors of his paintings. The flowers and mountains, the birds and lakes are a moving praise to the things that make up his days.

Directed by Sylvie Van-Brabant, 1999
onf-nfb.gc.ca/fra/collection/film/?id=33921

I'll Find a Way

This Oscar®-winning documentary presents Nadia, a 9-year-old girl with spina bifida. Her dream is to attend a regular school, even though she knows other kids will tease her. Wise for her young age, Nadia simply decides that she'll "find a way to deal with it." Despite having to overcome many obstacles, Nadia's got spunk and makes it clear she's not looking for sympathy.

Directed by Beverly Shaffer, 1977
nfb.ca/film/ill_find_a_way/

A Mind of Your Own

It is estimated that in every Canadian classroom, there are two or three kids affected by a learning disability. Although they are generally of average or higher intelligence, these kids struggle every day to keep up with the class and to be accepted. Meet Henry, Stephanie, Matthew and Max, four incredible kids who won't let their learning differences hold them down. As they confront their disabilities and revel in unique talents like singing and chess, it becomes clear that "different" can also mean wonderful. This warm and inspirational video will encourage and boost the self-esteem of kids struggling with learning disabilities, and foster understanding in their peers.

Directed by Gail Sweeney, 1999
citizen.nfb.ca/mind-your-own

My Brand New Life – Wheelchair Challenge

Rahaim, an able-bodied Torontonion, discovers how tricky it can be to get around in a wheelchair. School corridors and crowded sidewalks become obstacle courses. He also discovers that being an athlete doesn't require two arms and two legs. In the case of Rahaim's new friend, Shane, a physical handicap can be an opportunity to blossom in many different ways.

Directed by Kaveh Nabatian, 2003
citizen.nfb.ca/my-brand-new-life-wheelchair-challenge-clip-1-0

SHAMELESS: The ART of Disability

Art, activism and disability are the starting point for what unfolds as a funny and intimate portrait of five surprising individuals. Director Bonnie Sherr Klein (**Not a Love Story**, and **Speaking Our Peace**) has been a pioneer of women's cinema and an inspiration to a generation of filmmakers around the world. *SHAMELESS: the ART of Disability* marks Klein's return to a career interrupted by a catastrophic stroke in 1987. Always the activist, she now turns the lens on the world of disability culture, and ultimately, the transformative power of art.

Directed by Bonnie Sherr Klein, 2006
onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/collection/film/?id=51620

This Ability

This Ability is an innovative filmmaking project that puts the tools of media creation directly into the hands of adults with developmental disabilities. Formed as a partnership between the National Film Board of Canada and the Burnaby Association for Community Inclusion (BACI), with support from Philia and the United Way, the aim was to move away from videos that merely observe people with disabilities, towards ones that give an inside perspective on the human experience of disability.

Directed by Lorna Boschman, 2006
citizen.nfb.ca/node/6956&dossier_nid=1129



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More Films about Artists with Down Syndrome

Raymond's Portrait

Raymond Hu is a unique artist with a sensitivity and fierce passion for life that comes out in his paintings. He also has Down syndrome. At the age of nineteen he has won numerous awards for his work, has been recognized in the Congressional Record, and was recently named one of "25 role models for the next 25 years" by *Exceptional Parent* magazine. *Raymond's Portrait* interweaves interviews with Raymond, his family and his art teacher to convey the challenges of growing up with Down syndrome, the difficult yet rewarding experience of being fully included in his high school, and the way he creates his extraordinary Chinese brush paintings of animals. *Raymond's Portrait* introduces viewers to a remarkable young man and is a powerful example of what can happen when a child is encouraged to develop to his full potential, regardless of others' preconceptions about his abilities.

Directed by Donald C. Young, 1997
fanlight.com/catalog/films/267_rp.php

Outsider: The Life and Art of Judith Scott

For more than a decade, Judith Scott has been deeply involved in making large, colorful body-like sculptures out of found objects and yarn. Her works are abstract, dense, multilayered and, ultimately, a mystery, yet she cannot tell us what they mean, or what inspires her to create these objects. Judith has Down syndrome, is deaf, and does not speak. These sculptures are her most complex means of communication. From the studio where Judith created her sculptures to her group home in Berkeley, California to the Ohio institution where she spent most of her life to the museums and galleries where Judith's works are exhibited, *Outsider* takes us on an intimate journey into the life of this eccentric, but talented and compelling individual who flourished in the face of daunting odds.

Directed by Betsy Bayha, 2006
fanlight.com/catalog/films/453_otlojs.php

A Possible Dream – The Andrea Friedman Story

Andrea Friedman lives an ideal life. A film and television actress, Andrea has starred in a successful ABC network television series. And she has recently been accepted into the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. She is also an accomplished speaker and is sought after to give

keynote addresses at conventions all around the world. When she's not filming or touring, Andrea lives in beautiful West L.A. and drives her own BMW to work in a downtown law office. Weekends are spent with friends, shopping, going to movies, dancing or walking by the beach with her boyfriend. It is a life that most young women only dream about... except that Andrea has Down syndrome!

Directed by Hilary Pryor, 2007
Produced by May Street Productions (maystreet.ca)
 (Preview at youtube.com/watch?v=mk5Wma45ZMw)

WYSIWYG

Three impressive performance pieces by adults with developmental disabilities fuse exhilarating dance, cutting edge technology and film. The film, shot at a live performance of the Anjali Dance Company in the UK, creates a remarkable intimacy between the audience and dancers. The pieces explore reality and virtuality through the dancers' humour, honesty and skill and the imagination is given free reign.

Directed by Anna Lucas, 2004
anjali.co.uk

Artists with Down Syndrome

Erik Behnke is a professional book illustrator who has Down syndrome and autism.
brownbearproducts.biz

Rachel Heller is a British artist with Down syndrome.
flowerseast.com/Originals_Exhibitions.asp?Exhibition=03FCRH&OE=1

Lester Magoogan is a British artist and animator who has Down syndrome.
lestermagoogan.co.uk

Raymond Hu is an American painter with Down syndrome.
atdp.berkeley.edu/1623/students/jason/R.paintings.html

Chris Burke is a famous American actor who has Down syndrome.
chrisburke.org

Judith Scott was a world-renowned American sculptor who had Down syndrome.
hidden-worlds.com/judithscott/art.htm



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Down Syndrome Organizations (Canada)

Canadian Down Syndrome Society:
cdss.ca

Down Syndrome Association of Toronto:
dsat.ca

Down Syndrome Research Foundation:
dsrf.org

Regroupement pour la Trisomie 21:
trisomie.qc.ca

Organizations (International)

Down Syndrome: down-syndrome.org

Reading List of Books about Down Syndrome (Including Children's Books)

parentbooks.ca/Down_Syndrome.html

Disability Arts Organizations (Canada)

Centre for the Arts and Human Development (Montreal):
cahd.net

KickstArt Disability Arts & Culture (Vancouver):
kickstart-arts.ca

Creative Spirit (Toronto):
creativespirit.on.ca

Keys to the Studio (Toronto):
keystothestudio.com

Stage Left Theatre (Calgary):
stage-left.org

Artsmarts guide for artists with disabilities:
s4dac.org/artsmarts_handbook

Famous People Players Theatre:
famouspeopleplayers.org

Disability Arts Organizations (International)

VSA Arts (International):
vsarts.org

Mexican School of Down Art:
fjldown.org.mx

Die Schlumper (Germany):
schlumper.de

Accessible Arts (Australia):
aarts.net.au

Sprout (New York):
gosprout.org

National Arts and Disability Center (California):
nadc.ucla.edu

Disabled Artists Worldwide Network:
21stcenturydawn.netfirms.com

International Guild of Disabled Artists & Performers:
igodap.org

NIAD Arts Center (California):
niadart.org/

Project Ability (Scotland):
project-ability.co.uk