

INTRODUCTION TO INCLUDING SAMUEL

BY FILMMAKER DAN HABIB

When Samuel was four years old, he lay in a medically induced coma in the hospital because of complications from surgery. As I sat at his bedside, Samuel's neurologist, Dr. James Filiano, encouraged me to be a photojournalist in the midst of my fear. "You should document this," he said.

Making this film helped me face my fears and biases head-on, as both a director and a father. The film became my outlet for processing this new reality in our lives.

Samuel has cerebral palsy, which means his brain has trouble controlling his muscles. He uses a wheelchair, and it is difficult for him to talk.

When Samuel was about a year old, my wife Betsy and I would stay up at night, comparing notes: What did Samuel do better that day? What did he do worse? We also have an older son, Isaiah, but Samuel's disability tested our parenting skills in new ways. "How can he get a full education and go to college when he can't hold a pencil?" Betsy wondered.

Having Samuel forced me to look at my own prejudice. When I saw people who couldn't walk or talk, what thoughts crept into my head? It's painful to admit, but I often saw them as less smart, less capable and not worth getting to know. Is that how the world would see Samuel?

Betsy and I decided to attend the University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability Leadership Series to learn more about being effective advocates for Samuel. The Leadership Series helped us to see Samuel's disability as an intrinsic part—but just one part—of who he is.

Including Samuel is built on our family's efforts to include our son in our school, our community, our family—in every aspect of our lives. Samuel's life is the central thread through the film, and



photo: Lori Duff

I want viewers to learn a lot about him beyond the fact that he has a disability. He wrestles with his brother. He loves T-ball. He wants to be an astronaut—or maybe a race car driver—when he grows up.

But Samuel is young, and including him will probably be more and more challenging. So I also made this film to learn from the experiences of other people with disabilities who can look back on the choices they made, and their parents made, and how these choices affected their lives. *Including Samuel* documents the experiences of Keith Jones, Alana Malfy, Nathaniel Orellana and Emily Huff. The film chronicles the impact inclusion has had not only on them, but also on their families, educators, other students and their communities.

My hope is that the film inspires everyone who sees it to work toward fully inclusive schools and communities in a more informed and innovative way.

Making this film has helped me picture the full life we want and expect for Samuel. We have a supportive network of teachers, therapists, relatives and friends who help us work toward that vision every day. And there is Samuel himself, whose smile and persistence make clear his own vision of happiness.