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REELAbilities: Disabilities Film Festival to come to D.C.

by **Emily Jacobs**
Staff Writer

The REELAbilities: Disabilities Film Festival is coming to the Washington DC Jewish Community Center, JCC of Greater Washington and JCC of Northern Virginia Feb. 1-9, featuring nine films that showcase those with disabilities.

The film festival is making its debut in the area after originating four years ago at the JCC in Manhattan. In addition to premiering in the local JCCs, the REELAbilities festival will take place in 11 other states, and 23 locations throughout New York.

Co-founder of REELAbilities and director of the Israel Film Center at the JCC Manhattan, Isaac Zablocki, explained that the idea of a film festival came after he had received a number of films about disabilities, and wanted to put them all together.

"At one point I realized that we could turn this into more than just a one shot here and there and make this into something that has a deeper impact on the community," he said.

After seeing the success of the festival throughout New York, Zablocki and co-founder Anita Altman launched a national program last year, reaching out to various cities across the country including D.C.

"D.C. was very high on our list because of its influence and the community, we were very happy to see that they had come on board," Zablocki said.

For the three participating JCCs, bringing the film festival to their facilities was an obvious decision, as they all have growing special-needs departments and inclusion programs.

"We brought the festival here because it's the right thing to do and it's a fabulous festival with outstanding films," said Tracey E. Dorfmann, chief program officer at the JCCGW. "All three of the JCCs are very committed to being inclusive places, and we're really hoping to celebrate the lives of people with disabilities and really be able to share their stories and their art forms and really live the concept of inclusion."

As part of the festival guidelines, each film must be accompanied by a subsequent discussion, conversation or event, allowing the audience to gain a better understanding of the film they just saw.

"We want to give people the opportunity to express how they feel and see what their reactions are to the film they just saw," said Susan Barocas, director, Washington Jewish Film Festival and WJFF Year-Round at the DCJCC. "We want to find out what they know or what they want to know more about."

In addition to expanding the visibility of the disabilities community, Zablocki hopes that the festival might get rid of the misconceptions about those with disabilities that many people have.

"One of the goals of the festival is to change the perspective's on disabilities or at least enlighten people about this huge population that is one of the largest minorities in America," he said.

Jessica Tischler, the special needs coordinator at the JCCNV, explained that she wants audience members to leave the films "with a better understanding of people with disabilities. We want them to negate the misperceptions they have and see the actual abilities that everyone can have and that people with disabilities can do what everyone else can do and have the same needs and wants as everyone else."

Zablocki stressed the importance of REELAbilities being both a festival about film and a festival about disabilities.

"We want there to be a partnership that bridges gaps between both areas, film and disability. The moments that bring us the most pride are when people come to see the films because they're films, not just because they're there to support the disabilities community. We really hope that the festival reaches out beyond the Jewish community alone."

While all of the films in the festival aren't necessarily Jewish, Barocas explained that the festival is about "helping



The REELAbilities: Disabilities Film Festival will open with *Warrior Champions*, an 80 minute documentary about four Iraq war veterans striving to make it into the Olympic games.

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While all of the films in the festival aren't necessarily Jewish, Barocas explained that the festival is about helping people and making the world a better place. It's about giving people a place in the world and about community. Those to me are very Jewish ideals, so that for us at the JCC is why this festival is very much a part of the Jewish community," she said.

The REELAbilities festival is a collaboration among the three area JCCs, representing their "Three Centers, One Community" initiative stressing cooperation among the three, which they launched in October 2011.

"It's something that was really an opportunity for us to build something together and it's been a great experience," said Marc Jacob, assistant executive director of the JCCNV . "This will help us as we go forward, together and we hope that this is a program that will be around for a long time."

Added Dorfmann, "It was a real pleasure working with my colleagues, we've really had a great experience working together to bring such an artistic endeavor to the community. We hope a lot of people will come, the films are truly extraordinary and not to be missed."

February is Jewish Disability Awareness Month.

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 Ohr Kodesh Congregation, Chevy Chase
 4:00-5:00 PM
 Dor L'Dor Youth Program
 Unto Every Person There is A Name
 5:00-6:00 PM
 Community Commemoration
 Keynote Speaker Rabbi Michael Berenbaum

Virginia
 Gesher Jewish Day School, Fairfax
 2:00-4:00 PM
 Dor L'Dor Youth Program
 Unto Every Person There is A Name
 3:00-5:30 PM
 Keynote Address by Stuart Eizenstat
 Community Commemoration

For more information, please visit www.jcouncil.org or call 301.770.0681 / 703.962.9232

Names of those who perished to be read and remembered may be submitted at www.jcouncil.org/UntoEveryPerson by April 15, 2012 or brought to the service.

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