



Deej

Directed by
Robert Rooy

Words by
David James Savarese

Produced by
Robert Rooy and David James Savarese

Executive Producers
Jeanne Jordan and Steven Ascher

Co-Producer
Anne de Mare

Director of Animation
Em Cooper

Director of Partnerships and Engagement
Regan Brashear

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Logline

A nonspeaking young man dreams of autistic civil rights. The documentary film **Deej**, with its insider view of autism, challenges us all to live inclusion.

Synopsis

Abandoned by his birth parents and unable to speak for himself, DJ Savarese ("Deej") found not only a loving family but also a life in words, which he types on a text-to-voice synthesizer. As he makes his way through high school and dreams of college, he confronts the terrors of his past, obstacles to inclusion, and the sometimes paralyzing beauty of his own senses. In his advocacy on behalf of other nonspeaking autistics, he embraces filmmaking and poetry, and discovers what having a voice can truly mean.

In this first-of-its kind collaboration between a veteran filmmaker and a nonspeaking autistic, Robert Rooy and DJ share editorial control as they navigate the challenges of representing autism. *Deej*, the result of this often difficult partnership, is a story told largely from the inside, by DJ -- not by his parents or autism experts or even the camera. At its core, *Deej* reflects the level of participation that disability rights advocates insist upon: "Nothing about us without us."

Website: DEEJMOVIE.COM

Facebook: facebook.com/DeejMovie

Twitter: twitter.com/DeejMovie

IMDB: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5634002/>

Instagram: instagram.com/deejmovie/

Country of Production: USA

Genre: Documentary

Language: English

Year: 2017

Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/196489396>

David James Savarese

Producer and Subject



DJ Savarese graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Oberlin College in May 2017 with a double major in Anthropology and Creative Writing. An ASAN Scholar Fellow, he was also the recipient of Oberlin's William Battrick Poetry Fellowship and their Comfort Starr Award for meritorious scholarly work in Anthropology. As a writer, he has published poems and prose in *The Iowa Review*, *Seneca Review*, *Prospect*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *StoneCanoe*, *Wordgatherings.com* and *Voices for Diversity and Social Justice: Literary Education Anthology*. A self-advocate and national social activist, he consults and presents at conferences across the country, working to make literacy-based education, communication, and inclusive lives a reality for all nonspeaking people.

Personal Statement

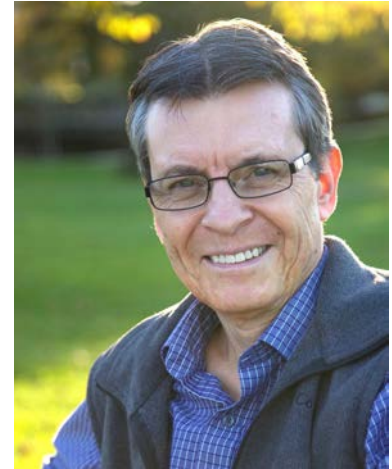
I won the lottery when my parents adopted me from foster care; I won it again when they included me in regular education. Now, I seek to help kids much less fortunate than I by showing people what a nonspeaking student with autism can do.

In DeeJ, the camera intrudes on every aspect of my life. If seeing truly is believing, then perhaps eyes can be opened to the full potential of kids with significant disabilities. Shot over a six-year period, DeeJ reveals not only what the ideal of full inclusion requires but also what it can accomplish.

Robert Rooy

Producer and Director

Robert Rooy is an independent filmmaker who has worked in more than twenty countries, creating media with and for international development, human rights and environmental organizations. His encounter with Muhammad Yunus, founder of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize, led to producing and directing **To Our Credit, a two-part PBS series**. In addition, he has worked as an assistant director on more than forty films, including *Lonesome Dove*, *Honeymoon in Vegas*, *Minority Report* and *The West Wing*. He holds an MFA degree from Yale School of Drama, a Distinguished Alumnus Award from Calvin College, and a National MediaMaker Fellowship from the Bay Area Video Coalition.



Personal Statement

When I first met DJ, I saw an attractive, earnest teenager who had been given a second chance at life through the love and encouragement of extraordinary parents. But it didn't take me long to understand that there was much more to this young man. His views on life were more sophisticated and perceptive than those of many adults, and his fresh, poetic ways of describing them outshone those of almost anyone else I'd met. I was also impressed by the fierce conviction that DJ brought to everything he undertook. He burned with an inner fire to "break barriers" for others like him. While he had come so far from a tormented past, what was striking was how far he wanted to go.

I was also struck by the piercing perspective that he brought to the issues surrounding disability -- and to my own misunderstandings about it. Disability -- especially neurological -- is an elusive subject because non-disabled people's perceptions and assumptions are seldom even voiced and as a result, are hard to pinpoint, much less change. This is true even for filmmakers. Even as our relationship matured, I often still found myself misunderstanding DJ's thought process and his intentions. So how to ask an audience to do better?

The Issues

The **Deej** team and its partners have launched the **Deej Inclusion Tour**, an engagement campaign that highlights several issues critical to autistics' hopes for a fulfilling future:

1. Inclusion shouldn't be a lottery.

DJ was born into poverty. Only through the miracle of adoption and his parents' insistence that he be placed in mainstream classes was he able to be included. To claim a place in mainstream society should be everyone's right, and access must begin with education.

2. Communication is a basic right.

Every child deserves the chance to achieve literacy and become fully educated. Competence must be presumed. Whenever possible, autistic children should be included in regular classes and not, as DJ has put it, in "segregated classes of easy lessons."

3. Redefining "normal."

Cultural perceptions shape reality; pity hurts, not helps. We must end old myths and stereotypes that often lead to discrimination and abuse. Even "low- and high-functioning" labels are misguided and can restrict an individual's rights. Neurological diversity should not just be accepted; it should be celebrated.

4. "Nothing about us without us."

Self-advocacy is essential in the fight for accommodation and acceptance. While the contributions of non-autistic people are important and appreciated, the meaningful involvement of autistics remains critical. The making of Deej as well as the shaping and execution of its engagement campaign embody this principle.

5. Interdependence, not independence.

We all need support of one kind or another and we all have something to offer in turn. Creating adequate community services and supports should be seen in this light. Society will benefit with a shift away from the culturally loaded concept of independence to that of self-determination, respect and interdependence.

The Poetry

Deej features four of DJ's poems, set to animation by Em Cooper.

I have always thought that poetry is autistic: it revels in patterned sound. For me, poetry is more natural than spoken language, maybe because I spent so many years hearing it without comprehension. I would simply attend to its intonations and rhythms. Even now, when I can decode spoken language easily, I notice things such as alliteration, assonance and consonance. A poem is like a person wearing earrings: it shimmers in the light. I of course use poetry to talk about my life, but a poem is only satisfying if it proceeds from an awareness of sensuous patterns.

Including poetry in Deej posed a singular challenge: how to find a cinematic companion to words without illustrating or overpowering them. A lengthy search led to Em Cooper, a British director and artist specializing in oil-painted animation. As we worked together, Em and I realized that the animation could function as a foil to the realistic mode of the film, inviting viewers to get behind what the camera appears to register about autism. Because the camera can't help but stare, another visual medium might better align with the autistic's point of view.

DJ Savarese



On reading DJ's poem Swoon, my mind was flooded by his descriptions of the visceral union of his sensory experience. His words had such breathtaking clarity - they sprang to life in my mind and I felt as though I could see the poem. The challenge DJ and I began to tackle together was how to create a sense of that 'reading mind's eye' on-screen. I wanted to create an atmosphere to underlie the poem, to hold the space so that DJ's words could have their powerful effect on the viewer.

Another aim was to find a way of using the animation to create openings within the objective on-looking of the live-action film, to hint at a more subjective point of view. I have found that the slippery combination of oil paint and live action gives an opportunity for this: images can form and melt, sliding into one another like fleeting thoughts. Punctuating the film with these sequences reminds us that the footage we see through the camera lens is only the exterior.

Em Cooper

Main Credits

Director

Robert Rooy

Words by

David James Savarese

Producers

Robert Rooy

David James Savarese

Executive Producers

Jeanne Jordan

Steven Ascher

Co-Producer

Anne de Mare

Cinematographer

Robert Rooy

Director of Animation

Em Cooper

Music by

David Majzlin

Editors

Robert Rooy

James Rutenbeck

Director of Partnerships & Community Engagement

Regan Brashear

Executive Producer for ITVS

Sally Jo Fifer

Also for ITVS:

Supervising Producer

David Eisenberg

Managing Director of Business Affairs

Isaac Hager

Consulting Producer

N'Jeri Eaton

*Deej is a co-production of Rooy
Media LLC and the Independent
Television Service (ITVS) with funding
provided by the Corporation for
Public Broadcasting (CPB).*

The Filmmaking Team

Jeanne Jordan and Steven Ascher Executive Producers

Steven Ascher and Jeanne Jordan of West City Films are an Oscar-nominated team whose work *The Boston Globe* calls “filmmaking at its finest.” Among their many critically acclaimed films are *Troublesome Creek* (Sundance Grand Jury Prize & Audience Award, Prix Italia, Directors Guild nominee), *So Much So Fast* (Sundance nominee, IFFB Audience Award) and *Raising Renee* (Emmy nominee, IFFB Audience Award). Their documentaries and dramas have been released theatrically and broadcast around the world on premiere networks including HBO, PBS, BBC, ZDF and A&E.



Jordan’s work as a producer and editor includes **Eyes On the Prize** and films for **American Playhouse**. She was also the Emmy-nominated series producer of PBS’s **Postcards from Buster**. She has taught filmmaking at Harvard University and the Art Institute of Boston. Ascher’s directing credits include films for television, TV spots and the drama, **Del and Alex**. He is also the author of **The Filmmaker’s Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide for the Digital Age**, a bestselling text and staple of universities and film schools international. The New York Times calls it "seminal".

Anne de Mare, Co-Producer

Anne de Mare is a documentary film director and producer, and her most recent feature is the Emmy Award winning **The Homestretch** (Independent Lens, 2015).

She is a Sundance Institute Documentary Fellow whose work has been supported by MacArthur Foundation, ITVS, The Fledgling Fund, BRITDOCS and Chicken & Egg Pictures (among others). Anne's first feature, **Asparagus! Stalking the American Life**, was a festival favorite and winner of the W.K. Kellogg Good Food Film Award. Together with long-time film partner Kirsten Kelly, Anne runs Spargel Productions in NYC. She is enormously proud of her work with Rob, DJ and Em on **Deej**.

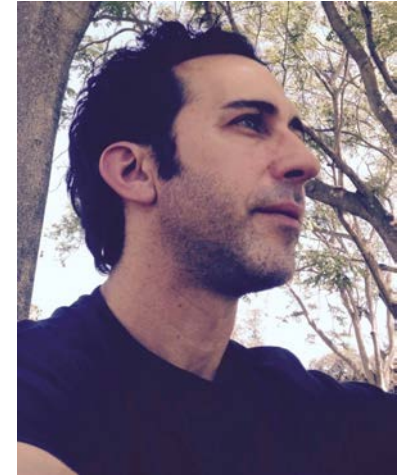


James Rutenbeck, Editor

James Rutenbeck's films have screened at Cinema du Reel, Margaret Mead, Independent Film Festival of Boston and Flaherty Film Seminar. His feature film **Scenes from a Parish** aired on Independent Lens in 2009. He was Executive Producer of **Class of '27**, broadcast on America ReFramed and streaming at The Atlantic. James has edited over 50 films for PBS, BBC, Channel Four (UK) and Showtime and received grant awards from CPB, Southern Humanities Media Fund and Sundance Documentary Fund. He received the du Pont Columbia Journalism Award for his work as an episodic producer on the PBS series **Unnatural Causes**.

David Majzlin, Composer

David Majzlin is an Emmy®-nominated composer and music producer whose eclectic, genre-bending approach to scoring spans across a myriad of styles unique to each project. Credits include Emmy®-award-winner **The Loving Story** (HBO), audience favorite, **Herb and Dorothy** (American Masters), **Sins Of My Father** (HBO), and **Shenandoah**, directed by Pulitzer Prize-Winning photographer, David Turnley. He has also worked as a consultant and coach with actors on set who are playing musicians in films such as **The Music Never Stopped** (Sundance FF), starring J.K. Simmons and Julia Ormand, and **Greetings From Tim Buckley** (Tribeca FF), starring Imogen Poots and Penn



Regan Brashear, Director of Impact & Engagement

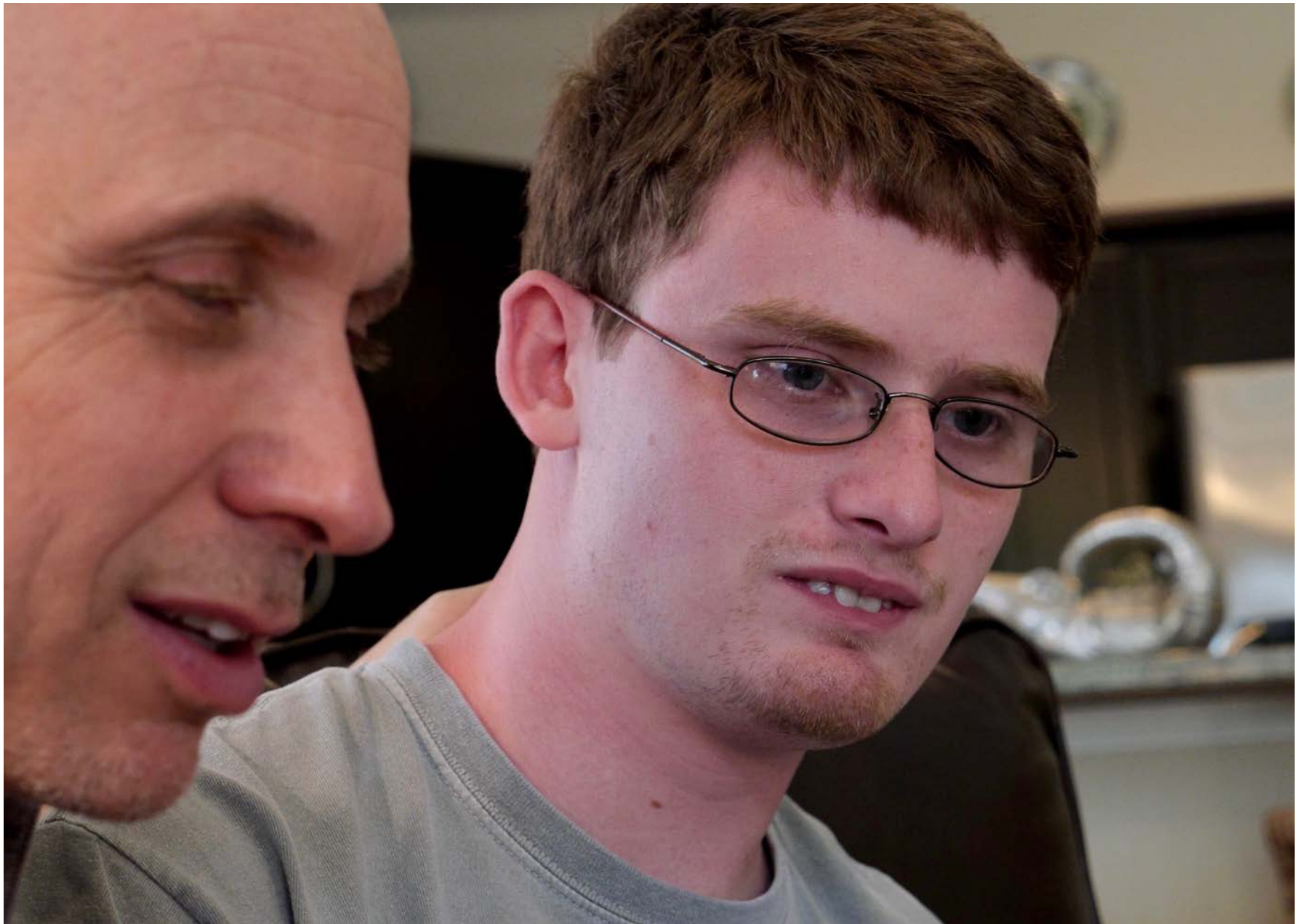
Regan Brashear is head of Launch and Member Services at New Day Films. She is the producer/director of the feature documentary, **FIXED: The Science/Fiction of Human Enhancement** (www.fixedthemovie.com). **FIXED** has won top awards at three leading disability festivals, enjoyed a successful PBS broadcast, had keynote status at many conferences, and is a top seller at New Day. Previously, Brashear served as Impact Producer for the Academy Award-shortlisted film on Lyme disease, **Under Our Skin**. Brashear has been active in the disability rights movement since a car accident in 1997, which began a personal journey with fibromyalgia and chronic pain.



Production Stills













Full Credits

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Cinematographer

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Em Cooper

Music by

David Majzlin

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James Rutenbeck

Consulting Editor

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Editorial Consultants

Nels Bangerter
Doug Block
Regan Brashear
Nyenev Laura Minnear

Director of Partnerships & Engagement

Regan Brashear

Poems by

David James Savarese

Swoon

Published in

The Seneca Review

Hobart and William Smith Colleges Press
Publishers

Red Light, Green Light

Published in

Voices for Diversity and Social Justice

A Literary Education Anthology

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers

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Sharon Liu

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Ryan Ferguson
Tom Geller

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J. Michael Sokol
Pete Tokar

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Ryan Gilbert
Alex Henderson
Tatyanna Hunter
Eli Katzoff
Nate Pierce
Hannah Scharlin-Pettee
Meghan Strobel
Ron Vande Kieft

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Adam Lubkin

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Lydia Landau
Adam Lubkin

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Laura Lake

Additional Transcription

Margie Allen
Chelsea Boice
Ben Baldwin

Online Editing & Color Correction

Pillar 2 Post

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Bill Jackson

Titles & Graphics

Dan Sharkey, Dizzy Giant

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Justine Jacob
Richard Lee

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Pierre Takal
Nomi Talisman
Rachel Thornton
Phillip Thornton
Joe Wilson
Jenny Woodward

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Deej is a co-production of Rooy Media LLC and Independent Television Service (ITVS), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

Additional support has been provided by the Lucius and Eva Eastman Fund, the Bay Area Video Coalition and the Awesome Foundation.

This program was produced by Rooy Media LLC and David James Savarese, who are solely responsible for its content.

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