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**EASTERSEALS DISABILITY SERVICES AND FILM INDEPENDENT PARTNER
TO RELAUNCH THE MEDIA ACCESS AWARDS AS THE
EASTERSEALS DISABILITY ARTS & CULTURE AWARDS (THE DARCYs)**

*Rebrand is the Next Evolution of the Media Access Awards,
Expanding the Future of Disability Representation in Entertainment*

LOS ANGELES (May 28, 2026) – After more than four decades of impact and advocacy, the Media Access Awards – honoring disability representation and authentic filmmaking in film and television – today announced an official rebrand as The Easterseals Disability Arts & Culture Awards (The DARCYs), ushering in a bold, new era for the awards ceremony and the industry at large. The initiative is spearheaded by Easterseals Disability Services and leaders from the disability community, with Film Independent serving as co-producer.

Founded in 1979 by Norman Lear, the Media Access Awards have long recognized artists, creators, and industry leaders who have advanced authentic portrayals of disability and expanded opportunities for disabled talent across entertainment.

The reimagined awards show builds on this legacy while introducing a modern identity, expanded mission, and broader cultural reach – reflecting the growing momentum around inclusion, accessibility, and representation in global media while calling attention to the work yet to be done.

At the outset, Easterseals created a Disability Advisory Committee, a talented group of disabled individuals who work in the industry, who have been integral to this evolution, and who will continue to provide ongoing guidance. The committee is led by co-chairs Emily Ladau and Nicole Lynn Evans, and includes members Jamie Brewer, Christine Bruno, Lawrence Carter-Long, Ashley Eakin, Danny J. Gomez, CJ Jones, Danny Kurtzman, Lachi, Jim LeBrecht, Sue Ann Pien, and Lolo Spencer.

Commented Ladau and Evans, “Inclusion must be a movement, not a moment. The inaugural DARCYS will be a joyful celebration of the disability community’s contributions to the media landscape and a bold call to action for a true disability representation revolution.”

Under this new structure, the DARCYS signal a significant move forward in scale, visibility, and integration. The DARCYS will be available to viewers around the world with live broadcast on YouTube and PBS SoCal, with rebroadcast on local PBS stations nationwide (check local listings).

Commented Mark Whitley, President & CEO of Easterseals Southern California, “The Easterseals Disability Arts & Culture Awards are about more than recognition – they’re about redefining what inclusion looks like in entertainment. By celebrating and honoring authentic voices and experiences, we’re helping set a new industry standard where disability representation is not the exception, but an essential part of great storytelling.”

Said Shawn Davis, Executive Producer, Film Independent Spirit Awards and The DARCYS, “For over four decades, Film Independent has championed a culture of inclusion in storytelling. Partnering with Easterseals Disability Services on the Easterseals Disability Arts & Culture Awards is a natural reflection of this mission – amplifying authentic representation and ensuring that diverse voices shape the narratives of not only our industry, but the world, too. Together, we’re not just celebrating great storytelling; we’re redefining who gets to tell those stories and how they are told.”

With a vision of establishing authentic disability representation as a driving creative force across all forms of media, The DARCYS honor excellence in representation and inclusion across the full spectrum of disability in film, television, and digital and emerging media.

The awards celebrate storytellers and changemakers who are reshaping narratives, eliminating stereotypes, and setting a new standard for disability inclusion across the entertainment industry.

Eligibility includes specific requirements ensuring that the disability inclusion is substantive, sustained, and integral to the work being recognized. Accessibility, including captioning and audio description, will be a key component of the submission and review process.

The DARCYS will celebrate excellence across a wide range of categories, including Best Feature, Best Documentary, Best Performance in a Feature, Best Scripted Series, Best Unscripted Series, Best Performer in a Series, and Best Social Creator. The awards will also include Achievement in Casting Ensemble, the Legacy Award, and the Christopher Reeve Emerging Talent Award.

The DARCYS will be introducing a competitive nominations process. Nominees will be determined by industry committees composed of filmmakers, critics, past Media Access Awards honorees, and industry guild and nonprofit organization representatives. The DARCYS are committed to meaningful representation within this process, with a majority of committee members being individuals with disabilities.

The inaugural Disability Arts & Culture Awards ceremony will take place Saturday, October 10 at The Historic Barker Hangar in Santa Monica, convening leaders from across entertainment, advocacy, and media for an evening celebrating the most impactful work of the year.

Submissions will open Tuesday, June 16 and close Tuesday, July 14.

For more information, visit social.easterseals.com/darcyawards. Follow @DARCYAwards on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X.

The Easterseals Disability Arts & Culture Awards visual identity is the work of Pentagram, the world's largest independent design consultancy. Nominations submissions and secure digital screening services are powered by Vision Media.

ABOUT EASTERSEALS SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Easterseals Southern California transforms lives every day. For over a century, Easterseals has championed inclusion and independence – delivering essential services like early childhood programs, autism services, employment and independent living support to more than 29,000 people each year. Through advocacy and education, we break barriers and create opportunities for the one-in-four Americans with disabilities. Learn more at social.easterseals.com

ABOUT FILM INDEPENDENT

For over 40 years, Film Independent has helped filmmakers get their projects made and seen. The nonprofit organization's core mission is to champion creative independence in visual storytelling in all its forms and foster a culture of inclusion, in support of a global community of artists and audiences who embody diversity, innovation, curiosity and uniqueness of vision.

In addition to producing the Film Independent Spirit Awards, the organization supports creative professionals with Artist Development programs, grants and labs. Signature mentorship program Project Involve fosters the careers of talented filmmakers from underrepresented communities. Weekly Education events and workshops equip filmmakers of all ages and experience levels with tools and resources. International programs provide cultural exchanges and career-building opportunities for film professionals around the world. And year-round screening series Film Independent Presents offers a robust program of unique cinematic experiences, including screenings, conversations, Live Reads and Bring the Noise musical events.

For more information or to become a member, visit filmIndependent.org.

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