

# "waiting for ronald"

Made possible by credit cards and love, *Waiting for Ronald* is a 22-minute celebration of independence, friendship and courage. Writer, director and producer Ellen Gerstein says, "I know it will take a long time to pay off this short film, but it was worth it."

And *worth it* is more than an understatement. What began as a dream of this former psychologist and social worker turned actor and filmmaker, evolved into an award-winning film that is brightening the hearts and futures of people with developmental disabilities across the country. The optimism is contagious as the characters challenge themselves to overcome fears and obstacles with humor and humility. The *I can do it* theme in *Waiting for Ronald* is pervasive and uplifting—not only for people with disabilities, but for everyone.

The genesis of *Waiting for Ronald* was Gerstein's passionate belief that *everyone is part of society and should not feel pushed aside or inferior*. As her idea sprouted into a story, and the story blossomed into a script, friends and professionals began offering support in the form of locations, cameras, editing and encouragement.

Once there was a working script and a willing crew to film it, the next step was finding a cast. It was important to Gerstein that the actors were believable and the connection between them was real. Gail Williamson, of the

Media Access Office, an entertainment industry casting liaison for performers with disabilities, sent in Jody Clark to read for the title character of Ronald. Clark had never acted before, although he loved films and was an extra on many sets. Gerstein was so charmed and impressed by Clark's natural talent that after three readings, she cast him in the title role. Other actors with developmental disabilities came in to read for the roles of Ronald's friends. Blair Williamson, reading for a small role, was so wonderful that Gerstein actually wrote the character of Scotty for him. Patrick Cooper rounded out the group of friends when he was cast as Andy. Well-known actor Bruno Kirby volunteered his considerable talent to the project as Ronald's group counselor. The casting was almost complete.

The role of Ronald's friend, Edgar, was proving difficult to cast. Michael Luckerman, an acting friend of Gerstein's, kept popping into her head. Could Luckerman be believable as the developmentally disabled Edgar? Gerstein wasn't the only one who had doubts. "I didn't want to offend anyone. I also didn't want it to be obvious that I was the only one of Ronald's friends who didn't actually have a disability in real life," confesses Luckerman.

First-time actor Clark was worried too. "I always thought actors were better than I was," he explains.

As in the film itself, everyone's fears were faced head on. In a courageous and risky bit of casting, Gerstein brought Clark and Luckerman on board as the film's unique pair of friends. She encouraged them to spend time together off the set, hoping they would develop a true off-camera relationship. Her hopes were more than realized. The two actors became close and, even though the film is out of the camera and onto the screen, they still enjoy each other's company.

An enormous hit at its world premiere, *Waiting for Ronald* won the Audience Choice Best Short Film at the famed Method Fest Film Festival. Jody Clark was nominated as Best Lead Actor at the same festival. *Waiting for Ronald* was also enormously well received at the Beverly Hills Film Festival and Gerstein is looking forward to future screenings at the Perspectives Film Festival, the Palisades Film Festival and the Wine Country Festival, among others. Gerstein is also currently working on a feature length version of *Waiting for Ronald*; the original cast will return with additional members being added.

*Waiting for Ronald* is a simple story about everyday heroes and has the best of what a film, and life, can offer—humor, heart, humanity and hope. It was well worth the wait.

■ ABILITY

by Laurelle LeVine Frome

[www.waitingforronald.com](http://www.waitingforronald.com)

ABILITY