

SPECIAL REPORTS

# Making Disability Less Abstract



By Ben Gose | OCTOBER 22, 2017

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Allan B. Goldstein spent more than 20 years as an actor in New York City, but he switched gears when his parents died and he became guardian to his intellectually disabled brother, Fred. Mr. Goldstein began writing essays about Fred and his family, and that put him on a new path that ultimately led to a career in academe.

Now, Mr. Goldstein, a senior lecturer at NYU's Tandon School of Engineering, holds center stage every semester in a course that pairs engineering students with adults who have disabilities. They work in small groups throughout the semester to create short films that highlight some aspect of the life of a person with disabilities.

Mark Abramson for the Chronicle  
Allan Goldstein, a senior lecturer in NYU's engineering school, invites people with disabilities into the classroom to consult with students.

Mr. Goldstein teaches the course twice every semester — in one section, people with cerebral palsy participate; in the second, adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities join students. The course requires extensive interaction, including visits to the agencies where those with disabilities attend day programs. The goal is to get the engineering students — some of whom will eventually design buildings that must accommodate the needs of the disabled — to see that people with disabilities have the same needs and wants as anyone else.

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"They no longer see the wheelchair, they see the person — that's where the empathy is," Mr. Goldstein says. "They learn that we're all just living differently."

For the participants with disabilities, known in the class as "consultants," the course is a chance to have meaningful interactions with people in broader society, says Peter Cobb, director of community outreach at Adapt Community Network (formerly known as United Cerebral Palsy of New York City).

"The class is unlike anything that I've personally seen," says Mr. Cobb, who has worked in the disability field for more than 30 years. "I really do think it's changing lives on both sides."

In February, Mr. Goldstein received the university's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Faculty Award, for demonstrating excellent teaching and community building. His course is also the focus of a 2016 documentary, *The Ability Exchange*. And he's in the early stages of trying to replicate the course elsewhere, including at more than a dozen NYU academic centers around the world.

The awards and attention are all the more surprising given Mr. Goldstein's initial lack of academic credentials. When he created the course in 2012, he had no graduate-school training in disability studies — or any degree beyond the B.A. in political science he earned from the University of Denver in 1971.

"I'm a guy who happened to fall into this gig," he says.

As an actor, Mr. Goldstein had several New York theater roles, and once played a bellhop for a gorilla — receiving a banana as a tip — in a television ad for American Tourister. But he struggled to make a living and spent more time waiting tables than acting, so in the late 1990s he gave up acting and began teaching English as a second language. He also began writing about his brother, a survivor of the now-closed Willowbrook State School, on Staten Island, known for deplorable treatment of its mentally disabled residents.

Mr. Goldstein was already in his 50s when he secured his first full-time job — teaching ESL at what was then Polytechnic University. He eventually became assistant director of its writing program. But his job became threatened when NYU assumed control of the engineering school in a merger; NYU already had plenty of full-time writing instructors.

Mr. Goldstein decided to create a new humanities course for NYU's engineering students. He had spent time shadowing James Lawler, a professor of information technology at Pace University, who started a program in 2007 in which IT students helped local residents with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Inspired by Mr. Lawler's program, Mr. Goldstein started his own disability-studies course in 2012. He also teaches "STEM and Theatre" — a course that features close readings of science-oriented plays such as *QED* and *Copenhagen*. He used the \$10,000 prize from a teaching award to help pay for a master's degree in disability studies, which he earned from the City University of New York's School of Professional Studies in 2015.

Tapping the aid network that he knew from his years of advocating for Fred, Mr. Goldstein created partnerships with the cerebral-palsy organization and, later, with an agency that runs programs for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

**I**n his "Disability Studies" course, Mr. Goldstein assigns such readings such as Harilyn Rousso's *Don't Call Me Inspirational: A Disabled Feminist Talks Back* (Temple University Press, 2013), and each week asks volunteers to report the latest news from websites like Disability Scoop.

But the main focus is digital storytelling. Bing Wang, director of the *Ability Exchange* documentary and an NYU alumnus, talks to the students about movie making. A sound engineer and a film-editing expert also address the students.

Andy Martinez, who expects to earn a civil-engineering degree from NYU next May, took the course last spring. He and another student created a short film featuring Luis, a disabled adult who loves to bake cupcakes. "It was a chance for him to share his story, and show that he's navigating his life just like the rest of us," Mr. Martinez says.

He says the course gave him a new perspective on his engineering work, especially in regard to laws designed to make buildings physically accessible. "Taking the class makes you feel more sympathetic to people with disabilities, as opposed to just following codes to stick to the letter of the law," he says. "You're doing it because it's the right thing to do."

As the course progresses, the students create storyboards and then first and second cuts of their films. The final cuts are presented — sometimes with popcorn — at the end of the semester.

In a scene from Mr. Wang's documentary, an NYU student named Derrick explains to Mr. Goldstein that he believes people with disabilities are often underestimated. Derrick and another student hope to illustrate what people with disabilities can achieve through a film sequence showing Chris, a consultant with cerebral palsy, beating Derrick in a game of one-on-one basketball. "We want him to ultimately win to prove that everyone is wrong," Derrick says.

The problem, Mr. Goldstein points out, is that Chris is physically unable to get the ball to the hoop.

"He wants to show what — that he can shoot the ball? That's not what he wants to show, he wants to show what he's *able* to do," Mr. Goldstein tells Derrick in the film. "You guys do what you're comfortable with, we were just pointing out that it comes across as false."

The final cut of the short film doesn't include a victory for Chris, but it does show Chris holding a basketball while artfully steering his wheelchair around Derrick on the court. And the subtitles reveal Derrick's changing perspective — he comes to realize that even if Chris can't shoot, he has a love for the game of basketball just like anyone else.

"Where are you going to get better teaching about disabilities than from the people with disabilities?" Mr. Goldstein says of his course. "That's the innovation."

*This article is part of:*

Innovators: 10 Classroom Trailblazers

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