

FROM ACADEMY AWARD-WINNING DIRECTOR ROGER ROSS WILLIAMS

# LIFE, ANIMATED



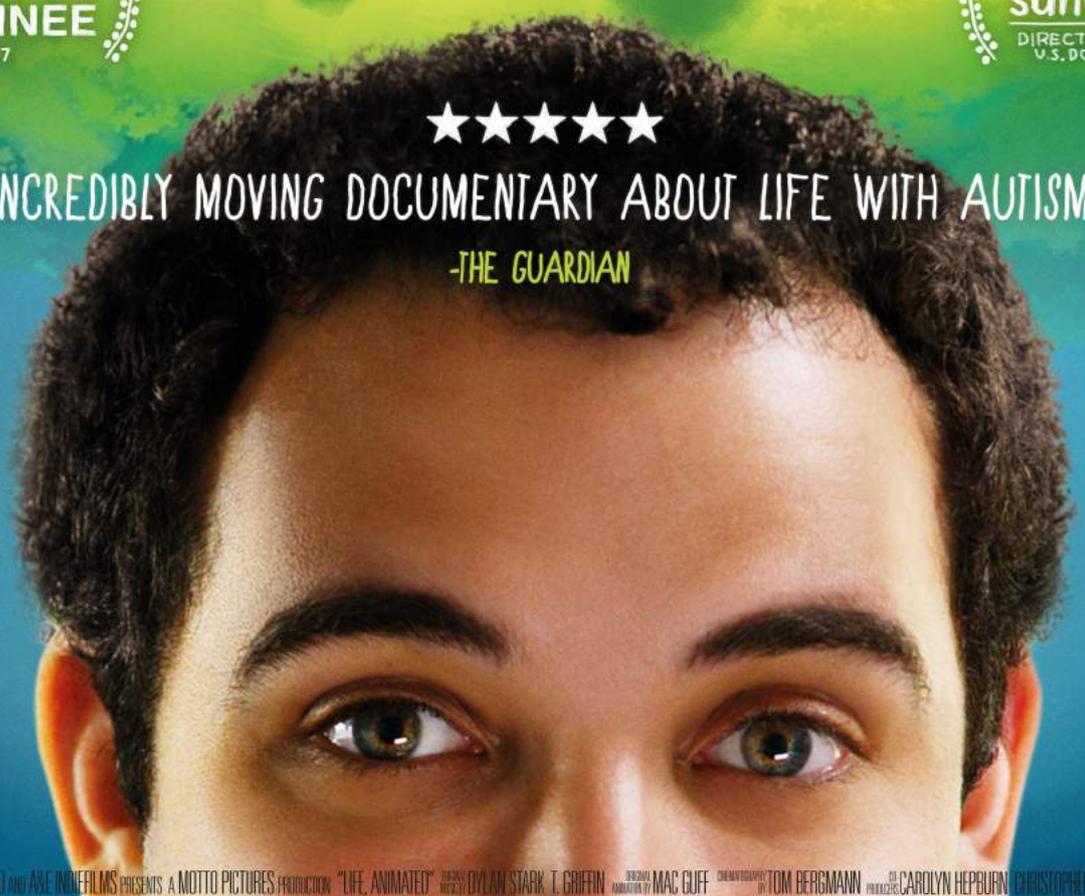
OSCAR  
NOMINEE  
2017

WINNER  
sundance  
DIRECTING AWARD:  
U.S. DOCUMENTARY



"INCREDIBLY MOVING DOCUMENTARY ABOUT LIFE WITH AUTISM"

-THE GUARDIAN



THE TRICHARD AND ABE FILMS PRESENTS A MOTTO PICTURES PRODUCTION "LIFE, ANIMATED" WRITTEN BY DYLAN STARK & T. GRIFFIN ANIMATED BY MAC GUFF DIRECTED BY TOM BERGMANN PRODUCED BY CAROLYN HEPBURN & CHRISTOPHER CLEMMENTS  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS RON SUSKIND PRODUCERS MOLLY THOMPSON ROBERT DEBITETTO ROBERT SHARENDOVY EDITOR DAVID TEAGUE  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JULIE GOLDMAN PRODUCED BY ROGER ROSS WILLIAMS



# LIFE, ANIMATED

een film van Roger Ross Williams

VS | 2016 | 89 MINUTEN | ENGELS GESPROKEN | NEDERLANDSE ONDERTITELING

**VANAF 23 MAART IN DE BIOSCOOP**



De film wordt uitgebracht door:

**PERISCOOP FILM**

Arie Biemondstraat 111 | 1054 PD AMSTERDAM |

t: +31 (0) 20 820 49 40 | [www.periscoopfilm.nl](http://www.periscoopfilm.nl)

Wiepko Oosterhuis | e: [wiepko@periscoopfilm.nl](mailto:wiepko@periscoopfilm.nl)

Publiciteit:

**FILM INCOMPANY**

Anne Kervers

e: [anne.kervers@filminc.nl](mailto:anne.kervers@filminc.nl)

t: 020-7371356

Petra van Horssen

e: [petra.vanhorssen@filminc.nl](mailto:petra.vanhorssen@filminc.nl)



## SYNOPSIS

In LIFE, ANIMATED ontmoeten we Owen Suskind. Tot zijn zijn derde een energiek, praatgraag jongetje die daarna plotseling ophoudt met spreken. Autisme doet hem afglijden in een zwijgzame eigen wereld. Bijna vier jaar gaan voorbij waarin Owen niet te bereiken is. Hij reageert maar op één ding: Disney-films. Op een dag besluit zijn vader met een handpop van Iago, de brutale papegaai uit Aladdin, aan zijn zoontje te vragen "Hoe is het nou om jou te zijn?" Onmiddellijk krijgt hij antwoord van Owen, met de letterlijke dialoog uit de film Aladdin. Vanaf dat moment besluiten de ouders met hem te communiceren aan de hand van zijn geliefde Disney-films en treden zij binnen in Owen's gesloten wereld. Ze ontdekken dat Owen leert over de wereld om hem heen door middel van de uitvergrote karakters uit de Disneyfilms. We zien hoe het Owen lukt zijn diploma te halen, een liefdesrelatie te beginnen en uiteindelijk zelfstandig te gaan wonen.

Met behulp van indrukwekkende beelden uit het familiearchief en een serie prachtige animaties, gebaseerd op Owens eigen tekeningen uit zijn jeugd, schetst regisseur Roger Ross Williams een ontroerend portret. LIFE, ANIMATED ging in première op het Sundance Film Festival 2016 waar het de Best Directing Award won in de categorie Documentaires. De film is in 2017 genomineerd voor een Oscar® voor Beste Documentaire.



## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

My films have always been about championing the outsider – this is what makes filmmaking such an exciting adventure. With *LIFE, ANIMATED*, I wanted to tell an incredible story but I also wanted to create a space that would offer insight into Owen Suskind and other people living with autism. Owen is a unique person for many reasons, chief among them are his emotional openness and scrupulous honesty. His vision of the world is extraordinary because he is unencumbered by many of the world's social cues whose main purpose is to restrict behavior and curb spontaneity. And that's very refreshing to me. What Owen has done by living his life immersed in myths and fables is find a way to dissect the world and in so doing he has come to an incredibly wise and rich understanding of the human condition.

What Owen draws from these classic stories is an understanding of the world that is as deep and complex as it is inspirational and instructive. It was important to me to get inside Owen's head and tell his story from his point of view. Too often the world looks askance at people who are outside of society's mainstream; this film is about looking at one of these outsiders in great detail, but from the inside, looking out at the world.

The process of making *LIFE, ANIMATED* expanded my vocabulary as a filmmaker, translating Owen's unique way of seeing the world into pictures and sound that help us better understand a truly extraordinary individual.

– Roger Ross Williams



## CREDITS

A&E INDIEFILMS PRESENTS

A MOTTO PICTURES PRODUCTION

A FILM BY **ROGER ROSS WILLIAMS**

INSPIRED BY THE BOOK BY **RON SUSKIND**  
"LIFE ANIMATED: A STORY OF SIDEKICKS, HEROES, AND AUTISM"

ORIGINAL ANIMATION BY  
**MAC GUFF**

CINEMATOGRAPHY BY  
**TOM BERGMANN**

EDITED BY  
**DAVID TEAGUE**

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS  
**MOLLY THOMPSON**  
**ROBERT DEBITETTO**  
**ROBERT SHARENOW**

PRODUCED BY  
**JULIE GOLDMAN, p.g.a.**

DIRECTED & PRODUCED BY  
**ROGER ROSS WILLIAMS**



## ROGER ROSS WILLIAMS

The first film that Roger Ross Williams directed and produced was *Music by Prudence*, which won the 2010 Academy Award® for documentary short subject; he is the first African American director to win an Academy Award. Williams next directed the feature documentary *GOD LOVES UGANDA*, which premiered at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival and went on to screen at over 60 film festivals worldwide, winning more than a dozen awards before being shortlisted for a 2014 Academy Award®.

Prior to moving into independent filmmaking, Williams was an acclaimed television journalist and producer for over 15 years for outlets including: TV Nation, ABC News, NBC News, CNN, PBS, Comedy Central and Sundance Channel.

Recently, Williams directed *Blackface*, his short film on the tradition of Black Pete in the Netherlands for CNN Films, which premiered in November to immense controversy and sparked a national debate on racism and the legacy of slavery. Williams presently has several projects in development including *Traveling While Black*, an interactive project that will feature a Virtual Reality component and a feature documentary about the prison industrial complex for The Why? Foundation, which will be broadcast in over 50 countries, reaching an audience of over 500 million around the world. His latest film *LIFE, ANIMATED* premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival to enormous critical acclaim and Williams won the prestigious U.S. Documentary Directing Award.

Williams serves on the Alumni Advisory Board of the Sundance Institute. He frequently mentors filmmakers from the developing world and under-represented communities on how to channel personal adversity into their art. Williams splits his time between upstate New York and Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

© foto: Justin Bettman

# ROGER ROSS WILLIAMS

## FILMOGRAPHY

2016 [LAND OF THE LOST SIDEKICKS](#) (short film)  
2016 [THE NEW YORKER PRESENTS](#) (1 episode)  
2016 [LIFE, ANIMATED](#)  
2015 [BLACKFACE](#)  
2015 [GOSPEL OF INTOLERANCE](#)  
2014 [INDEPENDENT LENS](#) (1 episode)  
2014 [GOD LOVES UGANDA](#)  
2010-2011 [UNDERCOVER BOSS](#) (24 episodes)  
2010 [MUSIC BY PRUDENCE](#) (short film)  
2003 [THEY LIVES THEY LIVED](#) (tv movie)  
2003 [NEW YORK UNDERGROUND](#) (tv movie documentary)

# RON SUSKIND (author & executive producer)

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and best-selling author Ron Suskind has written some of America's most important works of nonfiction, framing national and global debates while exploring the complexities of human experience.

Mr. Suskind's latest bestseller, *Life, Animated*, *A Story of Sidekicks, Heroes and Autism*, chronicles the twenty year struggle of he and his wife, Cornelia, with their youngest son's autism. The book, a journey of the heart, takes readers to the core of the most fundamental human issues – love, faith, friendship, brotherhood, what parents can offer their children, and how, in moments of darkness, we literally need stories to survive. His son, Owen, me-

morized Disney movies and learned to speak by turning them into a complex emotional language. He is the subject of documentary feature by Academy Award®-winner Roger Ross Williams. The film premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival and won the US Documentary Directing Award. *Life, Animated* has driven activism and research about compensatory strengths of the autistic and others who are "differently-abled" due to distinctive neurology or cultural/economic separations. Mr. Suskind is leading efforts to build a next generation of augmentative technologies – called Sidekicks -- to lift and support these communities.

His previous works include the New York Times bestsellers, *Confidence Men*, (September 2011) about the fall of the U.S. economy and the presidency of Barack Obama; *The Way of the World*, (August 2008), about the forces fighting the global "hearts and minds" struggle at a time when awesomely destructive weapons are available to the common man; *The One Percent Doctrine* (June 2006), a signature work on how the U.S. government frantically improvised to fight a new kind of war after 9/11; *The Price of Loyalty*, (January 2004), a sweeping tour of the inner workings of the American government and Presidency of George W. Bush; and *A Hope in the Unseen* (1988), a critically-acclaimed bestseller that has redefined national debates on race, class and achievement.

In addition to his books, he often appears on network television and has been a contributor for *The New York Times Magazine* and *Esquire*. Mr. Suskind was the *Wall Street Journal's* senior national affairs reporter from 1993 until his departure in 2000, and won the 1995 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing. He currently lives in Cambridge, Mass., with his wife, Cornelia Kennedy Suskind, and lectures about narrative and justice at Harvard Law School.

## A CONVERSATION WITH ROGER ROSS WILLIAMS:

### What kind of subjects are you drawn to as a filmmaker?

I'm definitely drawn to stories about outsiders. Feeling like that myself — I'm a gay black man — I often seek to give a voice to those in the world who don't have one. I also strive to find ways we can live together and understand each other. Like Owen Suskind, the subject of *LIFE, ANIMATED*, I felt disconnected as a kid and sat immersed in my own fantasies, creating stories in my own head — I had to find a way to connect with a greater world like he did, and like the subjects of all of my films have had to do in one way or another.

### How did this project originate?

I've known Ron Suskind for over 15 years during which he and I worked on many stories together for ABC and PBS. Ron is a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and the author of a book about his son, Owen, entitled *Life, Animated: A Story of Sidekicks, Heroes, and Autism*. Ron had told me about the book while he was working on it and I immediately knew it would make a great film, so my producer Julie Goldman and I optioned the documentary rights and brought it to Molly Thompson at A&E Indie-Films. That was around two years ago.

### What was your own knowledge of autism before you started this project?

I had very little awareness and understanding of autism going into this. I have to admit I was a little afraid of people with autism — I was uncomfortable and didn't





know how to interact or connect. But making this film totally changed the way I think about autism. I don't see it as a deficit or disability anymore; I see it as a difference. It is clear to me now that by ignoring this remarkable group of people we just aren't tapping into our true, full human potential and we are losing out as a society if we leave them behind.

**What were your thoughts on Owen before you started this film, knowing him already as you did? Who was he in your mind?**

I initially met Owen when he was very young, but only briefly. I already knew that the Suskinds were a remarkable family, but I didn't know what to expect going into this project. I came in with my own feelings of being uncomfortable, but that soon changed. The great thing about making documentaries is that you have the luxury of time, and I got to know Owen over time. My perceptions changed greatly. I'm a dreamer myself, as well as a storyteller. And no one loves the transformative potential of story more than Owen Suskind. He understands the beauty of a story or fable in a way that was very inspiring for a filmmaker.

**How long did you spend with the Suskinds on this project?**

About two years, from the inception of the project to completion.

**Was the film always about Owen becoming an independent adult?**

No, when I started the project I was going on the strength of Ron's book. I tried to structure the film around his story, but my editor David Teague and I realized there was another story unfolding. The book was in the past tense, but something was going on in the present tense that was extraordinary. Owen was experiencing the most transitional year of his life – graduating from college, getting his own apartment, falling in love for the first time – all things most people have experienced at one time or another. Here was a great opportunity not only to tell Owen's story from his perspective but to tell it as a classic coming of age story and to capture it as it was unfolding. Of course, for someone with autism, all these dramatic life transitions take place in a much more intense fashion, but the commonality of this stage of development in anyone's life is the heart of LIFE, ANIMATED. This is why I see the film as a universal coming of age story.

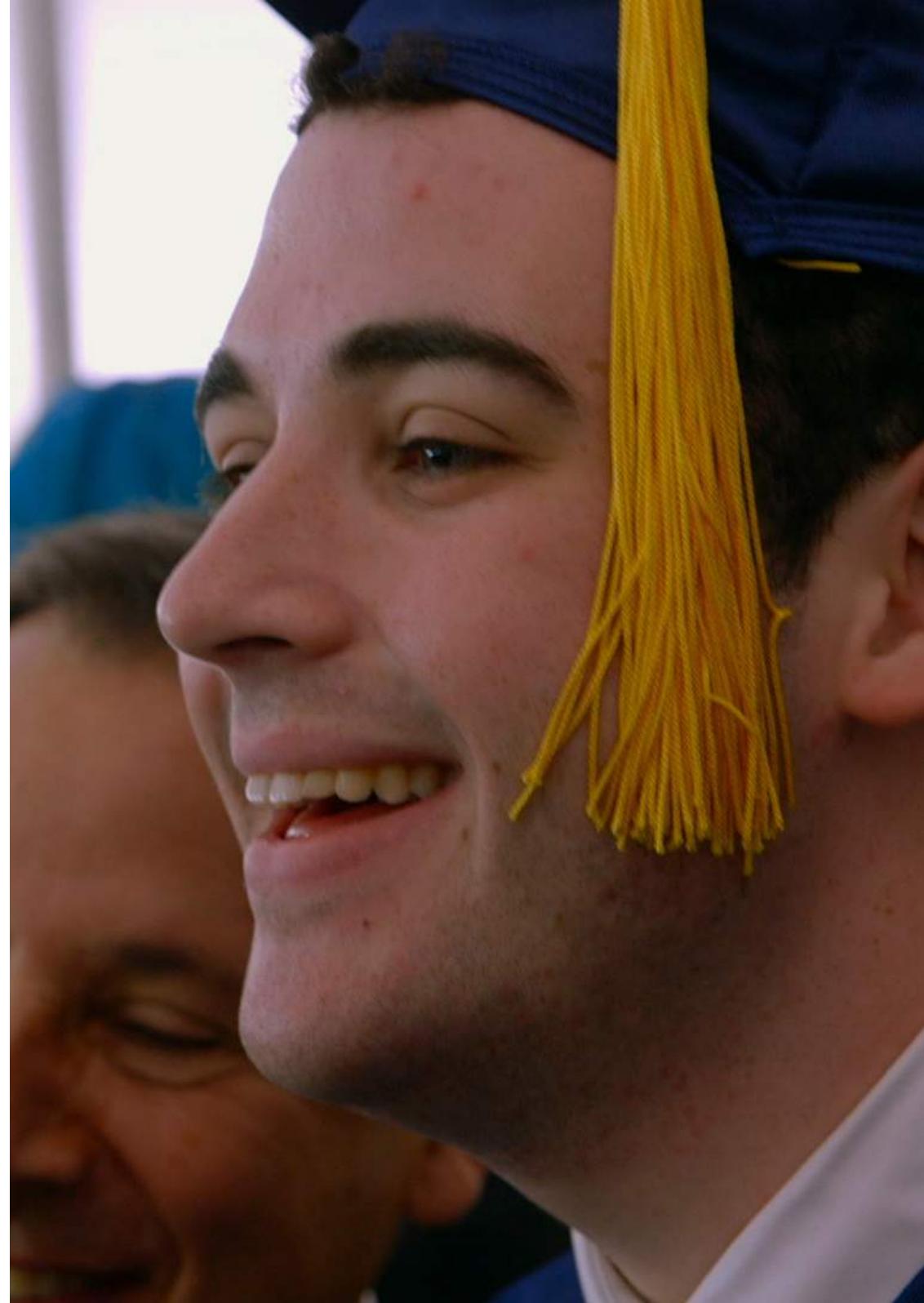
### What were your thoughts on Ron's book?

I was very moved when I first read the book – not only by the incredible love and bravery on the part of the Suskinds, but also by the challenges they faced and how they overcame those challenges. I was equally moved by the way Owen had created this incredible and colorful world in his mind with his Disney sidekicks, and how Ron brought that to life in his own way.

### What in your opinion is the beauty of story according to Owen's perspective?

The way Owen interprets and processes stories is fascinating to me, and it opened me up as a filmmaker in terms of the different narrative devices I could use to tell his story.

I came to love the way Owen processes media. He's looked into a television screen for his entire life and he knows the words to every Disney animated film ever made. He not only knows them intimately, he uses them to decipher the way in which the world works and, most importantly – how everyone is important to the way things go.



Owen has observed that the heroes in stories may carry out the great actions that change the world or turn the tide or fix what had gone wrong, but without the collaboration of the sidekicks – with whom Owen feels most allied – the hero could never accomplish his or her ultimate task. In Owen’s understanding of story, everyone matters, everyone is indispensable to what transpires and everyone has a right to claim the jointly held story as their own. That is the beauty of story that I learned from Owen Suskind.

**LIFE, ANIMATED is as much about sound as it is about vision. Can you elaborate?**

In the film you see various Disney clips playing on a screen, and Owen mouths every line. Visually, the issue was about getting inside Owen’s head and bringing that to life in the film. Soundwise, we captured Owen channeling all the different characters with their widely divergent voices and turned this into its own musical language. Dylan Stark and Todd Griffin, our composers, recorded Owen’s self---talking in addition to sound effects like the sound of VHS tape fast forwarding, etc. And then the brilliant Pete Horner and Al Nelson at Skywalker Sound turned it into a mix. So the film is very much a sonic journey as much as a visual one.

**You use animated sequences as another way of bringing to life Owen’s unique interior world. How did you create these scenes?**

Owen created the scenes. At a young age, he started drawing his beloved sidekicks – and he never drew heroes, only sidekicks. He made a story out of this called *The Land of the Lost Sidekicks*, and it’s a world that is quite beautiful. I worked with Owen and an amazing team of animators in France at Mac Guff Animation to bring to life Owen’s elaborate fantasy world. The villain Owen created for his story seemed to correspond with the challenges that he faces in his own life; it came to symbolize his autism in that the creature’s power was to make a person’s mind fuzzy or confused. While Owen was creating this story, he was in some ways writing his own biography or narrative, so I very much wanted to animate that on

screen.

**What was Owen’s reaction to the animated version of *The Land of the Lost Sidekicks* when you showed it to him?**

Owen has raw emotions – he doesn’t have filters. When he first watched it, he was jumping up and down and hugging us. Owen generally shies away from physical contact other than with family, but he couldn’t hold back from showing how much he loved the animation. It was an incredible experience showing him that part of the film for the first time.

**You get the impression from watching *LIFE, ANIMATED* that Owen is a joyful person. Where do you think his joy comes from?**

I think it’s definitely a testament to his family, and specifically his mother, Cornelia. She refused to listen to traditional medical experts, some of who advised that the family restrict Owen’s access to the things that made him the happiest, which were Disney animated movies. Cornelia knew that this would be like restricting Owen’s creativity.

In general, Owen’s parents worked intuitively with him and protected him, giving him what he needed in order to blossom. There’s such incredible love in that family, and one of the main reasons Owen is so happy is because he’s surrounded by that love.

**Where is Owen now in his life? Is he in a good place?**

I think he’s in a good place. He’s struggling with the same challenges of adulthood that we’ve all in some way faced, though obviously it’s much more intense for him. He’s still struggling with his relationship with his former girlfriend – the breakup was very difficult for him. But he still has incredible support from his family, so he’s okay, for now. He’s going to have to go through these struggles, and the family can only do so much. The breakups and setbacks and disappointments are beneficial in a way and I think he’s coping with them much better than anyone expected. He wants to set his own agenda, and after a rocky start I think he’s risen to



the occasion.

**What was it like working with Disney on this project? How forthcoming was the company in terms of licensing the animated sequences, which are so crucial to this film?**

It was important to develop a relationship with Disney early on in production. My producer Julie Goldman and I established and maintained that relationship throughout the production. We licensed the footage from Disney and they do not have any ownership or editorial control over the content of the film. I think the executives at Disney simply liked my vision and decided not to stand in our way.

**One of the key quotes in the movie is “Life is not a Disney movie.” How is that represented in LIFE, ANIMATED?**

One thing Owen learns over the course of the story is to move beyond Disney movies and deal with the real issues in his life, including romantic relationships. Characters in Disney movies don't have sex, but people in real life do. Owen faces many challenges as he moves toward independence and solutions can't always be found in the lessons learned from Disney films.

**You don't infantilize Owen in this movie – you treat him as an adult. Were there any places you couldn't go with him? Did the Suskinds set boundaries?**



We had built up such incredible trust with the Suskinds that they didn't put any restrictions on me, or my process; they never hovered. They allowed me to get to know Owen on my own terms. With romance and other adult concerns, Owen goes as far as he's comfortable with in his own life, and that's what I captured, especially in the scenes with his older brother Walt. I felt it was important to capture that, because Walt essentially was the hero figure in Owen's life.

**LIFE, ANIMATED and your previous feature GOD LOVES UGANDA are both to a degree about capturing hearts and minds. Do you see a connection between these films?**

I think both films are about outsiders looking for their place in the world, but they are doing so through inverted methods. In *GOD LOVES UGANDA*, the subjects were spiritual colonists who were reinforcing their own beliefs by proselytizing those beliefs in an attempt to influence the shape of the world. In *LIFE, ANIMATED*, Owen and the Suskinds offer no prescription for the world to take up beyond the idea that the 'differently abled' among us may hold the keys to many of the doors we have never been able to open in life.

In my estimation, *GOD LOVES UGANDA* was about a desire to narrow the range of understanding concerning the human condition and *LIFE, ANIMATED* is about widening that range so that all are included in this grand experiment of life.

I do like to go to places like this in my work. I just want to get it all down on the record. That's my motivation as a filmmaker – to capture it all as honestly as possible and then let the audience parse out what it all means.

VANAF 23 MAART IN DE BIOSCOOP

