

Hollywood, Etc.: There's no single way to address autism

by James Hebert

She set out to learn about life with autism, and after a year spent with people across the vast spectrum of that condition, Sigourney Weaver found she hardly needed to step out of her own two shoes.

HER INNER AUTISM - Sigourney Weaver plays a woman with autism in the new movie 'Snow Cake.' Working on the film has inspired the Oscar-nominated actress to advocate for autistic adults. CNS Photo courtesy of Neil Davidson. "What I ended up doing, in retrospect, was finding the autistic person in myself," says the actress, who plays a middle-aged mom with autism in the new movie "Snow Cake."

"God knows it's there," Weaver adds with a deep, warm laugh. "I mean, that's one thing you see very quickly, is we're all on the spectrum. We all have different ways of stabilizing ourselves."

"Snow Cake," arrives at a time of exploding awareness about autism spectrum disorders, the catch-all term for a range of conditions that share (to varying degrees) difficulties in the areas of speech, social interaction and repetitive behaviors.

It also comes as advocates for the autistic - including some autistic people themselves - are raising their voices in a plea for respect and acceptance.

Their message is similar to the point Weaver makes: that autism is part of the continuum of human neurology, not some separate category of existence. That it is, in essence, a difference rather than a disease, although its consequences for those affected and their families can be profound.

It can be a hard point to get across when so many mysteries swirl around the subject, and when the main message the public hears about autism is how common its diagnosis has become. The incidence of autism spectrum disorders among U.S. children is thought to be as high as 1 in 150 now; the ratio has risen in recent

years as understanding of what constitutes autism has broadened.

Weaver, whose memorable film roles over the years range from brave space warrior (the "Alien" series) to crusading naturalist ("Gorillas in the Mist") to monstrous boss ("Working Girl"), says spending time with autistic people in researching "Snow Cake" was eye-opening in ways she couldn't have imagined.

"I thought I knew a lot, but really, I knew less than nothing," she says. "And I felt so humbled, both by the people I met on the spectrum, and the people who devote themselves to bringing out their talents and successes, and improving their quality of life - parents, friends, teachers."

One of the most startling things she learned was how variable the condition is; there are as many expressions of autism as there are autistic people, which means there's no single way to address it - therapeutically or artistically.

"Some people have said, 'Well, my relative with autism doesn't have any of these capabilities,'" Weaver acknowledges, speaking of those who have seen the film. "But this movie is not about autism, and we were not trying to present the (prototypical) autistic person.

"This is about a man who's thrown together with these two different women, and Linda (Weaver's character) happens to be autistic. And he learns from her, as she does from him. I think interaction - for people who don't want interaction - is one of the messages of the film. Which is: It's good for us to mix it up with each other."

In the film, Linda is able to live on her own and hold a job stocking store shelves. She speaks capably - a struggle for many with autism - but has trouble deciphering the moods and motives of the people around her.

She winds up playing reluctant host to Alex (Alan Rickman), a stranger in whose car Linda's daughter died during a traffic accident. Alex also forms a bond with Maggie, a loner who is Linda's neighbor.

Angela Pell, the British writer who scripted "Snow Cake," was inspired by her own autistic son, though his story is far different from Linda's.

Nine-year-old Johnny is "at the other extreme of the spectrum," Pell says. "He doesn't have a huge amount of language. If I went to see 'Snow Cake,' I'd probably come out and say, 'Well, actually, that's nothing like my son.'

"But what I was trying to do is just give a general feel of what it's like to learn to live with and love somebody who's rather extraordinary, really. And there are a few other themes in there, just generally about acceptance, really."

Pell recalls that when Johnny was first diagnosed, "we had all these leaflets and books showing pictures of children on their own, with tears in their eyes. All these very negative images."

"And although it was quite challenging with our son to start with, it's not our experience that it's been totally negative. Our son is one of the happiest people I've ever met, and he brings a lot of joy to a lot of people."

Advocating for acceptance of those who are different might not seem particularly controversial, but "it's quite a minefield, actually," says Pell. And some of those mines are inscribed with the word "cure."

Those in what's loosely known as the neurodiversity movement say talk of a cure is insulting and demeaning because it suggests autistic people are broken or damaged or otherwise need to be "fixed." They also argue

that autism is an inextricable part of who the person is and cannot be removed like a bad tooth. The movement has a strong Web presence at such sites as Neurodiversity.com, Left Brain/Right Brain, Autism Diva, The Autism Acceptance Project, and www.taaproject.com.

Some also voice concerns that dangling the promise of a cure can make desperate families susceptible to questionable therapies.

Groups that have sprung up to fund research into a possible cure counter that it's cruel not to try to help those with autism - although nothing in the neurodiversity approach argues against taking steps to improve quality of life.

Quite apart from that debate, though, Weaver sees a more simple and basic need for understanding and respect.

"I don't like being in a world where I don't see people with different problems," she says. "I think it enriches our world. And it hopefully will enrich their world to be able to come and go without our shrinking in fear and ignorance. Which is all it is."

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