



Episode #132:

**"The G Word" Filmmaker Marc Smolowitz on
Giftedness, Equity, and Social Justice**

October 30, 2018

Debbie: Hey Marc, welcome to the podcast.

Marc: Thanks Debbie. It's great to be here.

Debbie: I'm looking forward to hearing more about your work and about the film that you're working on, *The G Word*, but before we get started, I'd love to just hear a little bit about who you are in the world. I know you have a lot of experience working on a lot of really cool projects, so can you tell us about yourself?

Marc: Sure. Thank you so much. Um, well first of all, it's really great to meet you this way and have a chance to talk about *The G Word*. Um, so by way of background, you know, I've been a filmmaker for gosh, going on three decades or in some way I've been in the film and entertainment world going on three decades, you know, I'm a director, producer and executive producer. And if you look at my IMDB or my website, you'll see a lot of documentaries on there that I've been sort of closely involved with. And documentaries are definitely a sweet spot for me in my work. Um, they're not the only thing I do. I do narrative work, I do episodic work. I, you know as a director for hire, I've worked on lots of different kinds of things for nonprofits and foundations and commercials, but really nonfiction storytelling I think has emerged over the arc of my career as my kind of specialty.

And um, and I love documentaries and I've sort of come at the documentary space from a lot of different roles and points of view. I think what you see in my career is a real commitment to sort of powerful personal storytelling and interest in social issues and kind of bringing those two things together. And what I do is I do a very, very deep dive on every film that I'm involved in. Um, whether I'm a director or producer or both. And, you know, as my, as my career has evolved, you know, and I'm getting older and wiser, you know, I'm, I'm taking on more role as executive producer or a consulting producer where other filmmakers hire me and my company to kind of really help them be successful. But when I do the deep dive, when I'm directing and I'm producing, um, I, I take that very, very seriously.

And I, um, I do sort of, you know, I'm very involved in research and really understand how I can add value to the storytelling landscape. Because more often than not, you know, storytelling preexists me like case in point, you know, I've made many films about HIV and Aids and I wouldn't dare to kind of jump into that storytelling landscape without understanding the implications of being an Aids storyteller. So with any social issue, whether it's organ donation or poverty or PTSD or you know, all these different issues that you may be seeing in the various films that I've made over the years. I spend a lot of time as do my team, as do the people I collaborate with, really making sure that, that we're doing this right and that we're being additive. That's the word that I use a lot. So it's, it's really this commitment to a belief that storytelling actually empowers people and audiences to, to sort of see the world differently and maybe change hearts and minds. Sometimes on important issues, maybe change policy, maybe change laws and certainly change social moray. Um, and, you know, I'm, I'm really honored and privileged to be able to do this work and so I'm happy to, I hope that introduction gave you a sense of sort of a gestalt around where I come

from. Um, as for specific films, um, you know, we can sort of see how the conversation goes and I can, I can talk about them as we, as you ask questions.

Debbie: Well, I'm just going to have to fess up that the geek in me, like the documentary lover, just wants to have a whole separate conversation with you because I, it's just such a genre that I love so much, but I don't know that that would be serving the audience for this podcast so much. So let's talk about The G Word, the film that, that you're currently probably one of many projects you're working on at the moment, but that film, I'm really curious to know how that even became a project that you were invested in. Do you have a personal stake in the game? Um, tell us your connection to the subject and what it's about.

Marc: Sure. That's a great question. Um, so The G Word is broadly a feature documentary about giftedness. Over time it has evolved into kind of a film about giftedness and intelligence and neurodiversity. And I've been using those three words kind of side by side as the film has developed. Um, yes, I, I do have a personal stake in these conversations. So by way of background god, I mean, it's funny, I was looking at the first emails, I mean, you know, something landed in my inbox in 2012 about this and it was from a gentleman called Ron Turiello, um, who is my producer on the film. And Ron reached out to me because he was noticing some interesting trends in his kid's gifted school, a private school in, in Silicon Valley called Helios. And as a guy who was sort of, you know, taking a break from work because he had a health crisis and was, sort of had, you know, a little more time to kind of work on personal projects.

He was differentiating and kind of, you know, interested in writing about giftedness. And so he reached out to me and asked me if I would come down and maybe find some film students who would, uh, you know, film some interviews for him for a, maybe a book project. And you know, and immediately like when I get the, I get these emails all the time, you know, where people reach out to me and they want to talk to me about a project. And this one immediately piqued my interest because I remember being that kid in the 1970's in public school who was pulled out for gifted day and what that felt like. And that whole sort of experience of how that shaped my identity. And so I started to do research and immediately I saw that there really had never been a comprehensive documentary on the subject of the gifted.

And I started to kind of go deeper and deeper with Ron and, and it's sort of evolved into a collaboration where by 2014 we had decided to make a film together. And, you know, we have been in sort of fits and starts filming these kind of longitudinal stories, um, as the movie has evolved, um, gosh, for going on three and a half years. And um, you know, I was one of those kids who was in the gifted program in the 1970's and that was a very different time, you know, for, for gifted programs. And you know, one thing that sort of registered with me very early on was I remembered that there were two types of kids in those gifted pull-out programs. There was the popular gifted kid and then there was the unpopular gifted kid. And I was fortunate to be one of the gifted popular kids, meaning that I had the right friends and my being smart was an asset and that got me to feel and be successful.

Whereas a lot of the other kids who were bullied or made to feel bad about themselves for being smart, I had great empathy for them. And looking back on it, I realized that the reason why I had great empathy for them is because at that very early age, and we're talking like second and third grade, I knew that I was gay. And I could see myself and that difference in them and that sense of social justice, that sense of fairness, that sense of standing up for what is right is something that was really baked into my DNA, very very early. And I think I had this consciousness as I was developing the movie that somehow those parts of my identity were going to intersect and that that was going to be a meaningful way into this story. And there's been a bunch of beats along the way where that kind of confirmed itself through interactions, through characters, through stories.

I tell a famous story about a young girl who's six years old at a school who, after a shoot, she came up to me and she gave me this big beautiful hug and she said, Marc, you're so great. You're so nice. You must have a really great wife. And I looked at her and I said, sweetheart, I you know I am married but I'm married to a man, I have a husband. And she just looked at me and she was six and she was bright eyed and like you could just see the connections, you could see the little computer going off in her brain and she rattles off back at me like all these words that are sort of like, you know, show her deep understanding of discrimination and inequality and concepts that many people in their twenties still don't have their arms around. And she's six years old and she gets marriage equality and like knew what Prop 8 was.

And it was just kinda like, you're the kid that I care about, you're the kid that I want to make sure you succeed. And then I started asking questions that kind of evolved into, okay, well she's in a private school, her parents are affluent, we're in Silicon Valley and there were sort of social problems that were happening with a lot of these kids who grew up, growing up in affluent families. Right. And some of that stuff, we can talk about in a few minutes, but I started asking a bigger question. Well what happens when there are no resources, you know, if you get the gifted sorta, sorta narrative unfolding in a poor school district or a low income neighborhood, what does that look like? And so I started to get super curious about that and that's kind of when the movie really took off. And the sort of driving question of the movie became 'who gets to be gifted in America and why, in the 21st century?'

And we landed on that thesis and so all the stories and all the characters that I've chosen with my team are sort of helping us answer that question. And it's been this kind of robust, beautifully engaged process of finding stories all around the country. And we are, we have stories that are urban, are suburban, are rural. And that's really important to me that we have kind of geographical scope. We have different regions of the country well represented in our stories and we also have stories that represent the cross section of race, class, sex, gender, and what I call zip code. So those are kind of tropes that kind of informed my point of view and I'm a real believer that education equity is in play here and that the gifted narrative in the 21st century is something that actually is quite important in a

country that does not value its smart people. In a country where a president, you know, is sort of very anti intellectual.

We are more and more facing a crisis, you know, with our education system and our education priorities and you know, the movie started to take on a whole new importance in the Trump era. And so it's been this long journey of wrapping my arms around the stories that I want to tell. And um, just to kind of give you a sense of where we're at. We're about, we're about 60 percent filmed. Um, we pretty much have all the stories identified. We're still fundraising, we're always looking for supporters and partners and sponsors, but, but we've really done this kind of very deep connection with what I call the official gifted community in both stakeholders. But then we've really broadened who we're talking to in terms of stakeholders to really make sure that we're connecting on lots of different levels of, of civil society.

Debbie: I have so many questions and just thoughts about what you've shared. I'm so personally drawn to the social justice piece. I think that's what I was so excited about when I learned about your film. That's something that, you know, I'm reading more and more about schools starting to really look at, as you said, who does get to be gifted. So I feel like there is a growing awareness. I don't know if you heard Malcolm Gladwell did a three part episodic segment for his podcast Revisionist History during his first season about this issue. That was fascinating and just really opened my eyes up more to this challenge for so many kids who aren't identified. So I'm excited. I do want to talk more about that and I also just want to just point out how refreshing it is that you do, you said you use the word intelligence, neurodiversity, giftedness kind of interchangeably. When I launched Tilt Parenting, I got a lot of emails from people in the beginning from parents of gifted kids saying, thank you so much for including us in this. Because it is a group that I think is so stuck in many ways and misunderstood and it's really complicated raising a gifted kid who doesn't fit in, but on the surface, you know, they shouldn't quote unquote shouldn't have any problems, right. And so I really appreciate that you're broadening that and making sure that gifted kids are, are better understood. So...

Marc: You know as I was developing the film I encountered twice exceptionality. Okay. I never knew about it before. Most people don't know what it is. It's not officially recognized by most of the kind of official bodies that recognize illnesses or disorders or medical conditions. It's, you know, it's a forming community. It's a forming diagnosis, it's gaining traction. I mean, we're only really in the last 15 years has it become a thing. And more and more it's a thing. And what I was really drawn to about 2e was that this was a community in motion, like these were parents and families and educators and advocates that were self organizing into something quite interesting and powerful. And if you, if I, dare I be so bold, we're kind of breathing life into gifted, um, in the 21st century in a way that it really had sort of, gifted had kind of retreated into academia and you know, didn't have the sort of clout that it, it really needed in order to get people to pay attention.

I mean, by clout I mean across a lot of social systems. Certainly, you know, by way of laws, gifted wasn't supported. By way of funding gifted isn't supported.

You know, and then by way of seeing gifted in the education setting in comparison, for example, to Special Ed, you know, really was sort of the stepchild. And the movie does kind of, we'll look at that. We will be really tracing the history of giftedness and helping people understand the laws and really how did we get here, you know, in the 21st century, like where are we as we are on the cusp of 2020's, right? With all this stuff. And there are new ideas about intelligence. There's a whole sort of psychological movement around around that. There's grit, there's growth mindset, there's other G words as I call them, that are kind of in the mix now.

We're really going to focus on the, on gifted, the G word as gifted as opposed to others but really entertain the other ones. But 2e was just amazing to me because I felt like wow, here is a community that is self organizing to take care of its kids in a way that are really empowered. And I saw lots of moms doing amazing things in their communities and, and I saw a story there, right, I saw a story unfolding. And I'm going to go out on a limb here and it's probably the first time I've said this on record, on a podcast, but I think 2e is the savior of gifted. I really do. And the reason why I believe that is because we operate in a society of so much deficits. Deficits are how things get funded. It's a priority, you know, we really, really want to fix problems.

And when you say gifted this is not, it doesn't fit into the narrative of deficits. And even though we know that being gifted comes with all kinds of challenges, social, emotional, and otherwise. And add in race, add in class, you know, it becomes even more complicated. It wasn't until 2e emerged, that concepts of neurodiversity emerged in recent years that suddenly gifted was on the, on the table again, because it was forcing people to see that intelligence can exist alongside other kinds of deficits in twice exceptionality. And so I think 2e is, is in a lot of ways like where we need to put the focus. So there will be 2e narratives in the movie that are kind of longitudinal over time where you get to know families, you get to know schools, you get to know characters, and you'll see them sort of alongside these other sort of stories in different cities and different locations that kind of aren't focused as much on neuro diversity, but all when it all gets woven in together, we're going to get a beautiful snapshot of all the different kinds of things that are going on in contemporary gifted communities.

Anyway. So that's, that was a long way of saying I'm all in for this concept of neurodiversity. I'm, I believe strongly that there's large numbers of people out there who are not being served because of this forming diagnosis, if you will. And I think that this is probably the population in the current century that is going to need to be the focus in our education conversation. The other piece that I think is paramount to point out is that we're now at a time where so many parents across the socioeconomic spectrum that are opting out of school entirely. Right? So at a time when education can be more personalized, where families can cobble together different kinds of education opportunities for their kids to get their kids' needs met, neurodiversity is going to thrive, it's going to find its place in that context. So in some ways, like I think the next 10, 20 years are really interesting and exciting for these stories.

Debbie: Well, as the mother of a twice exceptional kid, I hope that you're right. And, and I agree, you know, I, I've talked about this before, but I remember having a conversation with a parent coach, you know, when my son was a little guy and we were discovering some of the things going on with him and she was the first person to say to me that being gifted is a special need in its own right. And that really surprised me. I never had considered it in that way. And it's that really framed how I see this. And, and yeah, even if a gifted child doesn't have a secondary diagnosis, just by virtue of the way that they process and experience the world and feel things and you know, the way that their brain works, it is different and it deserves attention for their needs to be met. So.

Marc: Yeah, I mean, I think that more more, it's probably quite likely that a lot of gifted kids who don't have that that second diagnosis would receive that second diagnosis, if they were tested or if they were, if we went further with them in terms of, you know, looking at their, their neuro psych or whatever, you know, testing is a huge part of this, right? And getting people identified and, and there's lots of reasons why some are identified and some aren't. Right. And um, so one thing we are doing in the movie for example, is we're going to try to demystify the testing process. Um, one of our characters we're following who's 16 years old now, I'm sorry, 17 years old now. He's twice exceptional, has real issues with speech and sort of auditory processing issues. And um, he's a wonderful kid and his mom is a founder of a 2e school here in the bay area, so that family has really opted into giving us a lot of access.

His twin is also 2e. They're both amazing and they have their own narrative around this stuff and you know, getting him and getting the testing center to trust us to kind of respect confidentiality and the testing process was a huge endeavor, right? So we had to really figure out how to do that, how, what can we showcase? I mean I was at a conference a couple a couple summers ago and was learning about the testing process and like just the names of these tests and like all that milieu is so overwhelming for parents. Right? And, and it's like even if you can afford the tests, well then you get into this space where it's like there's all this new stuff you have to learn in order to become an expert to make sure your kid is being taken care of properly. So there's this, this stuff is complicated and it's, it's long overdue that it get looked at closely.

I'll tell you a little story, Debbie, that I think is really interesting to share with your listeners. You know, we, we worked on the film quite intentionally for a long time before we ever went public, so to speak. Meaning before we ever had a website before we ever had a social media presence. And that was very important to me because I didn't want to be, be public about making The G Word until I was super ready, until I knew exactly what I was trying to do with the movie. At least, you know, for the first wave of, of showing it in front of the public, right? Because I wanted a, the communities of people like yourself who are parents and advocates and engaging all this stuff to, to trust us because, you know, it's, it's, there's been a whole history around mistrust here that we have to honor and kind of be thinking about.

And also just realize that, you know, I didn't want people to think that we were like coming in to sort of rock the boat and just be there to sort of lift the veil on the controversies that are giftedness. And so I really wanted to show that we're walking the walk here. So really it took two years for me to figure out what I wanted to say to the public about making this movie because privately before I was making the movie, when I would tell people I was making this movie, I have people that I adore and respect, like roll their eyes at me and be like, you're making a movie about that. Like, what's that about, you know? And I, and my whole thing is like whenever somebody rolls their eyes at me, that means there's something going on here. Right? And there's something going on.

It's really complicated because people don't roll their eyes at stuff unless it really, really triggers them. And it's complicated and it doesn't fit neatly into their understanding of things. And so. So as I went deeper and deeper and deeper, I really realized that there was just so much going on here and it was so powerful. And then when we launched, which was I think November of I want to say 2015 going back, or maybe later, I can't, my years are blending. But that said whenever we launched, it was amazing to see what happened because we were super organized, we had great mailing lists. We really engaged advisors and partners and nonprofits in that process. And the first video that was launched on Facebook was viewed over 13,000 times in one week and was shared hundreds of times. And out of that came this groundswell of global interest from people everywhere.

I mean from as far away as Switzerland to Singapore. I mean we were hearing from parents who said thank you for making this film or more, more to the point, they said can you help me find resources? You know? And I thought to myself, my goodness, you know, we're the new movie, you know, like we're the new kid on the block and they're contacting us for resources. So immediately I said to my team, we got to get a resources page on our website. And these parents were often sharing deeply sad and troubling stories on email with us. I mean I'm talking about like 50 to 100 stories that came in in the first couple of weeks like this. Unsolicited to our gmail with people saying this is what's going on with my gifted kid and thank you for making this movie. And some of these stories were so intense.

So I made an early decision that I was going to include those stories some way in the voiceovers on narrative of the movie because I want to honor those families that reached out to us early on and gave us a signal that says we trust you. This is the kind of movie that that will be additive and will actually have value for, for communities like that we are a part of. But that resources piece is fascinating to me because here we are in a time where people can basically search anything they need to on the internet and yet they don't feel connected. You know? And that's also interesting and a bit troubling.

Debbie: Yeah. And that's what I find, you know, within the audience of Tilt in general is that piece of connection. And I think with parents of gifted kids, there is a particular stigma around giftedness that it's something people tend to hold close to their chest because there is a, you know, the eye rolling you talked about, and I

think, you know, you calling the film *The G Word* says something, you know, that as you use the word trigger and giftedness is a trigger for a lot of people. And so I'm kind of curious to know who do you see as the audience for this, you know, and maybe in answering that, talk about what your intention or highest goal would be for what the film would do in the world.

Marc:

Wow, that's a great question. Um, so as a filmmaker, you know, I want my films to play at the top tier film festivals and kind of enter the world in that way. You know, that's always how I see my work and I've been fortunate that, you know, many of my films have that kind of success trajectory, so we're going to be aiming for something similar, um, because that sort of point of entry will assure the film of other opportunities going forward. So, so on the conventional sort of film and independent documentary landscape for just for sales and distribution, like all that stuff is what I know how to do and through my company we will, we will work very, very hard to position *The G Word* for success, right? I mean, you know, at the end of the day we got to make a great movie. It has to, has to matter for large numbers of people.

It has to connect with like seemingly connect with bigger issues and bigger audience potential. And, and I am aiming for that like I want, I want more people than not to see it like that, that's my goal. So in that way, like every effort will be made to position this, you know, seemingly niche set of stories within a broader education conversation, which I think is vitally important that, that this, these stories be situated in that kind of more general conversation. One of the things that I ask every person I interview as an expert is I ask, when I sit them down, the first thing I say is tell me your education story, right? Because I really believe that that is something we as Americans, if you were born here and you went to school here, we all share some sort of education narrative or it or more to the point, there is this kind of social contract in this country that says to parents when your kid is five, you know, he or she or they is going to kindergarten and that's by law required.

And also by default and opportunity. And whether that pathway of entry becomes public, private, micro, charter, you know, innovation school, whatever it is, homeschool, parents connect with the concept that their children need an education. They go to school. It's part of our it's part of the narrative in our nation. And so it's only when they move forward that the particularities of that story change and that's when it gets super interesting and often super troubling. Right? So I think that if we can situate these narratives within that broader education narrative, we're going to do a very good job of getting the press and the, what I call mainstream audience for documentaries, to care about *The G Word*. So that said, alongside that, I always work in a very engaged way with the communities of interest. So we have an advisory board. We are creating a network of partners, um, nonprofits that work in this space.

We're going to work closely with all the talent centers like CTY and Belin-Blank, and you know, the one at Duke and Northwestern and really sort of position the movie for greater awareness among those players and stakeholders. We're going to do what I call a national community screenings programs. So even if the film has traditional distribution, things are unfolding, we want to have events, we

want to screen the film anywhere and everywhere we can. You know, upwards of 75 to 150 cities and locations where the movie when it's screened can be a kind of convening moment around these topics. So we would work with local nonprofits on the ground to have a screening and have a local conversation about gifted and talented. Because I think the, you know, the narrative is different in every city. We have heard about huge challenges in New Orleans for example, and then we've heard about huge success stories in Seattle.

Right? And so what the, what the New Orleans community and advocates will want to do with our movie may be different and the kind of conversation that they have will be different than the ones in Seattle, potentially. And my goal is that you move the movie off the entertainment page into the awareness page and I would be much happier and delight and I'll be happy if the movie gets coverage anywhere. But I'll be really delighted if our movie is causing people to write think pieces, you know, for, for, you know, all these wonderful media outlets that are kind of connecting the dots for us in the 21st century around kind of bigger interdisciplinary questions of our culture. Right. And so that's, that's my goal, is that the movie sparks big important national discussions about how we learn, how we think the brain operates, who our kids are that are being served or not served.

And that as many people are kind of welcomed into that discussion. The way I talk about it is I want to keep as many people in the room as I can. That's the kind of movie that I want to make with this movie. I don't want you to hear The G Word or hear it's description and go, ew that's just so not for me ew a movie about gifted. That or what I don't want to have happen is I don't want the gifted community to fight about it. Like that's a big thing I really feel strongly about. Like, you know, what I think people will notice is that we're going to do our best to kind of bring as many different types of folks into the movie as we can and then our social marketing strategy wrapped around that will further support that. Right?

So I mean, here's the thing Debbie, no one movie can be all things to all people, but we can certainly do our best to make people feel welcome and at the table. And you know, I can't promise that everyone out there listening will see themselves represented on screen, but I think they, they will have a point of entry into these stories that I hope will help them feel a part of The G Word. The name of the movie was very intentional. It's interesting, it started out almost as a working title and then it really stuck because it is exactly that. It's a container where the G can mean so many things for so many different people. And I want this movie to be, I want all of you to help us fill in you know, what that G really looks like and it often doesn't look or look or sound or smell or taste like anything that we really expect. So, um, and that's, that's The G Word. It's, it's, you know, you're going to come see our movie and you may think you know what you're going to see but I have a feeling we're going to surprise you. And that's what I'm aiming for.

Debbie: I love the idea of having it be a place to just bring different conversations. I think they're important conversations. So one of the things I wanted to just dive a little deeper into is the equity piece. And I'm just curious, you know, so much, there's

so many layers to equity in within neurodivergence and kids in general and within the gifted community. The identification piece and how gifted kids are identified is I think one of the biggest barriers. I'm curious to know, just in your process in making this, what you see as the biggest barriers or what you, what kind of momentum, if any, are you witnessing in terms of people trying to actively change the system and broaden how we're able to include more people into getting the gifted supports and accommodations?

Marc: Yeah. No, that's a great question. Um, so I think, you know, I spoke a little bit about 2e and the community that I witnessed self organizing and becoming empowered, you know, and that how we're going to be featuring that in the movie. Um, I think that's a huge piece of the puzzle, but it's certainly not the only one, but it's a powerful one. And so I'm delighted that we have access and that we're able to kind of showcase those stories, but there is something that I have really connected with in recent months that has actually become a major focus in the movie. Um, you know, for those people who are out there, you know, we have, uh, you know, we have a website, you know, I have a Vimeo channel and folks can see like, you know, there's four videos that have been produced while we've been making the movie.

And that's a big strategy for me. Like I like to test the waters with story, like test the waters with my ideas and put things out there so people can respond to that and see if it's working and see if it sticks and it makes sense for people. The third video, this is a video that features experts and it's called 'Who gets to be gifted in America and why?' and it really was sort of saying to the public, this is our main thesis. This is our main, the main driving inquiry of the movie, what do you think? And we had an incredible response to that video. It was so exciting to see people. And that video featured some pretty unexpected people in it, including Andrew Solomon who wrote *Far from the Tree*, Van Jones who as we know has his own show on CNN now. Um, so I was asking some kind of unexpected people what they think about giftedness.

And I think that that was actually really important to kind of get the community outside of itself a little bit because, you know, the gifted community, you know, dare I be so bold, has been talking to itself about itself for more than 30 years. And it's not serving anyone's agenda at all, um, to be that sort of siloed from the rest of the education movements and the rest of brain science conversations. I mean there's just so many ways that gifted is not sort of engaged outside of itself. And so I see our movie as a huge piece of the advocacy puzzle in terms of partnering with social movements to advance an education conversation that gets gifted out of its silo. So maybe there's a little bit of hubris in that, in saying that, you know, I don't think that we've come along to light the fire, but I'm hoping that we can help the fire, you know, kind of reach across other challenging areas of dialogue. That's, sometimes a movie can actually be a tool to connect with larger numbers of people.

So that's, that's my hope. And by seeing this with our online videos, it's, you know, it's clearly the potential is there. The thing that brought me really, so with these videos, they, you know, they're beautiful. I mean I'm proud of them. I think they're wonderful and you know, but in a lot of ways they weren't the movie yet.

They really were these kinds of character portraits, sketches, beautiful sketches I'm proud of, but still me figuring out a lot of things. In 2018 my team and I have figured out a bunch of stuff that I'm so excited about that really is about connecting all these stories into one movie. And so the next round of videos, you know, I can sort of predict that there'll be maybe another three or four before the movie is released, are going to start to show audiences where I am trying to connect the dots for them.

And the big thing that I've landed on in recent months is the question of class and income and poverty and um, and there's a whole movement and beautiful writing around the concept of what we call excellence gaps. And that may or may not be something that you're familiar with. There's a wonderful writer called Jonathan Plucker. He's also the president of the board of NAGC, the National Association for Gifted Children, super prominent thinker who has really helped kind of move us away from the idea of an achievement gap among the poor and other kids in different, in different socioeconomic strata, more into a concept of excellence gaps. And kind of coming at the problem of what's happening with high intelligence kids in impoverished neighborhoods, for example, coming at that problem and those questions a little differently. Now I say all this with a little bit of a cautionary tale around it.

I mean I'm a lot of people who hear me talking about excellence think I'm not going to be talking about neurodiversity and that is so not the case. Like I want to reaffirm to your listeners that just embracing the concept of excellence is not whole cloth embracing of of one, one side or another of this coin. I don't, I don't, I don't want to work on a movie that is sort of stuck in binaries. And that's what I meant earlier when I talked about getting the gift of community and you know, keeping as many people in the room. What I have connected with on an excellence gap narrative is the notion of class and poverty and income inequality. And you know, when I started asking the question, who gets to be gifted in America and why, I had an awareness that I wanted to focus on race, gender, class, and sex and zip code.

What I'm realizing is that all of them are important, but only class actually keeps more people in the room. You know, we have a lot of stigma around people who are poor in this country. And that's another movie and another conversation. We actually believe that all people should have a public education, a good public education or at least access to public education. And regardless of whether they're poor or rich or somewhere in between, wherever they live, they're supposed to be able to go to school. And so when you have a class conversation about about gifted or you have a class conversation about gaps in education, you actually keep more people at the town hall meeting. If I start talking about race, if I start talking about sex, if I start to talk about gender, if I start to talk about zip code, you can't keep as many people in the room. They start to fight with each other, they start to disagree.

People, with race, they get all upset and gender, no one understands it. Sexuality. Oh my god, you want me to think about that? Zip code, you know, forget it. Like the rural and the suburban and the urban people are just kind of like completely not talking to each other. So what I, when I landed on excellence gaps and I was

like, huh, this is something focused on class. This is focused on poverty. This is focused on income inequality. I can join that conversation as a storyteller and be super additive and kind of steer our way through this. And so it's starting to be a major through line in the movie. It's a way that I'm looking at stories that are urban, suburban, and rural. It's not going to be the only way I look at it, but I guess that was a really long way of answering your question that this is where I think the most potential resides.

Many of the activists who are people of color, who are change makers, who are addressing trans and gender nonconforming kids, I mean these people are connecting with excellence gaps because they understand that if you move through a conversation with class at the center, you keep more people engaged and then you can actually dip over to immigration and English language learners a little bit and kind of not lose everybody. You know, it, it's, it's a bit of a dance, right? You have to, you know, if you want to keep as many people in this inclusion conversation, I think you have to find your sort of most, your strongest way through that conversation and then allow for nimble movement into other groups and communities, but always kind of come back, you know, to that through line. So I hope I'm being clear that these are, these are sort of like the concepts that really excite me and while they may seem very theoretical and academic, they actually are playing out in very real ways in very, in actual programs, in actual schools and managed by actual nonprofits.

So it's a very interesting time for all this stuff. In San Francisco where I live and in L.A., which are two very large districts for education. They're coming at excellence gaps in, from a completely different vantage point, which is one that I am puzzled by, which is, for example, in San Francisco, they've ended all AP classes in public schools except one high school here and they're no longer offering advanced algebra to anyone except in that one school. And, and, and I may be overstating kind of like the sweepingness of it, but, but this is a huge controversy here. And their posture here is, they're leveling the playing field they're making, they're, they're lowering the excellence bar. But you know, it's, you know, like what if you're, what if you're an African American kid living in the Bayview here in San Francisco and you're actually a super smart mathematician and you have great potential and you're not going to get to take algebra, honors algebra, like how would we ever, how would we ever discover you and help you advance, you know. So I mean within gifted there's all these different sort of points of view. There's Renzulli versus Dabrowski. There's, you know, acceleration versus enrichment. I'm all in for getting everybody into the movie and keeping everybody in the room as much as we can and saying let's think about this stuff together and let's at the end of the day, keep the kids in mind. It's really about the children and most people I talk to agree that it has to be about the children. Like if we're not helping more children then why are we doing this?

Debbie: I am so excited for this film to come out. I really appreciate your breadth of, of knowledge and just your thought process and the way you're really trying to look at this through all angles. I think the class conversation is such an important one and I agree that that is kind of at the epicenter here and can touch on so many other pieces. So I'd love to know, this is a good way to wrap up our conversation,

tell us what your timeline is like and then how listeners, you know, my listeners are parents, educators, people who work for all kinds of organizations. So how can we get involved in supporting your work?

Marc: Oh, thank you for that. Um, this has been. Thank you for listening and for your support. So your listeners can go to our website, thewordfilm.com. And I encourage you to look at it and get to know us. We're on social media, you know, Facebook is our main channel, but we're also on Twitter and we're also on Instagram. We have an email that is dedicated to the film. It's 'thewordfilm@gmail.com'. And I encourage people to write us. Um, we also have a mailchimp newsletter and I encourage you to sign up. These are all things you can do on our website and you know, we're sending out newsletters and we're sort of keeping you informed of how things develop. But I will tell you that if you know, we are a community based endeavor in the sense that we want to work with all of you.

So if you're a parent, if you're an educator, if you're an advocate, if you're a journalist, if you're, whoever you are in the kind of landscape of all this, we invite you to pay attention and if you see ways that you can kind of lean into what I'm doing, lean into what our team is doing, you will, you will find that we are responsive to your ideas. Um, if emails come in, if they are thoughtful and they have intention and they seem to make sense for the movie, you're gonna hear back from us. I mean, we want to want to work with all of you. Um, and in that context, it's really about building partnerships. So if you work for a nonprofit in a particular city or town, let's get connected now. So when the movie is done, we can actually come to your city or town and work with you to present it in a way that is meaningful for your local community.

Um, so to that end, you know, it's a, it's a heavy lift to get a movie done. This movie is, it's expensive, you know, we'd sit and listen to all these different communities, do production. So dare I be so bold, if are people who want to support us, you can make donations on our website. It's, you know, we are a nonprofit, meaning that we operate as a 501(c)(3) because we have fiscal sponsorship. We're sponsored by the Center for Independent Documentary, which is one of the most prestigious, you know, nonprofits working in the documentary space in the country. So if you, if this sparks your interest, I mean, I, I encourage your viewers to think about making a donation. You know, we we're coming into the final quarter of the, of the calendar year, which is a big time for donations and a big time people think about their, their nonprofit charitable contributions and we'd be honored to be among the very important causes that all of your listeners may support. Um, separately, you know, our social media posts, share them, let people know about the movie, help people get connected with us.

It's, um, it takes a village and that village is, is a, is a digital one. So if you, uh, if you're on social and you like that kind of thing, uh, follow us and we will be at NAGC, the National Association for Gifted Children Conference. We're going to be doing filming there and I'm doing a presentation there and we will also be at Gifted Ed in Texas. Um, similarly, I'm actually the opening keynote this year, which is exciting. Um, I guess it's a keynote where I'm gonna be showing,

premiering a new clip there at their opening event. Then they're going to be grilling me and asking me tough questions. So I'm excited about that. And um, you know, if you feel like you have a local angle, I mean we've pretty much found all the stories Debbie. I mean I'm not, I wouldn't, if something really kind of amazing like landed in the inbox, we, I certainly wouldn't turn it down, but we are, we're close and so it's an exciting place to be.

I will predict more and more with confidence that we're a 2020 release so it may seem like oh my god, you got to wait two years for the movie but editing is a, at least a good six month process and you know, we have, we have quite a bit of work to do next year once we're actually in post production and between now and then think of how much could change in our country and in our, in, in gifted and all these important conversations. So we will stay close and connected to all of you and be listening actively for the most important issues and try to try to be a part of those conversations.

Debbie: Well thank you so much. This is super interesting to me personally. And I know that you probably sparked a lot of listeners' interests as well, so I look forward to following the progress. I've checked out the clips and listeners, I'll leave links to all the resources, the websites, social contacts on the show notes page so you can easily track them down. I do encourage you to check out the clips, the excerpts or the pieces that Marc's already produced. And thank you for coming by and yeah, we'll have to have you back on when the film is out in the world.

Marc: Oh, thank you so, so much. And, um, you know, to your listeners, let's keep this up because this is really, really important stuff that we're all passionate about.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [13th GEN](#)
- [The G Word](#)
- [Promos and excerpts from the film](#)
- [The G Word on Facebook](#)
- [The G Word on Twitter](#) (NAGC)
- [National Association for Gifted Children](#) (NAGC)
- [Andrew Solomon](#) (Far From the Tree)
- [Van Jones](#)