

# Sprockets

Toronto International FILM  
Festival for children  
April 14-18, 2008

A great deal of thanks and appreciation goes out to our teacher committees who volunteer their time to assist in the development of Sprockets lesson plans.

**TITLE:** Darius Goes West: The Roll of His Life

**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:** USA

**RELEASE YEAR:** 2007

**ORIGINAL LANGUAGE:** English

**DIRECTOR:** Logan Smalley

**RUNTIME:** 94 Minutes

**CURRICULUM LINKS:** Society, Challenge and Change, Politics, Creative Writing, Media Studies, Geography, Music and dramatic arts.

## **FOCUSING QUESTION:**

The film addresses our perception of disability and connections. It reframes our idea of what it means to live a fulfilling life and what young people can do to make a difference in the world.

## **SYNOPSIS:**

Recommended for Grades 9 to 12

Inspirational, eye-opening and a lot of fun, *Darius Goes West: The Roll of His Life* follows a teenager on a road trip across America as he raises awareness about the disorder that afflicts him and about the importance of accessibility.

Fifteen-year-old Darius Weems has Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD), the most common fatal genetic disorder affecting children worldwide.

# Sprockets

Toronto International FILM  
Festival for children  
**April 14-18, 2008**

There is no known cure. Having watched his older brother lose the fight against the same disease, and never having left his hometown of Athens, Georgia, Darius and twelve college-aged friends set out in an RV to cross the country on a journey filled with laughs, good times and new experiences. Their ultimate goal is to convince MTV's hit series *Pimp My Ride* to customize Darius's wheelchair. He hopes to use the show as a platform to raise awareness about his condition and accompanying accessibility issues to a generation that has never heard of Jerry Lewis or his annual Muscular Dystrophy telethon.

Darius's infectious laugh, clever raps and typical teenaged interests make it easy for viewers to relate to him. Refusing to be pitied in the face of a terminal disorder, and choosing instead to enjoy life and to speak out to help others, this extraordinary young man affirms the positive and important impact youth of all abilities can make when they take action.

## **TEACHER ADVISEMENT:**

"There is some joking around between teens and some language that some students might find offensive language. (e.g. slang terms used for testicles). The movie would still be appropriate for students 14 and older. Younger students might be more emotionally affected by Darius's appearance and references to children dying."

## **DIRECTOR'S FILMOGRAPHY:**

DARIUS GOES WEST: THE ROLL OF HIS LIFE (2007)

## **PRE-SCREENING PREPARATION:**

Preparation might include reading *The Terry Fox Story* or showing CBC archival clips about Terry Fox's journey. The teacher might also illustrate perceptions of special needs by putting a photograph or picture of a wheelchair on an overhead. Ask the question "what do they see?"

Is the wheelchair a symbol of a disability?

A means of mobility?

A limitation to mobility?

# Sprockets

Toronto International FILM  
Festival for children  
April 14-18, 2008

A sign of weakness?

An opportunity to help?

What do they feel when they see someone in a wheelchair? Awkward?

Annoyed? Sad? Embarrassed?

Inquire if students have ever been in a wheelchair? Ever broken a leg?

Know someone who is in a wheelchair?

Students could be asked to survey their own school and community.

What barriers are there to accessibility?

Should people with disabilities be accommodated?

What is reasonable accommodation?

In a politics or law class, students could be asked to read and discuss the case of Towne Cinemas.

**DURING SCREENING QUESTION/ACTIVITY:** E.g. while watching, think about the intended audience for this film?

The intended audience for this film includes teenagers, young adults and adults.

**POST-SCREENING ACTIVITY:** The following lesson plan would be suitable for any media studies or English class. The instructions can be modified to suit different grade or ability levels.

Theme: Perception: Reframing our perceptions.

1. Prior to screening the film students will have been given the opportunity to offer their perceptions when they see a picture of a wheelchair. (See examples above).
2. After watching the film. Show students an overhead that might contain the following: (Senior students could generate their own ideas about what each group or individual perceives)

What did people see when they saw Darius and his wheelchair?

# Sprockets

Toronto International FILM  
Festival for children  
April 14-18, 2008

- MTV sees a liability
- Friends see hope
- Civil rights leaders see a cause
- Disability Associations see a poster child
- Media sees a human interest story
- Children in wheelchairs see a hero
- Doctor sees a health condition
- Everyone sees courage, compassion and heroism
- Darius sees a lasting legacy

(teachers can make this more appealing by creating an overhead or poster including a picture or photo of Darius and his wheelchair connecting each perception)

3. Discuss with students the idea of how we frame things around our own perceptions and values.
4. Ask students to consider their perceptions of persons with special needs in a wheelchair after watching the movie. Have they changed? How? Why?
5. Ask students to describe other scenes in the movie where perceptions are challenged (e.g. scene in restaurant where Darius tries wasabi).
6. Darius wants people who see him and watch the documentary not to feel sorry for him but to be inspired. He hoped his journey would have a domino effect. Another way of looking at it is what is called the ripple effect. That is the attitudes and actions you adopt in life affects the lives of those around you. It is referred to as the ripple effect because it is likened to dropping a stone into a still pond and observing the ripples form and expand. Darius, through his positive attitude and determination created a ripple that will span beyond his own life. Darius's story is inspirational. Ask students to think of ways in which they too can inspire. Have students write down as many as possible. Alternatively, ask students to write down those individuals who they believe have inspired them.

Additional activities.

# Sprockets

Toronto International FILM  
Festival for children  
**April 14-18, 2008**

7. Consider the many themes in both these stories—compassion, friendship, courage, hope, adversity, adventure, commitment, tragedy. Choose one theme and create your own story in a format of your choosing, e.g. poem, rap song, graphic story, essay, poster.
8. “Idealism is the signature of youth.” Write a short essay on this statement.
9. Read the story of Alwyn Barry, or watch the CityTV video blog. Considering the theme of perception, how do Alwyn and Darius challenge and reframe our perceptions? Write a response paper on this theme.

**CONCLUSION/WRAP-UP:** Students should walk away with a sense of compassion and awareness that we are all vulnerable. They should be aware of how their perceptions may be shaped by media, stereotype, and culture, and that perceptions can be challenged. They should feel empathy for Darius and other children with Muscular Dystrophy, and indeed all those who are unfairly burdened with serious illness. They should walk away empowered with the idea that they can do something to make the world a better place. They should be aware that compassion must be coupled with action.

#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

1. Goddard, John “Alwyn Barry, 18: Filmmaker broke the stereotype on Jane-Finch”. Toronto Star, December 15, 2007.  
[www.thestar.com/article/285861](http://www.thestar.com/article/285861)
2. [www.citynews.ca](http://www.citynews.ca) Alwyn Barry—An Incredible Life. Video
3. [www.archives.cbc.ca](http://www.archives.cbc.ca) “Terry Fox’s Marathon of Hope” / “Terry Fox25: Reliving the Marathon of Hope.