

**Multimedia****Towards a Superfest Origin Story**

Emily Beitiks,

The Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability

**Abstract**

This article looks at the origin of Superfest, the world's longest running disability film festival. It is based on an interview between Emily Beitiks, Associate Director of the Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability and Superfest co-director, and Superfest founding member Peni Hall. The conversation took place remotely in December 2021.

*Keywords:* film, disability, film festivals

The following gives a glimpse into the origins of Superfest (<http://www.superfestfilm.com>), the world's longest running disability film festival. Superfest is hosted by the [Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability at San Francisco State](#). For more than 30 years, Superfest has celebrated cutting-edge cinema that portrays disability through a diverse, complex, unabashed and engaging lens. Superfest is one of the few festivals worldwide that prioritizes access for disabled filmgoers of all kinds.

What follows is based on an interview between Emily Beitiks, Associate Director of the Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability and Superfest co-director, and Superfest founding member Peni Hall, on the origins of Superfest. The conversation took place remotely in December 2021.

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### **The Early Days**

Superfest began in 1970, originally emerging out of Corporations on Disabilities and Telecommunications (CDT) in Los Angeles, which later became Culture! Disability! Talent! The original Superfest came out of the groundswell of disability culture activity in the 80s and 90s. It took place at La Pena Cultural Center with seating for approximately 250 people as a two-day homegrown community event, followed by entertainment and food from restaurants.

The mission was to put tools in the hands of people with disabilities to tell their stories and do creative things. Among the lemons, there was a great deal of “pretty amazing stuff” at the beginning. Peni Hall still personally keeps many of the original DVDs and VHS tapes from old Superfest entries. Among them, the festival was eventually able to get high quality international entries from outside of the US, e.g., a film with Palestinians living in tents creatively figuring out how to charge wheelchairs in a community with no electricity.

The festival moved to the Gaia building and sold tickets and t-shirts. At Redwood Gardens (where Peni Hall lives), there would be a second round jury of the films, evaluating, e.g., quality of representations, who was in charge of telling the story, etc. “What were the messages and who did it

empower?” Then, in phase three, “the gloves came off” and the CDT board (including Peni Hall, Cheryl Marie Wade, Liane Yasumoto, and Jane Burliss Vincent) would crowd into Liane’s apartment and “fight it out” and sort out entries and awards, while indulging in some chocolate.

An edited excerpt from the interview follows:

***Emily: What were some of the biggest challenges faced?***

Peni: Well, one of the biggest challenges was that, well, you know, we were the first! We didn’t have any disability film festival role models; we’re the longest running disability film festival, as far as we know; no one ever contacted us to say otherwise. So getting good materials [was the biggest challenge]. There was this flowering of disability culture, disability consciousness that was coming out in the 80s, so none of us really knew what we were doing, we just tried to figure it out.

Boy, I’m remembering this film, “Hos, cards, water balloons,” an ad for attendant care. Just learning the technology and how to do stuff was hard work, exciting but hard. The physical hard *workness* of it, it was all done by people with disabilities or we would rope our attendants into it.

There was not a focus on just showing people with disabilities facing their health challenges. There were also many inspirational films about a disabled person who overcomes their disability, and maybe not climbs Mt Everest but does some big challenge that if a nondisabled person does it it wouldn’t be a big deal, Stella Young “inspiration porn” kind of stuff. We had a LOT of that, so we did a lot of trying to educate filmmakers about what that meant. There was a lot less consciousness that people could be referred to.

Peni (cont.): For me the biggest challenge was just fatigue; we didn’t have the support of the university, we didn’t have funding, and we didn’t have the stuff Superfest has today. And so it felt sometimes like we were taking the pick axe and hitting trying to strike gold, and we had to hit it over

and over hoping. And using the pick axe was hard work because we were all people with disabilities, and just the pioneering aspect of trying to get the tools and the concepts into the hands and minds of disabilities so people with disabilities would go “I’ve got a story, this is what happens to me and it pisses me off, I’m going to take some classes and learn how this works and then I’m going to send it to Superfest.” And you know we got a lot of crap; weeding through the crap was a lot of hard work, but we were trying to find those concepts at a time when there wasn’t a lot out there.

***Emily: What surprises you about how Superfest has emerged today?***

Peni: What really surprises and excites me is not only the level of technological competence and some of the impressionistic stuff people are doing, I’m thrilled to see the number of people who are saying “oh yeah, let’s do this.” I don’t see the entries you don’t take, but think about it, it’s a worldwide movement that didn’t exist! *Oh my God really, someone did that?* [In the original Superfest], from Frank Moore’s idea, we created a category, the Pamela K Walker Innovation in Craft to recognize that someone came up with something totally interesting that we didn’t even think about. And you’ve come up with even more of your own and built on what we’ve created.

And I don’t think the content or idea surprised me, it was just how you’ve done it has been so surprising and rewarding to see, *oh wow, somebody thought to do that*. I have enough cognitive problems that I can’t go back and remember them all but I think *wow, you’re really getting stuff out of the woodwork*, so I’ve been surprised but not surprised. What you’ve done with the torch has been really great.

***Emily: Future dreams for Superfest?***

Peni: I was never the great visionary of the group, I think what would be kind of more of the same, moving outward, the ripples moving outward, I’d like to see a Disability Film Festival in Iran, or Palestine. I also think we have impacted a lot of people’s thinking, we can see the results of that, we

can see more sophisticated models. I hear people say stuff that we never would have thought of thirty years ago, but there's always going to be inspiration porn, there's always going to be crap, and we'll put on the mining hats to dig in, but we're better at it! We've influenced the minds of people. You have done an amazing job, we couldn't have passed the torch to a better party. You took what we did and ran or rolled or gimped with it.

That's just spectacular.

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Superfest 2022 is now accepting submissions <http://www.superfestfilm.com/submissions>.

Requirements:

- 1) Films must be on the subject of disability, feature a prominent disabled character, OR be directed, written and/or produced by a person with a disability.
- 2) Works must have been produced within the last 10 calendar years (since January 1st, 2012 for entry in Superfest 2022).
- 3) Entries for Superfest submitted on FilmFreeway on or before 11:59 PST on March 1st, 2022, no exceptions.

Donations: *Superfest accepts donations at the following [link](#).*

*Superfest will also be featured this year at the 37th Annual Pacific Rim International Conference on Disability & Diversity <https://pacrim.coe.hawaii.edu/superfest-film-festival/>*



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