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Program companion website: www.pbs.org/onaroll



**“ON A ROLL” THE INSPIRING STORY OF
DISABILITY ACTIVIST GREG SMITH, TO AIR ON
THE PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2005**

Film by Joanne Caputo

Premieres Nationally on “Independent Lens”

Emmy® Award-Winning Series on PBS

Hosted by Susan Sarandon

Tuesday, February 15, 2004 at 10 P.M.

(check local listings)

Celebrating Black History Month

(San Francisco, CA) — Two million Americans use wheelchairs. 54 million Americans have a disability. From his state-of-the art radio studio in his parents’ Mississippi house, Greg Smith—“the wheelchair dude with attitude”—uses his popular nationally syndicated radio program to offer advice, encouragement and inspiration to not only the huge number of disabled Americans but all Americans. His upbeat, tough, and often humor-filled message closes the gap between the abled and disabled by stressing that we all need help from each other, everyday. Directed by Joanne Caputo, **ON A ROLL** will air nationally on the acclaimed PBS series ***Independent Lens*** on **Tuesday, February 15, 2005 at 10 P.M.** (check local listings) in conjunction with Black History Month.

Greg Smith sounds like a normal dad as he talks to his daughter on his cell phone and calls her “sweetie pie,” but interviews with his three kids prove opposite: “He needs help using the bathroom and getting in bed. He can’t play baseball that good.” Yet daughter Berkeley also knows what he can do: “He can move and drive... and talk.” It’s an accurate description as we hear Smith telling listeners about his new power wheelchair that can zoom around at 8 miles an hour.



Smith looks tiny and emaciated, but with a deep announcer’s voice he interviews Christopher Reeve, then blows the whistle on Clint Eastwood, Nike and Rush Limbaugh, all guilty of insensitivity to people with disabilities. We soon realize that he is no ordinary 65-pound man. He’s the host of *On A Roll Radio* who began

broadcasting after a disability job discrimination experience in 1992.

By 2000, more than 40 cities air Smith’s program, but without major syndicator support. It’s part of the “institutionalized bigotry” that people with disabilities face regularly, according to Smith’s producer, Mike Ervin. Becky Ogle (former White House Disability Task Force director) and Judy Huemann (The World Bank Disability advisor) tell us about more concerns fueling current disability activism—nursing homes, independence vs. interdependence and the power of the growing disability voting bloc, now at 40 million.

Though Smith believes there’s a difference between disability discrimination and racial discrimination, his family has experienced both. It was in a “colored” waiting room where Smith’s mother, Adelia, first learned that her son had muscular dystrophy. His father, Jim, was forced to turn down a medical school because no Mississippi school would accept a black student, and was fired as a teacher for heading a voter’s registration drive. Now an affluent corporate executive, Jim Smith challenges all black people “to excel” and makes no exception for his severely disabled son. He insisted Smith learn to do things for himself—like climbing the stairs using his chin—and the viewer sees the result. Greg Smith is an adult with a severe disability who consistently strives for the dreams of a normal man.



Smith’s dreams also include relationships with women and he shares the challenges involved in being sexually active with his disability. It’s known as “facilitated sex,” according to Dr. Mitch Tepper, founder of SexualHealth.com, a normal activity of daily living that may require a little help.

As we learn in the film, in 1990, Smith, against his parents’ wishes, married Terri, a beautiful self-confessed “party girl” who also became his personal care assistant. From the beginning the marriage was troubled, yet Smith decided to have children anyway—three in quick succession. It caused his parents great stress, due to the genetic risks of his disability and knowing the marriage was falling apart.

Terri became violently abusive to Smith, an unfortunately not uncommon situation—the abuse mirrors the high rate of crime against people with substantial disabilities in the U.S. It’s higher than child abuse, elder abuse, hate crimes and domestic abuse combined.



Smith and his wife divorced in 1999. He won custody of the children with support from his parents, who welcomed the family into their home and changed their retirement plans to provide support.

Although Smith's personal life has often been fraught with drama, his work as an activist and speaker has been consistently rewarding. He's been profiled in major magazines and news programs and he's featured in a permanent exhibit on "33 Exceptional Americans" in Philadelphia. As we see in **ON A ROLL**, he was lead torchbearer during the 10th anniversary events of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that culminated in a huge Washington event addressed by several prominent politicians including then-President Clinton. Yet despite the ADA fanfare, Smith encounters a lack of disability awareness throughout his stay—turning off a hotel lamp becomes a major feat but it's the lack of accessible cabs he finds most frustrating. In an ironic twist, he's invited to hear the President speak about the ADA, but he can't get a cab. "It's a reminder we need to keep pushin!," Smith charges.

Back at home at his parent's house at the age of 40, Smith is not where he'd hoped but he's still optimistic. He weathers the removal of his GM promotional van when he can't meet their five million dollar insurance request but he remains frustrated by the lack of mainstream media's projection of the proper disability message. When the chronic lack of sponsors causes him to end *On A Roll* in 2003, he quickly creates a new show—*The Strength Coach*—where Smith is devoted to teaching the general public about "lifting the weights of life's challenges." A fighter, Greg Smith keeps on rolling even when the going gets tough, his spirit changing not only his own destiny but those of countless others as well.

The program's interactive companion website (www.pbs.org/onaroll) features detailed information about the film, including an interview with the filmmaker, cast and crew bios, links and resources pertaining to the film's subject matter, and a "talkback" section for viewers to share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film and more.

ON A ROLL is presented with Descriptive Video Service (DVS). DVS provides narrated descriptions of a program's key visual elements such as actions, settings, body language and graphics, all without interfering with the program dialogue.

ON AIR PARTICIPANTS—a selection (in order of appearance)

MIKE ERVIN is a monthly columnist for *New Mobility Magazine* and founder of Chicago-based ADAPT (American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today). Mike was the producer of *On A Roll Radio* and is the current producer of *The Strength Coach* radio show.

JUDY HEUMANN is currently the Development and Disability Advisor at The World Bank; Judy is "the mother of the disability rights movement," according to Greg Smith.

BECKY OGLE is a long-time disability rights activist, the former director of the White House Task Force on employment of adults with disabilities, and the current director of disability issues for the Democratic National Committee.

MITCH TEPPER, PHD is the founder and president of the Sexual Health Network and SexualHealth.com. His dissertation involved the study of orgasm and spinal cord injury.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

ON A ROLL is **JOANNE CAPUTO's** (Director/Producer) first documentary following her children's video, *Ballerina, Ballerina*. A *magna cum laude* graduate from the University of Pittsburgh, Caputo taught school in inner-city communities before transitioning to television production, at which she has worked for the past 20 years. Married and the mother of two teenage sons, Caputo is a recent breast cancer survivor with several documentaries in progress; she has also authored two non-fiction book manuscripts about enslaved African American mother Margaret Garner.

ABOUT THE GREG SMITH

Greg Smith, host and founder of the nationally syndicated *On A Roll Talk Radio* is recognized as one of the most dynamic voices in the disability movement today. A 2002 inductee into the esteemed National Speakers Association, Smith has dedicated his career to increasing disability awareness through the media and public speaking. His work has resulted in significant national media exposure, including profiles on CBS's *The Early Show* and National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, as well as articles in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune* and *Essence Magazine*, and many others. He spoke at the Congressional Black Caucus on disability issues for African Americans in 1999 and started an internet discussion group to discuss unique cultural issues that face this double-minority community. Smith's book *On A Roll* will be published in conjunction with the program's broadcast. He is currently the host of a new syndicated radio show called *The Strength Coach*; for more info on Smith and his activities, visit www.thestrengthcoach.com.

ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS

Independent Lens is an Emmy Award-winning weekly series airing Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. Hosted by Susan Sarandon, the acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement and unflinching visions of their independent producers. **Independent Lens** features unforgettable stories about a unique individual, community or moment in history, which prompted Nancy Franklin to write in *The New Yorker*: "Watching **Independent Lens**... is like going into an independent bookstore—you don't always find what you were looking for but you often find something you didn't even know you wanted." Presented by ITVS, the series is supported by interactive companion websites, and national publicity and community outreach campaigns. Further information about the series is available at www.pbs.org/independentlens. **Independent Lens** is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS, and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ABOUT ITVS

Independent Television Service (ITVS) funds and presents award-winning documentaries and dramas on public television, innovative new media projects on the Web and the Emmy Award-winning weekly series ***Independent Lens*** on Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. ITVS is a miracle of public policy created by media activists, citizens and politicians seeking to foster plurality and diversity in public television. ITVS was established by a historic mandate of Congress to champion independently produced programs that take creative risks, spark public dialogue and serve underserved audiences. Since its inception in 1991, ITVS programs have revitalized the relationship between the public and public television, bringing TV audiences face-to-face with the lives and concerns of their fellow Americans. More information about ITVS can be obtained by visiting www.itvs.org. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American People.

ABOUT PBS

PBS is a private, nonprofit media enterprise that serves the nation's 349 public noncommercial television stations, reaching nearly 90 million people each week through on-air and online content. Bringing diverse viewpoints to television and the Internet, PBS provides high-quality documentary and dramatic entertainment, and consistently dominates the most prestigious award competitions. PBS is the leading provider of educational materials for K-12 teachers, and offers a broad array of educational services for adult learners. PBS' premier kids' TV programming and Web site, PBS KIDS Online (pbskids.org), continue to be parents' and teachers' most trusted learning environments for children. More information about PBS is available at pbs.org, one of the leading dot-org Web sites on the Internet, averaging more than 30 million unique visits and 380 million page views per month in 2004. PBS is headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia.



ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American People.

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