

TELLURIDE

# MOUNTAINFILM \*ON\* TOUR

## FOR STUDENTS



### **Vasu Sojitra: Out on a Limb**

Directed by: Tyler Wilkinson-Ray

2014 USA | Duration: 7 minutes

#### **Film Summary**

After developing a blood infection at 9 months of age, Vasu Sojitra lost his right leg in an amputation. That didn't stop him from discovering — and pursuing wholeheartedly — an unbounded love of skiing that shaped his life. Today, Sojitra shreds bumps, hucks rocks, plunders powder and, with the help of outriggers and incredible will, accesses backcountry lines. *Out on a Limb* is a short profile of an individual proving that disability can be a mere hiccup instead of an impediment to your dreams.

**Teachers:** *This film could be useful in exploring physical, emotional or intellectual disabilities, as well as stereotypes and discrimination.*

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### Filmmaker Interview



*"...It's the differences among us that make the world an interesting place."*

**- Tyler Wilkinson-Ray | Director**

**Q:** When editing the film, was there anything you wished you could have included in the final cut?

**A:** *There was one shot where Vasu slashes through a big pile of snow and then drops off a cliff. It's absolutely amazing. Unfortunately, the cliff was bigger than he expected and he doesn't quite land it. I tried to still include the shot, but it came out in editing.*

**Q:** When you made the film, did you have a specific audience in mind?

**A:** *We were targeting the skiing community, but it has been nice to see it resonate with a broader audience.*

**Q:** Is there a specific action you hope people are inspired to take after seeing this film?

**A:** *It's more of an understanding than an action. We are hoping demonstrate that people with disabilities — both physical like Vasu's or mental — are just as capable as the rest of us. They just have to do things in a different way and with different equipment. It's not a better or worse scenario, just different. Beyond that, there are adaptive sports organizations all over the country, and I highly encourage everyone to volunteer with them if there is one in your area.*

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**Q:** What qualities does Vasu have that inspire you and in what ways do you think he can inspire others?

**A:** *Vasu is always looking for adventure. I don't think I've ever heard him turn down an opportunity to go skiing or climbing. No matter what the weather is or how tired he is, he is always up for it. Sometimes when I'm debating whether or not I want to attempt an early morning ski or another adventure, I think, "Vasu would totally be up for this." Next time you're wondering if you can do something remember that Vasu would totally give it a shot, and he has half the number of legs you do.*

**Q:** What are some of the challenges you encountered in the making of this film?

**A:** *There were two main challenges. The first was that we filmed most of it up in Quebec, Canada, and there were mornings when it was -35F when we were getting our stuff on. Filming involves a lot of planning to get the shot right, taking your gloves on and off, and steady hands, all of which are hard when it's that cold. I actually ended up having to go to the hospital for frostbite while filming this.*

*The other hard part was that we didn't have helicopter or snowmobiles so Vasu had to hike into every line and then boot pack up to the top. That means we really only had one shot at each line and sometimes only one line for a whole day's work. That meant Vasu had a lot of pressure not to fall and I had a lot of pressure to get the shot right.*

**Q:** Have you changed your opinion on what it means to be disabled? What was the biggest difference you noticed between Vasu's attitude toward his disability and the typical sentiments with regard to disabled athletes?

**A:** *Vasu does not think of having one leg as a disability, and in the film he calls the whole idea of disability a myth. The term disability implies un-able, and clearly Vasu is a very able person. Instead, he thinks in terms of adaptation — he can do just about anything you or I can do. He just might have to use a different piece of equipment to get there. We are certainly trying to have a conversation about disabilities with this film, but the broader takeaway is to understand how often our physical limitations are actually physiological limitations. We all have our own unique set of obstacles in life —*

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*Vasu happens to have one that you notice immediately upon seeing him — and what is more important than the obstacles is the attitude we take to it overcoming them.*

**Q:** Why did you decide to include this film in Mountainfilm for Students?

**A:** *Being different can be really hard when you're young. I'm hoping that by sharing Vasu's story it can help us appreciate that it's the differences among us that make the world an interesting place, and that if there is someone in your school who is "disabled," it's really only one very small part of who they are. If you don't know them beyond their disability, go say hi and find out who they really are. They might have a story just like Vasu's.*

**Q:** What does working in a documentary format allow you to do that other film formats (like Hollywood-style narrative) would not?

**A:** *Fictional Hollywood-style films can be very inspiring and thought provoking, but the cool thing about a documentary is that there is no hypothetical connection or abstraction to be made. Everything about it is real. Vasu is a real guy. His story is real, and someday you might bump into him on the street or ski slope, and you should say hi. He's a really nice guy.*

**Q:** What's the next big adventure or film project on the horizon for you?

**A:** *Film is a powerful tool. Right now I am working with some Native American tribes to do a short film on land rights and on another project with refugee farmers, but in terms of Vasu, we are planning on shooting another project together this winter. Vasu still has some tricks in the bag for us.*

**Q:** Any parting thoughts for Mountainfilm for Students?

**A:** *If these films inspire you to want to make your own films, do it! You don't need a fancy camera to tell powerful stories and start learning how to make films. Filmmaking, just like any sport or instrument, is about practice.*

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### Tags

Adaptive Skiing

Adventure

Disabilities

Disabled Athletes

Diversity

Independence

Physical Challenges

Outrigging

Overcoming Obstacles

Septicemia

### Pre-screening Activity

Discuss the definition of “disabled.” Ask students to share their experience with, or observation of, people with disabilities. What student activities do they imagine are or are not available to disabled students? What differences can you imagine the presence or absence of discrimination makes in a disabled student’s life?

### Introducing the Film

1. Ask students what they already know about people with disabilities. Fill in key information as needed:
  - a. What opportunities in adventure sports exist for disabled athletes.
  - b. General disability categories: physical, learning, intellectual, and emotional.
  - c. List common challenges experienced by disabled students.
2. Review vocabulary: adaptive sports, discrimination, Septicemia
3. If students aren’t familiar with documentary film, review the characteristics that distinguish documentaries from other film formats.
4. Give students an assignment for viewing (e.g., looking for how the subjects solve a particular issue or what the students notice about the film’s messages). Be sure they know why you are showing them this particular film (and how it connects to other work they are doing or subjects they are studying).

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### Discussion Question Categories

#### General/Open Prompts

1. What are the main messages of this film? Do you agree or disagree?
2. Name one thing you saw in the film that inspired you, one thing that made you mad or sad, and one thing you want to know more about.
3. Imagine going home and telling a friend or family member about this film. What would you say?
4. What is one lesson you learned from the film that you wish everyone in your family or community or school knew? What do you think would change if everyone knew it?
5. What did you learn from the film about the tools needed to ski with an amputation?
6. What did you notice about disabled athletes?
7. If you could ask anyone in the film one question, who would you ask and what would you ask them? What is interesting to you about that question?
8. Would you recommend this film to a friend? Explain your reasons.

#### Exploring Self

1. What did you see in the film that made the strongest impression on you? What was it about that moment that moved you?
2. If you were going to send a text message to a friend about this film, what would it be?
3. In what ways is Vasu like you or like someone you know? In what ways is he different?
4. At the end of the film Vasu says he is doing what he loves and will just keep doing it. Have you ever faced a challenge doing something you love to do?
5. What challenges do kids share when faced with a new sport? Do you think you would try a new sport? How do you approach new experiences and the challenges that come with them?
6. Have you ever assumed something about people with disabilities that you realized wasn't true after watching the film? Why did you feel that way initially? How did the film change your opinion?

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### Exploring the World

1. Before viewing the film, what did you know about people with disabilities? In what ways did the film affirm or challenge your image of other students with disabilities?
2. What similarities do you notice between kids with disabilities and you and your friends?
3. Do backcountry skiing or other extreme sports seem like activities that make sense for disabled athletes? Explain why or why not.

### Exploring Filmmaking

1. What questions do you think the filmmaker was trying to answer? How do you know?
2. In one word, how did the film make you feel? What techniques did the filmmaker use to make you feel that way?
3. What important perspectives do you think are missing in the film? What additional voices would you have included and why?
4. Describe the symbols (conventional or other) used in this story, both those that have meaning outside of the story and those that have meaning only within the story. What does each stand for?

### Exploring Social Issues

1. Vasu's friend (the filmmaker) says he forgets sometimes that Vasu only has one leg. Why do you think he says this? Did this film change your perceptions of people with disabilities?
2. Have you ever faced a physical or emotional challenge that you felt was unique to you and not shared by any of your friends? If so, how did you deal with it?
3. Vasu says, "Being independent is huge to having a disability." How does independence positively affect your attitude? Have you ever overcome a challenge that made you feel that same way?
4. Vasu states "Disability is a myth. People who do have these challenges and are able to adapt, are not disabled." Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.

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5. Do you think stereotypes are common in your school when it comes to people with physical or intellectual disabilities? If so, why?
6. The film repeatedly shows Vasu skiing difficult backcountry terrain. How do these images make you feel? How do you think a person with a physical disability would respond to these images?
7. Would an adaptive sports program work to improve life for kids with physical disabilities in your community? If not, what would?

**Sense of Wonder**

1. How do you think the Vasu felt when he realized he could ski as well as people without disabilities? What do you suppose he was thinking when he saw the view from the top of the mountain before he skied down?
2. What do you think Vasu learns from his experiences skiing that shape his view of what he is capable of and his relationship to the world as an amputee?

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### Extensions



#### Watch

Vasu's New Documentary Film, *Balanced* | Vimeo

<https://vimeo.com/131590668>

*Isn't It a Pity? The Real Problems with Special Needs* | TEDx

<http://tedxinnovations.ted.com/2015/04/02/spotlight-tedx-talk-why-separating-kids-with-disabilities-from-their-peers-hurts-instead-of-helps/>



#### Read

Exclusive Interview with Vasu Sojitra and Tyler Wilkinson-Ray | Teton Gravity

<http://www.tetongravity.com/story/ski/behind-the-scenes-of-out-on-a-limb>

The Early History of Adaptive Sports | Disabled Sports USA

<http://www.disabledsportsusa.org/disabled-sports-early-history/>

*How We Talk about Intellectual Disability* | Time Magazine

<http://time.com/3968428/maria-shriver-special-olympics/>

The Definition of "Disability" May Surprise You | Wikipedia

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disability>

*Famous Entertainers, Athletes and Legends with Disabilities* | Indiana University

<http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/cedir/kidsweb/fpwdinfo.html>

Modern Language and Etiquette for The Disabled | Action for Access

Language: [http://www.actionforaccess.mohistory.org/people\\_first\\_language.php](http://www.actionforaccess.mohistory.org/people_first_language.php)

Etiquette: [http://www.actionforaccess.mohistory.org/disability\\_etiquette.php](http://www.actionforaccess.mohistory.org/disability_etiquette.php)

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*The Art of Storytelling* by StoryCorp and Humans of New York | TED

<http://ideas.ted.com/the-art-of-storytelling-according-to-the-founders-of-storycorps-and-humans-of-new-york/>



**Do**

Activities to Learn More About Disabilities | Action for Access

<http://www.actionforaccess.mohistory.org/activities.php>

Activities for Teaching About Disabilities | Education World

[http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_lesson/lesson115.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/lesson115.shtml)

Storytelling Activities for Teens – Grades 9–12 | Dream Productions

<http://dreamonproductions.com/wordpress/PDF-ACTIVITY-PACK-FOR-TEENS.pdf>



**Book Recommendations (NF: Nonfiction, F: Fiction)**

**NF** | Grades 1–12

*All Kinds of Minds: A Young Student's Book About Learning Disabilities and Learning Disorders*, by Melvin D. Levine

[http://www.amazon.com/All-Kinds-Minds-Abilities-Disorders/dp/0838820905/ref=pd\\_sim\\_sbs\\_14\\_2?ie=UTF8&refRID=1CP9Y3QS4J2BRVH14MPK](http://www.amazon.com/All-Kinds-Minds-Abilities-Disorders/dp/0838820905/ref=pd_sim_sbs_14_2?ie=UTF8&refRID=1CP9Y3QS4J2BRVH14MPK)

**NF** | Grades K–3

*Don't Call Me Special: A First Look at Disability*, by Lesley Harker

[http://www.amazon.com/Dont-Call-Me-Special-Disability/dp/0764121189/ref=pd\\_sim\\_14\\_1?ie=UTF8&refRID=09Q9ZQF5KJ1WYHR6F3XW](http://www.amazon.com/Dont-Call-Me-Special-Disability/dp/0764121189/ref=pd_sim_14_1?ie=UTF8&refRID=09Q9ZQF5KJ1WYHR6F3XW)

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**F** | Grades 4–8

*Wonderstruck*, by Brian Selznick

[http://www.amazon.com/Wonderstruck-Schneider-Family-Book-Award/dp/0545027896/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1438632661&sr=8-1&keywords=wonderstruck](http://www.amazon.com/Wonderstruck-Schneider-Family-Book-Award/dp/0545027896/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1438632661&sr=8-1&keywords=wonderstruck)

**F** | Grades 6–12

*A Time to Dance*, by Padma Venkatraman

[http://www.amazon.com/Time-Dance-Padma-Venkatraman/dp/0147514401/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1438632451&sr=8-1&keywords=a+time+to+dance](http://www.amazon.com/Time-Dance-Padma-Venkatraman/dp/0147514401/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1438632451&sr=8-1&keywords=a+time+to+dance)

**F** | Grades 9–12

*The Beginning of Everything*, by Robyn Schneider

[http://www.amazon.com/Beginning-Everything-Robyn-Schneider/dp/0062217143/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1438632742&sr=8-1&keywords=the+beginning+to+everything](http://www.amazon.com/Beginning-Everything-Robyn-Schneider/dp/0062217143/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1438632742&sr=8-1&keywords=the+beginning+to+everything)

**NF** | Grades 9–12

*Everybody's Different: Understanding and Changing Our Reactions to Disabilities*, by Nancy B. Miller

<http://www.amazon.com/Everybodys-Different-Understanding-Reactions-Disabilities/dp/1557663599>