

A young person with curly hair is shown in profile, looking down. They are wearing a dark red hoodie. The background is a hotel room with a bed, a lamp, and a nightstand.

hoteling

a film by
ryan buffa

khary payton

jackson abram

darian rolle

kevin l. johnson

“Hoteling” is the practice of housing a child whose behavior or mental health conditions prevent them from being successfully placed in a traditional placement (eg foster or group home.) These are often children with multiple mental and/or behavioral health conditions who require 24-hour supervision to prevent them from causing harm to themselves and others.

The Department of Family and Child Services places these children in a low budget business class hotel with two government employed guardians of the same gender as the child to monitor them 24/7.

What was often meant to be a short stay in the hotel for the child while awaiting placement, has often lasted weeks or months at a time in some cases due to a shortage of foster parents and a stressed system which was amplified during and after the pandemic.

The practice of hoteling has persisted for years in Georgia and across the nation in states such as Washington, West Virginia, Texas and Oregon. In January 2023 on any given night in Georgia, approximately 50 to 70 children in foster care with complex needs would sleep in a local office or hotel.

Although significantly reduced from the number cited at the beginning of 2023, children in foster care with complex needs continue to be housed in hotels or Division of Family and Children Services offices on a regular basis as of the beginning of 2024.

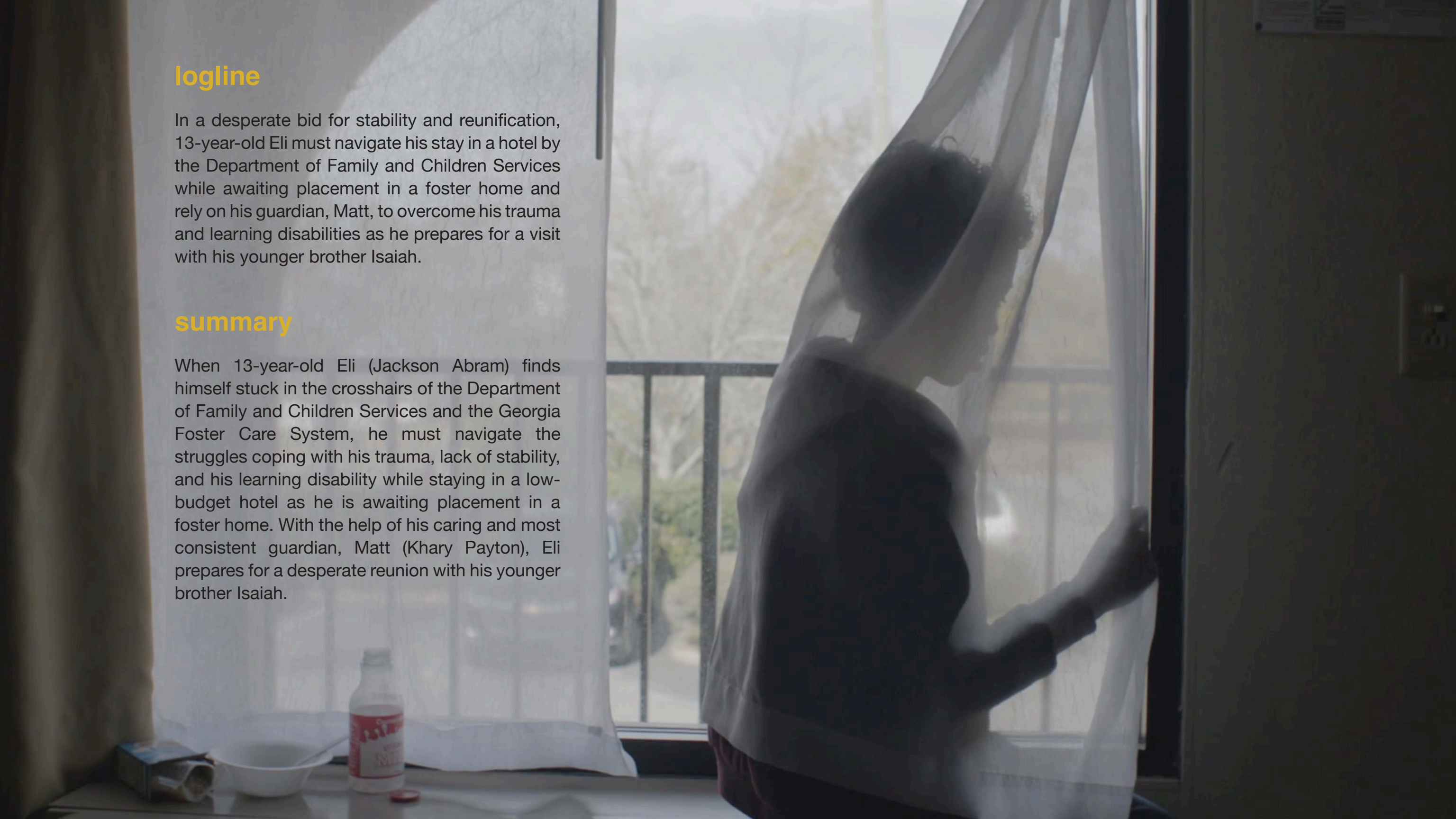


logline

In a desperate bid for stability and reunification, 13-year-old Eli must navigate his stay in a hotel by the Department of Family and Children Services while awaiting placement in a foster home and rely on his guardian, Matt, to overcome his trauma and learning disabilities as he prepares for a visit with his younger brother Isaiah.

summary

When 13-year-old Eli (Jackson Abram) finds himself stuck in the crosshairs of the Department of Family and Children Services and the Georgia Foster Care System, he must navigate the struggles coping with his trauma, lack of stability, and his learning disability while staying in a low-budget hotel as he is awaiting placement in a foster home. With the help of his caring and most consistent guardian, Matt (Khary Payton), Eli prepares for a desperate reunion with his younger brother Isaiah.





about the filmmakers



RYAN BUFFA **(Executive Producer/Writer/Director)**

Ryan Buffa is a writer, director and producer from Atlanta, GA and currently based in New York City. She began her producing career on The Walking Dead and ended the series as a Co-Producer. She was also the Associate Producer on TWDU: The Ones Who Live, premiering in February 2024. Her short films, APPLES & ORANGES and SWEETHEART have screened at several film festivals across the United States and both won Best Local Short Film (2018 and 2021) at the Atlanta Horror Film Festival. She has a BA in journalism and media production from Flagler College, where she has won several Student Society of Professional Journalism awards for her multi-media journalism.

HOTELING will be Buffa's third short film. Her hope is that by telling a fictional story based on the current events of hoteling practices by the Department of Children and Family Services, that it will help mobilize communities to both consider fostering and urge lawmakers to end this practice and provide better care for children and minors across the country. It is her belief that with the overturning of Roe v Wade and legalizing forced birth in the United States, that it is now more imperative than ever to tell stories about pressured and failing government systems, like the American Foster Care System, which will be further affected by such laws and therefore continue to burden and fail children and families while using taxpayer dollars to band aid issues.



MANDY MCCOWAN **(Executive Producer)**

Mandy McCowan is an Atlanta-based Producer. Her credits include Producer for BBC's "Moon & Me," Production Supervisor of AMC's "The Walking Dead," and Production Coordinator for many television and film projects. She is also the Director of Industry Relations for the Trilith Institute based in Fayetteville, GA.



SARA K. SHEETS **(Producer)**

Sara Kay Sheets is a Producer based in Atlanta, GA. Sheets began her film career in the Locations Department, working her way up to Location Manager and then transitioned over into the role of Production Supervising. She has a BA in Film & Video and a BA in Sociology from Georgia State University.



KRISTIAN ZUNIGA **(Director of Photography)**

Kristian Zuniga is an award-winning director of photography and UK VMA award nominee based in Atlanta, Georgia. Kristian has shot commercials for Coachella, Adidas, and Proctor and Gamble. He has shot music videos for Ed Sheeran feat. Chance the Rapper, and Drake. He's worked with VMA-winning directors and artists including Janelle Monáe, Raury, 6LACK, August Alsina, Run The Jewels, and more. His latest feature film, "Beast Beast," premiered at Sundance in 2020.

about the cast

KHARY PAYTON (Matt)

Khary Payton has become synonymous with one of DC's hottest heroes Cyborg, having voiced the character for over 20 years in numerous series, DVM's and games, including the critically acclaimed feature "Teen Titans Go! To the Movies" based on the #1 cartoon series "Teen Titans Go!"

Payton wrapped up the 11th and final season of AMC's "The Walking Dead," playing fan-favorite King Ezekiel, garnering up numerous acting noms and millions of fans worldwide. From one King to another, Payton is King Penguin in Universal's animated \$1.2 Billion global hit, based on the beloved long running video game, "The Super Mario Bros. Movie."

Payton will also reprise his role of Black Samson in Amazon Studio's huge hit, "Invincible" with season 2 returning in 2024. He will also return for season 2 of "The Legend of Vox Machina."

A few video games: The Sims, Reigel in Starcraft, Drebin in Metal Gear Solid, Azrael & Killer Croc in the Batman: Arkham franchise & Knox from Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare, are just some of the many roles he's known for.

Born in Augusta, Georgia, Payton caught the acting bug after seeing a production of Cyrano De Bergerac in the 1st grade. As a teenager, he developed a local rep as a rapper and stand-up comic, sharing the stage with such notables as Tom Kenney & Chris Rock. After spending his teenage years consoling comedians at the bar between sets, Payton opted for college at Southern Methodist University in Dallas to study acting and directing. He stayed in Texas for several years thereafter, honing his craft in classical and experimental theatre before finally making his way to Hollywood. Payton co-wrote, produced & starred in the independent sci-fi feature, "Astronaut: The Last Push." The film soared through festivals from London to LA, winning 13 awards including Best in Show at the IFS & Fargo Film Festivals. Payton took home three awards for Best Actor.

JACKSON ABRAM (Eli)

Jackson Abram, a young actor, has displayed remarkable versatility and depth in his roles. His performances in "Boxed in 2" and popular TV shows such as "Sweet Magnolias" and "Ordinary Joe" have earned him acclaim. These roles highlight his ability to bring a range of characters to life, showcasing his adaptability and skill. Abram's early interest in acting, beginning with a childhood fondness for character play, has evolved into a career marked by memorable and diverse performances. His commitment to his craft continues to make him a standout talent in the acting industry.

DARIAN ROLLE (Josh)

Darian Rolle is a Bahamian-American television, film, and stage actor. He credits an insatiable curiosity paired with his early years in the church as to what led him to the arts. Darian graduated from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke with a BA in Theatre. Most notable projects include; "Till" and "The Wonder Years." He continues to evolve as an artist and is most definitely one to keep your eyes on.

KEVIN L. JOHNSON (Martin)

Veteran actor Kevin L. Johnson can be seen across both television and film, but he is best known for his role as 'Sam Dermody' in Netflix's hit series "Ozark" starring Jason Bateman and Laura Linney. What originally started as a two-episode role in season one, led instead to Johnson portraying 'Sam' each additional season, including the fourth and final. Johnson can also be seen as 'Eric' in Netflix's "Florida Man," executive produced by Bateman and will guest star in the hit cult show "Stranger Things."

Johnson fell in love with acting while attending Clemson University. As an assignment for his newly declared English major, Kevin was required to see "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." The grand production impacted him so greatly that he registered for acting classes the next day for the following semester

Kevin graduated from Clemson University with a degree in English and a minor in advertising before landing an agent. He then began booking roles in commercials, including the North Carolina State Lottery and Burger King, and numerous short films. Johnson landed his first television role on the hit series "One Tree Hill," an audition he almost didn't attend. He then went on to book his first film role in "My Redneck Roots" and his first lead role in the film "Destiny Road."

Johnson's expansive resume includes roles in numerous television series and films. His television credits include CBS's "FBI," Cinemax's "Banshee," CBS' "Reckless," MTV's "Finding Carter," FOX's "The Resident," OWN's "Greenleaf" and OWN's "If Loving You Is Wrong." His additional film credits include "Prisoners" opposite Jake Gyllenhaal, "Careful What You Wish For" opposite Nick Jonas, "American Animals" opposite Evan Peters and "Blue Ridge" opposite Johnathon Schaech



director q&a

Q: What is the summary of this film?

A: Hoteling is about a process that's currently happening in a few states in the country within the foster care system. It is the practice where when children are waiting placement in a foster home and they have nowhere else to go state government places them in hotels with guardians who look over them 24/7 while they're in the hotel room. The hoteling practice has peaked since COVID and that is because there's not enough foster parents to take the rise in foster children that were entering the system at the time. And so what was meant to be a practice that lasts for a night or two has ended up being a lot of kids have done hotel stays for months at a time, 30 days to 60 days, things like that.

Q: Why did you decide to make this film?

A: As a filmmaker, I am most drawn to telling stories about family dynamics. I am especially interested in exploring how children know and understand more than we give them credit. I want to shine a light on issues that people do not know about and have them left thinking about it with an emotional attachment.

After Roe v Wade was overturned, I started seeing a lot of content about the foster care system and survivors of foster care come forward to share their experience. The conversation around foster care was put back in the spotlight because there is a statistical relationship between forced birth and the foster care system. This system has been hanging by a thread long before Roe v Wade was overturned in 2022. However, when Roe was overturned and states began dismantling women and families' rights in red states, there was no conversation or laws introduced on how to help support these already failing systems that are about to flood.

Q: What did you do for research?

A: I started researching and talking to people with lived experience. I interviewed the Program Director of Adoptions and Foster Care at CHRIS180, a child placement service. It is through this interview where I learned about the hoteling practice within the Georgia foster care system. When I learned about hoteling, I immediately felt a pit in my stomach. It was shocking, terrifying and sad. I couldn't believe this was happening and happening in our community. I imagined how many times I could be driving by hotels or motels and that's where children were staying with strangers, waiting for a home. I started asking my family, friends and neighbors - no one had heard about the hoteling practice. I had already written an outline for a different story, but as soon as I learned about hoteling, I started over. I want people to know about the hoteling practice within the foster care system.

Q: Tell us about the character of Matt.

A: I learned that the guardians watching children in the hoteling practice are not consistent figures in these children's lives. However, I wanted Matt to stand out and be someone who was still hopeful and wanted to go the extra mile when others are too exhausted or beaten down by the system. I was inspired by a friend of mine who was a special education teacher and led me to give Matt a backstory as a special needs teacher who made a career change after experiencing the challenges of working during COVID. I have a friend who went through a similar situation, and she is one of the kindest people I know. I wanted Matt to be a person who the Georgia foster care system and Eli would be lucky to have, but the system's limitations prevent him from being there consistently. Despite caring deeply for Eli and other kids, Matt is not family and has boundaries and obligations that prevent him from being there in the end. It is important that Eli misses Matt, as it highlights the need for consistency in the lives of foster children. Matt wants to be that person, but the system does not allow it.

director q&a

Q: Can you tell us about the Character of Eli?

A: Eli is a 13-year-old boy in the Georgia foster care system. He is struggling with a learning disability that has made it difficult for him to find a permanent foster family. He desperately wants to be reunited with his younger brother, who has found a loving foster home, but the challenge is proving to be overwhelming for him. I wanted to show that Eli is a character who is deeply loved by his mother and because of that he misses her during their separation. I don't go into the backstory of why they were separated, but I think we can see it wasn't a situation where the mother put Eli in jeopardy. Often these families are taken apart because the foster care system doesn't have the resources in place to keep families together, leading to situations like Eli's.

Q: Can you share some insights about the character of Josh?

A: Josh is a fellow guardian and the best metaphor I can come up with is if the foster care system was an iceberg then Matt could see above the water and below. Josh can see above the water, he can see the tip of the iceberg, but is young and naive, and lacking the necessary experience. He just graduated from college and wants to go to grad school, thinking of becoming a social worker, but this is his first dose of reality.

Q: What can you tell us about the character of Martin?

A: Martin is an experienced transporter and someone who, using the iceberg metaphor of the foster care system, he's on the water and he doesn't even see the iceberg. He's there and he wanted to do good. He's a good guy, but despite his good intentions, he struggles to fully grasp the complexities of Eli's situation and the empathy required to truly support him. Martin's journey involves learning to see beyond the surface and develop a deeper understanding of those in his care.

Q: How was it working with this cast on this project?

A: Working with this cast was a dream. They all embraced their characters fully and made my job as a director very easy. Khary has been a friend since we worked together "The Walking Dead" and is a creative person himself. He had a strong understanding of the characters and story, and his background as a writer enhanced our conversations. We talked through the script and about Matt's character, and he knew it was going to be a lot of layers to pull back to find out who Matt is and what he's bringing into the room. Jackson has a very naturalist approach that makes him enchanting to watch on screen and is a multifaceted rising talent. Kevin is incredibly kind and a generous talent in the Atlanta film community. Darian also has an infectious personality that is heartfelt and I believe that comes through with his altruistic yet naïve character. Everyone made it possible for a collaborative, creative and supportive environment to come together to tell this important story.

behind the scenes





a film by
ryan buffa

starring
jackson abram
khary payton

cast

martin	kevin l. johnson
josh	darian rolle
young girl	nola wallace
isaiah	asher clay
foster mom	madison hatfield

background

Christian Lee
Cain Bradshaw
Devon Lavette
Derrick Butler
Cayden Pacheco

Grace Lee
Ashley Lee
Laura West
Kemuel Crossty
Amarai Coleman
Tiffanie Parker

Alex Romano
Christopher Romano
Gavin Sams
Graham Sams
Willie Parker
Zuri Parker

Saige Aristilde
Joseph Romano
Christian Romano
Carter Sams
Malia Sams

post production

sound designer & mixer Chris Nicholson
DI colorist Chris Boyer
finishing producer Spencer Strauss
vfx artist Charlotta Forssman
animation artist Ariel Kaplan

"Blue the Bunny"
Written by Ryan Buffa
Illustrations by Gabriela Novotna
Graphic Design by Kato Lawton
Binding by Robert Ludemann

"Somewhere in Dreamland" (1936)
Max Fleischer's Color Classics
Paramount Pictures

"We Bounce Back"
by MVMT Music

"Manifest"
by Mattijs Muller

special thanks

Susan & Anthony Wood
Rachael Buffa
Joseph Buffa
Tori & Erik Bjerke
Maria Costan
Michael E. Satrazemis
Brian Bockrath
Derek Peterson

Scott Gimple
Donna Mburi
Lynn & Barry Wood
Channing Powell
Denise Huth
Norman Reedus
Michael Slovis
Angela Kang

Tom Luse
Meredith Meade Kew
Barbara Snow Buffa
Patty Carey-Perazzo
Geri Eubanks
Jason Gold
Julie Bitton
Quixote by Sunset Studios

Rebekah Freeman
Denise Gregarek
Megan Molinari
Daryl Prasso
Adrienne Prasso
Sean Prasso
Tracy Swiatly



A young boy with curly hair is sitting on a swing in a park. He is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. The background shows trees with autumn foliage and a clear blue sky. The swing's metal chain is visible on both sides of the boy.

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