

SHORT DOCUMENTARY PITCH: Michael Glen - The First Wheel Chair User to achieve a Hot Air Balloon Pilot Certificate

Working Title: Untitled

Format: Documentary - Short Subject (10-15min)

Genre: Retrospective/Archival Documentary Short

Status: In Development

Produced by: Chris Casaceli, Max Georgeson

Executive Producer: Catherine Nielsen

Production Company: Mountain Dog Visual Media

LOGLINE: After a spinal cord injury leaves him paralyzed, Michael Glen refuses to abandon his dream of following in his father's footsteps as a hot air balloon pilot, challenging federal aviation regulations and becoming the first wheelchair user to earn an LTA pilot rating.

STORY SYNOPSIS: Michael Glen grew up around hot air balloons. His father was a balloon pilot, and ballooning was always part of his life. That path changed after a serious car crash as a young adult left him with a spinal cord injury, causing him to lose the ability to use his legs. After years of recovery, Michael decided that his dream of becoming a pilot was not out of reach. He set out to earn a private pilot certificate; the first wheelchair user to ever pursue an LTA (Lighter Than Air) pilot certification.

Beyond the ingenuity required to develop his own assistive technology for piloting, including a physical process for inflating and flying the balloon without the use of his legs, he found himself facing regulatory hurdles. At the time, there was no precedent for certifying a pilot who uses a wheelchair. Through persistent training, problem solving, and direct engagement with regulators, he worked to prove that he could safely perform the duties required to pilot a balloon. His efforts ultimately led to him becoming the first wheelchair user to earn an FAA hot air balloon pilot certificate.

Today, Michael lives his dream flying a custom-made "chariot basket" that allows him to pilot the balloon and take passengers on balloon flights. He has also helped pioneer a balloon flight school focused on supporting people with disabilities who want to pursue their own pilot certifications, helping expand access to ballooning for future aviators.

tone and visual approach: This film presents an intimate portrait of Michael Glen and his pursuit of a dream that began in childhood. Visually, the film blends archival photographs from Michael's early life with a contemporary interview, grounding the story in personal history while reflecting on the path that ultimately led him to achieve his dream.

The archival material will be interwoven with cinematic air-to-air footage of Michael piloting his balloon, capturing the scale, movement, and quiet majesty of flight. These sequences will lean into a sense of nostalgia and wonder, using expansive aerial imagery to evoke the feeling of ballooning as it might live in a child's imagination: vast, dreamlike, and larger than life.

Through this combination of intimate portraiture and sweeping aerial imagery, the visual language of the film reflects both the personal journey and the enduring magic of flight.

LIVE ACTION INTERVIEWS: Our live action interviews with Michael will be shot using an advanced cinematography technique utilising a teleprompter video feed of the interviewer to allow the interview subject's eyeline to be addressed directly to camera. This unique cinematography technique provides unmatched audience engagement; the feeling that Michael is speaking directly to you.

ASPECT RATIO: The film will be presented in 2.39:1 aspect ratio, leaning into the widescreen format of the anamorphic cinematography, helping the interview and aerial sequences of the film feel cinematic, organic, and larger than life.

VISUAL REFERENCES - LIVE ACTION INTERVIEW



Frames from *The Queen of Basketball* and *A Concerto Is a Conversation* illustrate the use of anamorphic lenses for spoken-to-camera interviews utilising a teleprompter feed of the interviewer. This unique cinematic approach establishes a direct eye line between the subject and the audience, creating intimacy and presence, departing from the traditional off-camera eyeline common in documentary storytelling.

WHY THIS STORY, WHY NOW?

Michael Glen's story sits at the intersection of aviation history, disability access, and personal determination. At a time when conversations about accessibility and representation are expanding across many industries, aviation remains a field where stories of pilots with disabilities are rarely documented in depth. Michael's journey highlights how regulatory systems evolve when individuals challenge long-standing assumptions about capability. His work not only led to the first FAA hot air balloon pilot certificate issued to a person who uses a wheelchair, but also helped open pathways for others with disabilities who want to pursue flight.

Equally important is the fact that Michael's story has largely lived through word of mouth within the ballooning community. Ballooning is often associated with peaceful tourism imagery, but for pilots it is an intimate, immersive, and highly technical form of aviation. By centering on Michael's experience, the film reveals the complexity and majesty of balloon flight from a pilot's perspective, and the skill and determination that Michael employs to make it accessible.

A particularly unique production element is that the director of the film is also a commercially licensed hot air balloon pilot. This will allow the production to attempt a unique cinematic approach, with the director flying a second balloon in coordinated formation with Michael's aircraft, along with a cinematographer in the basket. This setup enables extremely unique balloon-to-balloon aerial cinematography with unprecedented control from the filmmakers.

Michael Glen's story is ultimately about expanding the boundaries of who gets to participate in aviation, and this film aims to present that story in a way that feels as expansive and inspiring as the sky itself.

ACCESS: Michael Glen has agreed to participate fully in the production of this documentary and has expressed strong support for the project. The filmmakers will have direct access to Michael for on-camera interviews, balloon flights, and other activities necessary to document his story and present-day work.

Michael has also indicated his willingness to collaborate with the production throughout the filmmaking process to help ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the film. His cooperation provides the project with rare firsthand insight into both his personal journey and his ongoing contributions to the ballooning community.

COMPARABLE TITLES: Several successful documentary shorts demonstrate a strong audience interest in intimate, character-driven stories about individuals with disabilities who challenge expectations and pursue ambitious goals.

Breathing Lessons: The Life and Work of Mark O'Brien is an Academy Award-winning short that follows poet and journalist Mark O'Brien, who lived much of his life using an iron lung after contracting polio. The film is widely recognized for its deeply personal storytelling and its focus on independence, creativity, and dignity.

Chau, Beyond the Lines is the story of a young Vietnamese artist living with disabilities caused by Agent Orange exposure as he pursues his dream of becoming a fashion designer. The film received an Academy Award nomination and gained recognition at major international film festivals.

Audible, released by Netflix, follows a deaf high school football player navigating identity, competition, and loss. The film was nominated for an Academy Award and reached a broad streaming audience.

Like these films, our documentary centers on a single determined individual whose personal journey reflects larger themes of access and opportunity. What distinguishes Michael Glen's story is its setting within aviation and ballooning, a world rarely documented from the perspective of a wheelchair user, combined with cinematic aerial imagery that places the audience directly in the sky alongside the pilot.

AUDIENCE: This film is intended first and foremost to resonate with audiences within the disability community, particularly individuals interested in stories of self-advocacy, independence, and personal achievement told from the perspective of a person with a disability. Michael Glen's journey illustrates how persistence and ingenuity can challenge institutional barriers and expand opportunities for others. For viewers with disabilities, the film offers a powerful example of an individual redefining what participation in a highly technical field like aviation can look like. By documenting Michael's advocacy and accomplishments, the film aims to inspire audiences who are pursuing their own goals in the face of structural or societal limitations.

Beyond this core audience, the film will appeal to viewers who engage with character-driven documentary storytelling centered on resilience, innovation, and human achievement.

Short documentaries focused on a single determined protagonist have found strong audiences on major streaming platforms such as Netflix. Titles like *Audible* and *Chau, Beyond the Lines* demonstrate that intimate nonfiction stories exploring disability, identity, and perseverance can resonate widely with both mainstream viewers and documentary audiences.

The film also connects with several additional communities, including aviation enthusiasts, the global ballooning community, and audiences interested in innovation and problem solving. The combination of an inspiring personal story and cinematic aerial imagery offers an accessible entry point for viewers who may not be familiar with ballooning, while still providing authenticity for those within the aviation world.

Ultimately, the film is designed to speak to anyone who has worked to overcome institutional barriers in pursuit of a meaningful goal. By focusing on Michael Glen's experience as both a pilot and an advocate, the film highlights the broader idea that access and opportunity in fields like aviation can evolve when individuals push systems to adapt.

THE FILMMAKERS: This film is brought to life by a team of award-winning filmmakers from Mountain Dog Visual Media, with deep experience in documentary storytelling, visual storytelling, and immersive sound.

Chris Casaceli serves as director and cinematographer, guiding the film with an intimate, character-driven lens and mastery of visual storytelling. He is a four-time Regional Emmy® winning filmmaker who has been recognized by the National

Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for his work in Sound Design, Editing, Producing, and Cinematography on the documentary short *Our World In Our Words* (2024). Chris will also edit and supervise sound design for the film.

Max Georgeson, Regional Emmy®-winning producer of *Our World In Our Words*, oversees development and production, ensuring the story is executed with clarity, focus, and cinematic excellence.

Will Casaceli, also a Regional Emmy® winner, will compose the film's original score and execute the film's audio mixing and mastering. Will studied jazz performance, composition, and audio engineering at The Eastman School of Music. He is known for music compositions that bring unique and nuanced emotional counterpoint to visual media, exemplified by his award winning work on the short documentary *Our World In Our Words* (2024). His extensive experience as a professional musician, composer, orchestrator, and sound mixer makes him uniquely suited to effectively contextualize Michael Glen's story through impactful music and sound.

Together, this team combines award-winning expertise across direction, cinematography, music, and sound to create a documentary that is visually compelling, emotionally resonant, and sonically immersive.



Left to right: Chris Casaceli, Max Georgeson, Will Casaceli

FINANCING: The filmmakers are currently seeking financing for the project at a total estimated production budget of approximately \$60,000. This budget covers all phases of production, including development, principal photography, travel, post-production, and deliverables. It also includes professional music composition and recording, as well as reasonable compensation for the filmmaking team and participating subjects.

This level of financing will allow the production to be completed using professional cinema equipment, aerial cinematography, and a full post-production workflow including editing, color grading, and sound design, ensuring the film is produced to a high professional standard suitable for film festival and streaming distribution.

PRODUCTION TIMELINE: Once financing is secured, principal photography is planned for Summer and Fall 2026, including interviews with Michael Glen, ballooning B-roll, and archival footage acquisition. Post-production will begin in late Fall 2026 and continue through Winter 2026–2027, encompassing editing, color grading, sound design, and original music composition. Post-production is scheduled to be completed by January 2027, allowing the film to meet deadlines for early 2027 festival submissions.

The film will enter a targeted festival run throughout 2027, including major documentary and short film festivals, with strategic positioning for awards consideration. Following the festival circuit, the filmmakers will pursue streaming and public distribution, with a planned public release in late 2027 to early 2028. This schedule ensures maximum visibility for both audiences and awards while maintaining flexibility for high-profile festival placements.

CONCLUSION: Michael Glen's journey to becoming the first wheelchair user to earn a hot air balloon pilot certificate represents more than a personal milestone. It highlights how determination and self-advocacy can challenge long-standing assumptions about who has access to the skies. By documenting Michael's path and his engagement with federal aviation regulations through the Federal Aviation Administration, this film captures an important and largely untold moment in aviation history while contributing to a broader conversation about access, representation, and opportunity in aviation and beyond.

Produced by the award-winning team at Mountain Dog Visual Media, the film combines intimate storytelling with cinematic imagery to create a documentary that is both deeply personal and socially meaningful.