

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:12	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:20	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. Next up on the show is Ryan O’Connell. Ryan is the creator and star of the show <i>Special</i> , which is streaming on Netflix. It’s loosely based on a book Ryan wrote in 2015 called <i>I’m Special: and Other Lies We Tell Ourselves</i> . Both the book and the television series draw directly from Ryan’s life. Ryan has cerebral palsy. He calls it CP for short. It’s a congenital disorder that can effect someone’s movement, muscle tone, or posture. For Ryan, that means it manifests primarily as a limp. When Ryan was 20, he left his hometown and started college in New York. It was a chance to start over. Instead of telling folks that he had cerebral palsy, he said he was hit by a car. It was true. He was hit by a car. But Ryan felt it was easier and maybe more relatable to chalk his condition up to a car crash than to explain his CP again and again to new acquaintances.
<p>In fact, he’s often said in interviews that it was harder to come out of the closet as disabled than it ever was to come out of the closet as gay. So, Ryan wrote about it—first in articles, then the book, and now on <i>Special</i>, the TV show—which just wrapped its second season. Season one of the show tackles Ryan’s coming to terms with his disability. In this newest season, Ryan learns to become more accepting of himself. He dates. He hooks up. He writes for a blog called <i>Egg Woke</i>—listicles and personal essays, standard fare for a sitcom about millennials in LA. But <i>Special</i>’s depiction of disability onscreen is groundbreaking. It shows the intersection of disability and sexuality in a way that’s rarely seen in film and movies. And it does all that in a way that’s funny and lighthearted and relatable.</p> <p>What follows is a conversation with Ryan O’Connell, conducted by our friend, veteran interviewer Ray Suarez. Ray’s also a big fan of <i>Special</i>. Before we get into the interview, like we said, Ryan’s show, <i>Special</i>, talks pretty frankly about sex. And you will hear that in the interview as well. If you or someone you’re listening to is sensitive to that, we wanted to let you know ahead of time. Okay. With that out of the way, here’s a clip from <i>Special</i>. In this scene from the second season, Ryan’s working from home and his new boyfriend, Tanner, interrupts him as he works.</p>			
00:02:50	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:02:51	Clip	Clip	Tanner (<i>Special</i>): Guess what we’re doing today?
Ryan: I don’t know. Writing until my brain feels like gibbity-gobbity-goop?			
Tanner: I got us tickets to the <i>[excitedly]</i> Malibu Wine Safari!			

Ryan: Wait, is that when you go like wine tasting with zebras?

Tanner: And a bisexual giraffe named Stanley!

Ryan: Animals identifying as bisexual. So important. Representation matters!

Tanner: I agree.

Ryan: But—I can't. I gotta work on my disability article today.

Tanner: Come ooon! All work and no rosé makes Ryan a dull boy.

Ryan: *[Chuckles.]* Ugh! Okay! Fine! I'm in.

[A drumbeat kicks in.]

Tanner: Whooo!
Music swells and fades.

00:03:23 Sound
 Effect Transition

00:03:24 Ray Host

00:03:31 Ryan Guest
 O'Connell

Yeah, he's in. It takes all of season two to write that article. More on that later. Ryan O'Connell, great to have you with us.
Thank you. I didn't even realize that—that it took the entire season for him to write one article. But, honey, talk about relatable! Am I right!?

00:03:40 Ray Host

00:03:46 Ryan Guest

[They laugh.]
Well, I've just finished season two. You, obviously, finished it a long time ago. You're happy?
Uum. *[Laughs.]* Wow. So *Herbie Fully Loaded*. Yes, I am happy. I'm also really happy to be in a studio wearing like oversized headphones. Like, I feel like my voice immediately goes to like a Terry Gross like sedated vibe for NPR and I just love it. So, yeah. I'm happy.

00:04:02 Ray Host

Welcome back to normal. I'm glad I could have you.

[Ryan thanks him with a chuckle.]

00:04:07 Ryan Guest

00:04:11 Ray Host

Is there another season?
No. We got canceled. *[Laughs.]*
Because your final scene—the out scene—leaves us in a place where we could go on forever or happily bring the curtain down. And you're saying B happened.
B happened because—well, we got ren-anceled. We got renewed and canceled in the same phone call. And what I'll say about that is that it allowed us to kind of craft a complete season. I think I would've been very upset if I didn't know about a season two or three—if I was left hanging. So, I actually really appreciated the cancelation upfront, because I was able to really just craft a complete story. And to me, I think the characters end where they should, you know, end.

00:04:48 Ray Host

Well, for people who watched season one—Ryan, the character Ryan, who's based on the human being Ryan, has gone from relationship training wheels to someone increasingly confident, increasingly dateable, increasingly partnered. It feels like a lot

00:05:14	Ryan	Guest	happened between season one and two! Did he start exuding pheromones? Get therapy? Switch cologne? What happened? Yeah, I think his <i>[censored]</i> grew like ten inches and just like—yeah. I think—like, you know, spiritually and maybe literally. I don't know. <i>[Laughs.]</i> No, I think—
00:05:23	Ray	Host	Should be easy to check!
00:05:25	Ryan	Guest	<i>[Laughs.]</i> Yeah, I know! Gosh darn it. No, I think—I think, you know, he came out about his cerebral palsy at the end of season one and I think he does feel this kind of renewed sense of confidence. I mean, in the first episode, the boy that he's smooching with asks about cerebral palsy and he's like—and he's just like, "Ugh. I don't know, babe. Just google it, 'cause I wrote about it." Like, I actually really, really relate to that, because I also came out of the disabled closet via an article and whenever anyone asked me about my CP from there on out, I was just like, "Babe. You can go the article. It's right there. So, I don't have to do the emotional LABOR for you, honey!"
00:05:58	Ray	Host	So, that part of the character Ryan's storyline, that he hid behind the story of a car accident—that's true. That really happened to you?
00:06:09	Ryan	Guest	Yeah, that's ripped from the headlines. I got hit by a car when I was 20. But IRL, it was actually like v, v traumatic. I was in the hospital for a month. I casually had six surgeries. But I did move to New York to go to school, and everyone just assumed my limp was from my car accident and I thought—a lightbulb went off and I was just like, "Wow! I can be an accident victim! That's sooo much more relatable than someone with cerebral palsy!" 'Cause, you know, I mean—any of us could get hit by a car. Gosh, I hope we don't. But it could happen. And people know what that means. Whereas cerebral palsy is confusing to people. They don't know what it means. They don't know how it looks on other—you know. And it looks different on everybody! You know? You can dress it up, you can dress it down. It goes from mild to wild.
00:06:57	Ray	Host	So, to me, I felt like I kind of—you know—stumbled upon this amazing shortcut, this life hack, if you will. But it just ended up actually hacking my life into pieces. Did people, as—who came to know you through the series—wanna understand better where the character and the guy overlap? Or was there just an assumption that basically it's your life story and you just wrote it down on paper and shot it. Is it important to know?
00:07:18	Ryan	Guest	I think so. I mean, I think when people think that this just me and I like wrote a dairy entry and then somehow magically turned it into a two-season television show, I think <i>[chuckles]</i> —I think that makes you not realize how much hard work went into <i>[laughing]</i> making it. And that the television show is its own medium and it's about structure and storyline and seeding things and paying them off.
			No, I mean, this character—to me—feels very, very fictional. I, emotionally, relate to the character of Ryan very deeply. I think Ryan is a character who is figuring out how to take up space in a world that isn't built for him, and I think his journey is about—you know—gaining the confidence of Rob Schneider in the late '90s. And I deeply, deeply relate to that journey. But in terms of like the specifics of his life, in terms of like him living with his mom since he was 28, in terms of him being a virgin 'til he was 28, in terms of

having no friends—I don’t relate to that. *[Flippantly.]* I was always popular. I was always *[censored]* and I had tons of friends! Can I curse on this? Did I—I didn’t even ask.

00:08:20 Ray Host You know, I’m not—I’m not sure. I will have to talk to Standards and Practices about it.

00:08:24 Ryan Guest Okay. God bless. *[Chuckles.]* I’m sorry.

[Ray laughs.]

00:08:30 Ray Host They have their work cut out for them! Don’t they, babe? Well, seriously, I want people to watch this and be thinking about this, because you do want us to know things, to get things. It’s not a documentary series on millennial disability, but it does try to hit people who are just unaware—not hostile, not indulgent, just unaware—of what goes on in a life like yours, both character Ryan and real-life human being Ryan. How do you do that with a light enough touch that we still get entertained but you still accomplish that purpose?

00:09:08 Ryan Guest Yeah, well I think that’s always been inherently my way—in terms of my work. I always say I wanna cover the vegetables in sugar. Like, tons of sugar. So, like you’re chowing down on something that you think is like a hot fudge sundae and you’re like, “Yum, yum, yum, yum, yuum!” But like, whoops! I secretly put like a mountain of kale in there and you’re getting your vegetables, honey. I just think that like when you don’t use comedy, it can often feel very didactic and very like, “This is what you should know!” And I think, in terms of like representation and identity in TV, I think we often get bogged down in the politics. And to me... to me, that doesn’t really do the work, in terms of like normalizing our existence and—I don’t know. I just—that’s not how I process information. Like, I just—like, I’m not that girl. So, I’m very, very conscious like—yes, I want you to learn something, but I wanna do it through sneaky, LOL ways.

00:10:00 Ray Host Even the title. *Special*. It’s a euphemism that sometimes grates. It’s part pander-y and part condescending. And yet, it is absolutely spot on when it comes to this show, because it’s—it’s both poking you in the ribs and winking at you at the same time. It’s actually a shorter version of something you’d written before, isn’t it?

00:10:28 Ryan Guest Oh, the—it’s based on my book, which is *I’m Special: And Other Lies We Tell Ourselves*. And then my producer, Eric Norsoph, was like, “Why don’t we just call it *[whispers]* *Special?*” And I really love that except for when you say you have a show called “*Special*” on Netflix, they go, *[in a cartoonish, valley girl accent]* “Like a Netflix special?” And you’re like...

00:10:42 Ray Host Well, yeah. *[Laughs.]* There is that.

00:10:43 Ryan Guest Nooooo. Nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh-nooo. So, oopsie.

[They laugh.]

00:11:03 Ray Host But I still stand by it. I think it’s a really great title and I think—I think we’re reclaiming that word, because I think “special” is a word that is often used to infantilize disabled people, and I’m just trying to make it chic again. You know? One thing that you’re able to do on Netflix is be more frank about human being’s actual sex lives and one thing that distinguishes *Special* is that we go through losing virginity, sex scenes that are frank, affectionate, and sexy. They were also the first gay sex

scenes that were that frank that I have seen on a small screen. When you're taking the audience somewhere new—even if it's an audience that's open to the experience—do you have to talk it out with other stakeholders in the Netflix universe?

[Ryan chuckles.]

00:11:53 Ryan Guest Does somebody have to get a memo saying, “Hey, you know, you should know that we’re gonna do this.” Or do you just deliver it? Oh my god, absolutely not. First of all, it’s so nice to be on a streamer because I’m not in the chokehold of *[dramatically]* Kraft Macaroni and Cheese. Or, you know, Bounty paper towels or Charmin Ultra.

[Ray giggles.]

Um, you know, ‘cause they don’t have advertisers, so who literally gives a *[censored]*? It’s actually insane that like people had to literally like produce their content based upon the needs of like Hamburger Helper, like truly are there any darker times? So, yeah, I just got to do whatever the *[censored]* I wanted. I mean, Netflix sort of knew the deal. They knew I wanted to tackle gay sex. They knew that—you know—this was a big, important part of Ryan’s story, because—as a disabled person—I felt like, you know, I came out of the womb and my *[censored]* was chopped off by society. And I feel like my whole life has been me searching for that and then putting it back on.

00:12:46 Ray Host So, yeah. It was really important to me that we don’t shy away from the sexuality aspect of it, and we really go for it. I’m wondering about... what would I say? Choreography.

[Ryan affirms.]

00:13:13 Ryan Guest Camera angles. We get to be present, as an audience, for the pillow talk about negotiation, about topping and bottoming. There’s repartee about intercourse. But no genitals. Are there rules? Are there creative choices that have to be made around this?

00:13:24 Ray Host *[Giggles.]* No, I’m obsessed. Oh my god, you’re really getting into the nitty gritty. I’m addicted. Okay. So, no. I mean, first of all—I mean, I just never wanted to show my penis. *[Laughs.]*

00:13:26 Ray Guest Okay. That’s fair! That’s fair.

Even though—even though I have been searching for it my entire life and I have put it back on. *[Laughs.]* Um, no, but I mean, my—you know, we definitely show a lot of skin. I remember we actually never really discussed a penis moment. I mean, I’m sure like my actors would have been—some of them would have been okay with it, I just never thought of it, TBH. I guess it’s my blind spot. But I will say, in terms of the sex scenes, like what was such a g-damn delight was hiring all gay actors, because if I had to describe the mechanics of gay sex to a straight actor, I would’ve deleted years off my life. Like, I would’ve just been literally a pile of ashes on the bed, and we wouldn’t have been able to shoot the scene. Because life is too short, am I right, honey!?

We—you know, shooting with gay actors has a certain kind of common ground. A foundation, if you will, that we can share. So, that was really, really helpful in shooting those scenes. And I was also just really lucky that like the people that I shot with were just like so incredible. Like, I remember Jeremy Glazer, who fetishizes me in episode two—spoiler alert. It was the first time I met him, and we just had to go from, “Hello, nice to meet you,” to like, “I love your [censored] scars.” So that was a good jump. You know? But Jeremy was like so generous and so kind and like sex scenes are so weird and like not fun. And like the best way to get through them is just to have a scene partner that like will just be there for you. I know it sounds like kind of corny, but it’s true ‘cause it’s so vulnerable. And so, I really lucked out in A) hiring all gay actors, but also hiring gay actors that were just like so ready to go there and kind of help me through.

00:15:05	Ray	Host	‘Cause now the—every now and then I read in the—in <i>the Union Magazine</i> that there are now sort of hand-holders, wranglers onset. What are they called? Intimacy coaches?
00:15:19	Ryan	Guest	Yeah! Intimacy coordinators, we had those. We had one. We had an intimacy coordinator. Yeah.
00:15:23	Ray	Host	Okay! Well, there we go! [Chuckles.] What are they doing? Are they applauding at the end of the scene? I—what exactly do they have to talk people through? Because I’m sure they appear on movie sets as well and certainly in non-gay sex scenes. What is it that we want them there for and what is it that we’re trying to make sure does not happen?
00:15:48	Ryan	Guest	I think they’re extremely helpful. I mean, thinking about how before you would just have like a straight guy with like a hot actress and just be like left to their own devices. I can’t imagine the creepy positions women were put in—like literally and emotionally—with no one to advocate for them. I think that sex scenes are really intense, and everyone’s comfort level is different. And you may not feel comfortable even sharing that comfort level with your scene partner. You know what I mean? There’s just a lot of—it’s a really, really vulnerable thing. So, I think they serve as a conduit. You know, sometimes, and they’re someone to talk to and kind of voice your concerns, your anxieties or whatever.

I know that, you know, my intimacy coordinator helped me put my cock sock on, so I’m hashtag #grateful for that. ‘Cause, you know, my disabled [censored] like had a hard time with the hand-eye coordination of it all. A cock sock is like—it’s a pouch for your penis. So, it can like stay in and not fall out. [Chuckles.] But I think—again, I think it’s—I think it’s different for everybody. I mean, besides the cock sock of it all, I didn’t need that much guidance. And also, I was shooting—you know, I was in communication with my co-stars, blah, blah, blah. But again, it’s different for everybody and I’m just—I’m really grateful that they’re there, because before that there was no safe space to check in with someone. And I’m sure people had really unpleasant experiences because of that, particularly women. ‘Cause, you know, we all know straight men are typically trash. But, um. [Laughs.]

00:17:15	Ray	Host	Uuuuuh...
00:17:17	Crosstalk	Crosstalk	Ryan: I mean—sorry.

Ray: That we may have to bleep out.

[Ryan cackles.]

00:17:22 Ryan Guest **Ray:** That part we may have to bleep out. [Chuckles.]
NPR revolts!

[They laugh.]

It's just—all of them—like, people's radios explode in their cars whenever they like—everyone that listens to this.

[Screaming.] "Nooo! Not this! You've gone too far!"

00:17:37 Ray Host [They chuckle.]
[Laughing] We see a lot of sex, cumulatively over all the episodes. Well, maybe not a lot, but more than we see actual work. And it is kind of—kind of fun and kind of funny that the young people who populate the world of *Special*—in the club, in the office—live pretty well for people who don't seem to be working up much of a sweat. They're dressed beautifully. They go to bars, and they eat out and they're—they're having a great old time! And California is a really expensive place to be. If they're living in group houses, if they're sleeping in their cars, I didn't see it in the—in the show. Was there [chuckles] a decision to just let that part of life slide? Because we had a lot of other business to get taken care of in the—in the dialogue of *Special* and we just weren't gonna spend too much time on that.

00:18:43 Ryan Guest Totally. I mean, I think I was focused on like the disabled representation than I was concerned about like what the receptionist at *Egg Woke* was making and if she lived in a condo or an apartment.

[They laugh.]

00:19:10 Ray Host You know? Creatively, I decided to let that one go. It wasn't—I let myself—I wasn't gonna—I wasn't gonna be kept up at night to see—to know what the receptionist was doing and why she could afford to be in—to be in a, you know, Isabel Marant top. [Laughs.] Well, I'm only half teasing, because the world of work is a funny thing, on television. Ricky Ricardo was a nightclub owner, but we never got the sense that he got up at four o'clock in the afternoon and stayed up until four o'clock in the morning. Rob Petrie was a comedy writer and we never saw him either with writer's block or particularly working hard at writing comedy! Robert Young's character in *Father Knows Best* sold insurance. I doubt he ever had a bad day at the office, from what I can remember. We barely saw their work and we never saw what was hard about work and it was never shown on screen. And, as far as I can tell, it took two seasons for Ryan to finish two articles!

[Ryan chuckles.]

00:20:02 Ryan Guest And even though there's little precise marking of time, every time the publisher came by, I thought she was gonna say, "Don't you guys do any work?!" Like, "Get the hell out of here!"
She did! Did you watch it?! She did!

00:20:04	Ray	Host	She did, but—
00:20:06	Ryan	Guest	That's all she said! That is literally all she said! Honey!
00:20:08	Ray	Host	But then she took the cockamamie answers and went back to her office! That was the wild part!
00:20:13	Ryan	Guest	Well! She's also someone who like paid—did a payout for one of the interns for walking in on her doing god knows what! She's not exactly a grounded character, honey!
<i>[Ray laughs.]</i>			
She sang the wedding march for god's sakes, in a black gown! This is when you're—this is when we crossed the line?! This is where the line is drawn?! As if! By the way, I feel like we do tackle money with Kim, because she's in so much debt. She's in so much debt, trying to keep up with the Joneses and like look a certain way, because—and we even say capitalism is hell. So, actually, I think we've done a lot more than typical TV shows, TBH.			
00:20:49	Ray	Host	What do you wanna do next? I mean, if you tell us you're canceled, well there's just too much—too much talent on the hoof, here, to lie fallow. What do you wanna do?
00:21:01	Ryan	Guest	Well, I wanna create a show that really dives deep into how much money everyone is making in an office and whether or not they live in cars or apartments or houses.
00:21:09	Ray	Host	<i>[Laughs.]</i> Okaaay. Touché.
00:21:10	Ryan	Guest	That would be my first <i>[laughs]</i> ... I'm gonna break that story as I leave NPR and I'm gonna—I'm gonna sell that <i>[censored]</i> to Netflix and you're gonna <i>[censored]</i> watch it and be like, "By golly, he did it."
00:21:20	Ray	Host	Watch it?! I'm gonna be your series consultant! What, are you kidding?
00:21:22	Ryan	Guest	No, you'll just—you'll be the money coordinator. You'll be like, "I need to see your bank statement. I need to see how much money you have in your account. I need to know what kind of car you're driving and whether or not you could afford it. A Jetta? Realistic. An Audi? I don't think sooo."
<i>[They chuckle.]</i>			
00:21:37	Ray	Host	Not on what you're making, pal!
00:21:38	Ryan	Guest	<i>[Yelling.]</i> "Not on what you're making, lady!"
<i>[Ray laughs.]</i>			
Um, yeah. I'm obsessed. Um, no. What's next for me. Okay. So, I'm writing for the <i>Queer as Folk</i> reboot, which is super exciting. And I'm also—I wrote a novel, casually, that's coming out next June. And I'm working on the film adaptation for that, which we also hope to shoot next year. So. Oh, I also sold a show to HBO Max, which we're like waiting to hear back from dot, dot, dot, dot, dot, dot, dot... For a long time.			
00:22:07	Ray	Host	Well, that's a lot! That's a lot to have on your plate as far as getting everything polished, finished, and ready to roll. Is that hard? That part?
00:22:19	Ryan	Guest	Um, no. I'm a type A Virgo workhorse from hell. So, I love having 80 different things going on. I don't know. I mean, I just—I love writing. I'm like one of those psychos that like actually enjoys the process. So, I also get bored pretty easily, so I need to go into different

00:22:48	Ray	Host	mediums and have different things to keep myself interested. And I feel really lucky that I'm in a place where people are paying me for things. 'Cause, you know, what comes up <i>[dramatically whispering]</i> must come down.
00:22:49	Ryan	Guest	<i>[Softly.]</i> Don't say that! And then I'll have that Jetta. <i>[They chuckle.]</i>
00:22:55	Ray	Host	And then I'll be sleeping in my own car. Uh, editor's note: Ryan's not knocking people who drive Jettas, just so we know. FYI.
00:23:02	Ryan	Guest	Well, you can bleep "Jetta", 'cause we've already beeped "cock sock". <i>[Ray cackles.]</i>
00:23:14	Jesse	Host	So. You can do—you can—I mean, honey, why not? Straight men are trash, bleep! Cock sock, bleep. Jetta, bleep. Yeah. Even more with Ryan O'Connell still to come. After a short break, Ryan continues to give Ray the business about basically everything and you do not want to miss it. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:23:28	Music	Transition	Bright, chiming music.
00:23:30	Jesse	Promo	Support for <i>Bullseye</i> and the following message come from Culturelle. Culturelle wants you to know that an estimated 45 million Americans may have IBS, according to the International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders. Culturelle IBS Complete Support is a medical food for the dietary management of IBS. It's designed to relieve symptoms like abdominal pain, bloating, diarrhea, and constipation in a safe, well-tolerated, once daily dose. Save 20% with promo code "radio" on Culturelle.com .
00:24:10	Promo	Clip	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> Music: Upbeat, cheerful music plays in the background. Allie Goertz: Hi, I'm Allie Goertz! Julia Prescott: And I'm Julia Prescott. And we host— Both: — Round Springfield! Allie: <i>Round Springfield</i> is a <i>Simpsons</i> -adjacent podcast where we talk to your favorite <i>Simpsons</i> writers, voice actors, and everyone who's worked on the show, to talk about shows that aren't <i>The Simpsons</i> . So, we're gonna be talking to people like David X. Cohen, Yeardley Smith, and Tim Long about other projects they worked on, sometimes projects that didn't go well. Julia: Mmmmm! Allie: Some failures. Julia: Yeeeah! Allie: Some rejections. <i>[Chuckles.]</i>

Julia: Some failed pilots. Some failed life events! *[Laughs.]*

Allie: Yeah! We just talk to all the failures of *The Simpsons*.

Julia: Yeeeah!

Allie: So, if you really love your *Simpsons* trivia and want to get to know the people who have worked on *The Simpsons* a little bit better, come by *Round Springfield*.

Julia: Every other week, on MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts!

[Music fades out.]

00:24:57 Promo Clip **Music:** Muffled radio communication fading into solemn piano music.

Speaker: An internal investigation found that a cop with the California highway patrol sexually harassed 21 women. But those findings were kept secret, until a new state transparency law passed. We dug through hours of tapes to find out what happens to officers who cross the line. Listen to *On Our Watch*, a podcast from NPR and KQED.

[Music ends.]

00:25:20 Jesse Host Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Our guest is Ryan O'Connell. He's the creator and star of the TV show *Special*, which just wrapped up its second season on Netflix. *Special* is a semi-autobiographical sitcom about Ryan's own life: his experience as a gay man and with coming to terms with his identity as a disabled person. Ryan has lived with cerebral palsy his entire life. O'Connell is being interviewed by our pal, Ray Suarez.

00:25:49 Ray Host I do think that having a character of immigrant stock is so important in 2021, when tens of millions of Americans were born somewhere else in the world. Tens of millions more have parents who were born somewhere else in the world. And so much of TV doesn't include that. Or it includes it like an applique—like something that you iron on to your—to your trucker's jacket or something. It's just like a patch. It is a part of American life and you, over time, take us on a lovely journey of Kim's inner life and dealing with being of the mainstream culture and just one step outside it, at the same time. Well done, Ryan!

00:26:52 Ryan Guest *[Chuckles.]* Thank you! I mean, I think Ryan and Kim are both similar in that way. I mean, they just feel like one foot in one world, one foot in the other. And they're not quite belonging to either, and I think—I think thematically even bringing in Karen, it's like these three people who, on their face, seem wildly different. You know? You have a curvy, brown woman. You have a woman in her mid-50s. You have—you know, a gay, disabled person. What could they have in common? Well, they're navigating—again—a world that is not built for them and they're figuring out how to gather up the courage and the sense of agency to say, "I wanna be the girl with the most cake." You know? "I want this. And I don't want to apologize for it because I'm chic, and you should have realized that by now. And if you haven't, that's your mistake."

So, it was really interesting, thematically, to kind of—to do that thread between these three people, because again, they are so different from each other, but I think—when stripped to their bare bones—they want the same things.

00:27:52 Ray Host Kim is a wonderful person. And, as I sat and watched her, I thought, “It would be hard to be her boyfriend.”

00:27:59 Ryan Guest Wait, WHYYYYY?!
00:28:02 Ray Host She sabotages relationships because she wasn’t always confident that she was as lovable as she is.

00:28:14 Ryan Guest Yeah! But, honey, isn’t that very relatable? Like what’s been your dating journey? Have you always been like, “I’m the *[censored]* best! Like live, laugh, looove! Like, you should be obsessed to date me! XOXO.” I mean, if you have, I’m addicted to you! Honeeey! Well. No. No, but I was watching her and thinking, “Oh, don’t do that!”

[Ryan agrees.]

There was Harrison, this lovely, self-made... potentially tech bro, but maybe ultimately pretty decent guy.

00:28:46 Ryan Guest Yeah! And he’s hot. You can say he’s hot, too. He’s hot. That’s an important part of it.

00:28:48 Ray Host And he’s—and he’s hot, too.
00:28:49 Ryan Guest Yeah. That’s important.
00:28:51 Ray Host And I saw it coming. It’s like knowing that a punch is coming. I thought, “She is gonna screw this up in part because she can’t believe this hot, decent guy really likes her. So, she’s gonna make him crazy so that, in some weird way, it’s not her fault that they’re breaking up, but it is!”

00:29:16 Ryan Guest Yeah. Yeah. It should feel like a gut punch. I mean, that—to me—is very relatable. That was like the story with my current boyfriend. My first boyfriend, the one that I’m still with. I’ve been with him for six and a half years. And when I met him, I was like, “Oh my god, he’s like lowkey the best person I’ve ever met.” ‘Cause I had dated before and *[sighs]*, it’s so funny. Even though I was like full of self-loathing, I was like, “I don’t hate myself enough to spend time with someone who doesn’t get me, or I don’t get—” Like, no. Like, my self-loathing didn’t run that deep.

But when Jonathan, my boyfriend, came waltzing in, I was like, “Wait. He’s like the best person I’ve ever met. And like I’m not ready for this and I don’t deserve this.” So, I broke up with him like a month in. And then, quickly realized—by going crazy, basically, doing the thing that Kim does to Harrison essentially. And then I realized the error of my ways pretty immediately and I like begged him to take me back. It was very dramatic. And he did! And we’re still together. Can you believe?

00:30:12 Ray Host Well, look, six years! That’s pretty good!
00:30:14 Ryan Guest I think it’s—yeah! It’s great! Very impressive. Yeah. It’s great. I mean—and I think it’s because, honestly, like when I was getting back together with him, or basically begging him to get back together with me, I was very upfront being like, “Look, I am *[censored]* up, I’m crazy. My neighborhood—like my brain is a unsafe neighborhood to walk around in at night. But I will promise to show up for you the best way that I know how, every single day.”

And honestly, when I said it, I didn't even quite believe it myself. I was like, "Well, or I could completely screw this up again." But he accepted me and all my flaws and like I think being up front about everything that was wrong with me—or what I perceived to be wrong with me—it just took the pressure off immediately. And then, from then on out it was like perfect.

00:30:56 Ray Host

Well, that's a moment where you realize, "Oh, hey, this may be something." If I'm actually moved to be my best me, because I think it's so important to show that to this person, that's a pretty good moment.

00:31:11 Ryan Guest

Well, changing is hard.

[They laugh.]

There's a lot of reasons—there's a lot of reasons why people don't do it. There's a lot of reasons why you meet people and—like, who are older, who you're like, "Have you ever looked under the hood?! 'Cause your hood's on fire, baby." You know what I mean? Because actually doing the work is unpleasant. Deeply. And it's really uncomfortable. Living authentically is great. 10/10, would recommend. But it also brings a whole new set of challenges and it's a lot easier just to remain frozen in your flaws and not—you know—ever really improve yourself.

So, yeah, it takes—it takes the right person for you to be like, "Okay, I'm gonna get the shovel and I'm gonna start digging. And it's gonna *[censored]* suck, but I get to come home to you every day, so that makes it worth it."

00:31:55 Ray Host

So, Jonathan has seen the arc of the story to the new TV star Ryan. How's he liking that?

00:32:04 Ryan Guest

It's—he's miserable. He's—

[Ray laughs.]

He crochets "SOS" into all our pillows and then hands them to the guests, and he just prays that one day someone will get him. He calls me a disabled dictator. *[Laughs.]* No, he's really happy for me. He's super supportive. He's also a writer. His first novel came out actually the same week as *Special*. His novel *Yes, Daddy*—which you should get anywhere books are sold. It was a really amazing week for both of us. It was definitely like one of those moments where you're like, "This is the highlight reel of our life and it's all downhill from here." *[Chuckles.]*

00:32:38 Ray Host

Or! "Our plan! It's working!"

[Ryan agrees.]

00:32:44 Ryan Guest

Go with that one.
That's the healthier way to think, for sure.

[Ray chuckles.]

But I think this business is so—this business is so traumatizing, I think. Like, I just—look, I've gone through periods of not working. I've had things that I thought were gonna work out that definitely

00:33:16 Ray Host didn't work out that like basically I've come to a place where I'm so jaded that I don't—I don't, you know, count—I don't—I don't start celebrating until the check has cleared. Do you know what I mean? It's so—I always get like a little spooked out by a string of successes, 'cause you just know that eventually it's gonna change. But you're right. I mean, to living gratitude. Well, you're 34, right?

[Ryan confirms.]

00:33:32 Ryan Guest So, you didn't—you know, you didn't come like a comet streaking across the sky out of the new school at 22 and have it all happen for you. You know. You put in your time. That must make it more satisfying.

00:33:37 Ray Host Okay, all I can hear is that you just called me old. Like, that hurt so bad. *[Laughs.]*

00:33:38 Ryan Guest You know why I can do that?

00:33:41 Ray Host You're like, "You're old as *[censored]*! You literally—this is the—you should be."

00:33:48 Ryan Guest I'm 64 frigging years old. I've been married longer than you've been alive.

00:33:50 Ray Host No! That's not true! How long have you been married for?

00:33:51 Ryan Guest 41 years.

[Ray affirms.]

00:33:57 Ray Host Wait, babe, you were a child bride.

00:33:58 Ryan Guest Yeah. Yeah. People...

00:34:02 Ray Host Babe, that's a bad—wait, that's crazy! You were like placenta going down the aisle.

00:34:11 Ryan Guest *[Laughing.]* People don't normally get married at the age I got married anymore, but back then it wasn't that uncommon. But yes. I've been married a really long time.

00:34:22 Ray Host Oh my god, gorgeous. I can't imagine deciding on anything when I was 24 and then sticking with it. *[Laughs.]* But you did. What does she—what does she think of *Special*?

00:34:28 Ryan Guest She liked it! She liked it and she's a little bit more prudish than I am, certainly.

00:34:29 Ray Host Really?

00:34:36 Ryan Guest And was, um—was surprised. I wouldn't say shocked, but I'd say surprised. And—

[Ray agrees.]

00:34:56 Ray Host Can you tell her something for me?

[Ryan agrees.]

Be like, "Look. Ryan had to watch so many straight sex scenes, growing up. Nonconsensually. He had to see so many." And a lot of them, by the way didn't even elevate the story. "And he just had to sit there, and he had to take it. And now it's her turn to sit through some sex scenes." You know what I mean?

That—well, that's true enough! True enough.

[Ryan agrees.]

And you know? There are a lot of aspects of American life—and I'd love to hear what you think about this—where we don't give people who are part of smaller groups, smaller subsets of society, credit for not only knowing to have—having to know their thing. The dance steps to their thing and the morays and the folk ways and the lines and the language of their thing. But they have to know everybody else's thing. White people have no idea how much Black people understand about the White world, 'cause they have to live immersed in it. Straight people have no idea how much gay people understand about the straight world, because they are very heavily *[chuckling]* the product of straight unions and grew up all around straight people and live in a world that still is dictated by the rhythms of that way of life.

It is—you know, give people a little credit for being observant, will ya?

00:36:03 Ryan Guest There's a lot of mental gymnastics. There's a lot of code switching. There's a lot of like you anticipating how people are going to perceive you and then you figuring out how you're gonna disarm them. You basically have to become MacGyver and like kind of like machete your way through a world that is not, you know—again, it's not made for you. And I don't think I even was conscious of how much work I was doing before I would even enter a scenario until, you know, a few years ago. And then I would just like, you know, I'd see like a straight white guy at the—like, you know, go up to a barista at my coffeeshop and kind of like give her a nonconsensual story about the band that he was starting and she like nodded pleasantly but was like dying inside, clearly. And I was just like, "Wait, how does this man not like take this woman's feelings into account? How is he not like hyperaware of how he's coming off? How could he be so *[censored]* oblivious?"

And then I realized—I was like, "Oh. I've had to become so hyperaware of how people are looking at me." And then I've had to either combat their, you know—their preconceived notions or whatever. Like, just—again, there's so much emotional labor on top that I wasn't even—that was just so sewn into the fabric of my life that I wasn't even aware of it, that I was doing it.

00:37:13 Ray Host Is there a point where you just say, "You know, I'm resigning. I'm not gonna do that anymore," or do you always have to do it?

00:37:21 Ryan Guest No. *[Sighs.]* Once you get a Netflix show, it's easieeer.

[They laugh.]

But who knows! Now that it's canceled, it might be really hard again. Stay tuned! *[Chuckles.]*

00:37:32 Ray Host No, but seriously. Is there—is there a point where you say, "Look, I'm not gonna do this obstacle course. People are just gonna have to take me as I am and take people as they are and part of my assignment in life is not making you feel comfortable.

00:37:52 Ryan Guest Yes. I mean, I think the acceptance of the show has completely changed everything for me. So, like I was in *[inaudible]* two summers ago, 'cause I go every summer 'cause it's—you know—gay utopia. And we went to the gay beach, which is just like hot guys *[censored]* in the dunes and it's like such a schlep. It takes like an hour to get there. I'm like full Reese Witherspoon wild, but it's

like worth it sort of. And I was on my way back and I was like going up an incline and I was like—I kept falling, ‘cause it’s like an incline and inclines and CP don’t mix. And I was like full like, you know, in the mud, in the sand, whatever. Not chic. Exhausted, sunstroke vibes, whatever. And it was embarrassing, because there were people that were passing us, you know, and moving forward and—you know—I was really holding up the line. And a group of like hot gays sauntered past me and were like, *[yelling]* “Oh my god, I love your show *Speciaaaa!*”

[Ray chuckles.]

And I’m just like, again—I’m like full Samara from *The Ring*, like *[censored]*. Like just totally like a goblin, like caked in the sun and sand and stuff. But I was like—and so, my kneejerk reaction was to be obviously humiliated and then I thought, “Wait. They love my show.” They love my show that I show, you know, getting—falling down. I show having trouble getting off of a bench. I have trouble opening mail. All of that of me. All the stuff that I was ashamed of. And they not only, you know, don’t mind—they love me for it. And that was huuuge for me. It sounds stupid, but like people accepting my show and loving my show is, by extension, kind of loving me and accepting me. Which, you know, I’d always longed for. So, it was incredibly meaningful to me.

00:39:33 Ray Host

That doesn’t sound stupid at all. That sounds like the opposite of stupid. *[Chuckles.]*

[Ryan “aw”s.]

When you’ve been—when you’ve been working toward both self-acceptance and broader acceptance and trying to figure out what it all means your whole adult life and now people are cheering you in the dunes? Well, they didn’t notice that you were caked with sand. They thought, “Oh my god! That’s Ryan O’Connell!”

00:39:57 Ryan Guest

Right. Well, no one *[censored]* me in the dunes, so there’s still work to be done.

00:40:01 Ray Host

Look, you have to leave a little something left on the to-do list, right?

[Ryan chuckles.]

00:40:07 Ryan Guest

You’re only 34 years old! Come on!

Yeah. Toootally. The to-dunes list. Oh god. Kill me.

[Ray laughs.]

00:40:18 Ray Host

I worked on *Will & Grace* for a season. You know? What are you gonna do? *[Chuckles.]*

Ryan, the character, as we mentioned, was hit by a car and it’s a plot device. Ryan, the human *Bullseye* guest, was hit by a car and hurt and you needed multiple surgeries. We get flashbacks from time to time through the two seasons. Without giving too much away, without it being a spoiler, I watched the final scene of season two closely. There’s a sidewalk just 20 feet away and you walk out into scene, credits—uh—in the middle of the street. And I’m just saying—

00:40:54	Ryan	Guest	<i>[Laughing.]</i> Stop.
00:40:55	Ray	Host	“Oh, come on. Is he asking for it? Get on the sidewalk, man! I care about you!” Couldn’t—wouldn’t it have been a lot safer if you just walked on the sidewalk?
00:41:05	Ryan	Guest	I’m obsessed with your close reading of the show. I’m obsessed with the bees in your bonnet. You have many bees. I’m addicted to all the bees. I wanna give them names. I wanna have a bee colony. I’m obsessed. That’s getting a series order on Netflix, those bees in your bonnet. I—yeah. I <i>[laughing]</i> —I just don’t know what to tell you.
			<i>[They cackle.]</i>
00:41:31	Ray	Host	<i>Bullseeeye!</i> You’ve hit the bullseye, baby! I mean—
00:41:34	Ryan	Guest	Oh, man! You know, the guy’s been hit by a car. Honey, but here’s the thing. No, you know what—can I just say? As someone who’s been hit by a car, I’m gonna say something really revealing and not chic. There have been a few times where I’ve almost been hit by a car again. So, you think it would be like, “You liiiive and you leeeearn, Alanis!” But no. I personally have not learned. I mean, I definitely look more than I used to, but there’s definitely moments where I’m like in a fugue and I come to and I’m like, “Oh. Eugh, eee... Uuuh was the light on? Was it my turn? I forgot.” Like, I’m—I get—I get very lost in thought. I like kind of space out and that’s been like a reoccurring theme throughout my life. And it’s why I got hit by a car at the age of 20. So, like I actually <i>[chuckles]</i> deeply relate to Ryan walking in the middle of the street. Because getting almost hit by a car and then not going the <i>[censored]</i> sidewalk is actually a very me thing to do. It’s very on brand.
00:42:38	Ray	Host	And that’s where me, Ryan the person, intersects with Ryan, the character!
00:42:42	Ryan	Guest	Aaaah, very good. You know, I—when I was hit by a car, I was—Okay! Stealing focus! <i>[Chuckles.]</i> Stealing focus. Okay, it’s not a competition! Like what the <i>[censored]?!]</i>
			<i>[They laugh.]</i>
00:42:49	Ray	Host	Wait, what was your story? What happened?! What happened?! When I was hit by a car, I thought, “Oh my—” I really—‘cause life slows down, and you see every frame per second in super slow motion. I even had the time to think, “Oh wow, I’m getting hit by a car now.” Every time I pass that intersection, which I do frequently, I think about getting hit by a car. I will—I guess I’ll reach escape velocity when I no longer think, “Oh-ho! Here was <i>[laughing]</i> —here’s where I was hit by a car!” It is, um—not traumatizing, but just always etched in a way that I can’t not think about it. So.
00:43:33	Ryan	Guest	Well, you know, listen. You can admit that it’s your trauma. You can admit that it was traumatizing and still be straight.
			<i>[They chuckle.]</i>
00:43:41	Ray	Host	So. <i>[Laughing.]</i> Thanks, man.

00:43:42	Ryan	Guest	It's a safe space, babe. It's okay, honey! You know? I know it's fragile. I know it's fragile. I know we all live in that prison! But, uh, yeah. You can say it's traumatizing, 'cause it does sound like it's traumatizing. Also, getting hit by a car is traumatizing. I think it is. There's no way for it to not be. Wait, were you okay, though? I mean, obviously you were 'cause you're talking to me now, but was it like bad? What was the vibe?
00:44:01	Ray	Host	Uh, I was basically one, soft—one massive, soft tissue injury from my shoulders to my ankles. Purple, yellow, red. Every color under the sun. But I didn't break anything, which is kind of amazing.
00:44:17	Ryan	Guest	How old were you?
00:44:19	Ray	Host	I was um... how old was I? Uuuh, 48.
00:44:23	Ryan	Guest	Gosh darn. Oof.
00:44:24	Ray	Host	I was thrown a great distance by this car. My bicycle went in one direction, I went in another direction. And yeah. I was—I was hurting for a long time. I was on some choice steroids. 'Cause it was—'cause it was—
00:44:39	Ryan	Guest	What—Steroids?! Do you mean painkillers?
00:44:42	Ray	Host	Well, steroids helped control the pain and helped control the swelling. And it was the only way I could continue to work and think and get out of bed in the morning, was being on steroids. It was—that part was bad.
00:44:54	Ryan	Guest	Do you have any long-lasting [<i>with a French accent</i>] damage? Or were you okay?
00:44:58	Ray	Host	No, thank god. No. I am fine, now.
00:44:59	Ryan	Guest	You're good? Good. Good.
00:45:01	Ray	Host	Oh yeah. But boy oh boy.
00:45:02	Ryan	Guest	I'm sorry. Yeah, it's rough. It's rough. And by the way, not to be this girl, but being injured—didn't it kind of be like, "Wow. I'm like disable for a little moment. This is like kind of crazy. Like, wow." Yeah.
00:45:15	Ray	Host	Yes! It reminds you of the caprice of all this, the fragility of all this, how—yeah. All I was doing was riding my bike to work and I could've ended up dead! How's that for a plot device? You know. It's just—you just think, "No, just minding my own business," and here comes this lady!

[*Ryan agrees.*]

00:45:42	Ryan	Guest	Yeah. It was one of those moments where you really do think about all those things. Well, you know, oftentimes I wonder why disability has not entered the zeitgeist the way that gender has—gender identity, race—you know. We've had conversations deepen over the last five years in particular. There's obviously a very long way to go, but they are in the zeitgeist in a way that they weren't five years ago. There's a lot more knowledge and awareness. And disability, which is huge—it's a huuuge portion of the population—continues to get ignored, I think. And if I was to really think about why that is—'cause I—'cause I do. 'Cause it is frustrating to see everyone evolve in their thinking in so many ways and how incredible that is and then, again, still see disability sort of frozen.
----------	------	-------	---

I think people have a really hard time thinking about mortality. I think people are really scared, because if you live long enough, the odds are you will become disabled. I don't think people wanna think about that. I think people wanna be young and there's such an

			emphasis on vitality and also under the rule of capitalism, there's so much tied into being able to, you know, be bigger, faster, stronger. Be the best quote/unquote "worker". So, I think disability is really, really triggering for a lot of people and it's easier for them to not think about it.
00:47:10	Ray	Host	Yeah. Indestructibility is a—is really not all that, folks. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> And it's an illusion, anyway.
00:47:17	Ryan	Guest	Well, it's a—yeah, it's a fallacy. Like, that's—but that's the thing. Like, I think it's an illusion that we've had to prop up and believe in to, you know—to make this happen. And we don't wanna puncture that.
00:47:30	Ray	Host	Ryan O'Connell is the star of the Netflix series, <i>Special</i> . The creative dynamo behind that series and a delightful guest.
			<i>[Ryan chuckles.]</i>
00:47:42	Ryan	Guest	What a pleasure to have you on <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:47:46	Jesse	Host	Oh my god, this was so, so fun. I mean, you like crack me up. Ryan O'Connell. His show, <i>Special</i> , is streaming on Netflix. You can check it out there. Ryan was interviewed by the great Ray Suarez. He's been working very hard and learning a lot <i>[laughing]</i> working on our program. You can also hear Ray—I'm joking. You can also hear Ray on the public radio show <i>World Affairs</i> , which airs every week on the radio and online.
00:48:10	Music	Transition	Relaxing music.
00:48:13	Jesse	Host	That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i> . <i>Bullseye</i> is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. At my house this week, I decided to put down some sisal floor covering. Sisal is a type of grass. It's kind of scratchy, but it looks nice.
			The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio and Jordan Kauwling are our associate producers. We get help from Casey O'Brien on the show. Production fellows at Maximum Fun are Richard Robey and Valerie Moffat. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for sharing it.
			You can keep up with the show on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We post all our interviews there. I am on Twitter @JesseThorn and on Instagram @Put.This.On and I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.
00:49:18	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
			<i>[Music fades out.]</i>