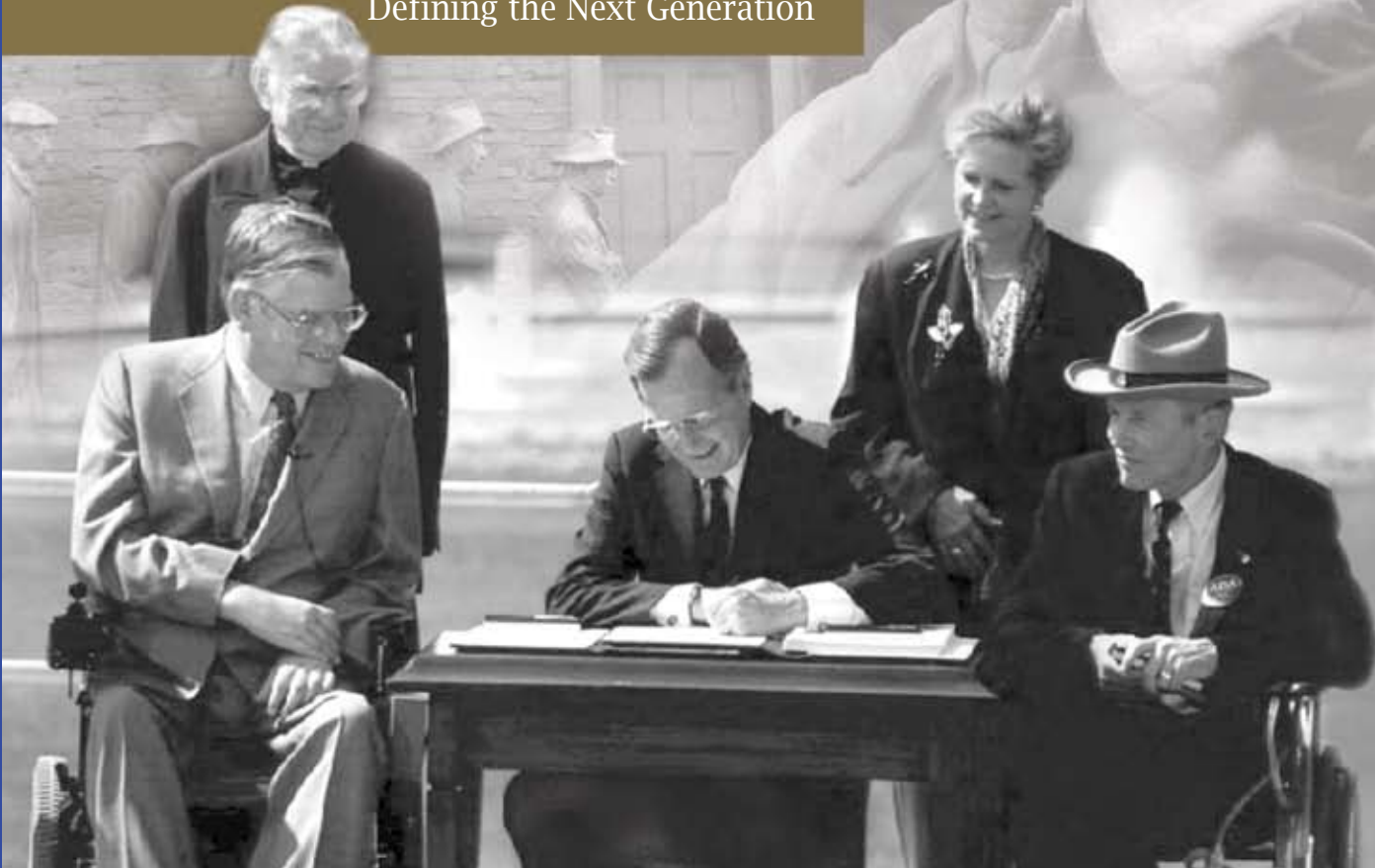


Disability History: An Important Part of America's Heritage

Defining the Next Generation



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The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed by President George H. W. Bush on July 26, 1990. As a result of this landmark legislation, communities and workplaces across the nation have become more inclusive and welcoming for America's nearly 40 million people with disabilities.

Despite the ADA's importance, however, many Americans are unfamiliar with the events that led to its passage. Inspired by the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and the feminist movement of the 1970s, disability leaders joined forces

and took action, holding sit-ins in Federal buildings, blocking inaccessible buses from moving, drafting legislation, and protesting in the streets. And like the broader movements that preceded it, the disability rights movement had its own heroes and champions: Ed Roberts, Gini Laurie and Justin Dart to name a few.

Teaching children about the contributions of particular populations to our nation's history, such as women and people of various ethnic backgrounds, has been recognized as important through the declaration of dedicated months as well as





Photo courtesy Yoshiko Dart

other educational programs. Disability history, however, has been largely ignored in school curricula. This is particularly paradoxical since anyone, regardless of age, race, or heritage, may become a part of the population of people with disabilities at any time. But the tide is beginning to turn—due mainly to the grassroots efforts of young disability leaders.

Promoting Positive Change at the State Level

The youth-led movement for equal education on disability history celebrated its first victory in West Virginia in April 2006, when the West Virginia Youth Disability Caucus was instrumental in the passage of an act establishing the third week in October as “Disability History Week.” This legislation requires public schools to educate students about disability history, people with disabilities, and the disability rights movement and encourages colleges and universities to promote awareness and understanding of disability history. Further, it encourages the legislature to provide recognition of Disability History Week through an annual proclamation and provide resources for instruction and activities.

Other states are following suit. The Florida Youth Council (FYC) is seeking to establish the first two weeks in October as “Disability History

and Awareness Weeks” in Florida’s public schools. This initiative began when the FYC took its idea to the 2006 Family Café Conference in Orlando, where they met with then Governor Jeb Bush, who agreed to support the effort by issuing an Executive Order. Subsequently, bills have been introduced in both the Florida House and Senate. Florida’s youth leaders are now collaborating with youth leaders from other states interested in introducing similar bills.

The North Carolina Youth Leadership Network (NCYLN) successfully advocated for the month of October to be devoted to “Disability History and Awareness.” In March 2007, proposed legislation was filed in the North Carolina House and Senate. To boost the effort, the NCYLN formed a partnership with the Alliance of Disability Advocates Center for Independent Living. With the backing of the disability community and other allies, including the North Carolina Parent Teacher Association, there was significant public support to pass the bill, which was signed by the Governor in July 2007.

Washington State successfully passed a bill that established October as “Disability History Month” in all public schools. In passing the bill, the legislature stated that “recognizing disability history will inspire students with disabilities to feel a greater sense of pride, reduce harassment and bullying, and help keep students with disabilities in school.” Washington’s bill also requires public institutions of higher education to provide educational activities related to disability history during the month.

Reflecting one of its 2007 legislative priorities, the Idaho State Independent Living Council proposed legislation establishing the third week of October as “Disability History Week,” during which Idaho schools would be required to instruct on disability history, the independent living movement, and disability rights. A concurrent resolution making October “Disability History Month” was passed by the State Legislature in March and went into effect shortly thereafter. The resolution encourages education

on disability history during October, but does not make it mandatory. Advocates are also trying to integrate disability history into the state curriculum and Idaho Standards Achievement Test.

Educating Tomorrow's Leaders Today

These and other efforts to integrate disability history into schools and communities reflect one of the key components of effective youth leadership development—learning about the history, values, and beliefs of one's society. Such youth leadership development experiences correlate with a number of positive outcomes, including decreases in negative behaviors (e.g., alcohol and tobacco use and violence) and increases in positive attitudes and behaviors (e.g., motivation, academic performance, self-esteem, problem-solving, positive health decisions, and interpersonal skills). Youth leadership development activities are similarly linked to increased self-efficacy and the

development of skills such as goal-setting, decision-making, and working well with others, attributes essential for success in adulthood and employment—and future advocacy efforts.



Photo courtesy Ken Stein

Resources

Following are resources for educators and others to enhance awareness and understanding of disability history and the contributions of people with disabilities:

ADL Curriculum Connections: Anti-Bias Lesson Plans and Resources for K-12 Educators

www.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/fall_2005/

This site provides curriculum suggestions for teaching disability history.

Center on Human Policies: Disability Studies for Teachers

www.disabilitystudiesforteachers.org

This site is a reference tool for teachers in grades 6-12. It includes lesson plans, activities, and materials for teaching disability history.

Disability History Museum

www.disabilitymuseum.org

This site promotes understanding about the historical experience of people with disabilities

by recovering, chronicling, and interpreting their stories. The site's library contains document and visual stills collections.

Disability Social History Project

www.disabilityhistory.org/index.html

This resource is a community history project that provides information about famous activists in the disability movement, a disability history timeline, and related information.

EDGE - Education for Disability and Gender Equity

www.disabilityhistory.org/dwa/edge/curriculum/

This site includes a high school curriculum incorporating disability and gender issues into the Humanities and Sciences.

Resources (continued)

Family Village

www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/general/history.html

This resource centralizes a number of resources on disability history.

Florida Youth Council

www.ncl-d-youth.info/fyc.htm

This site details the grassroots efforts to celebrate “Disability History and Awareness Weeks” in Florida and provides general information about disability history.

Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities

www.mncdd.org/parallels/index.html

This site provides extensive information on disability history.

Mountain State Centers for Independent Living

www.mtstcil.org/advocacy/2006youth-sb472.html

This page is dedicated to the youth who brought the “Establishing Disability History Week” law to West Virginia.

Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (PACER Center)

www.pacer.org/C3/curriculum/Session2/

This page provides both resources and curricula for teaching disability history.

Resource Center for Independent Living

www.rcil.com/DisabilityFAQ/DisabilityRightsMovement.html

This site provides a timeline of the disability civil rights movement.

Santa Monica College Accommodating Students with Disabilities

www.smc.edu/disabledstudent/Guide/34philos.htm

This page offers insight into the philosophy behind disability rights.

Smithsonian National Museum of American History

www.americanhistory.si.edu/disabilityrights/welcome.html

This site offers a virtual tour of the Disability Rights Movement Exhibit at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

Tolerance.Org

www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?p=0&ar=872&pa=1

This site contains activities that can be done in the classroom relating to disability history.

West Virginia Legislation

www.legis.state.wv.us/Bill_Text_HTML/2006_SESSIONS/RS/BILLS/hb4491%20enr.htm

This is the West Virginia bill that established “Disability History Week” in the state.

West Virginia News Release on Disability History Week

wvde.state.wv.us/news/1297

This page provides information to other states exploring ways to spread the word about their Disability History Weeks/Months. It also provides resources for teachers.



Office of Disability Employment Policy - U.S. Department of Labor
200 Constitution Avenue, NW · Washington, DC 20210
Voice: 1-866-ODEP-DOL (633-7365) · TTY: 1-877-889-5627
www.dol.gov/odep

