

TIMES PAST
1990

Judy Heumann at a rally
for disability rights, 1977

A 'Declaration of Equality'

Thirty years ago, Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act, an important civil rights milestone that protects people with disabilities from discrimination BY JOE BUBAR

Judy Heumann knows what it's like to grow up in a world that wasn't built for her. In 1949, when she was 18 months old, she contracted polio, which left her paralyzed.

When Heumann's mom tried to enroll her in kindergarten in Brooklyn, New York, the principal called her a "fire hazard" because of her wheelchair, and wouldn't let her in. When she was finally allowed to attend school three years later, she and other kids with disabilities were taught in special-education classes in the basement of the school—separated from the rest of the students.

Heumann couldn't go with her friends to many places, such as the movie theater, because there were no ramps, and she often had to be carried up flights of stairs.

But Heumann never felt ashamed of who she was. She knew it wasn't people

with disabilities who needed to change—it was the world around them.

"People continually think that those of us with disabilities would prefer not to have our disabilities,"

Heumann, now 72, says. "And I believe it's important for people to see that disability is a normal part of life and that the barriers we're facing, in many ways, are external to us."

Heumann would go on to spend much of her life trying to break down those barriers—leading sit-ins and other demonstrations as one of the most prominent activists in the disability rights movement. That movement resulted in the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (A.D.A.) on July 26, 1990. The federal law makes it illegal to discriminate against people because of their disabilities. It also mandates that places like schools,

grocery stores, and theaters be made accessible—for instance, by installing wheelchair ramps, designated parking spots, and Braille signage.

Today, 30 years later, the A.D.A. is still considered one of the most important pieces of American civil rights legislation ever signed into law.

One in four American adults have a disability.

A History of Discrimination

"For a long time, people with disabilities had little to no rights across the United States," says Keri Gray, a senior director at the American Association of People with Disabilities. "So the A.D.A. is a big piece of legislation that ensures that people with disabilities can not only exist in the United States but can thrive."

Today, 61 million people in the U.S. have a disability, making the disabled community the largest minority group in the country. It includes people with

PHOTOGRAPH BY HOLLYNN D'IL, AUTHOR OF BECOMING REAL IN 24 DAYS/PHOTO COLORIZED BY BIANCA ALEXIS

visible disabilities—such as paralysis and Down syndrome—as well as invisible, or hidden, disabilities—such as Asperger syndrome and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (A.D.H.D.). A person's disability can be permanent or temporary.

Despite the fact that one in four American adults have a disability, people with disabilities have had to overcome a long history of discrimination. Before the passage of the A.D.A., for example, restaurants could legally refuse to serve people and workplaces could legally refuse to hire people because of their disabilities.

People with disabilities were often looked down upon and segregated from society. In many states, they were barred from attending public schools. And many children with disabilities were sent away to institutions that were kept out of sight from the general public and where neglect and abuse were common.

There were also physical barriers that prevented people with disabilities from fully participating in society. Many of the things we take for granted today—including curb cutouts on street corners, wheelchair lifts on public buses, and ramps in front of buildings—were uncommon, keeping people with disabilities from having the same opportunities as people without disabilities.

"People who don't have a disability often don't think about it," says Lindsey Patterson, a scholar on the disability rights movement. "But for people with



The Capitol Crawl: Protesters abandon their wheelchairs and climb up the U.S. Capitol steps, 1990.

disabilities, stairs can be the barrier between whether they have a job or not or if they can go to school or not."

Fighting Back

When the Civil Rights Act—which banned discrimination based on race—was signed into law in 1964, it inspired people with disabilities to also fight back against the injustices they faced.

After graduating from college at Long Island University in Brooklyn in 1969, Heumann won a lawsuit against the New York City school system for denying her teacher's license because

of her paralysis—becoming the first teacher in New York public schools with a wheelchair.

The victory thrust Heumann to the forefront of the disability rights movement, where she continued to protest for equal rights under the law. During one demonstration in 1972, she and other activists with disabilities parked their wheelchairs in the middle of Madison Avenue in New York City during rush hour—bringing traffic to a halt.

Those actions helped lead to the passage of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which laid the groundwork for the A.D.A. Section 504 of the act states that it's illegal for any program receiving federal aid to discriminate against people with disabilities. That meant people with disabilities would have to be given equal access to all federal jobs and services, such as public housing.

But remodeling federal buildings to make them more accessible would require a lot of money. So the government stalled on taking action, and four years later, the law had still yet to be implemented.

Many people grew tired of waiting. On



Children with disabilities were often put in institutions, where abuse was common; an institution in New York City, 1972

JEFF MARKOWITZ/AP IMAGES (CAPITOL); BILL PIERCE/THE LIFE IMAGES COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES (INSTITUTION)

Timeline DISABILITY RIGHTS MILESTONES



Archery
at the first
Paralympics
in Rome,
Italy, 1960



A student uses a wheelchair lift to board a school bus.

1933 F.D.R. & Polio

Franklin D. Roosevelt (*left*)—paralyzed by polio—becomes the first (and so far only) president with a physical disability. But he mostly hides his wheelchair from public view.

1960 The Paralympics

The first Paralympic Games are held in Rome, Italy, for athletes with physical disabilities. They take place after every Olympics.

1975 Education for All

Congress enacts legislation requiring public schools to provide equal access to students with disabilities.

April 5, 1977, demonstrations took place across the country.

Sitting In for Equality

That day, Heumann wheeled her way into the office building of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in San Francisco with about 100 other activists. They refused to leave until Section 504 was put in place. Little did they know, their sit-in would end up lasting nearly a month—making it the longest occupation of a federal building in U.S. history.

Night after night, they slept on the cold, hard floor of the office building. Many hadn't prepared to stay more than a day, so they had only the clothes on their backs.

The hot water and phone lines were cut off. But several of the protesters knew sign language, so they relayed messages through the windows to the press and supporters outside. Other organizations, including the civil rights group the Black Panthers, also provided assistance, bringing them food, soap, and supplies.

But the main thing that kept them going, Heumann says, was “the belief that we could do it—and the belief that if we quit it would be a national failure.”

Their determination paid off. On April 28, the regulations implementing Section 504 were finally signed.

“For the first time,” says Patterson, “it really proved nationwide that people with disabilities are also human and deserve civil rights.”

Section 504 applied only to federally funded buildings and programs. But it paved the way for the A.D.A., which

FRANKLIN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (TOP); AP IMAGES (ARCHERY); THE TELEGRAPH; JOHN BURNHAM/IMAGES (BUS); COURTESY OF FANISEE BIAS

How I Found Purpose in My Disability BY FANISEE BIAS, AGE 20

I was in my sixth grade **P.E. class** when I went to get up from the ground. All of a sudden, I was unable to feel my legs, my vision became blurred, sound was faint, and I was in shock. I was rushed to the hospital, where I was diagnosed with a spinal disease called transverse myelitis. Throughout junior high and high school, I was in a wheelchair. I then moved on to forearm crutches, and now I walk with canes.

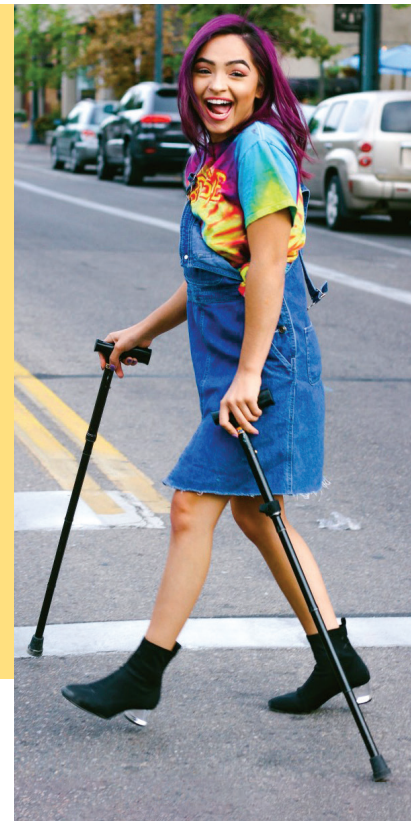
I used to think my “old” life ended at the time of my diagnosis in 2012, but it turns out that was just

the beginning of a new perspective on life, happiness, and disability. I never really talked about my disability in junior high. Growing older, I found the right people, support systems, and ways to engage in disability justice, where I discovered passion and purpose.

When I got to the University of San Diego in 2018—as a young, disabled, low-income woman of color and first-generation college student—I was eager to find community. I created a student organization called the Alliance of Disability

Advocates. We push for greater accessibility and accommodations on campus, such as elevators in buildings and American Sign Language interpreters. We also work to erase stigma surrounding people with disabilities and to increase awareness and implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (A.D.A.).

The A.D.A. isn't always enforced, so young people with disabilities need to know their rights and be their own advocates. We should never stop striving for more inclusivity, equity, and progress.





Activists lie down in front of a city bus in Denver to protest for wheelchair lifts.



The Disability Pride Parade in New York City, 2019

1978 The Gang of 19

Nineteen activists block traffic in Denver to protest for wheelchair lifts on public buses, sparking a movement to make transportation accessible.

1988 'Deaf President Now!'

A student protest at Gallaudet University, a college for Deaf people, leads to the school's first Deaf president and raises awareness of Deaf issues.

1990

Americans with Disabilities Act

TODAY Disability Pride

Disability justice activists continue to push for a more equitable society, and disability pride parades are now held in many cities across the country.

would extend the regulations to privately run places and businesses.

Momentum for passing the A.D.A. soon picked up steam but stalled in the spring of 1990. To pressure Congress to pass the act, hundreds of protesters arrived on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., on March 12. With news cameras rolling, dozens of them ditched their wheelchairs and crutches and pulled themselves up the steps of the U.S. Capitol. The dramatic protest came to be known as the Capitol Crawl. And it showed the world the importance of the A.D.A.—with its guarantee that places make “reasonable accommodations” for people with disabilities.

'The Shameful Wall of Exclusion'

Just over four months later, history was made. At a ceremony on the White House lawn in front of about 3,000 spectators, many of whom were in wheelchairs, President George H.W. Bush signed the landmark legislation, calling it a “declaration of equality.”

“Let the shameful wall of exclusion finally come tumbling down,” President Bush announced.



Wheelchair basketball at the 2016 Summer Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

The passage of the A.D.A. means that schools, transportation, and other areas of life are supposed to be accessible to everyone. As a result, things like closed captioning and elevators are much more common today—and people like 21-year-old Jake Linn have grown up in a very different world from the one in which Heumann grew up.

Linn, a senior at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has A.D.H.D., post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. He says the A.D.A. gives him confidence to be himself.

Thirty years after the A.D.A., there's still more work to do.

“The A.D.A. for me means I’m not afraid of asking for accommodations from school, in academia, or the workplace,” he says.

However, people with disabilities still face challenges that people without disabilities don’t. Many places still aren’t fully accessible, for instance. Studies have found that students with disabilities are bullied at high rates. And only 31 percent of working-age people with disabilities were employed last year, compared with 75 percent of those without disabilities, according to the Department of Labor.

Linn says a big problem is that people with disabilities are still too often viewed in a negative light: as people to pity, fear, or loathe. He’s studying film in college, hoping to help change the way people with disabilities are portrayed on TV and in movies.

“People have gained their perceptions from media,” he says. “And there are often negative depictions of people with disabilities, which has affected people like me.”

As for Heumann, she wants teenagers with disabilities to know that their rights are protected by the A.D.A.—and they’re not alone.

“I don’t want people to feel that they are lesser because they have a disability,” she says. “Ultimately, their disability gives them strength.” ●

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