



The ADA is 25!  
By Joan L. Headley, Executive Director  
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July 26, 1990 was an historic day for people with disabilities.

President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as shown in the iconic photo.

In addition to former President Bush, the most recognizable person in the photo is Justin Dart (far right), a polio survivor with Texas roots. Dart, who as Chair of the Congressional Task Force on the Rights and Empowerment of People with Disabilities, traversed the country holding public hearings which were attended by thousands of people with disabilities, friends and families documenting their lives of discrimination.

Seated at left is Evan Kemp, Jr., disabled with Kugel-Welander syndrome, who held a law degree and began his career at the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission where he received raises until he started using a wheelchair. He became politically active and ultimately was considered an “insider” because of his friendship with C. Boyden Gray, Bush’s legal counsel. Kemp was appointed by Bush to head the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in March of 1990 and was in the position to argue both publicly and within the administration for a disability rights law.

Behind Kemp is The Reverend Harold Wilkie, born without arms, credited with making organized religion more accessible to people with disabilities. First as a leader within the United Church of Christ, he became a national leader for social action opening the ministry to women and people with disabilities. Reverend Wilkie delivered the invocation at the ceremony and accepted a ceremonial pen from the President with his foot.

The lone woman and the mother of children with a disability is Sandra Swift Parrino. She was chair of the National Council on Disability, which is an independent agency today due to her insistence. The council called for federal civil rights protection for people with disabilities. The document, Toward Independence, spearheaded by director Lex Frieden, led attorney Robert L. Burgdorf to draft the first version of the ADA introduced in Congress in April 1988.

I recall the cramped room in St. Louis in which people publicly and passionately shared their stories as requested by Justin Dart, the signing of several postcards to be sent to Congress and the counting out and packing up of 1,000 postcards sent to post-polio support groups around the country.

I worked hard and was hopeful. I was not in Washington on July 26, but I was proud. The same was true for thousands of people with disabilities living in the United States.

Do you have your own memories of what you did to advance the cause?

Congratulate yourself and celebrate.

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