

# History Note – Many women played key roles in the passage of the ADA

by [Access Press Staff](#) // February 10th, 2017

In 1987, Congress declared March as National Women’s History Month. A special presidential proclamation is issued every year to honor the extraordinary achievements of women in the United States.

Countless women with disabilities have played key roles in the disability rights movement, the movement from institutionalization to community living, education reforms and the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA Legacy Project has compiled biographies of women who were leaders in the movement to pass the ADA 26 years ago. Access Press will present some of their stories in our February and March issues.

Thousands of other women served in various leadership capacities and were instrumental in securing the passage of the ADA. They all can be considered the “Mothers” of the ADA.

Patrisha Wright was more than a “Woman of the ADA.” Her leadership during the ADA’s passage eventually earned her the nickname “The General.” She was one of a handful of leading strategies based in Washington, DC and worked especially closely with Ralph Neas, Executive Director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights.

Wright and Neas collaborated with a number of other leaders who focused on different objectives for passing the ADA, including Washington lobbyists Liz Savage and Paul Marchand; grassroots organizers Justin Dart and Marilyn Golden; and attorneys Arlene Mayerson, Chai Feldblum, and Robert Burgdorf.

Wright served as chief of the negotiating team representing Americans with disabilities throughout the ADA legislative process. Leader Justin Dart called her “one of the great Congressional negotiators of American history.”

Wright made her first major inroads into the disability rights movement at the Section 504 sit-in in San Francisco in April 1977. Although she was there mainly to serve as a personal assistant to Judy Heumann, Wright began to reveal and develop her negotiating skills in dealing with authorities. This experience led her to become more involved with overall advocacy efforts.

In the late 1970s, she joined DREDF, the Disability Rights Education, and Defense Fund, where she worked with Robert Funk, Mary Lou Breslin, and Arlene Mayerson to advocate for disability rights on a national level. Wright was so widely respected in Congress and the White House that her unique apparel and colorful vocabulary were safe from reproach. The ADA’s success was due in no small part to Wright’s strategic leadership.

Wright’s many allies included Chai R. Feldblum and Liza Savage. Feldblum served on Wright’s team as a full-time negotiator and advocate. While working from 1988-1991 as Legislative

Counsel to the AIDS Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, Feldblum was also lead attorney on the team drafting the ADA. She served as chief legal counsel to the disability community during negotiations and passage of the ADA and was equally instrumental in drafting and negotiating the ADA Amendments Act of 2008.

In 2010, President Barack Obama nominated Feldblum to serve as Commissioner of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

During the late 1980s, when Savage was with the Epilepsy Foundation, she coordinated the Congressional lobbying campaign, building a coalition of more than 75 national disability, civil rights, religious and civic organizations, that led to the enactment of the ADA. Savage was Pat Wright's strong right-hand woman.

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*Access Press* is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at [access@accesspress.org](mailto:access@accesspress.org) or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, [www.mnddc.org](http://www.mnddc.org) or [www.mncdd.org](http://www.mncdd.org) and [www.partnersinpolicymaking.com](http://www.partnersinpolicymaking.com).