

History Note: Protests, podium appearances created lasting ADA images

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

During March, Women's History Month, Access Press honors women who played a role in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). They are sometimes described as the "mothers" of the ADA. This month is a look at some of the women whose actions created lasting images linked to the ADA's passage. Information is from the ADA Legacy Project.

Thousands of women worked toward the passage of the ADA and other civil rights legislation tied to the disability rights movement. Many women came out of the independent living movement, the earliest disability groups, and the legal and medical communities to be advocates. Some women sought the limelight and were on the front lines of protests and hearings at the state and federal levels. Others worked quietly behind the scenes and all worked with tenacity and seeming tirelessly.

Some of the "mothers" of the ADA are remembered for acts that drew widespread media attention. Jennifer Keelan, who became the central media image for the disability movement, might be considered a "daughter" of the ADA. A photo of eight-year-old Keelan, struggling forward on her hands and knees up the steps of the nation's capitol as part of an ADAPT protest, is an unforgettable image.

Many people questioned ADAPT's tactic of crawling up the steps and particularly the inclusion of a child. As one of the 60 people who participated in "The Capitol Crawl," Keelan was already experienced activist. She was first arrested at age seven with her mother, Cynthia, at a demonstration in Montreal. The mother and daughter remain activists to this day.

Another lasting image is that of Lisa Carl, the Tacoma, Washington advocate whose eloquent testimony about being denied entry to her local movie theater impressed Congress and then-President George H.W. Bush. Carl used a wheelchair, which the theater couldn't accommodate. She attended the ADA signing ceremony where she met Bush, who shook her hand and said, "Lisa now will always be admitted to her hometown theater."

Another ADA activist whose face became well known is Sandra Swift Parrino, a past chairperson of the National Council on Disability. The council's efforts on a comprehensive civil rights bill date back to 1983.

Parrino, the mother of two sons with disabilities, led the council through the long fight toward ADA passage. She worked with legendary activist Justin Dart and many others. In a 1986 report, "Toward Independence," the council included a recommendation that "Congress should enact a comprehensive law requiring equal opportunity for people with disabilities ... such a statute should be packaged as a single comprehensive bill, perhaps under such a title as 'The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1986.'"

In the days when the administration had few influential proponents, Parrino provided tenacious leadership to create the ADA as a real civil rights law and for its introduction into Congress. In the iconic photo and video of President George H.W. Bush signing the act into law, Parrino is the only female and “mother of the ADA” sharing the podium with the “fathers of the ADA” Justin Dart and Evan Kemp.

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 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 or www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com.