

Wolfensberger's influence cited in ADA history

by [Access Press Staff](#) // April 10th, 2014

American social constructs were dehumanizing for people with disabilities in the decades leading up to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). When looking back at this history, Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger is one of the standouts. His eye for the details, consequences, and ramifications of the origins and evolution of history on the attitudes and perceptions of people with disabilities is widely recognized.

German native Wolfensberger was a professor and director of the Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency at Syracuse University. He did research and taught at other universities. Much of his work was concerned with ideologies, structures and planning patterns of human service systems, especially concerning people with developmental disabilities and their families. He was the originator of Citizen Advocacy and Social Role Valorization, and the foremost proponent of normalization in North America. Wolfensberger died in 2011 but his work and teachings live on.

The Minnesota Governor's Council for Developmental Disabilities recently posted video clips in which Wolfensberger chronicles the rise of social justice, compassion, dignity, transformation and empowerment from the "profound bankruptcy of vision," to the "might makes right" power politics of professionals and services in the 1950s through the 1970s. This is part of the ADA Legacy Project. To learn about Wolfensberger and see the clips, go [here](#).

If it wasn't for the American normalization movement's positive influence on the American Civil Rights movement, the Disability Rights movement may have had a very different focus— attempts to improve institutions and segregated places rather than promotion of inclusion and integration in the community.

Wolfensberger describes how the American normalization movement's influence on education, and indirectly on the legal profession, brought the treatment of people with disabilities out of the programmatic construct and into the legal construct. He noted, however, that this evolution did not come without its own "mischief."

Wolfensberger had key influence on the federal Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (DD Act). Under former Sen. Lowell Weicker's (D- Connecticut) leadership, the 1984 amendments to the DD Act preceded the ADA with legislative language that promoted independence, productivity and integration.

The video clips feature other prominent figures discussing Wolfensberger's influence. One clip features Dr. William Bronston, who led the exposure and class action lawsuit against the State of New York's infamous Willowbrook State School on Staten Island in 1971. Bronston notes that Wolfenberg asks an gives no quarter in his telling of the history of human services, including the disability rights movement.

Wolfensberger challenges those who may feel they are playing a confident and active role in promoting social justice, compassion, dignity, transformation and empowerment. Wolfensberger's lessons provide insight on what more needs to be done and what needs to be done differently. He also raises cautions about the perversities associated with the disability rights movement, including the Americans with Disabilities Act. Recognizing how we have fallen short inspires us to do better.

The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, mn.gov/mnddc and mn.gov/mnddc/pipm