

Civil Disobedience is Part of the ADA's History

by [Access Press Staff](#) // April 10th, 2015

Protests marked the beginning and the end of the two year run-up to the passage of the Americans with Disability Act (ADA). Two history-making protests, the Ides of March to the ADA, occurred in the month of March – the Gallaudet student protest in March 1988 and the “Crawl Up” the U.S. Capitol steps in March 1990.

The Gallaudet protest marked the turning point of the public perception of people with disabilities as objects of pity and the beginning of a new public consciousness regarding people with disabilities. The “Capitol Crawl” is seen as helping to shape perceptions of people with disabilities, and promoting the view of disability as a civil rights issue.

The 1988 week-long protest by deaf students at Gallaudet University, calling for the appointment of a deaf university president, was a defining moment for the disability rights movement. This demonstration gave Americans a new consciousness about disability that grew out of a growing sense of oppression. It gave voice to anger bottled up over years of individuals being seen as pitiful and sick, and was reflected in news accounts.

The ADA was introduced two months after the Gallaudet protest. Lex Frieden, then of the National Council on the Handicapped said, “It would not have happened without Gallaudet raising people’s consciousness.” It was a historical irony that deaf students, equating disability with civil rights, gave such a boost to the ADA movement when so many people who are deaf regard deafness as a culture but not as a disability.

When the ADA stalled in the House Committee on Public Works and Transportation (now the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure), people within the disability community became alarmed. About 475 individuals, many in wheelchairs, gathered on the sidewalk in front of the White House to launch the “Wheels of Justice Campaign.” Sixty protesters with disabilities cast aside their wheelchairs, crutches and walkers to crawl or drag themselves, step by step, up the 78 marble stairs of at the capitol’s west front. Other protesters watched and cheered them on.

The protest, which became known as the “Capitol Crawl”, was intended to openly illustrate the struggles that people in the disabilities communities faced and spurred Congress to pass the ADA. The late Michael Winter, former executive director of the Berkeley Center for Independent Living, contributed his reflections on the protest to ADAPT’s 25th Anniversary “I Was There Series” of firsthand accounts:

“Some people may have thought it was undignified for people in wheelchairs to crawl in that manner, but I felt that it was necessary to show the country what kinds of things people with disabilities have to face on a day-to-day basis. We had to be willing to fight for what we believed in.”

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. 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.