

# 1990 Petition Regarded as Magna Carta for Disability Rights

by [Access Press Staff](#) // May 8th, 2015

What is considered to be the most impressive petition drive of its day, for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), bears the names of more than 8,500 people with disabilities, their advocates and organizations. While gathering thousands of petition signatures is easy with today's social media and online tools, this important petition took shape 25 years ago. Supporters had to pass and mail paper copies to get names added, which was no easy task.

But the petition was needed to show support for the ADA and to keep elected officials from weakening its protections. By March 1990, the ADA had already passed the U.S. Senate, 76-8, and had bipartisan Congressional support. The petition called for the ADA to be approved by the House of Representatives. The petition appeared in the February 7, 1990 edition of the *Washington Post*. It was the idea of the late Justin Dart. Justin's wife, Yoshiko, recalled that it was very expensive to buy a full page ad but he convinced the *Washington Post* sales department to charge only half price.

Yoshiko Dart solicited donations from around the country, kept up with hundreds of incoming contribution checks of \$2, \$5, \$10 and \$25; sorting and depositing them in their local bank, and entering donors' names without a modern computer system.

The ad was headlined, Message to Congress from Representatives of 43 Million Americans with Disabilities. The ad congratulated then-President George H.W. Bush, Attorney General Richard Thornburgh, Senators Tom Harkin, Robert Dole, Ted Kennedy, John McCain, Paul Simon, David Durenberger, Orrin Hatch and all who supported the Senate's approval of the ADA.

The ad stated, "WE URGE THE PROMPT APPROVAL by the US House of Representatives of this landmark legislation to provide to people with disabilities the comprehensive civil rights protection which other minorities attained more than two decades ago."

The ad also urged that the House reject "weakening amendments that would legalize intolerable discrimination which has made people with disabilities this nation's most isolated, unemployed, impoverished and welfare dependent minority." The ADA was under fire by those who claimed it would impose high costs on businesses, and put businesses at risk for litigation.

"These claims are groundless," the ad stated. "They reflect the same obsolete attitudes, unfounded fears and doomsday predictions that have greeted all previous extensions of basic civil rights protections." Yoshiko Dart recalled that Harkin was impressed by the ad and instructed his aide to find out who organized it. The aide called the telephone number listed at the bottom of the ad.

One week later, on February 14, 1990, Justin Dart had an opportunity to see Bush in the Oval Office. He wanted to make sure the president would see the actual ad. One of Yoshiko Dart's

daughters wrote a message, with red marker, on the full-page ad. “Mr. President, Happy Valentine’s! We love you!” That brought a smile from the commander-in-chief. Most of the elected officials who championed the ADA are gone from the scene. Justin Dart died in 2002 at the age of 71, from congestive heart failure related to complications of post-polio syndrome.

Years after his death, he is still is an icon for the modern disability movement and the ideals of inclusion, advocacy and leadership. In his final statement, Dart wrote: “I call for solidarity among all who love justice, all who love life, to create a revolution that will empower every single human being to govern his or her life, to govern the society and to be fully productive of life quality for self and for all.”

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*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](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.*