

History Note – A look back, 25 years ago

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

Many of the activists and leaders who pushed through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are gone now. Justin Dart Jr., who founded disability advocacy groups and was a leader in passage of the ADA, died in 2002. Evan Kemp Jr., who led the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and helped shape the ADA for President George H.W. Bush's administration, died in 1997.

But others who were involved with the ADA and its final passage in 1990 now reflect on those momentous times. These comments are excerpted from the ADA Legacy Project: Moments in Disability History.

Now-retired Senators David Durenberger (Minnesota) and Tom Harkin (Iowa) introduced the ADA to the Senate in the 101st Congress on May 9, 1989. Durenberger recalled the act's signing. "As President George H. W. Bush approached the platform on which he was to sign the ADA bill into law, the band played 'Hail to the Chief.'

All present, who were able, stood to welcome the president who helped make the ADA a reality. Immediately we heard a chorus of voices of those who were unable to stand, yell 'Down in front.' Said it all right there on the White House lawn!"

"If I learned anything from my life before the Senate, it was the value of independent living to persons with disabilities from early in life or after serious aging sets in, meaning living in interdependence with a community of supportive persons and public policies. By the time I stood for re-election to my second term in office, I proudly wore a 'Durenberger: He's Accessible' button produced by friends in the community of persons with disabilities," he said.

Durenberger recalled that the federal legislation had roots in Minnesota law and policy that date back more than 50 years. He also recalled that many people, businesses and advocacy groups said the ADA couldn't be passed for costs and practicality reasons. When told that companies and government couldn't afford to make changes outlined in the ADA, his response was "We can't afford not to do it."

Harkin chaired the Senate Subcommittee on Disability Policy. He worked closely with staff to rewrite the 1988 version and to negotiate consensus positions with the White House, business, colleague senators, and the disability community. He led the fight in the Senate to maintain the principle of equality. He called the ADA the 20th century emancipation proclamation for people with disabilities.

"Before the ADA, I heard stories of individuals who had to crawl on their hands and knees to go up a flight of stairs, who couldn't ride a bus because there wasn't a lift, and individuals couldn't attend a baseball game with their own family due to accessibility at the ball park. Millions of Americans were denied access to their own communities – and the American dream," Harkin said.

“I saw this firsthand in the life of my older brother Frank, who was deaf. He was the inspiration for my sponsoring the ADA, and my lifelong work on disability rights. We’ve come so far as a country since passage of the ADA,” said Harkin. “However, the work is far from over. We must continue the fight for policies that promote equal opportunity, full participation, self-determination, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for people with disabilities and their families.”

Congressman Steny Hoyer (Maryland) shepherded the ADA to overwhelming approval in the House in 1990. In 2008, Hoyer also led the effort to pass the ADA Amendments Act, which allows millions of people with disabilities to benefit from the ADA’s original intent of inclusion.

“When Congress passed the ADA 25 years ago, it represented a seminal moment in the history of civil rights in our country. For millions, the ADA has meant independence, opportunity, and dignity, and its impact on their lives and the life of our nation is incalculable,” said Hoyer. “I am incredibly proud to have played a role in enacting this landmark law – as well as in working to strengthen it through the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 when I was Majority Leader. Passing and improving the ADA has been a bipartisan endeavor, and I hope Democrats and Republicans will continue to stand together when it comes to advancing the cause of equality and inclusion for people with disabilities and their families.”

George Covington, special assistant to Vice President Dan Quayle, was among leadership in the White House credited with breaching the barriers of tradition to make the ADA happen. Covington, who is legally blind, helped Quayle reach out to people with disabilities. (Covington is retired and living in West Texas.)

Quayle was the first vice president to attend Paralympics competition, attending the games in Long Island, New York, in 1990, at Covington’s urging. Quayle reflected on the ADA. “Throughout my life, I have had the opportunity to meet and know individuals with disabilities. Believe me there is no difference between the attitudes, capabilities, and aspirations of disabled people and those of their non-disabled co-workers. The main distinction is the attitude of society. Too often, negative images, myths, and stereotypes cause employers to underestimate the talents and contributions of qualified job applicants with disabilities.”

“We have made great progress in the last 25 years but there is still a great deal to be done. Today, citizens with disabilities have forums for expressing themselves that were not even imagined when we passed the ADA. Social media allows everyone to reach vast audiences in real time. No one can express the goals and dreams of people with disabilities better than they can themselves,” said Quayle.

On July 26, 1990, Kemp had the honor of introducing President George H.W. Bush at the signing ceremony for the Americans with Disabilities Act. Dart was at his side. Kemp introduced President Bush as “the foremost member of the disability community.”

Twenty-five years later, the former president said: “Signing the ADA into law will remain one of the proudest moments of our administration. We reached out and worked in a true spirit of bipartisanship to get that landmark legislation done, and in so doing gave tens of millions

Americans a fairer shot at the American Dream. Even today, the ADA is still bringing Americans together to focus not on our differences, but on what unites us as a people. Now that I need a wheelchair to get around, I know firsthand how cut curbs, ramps, and other provisions of the ADA help mitigate the barriers to vast segments of society. I certainly did not envision being a beneficiary when fighting for the Act's passage, of course, but it has been gratifying to see how it is helping people in all kinds of situations."

Indeed, the former president was, and is, the foremost member of the disability community.

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.