

History Note: Stories bring the message of discrimination

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



The path to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was paved by storytellers, not just a few, but thousands of storytellers across the nation. More than 5,000 stories were collected by disability rights activist Justin Dart, to show the range of issues faced by people with disabilities and the barriers that limit ability to actively participate in their communities. Here is one woman's story:

On May 28, 1988, Lisa Carl, a young woman with cerebral palsy who uses a wheelchair, wanted to see a favorite film at an accessible theater in Tacoma, Wash. The theater manager refused to accept her \$1 admission and the theater owner, who was called by an advocate on Lisa's behalf, said, "I don't want her in here and I don't have to let her in."

Peter Guber, author of *Tell To Win*, contends that stories can also function as Trojan horses. The story is actually just a delivery system for the teller's agenda, a trick for sneaking a message into the fortified citadel of the human mind.

Dart, widely recognized as the "father of the Americans with Disabilities Act", was aware of the power of storytelling. He knew that people with disabilities and their families had powerful stories to tell — stories about discrimination, segregation and inequality. Dart knew that stories could impact change.

Between 1988 and 1989, Dart held 62 public forums in 50 states, Washington, D.C., and Guam to collect stories of discrimination. His intent was to create a network of national support for passage of the ADA. The forums, however, were his Trojan horse for putting the message of equal rights for people with disabilities into the minds of the public. The forums provided an opportunity for people with disabilities and other advocates to publicly disclose and express their frustrations and outrage at discriminatory practices. Some of those who shared their stories became leading advocates on disability rights, including Congressman Tony Coelho of California.

The stories are powerful and moving. One story was about a Nebraska university associate professor of communications, denied a place on a speakers' bureau because he stuttered. Another described an Illinois school system, where students with disabilities were locked inside wooden boxes for up to 30 minutes, as discipline.

It is fitting to celebrate the witness of leading disability advocates and their influence on what became the ADA. But many ordinary Americans with disabilities and their families were prophets of the ADA. Dart's collection of stories reminds us that the prophets we most need to remember are hidden in plain sight among us. The collection is part of It's Our Story, a mixed-media digital history archive that houses the most comprehensive collection of videos, photos and documents regarding life with disability in America, compiled by Scott Cooper. It's Our Story is available [here](#).

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.