

## **10c - Storming the Barricades**

While many groups have battled against legal barriers that have prevented their full participation, Americans with disabilities have struggled to remove physical barriers. Passage of Section 504 was a giant leap forward on the road to equal access to public facilities.

Since colonial days, Americans with mental and physical limitations typically have been pushed to the margins of society. Deemed uneducable, unemployable and socially unfit, thousands of disabled people were shut away in almshouses and later in state institutions. Such facilities were often places of neglect and abuse. They also promoted dependence. But in the early 1800s, doctors and others working with blind and deaf individuals began to promote the idea that the disabled could be integrated into their communities and become self-sufficient. With these goals in mind, the first school for the blind opened its doors in Baltimore, Md., in 1812; five years later, a school for the deaf was established in Hartford, Conn. By the end of the century, disabled Americans began to form their own organizations, such as the National Association of the Deaf and the National Federation of the Blind. These coalitions were not charities; rather, they were self-led advocacy groups that promoted the interests of disabled citizens.

Disability rights protests during the early 20th century, however, were fragmented and sporadic. Disabled Americans engaged in civil disobedience for the first time in 1935, when the newly formed League for the Physically Handicapped organized sit-ins and picket lines to demand Works Progress Administration jobs. Following World War II, disabled veterans also organized and pressed for employment opportunities.

In the 1960s, the Independent Living Movement ushered in a new era of activism. The movement began at the University of California's Berkeley campus when a group of physically disabled students - many of them paraplegics and quadriplegics - joined forces and formed what they called "the Rolling Quads."

The students spent long hours strategizing about how to become more self-sufficient and less isolated from mainstream society. Their efforts eventually led to the formation of the Center for Independent Living (CIL) which helped anyone with disabilities become integrated into the larger community by providing housing assistance, transportation and other services. Run by people with disabilities, the CIL was based on the principle that "independence" meant everyone had the right to make their own decisions about how to live, no matter how serious their disabilities.

The Independent Living Movement gave birth to a new generation of disability rights activists. They demanded freedom from discrimination - a right granted women and racial, ethnic and religious minorities - and freedom from the segregation imposed by inaccessible buildings, transportation and sidewalks.

Section 504 represented the coming together of these people with a new sense of what their rights were and what they could accomplish.

But Section 504 was just the beginning of changes to come. The crowning achievement of the growing disability rights movement was the passage in 1990 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), one of the most comprehensive pieces of civil rights legislation in history. Where Section 504 guaranteed people with disabilities access to schools, hospitals and other institutions that received federal funding, the ADA

extended their access to employment, transportation and privately owned businesses, such as stores and restaurants.

Implementation of the ADA has been a long, difficult process that continues today. But its impact on the lives of millions of people has been significant, offering disabled Americans for the first time in our nation's history the promise of full citizenship under the law.

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