

The Voice

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Happy Birthday ADA!

A Historical Look at Inclusion and Accessibility in New York

By Dr. Lynn Anderson, CTRS, CPRP
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Twenty years ago in July, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law. This historic civil rights legislation guaranteed people with disabilities the same access to all aspects of life as people without disabilities, from work to play to community living. Though the passage of ADA was a huge milestone for inclusion and accessibility, it is not the beginning of the story of equal rights for people with disabilities in New York, especially in the area of parks and recreation. Let's take a look back and revisit some of the notable events that marked improved inclusion and accessibility in New York, meet parks and recreation professionals who worked tirelessly to create positive change, and celebrate where we are today.

The Early Segregated Years

Since the 1600's, New York has provided some sort of services to people with disabilities. In the 17th and 18th century, people with disabilities were viewed as needing to be cared for, protected, and excluded from society. The New York Museum of Disability, administered by the self-advocacy group People, Inc. in Buffalo, provides an interesting timeline of the early years of treatment of people with disabilities. Often sheltered in county poor houses, people with disabilities were viewed as idiots, feeble-minded, lunatics, and un-trainable (www.museumofdisability.org). In the late 1800's and early 1900's, large institutions were built around New York, where people with disabilities were sent to live in segregated, crowded, and often dismal conditions. For most of the 1900's, people with disabilities were largely absent from most New York communities, spending their entire lives in places like Willowbrook, Hutchings, or Rome. Even veterans with disabilities from the World Wars often lived in the isolation of veterans' hospitals or homes like Bath or Oxford.

Community Integration and Mainstreaming

During the 1960's and 70's, the impetus to "deinstitutionalize" people with disabilities began in earnest, often fueled by lawsuits such as that brought by the Association for Retarded Children against the State of New York for the conditions and treatment received at Willowbrook. Throughout the 70's and 80's, more people with disabilities were being moved out of large institutions and living in communities, often in group homes, around the State of New York. During this time period, important legislation was passed that began to ensure equal rights and equal access for people with disabilities (see Table 1).

One significant law was the Rehabilitation Act and its Section 504. In essence, Section 504 stated that "no qualified individual with a disability in the United States shall be excluded from, denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under" any program or activity that either receives Federal

Table 1. A Timeline of Important Laws for Disability Rights

1968 Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) Declared that any building receiving federal funding from 1969 onward had to be accessible for people with disabilities.
1973 Rehabilitation Act (including Section 504) A large victory for the disability rights movement - the discrimination of people with disabilities is addressed for the first time especially in Section 504.
1975 The Education for All Handicapped Children Act Mandated that the states, with the assistance of the federal government, provide a free and appropriate education for all children regardless of the seriousness of their disability in the least restrictive environment.
1990 The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) An extension of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, a right to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment is again included in this legislation.
1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Provides civil rights protection to Americans with disabilities. Equal opportunity was established for employment, transportation, telecommunications, public accommodations and the state and federal government's services. This act is considered the most wide-sweeping civil rights bill for individuals with disabilities.
2008 Americans with Disabilities Act Amendment Act (ADAAA) Clarified issues related to the definition of disability, protected more people from discrimination and assured reasonable accommodations.
From: www.museumofdisability.org/society_law.asp and www.ada.gov

financial assistance or is conducted by an Executive agency (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005).

Section 504, along with the large movement of people with disabilities from institutional settings to community living, had a significant impact on parks and recreation. From being absent and invisible to society, to being in the neighborhood and at the park, people with disabilities posed new challenges to recreation and parks agencies. How did we respond?

The Pioneers of the 60's and 70's

At both the state and municipal level, the parks and recreation profession in New York began to meet the needs of people with disabilities in earnest. Because people with disabilities had been absent for literally centuries, the existing built environments and developed programs were not designed to accommodate wide variations in human functioning. Parks, playgrounds, museums, recreation centers, sports programs, and the like had been designed for the "typical" person. Stairs, narrow doors, dim lighting, limited forms of communication, and limited teaching and coaching styles were the norm. Parks and recreation facilities and programs needed immediate and targeted action to become more accessible and to facilitate "mainstreaming."

At the state level, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) led the way in helping parks and recreation develop more physically accessible facilities. Peggy Payne, a graduate of SUNY Cortland and then the Assistant Commissioner for Recreation with OPRHP was one of the pioneers in this effort (see Figure 1). In 1979, she worked with a team of university professors and students, architects, and parks professionals to develop a set of guidelines for physically accessible playgrounds. Called "Playground for All Children," the resource manual helped communities design and build play equipment for children of all abilities. The project had the full support of the Commissioner of OPRHP, Orin Lehman (see Figure 2). Around that same time, Peggy crisscrossed the state of New York, with colleague Brian McLane, doing what she called the "parking, curb cuts, and comfort station road show." Teaching park managers how to make their park amenities more physically accessible, Peggy and OPRHP helped to shift our state's parks and recreation infrastructure onto the path to inclusion for all.

Figure 1. Peggy Payne in 1977, then Assistant Commission of Recreation for OPRHP



Figure 2. Quote from Orin Lehman, Commissioner of OPRHP in 1979.

Many times, we place disabled children in separate play settings under the assumption that they will be overly frustrated if their performance level is lower than that of a normal child. In effect, what we are doing is creating strangers out of probable friends. By bringing about this separation, we are saying to disabled children, "You're different, you're inferior, and you're not allowed to play with other youngsters. Therefore, the disabled child begins to believe that he is indeed strange and unwanted and tends to shy away from direct participation in the real world. At the same time, we indicate to the normal children and to their parents that there must be something almost contagious about the disabled since we remove them from playgrounds and a normal social environment. With this experience in our earliest backgrounds, why then should we be surprised when normal and disabled adults often view each other as strange beings and cannot comfortably accept each other?"

In 1984, Peggy worked with a New York State Senate Select Committee to develop the "Winter Activities Guide for the Disabled." The guide compiled all the accessibility information about winter recreation throughout the state for people with disabilities, a precursor to the now available online recreation resource database developed and maintained by the New York State Inclusive Recreation Resource Center. Throughout the 70's and 80's, New York State, led by OPRHP and people like Peggy Payne, took accessibility very seriously, beginning programs like the Access Pass and the Empire State Games for the Physically Challenged.

Figure 3. Winter Activities Guide for the Disabled



In New York City, another pioneer was at work for the same cause at the same time. Dr. Gail Levine, a graduate of NYU and, since 1994, a professor at Kingsborough Community College, was at the time a recreation director and the 504 coordinator for New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Gail coordinated a program that existed at the time called REACH (Recreation, Education, Arts, and Crafts for the Handicapped), delivered throughout New York City in all its boroughs in the 70's. She also worked to implement Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act to make New York City's parks and recreation facilities more physically accessible. Gail worked with the self advocacy group, PRIDE, and the city to develop and implement the first ever "Parking Permit for the Physically Handicapped" (see Figures 4 and 5). With Adrienne Bresnan, then an architect with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, Gail provided trainings and assessed swimming pools and recreation centers across the city for physical accessibility.

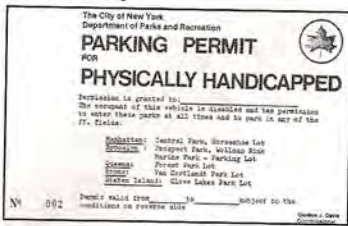
In her role as a coordinator with day camp programs for children and teens with developmental disabilities with New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, Gail hired the

Figure 4. Gail Levine and the First Ever "Handicapped Park Permit" in NYC



Displaying a sample of the new permit enabling the disabled to enter parks on weekends are: (l to r) Rose Senarchia, First Vice-president of PRIDE; Gail Levine, Director of REACH program; and Parks Department Commissioner Maurice Nixon. (Photo by Kurt D. Shamburg)

Figure 5. The First Park Permit for People with Disabilities in New York City



first ever person with a disability as a playground assistant, Edmee Rodriguez. Gail states, "I had to hire her in a 'creative way' as some would have challenged her ability to physically be able to perform her job duties." Throughout her years of training, education, and advocacy in the 70's with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, Gail felt her biggest accomplishment was raising awareness of people with disabilities and their need for services. "For my entire life, I've been always trying to make sure those who were left out were 'brought into the circle,' to participate fully in all the experiences that make life rich and full and joyful. That's been my mission." Gail continues to work tirelessly for inclusion, and has recently focused on "hidden disabilities" like psychiatric disorders, combating stigmatization and breaking down attitudinal barriers to full inclusion.

Inclusion - Where We Are Today

Thanks to the pioneering work of agencies like OPRHP and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, and to people like Peggy Payne and Gail Levine, the movement toward accessibility and inclusion was initiated. Today, we enjoy the benefits of the Americans with Disabilities Act, passed exactly 20 years ago. Our language has become more respectful, accurate, and sensitive. We know better how to support and accommodate people of varying abilities in parks and programs. We no longer segregate people in separate but not equal services, places, or programs. We assume competence and inclusion in "regular" programs and places. As summarized in Table 2 and Figure 6, we have experienced major shifts as we have matured as a thriving, diverse society.

In New York, under the leadership of the Inclusive Recreation Resource Center, we continue to work tirelessly for inclusion and access. Headquartered at SUNY Cortland, and funded in part by the NYS Developmental Disabilities Planning Council, the mission of the Center is to promote, support, and sustain inclusive recreation for people with disabilities across the state of New York through a variety of services. The Center provides training and education, such as Inclusion U, use of the

Figure 6. Major Positive Shifts in Pictures



Table 2. How We Have Changed for the Positive - Major Shifts

	FROM	TO	NOW
Disability	Seen as a defect and unchangeable; seen as preventing one from having a full life	Seen as something needing to be fixed; labels, stereotypes, and diagnoses	Seen as a variation in the human condition; people first - people are people
Societal acceptance	None - people with disabilities placed in large institutions away from society	Physically "mainstreamed" but separate and special programs and services	Physical <i>and</i> social inclusion in all aspects of living, from the built environment, to programs, to services
Attitudes and expectations	Negative attitudes; no expectations; sheltered and warehoused people with disabilities	Negative attitudes and low expectations; kept people with disabilities in separate segregated programs with simple goals, even though physically placed in communities	High expectations, challenges, risks, and opportunities for growth; full inclusion into the same life opportunities as those afforded to people without disabilities
Language	Derogatory - feeble-minded, idiot, fanatic, un-teachable, defective, possessed, imbeciles	Label first - handicapped, disabled, impaired, disturbed, autistic, retarded	Person first - people with disabilities; person with an intellectual disability, child with autism, etc.
Services	None - custodial care at best in large institutions where people were warehoused away from society	Segregated, special programs for the "handicapped" or the "disabled"	Full inclusion in regular programs and services in a community, with supports and accommodations if needed
Relationships	Caretakers, benefactors	Supervisors, special buddies, paid service providers	Friends, peers, neighbors

inclusivity Assessment Tool to describe accessibility and inclusion, technical assistance, the highly useful online recreation database (see Figure 7), and more to continue to change and improve our parks and recreation amenities in the state so ALL citizens can be fully included. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, under the leadership of Carole Fraser, Statewide Access Coordinator, has made major strides in increasing accessibility in outdoor recreation on our state lands. In New York City, the NYC Parks and Recreation Department also continues to improve access and services for people with disabilities. Table 3 lists useful websites for state resources for recreation inclusion in New York.

So much has changed, but what has stayed the same is the passion and commitment of parks and recreation professionals in New York to make sure ALL people can play wherever they choose. As we celebrate the 20th birthday of the Americans with Disabilities Act, we can renew our commitment and passion for the next 20 years. Perhaps inclusion in the 21st century will be one of those societal norms where we look back in time and can't believe it was ever any other way! Happy Birthday ADA!

Table 3. Useful Websites for Inclusion in Parks & Recreation in New York



New York State Inclusive Recreation Resource Center: www.nysirrc.org
 Other websites:
New York City Department of Parks & Recreation Access for All:
http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_about/accessibility/index.php
NYS Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation Access Pass:
<http://www.nysparks.com/admission/access-pass/default.aspx>
NYS Department of Environmental Conservation Accessible Recreation:
<http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/34035.html>

Figure 7. The NYS IRRC Online Recreation Database



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