

The Liberation Movement of the Disabled Community in the
Nineteen-Seventies

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As the Civil Rights Movement of the nineteen-sixties was dissipating, another liberation movement was evolving.¹ Inspired by minority groups such as women and African Americans in the nineteen sixties and seventies, the disabled were breaking new ground and asserting their rights for the first time.² With confidence from the Civil Rights Movement and other demonstrations, they protested and lobbied fiercely for what others had just gained. The disabled saw that the minorities before them had succeeded and believed it was now their time to become full members of American society as well.³ The largest obstacle that the disabled were forced to overcome was the long-held bias against them. The disabled community was believed to be helpless, worthless, and mentally deficient. Due to this prejudice the disabled community was the “largest, poorest, least educated, and most unemployed minority in America”.⁴ They were treated as “second-class citizens” and were a historically isolated minority, being barred from society.⁵ The disabled had traditionally been thought of and treated in a medical light, rather than one of support and understanding. In order for the disabled to become

¹ “Pendulum Swings in Education Reform, 1940-1990.” Encyclopedia of the United States in the Twentieth Century: Volume IV, s.v..

² “Rights for the Handicapped.” Volume VI: Baby Boomers and the New Conservatism, s.v.

³ “Rights for the Handicapped.” Volume VI: Baby Boomers and the New Conservatism, s.v.

⁴ Jane West, *The Americans With Disabilities Act: From Policy to Practice* (New York: Milbank Memorial Fund, 1991), xviii.

⁵ Jane West, *The Americans With Disabilities Act: From Policy to Practice* (New York: Milbank Memorial Fund, 1991), xviii.

functioning members of society, they must somehow break through and correct the mistaken beliefs held by the able-bodied community.

The disabled community began a two-part liberation movement in the 1960s. The first part of the movement involved the disabled community rejecting what able-bodied Americans believed about the disabled by both discarding the beliefs for themselves and by proving that these beliefs were wrong to society. The disabled community accomplished this by focusing on three main areas which were education, ability, and self-advocacy. By pursuing each of these three areas, the disabled could debunk the beliefs in all areas of life which combined to create a new outlook toward the disabled community. The second part of the liberation movement was integration into mainstream life. Because the disabled community rejected and debunked the beliefs that the able-bodied community held, they could then create a movement for physical changes to be made. The disabled community had to prove their worth and ability in order to give society a reason to integrate them into mainstream life. This integration was enforced by two means: legislation and accessibility.

In order for the disabled community to be integrated into society, they must first shed the beliefs held by the able-bodied community. Only when these beliefs were changed, could the disabled then begin integration into American society. They chose education, ability, and self-advocacy as their three major areas of focus. These areas would assist the general public in understanding that the disabled community was able to contribute to society, regardless of their disability.

The first method that the disabled community used to reject what able-bodied Americans believed was through the educational system. Disabled children in school were assumed to be mentally retarded or otherwise unable to function on the same level as able-bodied children. The advocates for these children understood, as many others did not, that the reason the disabled children were not doing as well was because they were not given a fair chance to learn “When the school did anything for the handicapped they usually put them in the basement of the oldest building.”⁶ This promoted low self-esteem and an aversion to learn which would perpetuate the image of the mentally impaired disabled. The advocates were fighting to prove that the disabled students could be successful and an asset to a regular classroom without becoming a burden to the teacher and fellow classmates. It is not that the disabled lacked the ability to learn, it is that they lacked the opportunity. One article stated that “these advocates have maintained that the handicapped have been the country’s most neglected learners, being provided with schooling only after ‘normal’ students were served.”⁷ This encouraged a two-class society in the schools and sent a direct message to the handicapped children that they were less than the able-bodied students.

Another major factor in the resistance was that many students and teachers did not know how to interact with the disabled. They often had trouble simply understanding how to behave toward a disabled student or classmate:

⁶ GENE I. MAEROFF, "Hope Rises on Education Of Handicapped Students :Hope Rises on Education of Handicapped," *New York Times*, 21 April 1974, 1, 48. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 4, 2006).

⁷ GENE I. MAEROFF, "Hope Rises on Education Of Handicapped Students :Hope Rises on Education of Handicapped," *New York Times*, 21 April 1974, 1, 48. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 4, 2006).

When handicapped children enter classrooms with normal children, the disabled child often feels tense and conspicuous while the non-disabled majority are often anxious about how to treat a child in a wheelchair...⁸

It was uncomfortable for both parties due to the fact that they had been segregated for the entirety of their lives. Due to this segregation, there had been no training of how to help a disabled child and the able-bodied students were bewildered as how to interact. The disabled were aware of the stigma that existed and while most were as bright as the able-bodied, they believed that they were not. There were many studies showing that the disabled were equal in intelligence to the able-bodied and it was not until they acknowledged this that the disabled children had confidence in their abilities. Once they had confidence in their abilities, the disabled children rejected what the able-bodied community believed and performed equally as well as the other students.

Many of the able-bodied children also had no prior experience working with a disabled person. One advocate commented, "It seems [the disabled students] had a difficult time making friends because so few normal children understood them."⁹ This demonstrates the extent to which the disabled were a misunderstood and neglected minority. This leads one to believe that if the able-bodied children had not been taught to interact with the disabled, then neither had their parents. This cycle of ignorance was a driving force that perpetuated the myth of inferior intelligence among the disabled. Only when the disabled children started to assert their own rights and show their intelligence did the cycle dissipate and understanding was finally facilitated. An adult observed "for

⁸ BARBARA AIELL, "Showing Normal Pupils What It's Like to Be Handicapped," *New York Times*, 13 November 1977, EDUC18. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 18, 2006).

⁹ BARBARA AIELL, "Showing Normal Pupils What It's Like to Be Handicapped," *New York Times*, 13 November 1977, EDUC18. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 18, 2006).

some children, they were proud of the accomplishments of their handicapped relatives, for the very first time.”¹⁰

The next approach that the disabled community used to eradicate able-bodied beliefs was expressing their abilities. Many able-bodied Americans believed the disabled community was a minority with nothing to offer society and incapable of competing with the able-bodied. The disabled community proved their worth by completing their job with the amount of skill equal to that of an able-bodied worker. One employer commented that “Those who have remained aren’t ‘handicapped’ in this job because they do it and they do it well.”¹¹ This quote shows exactly how the disabled rejected the stereotypes held about them and when they were working their handicaps disappeared. The disabled worker had so few opportunities to showcase their abilities that when they did obtain a job, many worked more efficiently than the able-bodied. By becoming a better worker, the disabled shed their stereotype in the workforce, “...workers [with disabilities] have learned skills and proven their value in industry.”¹²

Before the liberation movement, corporate America was extremely hesitant to hire the disabled. With pressure from the media and government, companies began to hire disabled workers and quickly discovered how dedicated and efficient the newfound workers were. From this point onward, much of corporate America did not care if a worker was considered ‘handicapped.’ As noted in the article “Hiring the handicapped is still good business...”, employers cared whether the worker was a profitable investment

¹⁰ BARBARA AIELL, "Showing Normal Pupils What It's Like to Be Handicapped," *New York Times*, 13 November 1977, EDUC18. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 18, 2006).

¹¹ JUDY GLASS, "Handicapped Make the Grade on 911 Calls," *New York Times*, 24 August 1980, L16. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 11, 2006).

¹² GEORGE VECSEY, "Crowding Recession Is threatening Some Job Gains Made by Disabled Workers," *New York Times*, 25 January 1975, 25. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 11, 2006).

for the organization, which in many appropriate professions the disabled were. The simple fact that the disabled were being hired should signify how skilled and capable these workers were. In some cases, the disabled were sought out by certain employers due to their aptitude in some areas, as a project manager for training the disabled stated:

We have proven that the disabled workers can enter the insurance, banking, government and brokerage firms without being sheltered...and we developed a core of employers who came to us for workers we had trained.¹³

In corporate America, the businesses did not care who the employee was, they cared who was making them the most money. One aspect would have been the efficiency and ability of the worker. The fact that the corporations hired disabled workers as opposed to able-bodied workers illustrates that the disabled were the more capable of the two in some occupations. This proved the beliefs of the able-bodied incorrect and gave hope for the disabled to confidently reject their previously held classification as worthless.

The disabled community also began to have enough confidence in their abilities to interact with the world and others around them. Disabled people gained more responsibility and could supply for their own needs. For example, "Sal Shierico, who has cerebral palsy, is the sole wage earner for his wife and child."¹⁴ This challenged the myth that the able-bodied community held and showed them that disabled people could independently provide for their families and themselves. Some aimed their abilities at helping others:

...at the [training] center, which was founded in 1952 by Henry Viscardi Jr., who is himself severely disabled. Mr. Viscardi has gained

¹³ GEORGE VECSEY, "Crowing Recession Is threatening Some Job Gains Made by Disabled Workers," *New York Times*, 25 January 1975, 25. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 11, 2006).

¹⁴ JUDY GLASS, "Handicapped Make the Grade on 911 Calls," *New York Times*, 24 August 1980, L16. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 11, 2006).

international recognition through his company (his office contains framed tributes from six Presidents of the United States).¹⁵

This shows many telling things about the disabled. The first is that they did have the ability to create their own businesses by which they could support themselves to live independently. The second is that the disabled were making such large changes that even the President was paying homage. The fact that Henry Viscardi had tributes from six different Presidents reveals the level of accomplishment that this one member of the disabled community achieved.

The last method that the disabled community utilized to break the myth of helplessness was self-advocacy. This was probably the most powerful and effective way that the disabled showed their ability because they, themselves, were the ones fighting the battle. They no longer needed advocates to protect them, mainly due to the fact that the disabled were ready and wanting to obtain their own rights; “crippled, palsied, and blind people aren’t just asking anymore. They are demanding.”¹⁶ The article that this quote is found in is even titled “Civil Rights: Handicapped No Longer Act Like It,” which illustrates how much the disabled were showing the able-bodied community what they are able to do independently. In the past, helping the disabled was considered a charitable act. The disabled did not want to be a charity, they wanted to be given the rights which all else possessed.

The disabled community wanted legislation put in place and improvements to be made. They were no longer willing to be shuffled to the back row and called last. They were taking action. “About 150 handicapped persons, many in wheelchairs, journeyed

¹⁵ GEORGE VECSEY, "Crowing Recession Is threatening Some Job Gains Made by Disabled Workers," *New York Times*, 25 January 1975, 25. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 11, 2006).

¹⁶ JERRY FLINT, "Civil Rights: Handicapped No Longer Act Like It." *New York Times*, 2 October 1977, E8. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 11, 2006).

from the Lincoln Memorial to Capitol Hill today to urge Congress to restore money to aid the handicapped,”¹⁷ stated one article. The disabled were breaking the myth because it was previously thought that the disabled could not do anything for themselves. The article specifically states it is the people in wheelchairs protesting and not the people who took care of them.

In Berkeley, California, disabled Americans found a model in the Center for Independent Living. The disabled would no longer waste their lives accomplishing nothing. They therefore escaped to Berkeley to protest:

Berkeley has become a Mecca for a new, equally radical movement- the growing numbers of handicapped people who are determined to live independent lives in the community, out of their family basements, out of the institutions that have kept them hidden for so long.¹⁸

This quotation reveals how strongly the able-bodied assumption was in the 1960s and 1970s, claiming that the liberation movement was “radical.” This shows what American society thought of the movement and how seemingly surprised they were that the disabled wanted to live independently. This quote also reveals that society knew and approved of where the disabled were being kept, such as in basements and institutions where they had no opportunity to influence and participate in society. The Center for Independent Living, however, showed America that disabled people were not helpless and had the ability to become successful, contributing citizens.

The disabled community successfully completed the first part of the liberation movement by re-establishing the public’s view of the disabled. Only because of this step

¹⁷ "A Protest Is Staged By 150 Handicapped Over Job Bill Veto." *New York Times*, 5 May 1973, 85. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 11, 2006).

¹⁸ NANCY HICKS, "Berkeley Turns Into Mecca for Handicapped Persons," *New York Times*, 8 September 1976, 16. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 11, 2006).

could the disabled then become contributing members of American society. The second part was made possible because most of the previous reasons against integration had been nullified and there was, therefore, no reason for the disabled not to be integrated. They sought this integration through legislation and accessibility.

The first means, legislation, was the main source of integration for the disabled community. The Congress passed many legislative measures that banned discrimination, emphasized equality, enforced accessibility, and attempted to establish a more independent and fulfilling life for the disabled. One such legislative measure was described as:

The regulations [...] could force sweeping changes in employment practices, building design and services in schools, colleges and hospitals that receive Federal support. The regulations will be followed by equally far-reaching rules from other Cabinet agencies, designed to bring those with handicaps into the mainstream of American life.¹⁹

As this quote shows, the Congress was trying to cover every aspect of a disabled person's life and, by doing so, integrate them frequently and as much as possible into American society. The disabled community demonstrated their ability to contribute to society and because of this, the government was more willing to assist in assimilation. They had previously thought that the disabled would be better suited and it easier for society to keep them in segregated, institutionalized homes. The disabled proved, however, that the myth that the able-bodied community believed was, in fact, just a myth and that the disabled could contribute to society. The fact that the disabled demonstrated their ability gave the government reason to push for integration.

¹⁹ NANCY HICKS, "Califano Signs Regulations to Ban Discrimination Against Disabled: Califano Signs Guides on Disabled," *New York Times*, 29 April 1977, NJ1. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 7, 2006).

Another part of the legislation was eradicating discrimination against the disabled community. A major reason the able-bodied community believed that the disabled were not equal was because discrimination had forced the disabled into institutions and other places where they could not show their talents and abilities. Because the disabled could not show their abilities, the able-bodied continued to believe the myth that their own discrimination created. The prejudice produced an unfair bias, as it had with many other oppressed minorities. The government recognized the cycle and eventually passed laws which prohibited this discrimination:

The law on which the regulations were based 'reflects the recognition of the Congress that most handicapped persons can lead proud and productive lives, despite their disabilities,' Mr. Califano said. 'It will usher in a new era of equality for handicapped individuals in which unfair barriers to self-sufficiency and decent treatment will begin to fall before the force of law.'²⁰

As one can see, the government was taking decisive measures to prevent discrimination from continuing. They realized that society could benefit from its disabled citizens and that the disabled had worth. Another article entitled "Carter Says He'll Fight Handicapped Job Bias,"²¹ states the main reason for this anti-discrimination law is that the disabled had the capacity to lead productive lives. It is not just because discrimination is wrong or they were people just as all else are, but they that could contribute to society. Without the disabled community proving that they had worth, ability, and means to contribute to society, the government would have had no pressing reason to create and strongly support anti-bias laws and furthermore, integration into the American public.

²⁰ NANCY HICKS, "Califano Signs Regulations to Ban Discrimination Against Disabled: Califano Signs Guides on Disabled," *New York Times*, 29 April 1977, NJ1. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 7, 2006).

²¹ "Carter Says He'll Fight Handicapped Job Bias," *New York Times*, 2 May 1980, B6. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 11, 2006).

The second piece of integration into American society was accessibility. In this time period, there was an absence of legislation for any building, sidewalk, or vehicle to have handicap accessibility. As a result, the disabled were limited to certain job opportunities, recreation, living arrangements, and almost every branch of life as determined by its accessibility. The disabled were at a major disadvantage not only from the prejudice held against them, but also from their inability to engage with society as a whole. This was one situation that kept the two communities segregated. The disabled community, although had proven their abilities, were still unable to show and contribute their worth in industrial America. One advocate described the difficulty, "We're involved in getting the handicapped back to work, but many times there is no way for the person to get to the job or even to get into the building."²² Even though the disabled community possessed the skills to satisfactorily complete a job, they did not have the opportunity to attempt undertaking the occupation because the building was inaccessible. This speaks to one of the reasons why the disabled had been isolated from society for centuries. By removing the physical barriers that segregated the two communities, the disabled could "...be full participants in every aspect of the life of this nation."²³ By proving that the disabled community could contribute to society, the able-bodied community was able to understand that it had been partially an inability to be physically involved which prevented the disabled from becoming fully integrated into the American life.

The liberation movement also encouraged the disabled community to begin taking

²² ALFONSO A. NARVAEZ, "State Orders Easy Access for the Handicapped," *New York Times*, 3 October 1976, 315. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 7, 2006).

²³ "Carter Says He'll Fight Handicapped Job Bias," *New York Times*, 2 May 1980, B6. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 11, 2006).

more involved vacations. They were no longer stationary. They branched out in to the country and even the world. By traveling to different environments, the disabled community had more of an opportunity to interact and network with the able-bodied. This connection created a better awareness of disabled needs because many companies and disabled travelers pushed for better accessibility on airplanes and hotels. The companies in particular responded due to the high demand, “To a certain extent, the travel industry seems to have discovered the handicapped traveler...”²⁴ It was previously assumed that the disabled community was physically unable to travel, but as this quotation shows, that was a fallacy. The disabled community was integrated into vacationing because the travel industry viewed their worth in dollar signs. Since the disabled were willing to pay for their vacations as the able-bodied did, the companies made sure that accessibility was becoming a reality.

The disabled community’s liberation movement successfully dislodged the old beliefs of the able-bodied community, which then allowed for the disabled become full members of American society. In destroying the old perceptions of the disabled, the opportunity arose for them to create a more positive, accurate description that the able-bodied was finally willing to accept. This belief was that the disabled community possessed worth, had ability, and was not willing to be second-class citizens any longer. The disabled community helped society to understand that they were not as different as most had assumed.

²⁴ ROBERT LINDSEY, "Travel for the Handicapped Eases as Old Obstacles Fall :Regular Airline Tours Many Obstacles Remain Travel for Handicapped Eases as Obstacles Fall Travel Agents Offering Tours for Handicapped Uplift' for Handicapped Like Anybody Else Action By Agencies." *New York Times*, 24 August 1973, 32. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 7, 2006).