

## **360Life: Celebrating 30 Years of the Americans with Disabilities Act**

President George H.W. Bush: "I now lift my pen to sign this Americans with Disability Act, and say: let the shameful wall of exclusion finally come tumbling down. God bless you all [applause]."

Narration: July 26th, 1990. Thousands gathered on the South Lawn of the White House and watched the historic moment that President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act into law. A law that has been described as the "Emancipation Proclamation" for people with disabilities, and one that might not exist today if it wasn't for the voices and actions of the disability rights advocates.

[Introduction music plays]

You're listening to 360Life, a podcast that gives you a 360 perspective for people of all abilities. I'm your host, Steph Amaya.

On this episode, we are celebrating the signing of the ADA, or the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the heroic actions that led up to that historic day.

[Music plays]

The ADA was created to establish and protect the civil rights of people with disabilities. Based on the prolific Civil Rights Act of 1964 that outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, the Americans with Disabilities Act outlawed discrimination on the basis of disability in employment, government at all levels, public accommodations, and telecommunications services. The purpose was to provide people, people regardless of ability, the same opportunities to live independent, self-determined lives in their own communities.

This was revolutionary, coming from a time when people with disabilities were often physically denied access to their communities - whether through uncut curbs, inaccessible public transit, or mass institutionalization - and socially denied access to things like equitable education, skilled job opportunities, or even basic acceptance.

Judy Heumann: "Now we had lots of neighbors in our Brooklyn neighborhood, and some of them were really very helpful for my parents. Some of them were really afraid of contagion, and they wouldn't even walk in front of our house. I think this was the time when my family really began to realize what disability meant to some people: fear."

Narration: That was Judy Heumann, an internationally recognized lifelong disability civil rights advocate, sharing in a Ted Talk her experiences growing up in New York. Judy was diagnosed with polio when she was 18 months old, and she grew up experiencing discrimination from an early age.

Judy Heumann: "I was learning more and more about what discrimination was, and equally important, I was learning that I needed to become my own advocate."

And Judy wasn't the only one. Across the country, more and more people came forward, sharing their experiences of discrimination, institutionalization, and lack of access. Together, they were ready to fight for change.

Justin Dart Jr., who is widely considered the "father" of the ADA, and his wife, Yoshiko, began a national cross-country tour, stopping in every state to gather stories from people with disabilities. With these stories of the injustices and hardships people with disabilities face because of their disabilities, the ADA was born. Here's Justin:

"We put all this written material into a big pile of – a very large pile of carton boxes – and wheeled it into a congressional meeting and piled it up so high on the table that they couldn't see the witnesses. And the witnesses couldn't see the congressmen. And we said, 'These are the people that want to have the ADA.'"

Narration: But "these people" and the ADA had strong opposition from business industry and religious lobbyists, and the ADA was moving very slowly through Congress. So, the Disability Rights Advocates along with ADAPT, a national grassroots disability advocacy organization, devised a plan that would be one final call to action, one so remarkable that legislators and the world would have to pay attention.

On March 12, 1990, hundreds of advocates gathered at our nation's Capitol building to demonstrate by getting out of their wheelchairs and literally crawling up the steps of the Capitol Building's West Entrance, showing how inaccessible the Capitol - the house for the people - was.

Jennifer Keelan: "I'll take all night if I have to."

Jennifer Keelan at only eight years old was one of the protestors that day. She was determined to climb the steps and garnered plenty of media attention.

Jennifer Keelan: "I get out of my wheelchair and I start climbing. And all these cameras are on me, I mean like 50 cameras, and I'm, you know, climbing these steps – like it's a

big climb – I'm mean, 82 steps for a ten-year-old. That's huge. You know, I've got the little pamphlet in the back of my pocket that we're supposed to hand over to the politicians to get the ADA passed. They say that it was that image of me climbing those steps, that was the final decision to get the ADA passed."

Narration: The media attention was a monumental step to ensuring that legislators could not ignore the voices demanding change.

And finally...

George H.W. Bush: "I now lift my pen to sign this Americans with Disability Act and say: let the shameful wall of exclusion finally come tumbling down. God bless you all [applause]."

On the South Lawn of the White House on July 26, 1990, President George H.W. Bush signed the ADA, a catalyst to a more inclusive and accessible future. Here's former Iowa Senator Tom Harkin, the lead author and co-sponsor for the ADA:

"You have to understand my brother Frank, my older brother, became deaf at a young age. I think he was maybe 6 years old, spinal meningitis. I saw how then his life was circumscribed by people looking at him and just saying, 'Well, you're deaf, so you can't do this, you can't do that.' I always had it in my mind that if I could ever get in a place to do something about deafness. I thought that if I could ever do something in that realm, and if I could change how people are treated, I would do that. And then I became aware then of a movement to have a broad civil rights bill to cover all people with disabilities, and that's sort of how I got started.

"I made a change recently in the Workforce Development Act, which we just passed last year before I left the Senate, and it focused on kids with disabilities in high school. Now, 15% of Voc[ational] Rehabilitation money has to go to into these programs in high school to get kids with disabilities internships, job coaching, mentoring, so that they go and get summer jobs, just like other kids. So they can learn maybe they want to do this, maybe they can't do this, maybe they want to do something else. I think if my brother were alive today, I think he would be very proud of that. He would sense that everybody with disabilities now have just much more opportunities than what he ever dreamed of. I think now he would think that more people like him have a better shake, a more fair shake."

Narration: So the ADA did more than make buildings accessible. It was a crucial step for people with disabilities to live independent, self-directed lives in their own communities, and to fight the discrimination they experienced. Here's Judy Heumann:

"We were fighting against discrimination and we had to band together...so we did, and what was born is what we call today 'The Disability Rights Movement.'"

Today, we celebrate the ADA because it has changed so much in our country. But we celebrate knowing that our "Disability Rights Movement" has more work to do to create a fully integrated world. We use the example of the fight for the ADA to encourage us as we move forward in our advocacy work, or as Justin would say, "Lead on!"

We hope you celebrate by sharing this podcast and the interviews on the ADA Ability360 has created, available at our website, [www.ability360.org](http://www.ability360.org).

[Music outro]

360Life is an original podcast production by Ability360, based in Phoenix, Arizona.

Sound production and mixing by me, Steph Amaya.

Music by Steve Combs.

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