**Background and Brief Chronology of the Disability Rights Movement**

1848 — The first residential institution for people with mental retardation is founded by Samuel Gridley Howe at the Perkins Institution in Boston. During the next century, hundreds of thousands of developmentally disabled children and adults will be institutionalized, many for their entire lives.

1880 — The International Congress of Educators of the Deaf, at a conference in Milan, Italy, calls for the suppression of sign languages and the firing of all deaf teachers at schools for the deaf. This triumph of oralism is seen by deaf advocates as a direct attack upon their culture.

The National Convention of Deaf Mutes meets in Cincinnati, Ohio, the nucleus of what will become the National Association of the Deaf (NAD). The first major issue taken on by the NAD is oralism and the suppression of American Sign Language.

Helen Adams Keller is born on June 27th in Tuscumbia, Alabama.

1883 — Sir Francis Galton in England coins the term eugenics to describe his pseudo-science of “improving the stock” of humanity. The eugenics movement, taken up by Americans, leads to passage in the United States of laws to prevent people with disabilities from moving to this country, marrying, or having children. In many instances, it leads to the institutionalization and forced sterilization of disabled people, including children. Eugenics campaigns against people of color and immigrants lead to passage of “Jim Crow” laws in the South and legislation restricting immigration by southern and eastern Europeans, Asians, Africans, and Jews.

1927 — The U.S. Supreme Court, in Buck v. Bell, rules that the forced sterilization of people with disabilities is not a violation of their constitutional rights. The decision removes the last restraints for eugenists advocating that people with disabilities be prohibited from having children. By the 1970s, some 60,000 disabled people are sterilized without consent.

1933 — Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the first seriously physically disabled person ever to be elected as a head of government, is sworn into office as president of the United States. He continues his “splendid deception,” choosing to minimize his disability in response to the ableism of the electorate.

1935 — A group in New York City called the [League for the Physically Handicapped](http://www.disabilityhistory.org/militanc.html) is formed to protest discrimination by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The league’s 300 people — most disabled by polio and cerebral palsy — all had been turned down for WPA jobs. The Home Relief Bureau of New York City was supposed to forward their job requests to the WPA, but was stamping all their applications “PH” (for physically handicapped) as a signal to the WPA not to give these people jobs. Members of the league sat in at the Home Relief Bureau for nine days and went to the WPA headquarters and held a weekend sit-in there. They eventually generated a couple thousand jobs nationwide.

Congress passes and President Roosevelt signs the Social Security Act, establishing federal old-age benefits and grants to the states for assistance to blind individuals and disabled children.

1938 — Passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act leads to an enormous increase in the number of sheltered workshop program for blind workers. Although intended to provide training and job opportunities for blind and visually disabled workers, it often leads to exploitation of workers at sub-minimum wages in poor conditions.

1943 — Congress passes the Vocational Rehabilitation Amendments, known as the LaFollette-Barden Act, adding physical rehabilitation to the goals of federally funded vocational rehabilitation programs and providing funding for certain health care services.

1947 — The first meeting of the Presidents Committee on National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week is held in Washington, D.C. Its publicity campaigns, coordinated by state and local committees, emphasize the competence of people with disabilities and use movie trailers, billboards, and radio and television ads to convince the public that its “good business to hire the handicapped.”

1948 — The disabled students’ program at the University of Illinois at Galesburg is established. Founded and directed by Timothy Nugent, the program moves to the campus at Urbana-Champaign, where it becomes a prototype for disabled student programs and then independent living centers across the country.

1949 — The first Wheelchair Basketball Tournament is held in Galesburg, Illinois. Wheelchair basketball, and other sports, becomes an important part of disability lifestyle and culture over the next several decades.

1950 — The Social Security Amendments of 1950 establish a federal-state program to aid the permanently and totally disabled (APTD). This is a limited prototype for later federal disability assistance programs such as Social Security Disability Insurance.

The Association for Retarded Children of the United States (later renamed the Association for Retarded Citizens and then The Arc) is founded in Minneapolis by representatives of various state association of parents of mentally retarded children.

1951 — Howard Rusk opens the Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine at New York University Medical Center. Staff at the Institute, including people with disabilities, begins work on such innovations as electric typewriters, mouth sticks, and improved prosthetics, as adaptive aids for people with severe disabilities.

1954 — The U.S. Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, rules that separate schools for black and white children are inherently unequal and unconstitutional. This pivotal decision becomes a catalyst for the African-American civil rights movement, which in turn becomes a major inspiration to the disability rights movement.

Congress passes the Vocational Rehabilitation Amendments, authorizing federal grants to expand programs available to people with physical disabilities. Mary Switzer, Director of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, uses this authority to fund more than 100 university based rehabilitation related programs.

1955 — Harold Wilke becomes the founder and first executive director of the Commission on Religion and Health within the United Church of Christ General Synod in New York. In this capacity he works to open religious life and the ministry to women and people with disabilities.

1956 — Congress passes the Social Security Amendments of 1956, which creates a Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) program for disabled workers aged 50 to 64.

1958 — Congress passes the Social Security Amendments of 1958, extending Social Security Disability Insurance benefits to the dependents of disabled workers.

1961 — President Kennedy appoints a special President’s Panel on Mental Retardation to investigate the status of people with mental retardation and develop programs and reforms for its improvement.

The American National Standard Institute, Inc. (ANSI), publishes “American Standard Specifications for Making Buildings Accessible to, and Usable by, the Physically Handicapped.” This landmark document becomes the basis for all subsequent architectural access codes.

1962 — Ed Roberts becomes the first severely disabled student at the University of California at Berkeley.

1963 — President Kennedy, in an address to Congress, calls for a reduction, “over a number of years and by hundreds of thousands, (in the number) of persons confined” to residential institutions, and he asks that methods be found “to retain in and return to the community the mentally ill and mentally retarded, and there to restore and revitalize their lives through better health programs and strengthened educational and rehabilitation services.” Though not labeled such at the time, this is a call for deinstitutionalization and increased community services.

John Hessler joins Ed Roberts at the University of California at Berkeley; other disabled students follow. Together they form the Rolling Quads to advocate for greater access on campus and in the surrounding community.

1964 — The Civil Rights Act is passed, outlawing discrimination on the basis of race in public accommodations and employment, as well as in federally assisted programs. It will become a model for subsequent disability rights legislation.

1965 — Vocational Rehabilitation Amendments of 1965 are passed, authorizing construction of rehabilitation centers, expanding existing vocational rehabilitation programs, and creating the National Commission on Architectural Barriers to Rehabilitation of the Handicapped.

William C. Stokoe, Carl Croneberg, and Dorothy Casterline publish “A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles,” establishing the legitimacy of American Sign Language and beginning the move away from oralism.

The Autism Society of America is founded by parents of children with autism in response to the lack of services, discrimination against children with autism, and the prevailing view of medical “experts” that autism is a result of poor parenting, as opposed to neurological disability.

1967 — The National Theatre of the Deaf is founded with a grant from the federal Office of Vocational Rehabilitation.

1968 — The Architectural Barriers Act is passed, mandating that federally constructed buildings and facilities be accessible to people with physical disabilities. This act is generally considered to be the first-ever federal disability rights legislation.

1970 — The Physically Disabled Students Program (PDSP) is founded by Ed Roberts, John Hessler, Hale Zukas, and others at the University of California at Berkeley. With its provisions for community living, political advocacy, and personal assistance services, it becomes the nucleus for the first Center for Independent Living, founded two years later.

1971 — The Caption Center is founded at WGBH Public Television in Boston, and it begins providing captioned programming for deaf viewers.

The Fair Labor Standard Act of 1938 is amended to bring people with disabilities other than blindness into the sheltered workshop system. This measure leads to the establishment, in coming years, of an enormous sheltered workshop system for people with cognitive and developmental disabilities.

1972 — The U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, in Mills v. Board of Education, rules that the District of Columbia cannot exclude disabled children from the public schools. Similarly, the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, in PARC v. Pennsylvania, strikes down various state laws used to exclude disabled children from the public schools. These decisions will be cited by advocates during the public hearings leading to passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. PARC in particular sparks numerous other right-to-education lawsuits and inspires advocates to look to the courts for the expansion of disability rights.

The Center for Independent Living (CIL) is founded in Berkeley, California. Generally recognized as the world’s first independent living center, the CIL sparks the worldwide independent living movement.

Demonstrations are held by disabled activists in Washington, D.C., to protest the veto of what will become the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 by President Richard M. Nixon. Among those organizing demonstrations in Washington and elsewhere are Disabled in Action, Paralyzed Veterans of America, the National Paraplegia Foundation, and other groups.

1973 — The first handicap parking stickers are introduced in Washington, D.C.

Passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act authorizes federal funds to provide for construction of curb cuts.

Passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 marks the greatest achievement of the disability rights movement. The act — particularly Title V and, especially, Section 504 — for the first time confronts discrimination against people with disabilities. Section 504 prohibits programs receiving federal funds from discriminating against “otherwise qualified handicapped” individuals and sparks the formation of “504 workshops” and numerous grassroots organizations. Disability rights activism seizes on the act as a powerful tool and make the signing of regulations to implement Section 504 a top priority. Litigation arising out of Section 504 will generate such central disability rights concepts as “reasonable modification,” “reasonable accommodation,” and “undue burden,” which will form the framework for subsequent federal law, especially the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

1974 — Disabled Women’s Coalition is founded at UC Berkeley by Susan Sygall and Deborah Kaplan. Other women involved include Kitty Cone, Corbett O’Toole, and Susan Schapiro. The coalition ran support groups, held disabled women’s retreats, wrote for feminist publications, and lectured on women and disability.

1975 — The Education for All Handicapped Children Act establishes the right of children with disabilities to a public school education in an integrated environment. The act is a cornerstone of federal disability rights legislation. In the next two decades, millions of disabled children will be educated under its provisions, radically changing the lives of people in the disability community.

Ed Roberts becomes the Director of the California Department of Rehabilitation. He moves to establish nine independent living centers across that state, based on the model of the original Center for Independent Living in Berkeley. The success of these centers demonstrates that independent living can be replicated and eventually results in the founding of hundreds of independent living.

1977 — The U.S. Court of appeals for the Seventh Circuit, in Lloyd V. Regional Transportation authority, rules that individuals have a right to sue under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and that public transit authorities must provide accessible service. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, in Snowden v. Birmingham Jefferson County Transit Authority, undermines this decision by ruling that authorities need provide access only to “handicapped persons other than those confined to wheelchairs.”

1979 — The U.S. Supreme Court, in Southeastern Community College v. Davis, rules that, under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, programs receiving federal funds must make “reasonable modifications” to enable the participation of otherwise qualified disabled individuals. This decision is the Court’s first ruling on Section 504, and it establishes reasonable modification as an important principle in disability rights law.

The Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF) is founded in Berkeley, California, becoming the nation’s preeminent disability rights legal advocacy center and participating in much of the landmark litigation and lobbying of the 1980s and 1990s.

1980 — The Women’s Braille Press is founded in Minneapolis to make women’s and feminist literature available in braille and on tape.

1981-84 — The newly elected Reagan Administration threatens to amend or revoke regulations implementing Section 504 1983 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Disability rights advocates, led by Patrisha Wright at the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF) and Evan Kemp, Jr. at the Disability Rights Center, respond with an intensive lobbying effort and a grassroots campaign that generates more than 40,000 cards and letters. After three years, the Reagan Administration abandons its attempts to revoke or amend the regulations.

The Telecommunications for the Disabled Act mandates telephone access for deaf and hard-of-hearing people at important public places, such as hospitals and police stations, and that all coin-operated phones be hearing aid-compatible by January 1985. It also calls for state subsidies for production and distribution of TDDs (telecommunications devices for the deaf), more commonly referred to as TTYs.

Sears, Roebuck and Co. begins selling decoders for closed captioning for television.

The National Disabled Women’s Educational Equity Project is established by Corbett O’Toole. It conducts the first national survey on disability and gender and provides regional training programs for younger disabled women in Pocatello, Eugene and Minneapolis.

1984 — George Murray becomes the first wheelchair athlete to be featured on the Wheaties cereal box.

The U.S. Supreme Court rules, in Irving Independent School District v. Tatro, that school districts are required under the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 to provide intermittent catheterization, performed by the school nurse or a nurse’s aide, as a “related service” to a disabled student. School districts can no longer refuse to educate a disabled child because they might need such a service.

1985 — The U.S. Supreme Court rules, City of Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center, that localities cannot use zoning laws to prohibit group homes for people with developmental disabilities from opening in a residential area solely because its residents are disabled.

1986 — The Air Carrier Access Act is passed, prohibiting airlines from refusing to serve people simply because they are disabled, and from charging them more for airfare than non-disabled travelers.

1987 — Marlee Matlin wins an Oscar for her performance in “Children of a Lesser God,” the only Deaf performer to win the award.

1988 — Students at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., organize a weeklong shutdown and occupation of their campus to demand selection of a deaf president after the Gallaudet Board of Trustees appoints a non-deaf person as president of the university. Later, the Gallaudet administration announces that I. King Jordan will be the university’s first deaf president.

1990 — The Americans with Disabilities Act is signed by President George Bush on July 26 in a ceremony on the White House lawn witnessed by thousands of disability rights activists. The law is the most sweeping disability rights legislation in history, for the first time bringing full legal citizenship to Americans with disabilities. It mandates that local, state, and federal governments and programs be accessible, that businesses with more than 15 employees make “reasonable accommodations” for disabled workers, that public accommodations such as restaurants and stores make “reasonable modifications” to ensure access for disabled members of the public. The act also mandates access in public transportation, communication, and in other areas of public life.

1996 — Not Dead Yet is formed by disabled advocates to oppose Jack Kevorkian and the proponents of assisted suicide for people with disabilities. The Supreme Court agrees to hear several right-to-die cases, and disability rights advocates redouble their efforts to prevent a resurgence of “euthanasia” and “mercy killing” as practiced by the Nazis against disabled people during World War II. Of particular concern are calls for the “rationing” of health care to people with severe disabilities and the imposition of “Do Not Resuscitate” (DNR) orders for disabled people in hospitals, schools, and nursing homes.

Sen. Robert Dole becomes the first person with a visible disability since Franklin Roosevelt to run for president of the United States. Unlike Roosevelt, he publicly acknowledges the extent of his disability. He is defeated by incumbent Bill Clinton.

Sources: “The ABC-CLIO Companion to the Disability Rights Movement,” by Fred Pelka (1997); [www.sfsu.edu/~dprc/chronology/index.html](http://www.sfsu.edu/~dprc/chronology/index.html); www.disabilityhistory.org/timeline\_new.html