

Significant Moments and People in Disability History
by Michelle Negrón Bueno



Shaquem Griffin is a professional NFL player with the Seattle Seahawks. In 2018, he became the first amputee to play professional football. Griffin was born with a condition that affected the development of his left hand which was amputated when he was four years old. He practiced hard and became a talented football player alongside his twin brother, Shaquille.

Growing up, the twin brothers played on the same High School football team and stuck together even in college. When the coaches on their first college team didn't give Shaquem the same opportunities as they gave his brother, they left that team and joined a different one where Shaquem had a fair chance to play. A few years later, Shaquille signed with the Seattle Seahawks and soon after Shaquem signed as well.

A History of Abuse and Discrimination

In the not so distant past, people who were born with conditions like Shaquem Griffin's, or had other invisible forms of disability, often were seen as lifetime burdens. People with disabilities were feared and misunderstood. This led to discrimination and abuse. Sometimes they were hidden at home away from the rest of society or left to grow up in institutions away from their families. For those with disabilities who entered mainstream society, they faced harassment and discrimination. Many were denied access to schools and jobs. Even hospitals, restaurants, stores, and other public places didn't let them in.

Many people with disabilities and their supporters didn't think this was fair. Over the last 150 years, activists have advocated for people with disabilities and have supported new laws that protect people with disabilities. Their advocacy has made it possible for people with disabilities to live full and independent lives in society.

What is a Disability?

Some disabilities are physical, like an amputee. Other disabilities are sensory, cognitive, learning, or mental. They may be a mix of these. Some disabilities are easy to see while others are invisible. Examples of disabilities include hearing loss and deafness, vision damage and blindness, paralysis, muscular weakness, autism, brain injuries, life-time illnesses, dyslexia, and mental illnesses.

Growing Awareness and Knowledge

Many different events and people have helped to forge a different world for people with disabilities. Some came as a result of medical breakthroughs like the use of amputation in the civil war. Others came from advances in the sciences of psychology and psychiatry. Also, powerful figures began to create change.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt became the 32nd U.S. President in 1932, he was the first President with a significant physical disability. Roosevelt had been diagnosed with polio which left him paralyzed. He used a wheelchair for mobility. During his recovery, Roosevelt founded the Roosevelt Institute for Rehabilitation in 1927 to provide treatment for people with disabilities. Many historians believe that Roosevelt's disability was key in shaping his presidency. His policies that helped the poor and others who weren't accepted in society opened the door to societal change.

During his presidency, members of the League of the Physically Handicapped organized a protest at the Home Relief Bureau in 1935. The Bureau was part of the government and existed



Attitudes toward people with disabilities have changed so much that the focus has become less on what people can't do to what a person can do if given the opportunity. Every day new technologies are being created that improve access to technology, communication, and society at large for people with disabilities.

to find jobs for people during the Great Depression. However, when people with disabilities applied, they were unfairly denied jobs. The members of the advocacy group staged a sit-in for nine days. A sit-in is an act in which people purposefully disobey a law to protest something they think is unfair. Sitting in the Bureau's offices wasn't lawful, but they did it to bring attention to the problem. U.S. newspapers told the story, and people all over the country began to support the organization's protest. As a result of the protest, 1,500 people with disabilities were given jobs just like non-disabled people.

Disability Rights Are Civil Rights

The movement continued to grow over the next 75 years. Following a wave of civil rights activism in the 1960s, disability rights activists began to make significant changes in the 1970s. Starting with the Rehabilitation Act in 1973, the door was opened to new laws protecting people with disabilities. In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed. The law was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 and amendments were signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1997. This law requires that students with disabilities attend school with their non-disabled classmates as much as possible and learn the same things at school that their non-disabled classmates are learning. The IDEA also requires that students with disabilities receive additional support, if necessary, for their education.



This is a rare photograph of President Roosevelt in his wheelchair.

In 1990, Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and President George H.W. Bush signed it into law. The ADA ensures that all people with disabilities are free from discrimination in the workplace, in local and state government agencies (including public



The Americans with Disabilities Act ensures that businesses and agencies accommodate people with disabilities in their buildings, services, and business practices.

schools and universities), and in public businesses like restaurants, theaters, stores, doctor's offices, and other similar businesses. The ADA requires physical accessibility and equal access to communication for people who are blind, visually impaired, deaf, and hard of hearing. It is the most detailed law requiring access in the U.S. for people with disabilities.

These changes didn't come easily. One of the most significant moments in disability rights is the 504 sit-in that took place across the country in cities such as San Francisco, Denver, and Washington D.C. It was led by leaders such as Judith Heumann and Ed Roberts, both long-time activists who became influential government leaders and were themselves people with disabilities. The sit-in lasted roughly 26 days in April 1977. It was the longest protest of its kind to that date in any government building. It was named 504 for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and was necessary because certain groups were not making the changes required by the Rehabilitation Act. It also helped to pave the way for the future legislation of ADA and IDEA.

A Global Movement

Even though changes didn't happen overnight or follow one charismatic leader or one event, the U.S. is now a world leader in disability rights. In 2006, the United Nations ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, an international agreement based on the ADA. People with disabilities all over the world are able to live full and meaningful lives though discrimination against people with disabilities continues to this day.

Did You Know?



Throughout her life, the internationally renowned portrait artist Frida Kahlo featured her own disabilities in many of her self-portraits. **Born in Mexico in 1907, Kahlo contracted polio at the age of six, affecting her ability to walk. A few years later she was severely injured in a bus accident, which permanently damaged her spine. Today, many of her paintings that hang in museums all over the world depict her disabilities.** In 2001, the U.S. commemorated her life on a U.S. stamp. Her work is also showcased in The National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C.

