

Significant Moments and People in Disability History
by Michelle Negrón Bueno



Shequem Griffin is a professional NFL player. Griffin was born with a problem with his left hand. It hadn't grown right before he was born. It was very painful. His hand was amputated when he was just four years old. Shequem loved football. He practiced hard with his brother, Shaquille. They became talented football players. Shaquille signed with the Seattle Seahawks. Shaquem signed a year later.

A History of Abuse and Discrimination

Not long ago, people who were born with disabilities were seen as problems. They were feared. They were misunderstood. This led to people treating them differently. Sometimes they were hidden away from society. Sometimes they were left in institutions where they lived away from their families. Many weren't allowed to go to schools, hospitals, restaurants, stores, and other public places. Some tried to live normal lives. But people treated them badly. They wouldn't let them do things that other people got to do.

Many people in the U.S. didn't think this was right. People with disabilities can live full lives in society. They should have rights like everyone else. People began to work together. They have changed the way people with disabilities are treated. New laws have been made. New laws protect their rights.

What is a Disability?

There are many kinds of disabilities. Some disabilities are physical. Some are mental. Some people have learning disabilities. People may have a mix of these disabilities. Some disabilities are easy to see. Others you can't see. Examples of disabilities include hearing loss and deafness. They include vision problems and blindness. Some people can't move parts of their bodies well. They may not be able to move at all. Some have brain injuries. Others have life-time illnesses.

Growing Awareness and Knowledge

Events happened that changed things. People have also helped to change things. Medical breakthroughs made changes. Amputation in the civil war saved lives. It also introduced more people with disabilities into society. Other breakthroughs included the treatment of mental illness. Some people wrote stories about their lives. These stories helped people understand what mental illness was like. Powerful people also helped to make change.

Franklin D. Roosevelt became the 32nd U.S. President in 1932. He was the first President with a major physical disability. Roosevelt had polio. It left him paralyzed. He used a wheelchair. Roosevelt started a treatment center for people with disabilities. Many historians believe that Roosevelt's disability was important to his presidency. He helped the poor. He opened the door to change.

During this time, members of an organization that supported disability rights held a protest. They went to a government agency in 1935. The agency was supposed to find jobs for people. But they were not being fair. People with disabilities were not getting jobs. The members of the organization held a sit-in. They stayed in the offices of the agency for nine days. A sit-in is an act of disobedience. People disobey a law to say something is unfair. Sitting in the agency's offices for that long wasn't lawful. They were bringing attention to the problem. Newspapers told the



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.

story. People all over the country heard about it. They supported the sit-in. As a result, 1,500 people with disabilities were given jobs just like non-disabled people.

Disability Rights Are Civil Rights

The movement kept going. It became important to more people. It grew over the next 75 years. There were a lot of civil rights changes in the 1960s. Supporters of disability rights built on that change. The Rehabilitation Act was passed in 1973. It opened the door to new laws that protected 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. Changes to IDEA were signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1997. This law says that students with disabilities go to school with their non-disabled classmates as much as possible. It also says that they learn the same things as their non-disabled classmates. The law also says that students with disabilities receive more support in school if needed.



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

In 1990, Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). President George H.W. Bush signed it into law. The ADA makes sure that all people with disabilities are not treated differently anywhere. This law included workplaces, public schools, and universities. It also included businesses like restaurants, theaters, stores, doctor's offices, and other similar places.



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

The law says that people with disabilities should be able to enter any of these places and use their services. It is the strongest law in the U.S. for people with disabilities.

These changes didn't come easily. One of the most important times in disability rights happened in 1977. The 504 sit-in took place all over the country. It was led by people such as Judith Heumann and Ed Roberts. They are both long-time supporters of disability rights. They would become important government leaders. They also have disabilities. The sit-in lasted 26 days. It was named for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. It was necessary because certain groups were not making the changes the law said they needed to make. It also helped to pave the way for future laws.

A Global Movement

Changes in disability rights didn't happen overnight. They didn't follow one leader. They didn't happen after one event. It took many years. It took many people. Now the U.S. is helping other countries. In 2006, the United Nations held the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This is an agreement between many countries. It is based on the ADA. That is why people with disabilities all over the world are able to live better lives. A lot has been done. There is still work to do. Treating people with disabilities differently continues to this day. Disability rights are human rights.

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.

