



Complex Child E-Magazine

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Lessons from the Past: Fighting for the Civil Rights of Children with Disabilities by Susan Agrawal

Let's start with a little bit of history. In 1973, Congress passed the Rehabilitation Act, which included Section 504, a small provision tacked on to what was basically a spending bill providing aid to people with disabilities. But this little provision, using wording from earlier Civil Rights legislation, made it illegal for any federal institution or any institution receiving federal funding to discriminate "solely by reason of...handicap."

It appears that Congress did not truly understand the significance of this little clause. It meant all schools, hospitals, federal buildings, and even public transportation had to be made accessible to people with disabilities. Once the now defunct Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) realized the cost of such an act—purported to be in the billions—they stalled for four years and refused to enforce the regulations.

After four years of waiting, the disabled community was tired of being ignored. They organized "sit-ins" or takeovers of HEW offices around the country. While most were only a day or two, the San Francisco sit-in lasted 25 days. More than one hundred people with severe disabilities, including many in wheelchairs, some on respirators, and some requiring cathing, risked their very lives to fight for this legislation. Fortunately, over time they gained many supporters, including high-ranking officials in state and local government who helped provide them with phone service, donated food, Easter and Passover services, air mattresses and showers.

Their diligence paid off. National officials agreed to sign the regulations for both Section 504 and the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, granting basic civil rights to people with disabilities and equal education to children regardless of disability.

These days we take our accessible ramps, handicapped parking spots, IEPs, and inclusion classrooms for granted. Few people remember those monumental 25 days in San Francisco, and even fewer know the names of the protestors who risked their lives to provide equality, education, and accessibility for all future children with disabilities. While we need to be thankful for all the progress that has led us to this point, all of us know that there is much more progress that needs to be made.

Every time we have to fight tooth and nail just to get an assistive technology device...every time a child is denied entrance into an inclusion classroom...every time a child in a wheelchair cannot ride the L train or subway because it *still* has no elevator

access...every time a person with a hearing impairment is not hired because his needs are too “costly” to accommodate...remember these proud Americans who risked everything for 25 days to bring basic civil rights to our children with disabilities. They went without food, beds, and even medical equipment to fight for our children.

Let’s honor them and the memory of their fight by making a few phone calls or writing a few letters to improve life for our children with disabilities today.