

Remembering Our Leader, Friend, and Mentor, Dr. Marvin Fifield

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Dr. Marvin Fifield

By Kelly Smith

It is with sadness and respect that we say goodbye to our friend and colleague, Dr. Marvin Fifield, the pioneering director of the Center for Persons with Disabilities (originally called the Exceptional Child Center). When the building opened in 1973, he was at its helm. And of all the people who have passed through its doors, he is likely the one who made the greatest impact.

At the time of his retirement in 2000, Dr. Fifield, or Marv, as he was affectionately known to all, had served as the director of the CPD for 33 years. He wrote the grant application, saw it funded, and directed the creation of the Center. His entire professional career was devoted to improving the lives of people with disabilities.

The CPD began as one of the smallest University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs, originally called University Affiliated Facilities) in the nation, and the first to be located in a college of education rather than a medical school. Under Dr. Fifield's guidance,

the CPD grew into a highly respected research and training institution with an education focus, one of the nation's largest of 67 such centers. Over the span of his career, Dr. Fifield personally wrote numerous grant proposals, receiving over \$60 million for over 50 projects. At the time of his retirement, the CPD was operating 72 projects.

Dr. Fifield actively promoted disability rights and legislation within the community, the state, and the nation. Dr. Fifield took two sabbaticals to go to Washington, DC to work with Senator Orrin Hatch on legislation concerning disability issues and work with the Office of Special Education.

On May 9, 2000, Senator Hatch read a tribute to Dr. Fifield into the Congressional Record, stating "... Without his skilled direction, numerous regional mental health centers, rehabilitation and vocational services, studies, and workshops would not now be available.... The lives of countless thousands of disabled and disadvantaged citizens have been enriched as a result of Marvin Fifield's work...our nation will benefit for generations to come."

Dr. Sarah Rule, the second director of the CPD, said much of the CPD's lasting influence could be summed up in one word: policy. Dr. Fifield's influence is still alive in the laws and procedures he worked on when they were just ideas.

Dr. Fifield served as a consultant and/or witness on behalf of disability programs for Congress and the Utah State legislature, and as a disability expert consultant to the World Health Organization and the National Advisory Council on Disability. He served terms as president of the Association of University Centers on Disabilities (American Association of University Affiliated Programs [AAUAP] at that time), and also as president of the Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America. Of his leadership, former AAUAP Executive Director Bill Jones wrote, "Marv recommended a legislative strategy that linked UAP training and research to almost every new federal and state initiative that concerned people with disabilities.... As a result of his vision, wise guidance, and effective leadership... the UAP network is serving and supporting almost every aspect of services to people with disabilities across the nation."

Dr. Fifield's tireless efforts greatly impacted services in the state of Utah. He was instrumental in developing the Tech Act legislation and wrote the proposal for the Utah Assistive Technology Program, one of the first nine such state projects approved by the federal government. He helped establish the Utah Legislative Coalition for People with Disabilities, which was uniquely effective increasing Utah's state appropriations for disability programs. After his retirement, he continued to work with the Utah

Legislature on policy and assumed a leadership role in expanding Independent Living Programs in Utah.

Dr. Fifield was a professor in the USU Departments of Psychology and Special Education. He published numerous books, monographs, refereed journal articles, and research reports. Indeed, the list of items he authored is so prolific that Senator Orrin Hatch once said, "Marv Fifield is so accomplished that his curriculum vitae is not so much measured in pages as in pounds."

In 1991, Dr. Fifield was the recipient of Utah's Golden Key Distinguished Service Award. The President of Utah State University awarded him the Leone Leadership Award for outstanding administrative leadership in 1996, and he was awarded the AAUAP Distinguished Service Award in 2000. Dr. Fifield also received many other recognitions throughout his career, too numerous to list.

To his associates, however, he looms large not just for the sum of his accomplishments, but also for the quiet and selfless way in which he made them. Interim CPD Director Dr. Judith Holt states, "Marv was an exemplary colleague and mentor.... He helped the staff at a fledgling UCEDD find direction and build a value-based foundation. Fifteen years ago, he supported a new staff member at the CPD in developing an innovative multi-university project that has impacted hundreds of leaders in the health field. I was fortunate to be the recipient of these examples of Marv's mentoring. Each day, I remember how Marv did it with graciousness, great insight, and a remarkable vision for the future. We are all richer for knowing Marv and most importantly, the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families across the state and country are richer."



Dr. Marvin Fifield speaking at the CPD 35th anniversary celebration.

Others remember Dr. Fifield as follows:

"Marv had such incredible impact for so many years I don't know where to start. He is the father of the program at Utah State, which has seen fantastic growth and impact on the lives of the people it serves. He spent many hours working with the Native American population, and he devoted his life to advancing programs and services to enhance the lives of people with disabilities. He had his fingers in many pies, he served on every board and committee that involved issues affecting their rights and lives. He served on the two sister agencies, Developmental Disabilities Council, and Disability Law Center Board. He was the Chair Person of Legislative Coalition For People with Disabilities Executive Board, he served on and chaired the Utah Statewide Independent Living Council, Options for Independence and many others to numerous to list. His years in Washington added to his seeing the value of Senator Hatch's Advisory Committee on Disabilities on which he spent many hours much to the benefit of the disability population nationally. His passing is the end of an era for the disability community." – Kris Fawson, Utah Statewide Independent Living Council Public Policy Specialist.

"During these early years the Center grew larger, became even more successful at getting grants and contracts, and continued to do even more cutting-edge activities. Marv's approach to leadership was key to the growth of the CPD.

Marv was always an easy to approach person, willing to talk about projects and issues. Behind the scenes he helped foster the Center's growth. Although there are times I miss the smaller, more intimate aspects of the Center where everyone knew everyone, we have become a stronger center. We are engaged in more diverse activities which benefit more people. Marv's vision led this growth." –Mark Innocenti, CPD Research Division Director.

"I am so sad to hear of Marv's passing. He was such a great leader and advocate for American Indian children with developmental disabilities and their families. His leadership in managing the Indian Children's Program contract was amazing. Under his leadership, the program positively impacted thousands of children and their families. The communities reached with training and TA also added to their capacity to effectively address disparity issues. I am sure ICP is one of many pursuits he accomplished. I will remember Marv and am grateful for the opportunity to have worked with him." –Christine Vining, Indian Children's Program

“Marv Fifield was a pioneer and visionary in special education. Marv has been on a life journey to improve the lives of people with disabilities. Marv was active in all major special education legislation, including, the Education of Handicapped Children's Act (EHA), Section 504, Americans with Disabilities Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). He assisted in Utah to operationalize these laws and regulations into pragmatic policy and practices for those with disabilities.

His contributions in improving the lives of people with disabilities in Utah and throughout the country will last for many years to come.... He was instrumental, with Dr. Glenn Latham, in bringing the Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center (MPRRC) to the Center for Persons with Disabilities. The MPRRC lasted for 35 years and impacted State Education Agencies across an eleven-state region. Marv was a gentle and considerate individual, he was always available and provided wise advice and guidance. He always kept the "main thing the main thing"—individuals with disabilities. He will be greatly missed, but never forgotten.” –John Copenhaver, CPD Technical Assistance Division Director.

“Marvin was a pioneer in the disability community, assisting with the passage of the ADA and the establishment of Utah's UCEDD (at the time UAF). His work has, and will be felt for decades to come. More importantly, Marvin was a hard worker, an optimist, and a mentor for many. He will be greatly missed.” –Cyndi Rowland, CPD Associate Director

“Marvin Fifield was a great mentor, supporter and believer in what contributions individuals with disability bring to the greater community and within the workforce. Marv hired me at the CPD and I consider him my strongest mentor and friend who gave me an opportunity to return to the work force after becoming paralyzed in a farming accident. My many years here at the CPD have been some of the happiest and most meaningful for me. Marv, I will miss you and thank you for everything you have done for the CPD and individuals with disability.” – Gordon Richins, CPD Consumer Liaison.

Anyone wishing to may [leave additional comments about Dr. Fifield.](#)



Dr. Marvin Fifield in a CPD classroom, circa 1981