

Through Their Eyes

07/25/2015

The Americans with Disabilities Act was a landmark piece of civil rights legislation, signed into law by President George H.W. Bush on July 26, 1990. The ADA's five sections, or titles, guarantee freedom from discrimination in employment, accessibility and accommodations for people with disabilities, both physical and mental.

As we mark the 25th anniversary of the signing of the ADA, the Center for Persons with Disabilities at Utah State University posed the question, "What does the ADA mean to you?" to a variety of people. Here are their answers.



Aubrey Taylor with her family

Aubrey Taylor, self-advocate

I always heard about the Americans with Disabilities Act and thought it was a cool thing. I was happy it was there for the people who needed it. But that's as far as my feelings went: "Cool. Good for them."

Things don't matter much to people until they become personal. Well, about 16 months ago, the ADA did become personal to me. When you lose your ability to walk, you realize just how much the "little" things become so much harder. And the bumps in the sidewalk and the steps into buildings/rooms and the tight corners that were once hardly noticed suddenly become giant walls between you and your previous lifestyle. These walls steal your independence, comfort, and dignity. Most people don't understand what it feels like to be five feet from your destination and completely incapable of reaching it.

But someone did understand; and they came up with a way to bring down these life-crippling walls. So that's what the ADA means to me now. It means to me that people care. It means that the world is improving. It means

that I can keep living life to the fullest and that people are working constantly to make that possible. It means freedom and independence, and it also means that I'm not alone.

I was born 25 years ago, and 25 years ago someone decided that quality of life matters for EVERYONE. A team effort to adjust small things will make worlds of difference for people with disabilities. Normal, wonderful, amazing people. These small adjustments to make our country accessible to everyone means we can all live up to the wonderful, amazing potential we have. You never think it's going to happen to you, whatever "it" is. But I'm in my twenties and need to use a wheelchair. Thank heaven someone cared enough to say that my life doesn't have to be over because of it.

Heather Humphreys, parent advocate

I am grateful for the Americans with Disabilities Act that promotes accessibility and opportunities to those with disabilities. My children are younger, and their needs have been mostly met by their IEPs. However, the looming realization that they are going to age out of those options makes it more important to know that there will still be ways for them to be integrated into society.

I have two children who are autistic, one of them with comorbid diagnosis that will cause her to lose sight as she ages. There isn't a cure for the loss of sight, only things to slow the progression. I have another daughter with a profound hearing loss, and she is losing hearing in the other ear slowly as well.

The ADA gives me the hope that they will be able to work a job. This opportunity positively impacts self-esteem, confidence, and the belief that they contribute to society. They are cute, and hard working, but they will need someone who is kind, patient, and committed to helping them be successful.

Two of my three children are using the bus system this summer to attend camps to help them learn new skills, and interact with others that wouldn't be an option if the bus system didn't exist. Increasing their accessibility to the community gives them the chance to learn, grow, and experience things that would otherwise be limiting factors.

I am confident as we continue moving forward on this disability path we will find ourselves grateful for the accessibility provided because of ADA legislation. It was put into place to make those who have challenges with incredible perspectives the chance to experience, and grow in the world around them. Equally important it

provides those of us without disabilities the opportunity to learn and grow from their strengths and insight.

Sara Doutré, parent advocate, CPD Consumer Advisory Council member

My daughter, Daisy, is deaf and uses cochlear implants to hear. For her, the ADA means that her deafness will not be a barrier to her doing the normal things kids do-- going to movies, going to college, working at her first job, and even traveling with our family. The ADA means that she will get reasonable accommodations when she needs them and it will not be a hardship to her or her family.

For me, the mom of a child with a disability, the ADA allow me to enjoy my time with my child more and spend less time worrying about whether she will have access to the things she needs and wants to do in her life. The ADA has raised the expectation for public entities for accessibility-- the things that parents had to fight for 25 years ago, we get to enjoy without the fight.

I am so grateful for the self-advocates and parents and family members who fought for the ADA. Raising a child with a disability is not without challenges, but their fight allows me to spend less time fighting and more time enjoying my child.



Darci Ostergar, USU Disability Resource Center Accessibility Consultant

At a young age I was concerned about social justice. I was excited to learn that I was a part of this big melting pot, America. I appreciated the diversity and I loved the variety of people and cultures. I was embarrassed, sad, and frustrated when we studied the Native Americans, slavery, and the Holocaust (to name a few subjects). Even at a young age, I knew that “same” was not “equal”... or fair, or even right. I knew I couldn’t fix the past, but I could be a friend to those who may have felt, or been a part of, some unfair treatment or judgment.

Time went by and I found myself an idealistic college student in the late 80s and early 90s. I worked with students in a special education setting, trying to make as much of a difference as one person could. Through the passing of the ADA, my individual point of view expanded

and joined with others who felt the same way. These laws stretched far beyond my small educational setting. It covered areas that expanded my knowledge to the other injustices occurring in employment, government programs, access to public places, transportation, and communication.

My desire for improvement for social justice, respect for diversity and opportunities for everyone evolved into my professions. As a mom, I advocate for my children with varying abilities. As a previous special education teacher and now in my current position as an Accessibility Consultant for USU students, I advocate for the removal of barriers. The ADA has enabled me to participate in this wonderful movement to improve society. The ADA legislation impacts my life on a daily basis, from the curb cuts that I use as a non-disabled person, to coordinating accommodations that students need to be successful. The ADA legislation positively impacts everyone, but I am especially grateful for the beneficial impact it has had in my life.

Gordon Richins, CPD Consumer Advocate

The ADA was passed three years after I acquired my physical disability (quadriplegia). At the time of my accident, all I knew about disability was I didn't want one. Now I have a significant disability. I've been very fortunate to have enjoyed a quality of life for the last 28 due to the passing of the ADA.

I attended USU from 1990 through 1994 and I learned a little bit about the ADA as a student. After graduation, I got a job at OPTIONS for Independence, northern Utah's Independent Living Center. While at OPTIONS, I started learning about the ADA and the many advocates, individuals with disabilities, professionals from workforce and politicians who worked tirelessly in passing the ADA.

The ADA means a great deal to me and the quality of life that I enjoy. To me it boils down to the great enhancement in quality of life for individuals and family with disabilities. Within this quality of life comes inclusion into our communities, enhanced respect, protections against discrimination, greater opportunities, and the ability to enjoy life just like everyone else. We can get on airplanes, we can get on public transportation buses, we can shop in stores etc.

The ADA also brought advancements in assistive technologies that have also enhanced quality of life for individuals living with disability. Assistive technology allows us to enjoy the many freedoms everyone else enjoys. For example, a speech board for an individual who cannot get

the words out clearly is invaluable to the individual utilizing it to communicate within their community, in the classroom or in the work environment. My power wheelchair allows me to have mobility and access throughout my community. With this comes the opportunity to work, so my chair is liberating to me. I get in with some physical assistance then I'm good to go all day.

The ADA really means we can now be included, accepted for who we are and are allowed to pursue our dreams.

Mat Bone, parent advocate, CPD Consumer Advisory Council member

People may wonder, "Why should I care about the Americans with Disabilities Act, because I am not a person with a disability. Is it not just the government meddling more in our lives? Are there not already enough protections for these disabled people?"

I am writing this as a person who does not have a disability. I have two children with disabilities so I do have perspective from both sides of the discussion. I have also seen people I work with, who have been contributing members of society, become disabled recently. Thanks to the ADA, not only are the people I know who recently became disabled able to remain contributing members of society, but my daughter has been able to excel in her education and will be able to get a good job and be able to do what she likes to do.

One thing that is important to remember is that just because someone has physical or mental limitations, it does not mean they are not able to do things. The ADA breaks down barriers that might otherwise prevent them from accessing things that help them accomplish things, but these individuals are able to do many things. It may be more difficult for them, but they are able in many ways.

Additionally, I realize as I grow older, I will probably not always be physically able to do what I have been able to do in the past. This law will help me as that happens. It is a good law and has helped countless people--some long-term disabled, some not-so-long term. It also helps us to be more aware of the human nature of each of us and to care more for those around us.

Tamara Wulle, CReATE Assistant

In 1990, when the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law, I was just seven years old. But because my parents had disabilities, I saw firsthand how it impacted people's lives as I grew up. It brought an excitement to our home as it offered hope for a more accessible community

in the (hopefully) not-too-distant future and protection against discrimination.

Not that it was actually renovated before I moved on from there, but my elementary school was only accessible to wheelchair users through a loading dock. Nobody else's parents had to enter the school in that way, and I remember conversations about how, "Now, because of the ADA, they'll probably have to fix that!" And such was the situation in numerous other locations, facilities, and activities that regular families (which is what we were) might normally attend or participate in without second thought.

Regarding the protection the ADA brought, though there still is a stigma about this, I will admit that there was a bit of fear prior to 1990 that parents with disabilities were not capable of raising children, and in some cases they were actually forced to give kids up to the foster care system, based solely on the fact they had disabilities--a draconian and punitive perspective I know, but a fact nonetheless.

In my case, my siblings and I were well-cared for and that never really developed, but there was nothing, really, to have protected us from the arbitrary opinion of someone in a position of power if it had come up. Under the ADA, however, that is completely illegal, as it should be if there are no other grounds on which to make a decision.

Yes, I can say that I was born at just the right time and into the perfect set of circumstances to truly appreciate the Americans with Disabilities Act, not to mention Justin Dart Jr., ADAPT, and the millions of people who advocated for its passage.



Sachin Pavithran at the White House

Sachin Pavithran, Director, Utah Assistive Technology Program and Chair, U.S. Access Board

In my opinion, the ADA was a good starting point. People with disabilities are more visible in the community. I think it is a great law, and it has done a lot, but like most laws, there are a lot of loopholes, and because of the loopholes, there are still huge barriers to employment. Employers are still skeptical, they find ways to work around not hiring a person with a disability. Stigma still exists, and a lot of employers are still unsure how to work with that.

Parts of ADA helped accessibility, especially wheelchair accessibility. Physical access is a work in progress, but overall, that part of the law is really working effectively. It's still a struggle to get equal access to information, with education being one of the biggest challenges. There are still a lot of limitations.

ADA as a law is a great law. I think we need to figure out more ways--there are a lot of gaps that need to be filled. It's not an answer to everything, but it's a good start.

Jeff Sheen, CPD policy analyst

I was a sophomore in high school when the ADA was passed—it was off my radar. I do vaguely remember stories about how it was horrible for businesses. I started to work in the disability field in 2001, and suddenly it became a very big part of my life. I started to travel with colleagues who had physical disabilities and began to notice accessibility features. I remember early on having travelled with three people who used those buttons on doors, and elevators, and I started having dreams about going into restrooms and being appalled that the restroom was not accessible! Once it became part of my world it literally became part of my view.

The ADA means inclusion. It means demonstrating publicly that as a society, we value everyone and want everyone to participate. That has not been fully achieved, but the ADA is that statement that people with disabilities have value and have the right to be fully included and to remove physical barriers.

The biggest barrier is attitudes and discrimination, but having physical accessibility allows people with disabilities to rub shoulders with their peers. Ignorance comes from not knowing better. Removing physical barriers plays a role in breaking down attitudinal barriers.