



February Guest Blogger: Julie Stahla, parent and Disability Rights Nebraska Board Secretary

I was asked to contribute to this blog with a short essay telling what the Americans with Disabilities Act means to me. After some thought, I'm not sure if it's what it means to ME but what it means for EVERYONE that is most important.

I am the mom of two great sons. Our youngest is 29 and has Down's Syndrome. Before he was born, and probably for the first 5 years of his life, I had no idea about the ADA. He was born in 1986. The ADA was born in 1990, authored by Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa and signed into law by President George H. W. Bush. That year, advocates and civil rights activists crawled up the steps of the Capitol building to convince lawmakers that this bill must be signed into law. Can you imagine? People using crutches or wheelchairs had no access to our nation's Capitol! My son was four years old. At four years old, we didn't think he would ever walk. We were meeting with a physical therapist weekly and standing him in a standing frame to strengthen his legs and body so that he could take some steps. And these people in Washington DC who were so committed to this law were crawling up the Capitol steps. Amazing.

Well, my son can walk. He gets around very well. He's hoping to become employed this year. Because of the ADA he will not be discriminated against because of his disability. If he needs reasonable accommodations in order to do his job, his employer will offer those. He is entitled to enjoy public transportation, accommodations when he goes to a hotel, when he eats out, and when he shops in our community. Because those activists crawled up the Capitol steps, my son and others like him have the right to accessibility and EQUAL OPPORTUNITY.

It may not be such a big deal to you, but to a person with a disability it means their life. It means they are on an equal basis with everyone else when it comes to living life. How many of you enjoy those automatic doors that open with the press of a button? Yeah, me too. Thank those civil rights activists for that. It made buildings all over the world accessible to everyone.

Celebrate on the 25th year of the signing of the Americans With Disabilities Act. Celebrate that we have inclusion and accessibility for everyone. Want to learn more about the ADA? Contact someone at a nearby organization for advocacy - Disability Rights of Nebraska, The Arc of Nebraska, or People First of Nebraska. We would love to visit with you about accessibility and inclusion and help you CELEBRATE!

Julie is from Grand Island. She and her husband, Bob, own their own business there. Julie has served on boards for the local Citizen Advocacy office, The Arc of Central Nebraska, The Arc of Nebraska, Goodwill Industries, the Transition Committee with the Grand Island school system, and currently serves as Secretary for the Board of Disability Rights Nebraska. She is the advisor of the Grand Island People First chapter and serves as an advisor to People First Nebraska.