

“**CHANGES
DO NOT
HAPPEN**
in a moment;
they happen in a
MOVEMENT.”

Change is A Movement

This is an excerpt from Claudia Gordon's keynote address given at the ADA25 Georgia Legacy Parade held on June 13, 2015 in Downtown Atlanta.



CLAUDIA L. GORDON currently works as chief of staff at the US Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs. Previously, she held a position in the White House Office of Public Engagement as the public engagement advisor to the disability community.

Friends, we gather together to celebrate a law that truly transformed how our society views, treats and accommodates citizens with disabilities. That law, the landmark disability civil rights known to us and the world as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has positively impacted the lives of thousands of Americans living with disabilities, including mine, for the past 25 years.

Let me echo something that my friend and fellow disability rights advocate Mark Johnson said: “the Americans with Disabilities Act is an integral part of our nation’s civil rights journey.”

So true. Disability rights are civil rights.

For far too long, our needs, our issues and our concerns were viewed as matters of charity. For too long, society’s primary preoccupation was on fixing us – through medical interventions, therapy and so forth – versus accommodating us; teaching us dependency versus providing us with the tools with which we can become independent and self-sufficient; forcing us into isolation versus integration and inclusion; controlling our freedom of choice versus empowering us make to informed decisions and fostering self-determination.

The signing of the ADA was a moment of incredible hope and optimism for people with disabilities and their families. The ADA symbolized the hope of a more inclusive society where all individuals could have the chance to live up to their full potential. It placed our country and the economy on the path to benefit from the talents and contributions of all Americans.

Helen Keller, who was deaf and blind, is one of the most beloved historic figures of all time because she embodied the American spirit of limitless possibilities. From the time she discovered the art of language at the water pump outside her home in Tuscumbia, AL, she never stopped breaking down barriers.

“People think that a revolution begins with injustice. They don’t. A revolution begins with hope.”

Ms. Keller taught the world that everyone has something positive to contribute when they are given an opportunity. She showed the world that with the right tools and attitude, anything is possible.

After all, we are to be defined not by our limits – but by our potential.

An advisor to Dr. King said: “people think that a revolution begins with injustice. They don’t. A revolution begins with hope.” I stand on the shoulders of countless disability rights advocates/activists and allies including parents of children with disabilities, who like

The ADA symbolized the hope of a more inclusive society where all individuals could have the chance to live up to their full potential.

Helen Keller taught us, believe everyone has something positive to contribute when they are given an opportunity.

They hope for a future wherein people with disabilities would enjoy equal access and full participation in all aspects of mainstream society; wherein we would lead independent lives, make informed choices and enjoy self-determination; wherein disability rights would be recognized as a civil right and not a matter of charity.

Their hopes laid the foundation for the ADA. Then, their action and sacrifices led to its drafting and passage.

Things didn't just get better for the disability community. People had to act to make it better. We may not have defining moments that are etched in our nation's consciousness like the Seneca Falls Convention – a milestone of women's civil rights movement/ women's suffrage, or Selma or the Stonewall riots of the LGBT community.

But our people sacrificed enormously to make things better for us.

I understand now what I didn't understand in 1990 – the ADA didn't come about overnight. Change does not happen in a moment; it happens in a movement. Just like the other civil rights movements before it: like the African-Americans who sat at the segregated lunch counters and refused to move to the back of the bus; people with disabilities obstructed the movement of inaccessible buses and marched through the streets to protest injustice – injustice such as being forced to live in institutions rather than in their communities with the necessary services and support.

They worked for years in cities and towns throughout the US attending protests, licking envelopes, sending alerts, drafting legislation, filing lawsuits and lobbying Congress.

Some of them are with us today – thank you.

This past March, our nation commemorated the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery March. I paused to truly reflect on what it means to stand on the shoulders of giants – I am here because they marched! I am here because so many sacrificed for me – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Congressman John Lewis and countless others who braved the violence of Bloody Sunday.

President [Barack] Obama said during his speech commemorating the anniversary, “Because of what they did, the doors of opportunity swung open not just for black folks, but for every American ...”

The passage of the ADA swung the door open for me.

I was a junior going into senior year of high school at the time the ADA was signed into law. It wasn't until the summer of 1991 that I truly gained an understanding of what the law symbolizes. I took a summer job with a nonprofit organization in New York City called Hospital Audience, Inc. Their mission is to provide cultural access to music, dance, theatre and the visual arts for individuals with disabilities and the elderly who live in nursing homes and other institutional settings as well as to children at health and social service facilities.

I was part of a cross-disability accessibility team. Together, we navigated our way around the Manhattan theater district visiting and surveying selected facilities for their accessibility features in anticipation of the ADA implementing regulations. We also measured curb cuts, counted wheelchair accessible parking spots, etc.

I learned so much and gained a new sense of awareness about the needs of individuals with disabilities other than deafness. I left NYC for college at Howard University with a new sense of empowerment and knowledge about my rights.



GCDD Executive Director Eric Jacobson (l) with Claudia Gordon, chief of staff at the US Department of Labor's Office of Contract Compliance at the start of the ADA25 Georgia Legacy Parade in June.

“Everyone has something **POSITIVE TO CONTRIBUTE** when they are given an **OPPORTUNITY.**”



Read Claudia Gordon's full speech on www.gcdd.org or scan the QR code to watch the video.