

“We’ve made some progress but there’s **MORE WORK TO DO.**

We’re not there yet, but today it’s time to **CELEBRATE.**

Georgia Celebrates the ADA 25th Anniversary

By Richard M. McKay



“Rosa [Parks] wanted to ride in the front of the bus. We wanted to get on the bus.”



The ADA Legacy Project Chair Mark Johnson and GCDD Executive Director Eric Jacobson address an enthusiastic crowd at the ADA25 Georgia Legacy Parade.

Disability advocates assemble on a hot summer day in Downtown Atlanta’s Hardy Ivy Park, at the start of the ADA25 Georgia Legacy Parade.

Perched in a tree’s shade from Atlanta’s summer sun, Mark Johnson, director of advocacy at the Shepherd Center, called those words into a microphone evoking the Civil Rights icon that helped end racial segregation.

On June 13 at Downtown Atlanta’s Hardy Ivy Park, people with disabilities, their families, caregivers and advocates gathered to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and participate in the ADA25 Georgia Legacy Parade, a commemorative event for the landmark legislation declaring people with disabilities have a right to equal opportunities.

He’s one of dozens who brought together this celebration. It included a cross-country ADA Legacy Bus Tour, hosted by The ADA Legacy Project which Johnson chairs, that will culminate on July 26 at The White House to

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mark the exact date the act was signed into law in 1990.

On parade day, Johnson was flanked by Eric Jacobson, the executive director of the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD), who’s made it his career to fight for better laws and programs for people with disabilities.

“It’s been 25 years,” Jacobson said. “We’ve made some progress but there’s more work to do. We’re not there yet, but today it’s time to celebrate.”





Led by the beats of the Shiloh High School Drum Corps, Claudia Gordon, chief of staff at the US Department of Labor's Office of Contract Compliance; Eleanor Smith, founder of Concrete Change; and Leslie Irby-Peoples, Ms. Wheelchair USA 2015 joined Johnson and Jacobson on the parade front line.

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Preserve, Celebrate, Educate

"Nobody is going to know our story unless we preserve it," Johnson told the crowd as he encouraged people to text, take photos, record videos and post on social media the day's events.

That's the mission of The ADA Legacy Project – preserve disability history; celebrate its historic milestones; and educate the public and future generations.

And, Atlanta is steeped in ADA history.

"How many of you are familiar with *Olmstead*?" Johnson asked, invoking the 1999 US Supreme Court case that ended most institutionalization of people with disabilities, deciding that it was unjustified segregation violating the ADA.

He spoke about the 75 Spring Street Sit-in in Downtown Atlanta where dozens of protesters with disabilities occupied 75 Spring Street, now the Richard B. Russell Federal Building, drawing national attention to one call – put chairlifts on all public buses.

"They were dragging us out of that building until someone called the president. We negotiated the final language of the ADA from that," said Johnson.

That's what the celebration is about. It honors the law that in 1990 brought order to a patchwork of rules and well-meaning ordinances, as well as casting out cold indifference across the country.

Advocacy

Parade attendee Autumn Baskin said that this is a community that is strong and proud.

"I'm here to show my daughter [Ayah] that she's part of a community that has a sense of pride," Baskin said. "I'm here to show her she has something to celebrate. People ask, 'what's wrong with her?' And I say 'Nothing.'" Baskin's daughter was diagnosed with cerebral palsy and is on the autism spectrum.

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William C. Harris of Atlanta, a wheelchair user, remembers the years before the ADA and what it has done since its passage.

"What the ADA did for me?" he said. "It gave me accessibility to any building you can get into. It gave me some semblance of

Leading the parade (l to r) Eleanor Smith, founder of Concrete Change; Leslie Irby-Peoples, Ms. Wheelchair USA 2015; Claudia Gordon, chief of staff at the US Department of Labor's Office of Contract Compliance; Mark Johnson, the ADA Legacy Project chair; and GCDD Executive Director Eric Jacobson.



Georgia ADAPT marches to the slogan "Free Our People" in support of equal rights for people with disabilities.



University of Georgia's Institute on Human Development and Disability proudly participates in the parade.

While we have challenges,

WE ARE ABLE, ...

We are differently abled.

Disability rights photographer and Road to Freedom bus driver Tom Olin (l), stands before the ADA Legacy Bus with Mark Johnson (c) and Eric Jacobson.



opportunity. At jobs they had to give me a real look and not just say they couldn't hire me because I'm in a chair."

But more importantly, he said it helped change the mindset of the people around him.

"While we have challenges, we are able," he said. "We are differently abled."

The Legacy Rolls On

Approximately 100 parade attendees were edged along by the tailing ADA Legacy Bus, wrapped in pictures of ADA history and the words "The Road to Freedom." On the sides were blended images of protests, people demanding rights to get on buses and the right to access into buildings, stretching back 35 years.

Tom Olin, the self-declared disability historian has been photographing the fight for rights for people with disabilities for decades. "I guess I've been floating around the country following this for more years than I can count," he said.

He pilots the ADA Legacy Bus, a 50-foot, 2001 Fourwinds RV that has traveled 15,000 miles to 27 states and 50 cities since last September spreading the word and reminding America of the anniversary.

On a recent five-day leg of the trip, Jacobson joined Olin as his copilot and they went on a loop from Atlanta to Johnson City, TN ending on May 15 at the North Atlanta Trade Center in Norcross, GA. It was also the weekend of the 2015 Mobility Expo.

Upon arrival, an energized Jacobson called it a great week where people really connected with the history of the ADA. But Jacobson said that the most moving part was arriving at the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, TN – the same school where Rosa Parks received her civil rights training before the bus boycott.

"It was impressive to feel all that history there, and know that we're connected as a part of an ongoing story," Jacobson said.

Inspiring the Future

Twenty-five years later, the ADA is being celebrated nationwide to commemorate the past, but to also inspire the future for ongoing advocacy.

At the ADA25 Georgia Legacy Parade, parade attendees convened at Centennial Olympic Park, where the Office of City of Atlanta Councilman Kwanzaa Hall declared the day Disability Pride Day in the City of Atlanta.

The event also featured speeches from two leaders in disability rights: Simi Linton and Claudia Gordon.

"This is deeply moving and I am very thankful and grateful for this opportunity to be here in Atlanta with all of you at a very meaningful time in our history," said Linton, who read an excerpt from her book *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. Most recently, she and Christian von Tippelskirch produced *Invitation to Dance*, a documentary about the disability rights movement portrayed through dance.



Actor on the TV show *NCIS: New Orleans* (r) and active wheelchair user Daryl "Chill" Mitchell was a guest speaker at the expo.



Attendees at the 2015 Mobility Expo viewing the latest technologies, products and services for people with disabilities.



Claudia Gordon, chief of staff at the US Department of Labor's Office of Contract Compliance, gave the keynote speech.

Gordon, who also worked in the White House as the Public Engagement Advisor to the Disability Community, gave the keynote speech. "We are all gathered together to celebrate a law that has truly transformed how our society views, treats and accommodates citizens with disabilities," she said. *(Read an excerpt from her speech in Expert Update on page 16.)*

A performance by Full Radius Dance, a professional physically integrated dance



Full Radius Dance, a professional physically integrated dance company, closed the festivities of the ADA25 Georgia Legacy Parade.

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"I just thought an anniversary sounds like a parade," said Gillian Grable, citizen-advocate and organizer of the parade. "We need to celebrate our advances, but focus on what needs to be done. We can't just celebrate. We have to also renew our commitment to making this world better for everyone."



Disability advocates with People First Mike and Mary Ann Curry took part in the parade promoting "Disable the Label" for people with disabilities.



An Excerpt from *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* by Simi Linton

Disabled people, and I will immediately identify myself as one, are a group only recently entering everyday civic life. A host of factors have typically screened us from public view. We have been hidden, whether in the institutions that have confined us, the attics and basements that sheltered

our family shame, the special schools and classrooms designed to solve the problems we are thought to represent. Or riding in segregated transportation, those "invalid coaches" that shuttled disabled people from one of these venues to another.

The public has gotten so used to these screens, that as we are now emerging, upping the ante on demands for a truly inclusive society, we disrupt the social order. We further confound expectations when we have the temerity to emerge as forthright and resourceful people, nothing like the self-loathing, docile, bitter or insentient fictional versions of ourselves the public is more used to.

We have come out not with brown woolen lap robes over our withered legs or dark glasses over our pale eyes but in shorts and sandals, in overalls and business suits, dressed for play and work – straightforward, unmasked and unapologetic. We are, as Crosby, Stills and Nash told their Woodstock audience, letting our "freak flag fly." And we are not only the high-toned wheelchair athletes seen in recent television ads but the gangly, pudgy, lumpy and bumpy of us, declaring that shame will no longer structure our wardrobe or our discourse.

For more about *Invitation to Dance*, a documentary film by Christian von Tippelskirch and Simi Linton, visit www.invitationtodancemovie.com



About the ADA25 Georgia Legacy Parade

The Georgia ADA25 Legacy Coalition is made up of the following like-minded partner organizations: Atlanta Legal Aid Society, Concrete Change, disABILITY Link, Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities, Georgia Disability History Alliance, Georgia State University Center for Leadership in Disability, One Billion Rising, the Shepherd Center, Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia and University of Georgia Institute on Human Development and Disability. We would like to gratefully acknowledge the support of the Center for Civil and Human Rights, Georgia State Financing & Investment Commission, State ADA Coordinator's Office and the Society for Disability Studies. The Coalition also gratefully acknowledges the following additional sponsors: Diversified Enterprises, Easter Seals of Southern Georgia, Georgia Advocacy Office and Georgia Municipal Association.