

Disability History: An introduction

Take a journey through the rich history and culture of the disability community with **Lawrence Carter-Long (LCL)** as your guide. LCL, the communications director at the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF), a national civil rights law and policy center at the Ed Roberts Campus in Berkeley, California, is a lifelong activist.

Transcript begins.

[rhythmic violin and percussion music]

[A lean, middle-aged white man with bleached-blond hair swaggers with cerebral palsy into a building through an automatic sliding door. He stops at the base of a red, spiral ramp—the centerpiece of the lobby at the Ed Roberts Campus—and speaks to the camera.]

LAWRENCE CARTER-LONG: In 2011, the Ed Roberts Campus opened in Berkeley, California, named after one of the founders of the independent living movement—a now worldwide movement of disabled people working for equal opportunity, self-determination, and respect.

[A montage of photos and footage shows disability rights protests from around the world.]

LCL: Here at the Ed Roberts Campus, accessibility is not an afterthought. It's built in—everything from the architecture to the tenants here in the building, advocacy groups, nonprofits, the supports and services.

[on-screen text: Lawrence Carter-Long, Communications Director, Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund]

[LCL turns and walks up the spiraling ramp. A person in a wheelchair speeds down the ramp, past a photo mural of the 504 sit-in. LCL proceeds to narrate the history of the disability rights movement in the US from various locations in the building.]

LCL: Disability rights are a part of civil rights history, but in order for that to be understood by the masses, we've got to get behind it in the ways that people have fought to include other things.

[Archival footage of iconic protests features suffragettes marching in New York in 1918; groups from the civil rights movement marching in Harlem in 1965, carrying banners that read, "We march with Selma!" and "We shall overcome"; and gay rights activists in a 1970s Los Angeles pride parade, holding signs and chanting, "Gay rights now!"]

LCL: Race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexuality. People had to claw and scratch and fight and protest and pass legislation in order for those things to get recognized as valid.

Let's walk through some of those significant moments in disability history.

[on-screen graphic: 1909]

LCL: 1909. Let's talk a bit about the dark history of eugenics.

[solemn, pensive percussion music]

[Archival photos from the early 1900s show disabled children; doctors under a sign that reads, "Eugenics Building"; and an audience seated before a stage with a sign that says, "Eugenic and Health Exhibit."]

LCL: For most of human history, disability has been a diagnosis—something to be cured, fixed, and cut out. Across the United States, from 1909 through the 1970s, disabled women, disabled men were put into institutions, were sterilized against their will and often without their knowledge.

[Archival photos from the mid-1900s show disabled people labeled, "Imbecile," "Moron," and "Feeble-mindedness."]

LCL: The words that were used—feeble-minded, idiot, moron—they were all meant to segregate and separate, the reverberations of that continue to play out now, a hundred years later.

[on-screen graphic: 1935]

LCL: 1935. If you hear the word "sit-in," you're likely to think about the American South, the civil rights protest of African Americans. But decades before, in eastern cities like New York City, Manhattan, groups like the League of the Physically Handicapped were sitting in for their right to work.

[contemplative electronic music]

LCL: After the Great Depression, 1935, everybody was hit hard. People with disabilities were specifically excluded from projects from the Works Progress Administration under the FDR administration.

[Archival footage shows people during the Great Depression.]

LCL: People with disabilities, who had met at a recreational center in New York City, said, "Wait a minute. Why should we settle for second class status?" And the day they sat down to meet, the sit-in began—one of the first recorded sit-ins in United States history.

So why did it take a disabled historian, someone like Paul Longmore, to uncover this fact decades later? This should be taught alongside the Freedom Riders, alongside Stonewall. This is one of those moments where people said, “We’re going to demand access to the same things that everybody else gets to take for granted.”

And yet people don’t know about it.

[on-screen graphic: 1977]

LCL: Spring of 1977. Disability rights activists in San Francisco and across the United States gathered to push, rally, and protest to make sure that regulations enacting Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act be put into law.

Let’s set the stage. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination due to disability in any programs, agencies, or by contractors receiving federal financial support. Going on three years later, but the regulations in order to enforce that law still have not been signed by Jimmy Carter. People with disabilities said, “We want access to the things that other people are taking for granted—federal buildings, education, employment initiatives.”

Demonstrations took place all across the nation.

[Archival footage shows protesters in San Francisco marching, chanting, and signing, “504! 504! 504!”]

LCL: In San Francisco, about 150 people, led by Judy Heumann, occupied the Health, Education, and Welfare building.

[Archival photos show protesters in wheelchairs and Judy Heumann speaking into a microphone. Archival footage shows protesters occupying the HEW headquarters, chanting, “504! Wait no more for 504!”]

LCL: People came together in the community. There was intersectionality before the word existed. We had support from churches, unions, civil rights organizations, gay groups, elected politicians.

We had the Gray Panthers offering support. We had the Black Panthers providing food. Twenty-eight days later, 504 was finally signed.

[Archival photos show disability rights activists at the sit-in. Archival footage shows the Gray Panthers delivering supplies and the Black Panthers serving food to protesters.]

LCL: Twenty-eight days later, 504 was finally signed.

[A black-and-white photo shows activist Kitty Cone delivering the 504 victory speech.]

KITTY CONE [VOICE-OVER]: “We showed strength and courage and power and commitment that we the shut-ins or the shut-outs, we the hidden, supposedly the frail and the weak, that we can wage a struggle at the highest level of government and win!”

LCL: Here we are, over four decades later, and that’s still the longest sit-in, the longest occupation, of any federal building recorded in the United States of America.

Why aren’t we using that as an example to say, this is what happens when communities come together? These are the changes that can occur when we stand together, roll together, sit together in solidarity.

[on-screen graphic: 1990]

LCL: 1990. Nearly a decade after Section 504 protests, the stage was set to take it to the next level. Organizers such as Justin Dart and Yoshiko Dart met with activists in every state—rallying, organizing, protesting—ready to create what would become our own landmark civil rights legislation: the Americans with Disabilities Act.

[A black-and-white photo of Justin Dart and Yoshiko Dart is followed by archival photos showing protesters in wheelchairs and a confrontation between protesters and law enforcement.]

LCL: Over 30,000 activists across the nation attended forums and gave testimonies to draw attention to the discrimination disabled people in America still faced, hoping to push Congress to approve the ADA.

[Archival footage from 1990 shows protesters outside the Capitol Building in Washington, DC, carrying signs in support of the ADA and chanting, “What do we want? ADA! When do we want it? Now! A! A! ADA! Pass the bill! Right away!” It’s followed by footage of Justin Dart and Congressman Major Owens addressing the crowd.]

[on-screen text: Major Owens, US Representative (D-NY)]

[on-screen text: Justin Dart, Disability Rights Activist]

JUSTIN DART: “We are here today representing 43 million Americans with disabilities forced by massive discrimination to be this nation’s most isolated, unemployed, impoverished, and welfare-dependent minority. As discriminatory barriers are eliminated, citizens with disabilities in America and in all nations will become producers, taxpayers, consumers, and participants in the full richness of their cultures.”

MAJOR OWENS: “The power now is in the hands of the people here on this hill. The people united will never be defeated! The people united will never be defeated!”

PROTESTERS [chanting with Owens]: “The people united will never be defeated! The people united will never be defeated!”

LCL: What did it take to pass that law? Disability being disruptive. Washington DC. They climb out of their wheelchairs, and they crawl up the steps of the United States Capitol.

[Archival footage shows disabled people, many on hands and knees, pulling themselves up the steps of the Capitol Building. The focus turns to 8-year-old Jennifer Keelan-Chaffins as she works her way up the steps.]

JENNIFER KEELAN-CHAFFINS: “I’ll take all night if I have to!”

PROTESTER #1: “You can do it!”

PROTESTER #2: “You’re almost there! We’re almost ready to reach the mountaintop.”

[The crowd cheers as Keelan-Chaffins reaches the top.]

LCL: A symbolic illustration of the obstacles that have been in our way for decades. Making that visceral, making that clear: We won’t be left behind any longer.

[pensive percussion music]

[on-screen graphic: 2007]

LCL: 2007. The Americans with Disabilities Act was the template, the backbone for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at the United Nations. In March 2007, a record number of 161 signatories signed on, the largest number ever in the UN’s history. But, ironically, the CRPD hasn’t been ratified here in the United States. So, clearly, there’s a lot of work yet to do.

From small, local efforts organized by many people collectively, disabled people have worked together across the United States to demand the right to education, employment, and housing. This community effort began decades ago and must continue today because although we have won some legal rights, there is still much discrimination. We need disability to be seen as a valuable part of diversity and we need general public respect to ensure that we can live independent, full lives.

We’ve waited long enough. The time to be included, the time for this to change is now. And you can be a part of it. You should be a part of it.

VOICE-OVER: Where are you in your Journey to Inclusion? For more information, go to DisabilityPhilanthropy.org, and promote using the hashtag DisabilityInclusion. Brought to you by the Presidents’ Council on Disability Inclusion in Philanthropy.

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