

UNITED SPINAL^{NOW}

Discrimination Endures

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When George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) on July 26, 1990, he said, “Let the shameful wall of exclusion finally come tumbling down.” Thirty years later, we know that large portions of the “wall” have come down, or been overcome by advocacy, ramps and collective common sense, but we know disability discrimination still exists.

We also know that without effective advocacy, disability-related discrimination will continue to exist. Accessibility and inclusion, unfortunately, are still an afterthought to many. Attitudinal barriers, especially regarding behavioral and psychological disabilities, still prevent many in the disabled population from full participation in American life.

Several weeks ago, we watched, in horror, as a Minneapolis police officer slowly suffocated a black man he had arrested on suspicion of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill. Just as shocking were the three officers who did nothing to save this man’s life, while a crowd implored them to intervene.

America is the most fortunate nation in the world, but, the French novelist Honore de Balzac said, “Every great fortune begins with a great crime.” Our great fortune as a nation began with the great crime of slavery. The trappings of slavery are still with us. The officer’s knee on the back of George Floyd’s neck, while knowingly staring into a video camera, is evidence of our shameful origins.

People with disabilities have an equally difficult history to overcome. Millennia of underestimating the potential for success and happiness of people with disabilities have limited opportunity and integration in the mainstream. While hate may not be in the heart of those who discriminate against those with disabilities, the pain inflicted and the burden carried by generation after generation of people with disabilities is quite similar.

Yes, America elected a black president, but no American believed that racism had been eliminated just because opportunity had increased. Yes, FDR was a wheelchair-using president seventy-five years ago, and it’s been thirty years since ADA passed, but we all know that despite more opportunity, disability-related discrimination is still alive and well.

According to a Ruderman Family Foundation 2015 white paper, up to 50 percent of those killed by police are people with disabilities. We must demand of government that law enforcement personnel be trained to intervene appropriately. Assuming criminal intent because of unusual behavior has resulted in too many unfortunate arrests, and even lives lost.

I was in the crowd when the ADA was signed into law. Thirty years ago, I really would have had trouble predicting ADA issues of 2020 — after all, there was no internet, so no Ubers, artificial intelligence and self-driving cars and barely any computers. But if you asked me then if there would be race discrimination in America in thirty years, I probably would have said yes.

It is my fervent hope that the next thirty years brings about a great enlightenment about the rights of people to live free from discrimination on the basis of race or disability. When we finally live in a post-racial society, there will still be people with disabilities. Let’s resolve to make their world a better place.