



Federation Of The Handicapped

By Warren Shaw

Federation for the Crippled and Disabled was a unique entrepreneurial effort by and for people with disabilities. It began in the spring of 1935, during the Great Depression, as a not-for-profit that combined self-help and sociability with job training and employment. Federation has not generally been considered in the context of disability activism, but it really ought to be.

Federation's origins were by chance – a meeting of three unemployed disabled men on the sidewalks of Times Square. They were drawn together by a police officer's encounter with one of them – a double amputee selling pencils and other small goods.

Concerned that an arrest might be imminent, two single amputees came to back up the legless man. After the man proved he was a licensed dealer and not a vagrant, the officer let him go, and the three went to get a cup of coffee.

Disease Caused Disability

The legless man was Michael Bertero, an immigrant from Turin, Italy, who had at one time been securely employed as a foreman in a furniture factory. A skilled craftsman – not a laborer – Bertero owned a home in the Bronx and was providing for his wife and children in the usual way. In 1930, he fell ill with Buerger's Disease, which required amputation of both legs at the hip.

Discharged by his employer and unable to find other work, medical costs and lost wages brought his family to the brink of financial ruin. Bertero's family was forced to rent out rooms. His son left school and found a job, while Bertero began scouring the City's subways on a small wooden platform fitted with roller skate wheels. He begged for change until he got arrested on the Lexington Avenue line.

He got off with a suspended sentence for disorderly conduct, then obtained a license to work as a "sidewalk department store owner" and began the low-paid work that brought the three men together.

Joining Mr. Bertero over coffee was Ralph Rice, who had lost a leg and most of his fingers to frostbite in an Alaskan blizzard and Robert Boster, a Midwesterner whose mangled leg had to be amputated after a railroad accident.

Drawn together by their common impairments and unemployment, they were caught in the same trap. With 25 percent of the nation out of work, the Depression was nearly insurmountable even for nondisabled people. What in the world were they supposed to do?

An organization of people with disabilities might provide a path to



Stamp depicting Federation

a better future. They all agreed on that, and they pledged to found an organization devoted to improving the situation of adults with disabilities.

Bringing New Members

As they tried to move this idea forward, Bertero, Boster and Rice found other people with disabilities who were looking for a way out and were willing to sign on as members. In keeping with their all-for-one, one-for-all philosophy, they dubbed themselves the Federation for the Crippled and Disabled.

Acting as officers, employees, fundraisers, publicists, social workers and vocational trainers, the founders raised enough money to set up operations in a beat-up building at Broadway and 66 St. With less than fifty members, its first hires were three disabled young women who received a small salary and secretarial training (which mainly consisted of typing up fundraising letters).

Federation was soon providing on-the-job training in watch-making, stenography, printing and other suitable occupations. It also succeeded in placing unskilled disabled workers in hospitals and hotels. It was at this stage in Federation's development, with about ninety members, that it first incorporated in 1937.

As described in Federation's certificate of incorporation, the trio's concept was a combination of social club and mutual aid society, intended to improve the circumstances of members through job training and assistance in job placement. The certificate of incorporation specifically stated that the new organization's purposes included preventing vagrancy and covering funeral costs for families too poor to do so on their own.

1,100 Members

Federation developed real expertise in screening members for their aptitudes and abilities and developing practical programs and training. It opened an artificial limb and braces manufacturing and repair fa-

cility, a print shop and a second-hand furniture and salvage shop, along with social services and job placement departments and a public relations staff. It put together speech classes and an occupational therapy program. Membership soon grew to over 1,100, a remarkable accomplishment that required moving to a larger space.

In 1942 Federation purchased its first headquarters. Instead of a modest second- or third-tier property, Federation picked something conspicuous – a flashy, if not quite palatial former music school, prominently opposite Carnegie Hall. This building is still well known today as Cami Hall – not the sort of place one would think of as the headquarters for a disability self-help group.

The founders saw this acquisition as a sign that their organization had arrived. As Bertero wrote in the *Long Island Star Journal*, "the dream conceived seven years ago [became] a realization . . . when the official opening of our new home at 163 West 57 St. took place . . ."

But this real estate overreach turned out to be a bad omen.

Record Keeping Flawed

Bertero, Boster and Rice

had set themselves up as officers, board members and staff, both raising the funds and deciding how they should be spent without any of the internal checks or record-keeping required for not-for-profits. This setup was flatly unlawful, and it touched off a crisis when the Attorney General moved to revoke Federation's corporate charter.

The results were disastrous. Federation's expansion halted. Fundraising practically collapsed. A partial shutdown followed, and 125 workers were let go.

In the end, the three founders got kicked out, and Cami Hall got sold. The organization even changed its name to Federation of the Handicapped. It managed to survive, but emerged shrunken in a little building at 211 West 14 St. with a revenue shortfall that never really went away.

Aid Mission Survives

Federation's mutual aid mission carried on, though. It hired a full-time social worker and developed new programs in toy making, sewing, book-keeping and building maintenance.

What's more, for many, many years Federation provided important social outlets for its members and trainees, with both formal and informal weekend, monthly and holiday events that included dances, dinners, card parties, professional entertainers, guest speakers and the like. It even developed innovative, disability-friendly vacation and travel programs that attracted considerable publicity.

But eventually the struggle to generate revenue began to dilute the organization's self-help purpose. Disabled people's representation on the board was cut back, and nondisabled professional management was brought in.

Federation increasingly turned to a sheltered workshop model. This enabled Federation to compete economically, and it began to win contracts to assemble and repair a variety of products. In 1960, for example, Federation began manufacturing cable assemblies for Pershing missiles. By 1964, electronics and industrial work furnished 70 percent percent of the organization's annual budget.

However vital such contracting may have been to Federation's bottom line, the work itself was invariably dull, repetitive and poorly paid – below minimum wage, almost by definition. Even though Federation continued to provide employment for people with disabilities, the dead-end nature of that employment constituted little less than an abandonment of its original self-help mission.

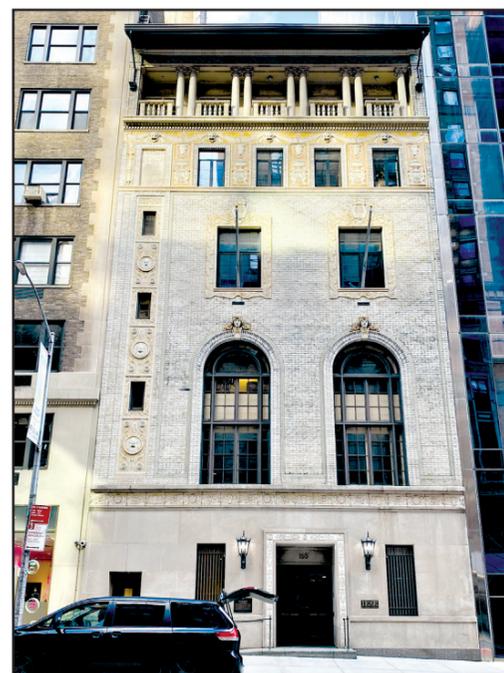
Sheltered Workshops

As rote assembly-line work became all but synonymous with the organization, Federation drew the disdain that the disability community has long felt towards sheltered-workshop employment. It played almost no part as the modern New York City Disability Rights Movement got underway in the 1960s, and those activists went about their mission with little or no idea that Federation's origins lay in an earlier iteration of that same cause.

By the end of the 1960s, Federation stopped its efforts to provide sociability and job training. News coverage of Federation had long focused primarily on its social benefit activities, but after 1970 it was almost entirely business-oriented.

More recently, the dilution of Federation's original purpose reached its conclusion. In 2015 Federation sold its longtime headquarters on West 14 St. and moved to midtown offices.

Merging with a number of other organizations and under a new corporate moniker, Fedcap, it has become just another star in the non-profit firmament. It no doubt serves a useful purpose but with little or no connection to the mission that brought it into being.



Cami Hall