

PIVOTAL YEAR 1978 – PART TWO

BY WARREN SHAW

(Continuing a two-part essay about the New York City Disability Rights Movement in the 1970s, and the succession from the World War II generation founders of the movement to the Baby Boomers who ultimately took it over.)

The generational freeze was never complete and it began to thaw in '74. Boomers like Fred Francis were an important part of that Spring's massive civilian gas demo, even though it was a founder-led action. And, coming out of that very successful event a mix of founders and Boomers, including Julie Goldberg, Sol Wieder, Kipp Watson and Michael Dickman formed the New York State Congress of People with Disabilities (NYSCPD).

As an outgrowth of the gas demo, NYSCPD's origins bear similarities to the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities (ACCD), which came out of the 504 Regs sit-ins of 1977.

So people were talking and working together more easily,



Julie Shaw and Fred Francis, are left to right in the foreground, and a side view of Anna Fay, on the right at the Gas Demonstration on March 4, 1974.

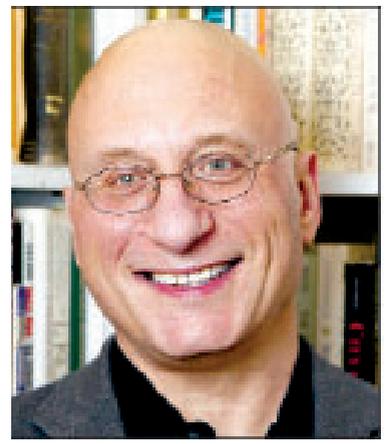
and that was obviously positive. But the reality was that the wind was at the Boomers' backs and in the founders' faces.

By the second half of the 1970s, the City was frankly running out of founders (and there hadn't been all that many to begin with). Richard Match quit activism altogether. Ivan Wyler moved to Westchester. Vincent Marchiselli got elected to the State Assembly, so he was up in Albany much of the year. Curtis Brewer turned away from group politics in favor of a one-man path as a solo attorney. Joel Tyler became a judge (where he is best remembered for ruling in 1973 that the notorious film "Deep Throat" was criminally obscene). Meanwhile, the two Boomer members of the Architectural Barriers Committee, Marilyn Saviola and Anna Fay, quit ABC to devote themselves to youthful organizations like Disabled In Action (DIA).

Julie Shaw and his founder comrades had long used the old leftie technique of creating fistfuls of organizations in order to give the appearance of a larger movement. They even got a bit playful at times – one of their letterbox names was ACRONYM (Allied Citizens Representing Other New York Minorities). But the thinning of their membership could not be denied.

By contrast, the ranks of Boomer activists continued to grow, as people like Ann Emerman joined the fight. And simultaneously, in spite of their anti-establishment reputation the Boomers began to display real talent at institution-building.

These trends built to a pivotal moment in the year 1978 and one of the primary vectors was the New York Metropolitan chapter of the National Paraplegia Foundation (NPF).



NPF actually predated the founders. It was the product of the disabled veterans of World War II, circa 1946 (co-incident with creation of the Paralyzed Veterans of America and the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association). But the New York Metropolitan chapter was set up in the early 1970s by Boomers like Anna Fay.

The New York Metropolitan chapter put an emphasis on community advocacy. That made for an uneasy fit with the national body, which had historically been more focused on medical research into spinal cord injury.

So in 1978, chapter leaders like Pat Figueroa, Phyllis Rubenfeld, Marcie Goldstein and Carr Massi withdrew from NPF and transformed the New York Metropolitan chapter into New York State's first Independent Living Center (ILC) – the Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York, or CIDNY.

Pat's colleague from Brooklyn College, Fred Francis, was working for Vocational, Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID) and helped get the critically important grant from the State, which included federal funds under the 1973 Rehab Act. Within a few years CIDNY was joined by The Brooklyn Center for Independence of the Disabled (BCID), The Bronx Independence Living Services (BILS), and other ILCs in Harlem, Queens and Staten Island.

CIDNY is a big part of the reason that 1978 was a pivotal year. Not because CIDNY was operationally all that different from its NPF incarnation, but because it was the implementation of a new theory of disability community life – a blend of expert service advice with community and political advocacy, supported by some public funding, which went on to develop into a permanent public resource.

The Mayor's Office for the Handicapped (MOH) had been an earlier draft of a similar vision, but its relationship to the community has frequently been more or less fraught by virtue of its position within City government. The ILCs, by contrast, were more standalone, and represented the retailing of activism down to the branch level, so to speak.

1978 was also pivotal in that Julie Shaw succeeded Eunice Fiorito to become the second Director of MOH. His elevation meant that the agency would live on, despite a then-recent threat of complete defunding and that MOH would remain the founders' turf, at least for the time being. But with the founding of the ILCs there could be no doubt that the New York City Disability Rights Movement would become the Boomers' show, very very soon.

Finally, by the end of 1978 the City's disability rights movement had taken on a multi-level configuration that remains recognizable today, more than forty years later. On the inside is MOH (now MOPD), a City agency which serves as a liaison, as an intra-governmental policy coordinator and as a technical resource. On the outside are activist groups like Disabled In Action, which agitate and direct attention to issues and causes. CIDNY and the other ILCs are somewhere in the middle, as publicly subsidized community coordinators, service facilitators, and change advocates. Other middle- and outer-tier groups would follow.

For example, the very next year, in 1979, the breach with the vets was definitively resolved when EPVA, led by Boomers like Terry Moakley and Jim Weisman, joined an emerging campaign for accessible mass transit. EPVA became a major movement component, one that built out still further the new institutional fabric that the Boomers were forging.

It was all a magnificent achievement by the kids. And by the time it was done the remaining founders saw the Boomers no longer as reckless disruptors but as brilliant successors, fully deserving of the respect and admiration that people like my father Julie Shaw and Vincent Marchiselli expressed to me, many years later.