AbleNews

The Viscardi Center

THE NEWSPAPER FOR, BY, AND ABOUT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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92NY's "Women inPower" Fellowship Introduces Groundbreaking Leadership Program for Neurodivergent Women

By Esme Mazzeo

92NY's Women inPower fellowship for rising leaders is celebrating its 10th anniversary with a cohort for neurodivergent women in the workplace. (Neurodivergence can be understood as variations in the human brain that result in differences in how people think, learn, and behave.) The neurodivergent cohort is the first known program to focus on helping mid-career neurodivergent women learn more about their identities and strategize with peers about using their strengths to move into higher leadership positions at work and within their communities.

"All marginalized groups are under attack," Filippa Christofalou, founder of The Drama Science Lab and a neurodivergent fellow, expressed to *Able News* when asked about why it's important that 92NY was focusing on neurodivergent women in 2025. "Now is a time [marginalized] groups [need] to be supported in any way."

Over the course of a year, Women inPower's cohort members meet at least once a month to have discussions and attend programming designed to help them understand their neurodivergent identities, examine how their identities might appear to neurotypical co-workers, leverage their strengths for maximum impact, and advance to higher levels of leadership within their communities and professional fields. Workshops within the program are tailored to help neurodivergent women build confidence and lead others while embracing their neurodivergence.

Members bond, support, and strategize with each other about topics like how to manage burnout, self-advocating from a place of strength, navigating their identities within the current political climate, and in some cases, embracing their newfound identities after masking their challenges for many years.

According to UCLA Health and Frontiers in Global Women's Health, women are often diagnosed with neurodivergent conditions like ADHD and autism later in life than men, who are more frequently diagnosed in childhood.

"There are many, many women leaders who suddenly have this new identity that they're navigating and this new way of thinking about their leadership and thinking about their career and thinking about their lives that they're now navigating in their late thirties, forties, fifties," Rebekah Shrestha, who leads the Belfer Center for Innovation & Social Impact and the Office of Strategic Planning at 92nd Street Y, told *Able News*. "And we felt like that was just a moment that this fellowship was so well-suited to support."

The fellowship began a decade ago to help women address what Shrestha called the "mid-career drop-off point." She explained that research indicates that women enter selective fields at higher rates than men and even enter management positions at comparable rates to men, but often struggle to move from middle management to senior leadership positions.

Having a community that encourages them to explore their neurodivergent identities while also helping them navigate workplace challenges and goals has been transformative for cohort members.

"I felt seen and understood by complete strangers. And then I was also able to provide that same feeling to others. I was able to provide genuine understanding and validation back to complete strangers," Vishney Ambalavar, a senior investigator at the U.S. Department of Labor, told *Able News* of her experience on the cohort's first virtual call.

Ambalavar received her ADHD diagnosis last year and is in her mid-30s. She said that thanks to the conversations and activities she's doing in the cohort, she now understands the characteristics of ADHD that started significantly impeding her in law school—issues with time management, focusing, and staying organized—don't make her a failure.

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Advancing Accessibility

Human Factors and Usability Studies: Putting Disability at the Forefront of Design

By Monica Gibson

As Victor Calise, Director in Walmart Belonging for Walmart's Accessibility Center of Excellence, said, ''accessible design cannot be born in a bubble.'' Involving people with disabilities at every stage of innovation is the only way to build a truly accessible society. Hofstra University is introducing a new program this fall that aims to address this issue.

The Human Factors and Usability Studies program will focus on human physiology, psychology, and its technological applications in software development and engineering design. To kick off this new program, Hofstra hosted a summit with speakers including Calise; Sara Czaja and Walter Boot of Weill Cornell Medicine; Greg Hlibok, a Hofstra alumnus who serves as Chief Legal Officer for ZVRS and Purple Communications; and Linda Boyle, the Vice Dean of Research and Professor of Civil and Urban Engineering at New York University. These speakers represent the interdisciplinary nature of Human Factors and Usability Studies, something academia has been embracing within the past ten years.

Human Factors and Usability Studies, the study of how humans interact with the environment in which they live, is synonymous with disability advocacy. We're coming up on the 35th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but in that time, it seems we've been fighting to fix people with disabilities rather than create accessible solutions. This new field aims to deconstruct this narrative by encouraging collaboration across various fields to achieve true accessibility. This involves partnerships among engineers, computer programmers, fashion designers, architects, news reporters, psychologists, doctors—and arguably most importantly, users with disabilities.

Also known as ergonomics, Human Factors and Usability Studies has been integral to design practices since the earliest human creations. Unfortunately, many people subscribe to the philosophy that if something works for them, it works for everyone.

During the Industrial Revolution, machines were designed with the expectation that workers would adapt to them without difficulty, often excluding those with disabilities who were unable to operate the equipment. This concept evolved during World War II when poor design began limiting human capabilities, particularly in the case of malfunctioning aircraft, which would be fatal. In 1949, the Ergonomics Research Society (ERS) was formed in Europe, originating the term ''ergonomics'' and focusing primarily on human productivity. Historically, the field of ergonomics unintentionally led to development of machines that favored productivity, discarding those who couldn't keep up. It is exciting to see the field now expanding to focus on accessibility, rather than being a barrier that contributes to the issue in the first place.

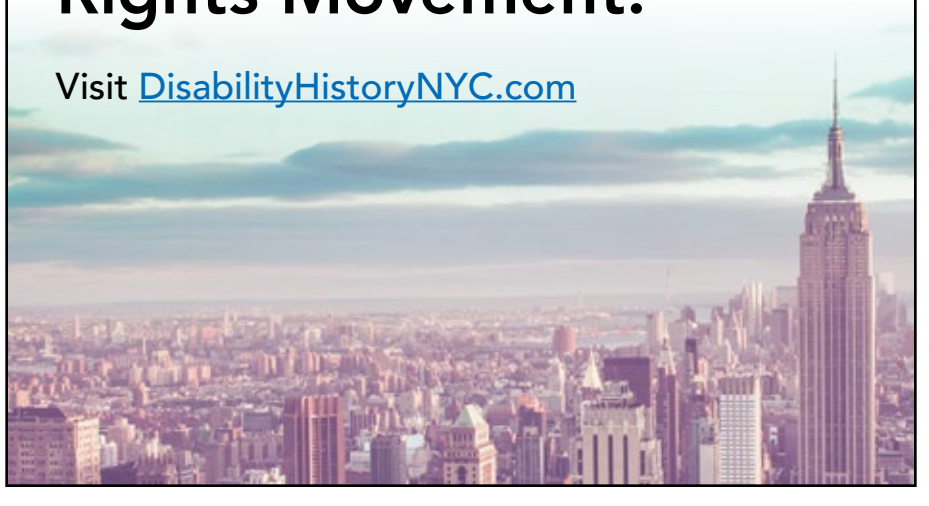
To dive deeper into this topic, Hofstra's summit featured a panel on designing for disabilities featuring Calise, a wheelchair user who previously served as accessibility coordinator for the New York City Parks Department and as Commissioner of the New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, and Hlibok, a Deaf advocate who previously worked at the Federal Communications Commission as chief of the Disability Rights Office in the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau, where he oversaw the implementation of the 21st century Communication and Video Accessibility Act.

Both speakers provided insight into past inventions that lifted up accessibility from the beginning, such as the iPhone. FaceTime, currently only compatible with Apple devices, has been instrumental for Deaf individuals to communicate using sign language. In fact, Hlibok highlighted a survey conducted at Gallaudet University that found that 85% of students reportedly use iPhones over other brands. This is a prime example of how accessibility can boost sales, creating incentives in a capitalist society, countering the argument heard in high offices about the cost of accommodating disabilities.

Ultimately, the goal of Hofstra University's Human Factors and Usability Studies program is to produce innovators who design with accessibility in mind, rather than addressing inaccessibility from two steps behind. It isn't enough to simply have an accessible campus; universities should teach students how to bring accessibility into their futures.

Learn about the leaders and legends of the New York City disability community, chronicled by Warren Shaw, historian of the New York City Disability Rights Movement.

Visit DisabilityHistoryNYC.com



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COMMENTARY AND OPINIONS

2025 NYC Mayoral Election

Candidates Vary on Attention to Disability Issues

By Christopher Alvarez

Photo of mayoral forum courtesy of CIDNY.

New York's Center for Independence of the Disabled (CIDNY) hosted nearly 200 disabled voters both in person and on Zoom for a heated mayoral debate at the end of April. The pressure was on the candidates to keep the crowd engaged as only two of them showed up in-person—former NYS Assemblyman Michael Blake, and attorney Jim Walden. NYC Comptroller Brad Lander and NYS Senator Jessica Ramos joined virtually.

Taking questions on healthcare, education, employment, housing, voting, and transportation, the candidates offered their responses on key issues impacting the NYC disabled community—a powerful voting bloc.

Running on plans to expand access to quality education and provide more affordable living options for the middle-class, Blake, a former state Assembly member from the Bronx, is pushing for vacant apartment taxes, a local median income, an increase in the income thresholds on housing applications, and holding landlords accountable for not accepting housing vouchers. ''We have to rescind the incentives for these landlords who are not ensuring that they are taking the support and the vouchers and the funding for someone that has disability concerns as well as for the developer,'' Blake said. ''A developer needs to be building out buildings and homes where you truly have the access points around accessibility.''

Walden also shared his housing goals, noting that he would create modular housing that's compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, an idea that he said works in other countries and that Mayor Adams' administration explored but did not follow through with.

''We have this crazy thing that other countries like Finland and Uganda use for displaced populations called modular housing that is transportable, that is clean, that can be sanitized,'' Walden said. ''I'm going to keep people off the street and out of shelters. Where we don't have housing, I'm going to put it with modular housing units and let families especially have a private area where they're not in shelters and I'm going to build new housing that is accessible fully to the disabled.''

Later, during discussions of education, Senator Ramos was applauded when she criticized the New York City Department of Education's website for limiting resources to special education students in the District 75 schools, which provide highly specialized instructional support for students with significant challenges. ''I think that's a travesty and that's going to end with my administration, making sure that our children with disabilities have opportunities to integrate and making sure that we are carrying those opportunities for higher education and even GED access and further digital literacy is something I want to make available to every New Yorker,'' she said.

Senator Ramos also mentioned a bill she is sponsoring that will require the MTA to disclose certain capital project data, as well as a bill she is co-sponsoring to eliminate the subminimum wage for people with disabilities in New York. ''This was her best performance,'' Zachary Borodkin, an Education & Outreach Training and Coaching Specialist at Open Doors who was in attendance, said about Senator Ramos.

Lander shared much about his efforts to run an inclusive, accessible campaign. He hired a Community Liaison for People with Disabilities, has convened disability justice roundtables, and built an accessible campaign website. As NYC Comptroller, he put out a comprehensive five-year accessibility plan and co-hosted the 2024 Disability Pride Parade. ''I was impressed when I attended his disability roundtable,'' said Robert Acevedo of Disabled In Action.

Perspectives missing from CIDNY's mayoral forum included former New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo, NYS Representative Zohran Mamdani, NYS Senator Zellnor Myrie, and former NYC Comptroller Scott Stringer. Given this knowledge, *Able News* also attended the Black Agenda Democratic Mayoral Forum in Brooklyn in April to gain further insight.

At that event, former Governor Cuomo was heckled with ''liar'' chants based on evidence that he falsified the accurate number of nursing home deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, although Cuomo proposed Medicaid cuts and changes to the eligibility criteria for home care programs during his last year in office, as looming budget cuts have taken these threats further, the hopeful mayoral candidate is changing his narrative. Cuomo told *Able News* that Governor Kathy Hochul is ''doing the best she can, but it's tough,'' also noting that ''she wants those Medicaid cuts [and] I'm very afraid of the Medicaid cuts. We're going to have to fight them on those.''

Also responding to the proposed federal budget cuts, Stringer put forth that he would enact a ''rainy day fund'' of $500 million dollars for both the City and State to combat them. Specifically pertaining to disability, Stringer noted that during his time as a NYS Assemblyman, he enforced accessibility at all publicly owned buildings in the city and would continue that work if elected.

Assemblymember Mamdani, who is popular amongst the younger generation of NYC voters, has been known for outraising all of his opponents combined in donor campaign funds during his first cycle. However, Marc Safman, CEO of Safman Consulting and a frustrated DeafBlind New York resident, says that none of this funding has been used ''to run an accessible campaign for all.'' Safman has refrained from going to Mamdani's campaign events due to a lack of ''reliable and culturally appropriate ASL facilitators or real-time captioning'' and his struggle to understand.

During the forum, Mamdani did not articulate a specific plan to address disabled New Yorkers, but he did tell *Able News* that current New York City Mayor Eric Adams ''had promised a specific amount of funding to be allocated for [employment] and then combined it into a larger pot. And when you put it in a larger pot, it doesn't have specificity. It starts to get absorbed elsewhere.'' Mamdani went on to share: ''So what I made a commitment to do, is make a dedicated funding stream for these kinds of opportunities so that we can actually ensure that it meets disabled New Yorkers where they need it the most and doesn't get used for the purposes of a press release and then shift it over elsewhere.''

Also without a set disability-focused plan is Senator Myrie. Part of his campaign's ''opportunity agenda'' is improving the NYC workforce pipeline, but he was seemingly puzzled to find out about the inaccessibility of the job application process for people with disabilities when asked about it. Myrie told *Able News* he would find a way to ''standardize the application process, that if you were putting a job up, both public private sector, that it'd be accessible. I got you.''

Reflecting on the importance of ''show[ing] that the disabled vote should be important to these candidates,'' Acevedo encourages others to get out there and make their perspective known in the mayoral election.

Get Outdoors and Get Together

By Kathryn Carroll, Esq., Disability and Program Coordinator, Association on Aging in New York

Outdoor recreation opportunities that are accessible to people with disabilities and older adults are essential. In aging services, we regularly remind clients that people need to engage in activities for our mental and physical health, as well as to maintain social connections. Unfortunately, opportunities available to us can be limited by physical barriers, lack of transportation, or other factors. However, there are many positive efforts across New York to create and promote accessible recreational opportunities for all.

Chemung County Senior Games

The Chemung County Senior Games hosted by the Chemung County Department of Aging and Long Term Care exists to highlight the active life of people over the age of 50, and, according to its website, its "participants exercise regularly, and some train all year long. We work with an alliance of partners in the field of health promotion and education to encourage health through exercise, physical activity, nutrition and positive lifestyle choices." The Department hosts opportunities for older adults to compete in a variety of events that might be inherently accessible or adaptable to those interested. Go bowling, take your best shot at cornhole, or play bocce on Chemung's wheelchair-accessible bocce courts.

NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Interactive Map

The DEC has been developing accessible opportunities for some time, but in July of last year the Department launched a website with an interactive map of all wheelchair-accessible recreation opportunities. The map lets you identify destinations by type of site and region of the state. As shared by the DEC, "DEC lands and facilities offer many recreational opportunities for people of all ages and abilities including camping, picnicking, fishing, boating, hiking, and nature viewing. Explore the DEC Accessible Recreation Destinations Map to locate wheelchair accessible features at education centers, campgrounds and day use areas, waterway access sites, and land areas."

ADX/Xperience for All

Adirondack Experience, the Museum on Blue Mountain Lake (ADX) is a private institution that is taking the lead on promoting accessible outdoor and cultural education opportunities. Notably, its annual Xperience for All event highlights intentionally accessible outdoor activities by offering chances to try things like canoeing/kayaking, birding, campfire cooking, hiking, and more. The next Xperience for All will be on September 27, 2025.

Get Outdoors & Get Together Day

Previously two separate events, Get Outdoors & Get Together Day is hosted by multiple state agencies to connect people to nature and provide increased access to the outdoors. The event "brings together people of all abilities, ages, identities, and backgrounds for fun, healthful activities as part of the Governor's initiative to broaden the diversity of users and ensure inclusivity of access to state public lands." This year's event is June 14, 2025. Learn more at the event page on the DEC website.

Adirondack Nature Festival for People with Disabilities

This event, now in its second year, is funded by Adirondack Accessible Tourism but engages many community partners to showcase what the Adirondacks have to offer people with disabilities wanting to get out into nature. The Festival this year is on August 16, 2025, and you can learn more on the festival website.

Erie Canalway Canalway Challenge Virtual Program

You can also enjoy the "outdoors" and our state's history virtually. The Fitness Inclusion Network at SUNY Upstate's Golisano Center for Special Needs and the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor created a Virtual 1st Mile Canalway Challenge for people with "mobility challenges." You can use this series of Peloton-style videos to exercise from home while getting to virtually cycle or paddle from Central New York into Rochester. There are 25 videos covering 25 miles of canalway, so you have lots of content to work into your home exercise routine. The videos document the physical accessibility of the canalway trail itself, should you want to consider visiting in person.

I have firsthand experience with all of these opportunities except the Senior Games and the Virtual 1st Mile, but hope to start my gym-based virtual canal cycling adventure soon. While not all of these opportunities may meet the needs or interests of every single person, I hope you take the time to explore what is available. Get outdoors and get together!

Connect, Learn, and Advocate

Visibility of Disability Exhibit at the Long Island Children's Museum

Through June 22

Throughout history, the voices and experiences of people with disabilities have often been overlooked or erased. Visibility of Disability seeks to shine a light on both the obstacles and the triumphs that individuals with disabilities have faced—and continue to face. This powerful exhibit invites able-bodied and neurotypical visitors to gain a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences and perspectives within the disability community. This exhibit is a collaboration between the Long Island Children's Museum (LICM) and the Museum of Disability History at The Viscardi Center. Contact LICM to learn more.

Adaptive Skate NYC 2025

June 8, 8:30am-2:30pm

Wheeling Forward's adaptive sports program, "Play It Forward," is proud to offer a free adaptive skating clinic at the Pier 62 Skatepark, 143 11th Ave between W 22nd & W 23rd Streets in NYC. Learn new skills and get in some practice for navigating the streets of NYC in your wheelchair. There will be art and music, and inclusive fun for all ages and abilities! Learn more and register.

Create Ability Exhibition Celebration

June 22, 9:30am-12:00pm

Celebrate the Museum of Modern Art's *Create Ability 2025* exhibition, featuring artwork created by participants with disabilities during programs this year. Join for drop-in art making, early-hour gallery tours, remarks, and a light reception. Learn more and register.

A11yNYC Goes to Civic Hall

June 3, 7:30pm

Join a series of lightning talks to celebrate 35 years of people and technology. Attend either virtually or in person at the Craig Newmark Auditorium is situated on the 2nd floor of Civic Hall in NYC. Learn more and register.

2025 Ann Marie Brown Scholarship

Application Deadline: June 20

Residents of Nassau or Suffolk County who are presently a college junior, senior, or post graduate student studying journalism, marketing/communications, or health care administration are eligible to apply for this $2,000 scholarship. Applicants must have a GPA of at least 3.0 and demonstrate community service and campus leadership. This tribute honors the memory of the late Vice President for Government and Public Relations of the Nassau-Suffolk Hospital Council, a professional organization that represents Long Island's not-for-profit and public hospitals. Learn more and apply.

Deaf Asian Street FESTIVAL
METROPOLITAN ASIAN DEAF ASSOCIATION

Deaf Asian Street Festival

June 28, 11:00am-5:00pm

This event, taking place at Columbus Park in Manhattan's Chinatown, will honor the vibrant contributions of Deaf Asians to both the Deaf and Hearing communities of the Greater New York Area. There will be a main stage with guest speakers, 30+ vendors, swag/food giveaways, a Kid's Fun Zone, a Social Zone, and a First Aid Station. Learn more and register.

Bowling with the Stars

June 7, 1:00-3:00pm

Join this afternoon of bowling and fun at Bowlero in East Meadow, NY to help fuel the NYC Spinal Grant Program. NYC Spinal Grants provide funding for life changing adaptive equipment, services and community programs that help people with spinal cord injuries maximize their independence and quality of life. Accessible lanes and adaptive equipment for bowling will be provided. Learn more and purchase tickets.

2025 National Survey on Health and Disability

The Institute for Health and Disability Policy Studies at the University of Kansas is looking for adults who live in the United States to participate in the 2025 National Survey on Health and Disability (NSHD). They are conducting this research to better understand and document how getting needed health care services and how having certain types of health care and/or insurance coverage affects the life, health, and participation in the community of people with disabilities. The survey is confidential and takes about 20-30 minutes to complete. It can be done online with a smartphone, tablet, computer, over the telephone, or in ASL via Zoom. Learn more about the survey.

COMMENTARY AND OPINIONS

Shifting Systems

Access to Jury Duty

By Rebecca Williford, Esq., President & CEO, Disability Rights Advocates (DRA)

I've been told not once, but twice that I shouldn't serve on a jury because of my disability. I use a wheelchair and am a practicing lawyer who argues cases in court. The idea that I might be too disabled to serve on a jury is mind-boggling.

While some people may not relish the idea of being on a jury, juror service is one of the most significant civic duties in a democracy. The Civil Rights Movement played a critical role in expanding jury service to include groups who had been historically excluded from jury participation, such as people of color and women. Representation on a jury matters to ensure justice.

Those facing criminal charges have the right to be tried by a jury of one's peers, a fundamental right guaranteed by the Sixth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. And in this moment in our nation's history, the courts, including jurors, have an especially critical role to play in preserving long-held civil rights protections. People with many types of disabilities, along with all marginalized groups, are often forced to fight for our rights to participate in the judicial process as jurors so our interests are represented and our rights upheld.

DRA has long played a role in ensuring people with disabilities can participate in civic processes—especially voting privately and independently. And I'm very excited to share that we're now expanding that work to include protecting the rights of people with disabilities to participate as jurors. DRA and our co-counsel, Brown Goldstein & Levy, filed a case on behalf of Albert Elia, and the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of New York after Mr. Elia was excluded from full participation in grand jury service in Kings County Supreme Court in New York because he is blind.

Mr. Elia was summoned to jury service and sworn in as a grand juror. For those who are less familiar with the criminal legal system, it's important to note that grand juries are a special type of jury. Their role is to assess the government's evidence that an individual committed a crime and determine whether there is enough evidence to bring criminal charges against that individual. Grand jurors typically consider many cases during their time of service.

Mr. Elia began his first day of service by hearing cases that involved photo and video evidence. In some of those cases, a government attorney presenting the evidence asked a witness to describe the evidence. However, this accommodation was not provided for all of the cases. Even though Mr. Elia requested accommodations that would allow him to interpret photo and video evidence, including audio description technology and verbal descriptions of material, the court did not make these accommodations. Later that day, the Court excluded Mr. Elia from grand jury service in cases that involved photo or visual evidence, despite the available accommodations. He was ultimately removed from continued participation altogether.

This is just one example of disability discrimination that deprives our justice system from benefiting from the valuable perspective of Mr. Elia and others with disabilities. DRA, our co-counsel, and our clients brought this case to ensure that the court makes jury service accessible for people with disabilities as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act. And as with all of DRA's cases, it is our hope that this case sets a precedent—so that courts across the country also take readily available measures to ensure participation by disabled jurors.

When people with disabilities participate in the judicial process, everyone benefits. If you're interested in learning more about this case and all of DRA's work to promote equity and inclusion for people with disabilities, visit our website. I look forward to soon sharing our victory on behalf of Mr. Elia, the NFB of New York, and all of us with disabilities. And the next time you receive that jury summons, I encourage your active participation!

Empowering Individuals with Disabilities

Are you facing discrimination in the workplace due to your disability? Are public places inaccessible, hindering your mobility and rights? Have you suffered a personal injury and need legal support? Look no further than Bell Law Group, PLLC. With over 20 years of dedicated service, we've been the beacon of justice for individuals with disabilities. Our team of experienced lawyers is committed to fighting for your rights.

We specialize in:

- Workplace discrimination, including failure to accommodate cases.
- Public accessibility cases, ensuring businesses comply with ADA and NY State Human Rights Law.
- Personal injury cases, advocating for your rightful compensation.

At Bell Law Group, PLLC, we understand the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. That's why we're passionate about being your voice in the legal system.

Contact us at 516-280-3008 or find us on the web at www.BellLG.com

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Reel Reflections

When History, Education, and Imagination Collide: Shift Happens

By Lawrence Carter-Long, Director of Engagement, ReelAbilities International

History doesn't repeat itself. It reminds us of unfinished work yet to be completed.

Whether we're talking about public policy, popular culture, or the stories we pass down to the next generation, the past is full of missed opportunities, untold truths, and lessons waiting to be learned. Ripe for rediscovery. But only if we're paying attention. Only if we're willing to learn from what came before to shape what comes next.

To create a more inclusive future, sometimes you have to look back with uncomfortable clarity instead of sanitized nostalgia. Rather than comforting ourselves with a used-to-be that never was, we can ask tougher questions that reveal sometimes difficult truths about whose stories got told, who got left out, and how we can tell a more inclusive narrative going forward.

For me, that approach (and the commitment it requires) came into sharp focus last spring.

In April, ReelAbilities launched a pilot program in partnership with NYC Public Schools (NYCPS) to bring disability-centered films both by and about people with disabilities into middle and high school classrooms. Educators will also have access to companion lesson plans and discussion guides designed for each film. There are currently 40 films with lesson plans available for classroom use, and NYCPS and ReelAbilities plan to create additional classroom guides to complement the more than 500 films in the ReelAbilities archive.

At the film screening and talkback at the Division of Inclusive and Accessible Learning's Summit that I facilitated April 4th, students didn't just watch passively. They listened, asked tough questions, and connected dots. One student said, "I didn't know movies about disability included people like me." Real, raw, and revealing moments like that matter because before you can dream of something new, you need to feel a different future is possible.

That starts by including young folks in our work and expanding their experience of disability, not at some distant magical day in the future, but right here, right now.

That same week, we screened "Deaf President Now!" at our 17th Annual ReelAbilities Film Festival: New York. The documentary tells the story of the 1988 student uprising at Gallaudet University. This was a watershed moment when Deaf students, faculty, and allies demanded their first Deaf president at a Deaf university, years before the Americans with Disabilities Act became the law of the land. Activists weren't just asking for more representative leadership. They also demanded increased visibility, authentic representation, and, in a word, justice.

For many in our audience, which included Deaf elders who lived that movement and Gen Z students discovering it for the first time, it was more than a film. It was the passing of a baton. A legacy paid forward. Generations generating something new.

That's precisely the point.

The documentary by Nyle DiMarco and Davis Guggenheim is more than a chronicle of protest. It is also a blueprint that shows what can happen when a community refuses to be ignored, when education becomes empowerment, and when big ideas about equal access become reality. And now, thanks to Apple TV+, it is reaching viewers around the world, bringing a pivotal moment in Deaf and Disability history to a much wider audience.

"Deaf President Now!" is also a powerful example of how to put the past in perspective. By making sure the lessons learned don't gather dust in textbooks or get reduced to footnotes. We bring them alive. We showcase them. We talk about them. We invite them to educate and change us.

Without context, access is empty, and without history, inclusion is incomplete.

At ReelAbilities, we're not just curating content; like *Able News*, we're facilitating necessary conversations. Through our NYC Schools program, our ReelAbilities at the Workplace initiative, and our national network of Affiliate Festivals, we're creating spaces where stories spark dialogue and conversations become action. We're not interested in inspiration without perspiration. We want engagement. Momentum. A blueprint for a fairer, more inclusive future.

And that future? It won't happen by accident. It will take work. Planning. Commitment.

Not everyone will march. Not everyone will testify before Congress. But everyone can watch. Everyone can learn. Everyone can start where they are using the tools they have. Everyone can contribute to a world where disability is recognized, valued, and respected.

The best part? You don't need anyone else's permission to be a part of it. You just need curiosity, commitment, and the willingness to get uncomfortable from time to time. That's where the transformation begins.

Where new opportunities emerge.

Where shift happens.

92NY's "Women inPower" Fellowship Introduces Groundbreaking Leadership Program for Neurodivergent Women

Continued from page 1

"The story I was telling myself is something that society tells people like us, but that doesn't mean it's true," she said. "I am not some singular failure [while] everybody else can somehow handle life… look at all these people who were moving through life being told the same things."

Ambalavar and other cohort members who spoke to *Able News* need support and understanding from their peers and bosses at work, which American workplaces often don't know how to provide.

"Throughout my whole career, I've delivered consistently excellent results, focused on streamlining systems, created sustainable improvements, [and] solved problems," Mary Kate Boughton, a digital strategist who was diagnosed with ADHD and autism in adulthood, told *Able News*. "I often feel overlooked, and I think it might be because I don't perform leadership in conventional ways. And the bigger point there isn't just about me being misunderstood. It's about the value the organizations are missing out on when they don't make space for neurodivergent ways of thinking."

Boughton explained that her neurodivergence requires her to perform socially in the workplace so colleagues don't label her as too direct or mean, which is tiring. She'd much rather they know she has ADHD and autism, which impact the way she communicates and completes tasks.

All of the fellows who spoke to *Able News* think that workplaces and communities would thrive under leaders who are allowed to be human and have differences, rather than those who perform traits of a conventional leader.

"I see [disclosing my neurodivergent identity] as an act of resistance, of resilience and vulnerability because I set the tone," said Christofalou. Telling her employees about her neurodivergence creates a safe space and has often inspired them to disclose challenges and ask for support.

"So much of what I actually love about myself comes from my ADHD," said Ambalavar. "I think I am creative and vibrant. I see unique patterns and solve problems in a way that I think is coming from the way my brain is making connections. I am sometimes in awe of what my ADHD has given to me."

Community Connections

Disabled People Get By With a Little Help From Our Friends

By Kieran O'Brien Kern

In the song "Under Pressure," Queen and David Bowie sang, "That's the terror of knowing what this world is about / Watchin' some good friends screamin' / "Let me out." Whether you call it pressure, agita, or stress, it has the ability to impact our lives and our health. According to a study on **stress self-management** for women with physical disabilities, increased stress illustrates the health-related disparity between disabled and nondisabled people.

In other words, "crip'n" ain't easy. Before I continue on…I assert that an easy life is not necessarily equated with a good life. All of us have a series of mental, physical, and intellectual "acrobatics" we use to navigate in an inaccessible world. It's more than ramps and accessible bathrooms. (Although if venues could avoid using them for trash and storage…that would be great!) We have always lived, and continue to live with, as cited in the study, "exclusionary social structures, physical and employment inaccessibility, and financial strain." This is our normal, and as such, "nearly one half (49%) of adults with disabilities report stress-related adverse health consequences compared to one third of the general population."

The study notes that a National Health Interview Survey found that disabled women with three or more functional limitations are "10 times more likely to report having difficulty with day-to-day stress than women with no limitations." For the disability community, that stress translates to less social support and connection, more pain, and can leave us more vulnerable to toxic situations.

A key intervention for stress and its mental and physical health implications, as noted in the study, are supportive relationships, social connectedness, and mutuality of relationships. To paraphrase the Beatles, we "get by with a little help from our friends."

This is certainly true for me. Social media may be full of noise and cute animal videos, but I would be remiss if I didn't reference that this is how I have connected with a lot of disabled women/parents who quickly became a safe place for me to find support and solutions.

One of the best illustrations of this was my experience as a first-time mom. At that point I didn't know any disabled parents. The baby setup I used took a lot of energy just to exist. My able-bodied friends and family were fantastic, but a lot of their solutions involved them doing tasks for me. I was left with almost no "spoons" (a disability community term for energy) by the end of the day. But I found and joined a social media group for moms with cerebral palsy. I could share my experiences and other members were having similar experiences. It was like a light went on. The solutions they helped with for my second child made my life a lot more functional, especially as I was parenting two kids.

Melissa McPherson, author of the inclusive thriller ***The Lesser Remain***, notes that her overall community shrank when she had children. While the non-disabled people in her life are supportive and listen to her concerns, they can't always understand the situations she's in because they haven't had similar experiences. It can feel isolating.

"As a writer, I use my writing to navigate some of these feelings but it is a bit like yelling into a void." McPherson explains. "I have managed to develop a small community online that is more of a private space and where when I share my experience there is always someone who knows exactly how I feel without me having to explain." She notes that having a place to go for solutions and solidarity has helped her feel seen and "been a savior to my real-life relationships."

Nicole Lomerson, also a disabled mom, has found solidarity and connection in her disabled peers as well. As a person with a disability, her life involves a lot

Continued on page 9

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Civics League Conversation

Own Your Narrative

By Marcus Johnson, Civics League for Disability Rights (CLDR)

In the growing roar of societal reform and agency overreach, one group continues to be systematically ignored, spoken over, and stripped of power: people with disabilities. The callous dismantling of systems meant to support us—often disguised as a war on fraud and abuse—has become a war on choice, on visibility, and ultimately on our very existence. Let's be clear: when systems limit choice, they limit lives. And for the disability community, this reality is not up for debate.

The numbers don't lie. According to the CDC, over 28% of adults in the U.S. live with a disability—that's more than one in four adults. The rates are even higher for Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, as well as among older adults. Despite these numbers, people with disabilities continue to be erased from public dialogue, policymaking, and cultural narrative. The data also show that we are more likely to experience poor mental health, higher rates of chronic illness, and devastating health disparities. And even as we strive for equity, our employment rate hovers at around 30-40%, while nondisabled people sit comfortably near 70%. That's a consistent and persistent 40% gap—a chasm carved by discrimination, systemic barriers, and outdated perceptions of value.

So, let's ask the question: if we are such a visible, statistically significant part of society, why are we still being treated like shadows in someone else's story?

The answer lies in the narratives crafted about us, without us. The disability rights movement has long held the banner cry of "Nothing about us without us"—and yet the world continues to speak for us, over us, and around us. Representation in media, policymaking, and education remains sparse. Decisions about healthcare, accessibility, and public space are made without consulting the very people who will be most impacted. It is more than disrespect. It is erasure.

This erasure is rooted in ableism and disablism—terms often used interchangeably, but which speak to different dimensions of oppression. Ableism is the structural and systemic discrimination baked into our society: the lack of ramps, the inaccessible websites, the funding cuts to disability services. Disablism, on the other hand, is the interpersonal prejudice we face daily—from being spoken down to, to being infantilized, ignored, or feared. But it's not just these external forces we must confront. Internalized ableism—the belief that we are "less than" because of our disabilities—is perhaps the most insidious threat of all.

That's why there can be no room for interpretation when it comes to our stories. If we don't own our narratives, others will—and they'll twist them into caricatures of pity, inspiration porn, or burden. It's on us to take back control. We must shatter the illusion that our presence is optional, that we are something to accommodate rather than embrace. Our identities are not open to debate, and our lived experiences are not open-source material.

To my fellow members of the disability community: you are not an afterthought. You are not "in the way." You are not too much or not enough. You belong—in every room, at every table, and in every conversation. The late disability activist and author Stella Young once said, "I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much." We're not here to make others feel grateful for their mobility, their health, or their convenience. We are here to lead, to create, to transform.

We need to be in the room where decisions are made, not because it's nice, but because it's necessary. Because we know our needs better than anyone else. Because our presence changes policies, perspectives, and priorities. Because when we speak for ourselves, we interrupt decades—centuries—of silencing.

So let's get louder. Let's build coalitions. Let's dismantle internalized shame and claim our full humanity. Let's show the world that we are not broken, not burdensome, not invisible. Let's own our stories with pride, because the cost of leaving our narrative in someone else's hands is too high.

We are not asking for a seat. We are taking it. And we are not moving. Respect that, because we are enough!

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Opinions expressed are solely those of the writer(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of *Able News* at The Viscardi Center and/or The Viscardi Center. Submissions should be on topics affecting the disability community, maximum 600 words, and must include the writer's name and phone number for verification. *Able News* reserves the right to edit for grammar, length, and factual accuracy. *Able News* cannot respond to all submissions and publication of submissions is not guaranteed. To submit an op-ed for consideration, please email a full draft to ablenews@viscardicenter.org.

Disabled People Get By With a Little Help From Our Friends

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of planning ahead. She has put a lot of time and effort into learning how to be productive and emotionally stable during times of uncertainty. She reminds herself that she can do hard things and be the example her daughter needs. Her community ties are key to this.

"The first people I reach out to are my cadre of disabled women who are at a similar life stage to me." Lomerson explains. "I find solace and comfort in knowing that my peers feel the way I do, and sometimes we feel these changes more acutely than our non-disabled peers."

As I researched stress coping strategies, results came up for activities like meditation, yoga, exercise, and getting outside. And for what it's worth, these are all fantastic strategies. But when a random able-bodied person is "so inspired" to see you out grocery shopping, or you're appealing the denial of a new wheelchair or assistive communication device for the third time, or you're just having an "off" day for your body or brain, having safe people to talk to who have experienced similar incidents is heartening. Feeling seen and understood is key to working through stressful and uncertain times.

Legal Lens

He Was Against It Before He Was For It: George H.W. Bush's Shift On Disability Issues

By James Weisman, Esq.

Vice President George H.W. Bush supported the 1988 draft of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as a candidate for President of the United States. However, he also chaired a 1981 task force formed by President Reagan on regulatory relief that opposed previous President Jimmy Carter's U.S. Department of Transportation's Section 504 regulation that required 50% of new bus purchases to be accessible.

The Reagan Administration withdrew the accessibility requirement, imposing merely an obligation on transit systems to certify in writing that special efforts were made for the elderly and disabled. Transit operators had a complete and total victory at the federal level as VP Bush and President Reagan did the transit operators' bidding.

The task force, however, was not as successful with the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The task force specifically targeted IDEA because of the high costs it imposed on states and public school systems. Until that law was passed, children with disabilities were not entitled to a free, appropriate, public education; school systems did not have an obligation to educate children with disabilities in the most integrated setting possible; and if children couldn't be accommodated in public schools, those schools did not have to pay for private placements. When Reagan got elected these were still new requirements and local governments and school systems wanted relief.

About one year after VP Bush's task force began trying to ''relieve'' schools of IDEA obligations, he announced that they had abandoned the effort.

Why was the Reagan Administration successful in derailing accessible transit (which delayed it for a decade) and unsuccessful when it tried to undo the obligation to educate children with disabilities? Parents. That's the answer.

Parents will move mountains for their children, especially if they are threatened. Years of parent advocacy had resulted in IDEA and the task force on regulatory reform was trying to go backwards. A deluge of letters and phone calls from parents intimidated even IDEA's strongest political opponents. Bush credited the task force retreat to parents' letters stating how bad it was for their children before IDEA, asserting their kids would not receive necessary services if IDEA was weakened.

President George H.W. Bush is my ADA hero. Without his support, Republicans would not have supported the bill. He opposed accessible transit but then supported the ADA, which required accessible transit. He opposed IDEA requirements but supported the ADA. Was he a hypocrite? No. He was enlightened. The VP realized, when running for President, that subsidizing people with disabilities to stay home, living in poverty, trapped on their block, ignored, overlooked and discriminated against was expensive. People with disabilities were being educated in public schools and would be job ready. Healthcare advances were extending life expectancies. The ADA was Bush's blueprint for the independence of people with disabilities. Accommodation of people with disabilities could become the norm, Bush knew, and that was the only affordable and morally responsible position for his administration.

Very little is practical or ethical in Washington, D.C. and even less is progressive now. Doing something merely because it is the right thing to do seems foolish to many of our representatives. But President George H.W. Bush found that accommodation was not merely the right thing do; it was the most practical as well.

Trying to Travel with Dignity in New York State

By Jeremy Willinger, Chief Communications Officer, CP Unlimited

A public bathroom at a stadium, concert venue, or highway rest stop is hardly the location someone envisions as the perfect place for inclusivity and consideration. However, for more than 300,000 New Yorkers, it is just the venue for solving an ongoing issue central to their personal dignity and well-being.

Currently, people who use wheelchairs and individuals who require changing do not have the necessary accommodations in restrooms across the Empire State—most states, in fact, aside from Arizona, California, New Hampshire, Tennessee, and Minnesota—which leads to humiliating and degrading circumstances. ''I had to crawl across the bathroom floor,'' recalled Diego Ortiz, self-advocate.

A simple solution has been proposed and is being considered in the halls of power: The Traveling with Dignity Act. Designed to mandate the addition of height-adjustable adult changing tables in public restrooms at sites that can seat 2,500+ people as well as thruway infrastructure by 2030, ''…the Act immediately provides a resolution for these daily indignities experienced by many of our most vulnerable. The height-adjustability is key as it makes the table available for anyone aged 8 to 80,'' said Penny Pagliaro, Executive Director of CP Unlimited Hudson Valley.

The bills (Senate #4042, Assembly #6219) have already garnered plenty of bi-partisan, state- wide supporters in both the Senate and the House and followers now play the waiting game to see if it will pass this session. We acknowledge the original backers including Senators Peter Harckham and Rob Rolison and Assembly Member Chris Burdick. A previous bill was held in the Assembly in 2024 and punted to the next year so we have arrived at a critical crossroads in its evolution and hopeful, eventual passage.

''People with differing abilities should be able to participate in the same activities, day trips and excursions that are available to everybody, and the best way to effectuate this is to provide as many adult changing areas and disability-friendly rest areas as possible,'' said Senator Peter Harckham.

While there have been piecemeal wins (a table here, a table there) the bill offers a widespread, immediate leveler to an issue that boils down to fairness and equality. The Changing Spaces Campaign, a national advocacy group focused on this very issue, echoes this sentiment. ''It will allow people who require this accommodation to travel freely throughout New York State,'' says Jaqueline Scali, co-Director of the New York chapter. ''To enjoy museums, see a concert, spend time outdoors at a state park or beach, and ultimately leave their homes without worrying if there will be a restroom there for them.'' It is apparent to anyone who uses public facilities that more can be done for veterans, seniors, people with disabilities, and others who use wheelchairs.

If we needed more motivation: The 2023-2027 New York State Plan on the Aging reports that the State currently ranks fourth in the nation in the number of older adults, with that population set to increase. New York is also home to the fifth-largest veteran population in the country with more than half over the age of 65, reports the Office for the Aging. With our population growing older and living longer the question will be: Does New York have the momentum to make full community participation a priority for this growing group?

Hundreds of thousands today and even more in the future are hoping the answer is yes.

Travel Tips

Accessible Gems to Visit in New York

By Emily Sauchelli

As summer is around the corner, it is time to head outdoors and experience all that Long Island and New York City have to offer. As a person with a mild physical disability who doesn't need mobility aid assistance, I still prioritize checking if the places I'm visiting adhere to the guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and promote inclusivity. Finding accessible places to visit shouldn't be a challenge, but since it sometimes can be, here are some accessible places I've already checked out that you can enjoy this time of year!

Little Island

Opened in 2021, Little Island is a public park overlooking the Hudson River that creates a serene environment for those who want to embrace nature, use their time to exercise, or just take a stroll around. The park is fully ADA compliant and accessible to visitors with varying types of disabilities. Besides offering audio tours, visitors with disabilities can also enjoy live performances in the waterfront amphitheater (The Amph) or the more-intimate performance venue (The Glade). Varying accommodations can be made for visitors that desire it, such as reserving accessible seating for shows. Learn more about accessibility at Little Island.

Planting Fields Arboretum State Historic Park

Planting Fields is a historic site in Oyster Bay, New York that features various grounds with stunning gardens and structures. It has been included in the National Register of Historic Places since 1979. Spanning 409 acres, this place has a whole lot to explore. From an accessibility standpoint, Planting Fields seeks to create a community that removes barriers to access, and the grounds of Planting Fields are wheelchair accessible.

I recently went to Planting Fields and noticed a visitor in a wheelchair making his way across the grounds. I was very pleased to see how much of this site is flat and has few steps, making those with disabilities able to roam the site at their leisure. Learn more about accessibility at Planting Fields.

Long Island Children's Museum

Located in Garden City, New York, the Long Island Children's Museum (LICM) is a learning facility dedicated to inspiring children through education and exhibitions. LICM has a variety of accessibility options to fit visitor needs, including a sensory room, sensory sensitive theatre, and assistive devices. The museum is wheelchair accessible and even offers free admission to licensed care providers who are assisting a paid visitor. In addition to these amenities, the museum also hosts free monthly "Friendly Hours" designed specifically for families who have children with disabilities. Learn more about accessibility at LICM.

Brooklyn Botanical Garden

Brooklyn Botanical Garden, composed of 52 acres of green space, is committed to making the garden accessible to all who visit. There are paved pathways throughout and most of the specialty gardens are step-free. Personal care attendants who assist visitors can attend the garden free of charge. And there are a range of accessible guided tours and programs available, including early-morning programs of facilitated, multisensory activities in the Discovery Garden for families who have children with disabilities and guided tours and programs designed for individuals with memory loss and their caregivers. Requests for tour accommodations must be made two weeks in advance. Learn more about accessibility at the Brooklyn Botanical Garden.

The author at Planting Fields Arboretum. Photo courtesy of the author.

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Around Our Towns

Photo courtesy of The Viscardi Center.

The Viscardi Center Hosts Games for the Physically Challenged Press Conference

Let the Games begin! On May 5, The Viscardi Center proudly hosted the Nassau County Games for the Physically Challenged press conference celebrating the annual event's 39th year. Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman, along with other elected officials, sponsors, and distinguished guests were greeted with warm smiles, handmade signs, and cheers from the Center's Day Hab Without Walls program participants. County Executive Blakeman shared that over 1,100 athletes, including students from Henry Viscardi School, would compete in a variety of events — track and field, swimming, and wheelchair basketball — on May 30 and May 31 at Mitchel Field Athletic Complex and Nassau Community College. A group of Viscardi Cougars gave everyone a sneak preview of how wheelchair basketball is played while its cheer squad amped up the crowd.

From Racecars to Rock Walls: Abilities Expo New York Metro Brought It All

The New York Metro Abilities Expo was an epic weekend filled with cutting-edge tech, adaptive activities, informative workshops, and incredible resources for the area's dynamic disability community. More than just an event, the Expo offered a welcoming space to engage with others who face similar challenges and build lasting connections.

As one attendee shared, "It's great to have access to so many different vendors and services under one roof," while another noted, "It was wonderful to be around so many other people with disabilities."

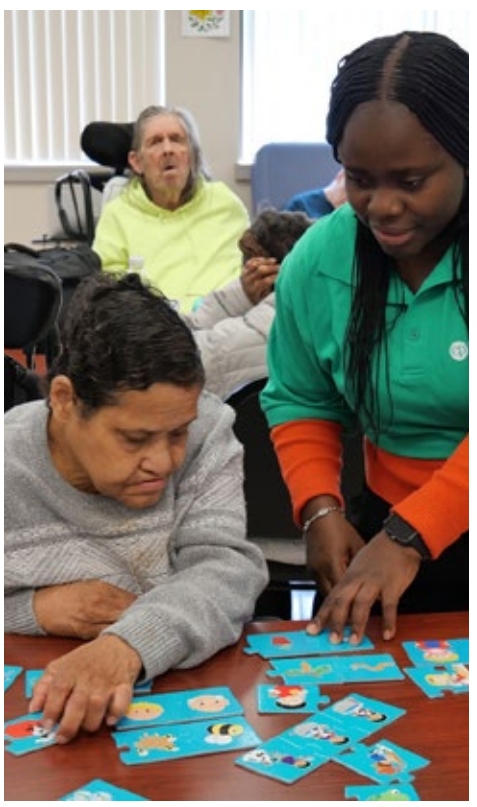
The show floor was bursting with products and services designed to elevate independence and accessibility. From wheelchair accessible vehicles, scooters, and daily living aids to adaptive clothing, smart home tech, communication devices, and service dog organizations—every booth offered tools to empower everyday life. Attendees also explored accessible travel options, employment resources, assistive tech innovations, caregiver support, and emergency preparedness tips, all tailored to the diverse needs of the community.

The energy throughout the event was contagious. Every corner of the show offered a chance to try something new and push personal boundaries. Attendees scaled the adaptive climbing wall, danced with inclusive performance groups, and joined in exciting adaptive sports. One major crowd favorite: a sleek, hand-controlled adaptive racecar that drew nonstop attention. Even better, attendees got access to resources on how they, too, can get behind the wheel.

The workshops were another major highlight, offering expert-led sessions on topics like home design, accessible travel, financial planning, advocating for your disabled child, and navigating healthcare systems—all providing attendees with real-world tools and takeaways they could apply immediately.

We're already looking ahead to next year so mark your calendars for May 1–3, 2026, and get ready for another unforgettable experience at the New York Metro Abilities Expo! Don't forget to visit our website to register for free.

Photo courtesy of Abilities Expo.



CP Unlimited Day Hab Ribbon Cutting

Dozens of officials and area leaders came out to celebrate CP Unlimited (CPU) and cut the ribbon on the Agency's newest and largest Day Hab program in the Hudson Valley.

The Day Hab in Fishkill, New York has five themed classrooms, a sensory room, a room for the M.O.V.E. (Mobility Opportunities Via Education/Experience) program, a changing area, hallways to accommodate wheelchairs, and integrated technology.

Building on CPU's commitment to innovation, the program also features the Agency's first robotic teaching assistant to help deepen vocabulary skills.

The location is one where possibility, strength, and dedication create true change for people with disabilities.

Photos courtesy of CP Unlimited.

Around Our Towns

Kitchen Renovation at Life's WORC

Assemblymember Charles Lavine (D-North Shore) finds few things are more gratifying than helping improve the lives of his constituents. Lavine was proud to be at the ribbon-cutting for a newly renovated kitchen at a Life's WORC group home in Westbury, which was funded with a $125,000 grant he secured. Lavine took a tour of the house given by resident Brett and his lovely fiancée Megan, and Brett showed him how to operate the refrigerator, one of several high-tech appliances featured in the state-of-the-art kitchen.

Photos courtesy of the office of Assemblymember Charles Lavine.

RISE Life Services Honors Staffers

RISE Life Services honored three of its staffers with the Rising Star distinction during a ceremony May 8, 2025, at its headquarters in Riverhead, NY. The three individuals each received a scholarship for continuing education related to their job. The three honored were Mastic's Crystal Dawson, assistant supervisor of Day Habilitation, who received a $5,000 scholarship; Eric Van Deusen, Huntington, who works in suicide prevention, $2,500; and Nurse Jennifer Maddalena of Mastic Beach, $1,000.

"The Shining Star Program not only celebrates exceptional work—it fosters a culture of appreciation that strengthens staff morale, engagement and long-term retention," says Vinita Jeanette Permenter, RISE chief operating officer. When our team feels seen and valued, they stay committed to the mission."

Founded in 1971, RISE Life Services is dedicated to supporting and empowering individuals with developmental and mental health challenges. Visit the RISE Life Services website to learn more.

Photo courtesy of RISE Life Services.

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Around Our Towns

Exhibition at DDI's Main Street Masterpieces Celebrates Creativity and Connection

In May, the Developmental Disabilities Institute (DDI) celebrated the successful conclusion of its "Home Is Where the Art Is" exhibition with a vibrant closing night at the Main Street Masterpieces Art Gallery in Smithtown, NY. The event drew over 50 guests who were deeply moved by the powerful artwork and the opportunity to connect with the artists.

The inspiring exhibition showcased the unique perspectives and creative talents of more than two dozen artists from DDI's Adult Day Services Program and Children's Residential Program. The artwork explored the themes of home, love, and personal journeys, and resonated strongly with the Long Island community. All proceeds from sales directly support the artists, promoting both awareness and empowerment.

"The artistic talent within our programs is truly exceptional," commented Amy Vidal, Recreation Coordinator for DDI. "Main Street Masterpieces provides a vital platform for individuals with developmental disabilities to express themselves and share their unique perspectives. It's incredibly rewarding to witness their pride in their accomplishments and their engagement with friends and community members."

Since its establishment in 2008, Main Street Masterpieces has been an essential platform for artists with autism and other intellectual/developmental disabilities to share their creativity. Located in the heart of Smithtown's bustling business district, the gallery hosts themed exhibitions throughout the year, both in person and online, offering a distinct window into the artistic worlds of DDI's program participants.

Top left: Edmund DiGiacomo, "Eat, Eat, Eat." Top right: Lauren Milward, "Yoga Class." Bottom: Jonathan Schott, "My Happy Place." Photos courtesy of DDI.

Disability History

How Richard Match Left a Legacy Behind in Nassau County

By Warren Shaw, Disability Historian, DisabilityHistoryNYC.com

A few months ago, in the April issue of *Able News*, I wrote about **Richard Match** and his formative role in getting disability activism off the ground in the Greater New York area, in the early 1960s. I thought it only fair to follow up by discussing his legacy in Nassau County.

In 1956 or so, Richard moved from Brooklyn to a ranch house around the corner from his sister—in Great Neck, just beyond the Queens border. Richard's move to Great Neck would turn out to be one of the most uniquely important coincidences in the history of the New York City Disability Rights Movement.

Richard had always spent a good deal of time with his two nephews, and in the fall of 1957 the older of the two enrolled at a nearby junior high school. The school boasted a rigorous program in a new and well-equipped building. Nothing obviously unusual about that—postwar America was building new public schools by the fistful. But this particular junior high was unique thanks, as I understand it, to the richest man in town. His oldest daughter was born with cerebral palsy. She could walk for short distances and had only a slight speech disability, but her physicians advised that a comprehensive regimen of physical therapy was essential to maximizing her capabilities and minimizing her symptoms. Taking this information to heart, her father made a large donation to the town, on the conditions that (1) the new junior high school had to be designed with facilities for his daughter's physical therapy, and (2) there could be no publicity for his donation, the school's special facilities, or his daughter's disability.

The upshot was that the new junior high school was built to be wheelchair accessible. It even had a swimming pool designed for use by people with disabilities. There was no civilian infrastructure like it anywhere in the New York Metropolitan area. But in accordance with the conditions of the donation, the school's physical education facilities were kept under wraps, practically a government secret. Until one afternoon, when Richard's adolescent nephew happened to casually mention it to him.

Swimming loomed large for Richard, because his disability was the result of a swimming accident, many years before. One might expect him to be traumatically averse to any repetition, yet the benefits of immersion were undeniable. There is no duplicating the freedom of movement in the water, virtually weightless, with a chance to ease and stretch paralyzed muscles, stiffened joints and tendons. And now Richard learned that there was a newly built and accessible pool just a five-minute drive away.

The town's Board of Education had been experimenting with a then-novel program of adult education. It was in that vein that Richard, as head of the newly-formed Long Island chapter of the National Paraplegia Foundation, backed by officials from the Rusk Institute for Rehabilitation Medicine, asked the Great Neck public school system to set up evening swimming classes for disabled adults at the one and only swimming pool usable by people with disabilities in the entire metropolitan area.

As you might expect of a freelance science writer, Richard possessed a massive storehouse of instantly recallable information (his nephews, without a trace of irony, called him a ''walking encyclopedia''), so much so that Richard became the first disabled contestant on the quiz show *The $64,000 Question*. More unexpected, perhaps, is Match's capacity to charm people. One of Richard's later colleagues, Anna Fay (herself a pioneering New York City activist), later recalled him as handsome and sociable, someone who ''was attractive to both men and women.'' And so it was that the friendly and persuasive Richard Match not only talked the Great Neck Board of Education into opening up the pool, but managed to ingratiate himself so well that he won a contract for a book-length history of the town's school system.

Once the pool program was up and running, Richard continued his campaign on behalf of people with disabilities. He persuaded the Great Neck public school system to train dogs as companion animals and assistants, an important option in a time when personal aides were practically nonexistent.

Richard Match, second from left, at the announcement of the formation of the Long Island chapter of the National Paraplegia Foundation, March 30, 1959.

And Richard pushed still further. I'm sure that he was influential, behind the scenes, in bringing Eugene Nickerson, a longtime Democratic executive of Nassau County, into disability activism. Later appointed to the federal bench, Nickerson presided over the notorious 1997 Abner Louima police brutality trial. Less well known is that Nickerson was a polio survivor, with a disabled right arm. In 1963, Nickerson convened a committee to advise him on the needs of disabled residents of Nassau County. It was, at least to some degree, the ancestor of today's Nassau County Office for the Physically Challenged.

The Nickerson committee was notable for the simple fact that it was the first county-level action of its kind anywhere in the United States. Richard Match became one of the committee's first appointees. A few years later, he was picked to lead a federally funded on-the-job training program for people with disabilities in Nassau County.

Finally, Richard persuaded Jones Beach to build a 250-foot-long wooden ramp that allowed wheelchairs users to get out onto the sand. My family and I used this ramp a number of times during my grade school years. It was always a bit nerve-wracking to watch my father hurl himself out of his wheelchair and onto our beach towel, but nowhere was Dad more relaxed and silly than during those lovely summer days in the sun and sand, munching on Mom's sandwiches and downing Key Food soda. Those days were possible only because of Richard Match's pioneering advocacy.

It is truly sad that Match's daring and unprecedented successes on behalf of his then barely self-aware community have gone unheralded and commemorated.

Conversations with *Able News*

Meet Austin Halls: Powerhouse Queer Disabled Pop Artist

By Emily Ladau

You're a powerhouse pop artist. Can you tell us about your music career?

I got into music very young. I was born with Moebius syndrome, which means my eyes and face are paralyzed. I had to learn a lot about navigating this world without something that we all use for communication—our faces. A lot of my art and my music comes from trying to find other ways to share myself to the world. For me, there's not a feeling that can't be related through a song. And whenever I am going through something, I'm always listening to music.

At 15, I got an opportunity to go to Nashville to record professionally. At that time, I was only doing inspirational content on social media. When I got home from Nashville, I was like, let me write more songs about the whole spectrum of who I am. I'm not just an inspirational person. Disabled people are always put into boxes in tokenizing ways, but I wanted to write a few songs about heartbreak and love and different things.

I've written two albums, and I'm on my third album right now, spilling the tea on disability joy. It started from the idea of asking, why don't we have any pop songs that talk about disabilities? There's not a lot of music that has the words 'disabled' or 'disability' in it. I wanted to claim the identity of being disabled, and I wanted to do it in a fun, 'Austin' way, so I wrote a dance electro-pop song called DISABLED, saying, 'Yeah, I'm disabled, so what? I'm hot and I'm sexy and I'm beautiful and I can do whatever I want.'

You also have experience as a model. Why is visibility of people with disabilities in fashion so important?

I still can't believe that I walked in New York Fashion Week. But it goes back to why I got into music and art. Having a facial disability is really, really challenging. People just assume the worst. So, a lot of how I express myself is through fashion. I always loved showing who I am on the inside through my outfits and colors and different patterns. And being openly queer, being openly disabled, I would have been so much happier and more accepting of myself if I saw someone like me earlier in my life. But I never saw anyone like me with a facial difference in fashion. I wanted to be that for other people. So, I started sharing my story of beauty and disability through social media. And then I got contacted by Runway of Dreams and they put me in their show. Now, it's a dream of mine to work with men's fashion brands and really be out there to show that disabled people can dress up.

What advice do you have for disabled people who want to contribute to expanding visibility and representation of the disability community?

The biggest thing that comes to my mind is authenticity. I know that's a trending hot word right now. But truly, just be yourself. For disabled people that are trying to be out there and trying to be seen and heard and represented, I say, just be what you want to be, be the light that you want to shine. You don't need to try to fit a mold. You don't need to try to do something that's already been done before. I think the coolest people are the people that just have an idea, and it's not an idea that has been done before, and they do it in ways that are new, fresh, and exciting. Whatever you're passionate about, just lean into it. Lean into the weird. Lean into the unique. And I think that's where the magic happens.

What disability rights issue is your biggest advocacy priority right now?

There's so much that we need to change about how we think and feel and talk about disabilities. Right now, something that has been a tangible thing that I'm working on is just reclaiming the words 'disabled' and 'disability,' because I didn't identify as disabled for a long time, and I think we need to destigmatize it. I'm trying to educate people to say 'disabled.' That's what my new song and my new album are about. Let's not shy away from uncomfortable conversations. Let's talk about disabilities.

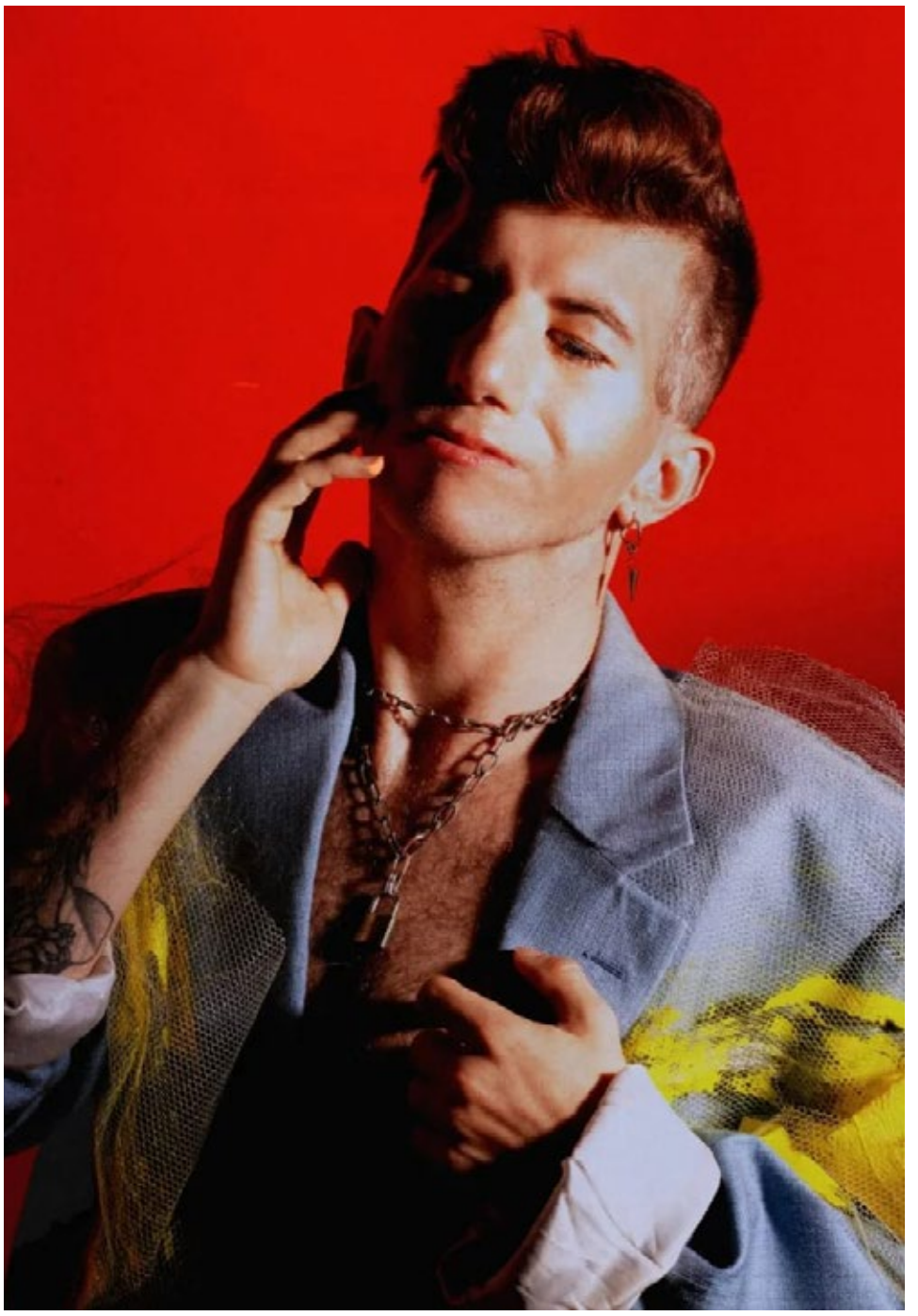

Photo of Austin Halls by Naomi Kaye Stein.

My advocacy has brought so much healing to me. The more that we don't shy away from the 'taboo' conversations on disability, I think we can bring light to our community. There are so many shining stars in the in the disability community and that's given me so much hope. It's given me a second family that I didn't even know I needed.

Thinking ahead, what's next on your exciting journey?

I try not to worry about the future so much, because it feels like everything is a lot right now, but the biggest thing is promoting and raising awareness through my new music video for DISABLED. It has a very diverse cast of people with disabilities and facial differences. And we filmed it at the 3 Dollar Bill, one of the biggest queer venues in New York City. My goal is for it to go viral. I'm just so tired of seeing the same story about disability. So, I want to be a light and help other people feel comfortable in their skin. I want them to feel like anything is possible and you don't need to try to be someone that you're not, because you already have the tools that you need within yourself.