AbleNews

The Viscardi Center

THE NEWSPAPER FOR, BY, AND ABOUT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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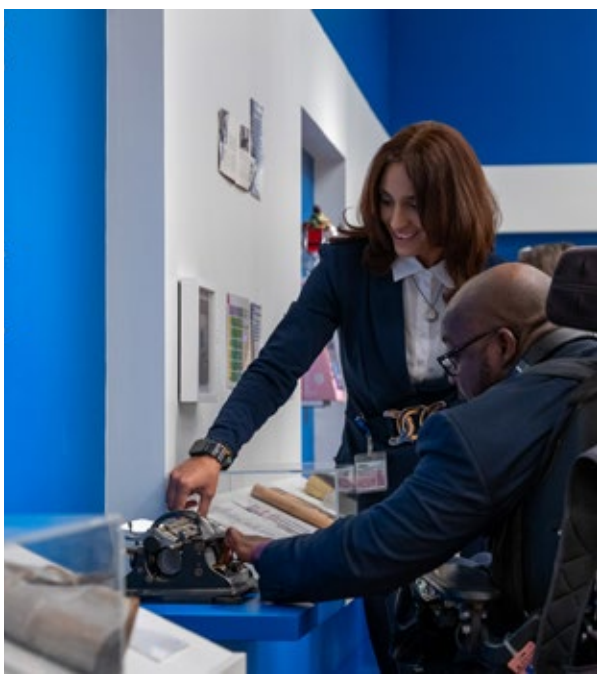
Newly Revamped Museum of Disability History Opens at The Viscardi Center

By Warren Shaw



(Left) The Viscardi Center is the new home of the Museum of Disability History opening to the public in late January. (Right) Museum Director Natalie Reyes highlights one of the many museum exhibits to a visitor. Photo credit: Allan Prinstil/The Viscardi Center.

On a torrentially rainy Thursday in late October, I went to the campus of The Viscardi Center in Nassau County for the ''soft launch'' of the newly rebirthed Museum of Disability History.

Despite the weather, Viscardi's entrance hall was bursting with guests, public officials, media, and students. Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman began the afternoon by acknowledging Viscardi's unique significance as a disability resource and educational institution. He congratulated its ongoing expansion and noted that the Museum of Disability History is the only such institution in the United States.

Speeches by Viscardi officials and local elected representatives followed. Their points were aptly summarized by Museum of Disability History Board chair Steven Markowitz: ''We expect the museum in the coming months and years to host school groups and veterans, businesses and families, nonprofits, and disability students and scholars and a host of others, to learn about and celebrate the complex and transformative history and culture of the disability community.''

Then came the ribbon cutting. The assemblage made its way to the entrance of the museum's exhibition space, where Viscardi's President & CEO, Dr. Chris Rosa, and County Executive Blakeman worked an oversized set of shears on a big, hapless blue ribbon.

An Impressive Collection

They opened the doors to a large square room. Inside was a tantalizing and broad smattering from the museum's collection, which spans centuries and crosses the nation. Its very breadth underscored one of the exhibit's points: ''There is not one single, uniform disability history in the United States, but many.''

Grouped into what the exhibit called ''portals,'' images and artifacts and text blocks provided information on subjects like the independent living movement, including Ed Roberts and the Berkeley IL Center, and sanitariums, deinstitutionalization and Willowbrook, and the fight against electroshock. There was a display about the influence of eugenics on ideology and policy, including the fight against forced sterilization. Another portal concerned modern representations of disability, such as a wheelchair-using Barbie.

There was considerable material on the history of assistive technology, from orthopedic shoes to artificial limbs, and an antique wheelchair. Journalism and advocacy by people with disabilities spanned a wide gamut, beginning with *Grit-Grin*, a 1929 monthly published by residents of tuberculosis wards, and *Mouth*, a magazine from the 1990s. One fascinating display concerned century-old puzzles that were used to test the intellectual capacity of people passing through Ellis Island. There was even a section on disability advocacy by superstars, like John Lennon's 1972 benefit for the residents of Willowbrook.

The tenor of the portals ranged from defiant to celebratory. I was delighted to see an emphasis on appealing to school-age children.

A crowd favorite was a Braille edition of *Playboy* magazine (no pictures), but the most spectacular highlight was a mint condition, teal Invacar, a single-seat, three-wheeled vehicle produced as a mobility aid in England between 1948 and 1977. The exhibition room was aptly paired with an adjacent display about Dr. Henry Viscardi, Jr., which included his stunningly preserved office, crammed with materials and mementos from his unique career as an activist, author, lobbyist and educator.

The museum is part of the new Kornreich Institute for Disability Studies at The Viscardi Center. Named in recognition of the lead donors, John and Janet Kornreich, well-known Long Island philanthropists who fund several of Viscardi's major initiatives, the Institute promotes disability equity and inclusion through education. To that end, the museum's content, including its oral history components and interactive technology, will be incorporated into the curriculum at the Henry Viscardi School, which serves students Pre-K through age 22 with physical disabilities. The Institute will make the same resources available to local schools/youth organizations, colleges and universities, businesses, organizations, disability scholars, and government entities, to facilitate increased awareness of the accomplishments of people with disabilities in New York, on Long Island, and throughout the United States.

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Disability History

Manhattan Gallery Features Disability Rights Archive

By Warren Shaw

In mid-October, I attended the opening party for a new exhibition at the Positive Exposure Gallery in Manhattan - a selection from the thousands of pieces acquired by the New York Disability Rights Archive (or NYDR Archive).

Regular readers of this column will recall that back in early 2022 I ran a story about the then-new archive and its principal, Jessica Murray. Over the past nearly four years the NYDR Archive has become a fully-fledged reality. Housed in the library of the College of Staten Island (or CSI), the NYDR Archive preserves disability history-the records, stories, and strategies of local activists and advocates. About a dozen individuals, along with United Spinal (formerly known as the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association), have contributed documents, publications, clippings, photos, objects and ephemera about disability and the battles for disability rights in the New York Metro area. Murray has been busily cataloging and indexing a collection which now totals more than forty-five linear feet of documents and photographs, as well as a small collection of three-dimensional pieces. The archive's materials are available for review and study at the CSI campus, which is on the former site of the infamous Willowbrook State School.

The exhibition focuses on issues of transportation access (the archive's most extensively documented area, at least so far). Divided into six sections, it covers accessible mass transit; curb cuts and other street-level issues; automobile access, including parking, accessible taxis and paratransit; and training on how to travel safely in our complicated, hectic City. A video component includes commentary and war stories from people like James Weisman, formerly of United Spinal. There are approximately eighty pieces in the exhibition, along with explanatory text blocks—an orderly presentation that in no way interferes with the drama of the contents.

Discussions about mounting an exhibition at Positive Exposure began taking shape earlier this year. The proprietor of the gallery, Rick Guidotti, brought his trademark enthusiasm to the task, and made available some thirty feet of wall space. I offered some thoughts on the exhibition during the planning stages, and Serena Shepard (a Master of Library Science student at Pratt Institute) assisted as well, but it was Jessica Murray, Peggy Groce and Susan Abdulezer who put in the lion's share of the work. The eighty or so attendees at the opening party, which included the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities and leaders from groups like Disabled In Action and AHRC, gave them very enthusiastic and well-deserved rounds of applause.

The exhibition remains on view at Positive Exposure, 83 Maiden Lane, New York, through December 31. Entrance is by appointment only; guided tours are events@positiveexposure.org, and visit their website for related events.

NYDR Archive continues to welcome donations! Please email archives@csi.cuny.edu for further information.

For more of Warren Shaw's work in disability history, please go to www.DisabilityHistoryNYC.com

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The deadline for the February issue is January 15, 2026.

(Left): The museum's content will be incorporated into the curriculum at the Henry Viscardi School, which serves students with physical disabilities from Pre-K to age 22. The museum will also host school field trips and youth/adult groups. (Middle): Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman joined The Viscardi Center President and CEO Dr. Chris Rosa in a ribbon cutting at the museum in late October. (Right): Exhibits at the museum include a teal Invacar, a single-seat, three-wheeled vehicle produced as a mobility aid in England between 1948 and 1977. Photo credit: Allan Prinstil/The Viscardi Center.

The Museum of Disability History at The Viscardi Center opens late January. Here's information for planning a visit:

Hours
Sunday: Open third Sunday of each month, 10 AM – 4 PM
Monday: Closed
Tuesday: 10 AM – 5 PM
Wednesday: 10 AM – 7 PM
Thursday: 10 AM – 5 PM
Friday: Closed
Saturday: Open first Saturday of each month, 10 AM – 4 PM

(School/Group visits may be scheduled in advance)

Admission & Tickets
Adults: $10
Youth (ages 5–17): $7
Children (under 5): Free
College Students (with valid ID): $7
Seniors (60+ with valid ID): $7
Veterans, Active & Retired First Responders (with valid ID): $7
Members: Free

Prices subject to change. Valid ID required for discounted admission.

Accessibility
The Museum of Disability History is fully wheelchair accessible and offers a range of supports for visitors who are blind, have low vision, are deaf, or have hearing loss.

Accessibility features include:
- Captioned video content
- Assistive listening devices
- Audio descriptions via Bloomberg Connects
- Sensory bags with noise-reduction headphones and fidgets (available at no cost)

Service animals trained to perform tasks related to a disability are welcome. Please visit the museum entrance desk for assistance or to borrow accessibility items. For directions and more information, visit here.

Newly Revamped Museum of Disability History Opens at The Viscardi Center
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'The larger understanding of disability'

Over the course of the afternoon, I spoke with the museum's director, Natalie Reyes, and Dawn Nolan, Viscardi's Senior Vice President for Program Development. For me, as a longtime booster of disability history as a subject all its own, it was a rare pleasure to be surrounded by like-minded people, and to share their enthusiasm for Viscardi's latest accomplishment.

Next came a conversation with Viscardi's President & CEO, Dr. Rosa. A disability studies scholar, he was the longtime Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Inclusion Initiatives at the City University of New York (CUNY). It was in that capacity that he and I first met, back in 2013 or so. I asked him about the history of the museum (which I recall chiefly as a website that belonged to a collection in Buffalo, a very long drive from New York City).

Dr. Rosa told me that "I almost literally stumbled into the collection. I was with a group of student leaders at a conference in western New York, and we were looking for things to do and see during our downtime. To my joy there was a museum of disability history, only a few miles from our hotel. The students and I took a day trip and were utterly blown away. It was by no means exhaustive, but it was a noble effort to weave a coherent narrative, and a good point of entry to engage in the larger understanding of disability."

Yet the Buffalo location became "a casualty of the pandemic," Rosa continued. "We're very grateful to the stewards of that museum. They did museums the old-fashioned way, they kept the lights on by keeping patrons coming through the door, and when the pandemic made that very difficult, there came a point where they needed to close their doors.

"I was heartbroken, because I recognized that it was a jewel. Out of admiration and remorse, I called the director of the museum, David Mack-Hardiman. He was also feeling the weightiness of the loss, so I asked him 'What's the future of the collection? Where does your board envision the collection living?' And then the big one — 'Would you consider moving it downstate?'

"I had an eye on bringing that collection to the College of Staten Island," Dr. Rosa said but when he moved to Viscardi the idea came with him: "With the blessing of CUNY and a commitment at the College of Staten Island to partner with us, we agreed to pursue it together, with the museum having a home here at The Viscardi Center, which we see as a cradle for disability history and culture.

"We don't have a library here, or an archive, but at the College of Staten Island, which is on the former campus of Willowbrook, we have a brilliant archivist and a library which is really committed to including disability history and culture. The President of the college, Tim Lynch, is on the board of the museum, and he understands the unique and sacred responsibility to tell the story of American disability history, in its totality."

The Museum of Disability History is scheduled to open in late January.

For more of Warren Shaw's work in disability history, please go to www.DisabilityHistoryNYC.com

Walking on Water: How Deaf Entrepreneur Karen Putz Found Strength and Success After Hearing Loss

By Dawn Colclasure

Karen Putz, deaf author and entrepreneur, enjoys barefoot waterskiing. Photos courtesy: Karen Putz.

In a family with a rare gene that could cause deafness, Karen Putz knew the value of living life to the fullest. ''I was born with normal hearing,'' she explained. ''My mom and all of her siblings were deaf or hard-of-hearing, thanks to a super-rare gene.''

She watched one older sister become deaf after a fall, another sister lose the little hearing she had left following an accident, and three brothers become hard-of-hearing in adulthood.

Even so, Putz embraced life and all it had to offer. Especially when it came to water sports – Her father taught her to water ski at the age of nine. ''When I was eleven, my family bought a cottage with a guest house on Christie Lake in Michigan. I started water skiing every summer and learned to barefoot water ski when I was seventeen,'' she said. ''Two years later, I was barefooting and trying to cross the wake–I took a hard fall.''

When she climbed back into the boat, she was deaf but didn't realize it at first and thought she had water in her ears. ''I pretty much abandoned the sport afterwards–I did the occasional barefoot run but I was cautious,'' she said. ''I took up volleyball and traveled with a deaf team for twelve years.''

Adjusting to life as a newly deafened individual was a difficult transition for her to make. ''Those first days and months were very rough,'' she explained. ''I had just transferred to Northern Illinois University and discovered they placed me on a 'deaf' floor in the dorm. When the elevator opened, I saw people signing. I did not know sign language, and I had spent my entire life hiding my hearing loss.''

Several years later, Putz revisited her passion for water sports, hoping to face her fears. ''The day before my forty-fourth birthday, I tried to barefoot again. Couldn't do it. I was so sad and I cried, thinking that midlife sucked and I should have enjoyed barefooting when I still could do it,'' she said.

Her husband, Joe, saw a *TODAY* featuring Judy Myers, age sixty-six, barefoot water skiing. Myers started when she was fifty-three. Karen Putz reached out to her and was invited to Florida. There, she trained with Keith St. Onge, a two-time world champion in barefoot waterskiing.

''I got up on my first try. I returned to Florida three weeks later, and barefooted again. I ended up writing *Gliding Soles*, Keith's book,'' she said.

Her writing didn't stop there.

''When my youngest son was three, my husband bought a computer. I started writing online for various websites and getting paid for it,'' she said.

She moved on to writing, and self-publishing, books. ''I had always envisioned myself writing books. Yet, I never pursued the book writing path–I kept putting it off. I was passionate about barefooting and was planning to compete in tournaments. Problem was that the information was not organized–it was all over the place,'' she said. ''I was confused about the process and the scoring system. I figured if other people were confused like me–they would benefit from a book explaining it all.''

She gathered information from all the World Champions and instructors and competitors and wrote a book in 2012 entitled *Barefoot Water Skiing: From Weekend Warrior to Competitor.* ''It is still selling today!'' she said, ''I've self-published and also published with a New York publisher.''

Putz, who lives in New York, also founded Deaf Academy, which offers courses in American Sign Language (ASL) online. The online learning platform focuses on personal growth and is done completely in American Sign Language. ''I got the idea after doing so many workshops in schools with deaf and hard of hearing students,'' she said. ''I wanted a place where adults could continue their learning in a personal way.''

But she didn't stop there. ''I started a nonprofit with three other deaf individuals, Deaf Senior Services Coalition, and we are focusing on making housing and health care accessible for those who are 55 and older, whose language is primarily ASL,'' she said. She and her husband are launching their first lake house Airbnb, Barefoot Haven, which will be available in 2026.

Looking back, Putz understands that even though she faced barriers in life, they were not meant to be the end of her goals or her happiness.

''There are blessings or lessons in every challenge or barrier that you face. Turn your turmoil into triumph–reframe the story of your life so that you can have joy in the journey,'' she said ''You were born to stand out–not to fit in. Use your unique talents, gifts, and skills to create a Passion Path that fits YOU. Shine in your own brilliance!''

Learn more about Karen online at these links:

www.karenputz.com
www.yourpassionschool.com
www.deafacademyonline.com
www.parentcircledeafhh.com

Helen Keller Services Unveils Walters-Smithdas Legacy Atrium

By Matthew Figueroa

A celebration at the newly renovated Walters-Smithdas Legacy Atrium at the Helen Keller National Center (HKNC) in mid-November was dedicated not only to the modernized space that would greet new guests, but also to the life, accomplishments, and personality of the late Dr. Robert J. Smithdas.

Speakers and guests were invited from around the country to the HKNC's campus in Sands Point for the highly anticipated ribbon-cutting. In her remarks, Sue Ruzenski, CEO of Helen Keller Services, said of Dr. Smithdas, ''his vision helped establish Helen Keller National Center as a place of hope and empowerment for thousands of individuals who are DeafBlind.''

Smithdas, a DeafBlind teacher, was an advocate and author who shone as a guiding light to the DeafBlind community. The former leader at the HKNC reinforced the work and accomplishments of Helen Keller, showing the world that with the proper services and rehabilitation, DeafBlind people could contribute massively to society as creatives, advocates and scholars.

The renovated atrium is also dedicated to the late Barbara Walters, an award-winning journalist who famously befriended Dr. Smithdas during a *Today* show interview in 1967. The $1 million contribution from her estate continues to help HKNC provide its services to the DeafBlind.

The Walters-Smithdas Legacy Atrium was designed with the DeafBlind in mind. The room is tactile and textured, making use of paneling and smoother surfaces. The open space is accessible for DeafBlind individuals, with accessories to the atrium made to assist with movement. Its reception area features bronze recreations of various words in ASL, alongside historical relics to the DeafBlind community.

In addition to Ruzenski, the ceremony featured speeches from Sands Point Mayor Peter Forman, former HKNC participant Elizabeth Schmaltz, and Dr. Francis Casale, a preacher and former HKNC participant.

Sue Ruzenski, CEO of Helen Keller Services, speaks at a ribbon cutting ceremony to unveil the Walters-Smithdas Legacy Atrium in honor of the late award-winning broadcast journalist Barbara Walters and the late Dr. Robert J. Smithdas, former leader and advocate for the establishment of the Helen Keller National Center (HKNC) for DeafBlind Youths & Adults. Photo credit: Alex Kaplan.

Schmaltz, a member of the DeafBlind community, praised the center for its work on community building. She called the HKNC a ''light'' in the darkness and said, ''meeting other deafblind individuals here felt like finding a family.''

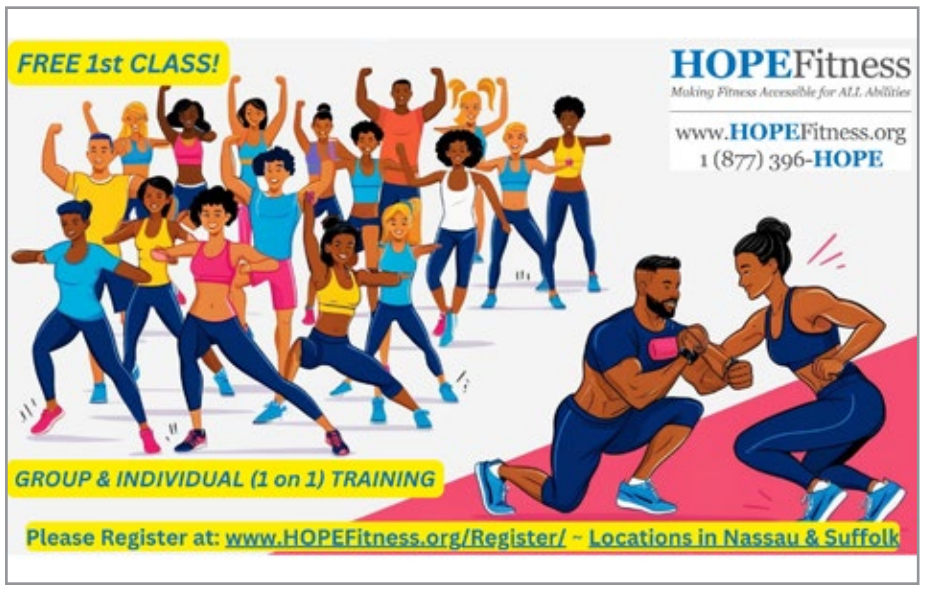
Dr. Casale, another DeafBlind individual, recalled his memories of Dr. Smithdas in his speech. He called him ''so smart, so warm and so encouraging.''

The speakers and guests at the ceremony seemed to share one united sentiment: the HKNC continues to offer the rehabilitation and vocational training needed to ensure independence for DeafBlind individuals. ''This center is where DeafBlind people come to reclaim their independence,'' Dr. Casale said, ''to work, to grow, and to live full lives outside the dark.''

Helen Keller National Center offers training to the DeafBlind across the country through its 11 regional offices, according to Joseph Melillo, national employment and business relations specialist at HKNC. It's the country's only national program that offers vocational rehabilitation to DeafBlind individuals of all ages

For its national recognition and accomplishments, Mayor Forman gave the HKNC an official proclamation. In his statement, Forman backed the center's goal of ''empowering people through training, support, and opportunity,'' and ''promoting acceptance, understanding, and shared experiences.''

Matthew Figueroa is a reporter with The SBU Media Group, part of Stony Brook University's School of Communication and Journalism's Working Newsroom program for students and local media.



An Inclusive Holiday

Holiday Fun in New York: Festive Events for All

By Ariel Arana

Pal-O-Mine Equestrian will once again host Winter Wonderland. Photo courtesy: Pal-O-Mine Equestrian.

The holidays are the best time of the year to spend with family and friends. To jump-start your festivities, here are some great events happening in New York to help you get into the holiday spirit. The events listed are accessible to all.

LONG ISLAND

Winter Wonderland on the Farm

On Pal-O-Mine's scenic 13-acre farm in Islandia, visitors to its Winter Wonderland can meet horses, sheep, donkeys, and miniature horses, explore holiday displays, enjoy storybook readings, outdoor movies, seasonal music, hot chocolate and treats, a festival of trees, a gift shop, family photo ops, and even special guests from the North Pole. Pal-O-Mine Equestrian began in 1995 as a therapeutic horseback riding program for individuals with disabilities and other vulnerable populations. The farm is located at 829 Old Nichols Road, Islandia.

Info:
Dec. 5: 4:30-8 pm, Dec. 6: 12-8 pm and Dec. 7: 4:30-8 pm
Admission: $20 per person (children 2 and under free); military discounts are available. Tickets sold at the gate. Call 631-348-1389 for more information.

Breakfast with Santa

Treat yourself to a buffet-style breakfast, a photo opportunity with Santa, holiday music and entertainment for the kids, along with a special visit from the Grinch at the Roslyn Hotel. The hotel, located at 1221 Old Northern Blvd., Roslyn, includes accessible rooms, parking and an elevator.

Info:
Dec. 13-14: 11:30 am-1 pm
Reservations: are required by Dec. 8.
Prices: $29 per child (ages 3-12), children under 3 years are free, and $49 per adult. Call 516-625-2746 for more information.

Community Chanukah Celebration

Celebrate Chanukah with the community! Enjoy activities, Sufganiyot, latkes, gelt, and candle lighting at this free event held at the Sid Jacobson Jewish Community Center, 300 Forest Drive in Greenvale. The JCC features a wheelchair-accessible entrance, parking, and restrooms.

Info:
Dec. 14: 2-4 pm
Admission: Free
To register, contact Lauren Chizner, lchizner@sjjcc.org.

Candle Dipping Workshop

Grab a friend, roll up your sleeves and get to work. Create your own colorful candle, hand-dipped with tinted waxes, as well as a candle holder for this winter at The Whaling Museum & Education Center.

The museum is wheelchair accessible, with only one level and accessible bathrooms. Service animals are welcome. Admission and the program fee for an aide is complimentary as long as the aide does not participate in the program. It is strongly recommended to bring an aide for visually impaired visitors, as the program involves glue guns and hot melted wax.

Unmetered street parking is available by the museum. There are also two curb cuts in front of the museum available for drop-offs. The Whaling Museum & Education Center is located at 301 Main St., Cold Spring Harbor.

Info:
Dec. 29-30: 11 am-1 pm
Admission: $8/$12 Member
Call 631-367-3418 for more.

Countdown to the New Year

Come wine and dine at the Fox Hollow for an elegant evening on New Year's Eve. Start the New Year right with activities such as dinner at the Volpe Ristorante and listening to a live band.

All the public areas of Fox Hollow are accessible. Six of their suites are fully equipped and ADA compliant. They also offer rooms with additional accessibility features that can be specifically booked. Check their website for more details. The Fox Hollow is located at 7725 Jericho Turnpike, Woodbury.

Info:
Dec. 31: 7 pm-12:30 am
Prices: $199 per person plus other options. Call 516-921-1415 for more information-.

MANHATTAN

Winter Village and Skating Rink

Bryant Park's Winter Village is a festive midtown Manhattan destination featuring free ice skating, holiday shopping, and dining, including cozy igloos and a small seating area you can reserve.

Bryant Park also is generally accessible with entrances, pathways and restrooms. For more information on drop-off locations and accessible subways, visit it's website's accessibility page. Wheelchairs and other mobility aids are welcome on the ice. Adaptable sleds are also available upon request at no extra cost.

If you plan to use an accessible sled or other mobility device on the rink, online booking is not required. Visitors requiring accommodations call or email prior: please email skate@bryantpark.org or call 917-438-5166.

Info:
Open daily through Jan. 4; Check online for hours of operation. Rink admission is free; Skate rentals $18.72 - $60.32

Tree Lighting Ceremony at Rockefeller Center

This year's tree is a Norway Spruce from East Greenbush, New York. It's wrapped with more than 50,000 lights and crowned with a Swarovski star. See it lit on December 3 or check it out while it's up until mid-January. The Lighting Ceremony is open to the public and will feature several live performances.

Rockefeller Center is fully wheelchair accessible. The main entrance with power-assist doors is located on 50th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. Service dogs are welcome.

Info:
Lighting Ceremony: Dec 3,
7 pm -10 pm. Open to the public.

BROOKLYN

Brooklyn Botanic Garden Lightscape

Go to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden this holiday season to walk through a magical display of lights. The Lightscape features ''light-splashed landscapes'' and ''luminous installations''.

The garden is wheelchair accessible from any public entrance. Nearby MTA stations include elevators. The grounds are accessible by paved pathways but certain areas can be narrow, rough, uneven or steep. Service animals are welcome. Accessible bathrooms are located throughout the garden. Each entrance and visitor booth is equipped with induction loops that transmit directly to hearing aids with T-coils.

Info:
Nov. 21-Jan. 4. Call 718-623-7200 for more information on various times and shows.
*Sensory-Friendly Early Entry on Dec. 5, Dec. 30: 4 pm
Admission:
Member Adult: $29 - $37; Member Child ages 3-11: $15 - $20
Adult: $29 - $44; Child $22 - $28; Baby: Free

See information on specific tickets.

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Alice Wong, An Appreciation

By Warren Shaw

One of the most compelling and influential disability voices of our time, Alice Wong, has passed away. She was 51 years old.

Wong grew up the daughter of immigrants from Hong Kong, in the suburbs of Indianapolis. Born with spinal muscular atrophy, a progressive neuromuscular disorder, as a child Wong gravitated to science fiction and literature, because she found allies and role models in characters like the X-Men's Charles Xavier. Wong later described herself, with her trademark wry wit, as a "nerd of color." In an autobiographical essay, "A Mutant From Planet Cripton," Wong summed up her life's mission by writing, in the third person, that "'Alice,' her Earth name, embraced her identity and found power in the community of fellow Crips around her. Scrutinized and labeled deviant by the Authorities, Alice and her Siblings of Cripton continue to fight for social justice and equality for mutants and non-mutants alike."

Wong became best known for boosting the voices of other people in the disability community. A principal vehicle was the Disability Visibility Project which, in partnership with StoryCorps, collected oral histories from at least 140 people. The project eventually incorporated a podcast, and maintains a very active online presence, at **disabilityvisibilityproject.com**.

As that community grew, it took on political engagement under the hashtag #CripTheVote, which hosted Twitter town halls with figures like Senator Elizabeth Warren and former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg. Other collaborations included #CripLit and, in the wake of Donald Trump's election as President in 2016, Wong assembled an anthology of essays entitled *Resistance and Hope*. Other collections followed, including her best-known work, *Disability Visibility: First Person Essays From The Twenty-First Century*, published in 2020.

A successor anthology, *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire* appeared in 2024. By then Wong had published a best-selling memoir, *Year of the Tiger: An Activist's Life*, and had become something of a pop culture figure, to the point that she played a fictionalized version of herself on the Netflix animated series *Human Resources*.

Wong's outreach to young people included a young adult's edition of *Disability Visibility*, and a column in *Teen Vogue* magazine. She brought Asian American and Pacific Islander voices into the disability movement. In 2013 Wong became an Obama presidential appointee to the National Council on Disability, and in 2024 she was named a MacArthur Fellow—the so-called "genius grant."

Because of her disability-related service requirements, she was a nearly lifelong recipient of Medicaid, which she described as a "life-giving program." Wong nonetheless wrote that "death is an intimate shadow partner." But nothing interfered with her determination, as NPR put it, to live "an unapologetic, unabashed disabled life filled with science-fiction, good food, and cats." WQED quoted her as saying "Being able to use my privilege to pass on opportunities to other disabled people and support projects I believe in brings me so much joy. We live in such bleak times and what keeps me going is living to the maximum without apology."

As her medical situation progressed, Wong began communicating through digital text-to-speech. True to her nerd roots, she took to describing herself as a "disabled cyborg." That blend of unflinching humor, vulnerability, and radicalism persisted right to the end. In a dying declaration posted by her friend and colleague, Sandy Ho, Wong wrote "Hi everyone, it looks like I ran out of time . . . You all, we all, deserve the everything and more in such a hostile, ableist environment. . . I'm honored to be your ancestor. .

"Don't let the bastards grind you down."

For more of Warren Shaw's work in disability history, please go to **www.DisabilityHistoryNYC.com**

Photo of Disability activist Alice Wong. Photo credit: Allison Busch Photography.

For more on Alice Wong, please see page 14.

Holiday Fun in New York: Festive Events for All

Continued from page 6

Kwanzaa Festival at Brooklyn Children's Museum

NYC's largest Kwanzaa festival returns for its 18th year—a week-long celebration of African heritage and culture. The Brooklyn Children's Museum is accessible, with ramps, elevators, and ADA-accessible restrooms available for visitors who cannot use stairs. The museum is also stroller-friendly and provides loaner sensory kits for visitors with sensory sensitivities.

Info:
Dec. 26-30: 10am-5 pm
Admission: Adult and children: $15; Grandparent $14; Baby: Free
See information on date specific tickets.

BRONX

Bronx Zoo Holiday Lights

Enjoy "Celebration in Lights" with interactive experiences like the Holiday Train and the Enchanted Sea, while taking in spectacular sights such as the Lantern Safaris and the Light Tunnels. Guests with mobility concerns are recommended to arrive at the Southern Blvd. entrance. Use the Zoo's Accessibility Map along with the Interactive Zoo Map for general information on the accessibility of the grounds and exhibits.

Info:
Select Dates: Nov. 21-23 & 28-30. Dec. 4-7, 11-14, 18-23, 26-31. Jan. 2-4. Lights go on and lantern trails open at 4:30 pm and remain open until 9 pm.

*Dec 4 is a Sensory Friendly Night with some modifications to the experience. Advanced registration required. No tickets will be sold on site. See more information on date-specific tickets.

QUEENS

Astoria Holiday Market

Astoria Market is bringing a festive mix of handmade crafts, delectable baked goods and unique vintage merchandise to Bohemian Hall in Astoria. The market is a top spot for Queens-based artists to sell their wares locally, providing the perfect place to buy the ideal gift.

The facility is wheelchair accessible, and the staff are trained to provide assistance when needed. Service animals are allowed.

Info:
Dec. 7 & 14: noon-6 pm
Bohemian Hall & Beer Garden (Main Hall & Party Room)
29-19 24th Ave, Astoria, NY 11102
Admission: Free

Navidad by Calpulli Mexican Dance Company

Navidad celebrates the holiday traditions experienced by a young person of Mexican immigrant parents growing up in New York City. Flushing Town Hall is committed to providing accessible service for all visitors with disabilities. Access for wheelchair users and individuals with limited mobility via a public elevator in the building and lift at the front of the building. For information about any accessibility issues, please call (718) 463-7700 x 222.

Info:
Dec. 13: 2pm
Admission: Adults $15; Members $12; Children 12 and under $8

Ariel Arana is a reporter with The SBU Media Group, part of Stony Brook University's School of Communication and Journalism's Working Newsroom program for students and local media.

Connect, Learn, and Advocate

Invisible Disability - Discussion

December 2 - 6:30 pm to 7:30 pm

A panel of experts with diverse professional and personal backgrounds will share their knowledge, experience, and perspectives about invisible disability. Join Inform Your Community for this lively and important discussion. Panelists will also take questions from the audience. The event will be held in the Daffodil Classroom at Pier 57, 25 11th Avenue. Access tickets here.

International Day of Persons with Disabilities

December 3 - 10 am to 11:30 am (Virtual Event)

The United Nations observes International Day of Persons with Disabilities each December and for this year, the theme is ''Fostering disability inclusive societies for advancing social progress.'' The commemorative event will take place virtually at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, and will bring together Member States, UN leaders, disability advocates and youth for a presentation and panel discussion. For more information, visit here.

Island to Impact Online Event

December 3 - 1 pm to 2:30 pm

Disability: IN Minnesota is hosting a free online event in honor of the 2025 International Day of Persons with Disabilities entitled *From Island to Impact: Survivors' Perspectives on Disability Inclusion*. The conversation features *Survivor 48* contestants and disability advocates Eva Erickson and Mitch Guerra, who will share their journeys of resilience, representation, and inclusion—both on and beyond the island.

This event will be held on Zoom. To register, visit here. Registration deadline is December 2, at 5 pm and Zoom information will be sent out to all who are registered.

Accessibility: ASL Interpretation and live captioning will be provided for this event. If you need other accommodations to participate, please register at least 5 days prior to the event.

Virtual Access Family Program: Underwater Archaeology

December 7 -11 am to 12 pm

The Intrepid Museum offers monthly programs for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families. This free virtual event features the Intrepid Museum's special exhibition *Mysteries from the Deep: Exploring Underwater Archaeology*, which highlights the science and stories of underwater archaeology. This program takes place over Zoom and includes an at-home activity packet. Space is limited and register in advance here.

A Less Stressful Holiday

December 11 - noon pm to 1:00 pm (Online Event)

Presented by INCLUDEnyc, this free virtual event features tips and strategies to prepare your child, your family, and yourself to have a less stressful holiday. The holiday season can bring the joy of family reunions, but it can be a stressful time for parents with children who become overwhelmed by new experiences and social demands. This year it can be different! To learn more and register, visit here.

Kessler Foundation Seeking Participants

The Kessler Foundation is seeking participants for two research studies:

1. Evaluating the Bambini Exoskeleton for Pediatric Cerebral Palsy

This study tests the safety and effectiveness of the Bambini robotic exoskeleton as a walking training tool for children with cerebral palsy.

Who can participate: Children ages 5–14 with cerebral palsy who can stand for up to 30 minutes and walk at least 10 yards with an assistive device (walker, cane, or crutch).

Location: Kessler Foundation, 1199 Pleasant Valley Way, West Orange, NJ

Compensation: None

Contact: Moe Huzien
MHuzien@KesslerFoundation.org
973-965-6627

2. Understanding Wheelchair Breakdowns

This study examines how social, cultural, emotional, and environmental factors affect wheelchair breakdowns and repairs.

Who can participate: Adults (18+) who identify as Hispanic, Non-Hispanic Black, or Non-Hispanic White; have a spinal cord–related condition; use a manual or powered wheelchair; and have needed or are seeking a wheelchair repair. Participants must have computer access.

Location: Remote/Online

Compensation: Up to $425

Contact: Autumn Pope
APope@KesslerFoundation.org
973-801-4706

includenyc

INCLUDEnyc Fair 2026

January 24, 2026 - 10:30 am to 3 pm

Join INCLUDEnyc for New York City's largest annual fair for young people with disabilities, where families can connect with resources and services, including summer camps, afterschool programs, sports, arts, technology, and recreation.

The event will be held at the Tisch Skylights at The Shed - 11 Hudson Yards, New York, NY 10001 (North entrance, near the intersection of 30th Street and 11th Avenue) To learn more and register, visit here.

Albert G. Prodell Middle School students played adaptive soccer with Bionic Project athletes Photo courtesy: Shoreham-Wading River Central School District.

Bionic Project Athletes Spread Awareness to Students

Students from Albert G. Prodell Middle School in Shoreham recently learned an inspiring lesson during a visit with athletes from the Bionic Project. Founded in 2018 by amputee Will Borden, the goal of the program is to create a more inclusive world for everyone. dismantle disability bias, build empathy, and foster connection through education, story, and sport.

Focused on the theme ''we are all connected; community is essential,'' the full-day program began with an assembly on topics such as inclusive behavior and language and media narratives around disabilities and assistive technology. The day continued with adaptive sports clinics led by four instructors, two of whom are elite athletes with physical disabilities. The athletes demonstrated to the students in the Shoreham-Wading River School District how to use crutches during an adaptive soccer clinic.

Dana Rogers, executive director of the Bionic Project based in Cambridge, Mass., explained that the goal of the program is to create connections with people of all types of ability while being coached by professionals.

''The students experience it [the disability] in their bodies and learn a new sport with different equipment and skills,'' Rogers said in a statement. ''We have hopefully expanded the notion of what a disability is and what an athlete looks like.''

The Wheatley School Unified Basketball Team. Photo Courtesy: East Williston Union Free School District.

Special Olympics Names The Wheatley School National Banner Unified Champion School

The Wheatley School in Old Westbury has been recognized as a National Banner Unified Champion School by Special Olympics North America, a distinction that represents the highest level of achievement for Unified Champion Schools nationwide, school officials announced.

The honor celebrates The Wheatley School's commitment to an inclusive school community. Only a select group of schools across the country earn this recognition each year by meeting standards of excellence in areas such as Unified Sports, inclusive youth leadership, and schoolwide engagement, according to school leaders.

''We are honored that The Wheatley School has been recognized as a National Banner Unified Champion School,'' Dr. Danielle Gately, Superintendent of Schools, said in a statement. ''This recognition reflects the spirit of inclusion, leadership and teamwork that our students, staff, and community embrace every day.''

As a Unified Champion School, Wheatley offers opportunities for students with and without disabilities to participate together on sports teams, in physical education, and through leadership activities that promote understanding and respect throughout the school community.

With this recognition, Wheatley joins 45 schools in the state that have achieved banner status. The award not only honors past accomplishments but also requires schools to demonstrate long-term sustainability of their inclusive practices, ensuring that the legacy of inclusion will continue for years to come, school officials said.

Danny Awards Honors Musicians

The sixth annual Danny Awards took place in late October at Manhattan's Town Hall, celebrating ten remarkable artists selected by industry experts for their exceptional talent. The lineup featured a blues-rock guitarist, a country songwriter, a metal virtuoso, and visionaries spanning every genre. Presented by Daniel's Music Foundation, the global event honors the extraordinary contributions of musicians with disabilities to the world of music. Photo credit: Joe Papeo.

The Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York (CIDNY) hosted an October gala with the theme ''Celebrating Advocacy: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow.'' In right photo: Geraldo Rivera, Emmy and Peabody Award-winning journalist, served as keynote speaker and is pictured here with Bernard Carabello who is on the CIDNY board. At left: Assemblymember Harvey Epstein with Mike Schweinsburg of 504 Democratic Club who received the Lifetime Achievement Award in Disability Justice. Photo courtesy: CIDNY.

Around Our Towns

A Trailblazer's Triumph: Kelli Fisher Wins Inaugural NYSID Award

by Ava Lefkowitz

Kelli Fisher is the first recipient of the inaugural Trailblazer Award from NYSID. Photo courtesy: Spectrum Designs.

If someone had told 16-year-old Kelli Fisher, growing up in Plainview, Long Island, that within two decades, she would deliver an acceptance speech for an award honoring her professional accomplishments, she would not have believed them. Yet, that is exactly what happened when Fisher, now 36, addressed an audience of more than 275 guests in October at the Rivers Casino & Resort in Schenectady to become the first recipient of the inaugural Trailblazer Award from New York State Industries for the Disabled (NYSID) for her contributions to "advancing employment and other opportunities for individuals with disabilities."

A shy and quiet teen without many friends, Fisher was diagnosed with autism at 14 years old. She was told she would not get a license or succeed in college, a prophecy which was reinforced in her early work years when employers would cite her avoidance of eye contact as justification for refusing to hire or retain her at various jobs.

All of that changed six years ago, when Fisher took a part-time job at Spectrum Designs, a non-profit based in Port Washington that provides meaningful employment for individuals with autism. Starting as a part-time assistant with Spectrum's laundry and baking businesses, Fisher soon converted to a full-time employee with Spectrum's custom apparel business. Within a few years, Fisher's creativity earned her promotion to her current role of Social Media Manager, becoming the first autistic person to hold this position at the organization.

Last year, Fisher completed her metamorphosis from shy teen to self-described "proudly autistic" adult when she was featured in Spectrum's "Out of the Box" autism awareness ad campaign which won multiple awards, making her an overnight celebrity. Later that year, a promotional video that Fisher developed, scripted and produced, featuring her autistic colleagues, went viral with over 30 million views, attracted Hollywood attention, and ultimately landed Fisher a spot on *The Kelly Clarkson Show*.

Spectrum's inclusive workplace, with approximately 70% of its workforce identifying as neurodiverse, provided the optimal environment for Fisher's success. "At Spectrum Designs, I'm surrounded by coworkers who are proof that brilliance doesn't come from fitting in; it comes from standing out," she said.

With no trace of that teenage awkwardness she once possessed, Fisher confidently strode up to the podium to accept her NYSID Trailblazer Award. Explaining that autistic people do not just think differently, but also create differently, she shared this message with the audience: "You don't need to fit inside someone else's box. You were made to design your own. And if you're brave enough to share your story, you might just find that the world can't stop watching."

NYSID President & CEO Maureen O'Brien could not agree more. The Trailblazer Award, created in honor of NYSID's 50th anniversary, recognizes what lies ahead as NYSID embarks on its next 50 years, O'Brien said. "From an annual pool of nominees, NYSID felt "Kelli stood out in a way that deserved special recognition."

Ava Lefkowitz is a freelance student journalist interested in advocacy for disability rights.

COMMENTARY AND OPINIONS

Civics League Conversation

The Leashed and the Unleashed: A Necessary Tension in Disability Advocacy

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

True change happens when fiery truth-tellers and careful negotiators work in tandem — one shaking the system, the other reshaping it. Progress demands both courage and calculation.

"You can't handle the truth!" – Jack Nicholson, *A Few Good Men* (1992)

That line, though cinematic, often plays out in real life for advocates who speak truth to power. Many find themselves negotiating not only with systems resistant to change but also with the internal politics of the very organizations that claim to champion justice. The question then becomes: are we serving the mission, or are we serving the funders?

Advocacy, at its core, is the act of supporting a cause, idea, or policy — it's about influencing decisions to create meaningful, positive change. Yet influence itself can be a double-edged sword. When advocates are employed by institutions with political or funding constraints, their power to challenge injustice can be muted. The fear of losing access, resources, or one's job can quietly transform bold advocacy into careful diplomacy.

This balancing act becomes even more precarious when the advocate's lived experience is intertwined with the cause. For those of us with disabilities, advocacy isn't theoretical — it's deeply personal. Every fight for access, equity, or dignity echoes our own daily battles. But that same emotional resonance can blur the line between personal passion and strategic action. The true test of advocacy is knowing how to separate emotion from fact without stripping the humanity from either.

And the facts speak volumes. According to the World Health Organization, 1.3 billion people worldwide — roughly 16% of the global population — live with a significant disability. In the United States, the employment–population ratio for people with disabilities is just 22.7%, compared with 65.5% for those without disabilities. That gap isn't about capability — it's about access, bias, and attitudinal barriers deeply embedded in our systems.

Nearly 4 in 10 adults with disabilities in the U.S. report being treated unfairly in healthcare, employment, or when seeking public benefits, according to the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. Disability discrimination remains among the top complaints filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) — over 33,600 cases in 2023 alone.

These numbers are not abstractions; they are evidence of a structural imbalance that polite advocacy alone cannot dismantle.

The Leashed Advocate vs. The Unleashed Advocate

Here's where advocacy gets complicated. There's an unspoken hierarchy in advocacy spaces — a contrast between the leashed and the unleashed advocate.

The leashed advocate is the one invited to the negotiations. They speak in a measured, palatable tone — an "inside voice" that fits comfortably in legislative hearings and executive offices. They maintain relationships, preserve access, and can often nudge policy along incrementally. But that access comes with invisible restraints: speak too forcefully, and the door quietly closes.

The unleashed advocate, on the other hand, refuses to soften truth for comfort. They raise their voice, challenge inequity directly, and energize communities who have waited too long to be heard. Their power is raw, necessary, and often disruptive — the very spark that ignites movements. But in a world where power fears disruption, they can also find themselves locked out of the rooms where deals are made.

Both roles, however, are essential.

The unleashed advocate pushes the system; the leashed advocate negotiates within it. One agitates; the other articulates. One yells to shake the table, and when the room finally quiets, the other sits down to turn the noise into policy. The truth is, victory rarely happens without both.

A Real-World Lesson: The PPL Controversy

A powerful example of this dynamic played out when advocates in New York and other states opposed the monopoly of Public Partnerships LLC (PPL) as the single Statewide Consumer Directed Personal Assistance Program (CDPAP) Fiscal Intermediary for New York State. All Consumer Directed Personal Assistance Services (CDPAS) recipients are required to work with PPL as their Fiscal Intermediary for home care services. Advocates with disabilities — many of them fierce, outspoken, and rightfully frustrated — raised alarms about reduced choice, poor oversight, and threats to consumer-directed care. Their critiques were accurate and urgent.

But the volume of their outrage — though justified — made lawmakers and the office of Governor Kathy Hochul uncomfortable. The unleashed advocates were gradually sidelined from direct discussions, replaced by more measured voices that decision-makers found "easier to work with." The result? Incremental policy improvements rather than the full overhaul that was needed.

It was a painful but important lesson: being right is not always enough to win. Power often responds not to truth, but to tone. And the hard reality is that advocacy effectiveness often depends on timing, temperament, and tactical restraint.

Strategic Unleashing

The beauty of the unleashed advocate lies in their authenticity — their refusal to dilute truth. But strategy matters. To truly move the needle, the unleashed advocate must know when to roar and when to recalibrate. Being "unleashed" doesn't mean being reckless; it means being intentional — unapologetic about the truth, but strategic about the path to change.

We must recognize that change, unfortunately or fortunately, is often incremental. The leashed advocate can open the door that the unleashed advocate has rattled. The unleashed advocate can reignite passion when progress slows. Together, they sustain momentum — one outside shaking the gates, the other inside, quietly turning the key.

Photo courtesy: Marcus Johnson.

To Bedfellow or Not?

So, to bedfellow or not? The answer isn't binary. Partnership, when rooted in mutual respect and transparency, can amplify both voices — the fiery and the formal. The goal isn't to silence either, but to synchronize both toward justice.

Because in the end, advocacy isn't about protecting positions — it's about transforming systems. It's about ensuring that every person with a disability has equal access not just to spaces, but to power.

The unleashed advocate wields truth. The leashed advocate translates it.

Together, they make change not only possible — but unstoppable.

Closing Thought

Data can prove inequity, but only courage can dismantle it. The unleashed advocate brings the fire; the leashed advocate brings the form. Progress demands both — working in tandem, refusing to yield to fear or comfort, and never forgetting who the fight is truly for.

Marcus Johnson is co-leader of the Civics League for Disability Rights (CLDR), an independent, volunteer-led group of New Yorkers with disabilities who advocate for themselves, their community, and for systemic change in healthcare and access for people with physical disabilities. Contact: civicsleague@gmail.com

Legal Lens

Airlines Challenge New Rules—and USDOT's Enforcement Freeze Stall Accessibility Reforms

by James Weisman, Esq.

Last December, as President Joe Biden and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg left office, the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) published a newly updated regulation implementing the Air Carrier Access Act, (ACA) which was passed in 1986.

Two months later, Delta, American, United, JetBlue and Southwest Airlines, encouraged by newly inaugurated President Donald Trump's attack on over-regulation by government, sued USDOT to invalidate the regulation

All wheelchair-using airline passengers have struggled with airplane access issues for decades. Inaccessible lavatories, humiliating and dangerous boarding practices, untrained escort and gate personnel to assist with boarding and disembarking, failure to arrange boarding chairs and assistance despite advance reservations, lack of enforcement by USDOT of nondiscrimination regulations, and damage to wheelchairs inconveniencing and immobilizing travelers, as well as denying liability for the damage are just some of the thousands of Air Carrier Access Act complaints received by USDOT every year. In fact, Secretary Buttigieg's USDOT imposed a $20 million dollar fine on American Airlines for ACA violations. No Secretary had ever imposed an ACA fine this big and it highlighted the need for better regulation and enforcement.

In response to years of disability advocacy and recognizing that airlines have not voluntarily done much to provide access, USDOT developed a new regulation which would have definitely improved air travel for people with disabilities.

Key Provisions Suspended

This probably won't come as a shock but Trump Administration Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy has suspended indefinitely the enforcement of key provisions of the regulation. He issued a Notice of Enforcement Discretion, essentially saying that the agency will not enforce the provisions the airlines are suing about. USDOT, meanwhile, is reviewing the rule. Rule changes will take over a year to happen but they may not since the airlines are happy with the nonenforcement.

Secretary Duffy, the father of a child with a disability, announced in September that he will pause enforcement of four provisions of the regulation:

1. The presumption that airlines are liable when a passenger's wheelchair is not returned in the same condition as when it was checked with baggage.
2. Annual training and refresher training for personnel and contractors who interact with passengers with disabilities and/or handle their mobility equipment.
3. The requirement that airlines notify wheelchair and scooter users before they travel of their rights to file claims if they are discriminated against or their equipment is damaged.
4. The reimbursement of the difference between the fare on a cheaper flight that couldn't accommodate a wheelchair or scooter in baggage and a more expensive flight on which it fits.

Waiting Decades For Accessibility

Wheelchair and scooter users have waited decades for the airlines to behave and be treated like any other carrier.

Buses, trains, and even taxis are accessible, yet airplanes have been allowed to remain inaccessible—still unable to safely transport passengers who use wheelchairs, posing risks to both travelers and airline staff.

The airlines have been bailed out of financial troubles by US taxpayers repeatedly. In both 2008 in response to economic downturns, and in 2020 in response to COVID shutdowns, government provided air carriers billions in relief. If airline bailouts were conditioned on airplane access there would be no need for a new nondiscrimination regulation as airlines would have found it to be in their interest to safely and graciously accommodate all passengers, not just those who can walk.

Photo courtesy: James Weisman, Esq.

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.

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Reimagine Seated Health with Kalogon

People who use wheelchairs have unique seated health needs - everybody is different and some may need more postural support, some may need to focus on skin integrity, and all want to focus on being able to improve their seating tolerance and comfort to live the lives they want to live. Building successful products for the wide variety of needs includes listening to the people who are sitting on products and the seating specialists who work with them. Kalogon builds products by listening, learning, and continuous improvements.

Kalogon has an innovative complete seating system for customized needs featuring Orbiter Med and Bondar. Launched in 2024, the award-winning Orbiter Med, coded as an E2609 custom cushion, combines Kalogon's groundbreaking Advanced Pressure Management System (APMS) with the individualized postural support of a custom cushion reimbursable by insurance. Each Orbiter Med is designed and fabricated based on a person's unique seating and positioning requirements.

Orbiter's core technology, APMS, has been proven to improve blood flow with two peer reviewed studies published in 2024. This technology uses an app where seating specialists can tune a cushion to deliver the optimal seating experience for each person. Once the settings are dialed, the cushion performs intelligent pressure redistributions throughout the day adjusting to people's movements and ambient environments. Other benefits of this technology are that it allows for people to adapt the cushion over time by a simple app adjustment and for different activities.

Clinician Testimonial: ''I have used the Kalogon smart cushion for 4 months, and I have seen improvements in the condition of multiple patients. I currently have a patient on the cushion that had a stage 3 sore, which has healed and continues to improve'' – Chad, Director of Rehab at Viera Del Mar.

In June 2025, Kalogon announced the launch of Bondar, a new Medicare E2617 coded custom-fabricated wheelchair back support. Custom-fit to each user's unique body shape, Bondar is a 3D-printed back support designed for people who need additional postural correction or support from their wheelchairs. Based on clinical feedback, Kalogon designed Bondar to be user-friendly for installation and adjustments. The mounting system is easy to lock in place and remove, with fewer screws and steps to fit than most backrests on the market today. The powerful combination of Bondar and Orbiter Med offers customers a fully coded system that supports overall seated health, including better respiratory function, digestion and mental well-being.

Seating specialists, such as assistive technology professionals, occupational therapists, and physical therapists, can order Bondar & Orbiter Med custom-fit for clients on Kalogon's interactive real-time configurator, Launch Pad. As they input precise measurements, a 360-degree image of the custom order updates in real time, allowing specialists to visualize the final product.

Please speak to your seating specialist to see if Kalogon's products are right for you.

The information in this article was supplied by Kalogon.

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.

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

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Global Tributes Pour in for Disability Rights Activist Alice Wong

Compiled by Warren Shaw and Joie Tyrrell

Following the death of disability rights activist Alice Wong in November at age 51, tributes from around the world poured in. The following are among those shared with *Able News*.

Iowa Senator Tom Harkin (retired), lead author of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), expressed his gratitude for her lifelong work and sadness at the news of her death. "Alice never gave up on the fight for full inclusion for all people with disabilities," Harkin said. "She was a trailblazer."

"I was deeply saddened to hear the news of Alice Wong's death. As a disability activist and writer, she spent her life not only telling her own brilliant stories, but also the stories of so many others with disabilities—spotlighting important accounts that too often are left untold."

- **NYC Comptroller, Brad Lander**

Photo credit: Eddie Hernandez Photography.

"Over the years, many have tried to bring more visibility nationally to the collective disability community, but Alice Wong had the creativity to truly leverage social media to make that happen. Her presence will be deeply missed,"

– **Beth Haller,** a Facebook friend and former New Yorker, co-founder of GADIM, the Global Alliance for Disability in Media and Entertainment.

"Alice Wong's passing is a tremendous loss for the disability community," says **Daniel Van Sant,** Director of Disability Policy at The Harkin Institute. "[Wong] was one of the most visible and influential leaders in the disability justice movement. Her books and advocacy have left an indelible mark on me and so many others."

"As someone who also is a disabled person who was mainstreamed in public school, Alice's story deeply resonated with me. Her work inspired me to become an advocate and I hope to live up to her legacy in my work to make NYC a more accessible place to live"

- **Nick Astor,** Constituency liaison for People with Disabilities at the NYC Comptroller's Office.

Inclusion Is the True Holiday Spirit

By Layla Duran

The true spirit of the holidays is inclusion, yet too often, accessibility is left off the guest list.

''Belonging is a huge piece of accessibility. It's not just: 'I got into the room.' It's that I'm welcomed and I belong there, I'm part of it,'' said Janie Avant, an inclusive content specialist for the Nora Project, a program that promotes disability inclusion by engaging educators and students, and is now part of the nonprofit Center for Enriched Learning (CEL), in Riverwoods, IL.

Here are some of Avant's recommendations for a more inclusive holiday:

- Start early. Prior to hosting a gathering, consider family members who have disabilities and may have certain access needs.
- Check the environment. Holidays can be filled with large crowds, lights, and music and that can become overwhelming and overstimulating. For guests who may have sensory issues, set up an area reserved as a quiet space.
- Variety is key. Games are often a highlight of holiday gatherings but making them inclusive can be challenging. Offer a variety of crafts that a child or adult could choose from that adapt to meet different levels of motor skills.
- Appropriate gifting. Have gifts that are easy to unwrap or loosely wrapped – especially for children with a motor disability.
- Shop local. Look for business owners and shop owners from the disability community to help with appropriate gift ideas.

For those who host or organize gatherings outside of the home, Joe Zesski, the program manager at the Northeast ADA Center – which provides technical assistance to all sectors of the public on the American with Disabilities Act via a telephone hotline - offers this advice:

Make sure to plan ahead for an inclusive holiday.

choose a location accessible by public transit, check the physical accessibility of the space, and confirm whether the caterer can provide options for different dietary needs.

''I think that the holiday season is a good time to remember what's really important about family and that being together, and having fun, and making memories is something that everyone in a family should enjoy and be able to do,'' he said. ''People may need to do that in a different way and for families, it's important to keep that in mind, that sometimes you might need to do things differently than we're used to, but it makes a big difference in making people feel welcome and part of our family.''

Layla Duran is a reporter with The SBU Media Group, part of Stony Brook University's School of Communication and Journalism's Working Newsroom program for students and local media.

Top Disability-Friendly Vacation Spots to Add to Your 2026 Travel Vision Board

By Esme Mazzeo

The Ferris wheel at Morgan's Wonderland. Photo courtesy: Morgan's.

New year, new you, new scenery. As 2026 approaches, why not add a travel destination to your vision board? We curated some vacation destinations that are focused on serving the disability community, whether the experiences were designed with disabled people in mind or adapted and renovated to be more inclusive. There's an amusement park built on a foundation of inclusion, a state that made sure all its tourist regions could provide disabled people with adventurous experiences, an estate to escape to for a staycation, and more.

Morgan's Wonderland-San Antonio, Texas

If you have a child with a disability who loves rides (and general fun), you're going to San Antonio, Texas to a vacation wonderland. We're not talking about Taylor Swift's ''Wonderland'' but Morgan's Wonderland and Morgan's Inspiration Island. They're inclusive, accessible theme parks started by Gordon V. Hartman and his wife Maggie Hartman who inspired by their daughter Morgan, who has physical and cognitive disabilities. The Hartmans wanted to create a theme park ''to provide a fun, clean, and beautiful environment free of physical and economic barriers that all individuals can enjoy, regardless of age or ability.'' As of 2025, they have two.

Rides at Morgan's Wonderland include a wheelchair accessible multi-rider swing (Joy's Happy Swing), the world's first 4-seater zipline, a 4D inclusive rollercoaster ride experience, a Ferris wheel, a carousel, a butterfly playground, and so many more! Then, make your way to Morgan's Inspiration Island for the accessible splash park. There, you'll find riverboat rides and plenty of areas to play in water.

Other accessible attractions in San Antonio include the River Walk an accessible boat cruise, and the San Antonio Botanical Garden. When planning your trip, use one of Morgan's World's hotel partners so that a portion of your fee goes back to the park to support its mission.

Oregon: The first 'Accessibility Verified' state in the US

Travel Oregon worked with the accessible travel site Wheel the World to become the first accessibility verified state in the U.S. To earn this status, businesses in all seven tourist regions in the state met rigorous, evidence-based standards to be sure that hotels, outdoor experiences, and cultural were accessible to people with varying disabilities. A total of 750 hotels were assessed on 43 communities in the state. As part of this effort, Oregon is now the first state to offer people with mobility disabilities the option of planning a travel itinerary online that prioritizes their access needs.

The accessible experiences open to the disability community in Oregon seem endless. From visiting beaches to climbing trees in a power chair to ziplining, wine tasting, visiting aquariums, kayaking, accessible horseback riding, or even just visiting a Deaf-owned coffee shop, infinite adventure awaits. So go plan now (when you're finished reading)!

National Parks (Grand Canyon National Park-Arizona & Yellowstone National Park-Wyoming)

National parks are often must-see destinations for travelers, so we're including the Grand Canyon National Park and Yellowstone National Park in one section. Starting with the Grand Canyon, consider booking the Grand Canyon Railway Hotel for your stay, which has ADA accessible rooms with features like roll-in showers and lowered countertops. Accessible train rides into the park take you to the South Rim of the park, in the Historic Village, which includes the paved Rim Trail that is easily navigable for wheelchairs. If you plan ahead, you can book an ADA-compliant motorcoach to take you to all the accessible, must-see views.

Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming (with extensions into Montana and Idaho) also provides as much accessibility as possible for disabled visitors through sign language interpreters (book at least three weeks in advance), captioning at select visitor centers, and audio descriptions and tours available for many trails and attractions. Service animals are welcome, as are Segways and similar devices for people who are using them in lieu of a manual or power chair. Visit the accessibility section of the website while planning.

Note: Some areas of national parks are designated historic and cannot be made accessible to all.

Las Vegas, Nevada

Some disabled people aren't as outdoorsy as others, but there's no shortage of entertainment in Las Vegas, Nevada. The Vegas Strip (Las Vegas Boulevard) is wheelchair accessible, per Wheel the World, which is key because it features many of the casinos, entertainment attractions, and hotels that make people want to go there on vacation. Just be aware that because it's such a huge tourist spot, it can be crowded on weekends.

The Bellagio Fountain at the Bellagio Resort is a can't-miss spot as it features a free music and lights show with dancing fountains every 15-30 minutes. While there, check out the resort, which was built in 1988 and is the most lavish one on the strip. It has an art gallery, and a Botanical Garden and Conservatory with seasonal decorations. Fans of celebrity culture, entertainment and sports obviously shouldn't miss Madame Tussaud's Las Vegas to see the wax figures of famous people you love. In addition to an accessible entrance and elevators, caregivers are admitted free, service dogs are allowed and wheelchairs can be borrowed (first come, first served). Vegas also has guided tours, a bustling buffet scene, and offers day passes to some hotels so if the pool where you're staying doesn't meet your access needs, you can find another. Don't forget to go see Cirque Du Soleil, the Mob Museum, and the Neon Museum. Or the Hoover Dam if you want to experience a little nature.

Miami, Florida

If you want to stay on the East Coast and are craving a vacation experience beyond theme parks, consider Miami, Florida. Accessible air boat rides in the Everglades are available, and some accessible beach experiences include The Beachwalk, with matted paths on the sand, and accessible picnic areas in Haulover Park.

Miami also has a thriving arts and culture scene. You can take a private, accessible, guided tour of Little Havana, see the historic Art Deco District in South Beach via a guided tour, visit the Phillip and Patricia Frost Museum of Science, and so much more. Miami is accessibility verified via Wheel the World and caregiver support services are available via Wheel the World.

The Troutbeck in Amenia, New York

Staycations are vacations, so we're featuring The Troutbeck in Amenia, New York, because even if you want to stay in the tri-state area, you deserve a getaway. Troutbeck is a private estate two hours from Manhattan with three accessible ground floor guest rooms, a ramped pool, an accessible fitness center called The Barns with accessible changing rooms, two accessible pool deck level cabanas, and an accessible restaurant.

You don't need to leave the grounds, but if you feel like getting out for the day, visit the paved Harlem Valley Rail Trail or visit Millbrook Vineyards & Winery.

Conversations with *Able News*

Meet Christine Bruno - Actor, Advocate and Leader for Disability Equity in Entertainment

By Joie Tyrrell

Christine Bruno is an award-winning actor, educator, activist and disability equity consultant for the entertainment industry. She has appeared in theatre, film and on television across the U.S. and internationally.

She sits on both the National Board and New York Local Board of SAG- AFTRA, is Chair of the NY SAG-AFTRA Performers with Disabilities (PWD) Committee, Vice-Chair of the Diversity Advisory Committee, and serves on several other SAG-AFTRA Committees.

She is an Adjunct Professor at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, holds an MFA in Acting and Directing from the New School, and is a proud member of SAG-AFTRA, AEA, The Actors Studio and The Actors Center. In 2024, she was named a Disability Futures Fund Fellow by the Ford and Mellon Foundations.

Bruno spoke with *Able News* about the importance of authentic representation.

You've said disability is not a technical skill, it's a lived experience and a culture. What does that mean in the context of acting and casting?

I first heard - ''Disability is not a technical skill'' — from Kitty Lunn, a wheelchair dancer and choreographer who is a longtime member of the SAG-AFTRA Performers with Disabilities Committee, which I now chair. Some years ago, it was expanded to include, ''It's a lived experience and a culture,'' to help people understand that in the industry, disability isn't something you can just ''put on,'' like a costume.

We've seen several actors win awards for appropriating disability, treating it like a skill to be learned. But disability is a lived experience and for many, a culture and an identity.

The industry now understands that blackface and other forms of appropriation are offensive and harmful, yet disability appropriation remains harder for many to grasp. That said, it's much better than when I started working as an advocate for disability representation, but we still have a long way to go. Twenty-eight percent of the population identifies as having a disability, yet only 5% of characters on TV have a disability and just 2% are played by disabled actors.

What progress have you seen in authentic representation?

There has been noticeable progress in the last seven or eight years—after decades of very little. We've seen real change on stage, on television and in film. Film still lags TV and theater, and we don't quite know why.

But audiences have played a big role. They're beginning to say, ''We won't support you if we don't see ourselves authentically represented.'' That mirrors what happened when the black community began pushing back in the '90s when they weren't seeing themselves represented on TV. Money talks, but it also talks in the other direction. The backlash following taking Jimmy Kimmel off the air is a perfect example.

And we're not just seeing gains in representation; access is being built into the art itself. Artists like my dear friends, writer/performer Ryan J. Haddad and Alice Sheppard, disabled dancer/choreographer and founder of Kinetic Light, are transforming the way we make art by creating access as aesthetic—integrating access directly into performance — and audiences are responding. Ryan's piece, *Dark Disabled Stories*, premiered at The Public Theater and Kinetic Light's most recent piece, *The Next TiMes*, had its world premiere at New York Live Arts. Both played to packed houses and received rave reviews.

You've worked to connect disabled actors with casting professionals. What misconceptions or challenges do you encounter there?

I used to work for Inclusion in the Arts, a nonprofit that advocated for artists of color and disabled artists and closed in 2017. As the representation of artists of color increased and nonprofits sprang up that centered communities of color, the organization shifted its focus to disability because that's where we saw the greatest need.

When the organization closed, there was (and is) still much work to do. As a working actor, I wasn't interested in running a nonprofit, so I continued the work as a freelance consultant. When I started at the organization in 2005, much of my job was fielding calls from casting directors; that always included educating them about pretty much everything you can think of — language, audition protocol, scripts, arranging interpreters or accessibility support, labor law.

It used to be extremely difficult even to get disabled people ''in the room.'' That's improved a lot. Most casting directors are fully on board with authentic casting. Directors can sometimes be a harder nut to crack, but the biggest hurdle continues to be producers.

New legislation related to accessibility in entertainment is currently being considered by the NYC Council. Can you tell us about that?

The bill is called *Intro 1307, Accessibility in Entertainment Fund*. It was introduced by Christopher Marte, councilman for the 1st District.

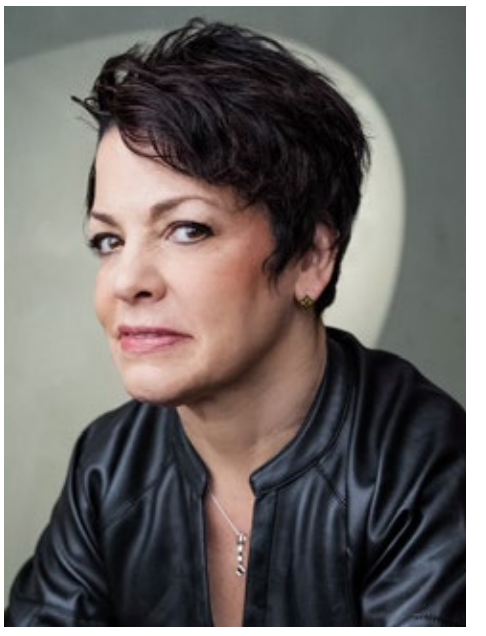
The bill is the brainchild of retired casting director, Rosalie Joseph, who has long championed disabled artists. After years of failed efforts by many to get producers to build funds into their budgets for access and accommodations, Rosalie and her colleague, casting director Eric Goldberg, worked with Councilman Marte to draft the legislation. The legislation charges the city to establish a dedicated accessibility fund that removes barriers to hiring disabled talent.

In October, we showed up in full force — in person, on Zoom and via written testimony — to a City Council hearing to provide testimony in support of the bill. Actor Woody Harrelson and Broadway director Sam Gold, plus working disabled artists and allies, myself included, provided powerful testimony.

What gives you hope for the future of authentic disability representation on stage and screen?

The bill gives me huge hope, at least for New York City. If it passes, our hope is that other markets will follow.

Producers often assume accommodations are expensive, but most cost between $0 and $1,500.



Christine Bruno is an award-winning actress and disability equity consultant. Photo Courtesy: Christine Bruno.

That's been the biggest barrier. If we can remove that misconception, it'll be a game changer. I think we'll see a real influx of disabled talent in front of and behind the camera, onstage and backstage.

I'm extremely proud of my advocacy and honored to represent my community, but I didn't become an artist to be an activist. The lack of access forced many of us to become both our own advocates, as well as advocates for others. Too often, we're also expected to be free consultants in the rehearsal room. These are two separate jobs. I would love for all of us to be able to just show up and be an artist.

What do you hope audiences take away from authentic representation?

Art is about connection and the best art represents our shared humanity.

Authentic representation is just the first step. Ultimately, I want audiences to recognize that disabled artists can play any role—teachers, parents, doctors, anyone —because we are everyone.

I have always trusted the audience. They're infinitely smarter than producers give them credit for. They may not always be able to articulate it, but they can feel whether something is authentic.

The more audiences demand authenticity, the more the industry WILL listen. That's when we'll see sustainable and lasting change.

Until then, we continue to fight the good fight!