AbleNews

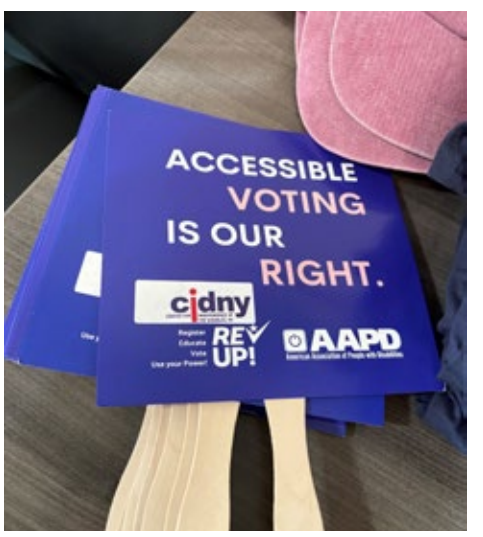
The Viscardi Center

THE NEWSPAPER FOR, BY, AND ABOUT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

ISSUE 30 | OCTOBER 2026

Disability Voting Rights Focuses on Inclusion at the Ballot Box

By Eliana Park



The Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York (CIDNY) hosted a voter education meeting during Disability Voting Rights Week at its Manhattan office. Photo credit: Joie Tyrrell.

Voting is fundamental to American democracy, but for voters with disabilities, being able to exercise their right to vote independently and with dignity can still depend on whether a machine works, whether a polling location is accessible and on the training of poll workers.

For Dr. Shannon McLennon Wier, voting was never as simple as walking into a polling location and casting a ballot with dignity.

Wier, who lives in Dutchess County, is the executive director of Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York (CIDNY). She is blind and has been voting since she was 18. But it was not until last year, when she was in her mid-50s, that she was able to vote independently.

For years, Wier depended on sighted people to take her to polling locations, read her ballot, and help her mark it. In 2024, Weir encountered another malfunctioning device at her polling place. After speaking with CIDNY's general counsel, the organization contacted the Dutchess County Board of Elections. Wier said the county subsequently changed its approach to purchasing voting machines, moving toward machines that could be equipped with universal ballot marking devices.

The following year, Wier voted independently for the first time.

As the start of early voting and Election Day draws closer, advocates and election officials have been working to educate voters with disabilities about their options for casting a ballot. Events were held in September to mark Disability Voting Rights Week including a hybrid forum at CIDNY's Manhattan office where representatives from the League of Women Voters and the New York City Board of Elections shared resources. The two-hour session included a video demonstration of newly accessible tools designed to assist disabled voters at the ballot box and how poll workers are being trained for their use.

Michael Ring, disability voting rights advocate and a poll site coordinator in New York City, shared how people with disabilities can serve as poll workers, saying ''as a poll worker, you're here to help people vote… and I get to be seen as a person with a disability helping people.

New York law and election guidance provide voters with disabilities several ways to access the ballot. The New York State Board of Elections says voters have the right to vote privately and independently, as well as the right to accessible polling places and voting machines. Ballot-marking devices can include audio and tactile interfaces, adjustable text and contrast, headphones and connections for devices such as Sip-N-Puff systems, which work by blowing into the device through a tube.

But advocates and organizations that work with people with disabilities say accessibility can involve much more than whether a machine is available.

Wier said she encountered polling places with stairs but no ramp, polling locations on upper floors without elevators, missing equipment for ballot-marking devices and poll workers who did not know how to operate the machines.

''My time is valuable just like anyone else's time,'' Wier said. ''It shouldn't be that I have to wait over two hours to vote.''

At Brightway Living and Learning, which primarily serves people with autism and other developmental disabilities on Long Island, transportation to the polling locations is one of the biggest barriers they see. Getting residents to polling places is not always easy, and without transportation, some people may not be able to vote at all.

The environment inside a polling place can also create difficulties. Sherry McKeown, the Administrative Director of Adult Day Services at Brightway, said some polling locations can be loud, crowded or overwhelming, particularly for people who are sensitive to noise or temperature.

Language and reading comprehension can create another barrier. Some people supported by Brightway have difficulty reading or understanding written language and may need significant assistance completing voter registration documents.

The organization recently worked with the Suffolk County Board of Elections on an event that allowed people supported by Brightway to practice using new voting machines before encountering them at a polling place. The goal was to reduce anxiety by allowing participants to know what to expect.

Nassau County is also making changes to its voting equipment. Danielle Asher, of the Nassau County Board of Elections, said the county is replacing its AutoMARK ballot-marking devices with ClearMark machines.

The state Board of Elections describes the ClearMark as a ballot-marking device that allows voters with disabilities to vote privately and independently on

Continued on page 11

IN THIS ISSUE

Page 5
Accessing the Outdoors

Page 13
Inclusive Oral Health

Page 16
Conversations with *Able News*

New York Disability News

Voters Back Disability Employment, Urge Action.

By Christopher Alvarez

A statewide survey of voters found overwhelming support to expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

With another round of elections coming up, New York voters say they want more diversity in their workplace. However, this potential possibility wanes on the fate of the state's Preferred Source Program, which is powered by state and local government purchasing, and has a sunset clause for the end of 2026 to create employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Councilwoman Mariann Dalimonte, who represents North Hempstead's sixth district, called on New York State Gov. Kathy Hochul to lift the expiration date because ''employers benefit and taxpayers benefit when people have opportunities to work and contribute rather than being left on the sidelines,'' she said at a late August press conference at Spectrum Design's Port Washington headquarters.

More than 70% of the employees at Spectrum are neurodiverse or autistic and that's the kind of environment that New York voters overwhelmingly support.

Able News was invited to the event that revealed those findings and more from a bipartisan statewide voter survey as well as new research from the Rockefeller Institute of Government. The survey found that an overwhelming majority - 93% of registered voters - believe it is important that workplaces are inclusive while more than four in ten voters say employers in New York are not doing enough to support disabled employees.

For Kelli Fisher, her work at Spectrum as the marketing development specialist has ''given me confidence, independence, and a sense of purpose. Employment is about so much more than a paycheck. It's about being valued, being a part of a team, learning, growing, and knowing that your work matters,'' Fisher said.

Barriers remain. Voters said people with disabilities face significant challenges such as limited hiring opportunities (77%), lack of workplace accommodations (73%), and stigma surrounding disabilities (71%), according to the survey conducted by Global Strategy Group on behalf of New York State Industries for the Disabled (NYSID) earlier this year.

Similarly in the city, *Able News* recently reported on Comptroller Mark Levine's yearly report that found that NYC: ATWORK, the city's program designed to help people with disabilities find jobs, only supported 4% of the 35,000 New Yorkers with disabilities seeking employment.

Together, the Global Strategy Group survey with NYSID queried 1,000 registered voters statewide and support was strong for expanding programs to create opportunities for disabled New Yorkers to work. When survey respondents were told about New York's Preferred Source Program, 85% of voters agreed that the state should prioritize expanding such programs.

''We're at that time again (come January),'' Maureen O'Brien, President & CEO of NYSID, said. ''So, as we move forward in trying to get the legislation renewed and made permanent, we want to share this data with everybody.''

NYSID operates under a temporary authority within the state's Preferred Source Program and renewal is required by the State Legislature every three years. NYSID generated a $470 million economic impact statewide, employing 5,000 workers with disabilities who earned $79.8 million in taxable wages, O'Brien said.

''These are folks going to work, participating in their communities, paying taxes just like everybody else,'' O'Brien said. ''We did about 3,000 contracts across the state last year, and we work with 100 agencies like Spectrum Designs around the state, so when people talk about growing employment

Continued on page 7

ABLE NEWS
201 I. U. Willets Road
Albertson, NY 11507
ablenews@viscardicenter.org
516-465-1416
ablenews.com

Published By
The Viscardi Center

Managing Editor
Kim Brussell

Editor
Joie Tyrrell

Designer
Neil Esposito

Staff Writer
Christopher Alvarez

Contributors
Dr. Rita Bilello
Lawrence Carter-Long
Dawn Colclasure
Marcus D. Johnson
Kieran O'Brien Kern
Ron Lyons, Jr.
Katherine Magnoli
Eliana Park
Warren Shaw
Joie Tyrrell
James Weisman, Esq.

Publisher Emerita
Angela Miele Melledy

Advertising Sales Representative
Wendy Kates

The Viscardi Center

Able Newspaper is published by The Viscardi Center, 201 I.U. Willets Road, Albertson, NY 11507. *Able* welcomes article suggestions for consideration. Submissions are the author's warranty that the material is not an infringement of the rights of others and that the material/photos may be published without further approval. Editorial material does not necessarily reflect the view of the editor/publisher of *Able Newspaper.* Advertisers are responsible for the content of advertisements. No part of this publication may be reprinted without the permission of the publisher. *Able* is not responsible for errors in advertisements beyond the price of the space occupied by the error. The publisher reserves the right to decline advertising for any reason.

Correction:
Gerard Heller resided in Surf Manor Home for Adults in Coney Island, which closed many years ago. A story in the September issue had identified another facility.

Able News Can Help You Diversify Your Workforce

You can now actively recruit qualified candidates with disabilities for all levels within your organization by placing an employment ad with *Able News*.

- ★ Reach a diverse, often untapped talent pool based in the New York metro area and Long Island
- ★ Dedicated section for recruitment ads for a specific position or a general hiring message
- ★ Ads can be placed in the monthly digital edition of Able News or online in the new employment section on AbleNews.com

Take Advantage of our Special Offers!

10% OFF total buy when ad is placed for 3, or more, consecutive months.

50% OFF second placement when same ad is placed in the digital edition and online

Learn more about recruitment advertising rates by visiting Ablenews.com/advertise/ or contacting Wendy Kates at 516-465-1587 or wkates@viscardicenter.org

AbleNews at The Viscardi Center

Interested in Submitting News Content or Placing an Ad?

Email:
ablenews@viscardicenter.org

Call: 516-465-1416

The deadline for the November issue is October 15, 2026.

Serving Up Job Skills at the Queens CoSpire Café

By Christopher Alvarez

The CoSpire Café provides young adults with cognitive disabilities real-world job training. Photo courtesy: Community Inclusion and Development Alliance.

It's almost coffee time at a new Queens café run by young adults with disabilities.

A **spotlight disability employment report** by City Comptroller Mark Levine released during Disability Pride Month, highlighted data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) showing that 70% of the working-age population with cognitive difficulties are out of the labor force.

Young Seh Bae, a mother of an autistic child, had a mission to change that when she founded Queens-based nonprofit **Community Inclusion & Development Alliance (CIDA)** in 2016 to plan a future life for kids like her son after school.

"Families spend years advocating for education and services, but when our children become adults, opportunities for meaningful employment and community participation become much more limited," said Young Seh Bae, Ph.D., Founder and Executive Director of CIDA, in a press release shared with *Able News*.

This month, kids on the spectrum will welcome customers to CoSpire Café in Bayside, for the second time this year as part of the internship phase of CIDA's job readiness program for individuals with cognitive disabilities.

"We created CoSpire because young adults with disabilities need more than classroom instruction. They need opportunities to learn, practice, work, and show the community what they can do," Dr. Bae said in the release.

After rigorous classroom-based instruction and acquiring food service, career and personal goal-setting skills at CIDA's headquarters, the young disabled adults move a mile and a half north to the café to learn how to make coffee, serve customers, use the cash register and make a transaction. While the servers work, CIDA hosts family support groups to assist parents through mental and physical health as well as other issues related to disability services.

Since incorporating as a nonprofit in 2016, CIDA has grown to serve approximately 2,000 families across New York and employ 30 individuals with developmental disabilities since the opening of the café in June, selling breakfast sweets, coffee and smoothies in a tiny, luminous gallery space that's decorated with inclusive inspired paintings made by the kids. The café internship is split into two-month cohorts a year, one in August and the other in October, with a strong focus on culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

In recognition of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, CoSpire will celebrate four years since the start of the job readiness program and four months since the opening of the neighborhood café that builds an inclusive workforce. CIDA will also celebrate its tenth anniversary as a nonprofit supporting individuals with disabilities and their families through education, family support, life-skills development, employment preparation, community participation, and advocacy, in December.

Although New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani has rolled out a series of **initiatives** in favor of marketing improvement strategies for small businesses and nonprofit organizations, Dr. Bae says the administration should do more for those dedicated to improving the lives of people with disabilities.

CIDA has an annual budget of just $150,000 and all café revenue is reinvested into CIDA's Job Readiness Program for young adults with disabilities.

Even though they use the coffee shop to seek partnerships with local employers who can provide internships, employment opportunities, workplace exposure, and other pathways into the workforce, efforts still fall short, Dr. Bae said.

"There's a lot of big companies offering big stuff but I think opportunities is in the local small companies or small stores, and if they can create a job opportunity for young people, I think job opportunities could maybe [be] much more expanded than just focusing on Amazon or those mega stores," she told *Able News* at CIDA's headquarters in Queens.

Dr. Bae openly invites their CIDA's Queens neighbors and local businesses to visit CoSpire, meet the young adults at work and partner with them on October 13, when the nonprofit will serve and try to brew additional funding in their meeting with NYC Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities Commissioner Nisha Agarwal, who is scheduled to visit.

A recent bipartisan statewide voter survey conducted by **Global Strategy Group** found that nearly three-quarters of New York State voters support policies that incentivize businesses to hire more people with disabilities.

Inclusion becomes meaningful when people with disabilities have genuine opportunities to learn, work, contribute, and belong alongside everyone else and that is true for Dr. Bae.

"An inclusive workforce cannot be built by disability organizations alone—it takes an entire community willing to recognize ability and create opportunity," Dr. Bae said in the release.

CoSpire Café is located at 36-28 Bell Blvd., Bayside, NY 11361.

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month

GET THE FACTS ON BREAST CANCER

One in eight women will develop breast cancer in her lifetime—but knowledge is power. This October, "Go Pink" with our series of informative events, hosted by Northwell's Katz Institute for Women's Health, Cancer Institute and Imaging.

RAISE HEALTH

Learn more at Northwell.edu/GoPink

Generously supported by

FOUR LEAF Federal Credit Union

Northwell℠

How the DEC is Making Public Lands More Accessible for Fall Activities

By Dawn Colclasure

Adaptive Archery is one of the outdoor activities offered by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. Photo courtesy: Leah Akins, Statewide Accessibility Coordinator, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC).

What kind of fall activities and events are taking place this year? Thanks to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), there are now several public lands offering outdoor activities that are more accessible to everyone.

In addition to ensuring public lands are more accessible to people with disabilities, the DEC (ADD) has also made fall events accessible, including a **Harvest Fest** at Stony Kill Farm that featured fun, food, music and wheelchair-accessible features.

Leah Akins, Statewide Accessibility Coordinator, stated, ''Each year, DEC education centers host fall festivals that offer a variety of activities for all ages and abilities.'' She added, ''All these festivals are free, open to all, and do not require registration.''

In addition, the DEC provides inclusive sensory kits to interested youth at festivals for free.

''We purchased these from the Autism Society and they have a selection of materials to hopefully assist neurodiverse individuals feel comfortable at busy festivals,'' Akins said.

Other accessible outdoor activities to participate in this fall include:

- Adaptive archery at the Black Creek Marsh Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Voorheesville, Albany County. This new facility includes shooter lanes that are wheelchair accessible as well as elevated shooting platforms.
- Horseback riding at the Whiskey Road Horse Trail located in the Rocky Point Pine Barrens State Forest, which provides an accessible mounting platform.
- Hiking on wheelchair-accessible trails. These trails can be found at the Ridge Pine Barrens State Forest as well as the Rocky Point Pine Barrens State Forest.

Thanks to a statewide initiative known as ''These Lands Are For Everyone'' (TLAFE) spearheaded by Gov. Kathy Hochul, the DEC has created adaptive viewfinders at 36 different locations across New York. According to the DEC website, ''the adaptive viewfinders feature EnChroma lens technology designed to help visitors with red-green color vision deficiency experience a broader spectrum of color while enhancing scenic viewing for all users.'' One such location where these types of viewfinders can be found is Prospect Mountain at Lake George.

''The TLAFE initiative builds on DEC's long-standing work to provide accessible recreation opportunities across the state so that people with disabilities have equal opportunity to access and enjoy the almost five million acres of state land that DEC manages,'' Akins said. ''DEC highlights 260-plus accessible recreation destinations on its **interactive mapper** and it includes over 85 boating, 60 fishing, 50 hiking and day use, and 45 camping facilities with accessible features statewide.''

Visitors can read more about recent accessible **infrastructure projects** and upcoming inclusive programming on DEC's **outdoor recreation web pages**.

In a press release shared with *Able News*, the DEC also highlighted other adaptive recreation amenities made possible through a partnership with the state Department of Health's Disability and Health Program. Those include new mobility scooters at **Five Rivers Environmental Education Center** and **Reinstein Woods Nature Preserve**.

Finally, another outdoor activity perfect for anyone who enjoys getting out in nature is open all year. The Adirondack Rail Trail is a 34-mile, multi-use recreational corridor between Lake Placid and Tupper Lake. The trail is compatible for wheelchair users. This trail runs through three communities and offers access to various waterways and campgrounds in the Adirondack Forest Preserve.

In addition to providing excellent fall foliage viewing, there are also opportunities for birdwatching, and since the trail runs along waterways, it is well-suited for fishing and sightseeing. However, be advised that weather conditions may make using the trail difficult for wheelchair users and that there are skiers and snowmobiles present on the trail during the winter. Call ahead to the DEC Region 5 Ray Brook Office at 518-897-1200 from Monday through Friday, 8:30 am to 4:45 pm, to check weather conditions and see if the trail is wheelchair accessible for a particular day and time.

To learn more about various accessible outdoor public lands, visit the **DEC website** and click on ''Places to Go.'' On that page, you can access ''Accessible Recreation'' to find all of the information needed to discover the right location for your desired outdoor activities.

Inclusive Fashion

HVS Alumni Make a Fashionable Statement for Inclusion at New York Fashion Week

by Christopher Alvarez

Left: Destini Mitchell-Murray, center, and models present pieces from the Flex My Ability collection during a New York Fashion Week runway show. Photo courtesy: Destini Mitchell-Murray. Right: Model Eman Rimawi-Doster wore the designer, One World Peace Co., for a show during New York Fashion Week. Photo courtesy: Eman Rimawi-Doster.

One of the biggest myths about disability inclusion is that people with disabilities don't care about how they look or don't spend money on clothing. Mindy Scheier, Founder of Runway of Dreams, contradicts these assumptions.

Surreal. Incredible. Astonishing. Astonishing and empowering. That's how models described the electrifying night Fedcap's Runway of Dreams (RODF) hosted on its ten-year anniversary of New York Fashion Week at Center415, in Manhattan in mid-September.

Able News was invited to cover the organization's largest industry stage to date, empowering people with disabilities to have confidence and self-expression through inclusion in fashion and beauty.

From Tommy Hilfiger to Victoria's Secret adaptive and universal design, representatives of leading clothing brands came to show that they are ready and willing to answer Scheier's call of design for all.

Approximately one in four New Yorkers lives with a disability, yet people with disabilities have historically had fewer options for clothing that combines accessibility and functionality with style.

The idea of RODF was born when Scheier pulled an all-nighter tailoring a pair of jeans to the right fit for her son Oliver, who has muscular dystrophy. He wore the jeans he wanted to school and when someone dared Scheier to organize an all-inclusive runway show at the biggest stage, NYFW, she did that too ''because every child deserves the right to feel comfortable and pretty in their own body,'' she told the audience, kicking off the fashion show.

A Boost of Confidence

The time of saying 'never' stopped on the runway stage at age 57 when bestselling author, and global keynote speaker, Ruth Rathblott decided to 'Unhide and Seek' out a new her with her missing left hand out in the open.

Wearing a black, adaptive Victoria's Secret bra, Rathblott walked to the end of the stage, pulling her hand out of the black dress pocket, rolling up her see-through sleeve and strutting her limb loss with pride.

''For years, fashion wasn't just about what looked good. Clothing became part of how I hid,'' she told *Able News* in an emailed interview. ''Today, I get to ask a very different question: 'What do I actually want to wear?'''

Universal Access to Fashion

Modeling a sporty, adaptive Tommy Hilfiger professional look was 30-year-old Henry Viscardi School (HVS) alum Ron Kort, who said that ''disability inclusion and representation in all forms has always been a priority for me… fashion including.''

As a disability civil rights and employment attorney from Brooklyn, Kort's wide waist but extremely thin legs make him wish that it were easier to find styles that fit off of the rack. Customizing and tailoring his clothes allows Kort to contribute to the advancement of disability inclusion, an interest he shares with his significant other, Destini Mitchell-Murray, who also attended Viscardi.

''Runway of Dreams played a substantial part in making adaptive clothing mainstream when it was once only a niche activity done by parents and caretakers,'' Kort told *Able News* via email. ''Today, inclusion and adaptive designs are everywhere.''

Through large-scale runway shows, campaigns, and educational programs, Runway celebrates innovation and advocates for universal access to fashion and beauty.

Kimberly H. Ridley, Chief Disability Officer of New York State, has announced that Gov. Kathy Hochul will put forth an Adaptive Clothing Grant Program through the state's Fashion Innovation Center to advance adaptive fashion for people with disabilities.

People with Disabilities in the Spotlight

HVS high school sweethearts Kort and Murray supported each other at their respective fashion shows, but Murray had her eyes set on a bolder mission— breaking into mainstream fashion.

Still deciding her future, Murray switched career paths from teaching to marketing and becoming a fashion designer while at Hostos Community College because growing up, she didn't see many people like her who use a wheelchair and are represented in fashion. The 27-year-old dedicated her time to building her own disability-inclusive clothing brand.

Making a fist in the shower just days after coming off a shoulder injury, Murray was feeling proud about her recovery process. She was making progress and improving her muscle strength back up and of course she had to ''flex it in front of the mirror,'' she said. That day, Flex My Ability clothing brand was created to show that anyone can persevere.

This year's New York Fashion Week gave Murray the opportunity to build on her innovative fashion statement when she debuted her designs at the Bronx's La Bodega Lux Loft Fashion Show on Sept. 13. She was the only disabled designer but that didn't intimidate her.

Leading the models down the runway from her chair with hand signals, Murray ruled the show for 15 minutes, receiving a standing ovation for her collection that included hoodies, T-shirts and black shorts with the abbreviation ''FMA.'' One of the models Murray brought with her, who wore black shorts with red handicap logos on both rear pockets, was deaf. Now that's disability inclusion.

''Being part of a show that wasn't specifically for people with disabilities was important to me because I believe we should be included in mainstream fashion too. We shouldn't only be seen in disability-specific spaces,'' she told *Able News*.

Model Eman Rimawi-Doster battled through last-minute illnesses to make it to The Model Experience show in Brooklyn because she felt the need to convince people that she is worth investing in as a model, she told *Able News*. She represented designer One World Peace Co. by wearing a black, baggy t-shirt he gifted her.

With the t-shirt tucked into her white shorts, she danced and struck poses with conviction, allowing her to freely show off her disability—a double amputee with a crutch.

''There needs to be more people with all kinds of disabilities in these shows,'' she said. ''We spend money. We like clothes and fashion. We are beautiful. Why not include us?''

For more coverage of NYFW, please see AbleNews.com

A Fall Guide to Accessible Equipment for the Home

By Ron Lyons Jr.

Autumn is the perfect season to consider accessible amenities for the home.

Fall is upon us, and that means much more than leaves falling, sweater weather, and pumpkin spice drinks from Starbucks. Let's spruce up our home with some accessories to ease everyday living for people with disabilities.

This is a comprehensive list of accessibility accessories for every room in the house. In some way, shape or form something from this list is made to improve safety, make daily tasks become simplified and provide a little more independence. Additional research is always needed to see what works best for the recipient. What may work well for one doesn't work well for everyone. As always, check before finalizing a purchase on any product. Prices are subject to change so make sure you have the most up to date information.

Amazon Echo Show: Unless you've been living under a rock chances are you've seen or been around someone who has an Alexa device. With the Echo Show you'll be able to stream media, order food and control your electronics in your home all with simple voice commands or setting up routine timers. For people with disabilities this eases the strain of doing everyday tasks. There's even a kids' version. This item can be bought from Amazon for $250 or retail stores.

TOTO Washlet KS6 Electronic Bidet Toilet Seat: When it comes to bathroom hygiene for individuals with disabilities, whether you have assistance or doing it independently it's a challenge. Having a bidet can make cleaning ones' self a little bit easier. This bidet has the ability to spray warm water around your private areas, and bottom making cleaning more accessible. Additionally, using less toilet paper with a remote to control spray functionality. The bidet can be purchased here from one of TOTO's authorized retailers.

Heat and Massage Dual Lift Recliner: Bed sores are a cautionary tale for everyone, but especially those with limited leg mobility. Recliners have advanced far beyond the use of just sitting in front of a television; they've become a medical necessity for some. With this recliner, it's able to tilt forward to assist you when attempting to stand up. Also, if you have sensitive bones, aches, or pains, the recliner is also able to massage and heat the waist, thighs, legs, and back. This recliner retails at $529.99 from Wayfair. There is also a storage compartment on the outside, just in case you want to watch TV.

Uccello Electric Safety Kettle: For those of us who like to start their morning with something other than coffee, more along the lines of tea, the Uccello Electric Kettle is a safeguard allowing you to heat up and then gently pour water into your cup without holding the kettle. Keeping you out of harm's way by simply just tilting the kettle over into your cup. It's available for purchase on Amazon for $113.50.

Toilet To-Tub Sliding Transfer Bench: Do you need help with the toilet? How about the shower? Maybe both? Continuing with the theme of bathroom hygiene, this multipurpose bathroom seat can help you safely with a seat belt get on the toilet and simultaneously transfer you to the bathtub. The aluminum seat provides both safety and comfort for the user. This two-in-one transfer bench can be purchased from its distributor, Eagles Health Supplies, on their site for $372 or at Amazon.

LapStacker Flex: Wheelchair users at one point in their lives have struggled to carry something in their lap, from something as small as a water bottle or phone to something as big as their laundry basket. The people over at Adaptdefy have found a solution for that with their flagship product, LapStacker Flex. It's a strap that's able to go over both manual and power wheelchairs, where you'll be able to carry anything in your lap. It's a retractable magnetic strap that will change the way you carry things for the price of $129, which can be purchased from their site here for manual wheelchair users. For power wheelchair purchase the LapStackerXD model here.

Users can control the Echo Show with voice commands.

Voters Back Workplace Inclusion, Urge Action to Preserve Employment Opportunities

Continued from page 2

for individuals with disabilities, we are a ready-made network that's ready to go.''

Spectrum Designs is a full-service brand and merchandise business now operating out of three locations, said Patrick Bardsley, Co-Founder & CEO of Spectrum Designs. Today, more than 70% of the 100-person workforce is made up of individuals who are neurodiverse and on the autism spectrum.

Disability employment is ''workforce development, it's economic development,'' Bardsley said. ''It's smart investment in communities, businesses, and families. And when people with disabilities gain meaningful employment, everyone benefits.''

In addition, recent research conducted by the Rockefeller Institute of Government found that many New Yorkers with disabilities want to work but worry about losing critical public and healthcare benefits, complicated eligibility requirements, and a lack of support.

In its report, *Stepping Away From the Benefits Cliff: Policy Strategies to Support Employment for People with Disabilities in New York State*, the Institute found that improving employment opportunities for people with disabilities would strengthen the state's workforce and economy while improving the quality of life for thousands of New Yorkers.

A separate Rockefeller Institute analysis found that nonprofit disability service providers generated more than $15.6 billion in economic output across New York in 2023, supported more than 194,000 jobs, and produced approximately $2.4 billion in state and federal tax revenue.

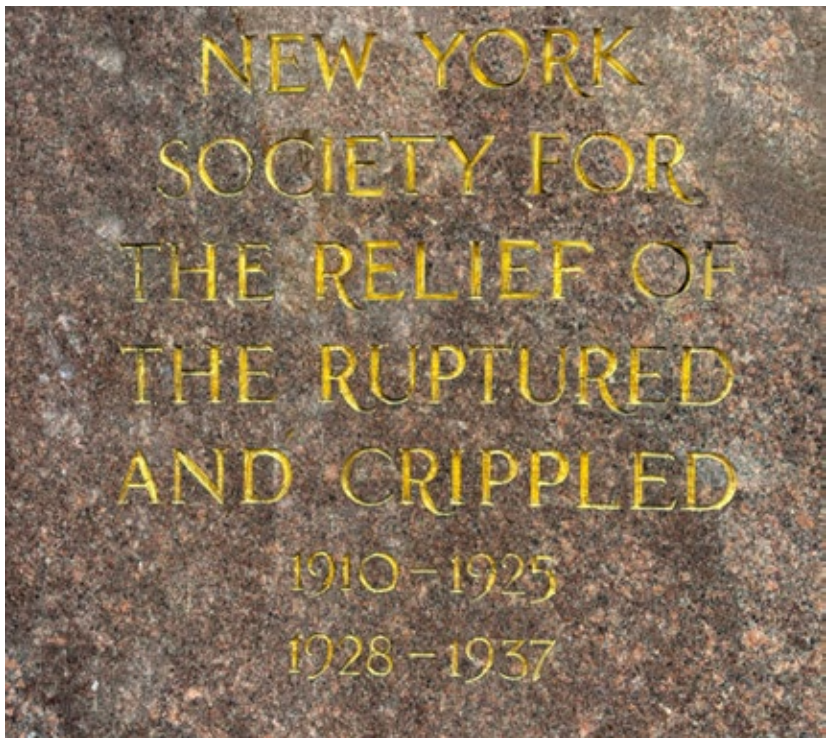
Spectrum Board member John Beyer owns Men on the Move Moving and Storage and contracts with Spectrum for T-shirts, hats and other items. His son, Gregory, has worked for Spectrum for 15 years.

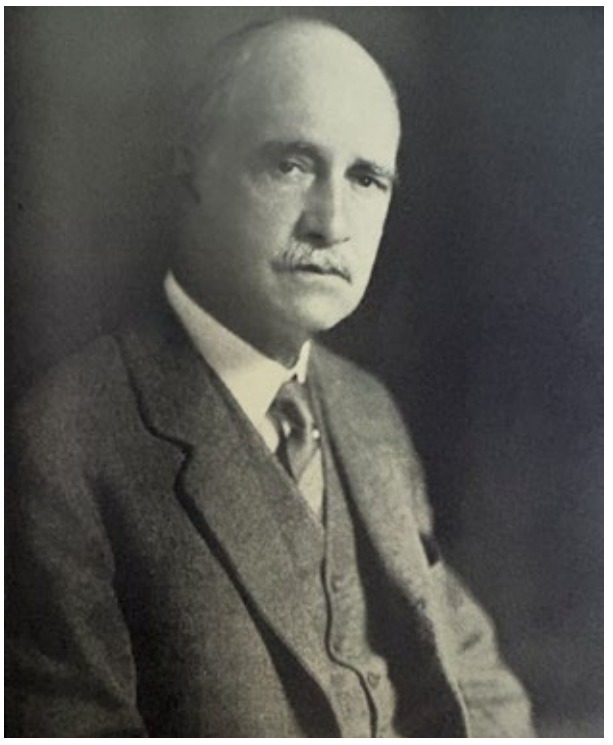
''What's happening here is just the beginning… and that needs to be supported,'' he said.

Disability History

The William Church Osborn Memorial

by Warren Shaw





Left: The Osborn Memorial's commemoration to the New York Society for the Relief of the Ruptured and Crippled. Photo credit: Warren Shaw. Right: William Church Osborn.

On an inconspicuous spot just north of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, there stands a memorial that includes, uniquely, a salute to an organization that changed the world for people with mobility disabilities. The memorial honors a patrician New Yorker who devoted much of his life to good works. Highly respected in life but forgotten today, William Church Osborn received in death a public monument of a kind that was already slipping into the past when it first opened in 1953.

William Church Osborn settled in New York City after graduating Harvard Law in 1889, at the age of 26. He moved in the highest of social circles and was clearly a man eager to make an impact. Osborn sought political office and ran or served on the boards of railroad companies, museums, and charities. He served as president or chairman of the board of the Children's Aid Society for fifty years, and for forty-five years at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

''Few men,'' *The New York Times* put it, ''made so rich and varied a contribution to their community… he brought vitality, intelligence and a deep sense of humanity to every civic task he undertook… integrity was implicit in thought, word and action.''

After Osborn's death in 1951 at age 88, his lifelong support of children and the visual arts led to a successful drive for a memorial, next to the museum that he'd led for decades. The memorial was placed at the entrance to a new playground and featured a stunning pair of entry gates depicting scenes from Aesop's Fables. The gates were designed by Paul Manship, the sculptor whose best-known work is the enormous statue of Prometheus at the Rockefeller Center skating rink.

Flanking the Manship gates are a pair of granite pylons, designed by architect Aymar Embury II, which recite highlights from Osborn's career. And that's where the connection to disability comes in.

Among his many accomplishments, Osborn had a nearly half-century role at the resoundingly titled New York Society for the Relief of the Ruptured and Crippled, the nation's first organization devoted to improving the lives of people with orthopedic or mobility disabilities. Make no mistake—Ruptured and Crippled was at the medical forefront for orthopedic disability, right from the beginning. Now known as the Hospital for Special Surgery, it continues to this day, and Osborn was a principal figure in developing its second hospital building, which opened in 1912 at 42nd Street and Second Avenue. The dates of Osborn's two stints as President are carved into the right pylon of the memorial.

Every once in a while, people ask me about the Society for the Ruptured and Crippled, and almost invariably the question is prompted by the Osborn pylon. But if you've never noticed it, don't feel too badly, because unless you go looking for the Osborn memorial, you won't find it. These sorts of memorials to elite New Yorkers were already going out of fashion by 1953, and the style of the postwar period wasn't really sympathetic to that kind of work. So, the granite pylons at Osborn, for example, were polished to a Modernistic, mirror-like shine which makes the text challenging to read (or to photograph). And although the Manship gates are remarkable pieces of public art, they are necessarily open during the day, so they sit edge-on, at right angles to the sidewalk, hard to spot.

Tucked into the path of a playground, practically in the shadows of the Metropolitan Museum, the Osborn memorial is a time capsule and artwork which stands without drawing notice from the museumgoers, the tourists or the sidewalk vendors (still less the playgrounders themselves). But it's one of those small miracles of life in our heedless City—and the only place a passer-by can bump into a commemoration to the New York Society for the Relief of the Ruptured and Crippled.

Photographs by Warren Shaw. DHNYC thanks Shasuna Lin for her assistance with photo production.

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

ALMA RANGEL GARDENS

Waiting list has been re-opened and applications are now available for ALMA RANGEL GARDENS, a 88-unit HUD-subsidized building for elderly over 62 years old, with limited income, located at 55 West137th Street, in Manhattan. Eligibility will be based on Section 8 guidelines and HUD regulations.

Interested persons may obtain an application by calling Alma Rangel Gardens at 917-507-1108 or by writing to:

ALMA RANGEL GARDENS
Management Office
55 West 137th Street
New York, NY 10037

EQUAL HOUSING OPPORTUNITY

Completed applications must be sent by regular mail to the P.O. Box indicated on the application. Duplicate applications will be dropped to the bottom of the list. Completed applications should be received by the deadline date of December 10th, 2026

Halloween for All

Adapting Spooky Season Traditions

By Kieran O'Brien Kern

Stephanie Debes, of The Makeup on Wheels Foundation, applies makeup to create a scary look. Photo courtesy: Stephanie Debes.

Happy fall, y'all! Sweater weather is here, leaves are crunching under our wheels and feet, and pumpkins, PSLs, costumes, and candy are back in season. Of course, making the most of fall can take a little creativity and planning when you're accommodating a range of needs.

Few things say Halloween like a jack-o'-lantern glowing on the porch or peeking from a window. And pumpkin decorating can be adapted for different strength, dexterity, and sensory needs. According to MobilityWorks, tools with large handles or nonslip grips can make carving easier, while powered knives offer steady pressure for anyone who finds that difficult to maintain. Not into carving? No problem. Real or foam pumpkins can be painted, stenciled, covered in stickers, or dressed up with push-in decorations such as googly eyes and foam shapes for a fun 3D effect. Finish the look with a battery-powered tea light, a safer alternative to a candle.

One of the best parts of Halloween is getting to become someone—or something—completely different for a day. Costume shopping used to be difficult at best, but today retailers from Amazon to Target offer inclusive and adaptive options, from princesses to Pikachu. So, what makes a costume adaptive? According to Custom Dance Costume, adaptive design doesn't assume one body type or range of motion. Instead, it makes room for different movements, postures, and sensory needs. Wheelchair-friendly costumes are designed for seated wear, often with longer front hems and reinforced seats. Other helpful details include soft, seamless, tag-free fabrics; magnetic or Velcro closures; and fasteners that are easier to manage. Many options also accommodate limb differences, ports, GI tubes, and a wide range of sizes.

And how do you complete the transformation? With makeup, of course. Licensed aesthetician Stephanie Debes, a wheelchair user and founder of the State Island-based nonprofit Makeup on Wheels, loves how makeup lets people express themselves: "It's all about creating art that's formed to you and what you want to create."

Debes applies makeup with her right hand and two fingers on her left hand, which she calls her "Lucky Fin." She looks for products that work with her functionality, including liquid foundations with push buttons, pop-up dispensers, or easy-to-squeeze packaging; lipsticks with magnetic caps; and blush brushes with thicker, easier-to-grip handles. Two essentials in her kit are a versatile blending brush—her "best friend" brush—for foundation, blush, bronzer, or highlighter, and palettes that keep her products together.

For Halloween, she recommends thinking beyond a product's usual purpose. Eyeshadow, for example, can move from lids to cheeks or lips for a ghostly, otherworldly effect. There's no single adaptive technique that works for every kind of functionality, so start by trying different tools and products to discover what feels comfortable in your hand and on your face.

If a scenic hayride and a picture-perfect pumpkin sound like your kind of autumn outing, Alstede Farms in Chester, New Jersey, offers ADA-compliant hay wagon rides every weekend from late May through October. The wagon accommodates two wheelchair users, with extra seating for family and friends, and some rides include audio descriptions for blind and visually impaired guests. Even better, it follows the same scenic route as the farm's regular rides and provides access to all pick-your-own activities. Planning a weekday visit? Call 908-528-8823 at least 48 hours ahead to arrange a ride.

There's no one right way to celebrate Halloween. If getting to the front door to hand out candy or allergy-friendly treats isn't practical, set up a table in the driveway and enjoy the parade of trick-or-treaters from there. Want to collect treats but skip the stairs, long walkways, or extra energy demands? A trunk-or-treat can be a great option; these events are usually held in parking lots, with fewer physical barriers between stops. And if a cozy night in sounds better, invite a few friends over, grab the snacks, and a playlist of festive films including classics such as *Young Frankenstein*, *Hot Fuzz*, or, naturally, *Halloween*.

Making the most of fall can take a little creativity and planning when you're accommodating a range of needs.

Classified Ads

REPAIRS

Smithy's
Stair lift and wheelchair repairs.
516-406-5937

HAIRCUTTING

Haircutting
Haircutting in your home.
917-363-6834

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Place Your Recruitment Ad Here!
For rates visit: Ablenews.com/advertise/
Call: Wendy Kates at 516-465-1587

Connect, Learn, and Advocate

Disabled In Action Community Meeting

Oct. 4: 1:30 pm to 4:00 pm
(In-person)

DIA is a civil rights organization committed to ending discrimination against people with disabilities – all disabilities. All are welcome. The meeting takes place at Positive Exposure Gallery, 83 Maiden Lane, Manhattan. Positive Exposure is wheelchair accessible, including the restrooms. If you need a reasonable accommodation such as American Sign Language interpretation or live captioning, please email us at info@disabledinaction.org or call us at 646-504-4342 and leave a message with a callback number at least 10 days before the meeting.

Fall Fest

A Celebration of Inclusion, Accessibility, and Community
October 4: Noon to 3:00 pm
(In-person)

Join the Kessler Foundation for Fall Fest at the Kessler Campus, 1199 Pleasant Valley Way, West Orange, NJ.

Fall Fest, a free, family-friendly celebration that brings together people with disabilities, caregivers, researchers, and our community for an afternoon of fun, connection, and purpose, all in support of disability and rehabilitation research.

See here for more information.

Talent Connection Job Expo

October 5: 9:30 am to 1:00 pm
(In-person)

The Town of Oyster Bay will host a free 2026 Talent Connection Job Expo, connecting Long Island employers with job seekers of all abilities. Attendees can meet recruiters from a range of industries, explore employment opportunities, and discover career pathways in an inclusive, supportive environment.

The event will be held at the Town of Oyster Bay Ice Skating Center, 1001 Stewart Avenue, Bethpage. Partners include FREE, ACLD, the Suffolk County Department of Labor, Licensing & Consumer Affairs, and ACCES-VR.

Visit here for more information or contact Anita Dowd at adowd@familyres.org or Jeanie Shelton at sheltonj@acld.org.

Disability Pride NYC Parade

October 18: 10:00 am to 3:00 pm
(In-person)

Join Disability Pride NYC for the 2026 Disability Pride NYC Parade, with the route leading from Madison Square Park to Union Square Park.

The Parade is a free, community-centered celebration of disability pride and inclusion. This year's theme is "Together We Build" and the event celebrates the 50th anniversary of the historic 504 Sit-in.

The Parade is presented by Disability Pride NYC, with the New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities as a co-sponsor. Brief opening remarks will be livestreamed with CART, ASL interpretation, and audio description at www.disabilityunite.org.

Participants can march, table, and/or volunteer, while spectators are welcome to attend without registering. The event will also feature a Disability Pride Block Party at Union Square. The Parade is accessible, with wheelchair-accessible portable restrooms available at both the start and end of the route and water available at Union Square.

Participants and those who want to table must register in advance.

Demystifying Disability: Celebration and Conversation

October 24: 4:00 pm to 6:30 pm
(In-person)

Join author, former *Able News* editor and disability rights activist Emily Ladau for a free event in celebration of the disability community.

Following the recent release of the updated edition of her acclaimed book, *Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to be an Ally*, Ladau will be in conversation with Xian Horn, Founder of Give Beauty Wings, to discuss how to continue to meet people where they are in their journeys of learning about disability, while also honoring needs for self-care.

ASL interpreting and CART will be provided. There will be light bites and beverages. The event will be held at Positive Exposure, 83 Maiden Lane, Manhattan.

Should you have any additional accessibility needs, reach out to events@positiveexposure.org.

College is Possible: Non-Diploma Credential Programs

October 27: 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm
(Virtual)

Educational programs on college campuses for students with developmental and/or intellectual disabilities who use Alternate Assessment and will leave high school with a non-diploma credential. Families are welcome. This free event hosted by IncludeNYC features a panel of experts and a Q and A session with representatives from CUNY Unlimited, Melissa Riggio Higher Education Program, THINK College, ACCES-VR, student self-advocates, and more!

Language: English with Spanish interpretation. **Closed captioning will be offered through Zoom's captioning feature in multiple languages.**

Register here or for more information or to register by phone, call 212-677-4650 x21.

State Sen. Pete Harckham joins advocates at a press conference hosted by CP Unlimited in Westchester where he urged Gov. Kathy Hochul to sign the Traveling with Dignity Act. Photo credit: CP Unlimited.

Officials Call for Support of Traveling with Dignity Act

State lawmakers, disability advocates, caregivers, and individuals with disabilities urged passage of the Traveling with Dignity Act at a press conference in Westchester in August.

Hosted by CP Unlimited, a New York nonprofit supporting individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the discussion focused on legislation that would require height-adjustable adult changing tables in large public venues and rest stops across the state.

Officials at the event urged Gov. Kathy Hochul to sign the legislation.

"What this will do is open our public building and public facilities… to have the appropriate facilities," said State Sen. Pete Harckham, in a livestream of the event. "This is a human rights issue. … this is about dignity. This is about access."

Families face significant challenges when public restrooms lack appropriate changing facilities. Adult changing tables can determine whether people with significant disabilities are able to participate in everyday public life, officials said.

"This bill that has now passed both chambers has actually been a long time in coming," state Assemblymember Chris Burdick said in the livestream. "This would have a far-reaching impact."

He added that, if passed, New York "would become a leader in the area of providing for adult changing stations throughout the state – not just in government buildings but in private venues with a capacity of 2,500 or more."

Joie Tyrrell contributed to this report.

The Discover Long Island team poses with Goliath during their volunteer day at Pal-O-Mine Equestrian in Islandia. Photo courtesy: Pal-O-Mine Equestrian.

Pal-O-Mine Equestrian, Discover Long Island Announce New Partnership and Promote Accessible Experiences

Pal-O-Mine Equestrian, an Islandia nonprofit that provides equine-assisted therapeutic programs in the heart of Suffolk County, recently welcomed a team of 14 volunteers from Discover Long Island, the region's only accredited destination marketing organization, for a hands-on day of service and connection as part of Pal-O-Mine's Corporate Volunteer Engagement Program. The visit also marked the launch of a new partnership between the two organizations, with Discover Long Island joining Pal-O-Mine in promoting fully accessible, nature-based experiences on the organization's 13-acre farm in Islandia, just minutes off Exit 58 of the Long Island Expressway.

"We're thrilled to welcome Discover Long Island into the Pal-O-Mine family as a partner," said Lisa A. Gatti, Founder & CEO of Pal-O-Mine, which provides programs for children and adults with disabilities, veterans, first responders, people struggling with mental health challenges, at-risk youth, cancer survivors, individuals with Alzheimer's and many others. "Their team spent the day working alongside our clients in our therapeutic garden, in the barn and with our horses, taking with them a real understanding of what we do here every day."

The Discover Long Island team spent the day immersed in Pal-O-Mine's programs, including J-STEP, the Job Security Through Equine Partnership vocational initiative. The volunteers split their time between hands-on garden work and beading repurposed horseshoes into beautiful wind chimes. A visit to the farm's flock of chickens, including a batch of baby chicks, proved to be a highlight of the day, as was a meet-and-greet with Goliath, one of Pal-O-Mine's beloved horses.

"Creating a destination that welcomes visitors of all abilities starts with understanding the experiences, needs and opportunities within our own community," Sharon Wyman, President & CEO of Discover Long Island, said in a statement.

Disability Voting Rights Focuses on Inclusion at the Ballot Box

Continued from page 1

paper ballots. It includes audio and tactile interfaces, adjustable screen size and contrast, headphones, paddles and Sip-N-Puff compatibility. Nassau is listed by the state as a Clear Ballot county.

Asher said Nassau plans to have a ClearMark in every polling location for both early voting and Election Day.

Poll workers are trained to assist voters, Asher said. If a ballot-marking device breaks, bipartisan poll workers can read the ballot to a voter upon request without directing the voter toward a particular candidate or choice. Voters can also bring their own assistant, who must agree not to influence the voter's decisions.

The state Board of Elections similarly says poll workers are trained to treat voters with dignity, communicate effectively, and offer assistance for access needs. Voters with print disabilities can also apply for an accessible ballot that can be completed using accessible features at home.

For Wier, however, having policies and equipment is only part of the solution. The equipment must work, polling places must be accessible and poll workers need to know how to help.

CIDNY conducts polling-site accessibility surveys during elections, collecting information about barriers encountered and sharing reports with government and election officials.

Wier said the continued need for those surveys raises a larger question about how quickly problems are being fixed.

"There's a lot more that needs to be done," she said.

For her, the goal is simple: a voter with a disability should not have to depend on someone else to make their voice heard.

And as Wier put it, "anyone can be disabled one day."

Eliana Park 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.

Joie Tyrrell contributed to this report.

Voting Resources:

League of Women Voters NYC
Lwvnyc.org

Board of Elections (NYC)
Vote.NYC

Board of Elections (Nassau County)
https://www.nassaucountyny.gov/566/Board-of-Elections

Board of Elections (Suffolk County)
https://suffolkcountyny.gov/Departments/BOE

NY Department of Motor Vehicles
Dmv.ny.gov

Reel Talk

From Humbling Discovery to Historic Opportunity

By Lawrence Carter-Long

Left: Lawrence Carter-Long. Right: The title card from the 1920's era movie, *The Flying Ace*, that featured amputee actor and stunt performer Steve "Peg" Reynolds. Photo courtesy: Library of Congress.

It started with an embarrassing realization.

"How did I not know about this?"

I'd built a career of sorts introducing audiences to obscure but notable films about disabled people and disability communities. Spearheaded Turner Classic Movies' first disability film showcase with Inclusion in the Arts in 2012. Four showcases later, I'd introduced films like *Titicut Follies*, *El Cochecito*, and *The Crippled Masters* to new audiences. And spotlighted *Inside Moves*, Harold Russell's second feature, a whopping 34 years after *The Best Years of Our Lives*.

Sometimes, those introductions took on a life of their own. Screening *The Crippled Masters* on TCM led to Film Masters giving it a 2K restoration. I even wrote the liner notes. A film I'd watched on a copy of a copy of a VHS dub was getting a fresh start. Fifteen-year-old me would have been floored.

Finding what had fallen through film history's gaps had practically become a second job. One I enjoyed and prided myself on.

History, however, had some humbling homework in store.

While preparing a July 2024 Disability Pride Month program with my dear friend, filmmaker Jim LeBrecht, and the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures team, a colleague brought *The Flying Ace* to our attention. A 1926 silent adventure with an all-Black cast, featuring amputee actor and stunt performer Steve "Peg" Reynolds.

Say wha–?

The Library of Congress had preserved it. I found a copy. There was Reynolds, lighting up the silver screen, stealing scene after scene. Nearly a century ago. Somehow, we'd missed it.

I'd finished watching, but the film wasn't done with me.

Planning my July 2025 TCM showcase, my first for ReelAbilities, I discovered most peers hadn't heard of it either.

Now a different question nagged. What were we going to do about it?

Behold! An opportunity!

In December 2025, I sent the email equivalent of a cold call to Dr. Novotny Lawrence, director of Indiana University's Black Film Center & Archive.

"Great name!" I began. Somebody had to say it.

"I'm writing because I have an idea," I continued. "It isn't fully formed yet, but it won't leave me alone either. I've learned to listen when those things beckon."

What beckoned was a chance to spotlight disability representation and Black film history in the same frame. BFCA brought scholarship and the Richard E. Norman and Race Filmmaking Collection.

Mostly, I brought questions.

Then we compared notes.

A gap in my knowledge became a collaboration. Our first pillar: Partnership.

Those conversations grew into ReelAbilities Rediscover. Cover something and you can hide it. Add a little "dis" and suddenly you're revealing something new, unknown, or ignored. Funny what a difference those three letters can make. Especially when we give them something to do.

We'll pilot the idea October 7 at Indiana University Cinema in Bloomington. Others have screened *The Flying Ace*. We began by comparing notes. Now, thanks to the Filomen M. D'Agostino Greenberg Music School, we'll be hearing a few. The school's star pupil, Grammy-winning blind musician Matthew Whitaker, will create and perform a new, partially improvised live score with saxophonist and FMDG Executive Director Robert Derke.

Bridge Multimedia's audio description uses two distinct voices: One describing the action, another reading the original intertitles. Reynolds' movement, mischief, and ingenuity deserve a presentation where all can appreciate his stunts. ASL interpretation and live captions will accompany all conversations before and after the screening.

That brings us to our second pillar: Presentation. If the movie is the anchor, the presentation is how we bring everyone onboard. Each partner helps shape the experience by bringing something unique to both the process and the event born from it. Together, we're building something none of us could do alone.

A nation's 250th birthday is a good time to ask who is in the picture. Our collaboration with the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage as part of America 250, brings disability culture, Black film history, and musical traditions into the same frame. Turning a footnote into a close-up. Reynolds was there all along. The rest of us are still catching up. Perhaps reintroducing him will also help us explore other histories we didn't know we shared.

Wise folks call that perspective.

There's a certain poetry in piloting *ReelAbilities Rediscover with The Flying Ace*. A century-old film, a new venture, and lessons we can only learn midflight. Homework complete. Now comes the education.

Daunting? Sure. But what began with "How did I not know about this?" has become "What can we discover together?"

Sometimes the best trips include unknown destinations and unexpected detours.

Lawrence Carter-Long writes about words, meaning, and movies at the intersection of inspiration and perspiration. He is Director of Engagement for ReelAbilities International, which presents the annual ReelAbilities Film Festival and uses film year-round to advance disability inclusion, access, and cultural change on screen and off.

Inclusive Oral Health

We Should Stop Asking Patients to Adapt to Dental Care

By Dr. Rita Bilello, Clinical Director, NYU Dentistry Oral Health Center for People with Disabilities

Accessibility is a top priority at the NYU Dentistry Oral Health Center for People with Disabilities (OHCPD) where the environment is designed to put patients at ease. Photo credit: Rick Guidotti, Positive Exposure.

What if we stopped expecting people with disabilities to adapt to dental care, and instead designed dental care to meet their needs?

Securing a dental appointment for people with disabilities does not guarantee inclusive care. A recent community oral health survey revealed this unfair reality: Even when patients with disabilities manage to get into a dental clinic, the environment is rarely customized to their needs.

I am a dentist who has dedicated my career to serving people with disabilities. Not surprisingly, my patients' needs are diverse. Some need a weighted blanket to feel less anxious in the dental chair. Others need to remain in a wheelchair during their visits. Others only feel comfortable when we dim the overhead lights, muffle the sound of our instruments, or allow their caregiver to sit nearby. We're happy to provide these accommodations, but in the past, our patients have not been afforded this level of care.

I've been hearing these stories for decades, and it's beyond time for a change. I want dentists to stop asking patients to adapt to their offices. Instead, I want them to ask, *How can we adapt our offices to meet patients' diverse needs?*

This question has guided my career, and it was the driving force behind the creation of NYU Dentistry's Oral Health Center for People with Disabilities (OHCPD), the center I direct. At the NYU Dentistry OHCPD, accessibility rules. The environment is designed to put patients at ease, with oversized exam rooms that provide plenty of space for caregivers. There are reclining platforms that allow people to receive dental care without leaving their wheelchairs. A multisensory room with soothing music, adjustable lighting, and calming images on the walls helps reduce patient anxiety prior to treatment. A bariatric dental chair is available for those who need it. Most importantly, the entire center team — staff as well as providers — is trained to ensure that people with disabilities and complex medical conditions know we don't just care about their dental health; we also care about them as people.

> **"How can we adapt our (dental) offices to meet patients' diverse needs?"**

What We've Learned

We recently participated in a survey of The Viscardi Center's community to learn about their dental care experiences. Patients, families, and caregivers identified common barriers to accessing care: physical and sensory challenges, long waits for appointments, and poorly trained staff. But the survey also revealed some less predictable findings:

1. **The Viscardi Center community values dental care.** Even though half of the survey participants said it was somewhat or very difficult to get care, two-thirds of them receive regular dental checkups, and they are willing to travel for care that meets their needs.
2. **Healthcare providers remain the primary source of dental information and support for the community.** Health professionals — not Google, social media, or AI — were the most trusted source by far. Three quarters of patients and their caregivers turn to dentists, doctors, and therapists for advice, with friends and family a distant second.
3. **The desire for special care dentistry is even greater than we realized.** The NYU Dentistry OHCPD has served thousands of patients since opening our doors in 2019, yet most survey respondents had never heard of us. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. Despite dissatisfaction with their current care, many patients are so conditioned to adapting to conventional dentistry that they don't even know to look for dentists who are willing to accommodate their needs.

A Roadmap for Change

The survey findings prompted us to reconsider what we mean by access. Accessible spaces, providers who understand patients' diverse needs, an environment that allows people with disabilities to receive care with dignity — these are essential to the access equation, but they are not enough. If patients cannot find us or other dental care that works for them, access remains out of reach.

The findings also give us a roadmap for increasing access to special care dentistry. The people we serve have told us what they want and what stands in their way. Now the profession has to decide whether those barriers are problems patients must overcome, or problems we are willing to address by redesigning care.

We're proud of the environment we've created at the NYU Dentistry OHCPD, but one dental office won't change the care paradigm for people with disabilities. That requires another critical facet of our center's mission: preparing the next generation of dentists to provide care that accommodates all the needs of people with disabilities. Then we can finally stop asking patients to adapt to dentistry's limitations, and instead, provide truly accessible care.

Dr. Rita Bilello, Clinical Director, NYU Dentistry Oral Health Center for People with Disabilities (OHCPD). Photo credit: NYU Dentistry.

This October, during National Dental Hygiene Month, guest contributor Dr. Rita Bilello, Clinical Director of the NYU Dentistry Oral Health Center for People with Disabilities, breaks down the frustrating disconnect between dental care and accessibility. Drawing on her years of clinical experience, she explains what patients and families want—and how clinics like hers are actively training the next generation of dentists to provide it.

October is National Dental Hygiene Month

COMMENTARY AND OPINIONS

Civics Leagues Conversation

A Job Is Not Economic Justice

By Marcus D. Johnson, Disability Justice Activist, Co-leader, Civics League for Disability Rights

Marcus D. Johnson

October continues to perplex me.

Every year, National Disability Employment Awareness Month arrives with familiar language about inclusion, opportunity, and celebrating the contributions of people with disabilities in the workforce. Those contributions deserve recognition. But after more than eight decades of formally recognizing our capacity to work, what exactly are we still celebrating?

The observance began in 1945 as National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week. A week became a month. Disability rights became civil rights. The Americans with Disabilities Act became law. An entire infrastructure of vocational rehabilitation agencies, workforce programs, and nonprofit organizations grew up around helping people with disabilities work.

Yet the economic disparity remains. The question has never been whether people with disabilities can work. We can, we do, and we have. The question is whether the institutions built to facilitate our employment have produced anything approaching economic equality.

The numbers demand that question. In 2025, only 38.1 percent of working-age people with disabilities were employed, compared with 74.8% of people without disabilities. Our unemployment rate was 8.8%, more than double the 4.1% rate for people without disabilities. Among 17.4 million working-age Americans with disabilities, that gap has held for years, through funding increases, awareness campaigns, and program expansions.

The federal Vocational Rehabilitation State Grants program is the largest dedicated public investment in disability employment, distributing more than $4 billion annually to state agencies. In 2023, more than 115,000 people with disabilities obtained competitive integrated employment through VR, most with significant disabilities. These are real outcomes. But billions invested and nearly a million people served annually should not still leave a 36-point employment gap untouched. Individual placements can succeed while the underlying disparity remains structurally enormous.

> **"October should become more than awareness. After 81 years, awareness is an extraordinarily low bar."**

The Outlook in New York

New York City is an uncomfortable case study. A 2024 analysis by the city Comptroller found that the employment rate of people with disabilities was half that of nondisabled New Yorkers. A follow-up review released in July 2026 shows what that gap looks like on the ground: NYC: ATWORK, the city's flagship disability employment program, served 1,268 people and helped 99 obtain jobs over two years—less than 4% of the roughly 35,350 New Yorkers with disabilities reportedly seeking work. This is not an indictment of ATWORK's six staff members confronting an enormous problem. City officials testified the program needs at least seven more just to meet existing demand. It is an indictment of what the city has decided constitutes sufficient investment.

Even when placement happens, the job itself often reproduces the hierarchy. People with disabilities are overrepresented in service, sales, and office occupations, and underrepresented in management: 37.5% of us work in management, professional, and related occupations, compared with 43.9% of workers without disabilities. We are also nearly twice as likely to work part time, which quietly limits benefits, income, and advancement even for someone technically counted as "employed."

At the furthest edge of this hierarchy sits Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act, which still allows employers to pay disabled workers less than minimum wage. As of November 2024, nearly 40,000 people with disabilities were working under 14(c) certificates, according to the Government Accountability Office, averaging $4.15 an hour; more than half earned less than $3.50. A federal proposal to phase out the certificates was withdrawn in 2025. This is not a relic. It is current law, and it contradicts everything October claims to stand for. So when we announce that another person with a disability has been "placed," I want to know more. What are they earning? Do they have benefits? Is the job full-time? Is there a path to promotion? Five years later, are they supervising anyone, directing a budget, or sitting at the table where institutional decisions are made?

A job is not automatically economic justice.

Lacking in Representation

That distinction gets more uncomfortable when the organizations in question are the ones built to serve us. In February, I wrote in *Able News* about the hierarchy operating inside our own institutions. Employment data confirms it operates at the top as well. Candid research on the nonprofit sector found that 10% of nonprofits have a CEO with a disability—a share that drops to 3% among the largest organizations, even as it holds at 20% among the smallest. Representation shrinks exactly where power concentrates. If an organization receives money to address disability unemployment and publishes its placement numbers, it should also tell us how many people with disabilities it employs, what they earn, and how many hold executive authority. Otherwise, institutions can prosper by addressing disability unemployment without ever being required to eliminate disability economic inequality.

October should become more than awareness. After 81 years, awareness is an extraordinarily low bar.

Measure wages. Measure benefits. Measure hours. Measure promotions. Measure leadership. Fund programs like ATWORK at a level that matches the population they exist to serve, not the level a budget office finds convenient. End the subminimum wage. And require every organization that speaks the language of disability employment to report the economic outcomes of the people it claims to serve.

Celebrate us working. Absolutely.

But do not confuse our participation with our liberation.

Limiting choices limits existence.

Marcus D. Johnson, CRC-CVE, LMHC, is a disability justice activist with more than two decades of experience advancing disability justice, disability-competent healthcare, and community inclusion. He is co-leader of the Civics League for Disability Rights and a longtime contributor to Able News, writing from lived experience of significant physical disability at the intersection of disability, policy, and systems change.

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month

We're proud to share news for, by, and about people with disabilities. As a registered digital reader, you'll receive *Able News* in your inbox each month. **Sign Up Today!**

Legal Lens

When Disabled Veterans Joined the Fight for Everyone

By James Weisman, Esq.

Terry Moakley. Photo credit: DisabilityHistoryNYC.com

The veterans' hospital in the Bronx is called the James J. Peters Veterans Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center. The building, opened during the Carter Administration, is also a VA spinal cord injury center. Jim Peters, the wheelchair-using Executive Director of Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association (EPVA), and my boss from 1979 until his untimely death in 2002 at age 57, was a champion of disabled veterans' rights but understood that the disabled veteran community needed to embrace the civilian disabled community to achieve social change.

Peters, of Gerritsen Beach, Brooklyn, and then Huntington Station, was a newly paralyzed veteran, living under horrific conditions in the old Kingsbridge VA Hospital in the Bronx. He and other paralyzed vets encouraged a 1970 LIFE magazine exposé of the neglect of Vietnam era vets with spinal cord injuries. Another paralyzed vet, Ron Kovic, of Massapequa wrote *Born on the Fourth of July*, a best-selling memoir, also revealing shockingly poor care and conditions including beds in hallways surrounded by open garbage cans, and rats running across the beds of quadriplegics.

A new, state-of-the-art hospital opened in 1980. Peters was also a Vice President of the Paralyzed Veterans Of America for 23 years. Under his leadership EPVA provided millions to the hospital for fellowships, equipment and its Spinal Cord Injury Research Center, but he was quite aware that enhancing the rights of people with disabilities depended on the representation and participation of all people with disabilities that stood to benefit. Before his death he began the transition from a veteran's organization to United Spinal Association, which now has over 60,000 members throughout the United States, mostly all of whom use wheelchairs.

"Terry Moakley rewrote NYC's Building Code, along with city and private architectural experts, and the city's code meets or exceeds ADA access standards and has for decades. Our bus system was the first in the US to become 100% accessible due to his leadership."

Peter Addesso, of Lynbrook, Silver Star winner for his heroic actions during the Tet Offensive's 1968 battle of Hue City depicted in the movie *Full Metal Jacket*, was the EPVA Board Chair who presided over the transition. EPVA's all disabled veteran board of directors, guided by Addesso, brought civilian wheelchair users onto the new United Spinal Association's Board and into its leadership ranks.

Peters' outreach to the disability community was fostered by EPVA's founding board members. In 1946 Bob Moss, of Roslyn Heights, was an original incorporator of EPVA but almost simultaneously formed the National Paraplegia Foundation, a non-veteran spinal cord injury organization. That became the National Spinal Cord Injury Association which later merged with United Spinal Association. Moss led demonstrations for accessible housing at Grand Central Station in the late 1940s and stayed on the EPVA board for almost 40 years.

When I came to EPVA as an attorney, in 1979, many World War II and Korea veterans, including Bob Moss, were still on the board of directors. I was recruited by Peters and quadriplegic Marine Corps veteran, Terry Moakley, who grew up in Hicksville. Peters and Moakley wanted to sue New York City and its transit system. A graduate of Chaminade High school, St. John's University, with a master's degree in comparative literature from Hofstra University, Moakley was EPVA's liaison to the disability community. He and I recruited post-polio wheelchair user and disability advocate Denise Figueroa, and we sued MTA in 1979. Figueroa, a nonveteran, Jim Peters, and Terry Moakley were the plaintiffs in the case.

Terry Moakley, who passed away twelve years ago, was smart, funny and genuine. The Transit Workers Union loved him even as the MTA Board, opposing accessibility, said the union would want higher wages for bus drivers because they would have to operate lifts, a new job duty. After meeting with Moakley, Sonny Hall, TWU President, stated that unionism is a people's movement and that people with disabilities were people first, were welcome on buses and that there would be no new wage demand. Moakley and I created a bus driver awards program, hosted by Moakley, that lasted for years, and encouraged drivers to accommodate passengers. Gov. Mario Cuomo gave the awards one year, even as Mayor Koch, and his MTA Board appointees opposed access and refused to attend. Moakley rewrote NYC's Building Code, along with city and private architectural experts, and the city's code meets or exceeds ADA access standards and has for decades. Our bus system was the first in the US to become 100% accessible due to his leadership.

Disabled veterans, especially Vietnam era veterans, grew up during both the Black and women's movements. They saw that social activism can open eyes, change attitudes, and human behavior. They were not ready to stay at home just because they were wounded serving their country. They wanted jobs, families, houses, transportation - they wanted access to the American dream. Working with nonvets, they changed the world.

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.

Conversations with Able News

Meet Director Cameron S. Mitchell – Exposing Erased Disability History in the film, Disposable Humanity

By Katherine Magnoli

Cameron S. Mitchell, Director of *Disposable Humanity*. Photo credit: Bushwick Film Festival.

For Cameron S. Mitchell, director of *Disposable Humanity*, the award-winning documentary confronting the Nazi murder of disabled people, the recently released movie is more than just a film. It represents a counter-memorial and a call to join the revolution, he said.

The documentary uncovers previously unseen information and historical artifacts revealing how Aktion T4 developed the killing methods, gas-chamber technology, and trained personnel necessary to implement the Holocaust. The film follows the Mitchell family's investigation into the history and memory of Aktion T4, documenting how the Nazi regime first tested and developed its system of mass murder on people with disabilities.

Disposable Humanity had its Oscar-qualifying theatrical engagement this summer at Laemmle Monica Film Center in California. The global premiere was held in September at Positive Exposure Gallery in Manhattan and featured a question-and-answer session with Mitchell and Executive Producer Steve Way, the disability rights advocate and actor whose well-known work includes roles on Hulu's *Furious* and *Ramy*. Information is available on the film's website regarding viewing options.

''*Disposable Humanity* is not just a film; it is a film counter-memorial,'' Mitchell said in a statement. ''By confronting the brutal legacy of Aktion T4, we seek to raise awareness about the contemporary implications of viewing individuals through a lens of disposability and its impact on disabled people.''

In an interview with *Able News,* Mitchell shared his early inspirations and his goals for the film's impact.

Tell us about your backstory and when you first realized you wanted to make films.

That story is the story of my film *Disposable Humanity*, funnily enough! I didn't realize it at the time, but when my folks took me to Germany when I was in fifth grade, my head was full of movies. *The End of the Affair* remains one of my earliest memories (my folks often let me watch films…beyond my age group we'll say) and then seeing *The Matrix* really sealed the deal for me that I wanted to do something to change the world. I just didn't know it was movies yet. So, when we went to Germany and encountered our first Aktion T4 memorial, I immediately sat down and drew the experience. I drew a lot in my early days; it was a way that I could process the world as a neurodivergent kid. It let me sit with the subject–often art, statues, whatever I was compelled by–but this time when I sat down to draw I began to create a story. It was the story of my family encountering a memorial to killed disabled persons while being told that the memorial itself wasn't accessible. That memory stuck with me all the way until now–at the age of 35–and still stirs me and guides me in a lot of what I do.

You, along with Steve Way, are spearheading the movement for more authentic representation. Can you take us through the thought process of why you this should be your debut project?

Well, for me this was always going to be my first feature film. I think I knew this very early on, once I started taking courses on Visual Anthropology in college at Temple University. I loved the code of ethics that Visual Anthropologists held themselves to: the idea that a film made about a community ultimately had to involve that community.

Shifting power dynamics and taking them back from colonialist filmmakers. Acknowledging the power of the camera, the ''gaze'' so to speak, and the idea of the camera as an interlocutor of subjects both filmed and filmmaker. *Disposable Humanity* has a lot of influences but if I were to highlight some, I would cite *Cannibal Tours* by Dennis O'Rourke where he turns the camera on his own boat of tourists visiting Papua New Guinea, the film, *Sherman's March*, by Ross McElwee where the filmmaker intertwines personal familial narrative and politics with a historical retelling of General Sherman's extremely violent march through the South, and the films of Errol Morris.

What message do you hope viewers learn from the documentary?

All of these films in a way helped me process what I had been holding onto since I was a little boy, that moment where we discovered T4 as a family and what that had meant and continued to mean to me. Imagine growing up reading the *Diary of Anne Frank* and *Maus* and seeing all of these incredible artistic renderings of atrocity and never seeing the fact that the Holocaust started with disabled people? I mean, what is there really to process there? Everything. I'm still processing it, in a way. Which is why when I first saw Steve touring with the film *Good Bad Things*, I knew I had to try to have him aboard the film. And so, I convinced him to watch a VERY rough cut of the film and he did. He got back to me immediately.

Watching Steve talk about the film since, in fact every time we do it together or apart, I am amazed to see the growth and perspective that comes with it. It really speaks to the power of the subject matter and how the title of the film, *Disposable Humanity*, will really never go away until we fully embrace and speak about this erased and forgotten past that literally catalyzed one of the most talked-about atrocities in human history. Imagine, we even removed disabled people from that. And that's why I think the more people that see this film, the more its message gets out there and we can start to try to comprehend how entirely and systemically we eradicate disabled people from the conversation every day until that changes. Until we remember.

The documentary, *Disposable Humanity*, reveals the true history behind the systematic murder of people with disabilities by the Nazi regime.

From a personal standpoint, how did you emotionally cope with the heaviness of the topic? Did it make it difficult to complete?

Making the film was the coping. Making the art gave me hope and shifted some of the unbearable weight of this knowledge – which really is the heaviness, knowing that so many do not know this past or chose not to know it – out into the world. If a film is made, then we can no longer deny that someone came forward and said ''Hey, why do you think only doctors were allowed to pull the gas nozzle? Where did gas chambers come from? How can we keep ignoring that disabled people were the first to be killed and the last to be remembered?'' Someone has to do something about this.

For more coverage, please see AbleNews.com