

50th Anniversary of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, with Mark Johnson

By Mark Johnson and Madison Beasley, PT, DPT



Photo of Mark Johnson (1995) by Billy Howard from the book *Portrait of Spirit: One Story at a Time* by Maggie Holtzberg and Billy Howard.

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[ADAPT](#), an activist organization group committed to organizing around issues of accessibility and justice. He was involved with the Paralympic Games in Atlanta in 1996 and was a major organizer for the Spirit of ADA Torch Relay in 2000, an event that commemorated the signing of the [Americans With Disabilities Act](#) (ADA) in 1990. He has served as the Director of Advocacy at the Shepherd Center in Atlanta and as Chair of The ADA Legacy Project, a group committed to recording, preserving, and promoting the history of the ADA.

In this interview-based article, Mark Johnson helps to commemorate, reinforce, and reflect on the groundbreaking policy decision of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

History of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the first federal civil rights law for people with disabilities in the United States. It framed the concept of civil rights for people with disabilities in terms of *equal access* to services,

activities, and places. President Richard Nixon signed it into law on September 26, 1973. This year, September 26 will mark the law's 50th anniversary. The law states:

“No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States ... shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program, service, or activity receiving federal financial assistance or under any program or activity conducted by any Executive agency or by the United States Postal Service.”¹

The law intended to provide equal access to people with disabilities by removing barriers created by non-inclusive architecture, transportation, and employment practices in all settings that receive federal funds.

The law was only a first step, however. Without signed regulations to enforce the law, businesses and organizations ignored Section 504 and did not make the practical changes necessary that would provide equal access.

For four years, the disability community grew frustrated by the lack of progress. In 1977, hundreds of disabled activists across the country organized sit-ins, rallies, and protests at the regional offices of the federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) to draw attention to the lack of progress. Activists picketed in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Philadelphia, Seattle, New York, and Washington, DC. More than 100 protestors occupied the San Francisco HEW federal building for 28 days—an event known today as the 504 Sit-In. In response to the pressure, the then US Secretary of Health,

Education, and Welfare, Joseph Califano, finally enacted a list of regulations for Section 504 on April 28, 1977.²

Prior to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973: How Did Federally-Funded Programs Treat Those With Disabilities?

Before 1973, people with disabilities were not provided with the same opportunities as their counterparts. Mark Johnson recalls life before the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as a “segregated, out of sight—out of mind, approach,” which included special schools and state institutions where people with disabilities would often get placed. These schools and state institutions were later recognized as having demoralizing standards of care that had long-term negative effects on the individuals who were placed in them and the communities where they were located.² Johnson remembers Central State Hospital in Milledgeville, GA—cited as the nation's largest psychiatric hospital, with almost 13,000 patients at the height of its notoriety. The conditions and treatment protocols at Central State Hospital and others were difficult to imagine, and represent the way people with disabilities were viewed and treated prior to the passing of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Fueling the Disability Rights Movement: “Nothing About Us Without Us”

In the years leading up to the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Johnson says he noticed a change within the medical community as disabled people increasingly stated, “I am part of the *solution*.”

“Nothing About Us Without Us” is an empowering mantra that has fueled the disability rights movement and represents the “conviction of people with disabilities that they know what is best for them,” as quoted by James Charlton in his book, *Nothing About Us Without Us*.³

Johnson graduated with his master’s degree in Guidance and Counseling in 1977, the same year the regulations for Section 504 were signed. During this time, he began working with a group who were teaching people with disabilities what their official rights were.

Despite the many years it took for the regulations to be implemented, people within the disability community sought to empower each other by organizing around common issues and making their demands known to the public through public protest and civil disobedience. These issues were discussed in media such as *The Disability Rag*, which Johnson remembers as “THE magazine in our community. It was like drug, sex, and rock and roll...it was just honest...it was raw.”

Fifteen years later, in 1988, the regulations were still not fully implemented. According to Johnson, “I got some calls from some students at UGA and they said, ‘we just can’t seem to get the university to listen’... So, long story short, we ended up organizing a protest, and

a student got out of his chair and crawled up the steps of the building.” The building he crawled to was the disability student service office and was located on the second floor with no elevator access. “It was front page [of] *The Atlanta Constitution*⁴ and [the office] got temporarily moved until the students with disabilities decided where it ought to go,” Johnson says.

Looking in the Mirror for Change in the Future

As the 50th Anniversary of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 approaches, Johnson advises that anniversaries present an important opportunity to bring attention to the shifting of history, but they also help call people to action. “There was this great moment, 50 years ago, there’s this opportunity to look in the mirror, and there’s an opportunity if you haven’t [yet], to implement, after looking in the mirror, what you still need to do,” Johnson says.

According to Johnson, we’ve seen a lot of progress within the context of how long social change takes. He says, “Sliced bread has been around a long time and it takes a while for different silos to catch up with it—the movement, the paradigm, the language, the policy—and what I see happening around the world and in the country now is a lot more focused on justice and intersectionality, and that’s incredibly exciting.”

Advocacy groups and individuals that Johnson currently finds hope in for the future of disability rights include:

- [New Disabled South](#)

- [RAMPD: Recording Artists and Musicians With Disabilities](#)
- [FWD-Doc: Filmmakers With Disabilities](#)
- [Communication FIRST](#)
- [Andraealavant.com](#)
- [Withkeri.com/meet-keri-gray](#)
- [Caravan](#)
- [U.S. Access Board](#)

References/Resources

1. "Rehabilitation Act of 1973," PL 93-112 (hr 8070), September 26, 1973. Available at: <https://www.eeoc.gov/rehabilitation-act-1973-original-text>. Accessed August 18, 2023.
2. [Atlanta Journal-Constitution: Asylum's dark past relived as cycle ends](#)
3. Charlton, James. *Nothing About Us Without Us*. University of California Press; 2000.
4. Clippings from The Atlanta Constitution:
[Handicapped UGA students protest lack of access](#)
[UGA plans to charge students for using disabilities clinic](#)

About the Author



Mark Johnson is a well-known advocate and leader in the movement for disability rights. As a devoted community organizer, he is committed to participating in and leading actions that demand and inspire justice for marginalized voices within the disability community. In the early 1980s, he helped found ADAPT, an activist organization group committed to organizing around issues of accessibility and justice. He was involved with the Paralympic Games in Atlanta in 1996 and was a major organizer for the Spirit of ADA

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Madison Beasley, PT, DPT is currently a physical therapist at Baylor Scott & White Health. She earned her Doctorate in Physical Therapy at Emory University School of Medicine and graduated from The University of Texas at Austin with her Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology and a certification in Medical Fitness and Rehabilitation. The humanities help her to understand the biopsychosocial and emotional aspects of patient care and to find meaning and connection with others, especially her patients. She hopes to continually challenge her understanding of the world and those living in it to create a dialogue with patients and a relationship of togetherness in the healing process.