

SPECIAL EDITION

2024 DISABILITY HISTORY ESSAY CONTEST

The SILC is very pleased to share this Special Edition of the IL Edge showcasing the winners of the 2024 Disability History Essay Contest. The contest reinforces WV Disability History Week held the third week of October.

The theme for the Disability History Essay Contest this year was, "In 2023, the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which was incorporated as Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act in 2014, celebrated its 50th anniversary. Discuss how this historical legislation has advanced access to and equity in employment opportunities for people with disabilities in your community."

Awards were presented at High School Senior Awards Ceremonies across the State by the WV Division of Rehabilitation Service's (WVDRS) District Counselors, and the West Virginia Statewide Independent Living Council (WVSILC) Board Members and Staff.

This special edition of our newsletter includes all the winning essays, photos of the authors, and a bit of information to help you get to know these students. In addition to the award certificate, the authors of the winning essays received an engraved personalized key chain and a check for the amount of their award as follows:

- State Winner - \$3,250
- District 1st Place Winners - \$1,750
- District 2nd Place Winners - \$1000

Congratulations to all the winners! I hope this contest continues to motivate high school seniors to not only submit an entry, but to learn more about disability history and how the disability rights movement has changed our world and our lives.

Continue Learning,



Jerry Boyko
Executive Director

2024 Disability History Essay Contest

This contest gives WV High School Seniors an opportunity to showcase their writing skills, share their knowledge of the Disability Rights Movement and perhaps earn some money to help advance their future!

The contest is a collaborative effort of the WV Division of Rehabilitation Services, the Statewide Independent Living Council and the State Rehabilitation Council, with cooperation from the WV Department of Education and the local schools. The winning essays and their authors are recognized and presented with a check generally at the Senior Awards Ceremony at their respective high schools.



MISSION

"The mission of the WVSILC is to promote the value, equality, full-inclusion, and freedom of choice of all West Virginians with disabilities."





State Winner



Caleb Messer is a senior at Scott High School. During high school he served four years as student body council, holding multiple positions including President. He was active with the marching band as drum major, a member of the National Honor Society, and the president of the Tri-M Music Honor Society. He is graduating with high honors including 44 hours of college credit through dual-credit high school classes and another 18 hours of college credit through online college classes.

He has accumulated more than 100 hours of community service by volunteering at multiple events held by non-profits including the America Red Cross blood drive and United Way Backpack Buddies Packing Day.

Caleb plans to attend Marshall University to earn a bachelor's degree in elementary education along with certifications in early childhood education and special education. His goal is to become an elementary school teacher and principal in West Virginia. ■

Caleb Messer Scott High School

The Historical Significance of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Although it is a rural area that has been ravaged by the opioid epidemic and economic downturn, my county still offers an abundance of opportunities to individuals with disabilities. That is a testament to the organizations and leaders who champion that cause in their communities. However, it also is the result of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, a historic piece of legislation that created employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities (United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2023). For example, Section 503 not only prohibited federal agencies from discriminating against individuals with disabilities in their employment practices, but also required them to implement policies and procedures that led to recruiting, hiring, promoting, and retaining individuals with disabilities (United States Department of Labor, 2023). The result: Individuals with disabilities were protected and empowered for the first time in our nation's history. Furthermore, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 laid the foundation for legislation like the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act in 2014, which might be its most significant impact because of the access and equity that they produced for that underserved population (Department of Homeland Security, 2023). Indeed, it served as a catalyst of the civil rights movement for individuals with disabilities.

This topic is important to me because I plan to become a special education teacher after I graduate from Marshall University. My father was a special education teacher before becoming an administrator, and I saw firsthand the difference he made in the lives of his students; many of them still contact him and thank him for his impact and influence. My participation in my high school's Partners Club also has persuaded me to pursue a career in which I work with individuals with disabilities. The Partners Club pairs general education students with special education students who have severe and profound disabilities. Its goal is to promote inclusion in our school. We spend lunch with our assigned students. I love my time with my partner, whose happiness is contagious. I look forward to it as much as he does — and maybe more. Our friendship is a mutual blessing, and I know I will be able to develop similar relationships with my students as a special education teacher, and I know I will be able to implement or continue similar programs at my school as an administrator.

It is sad to think that my partner and other individuals with disabilities would not have employment opportunities in particular or civil rights in general if the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and subsequent legislation had not been passed. That was an eye-opening fact that I learned this summer when I took English 200 from Dr. Roxanne Aftanas at Marshall University. In that online college class, we watched the Netflix documentary "Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution," which highlights the discrimination and mistreatment that individuals with disabilities faced in America before and during the 1960s and 1970s (Lebrecht & Newnham, 2020). What I saw and heard in that documentary reinforced my desire to become a special education teacher so I can educate those students and advocate for them.

Fortunately for individuals with disabilities, we have made significant strides in access and equity for them in our country and my county. For example,

(See Messer p14)



Joscelyn Camargo South Charleston High School

Historical Equal Employment Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities

In 2023, the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 marked its 50th anniversary since its inception. This landmark legislation, initially incorporated as Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act in 2014, has played a pivotal role in advancing access to and equity in employment opportunities for people with disabilities in communities across the United States. This essay explores the historical significance of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, its impact on fostering inclusivity, and its continuing relevance in my community.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was a watershed moment for disability rights in the United States. It was a response to a growing awareness of the systemic barriers that individuals with disabilities faced in accessing education, employment, and other opportunities. The Act aimed to level the playing field by prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability in programs conducted by federal agencies, in programs receiving federal financial assistance, and in federal employment. This was a momentous step towards ensuring that individuals with disabilities had an equal shot at success in the workforce.

One of the key provisions of the Rehabilitation Act was the creation of vocational rehabilitation programs. These programs have been instrumental in helping individuals with disabilities in my community gain the skills and training necessary to secure meaningful employment. The Act's emphasis on providing comprehensive vocational rehabilitation services, including counseling, job training, and placement, has paved the way for countless success stories in my community.

Furthermore, the Act established the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, also known as the Access Board. This board was charged with developing guidelines and standards for accessible design and construction. As a result, public spaces, transportation systems, and buildings in my community have become more accessible, allowing individuals with disabilities to move freely and independently. This has not only enhanced their employability but also improved their overall quality of life.

In 2014, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was incorporated as Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). This integration emphasized the Act's role in workforce development and modernized its provisions to align with the changing landscape of employment. It reinforced the importance of vocational rehabilitation services and promoted collaboration between workforce development and disability service systems.

In my community, the impact of the Rehabilitation Act is palpable. Employment opportunities for people with disabilities have expanded significantly over the years. Local businesses have recognized the value of a diverse workforce and have taken steps to ensure inclusivity. Many organizations have partnered with vocational rehabilitation agencies to create tailored job training programs. This has not only empowered individuals with disabilities but also enriched our community by harnessing their unique skills and talents.

District 1 First Place



Joscelyn Camargo is a senior at South Charleston High School. During high school she had a cumulative GPA of 4.68 and was valedictorian for the class of 2024.

She plans to attend West Virginia University (WVU) to major in Neuroscience, pursuing a minor in Psychology. She wants to eventually earn her MD degree. She wants to specialize in Psychiatry because she has a passion for mental health advocacy. She wants to provide compassionate care and support to individuals facing mental health challenges.





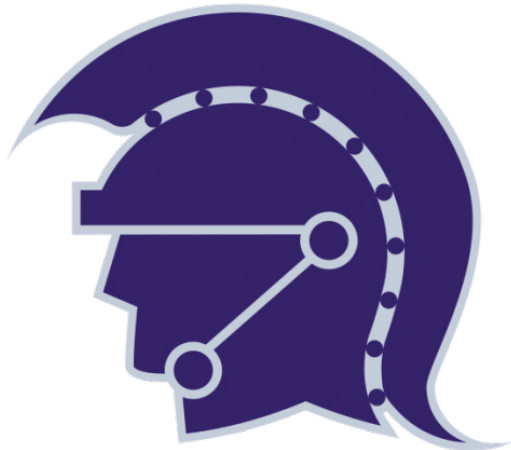
District 1 Second Place



Alexandria Harper is a senior at Riverside High School. During High School she maintained a 5.0 GPA and will be graduating in the top 1% of her class. She is an active member of Riverside's National Beta Club and the president of Mu Alpha Theta. She is an avid cheerleader and became the cheer captain her senior year.

Alexandria has developed a passion for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and the environment. She created a Teens for Change community service group before her senior year. The group planted trees, pollinator gardens, Firefly Sanctuaries, Habitats for bats, and cleaned up streams and roadways in the community.

She plans to obtain an undergraduate degree in biology, followed by attending medical school with the purpose of making a positive impact on her community. ■



Alexandria Harper Riverside High School

“In 2023, the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which was incorporated as Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act in 2014, celebrated its 50th anniversary”

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a federal act passed by Congress that “prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs conducted by federal agencies, in programs receiving federal financial assistance, in federal employment and in the employment practices of federal contractors.” (Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Rehab Act), n.d.). The passing of this Act had a profound impact on the lives of those living with disabilities. Thanks to this law, persons with disabilities could obtain jobs and establish careers that could support them and their families. This law prevented discrimination based on a disability that should never have been used to define them. It allowed them to make meaningful contributions to society.

This historic legislation allowed persons with disabilities to enter the federal and federal contractor workforce. This was the first major federal disability rights law, and it served as a model for the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which protected individuals with disabilities from being discriminated against in the private sector (Employment Protections Under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973: 50 Years of Protecting Americans With Disabilities in the Workplace, n.d.). This Act also requires employers to “take affirmative action to recruit, hire, promote, and retain these individuals.” (Section 503, n.d.). Requiring employers to seek out, employ, and keep workers with disabilities helps open job opportunities and increases the understanding employers and coworkers have regarding a disability, making the workplace a better environment for everyone.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 has had a positive impact on my community. It has provided career opportunities for people with disabilities and helped them provide for themselves and their families while contributing to the community with valuable life skills and lessons to which others might not have been exposed. I have had the pleasure to learn from a teacher with a disability; his sense of humor, perseverance, and unique teaching style are inspiring. Most students do not have the opportunity to learn from such a robust and inspiring individual; with this law, he might have been given that opportunity to impact so many.

On a more personal level, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 has impacted my life. My grandfather and sister were diagnosed with epilepsy and migraine disorder. Epilepsy is a disorder that causes people to lose consciousness and have seizures. After a seizure, a person can remain postictal for hours. Recovery from a seizure can last for days. Migraine disorder can also cause a person to be bedridden for days at a time. This makes it difficult for them to gain employment and work. This Act enabled my grandfather to maintain employment and provide for his family. My grandfather was one of the best employees at his office. His employer bragged about him often and even stated that he was so thankful he did not let a disability prevent him from hiring him because he was the hardest-working person he had ever employed.

Lane Siciliano

University High School

In 2023, the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which was incorporated as Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act in 2014, celebrated its 50th anniversary

“Just because a man lacks the use of his eyes, doesn't mean he lacks vision.”
– Stevie Wonder

Mr. Stevie Wonder, one of the most celebrated and influential musicians in modern popular music, is living proof that a disability is nothing more than a different ability. He and others who have risen to the pinnacles of their profession show us that people living with disabilities work as hard and contribute as fully as those who are not when provided the proper accommodations. People with disabilities deserve not only equal but equitable opportunities to realize their full potential.

Through the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, we took our first legislative step to provide such opportunities, and few acts, before or after, have had as great an effect. Living alongside family, friends, and neighbors with disabilities has given me a special opportunity to see firsthand the power and long-lasting effects of this legislation. It has been crucial to dismantling systemic barriers and fostering inclusivity in both employment and the workplace. My aunt worked in integrated environments for more than 25 years despite her limitations due to Section 504 and its provisions for reasonable accommodation. Just weeks ago, my best friend was hired for the first time due to affirmative action requirements outlined in Section 501. The nation, and more specifically my community, have seen substantial improvements in employment opportunities for my aunt, my friend, and countless others as a direct result of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and additional legislation it inspired down the line.

Discrimination Throughout Our Nation's History Since the founding of the United States, our nation's citizens with disabilities have experienced intense discrimination for their differences. By the mid-1600s, colonial laws were in place that reflected Elizabethian “Poor Laws” (which determined the value of a person based on their ability and willingness to work). They instituted deportation to Europe of those deemed “unworthy,” “unfit for work,” and a “societal burden.” (Patterson)

Later, the Industrial Revolution introduced new impediments to workers with disabilities, as repetitive tasks performed with minimal assistance and within limited timeframes became the norm. Individual ability and productivity largely replaced the cooperation and community present in agrarian work environments. This rigid, unwelcoming system effectively separated the “able” from the “unable,” and helped employers begin to unfairly classify those who did not fit the mold as “disabled” (Patterson).

Stripped of the little tolerance and aid they received before, members of the disabled community were often forced to engage in work that exploited their differences for entertainment: circus acts and freak shows. From the 1840s through the 1960s, when they finally (mostly) died out, these shows profited from people with disabilities, reflecting the broader difficulties faced

(See Siciliano p17)

District 2 First Place



Lane Siciliano is a senior at University High School. During high school he was a member of Rho Kappa, Future Leader Program (FLP), Color Guard, (NSHSS) National Society of High School scholars, (NYLF) National youth leadership foundation, and a promise scholarship awardee. He is a three-year member of WVU fencing club.

Lane appreciates spending time outside; hiking, rock climbing, and being a star scout. He enjoys videos games, history, and staying up late to watch lore videos.

Lane plans to join AmeriCorps for a year then attend Haverford University majoring Anthropology and Psychology. He desires to serve. ■





District 2 Second Place

Jordon Cox North Marion High School

Discuss how the Federal Rehabilitation Act has advanced access to and equity in employment opportunities for people with disabilities in your community



Jordon Cox is a senior at North Marion High School. During high school he was a varsity tennis player, a tennis team captain for two years, a two-year varsity swim member, a cross country team member and National Honor Society member.

He has served his community through volunteering for projects such as making blankets for the humane society and kits for the homeless.

He intends to enroll at West Virginia University with a focus on Exercise Physiology, with the ultimate goal of pursuing a career in the medical field as a certified radiologist. ■



The Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 commemorates 50 years of helping people with disabilities. As the first federal disability rights law to be passed, it brought forth equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities by prohibiting discrimination from federal contractors and subcontractors.

The two core provisions of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 are sections 501 and 503. Section 501 specifically states that people with disabilities be protected from disparate treatment and harassment because of their disability. This required federal government agencies to limit their questions and medical examinations of those disabled as well as maintaining confidentiality of such medical records for prospective employees. The Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 also required agencies to provide reasonable accommodation, both physically and mentally, to aid qualified applicants. These accommodations include facility enhancements such as installing ramps, modifying restrooms or workspace layouts; utilizing assistive technologies such as specialized computer software such as screen reader software or use of videophones; or providing Braille, large print, closed captioning, or sign language interpreters to aid communication. Other accommodations that minimized financial strains to employers includes services such as adjusting work schedules to allow for medical appointments and making modifications to current facility policies to allow for service animals.

Section 501 also allows for the use of personal assistant services to those disabled. They assist in personal non-medical services such as helping someone to eat or use the restroom should they be unable to complete those tasks on their own.

The employer must adhere to all the above unless doing so would cause undue hardship to them. An undue hardship refers to not only the financial hardship but also any substantial change that would alter the nature or operation of the business.

Under section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act, any contractors or subcontractors with 50 or more employees and a federal contract of \$50,000 or more who do business with the federal government are required to not only recruit, hire, retain and advance qualified people regardless of disabilities, but must also develop and maintain an affirmative action program within 120 days from the start of their contract.

This affirmative action program establishes, in writing, a one-year program in which audits are utilized to identify specific problem areas regarding equal opportunities for disabled individuals. For instance, the audit would be looking to confirm that federal contractors have met the 7% employment hiring goal, allow for individual to self-identify as disabled, be proactive about asking disabled employees if they need accommodations, utilizing inclusive recruiting methods in order to find qualified workers, and by developing and implementing



Connor Dorsey

John Marshall High School

Discuss how the Federal Rehabilitation Act has advanced access to and equity in employment opportunities for people with disabilities in your community

Coming off of the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, people with disabilities were still marginalized, continuously being discriminated against in their efforts to join the workforce. Through nine years of debating and fighting against their oppression, the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was enacted. With this act in effect, people with disabilities were guaranteed no discrimination in employment in federal agencies and programs receiving federal financial aid. Although these rights were given, many people with disabilities still felt that they were not given the equity they deserved.

Extensive protest and advocacy for something to change was a large reason the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was enacted. In Time Magazine's article about Judy Heumann, a current teacher and activist diagnosed with polio, the story of her persecution is shared, "She'd gotten dressed up and her mother had pulled her wheelchair up a flight of stairs before the principal intervened. Her disability, he said, meant she was not allowed to attend the school. Heumann had polio as a child, and it left her legs paralyzed and limited use of her hands and arms." Given no resources or effort, Heumann along with thousands of other people with disabilities were continuously discriminated against. In my opinion, the discriminatory actions towards people with disabilities is inhumane, and should have been acted on prior to when it was. When the benefits of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 were given, requiring the government to grant equal access to employment opportunities, people with disabilities were relieved, but not satisfied.

Due to the implementation of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, people with disabilities were given equity in employment, but other essential elements to independence were not. This lack of opportunity led to continued protest in favor of more change, ultimately leading to the establishment of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. It was not until this act was introduced, prohibiting discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, transportation, and communications, that people with disabilities felt they were given the resources needed to succeed. The ADA, built on the foundation that the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 introduced, granted every person with disabilities the resources needed for a fair opportunity to succeed. Things such as access ramps, reasonable accommodations, and handicap designated areas were placed throughout communities across the U.S. Given equity in schools, transportation, and many public places, the fight against fairness for people with disabilities took a significant step in the right direction.

Rising from little to no employment for people with disabilities, the Bureau of Labor Statistics' 2022 survey reports that "21.3 percent of persons with a disability were employed, up from 19.1 percent in 2021", and "The employment-population ratio for persons with a disability in 2022 was the highest record since comparable data were first published in 2008". Not only do these statistics hold significant numerical value, they also go to show how much of an impact the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, along with the Americans with Disabilities Act have had on the employment of those with disabilities.

The federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 has proven to be a significant milestone
(See Dorsey p 14)

District 3 First Place



Connor Dorsey is a senior at John Marshall High School. During high school he was a member of the John Marshall High School orchestra, a WVU Bucklew Scholar, a member of the WV All State orchestra, and on the lacrosse team.

He has successfully maintained employment with Menard courtesy patrol while also overseeing operations as a manager of a landscaping business.

He intends to enroll at West Virginia University in order to pursue a Bachelor of Science degree in Data Science. ■





District 3 Second Place



Kathryn Prather is a senior at Wheeling Park High School. During high school she passed 20 Advanced Placement Exams and has taken junior level college classes outside of high school. She was named a U.S. Presidential Scholar Semifinalist, a National Merit Scholar, and named as the 2023-2024 Female Athlete in the West Virginia Secondary School Activities Commission (WVSSAC) Academic Achievement Program. She is a four-year letterman on the varsity soccer team and principal cellist of her orchestra.

Kathryn volunteers for the SMART Centre (Science, Mathematics, Art, Reading, and Technology), a local science center and the Wheeling Area Soccer Association as a head coach for multiple teams. She enjoys participating in Junior Nature Camp and relaxing in a hammock during pleasant weather.

Her intention is to enroll at Johns Hopkins University to pursue a dual major in Engineering and Economics. ■



Kathryn Prather Wheeling Park High School

Discuss how the Federal Rehabilitation Act has advanced access to and equity in employment opportunities for people with disabilities in your community

In the 1950s, over 2,400 patients were confined to the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum, or the Weston State Hospital, located in Weston, West Virginia. The building was only designed to house 250 (Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum). Throughout the history of West Virginia, it has made strides to improve opportunities for people with disabilities, but there is a long way left to go to reach equality in education and employment.

People with disabilities have been mistreated by society as a whole longer than West Virginia has been a state. The Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum was opened in 1859, just before the start of the Civil War (Hurd 809), and it remained open and overcrowded until it was forced to close in 1994 (Disability Rights of West Virginia). Overcrowded asylums are one example of the mistreatment that people with disabilities have endured, but the discrimination does not end there. People with disabilities have been treated as second-class citizens in their education, employment, and self-autonomy. It is an ongoing fight at the national level to ensure civil rights for disabled people and help all be enabled to reach their potential. Fifty years ago, the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 kicked off progress in disability rights nationwide, and its impacts in the community of West Virginia are still felt today. Greater wellbeing in the community has been achieved through increased access and equity in education and employment, thanks to further legislation.

In order to understand the modern effects of disability rights legislation in West Virginia, the history of the Disability Rights Movement overall must first be addressed. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 laid the groundwork of the Movement by prohibiting programs receiving federal funding from discriminating against people with disabilities in Section 504 (Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion). In other words, in order to secure funding from the federal government, programs had to comply with the regulations established regarding employment and discrimination. This was the first major step in advancing equity and access to employment opportunities for people with disabilities. It meant more people with disabilities could equitably apply for jobs in programs receiving federal funding, and they could gain employment on a more equal footing than was previously possible. One example of this in effect would be that a person with a disability could apply to work at a government job without being discriminated against. So, people with disabilities were given more ability to reach their potential, at least in federally funded sectors. Other legislation, amendments, and court cases followed suit in the ensuing years on both the national and state levels to make employment more accessible.

Within West Virginia, multiple pieces of legislation and orders were passed which furthered the inclusion of people with disabilities in employment opportunities. For example, in 1981, the Medley Consent Decree was signed, and it required that the WV Departments of Health and Human Resources, the WV Department of Education, and the WV Division of Rehabilitation Services all had to “develop and coordinate specific community-based services” for school-aged individuals with developmental disabilities who lived in institutions for more than 30 days (Disability Rights of West Virginia). In plain English, the state was made to educate institutionalized individuals. Education is often the first step towards employment, so this was a significant step in advancing

(See Prather p19)

Reagan Bennett

Shady Spring High School

“In 2023, the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which was incorporated as Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act in 2014, celebrated its 50th anniversary. Discuss how this historical legislation has advanced access to and equity in employment opportunities for people with disabilities in your community”

Throughout the whole United States, there are thousands of federal or federally funded jobs. For example, in the city of Beckley, West Virginia, which is a city with an average population for the state, there are over 200 federal or federally funded jobs. This amount increases exponentially with larger cities in the state and the country. In the past, these jobs would not have been filled by someone with any form of a disability. However, times have changed and laws have been passed. The Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 helped to change the course of history for people with disabilities. This act banned the use of discrimination on the basis of disabilities in a workplace that is federally run, federally funded, or has federal contractors. The four main sections of the act, especially the 504 section, outline the rules and regulations for how the workplace will be operated under this act. Therefore, it provided a huge step forward in the movement for people with disabilities.

In the early 1960s, there were many movements that started to take ground. One of the most notable being the Civil Rights Movement, but there was also a major movement that coined the term the Disability Rights Movement. This movement aimed to increase the rights for people with disabilities and to end the stigmatism around them being in the workplace. Therefore, when the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was introduced, it provided a huge step forward for the movement. In the times before the act, it was not common to have an employee with any form of a disability in the workplace. This is largely due to the amount of discrimination faced in the workplace. However, the act introduced the idea of prohibiting this form of discrimination in the workplace.

The act was written and introduced in 1973. However, section 504 of the act was not implemented at the time. It would not be implemented until 41 years later when the Workplace Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 was passed into law. This act was created to aid jobseekers in the process of gaining employment. It provided easy access to the job market, education, and support systems for anyone that is struggling to find employment. Therefore, this passed even more legislation that gained rights for people with disabilities. The original act in 1973 provided support for people with disabilities in the federal workplace, support for education and training of people in minority groups, and guaranteed equal access to technological information. The new act in 2014 provided the 504 section, which was introduced in the original act in 1973, that prohibits discrimination on the basis of having a disability and provided a new system that was easily accessible to find and gain employment. Therefore, people with disabilities gained access to these new systems that could benefit them in gaining employment and, also, protected them from the discrimination that was faced before.

These acts affected the United States as a whole, which includes many
(See Bennett p18)

District 4 First Place



Reagan Bennett is a senior at Shady Spring High School. During high school she was the Vice President of the National Honors Society, involved in the Next Step Mentoring Program and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. She maintained a GPA above 4.0 throughout high school and took several Advanced Placement and Honors courses.

She balances her time between being a dancer and a student teacher at Rhythms of Grace Dance Studio, and works part-time at Chick-fil-a.

She plans on attending Concord University to study Biology with the goal of pursuing a career in medicine and healthcare. ■





District 5 First Place



Megan Griffey is a senior at Tug Valley High School. During high school she was a member of the Beta Club, National Honor Society, the Math Field Day team, the Academic team, the Pumpkin Drop Team, and the Tug Valley Lady Panthers Softball Team. During her senior year she was the secretary of the school's National Honors Society, and the team captain of the Academic Team.

As a member of the local Tug Valley Area Juniorette Club she had the opportunity to actively participate in community service initiatives within her community.

She plans to attend Marshall's Bachelor of Science/Doctor of Medicine (BS/MD) program and Biological Science with Pre-med Concentration. Her goal is to become a physician and give back to her community in rural West Virginia to help serve the underprivileged. ■



Megan Griffey Tug Valley High School

The Advancement of Equity for Individuals with Disabilities

"Inclusion is intentional. It is about identifying and removing barriers so that everyone can participate to the best of their ability" (The Centre for Inclusive Leadership). Originating from the Declaration of Independence, the American philosophy has been centered around equity for every citizen. Despite the initial goal for all men to be equal, this standard has not been upheld for all Americans. Throughout history, individuals with disabilities have not received equal opportunities in their daily lives. In response to the drastic indifferences that individuals with disabilities face, the American government has passed various acts, such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, to provide equity for all American citizens.

In 1973, the first major step towards equity among individuals with disabilities was taken by the federal government. The passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 provided the first federal law which addressed the discrimination against people with disabilities. According to the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion, "The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as Amended (Rehab Act) prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs conducted by federal agencies, in programs receiving federal financial assistance, in federal employment and in the employment practices of federal contractors" (EARN). Through this act, the federal government took steps to remove the barriers that prevented equal opportunities for individuals with a disability. This historical legislation served as a precursor for the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which continued to make advancements for equity for individuals with disabilities.

As the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which was incorporated as Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act in 2014, celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2023, it continues to impact the daily lives of individuals across the nation. This has explicitly been apparent in my community as various measures have been taken to provide equity for individuals with disabilities. In recent years, my community has integrated new advancements that allow individuals with disabilities to have the same opportunities as others.

The impact of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 has been largely apparent in my personal life. Throughout my life, I have witnessed an immediate family member struggle with medical issues pertaining to her foot. As a result, she has been forced to wear a walking boot and use either crutches or a scooter to be mobile to perform her job. Despite her condition, she has held a job at both a local school and as a pharmacy technician. The advancements through the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 have been seen through both these job positions, as accommodations were made for my family member to ensure she had equity in her employment.

While working at a local school, my family member was forced to travel throughout the school to complete her daily tasks. In order to do this, she used her mobility scooter daily to complete mundane tasks. The school provided her equity in her employment as they did not discriminate against her despite her being an individual with a disability. To help ensure equity, they allowed her to use her scooter and gave her access to the elevators to prevent her from climbing several flights of steps. Furthermore, the school established a parking spot for my family member near a ramp and the school entrance to lower the

Piper Cook Wyoming East High school

The Impact of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, also known as the Rehab Act, enacted no discrimination against people with a disability in the workforce of a federal institution or a workforce receiving federal aid. The Rehab Act was the first federal addressing of protecting people with a disability and securing them equal opportunities. Based on the 2021 US Census, West Virginia has nearly 20% of the population of people with a disability, which is in the top three states with the highest percentage of people with a disability. The Rehab Act allows that percentage of the WV population to have an equal opportunity in federal jobs and to not face discrimination. This act has impacted communities in numerous ways over the past 50 years, but the best example would be about my papaw who was active his entire life in his community.

When he was born, he was diagnosed with Spina Bifida. This defect occurs when along the spinal cord the neural tube does not close all the way causing the spine to not form and close as it should. The intensity of the effects of Spina Bifida ranges based on where the opening is located and the size. Each person who has Spina Bifida can react differently; some may see little effects while some will see physical and mental disabilities. People with a disability from Spina Bifida can still have a life that allows them to reach their full potential, but some face more hardships than others. When a baby is diagnosed with Spina Bifida it is unknown what that individual will face during their lifetime and leaves the family worried. While my papaw was little, he had many surgeries to try and ease his pain and fix his defect. He would end up having more surgeries as he aged, but he struggled with a physical disability his entire life.

The members of the community grew fond of my papaw and felt the impact he wanted to leave on them. As a D.A.R.E. officer, he warned students about the dangers of drugs, but he was also able to show students to never stop fighting. He was a true example of never letting yourself get in your way and if you believe in yourself you can succeed. The Rehab Act affected his life by allowing him to live his dreams and not face discrimination in the workplace. At the same time, the Rehab Act affected the community by giving the people of the community a chance to find a friend in him even though he had a disability. Without the passage of this Act, he could have been dismissed from the force as soon as he was unable to do field work and never had the opportunity to impact the thousands of students he did.

When my papaw got older, he lost his ability to walk completely. He fought for many years to try and be able to walk for his grandkids, but even a wheelchair did not stop him. He became a town council member of the community and was the head of the town police section for over a decade. Because of the Rehab Act, he was able to work was the head of the town police section for over a decade. Because of the Rehab Act, he was able to work for many years meeting the people of the community and building relationships with them as students that they would later remember when electing him to the town council. Because my papaw fought his entire life to never let his disability stop him, he taught all his grandkids to do the same. He was a true example of how The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 impacted communities and the lives of people with a disability. ■

District 5 Second Place



Piper Cook is a senior at Wyoming East High school.

She intends to obtain a dual degree in Mathematics and Statistics from Marshall University. She has been selected to be a Yeager Scholar at Marshall University.

In her spare time, Piper finds joy in listening to the music of Taylor Swift, socializing with her friends and family, and participating in theatrical activities. ■





District 6 First Place



Kyra Biser is a senior at Keyser High School. She consistently strived for excellence in all her endeavors, excelling in English. Throughout her high school years, she maintained a 3.75 GPA and actively participated in various extracurricular activities such as Student Council, Art Honors Society, Drama Club, and the Keyser High School Bowling Team. She discovered her passion for writing through AP Literature courses and achieved success in composing a play for the Drama Program where she took on lead roles and directed performances.

Kyra plans to earn a bachelor's degree in biology at Potomac State College before enrolling in a one-year certificate program at WVU for Radiation Therapy. Her ambition is to become a Medical Dosimetrist, specializing in customizing chemotherapy doses for patients. ■



Kyra Biser Keyser High School

Discuss how the Federal Rehabilitation Act has advanced access to and equity in employment opportunities for people with disabilities in your community

A person like me gets overlooked and lost in a crowd because I am pretty average in looks and abilities, just an average girl. My ability in sports is average, and because of asthma will never be Olympic style. My brain is also pretty average but at times becomes a little distracted and never a good tester, and one would never know my hearing is imperfect because I adapt well. Senior award night I will be overlooked and no scholarships will go towards me. There are many students out there who have some limits and are not given the same opportunities because of being a little different. I am one of those.

I plan to get attend a community college to start my Radiation Therapy program and then apply into WVU Medical school to further the degree. My freshman year of high school I was placed in a program developed to make sure a student like myself would be given an amazing opportunity to work with the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, which has guided me during high school and has helped keep me on track for reaching my goals. Bridgette Kady has been an asset and placed me into programs like building a computer from nothing to functioning. These opportunities will give me a little extra something special on my transcript and real world experience and opportunity. The program has also helped other students who do not plan to go to college get into the workforce. With her help I was even able with my disabilities to get a job at McDonald's and after a year of working there became a trainer and crew trainer.

Before the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 people like me where not so fortunate. Often times people with disabilities were overlooked for employment; if not the best of the best then people are overlooked. People who are driven and have the abilities to do great things were often shadowed by others. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 changed things in the workforce.

Our American society is a face paced world and is driven by many innovative and hard-working people. Before these acts were passed those who with disadvantages were often overlooked and not considered for jobs. When the Rehabilitation Act came into effect it allowed those who were disadvantaged to be given a fair chance, and now people like me are not even aware of the issues ones before had to face.

Although I love my home state of West Virginia, it at times can be brutal for the citizens. There are a lot who are disabled, on fixed incomes, who are living in generational poverty and come from families who never have graduated or made it into college, and many of them are struggling for employment opportunities. There are many on disability or who are at a disadvantage and do not have the skills needed for the workforce. However, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 gives access to support services of education and training. It has allowed many in our poor state to have the support for a chance and a means for a change of life. Good employment is a key factor in success of life. It is also the only way to get out generational poverty which has seized many citizens of the state.

(Biser Continued from p12)

These programs have been created to help. Over the years many families have been given opportunities for this change and a chance to get out of generational poverty. Plus it helps the local business economy when jobs are fulfilled. These Acts have placed millions of people into jobs over the years. In fact, these programs allowed my mother to become the first person in our family to have a professional job which she has held over twenty years. These programs help the less fortunate; the ones who would be overlooked; the ones who really need the jobs. Lives have been changed because opportunities have been created and the ripple effect branches out into many lives. People just need opportunity in life. A chance.

I can be labeled as having a disability. My asthma proves I will never be the star athlete, and my ADD and hearing issues have proven at times I struggle in the classroom and the real world even if discrete. However, this does not mean I am any less of a student or a person. As an adult I plan to be fully functioning and helping others who are facing cancer. As a Radiation Therapist my heart and soul will be placed into taking care of patients. The highest test scores, or ability to run fast do not matter when one is sitting in a chair pumped of medication fighting for life.

The federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 have given people opportunities. The local economy, the state, and even our country have all benefited from the millions of jobs people, like me, have been given; in addition to college and employment opportunities due to these acts. A small ripple effect can make a big change. A little extra push in high school has given me the ripple effect for life, and I know I will make it in others. As Dr. Seuss once said, "One has to be odd to be number one." It is okay to be different and have to work a little harder than others. I know even with my differences I can still be successful. I have already proven I am on my start of doing just that. ■

(Camargo continued from p3)

The Act has also fostered a cultural shift in my community regarding perceptions of disability. It has contributed to a more inclusive society where people with disabilities are not defined by their limitations but by their potential. Employers have become more open to hiring individuals with disabilities, and coworkers have embraced diversity in the workplace. This shift in attitude has created a more welcoming and supportive environment for everyone.

Despite the progress made, challenges persist in my community. Unemployment rates for people with disabilities are still higher than the national average, and disparities in income and employment opportunities persist. Access to education and training can still be improved. The 50th anniversary of the Rehabilitation Act serves as a reminder that the journey towards full equity is ongoing.

In conclusion, the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2023, has been a beacon of hope and progress in my community. It has advanced access to employment opportunities and fostered equity for people with disabilities. Through its provisions, vocational rehabilitation services, and a changing societal mindset, the Act has transformed the lives of countless individuals in my community. As we reflect on its history, we must also renew our commitment to ensuring that its principles of access and equity continue to guide us towards a more inclusive future. ■

Reagan Bennett, District 4 first place winner of the 2024 Disability History Essay Contest was presented with a check, a certificate and a key chain at Shady Spring High School's award ceremony by DRS Counselor Veronica Bunch.



Will you be next?



(Dorsey continued from p7)

in the advocacy for access to and equity in employment opportunities not only my community, but communities across the nation. At my very own place of work, I am employed alongside a person with a disability. Knowing that before the implementation of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 my coworker would have not been given the opportunity for this employment increases my support for this act drastically. Rights for people with disabilities is still a work in progress, the '73 act was a landmark legislation that began the movement for equity in and access to jobs for people with disabilities across the U.S.

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Caleb Messer, State winner of the 2024 Disability History Essay Contest was presented with a check, a certificate and a key chain at Scott High School's award ceremony by DRS Counselor Tammy Vance.



(Messer continued from p2)

employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities in my county start as early as high school, thanks to the Building Bridges program. The instructor takes her students with severe and profound disabilities to the courthouse, a grocery store, an animal hospital, and a fast-food restaurant, where they get to experience different employment opportunities and environments. At the courthouse, they shred papers as well as address and stuff envelopes. At the grocery store, they reorder items as well as stock and face shelves. At the animal hospital, they clean animal bowls as well as sweep and mop floors. At the fast-food restaurant, they sweep and mop floors as well as wipe tables and chairs. Another program, West Virginia Guideposts to Graduation, has produced employment opportunities at the local hospital, where participants work in the housekeeping and laundry departments.

Similar services are provided to adults with disabilities through two organizations, The Arc of the Three Rivers and ResCare Community Living. Both organizations offer supported employment and job development or placement along with many other services (The Arc of the Three Rivers, 2023; ResCare Community Living, 2023). Their clients can be seen throughout my county working at gas stations, retail stores, and fast-food restaurants, among other employers. The Arc of the Three Rivers and ResCare Community Living share a common goal: Helping their clients find and keep paid employment opportunities at the highest-possible levels based on their clients' abilities and interests (The Arc of the Three Rivers, 2023; ResCare Community Living, 2023). Their employees provide their clients with the supervision, support, training, and transportation needed to be successful in those environments (The Arc of the Three Rivers, 2023; ResCare Community Living, 2023). Both organizations also emphasize full inclusion in their clients' workplaces and communities (The Arc of the Three Rivers, 2023; ResCare Community Living, 2023). It all leads to a better quality of life for those individuals with disabilities (The Arc of the Three Rivers, 2023; ResCare Community Living, 2023).

Stevenson LLC is another organization that strives to make a positive impact on the lives of individuals with disabilities in my county. Stevenson provides individual program development, person-centered supports, respite care, service coordination, therapeutic consulting, skilled nursing, dietary therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, and transportation to its clients (Stevenson, 2023). One of its clients is well known in my community. He attends all of my high school's football games at home, and he loudly and proudly cheers for our football team, cheerleaders, and marching band. His loyalty and positivity are inspirational. He is another reason I want to work with individuals with disabilities.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was a life-changing piece of legislation for individuals with disabilities (United States Department of Labor, 2023; United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2023). It not only provided employment opportunities for those people, but also — and perhaps more importantly — produced significant strides in the civil rights struggle for that marginalized community through the subsequent legislation that it inspired (Department of Homeland Security, 2023). Although our legislators passed it 50 years ago, I see the positive effects of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 in my school and county today, which makes me proud and happy. I hope to contribute to the ongoing cause of access and equity by becoming a special education teacher, which will allow me to educate individuals with disabilities and advocate for them.

(Griffey continued from p10)

the distance she had to travel. Despite her difficult situation, through the advancements of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, my family member received equal treatment in her employment.

Additionally, the impact of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was further demonstrated through my family member's employment as a pharmacy technician at a local hospital. In this position, she worked to fill prescriptions and dispense medicine to patients. Consequently, she was required to move around throughout her shift. Although her mobility was limited, she received equity in her employment as the pharmacy allowed her to use her scooter to complete her tasks. Additionally, her supervisors allowed her to use a chair when filling her prescriptions to give her relief from the pain in her foot. Regardless of my mother's condition, the administration gave her equal opportunity in her employment and made accommodations that allowed her to maintain her job.

In addition to the impacts that the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 has had on my personal life, this historical legislation has advanced opportunities for equity in employment for individuals with disabilities across my community. In my community, recent advancements have been made to help limit the barriers that individuals with disabilities face. My community has implemented a new project, which is adding wheelchair ramps on the sidewalks throughout my town. These ramps allow individuals who use mobility devices to easily commute through my town. This advancement, enacted in correlation with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, will enable individuals with disabilities to access employment opportunities within their community.

In closing, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 has significantly impacted the lives of individuals with disabilities. Throughout history, the ideology of equality has been a priority for the American government. Despite this precedence, equity has not always been available to all citizens. Individuals with disabilities have faced extensive barriers in their daily lives, resulting in difficulties in employment. Through the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, eminent steps have been taken by the American government to bring forth equity for all citizens, no matter their situation. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 set a precedent that continues to be expanded upon in modern times. Through this historical legislation, individuals with disabilities have received equal opportunities in the workforce, allowing for the opportunity to fulfill the American dream.

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(Messer continued from p14)

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Connor Dorsey, District 3 first place winner of the 2024 Disability History Essay Contest was presented with a check, a certificate and a key chain at John Marshall High School's award ceremony by DRS Counselor Julie Young.





(Harper continued from p4)

employment. He might not have been given that opportunity if the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 had not passed. My sister will face the same issue once she graduates high school and attempts to enter the workforce. Our high school has helped her form connections with government programs that will help her succeed in college and find employment so she can be successful and not let a disability hinder her goals. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 paved the way for persons with disabilities to find successful careers and live the lives they want, free from discrimination.

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(Cox continued from p6)

policies that would ensure that those with disabilities are not harassed in the workforce.

While these provisions may sound like common sense to us, they were needed to ensure that disabled individuals would be treated fairly without fear of retaliation against them. I have seen these regulations affect someone in my community when I went to collect my mail from the post office. My wheelchair bound postmaster required accommodations to allow her to fulfil her job's duties.

The Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 would set a precedent for other laws and regulations such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Legislative actions like these helped to include and properly represent people with disabilities in the workforce. I believe there is a continued need to monitor the inclusivity of people with disabilities in the future to ensure that those affected do not get discriminated against.

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The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was signed into law by President Richard Nixon on September 26, 1973. It was the first federal civil rights law for people with disabilities in the United States, ensuring equal access to services, activities, and places.

50th Anniversary

Rehabilitation Act of 1973

September 26, 1973

2024 Disability History Essay Contest

THIS CERTIFIES THAT

Caleb Messer

is the State Winner of the 2024 West Virginia Disability History Essay Contest and will receive

\$3,250



This contest is a collaborative effort of the WV Division of Rehabilitation Services, the Statewide Independent Living Council, and the State Rehabilitation Council, in its cooperation from the WV Department of Education.

(Siciliano continued from p5)

consistently and historically by this community.

These upsetting trends continued well into the 20th century. Sweeping societal changes underway during this time utterly and completely disregarded the needs of those living with disabilities. There were occasional breakthroughs, but overall, cyclic discrimination and ill-treatment remained unchanged.

The Beginnings of Change Despite challenges that seemed insurmountable, people with disabilities still participated in every field of work. They continuously demonstrated their resilience and ability (“Work”). Then, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s inspired activists to begin demanding equal rights and opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

The new movement pushed for change until, on September 26, 1973, The Federal Rehabilitation Act became the first major legislative effort to address discrimination against people with disabilities. For all communities, including mine, it was a major step forward (Office of Disability Employment Policy). The Act “prohibits discrimination based on disability in programs conducted by federal agencies, in programs receiving federal financial assistance, in federal employment and the employment practices of federal contractors” (“RHRA”).

However, the real nuances are found in the individual sections. Section 501 mandates affirmative action and nondiscrimination in federal employment. Section 503 extends these mandates to federal contractors and requires contractors to proactively create inclusive workplaces. Section 503 influenced private-sector hiring practices and has contributed significantly to the employment of persons with disabilities beyond the federal government.

Section 504, which was not originally part of the 1973 Act, is one of the most historic and important of the sections. Signed by President Jimmy Carter in 1977, it emphasizes reasonable accommodations and prohibits discrimination based on disability in federally funded programs and activities. A series of sit-in protests staged by associations like the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities helped ensure its adoption (dredf).

Other sections of importance include 508, which deals with electronic and information technology accessibility, and 509, which addresses compliance and enforcement. The more recent adoption of these sections puts into perspective the scope and importance of the original legislation.

The Act in Action In my community, I have seen doors open for many people in my life due to the FRA and the subsequent acts and bills it inspired.

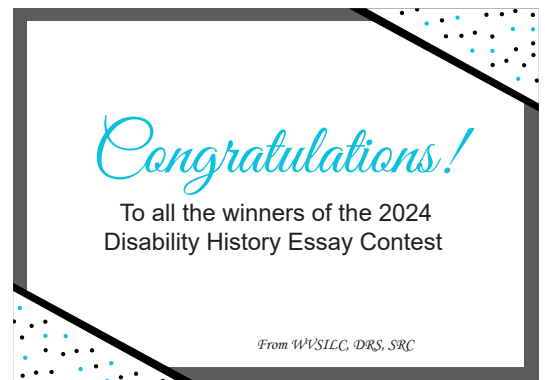
For example, the Jobs Accommodation Network (JAN) is an organization local to my community that helps employers recognize the value that qualified workers with disabilities bring to the workplace (“About JAN”). JAN was created to inform employers about the details of The Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (“DOL/ODEP-1.”), which resulted directly from Section 504 of the 1973 legislation (“Guide to Disability Rights Laws”).

The ADA is heavily integrated into the disability discrimination laws in my community and is commonly associated with regulations regarding the treatment of workers with disabilities. Understanding the ADA is important to understanding the effects of the FRA because it is a direct result of said Act, and therefore the effects of the ADA are the effects of the FRA (WVDDL).

One of the most significant and encompassing advances in my community
(See Siciliano p18)

ADA

AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT



Megan Griffey, District 5 first place winner of the 2024 Disability History Essay Contest was presented with a check, a certificate and a key chain at Tug Valley High School's award ceremony by DRS Counselor Lisa Vinson.





(Bennett continued from p9)

communities. The city of Beckley, West Virginia, for example, has a population of around 17,000 people, according to the United States Census Bureau, and around 21% of this population is made up of people with a disability. Therefore, almost a quarter of the community's population was made of people with disabilities. Before these acts, that would have been 21% of the population being denied equal opportunities in the workplace and facing discrimination in the workplace. However, the acts changed this. People with disabilities now have equal opportunities and equal treatment in the over 200 jobs stated before. The 21% can now be working confidently and happily without the fear of discrimination. This is huge step forward from what was once faced by people with disabilities.

This year, 2023, the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 celebrated its 50th anniversary. We celebrate 50 years of this act, but we also celebrate 50 years of progress. The rights of people with disabilities are extended to the workplace, especially the federally run and funded organizations. Before, this freedom from discrimination and ability to have equal access was unheard of for people with disabilities, but now this ideal image has become an amazing reality. Therefore, the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, alongside the Work Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, advanced the accessibility and equity for people with disabilities all throughout the United States, and the smaller communities found within.

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(Siciliano continued from p18)

a settlement agreement from the 1990s to the early 2000s between our state, the county in which our state capital is located, and the federal government under the ADA. It was a compliance review regarding Title II of the ADA, the authority of section 504 of the FRA, and other legislation. It led to new requirements for programmatic self-evaluations, public information campaigns, increasing the workforce to ensure new requirements were met, and establishing a process for resolving complaints and violations of the legislation (SABTUSAKCWVA).

The sweeping changes this settlement inspired are far-reaching, and it has changed the lives of countless people in my community. Settlements like these help show the extent to which the FRA has impacted people living with disabilities across the nation, even those living alongside me day to day.

What Is Next? Unfortunately, there is a need for further improvement. According to Statista.com, the community in which I live has the largest percentage of people with disabilities per capita in the nation; 18.7% of our population live with disabilities, physical and otherwise. The percentage of workers with disabilities within my community is also the lowest in the nation at only 31.1% (2020 ADSC).

Despite the FRA and other acts and bills meant to relieve discrimination, injustices remain. We must all take action alongside our fellow citizens living with impairments to ensure a better future for everyone.

As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle". And we must struggle together.

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Mason Ryck
2014 State Winner
Robert C. Byrd
High School

Blake Huffman
2015 State Winner
Winfield
High School

Lindsey Beane
2016 State Winner
Hurricane
High School



(Prather continued from p8)

access to employment opportunities to some of the most vulnerable people with disabilities. For instance, someone with a mental disability could be taught a trade such as carpentry and be employed in their community. Furthermore, in 1984, the Client Assistance Program was established in order to “help individuals...getting services from...programs funded under the federal Rehabilitation Act” (Disability Rights of West Virginia). The Client Assistance Program allowed West Virginians with disabilities to access employment programs, which promoted inclusion and diversity in the workplace. Taken together, these events made it so that people with disabilities had more opportunities. They became more able to gain education and employment in the community of West Virginia.

On a national level, The Americans with Disabilities Act was passed by Congress and signed by President George Bush in 1990. The ADA revolutionized disability rights by building on the ideas of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973. According to The United States Department of Labor website, the ADA “prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in several areas, including employment” (U.S. Department of Labor). So, it took the ideas from 1973, and made them independent of federal funding. People with disabilities were finally granted, in writing, their full rights in employment and beyond as American citizens. Companies and other private entities could no longer discriminate against people with disabilities in regards to employment. Additionally, The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act became law in 2014 in order to help job seekers “access employment, education, training, and support services” (U.S. Department of Labor). The Act helped people with disabilities to achieve their employment potential by connecting them with more opportunities. For example, someone who was previously unable to get a job could start working at a local retail store thanks to these services. All together, these pieces of legislation took what started in 1973 and brought it to the modern day. They extended the rights of disabled people, without regard to the involvement of the government.

Today, communities in West Virginia have become more equitable in access to employment opportunities thanks to the local and national legislation discussed above. A higher percentage of the population with disabilities have been employed recently than in previous times. However, there is still a long way to go to true equality. West Virginia has a huge population of people with disabilities, at about 1 in 5 residents having a disability of some sort (Cornell University). But, West Virginia is well below the national average of the percent of people with disabilities who are employed (disabilitycompendium.org). While significant progress has been made, there are still many disabled individuals who could make a greater impact on their community through employment. So, the community of West Virginia can improve itself by allowing people with disabilities to positively affect their communities through employment. West Virginia can reach its full potential by helping people with disabilities reach their full potential through equality and access to employment.

In summary, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 sparked increased civil rights for people with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities have been granted increase access to education and employment, which allows them to make a greater positive impact on their communities. Within West Virginia, people with disabilities have been aided through various legislation. But, West Virginia can go further. The state needs to take the ideas of equality championed in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and make it a reality for more residents with disabilities through further accessibility to education and employment.

Lydia Andlinger
2017 State Winner
The Linsly School



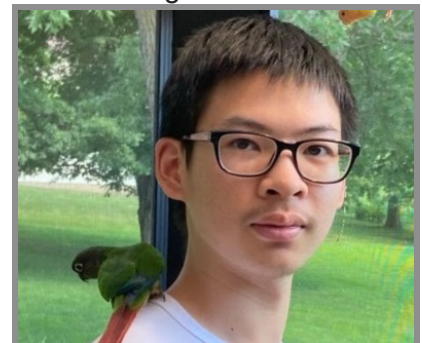
Hannah Casey
2021 State Winner
The Linsly School



Mattelyn Lamp
2022 State Winner
St. Marys High School



Lingjian Zheng
2023 State Winner
Parkersburg South
High School





(Prather continued from p20)

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Kyra Biser, District 6 first place winner of the 2024 Disability History Essay Contest was presented with a check, a certificate and a key chain at Keyser High School's award ceremony by West Virginia Statewide Independent Living Council member Kevin Smith.



Disability History: An Important Part of America's Heritage

Source: [US Department of Labor](#)

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed by President George H. W. Bush on July 26, 1990. As a result of this landmark legislation, communities and workplaces across the nation have become more inclusive and welcoming for America's nearly 40 million people with disabilities.

Despite the ADA's importance, however, many Americans are unfamiliar with the events that led to its passage. Inspired by the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and the feminist movement of the 1970s, disability leaders joined forces and took action, holding sit-ins in Federal buildings, blocking inaccessible buses from moving, drafting legislation, and protesting in the streets. And like the broader movements that preceded it, the disability rights movement had its own heroes and champions: Ed Roberts, Gini Laurie and Justin Dart to name a few.

Teaching children about the contributions of particular populations to our nation's history, such as women and people of various ethnic backgrounds, has been recognized as important through the declaration of dedicated months as well as other educational programs. Disability history, however, has been largely ignored in school curricula. This is particularly paradoxical since anyone, regardless of age, race, or heritage, may become a part of the population of people with disabilities at any time. But the tide is beginning to turn—due mainly to the grassroots efforts of young disability leaders.

Promoting Positive Change at the State Level

The youth-led movement for equal education on disability history celebrated its first victory in West Virginia in April 2006, when the West Virginia Youth Disability Caucus was instrumental in the passage of an act establishing the third week in October as "Disability History Week." This legislation requires public schools to educate students about disability history, people with disabilities, and the disability rights movement and encourages colleges and universities to promote awareness and understanding of disability history. Further, it encourages the legislature to provide recognition of Disability History Week through an annual proclamation and provide resources for instruction and activities.

Other states are following suit. The Florida Youth Council (FYC) is seeking to establish the first two weeks in October as "Disability History and Awareness Weeks" in Florida's public schools. This initiative began when the FYC took its idea to the 2006 Family Café Conference in Orlando, where they met with then Governor Jeb Bush, who agreed to support the effort by issuing an Executive Order. Subsequently, bills have been introduced in both the Florida House and Senate. Florida's youth leaders are now collaborating with youth leaders from other states interested in introducing similar bills.

The North Carolina Youth Leadership Network (NCYLN) successfully advocated for the month of October to be devoted to "Disability History and Awareness." In March 2007, proposed legislation was filed in the North Carolina House and Senate. To boost the effort, the NCYLN formed a partnership with the Alliance of Disability Advocates Center for Independent Living. With the backing of the disability community and other allies, including the North Carolina Parent Teacher Association, there was significant public support to pass the bill, which

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was signed by the Governor in July 2007.

Washington State successfully passed a bill that established October as “Disability History Month” in all public schools. In passing the bill, the legislature stated that “recognizing disability history will inspire students with disabilities to feel a greater sense of pride, reduce harassment and bullying, and help keep students with disabilities in school.” Washington’s bill also requires public institutions of higher education to provide educational activities related to disability history during the month.

Reflecting one of its 2007 legislative priorities, the Idaho State Independent Living Council proposed legislation establishing the third week of October as “Disability History Week,” during which Idaho schools would be required to instruct on disability history, the independent living movement, and disability rights. A con-current resolution making October “Disability History Month” was passed by the State Legislature in March and went into effect shortly thereafter. The resolution encourages education on disability history during October, but does not make it mandatory. Advocates are also trying to integrate disability history into the state curriculum and Idaho Standards Achievement Test.

Educating Tomorrow’s Leaders Today

These and other efforts to integrate disability history into schools and communities reflect one of the key components of effective youth leadership development—learning about the history, values, and beliefs of one’s society. Such youth leadership development experiences correlate with a number of positive outcomes, including decreases in negative behaviors (e.g., alcohol and tobacco use and violence) and increases in positive attitudes and behaviors (e.g., motivation, academic performance, self-esteem, problem-solving, positive health decisions, and interpersonal skills). Youth leadership development activities are similarly linked to increased self-efficacy and the development of skills such as goal-setting, decision-making, and working well with others, attributes essential for success in adulthood and employment—and future advocacy efforts. ■



Signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act

West Virginia Code §18-100-5 Disability History Week

Source: [WV Legislature](#)

(a) The third week of October annually is designated as Disability History Week for the State of West Virginia.

(b) In recognition of and to further the purposes of Disability History Week, each public school shall provide instruction on disability history, people with disabilities and the disability rights movement. The instruction shall be integrated into the existing school curriculum in a manner such as, but not limited to, supplementing existing lesson plans, holding school assemblies or providing other school activities. The instruction may be delivered by school personnel or by guest speakers.

(c) State institutions of higher education are encouraged to conduct and promote activities that provide education, awareness and understanding of disability history, people with disabilities and the disability rights movement.

(d) The Legislature is encouraged to annually recognize Disability History Week by introducing a concurrent resolution to:

- (1) Recognize youth leaders in the disability rights movement;
- (2) Reaffirm a commitment to the full inclusion of people with disabilities in society; and
- (3) Recognize the disability rights movement as an important part of the history of this state and nation.

(e) Recognized resources for information, materials and speakers regarding disability history, people with disabilities and the disability rights movement include, but are not limited to:

- (1) Centers for Independent Living;
- (2) The Statewide Independent Living Council;
- (3) The Developmental Disabilities Council; and,
- (4) The State Americans with Disabilities Act Coordinator.

(f) The provisions of this article are not intended to create a burden, financial or otherwise, for public schools, teachers or state institutions of higher education. ■