

SPECIAL EDITION

2025 DISABILITY HISTORY ESSAY CONTEST

The SILC is very pleased to share this Special Edition of the IL Edge showcasing the winners of the 2025 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 2006, a group of West Virginia youth helped to pass the law establishing Disability History Week, which requires disability history to be taught in all West Virginia public schools. Consider the barriers (including physical, attitudinal, communication, economic, etc.) faced by people with disabilities, and discuss your ideas on eliminating barriers and enhancing independent living and employment opportunities for West Virginians with disabilities."

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

2025 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



Sydnie Wolf is a senior at Chapmanville Regional High School. She has maintained straight A's while taking every available Honors, AP (Advanced Placement), and Dual Credit classes. She also pursued art courses. She became the third student in the school history to earn the AP Capstone Diploma by passing multiple AP exams and completing research projects. She served as team captain for the high school division and is active in the Eagles' Nest program. She also volunteers at Dignity Hospice House and teaches lessons at local elementary schools.

Sydnie plans to attend Marshall University as part of the accelerated BS (Bachelor of Science) to MD (Doctor of Medicine) program, majoring in Biology and completing her undergraduate degree in three years. She has already been accepted to the Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine and aims to specialize in pediatrics.

Sydnie enjoys volunteering at her church, playing piano, practicing archery, and reading. She is active in Calvary Baptist Church's youth program and hopes to stay involved after graduation. She values her piano lessons for their calming effect and getting lost in a good book. ■



Sydnie Wolfe

Chapmanville Regional High School

Three years have passed since I learned firsthand how it feels to be a person with a disability. It started like any other day on a break from school. A 14-year-old freshman at the time, I curled up in my bed to watch TV before going outside to play with my brother. Minutes into my favorite show, the images on the screen suddenly and inexplicably became blurry. My eyes had crossed, and each one had a different view that overlapped with the other. I could not see straight with both eyes open. I visited many doctors, but their only solution was to wear an eye patch so my view would be clear, and I could maintain my daily routine. For several months, everyone stared at me when I walked by because I could not see correctly without an eye patch, but I learned to live with it. Thankfully, my eye eventually fixed itself, and I no longer have to wear an eye patch. However, my time wearing it was an eye-opening experience because I had to endure and overcome obstacles that individuals with disabilities face each day. I developed a deeper understanding of and greater respect for individuals with disabilities. I learned that life is not easy for people with disabilities, but it should be.

When the West Virginia Youth Disability Caucus worked to pass an act that established the third week in October as Disability History Week in 2006, it was a major step in breaking down educational and awareness barriers that prohibited individuals with disabilities from receiving the same opportunities as their peers (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). However, much work still needs to be done to create equal opportunities across all areas of life for people with disabilities. Changes, such as specialized community programs, implementation of new technology, and increased networking opportunities, are only a few that can be made to grow from Disability History Week and make West Virginia, and eventually the world, more accessible and equal for people with disabilities.

To begin with, West Virginia communities can host workshops to educate people on how to treat individuals with disabilities more equally and help them feel less alienated. Devastatingly, 40 percent of adults with a disability report heightened feelings of loneliness and social isolation (Center for Health and Research Transformation, 2020). This feeling often stems from an assumption that no one understands them or what they endure, which is why community programs targeted at educating the public can help break this attitudinal barrier. I believe many problems can be solved with education, so I think that community programs designed to bring people without disabilities and

Aubrey Cox

Ripley High School

Living with an intellectual, cognitive, or developmental disability is a struggle that no one could truly understand unless they have experienced it. As an individual without a disability, I take so many everyday occurrences for granted. I have conversations with people around me every day, and I hardly stop to wonder what it would be like if I was deaf and had to communicate through ASL. I read the menu at my favorite restaurants, and I don't think about those who rely on braille to interpret the menu. I have never experienced wanting to visit a certain shop and not being able to access it because there is no wheelchair ramp. As a society, we need to help eliminate physical, communicational, attitudinal, and economic barriers that people with disabilities face. We need to ensure that people with disabilities are given the same opportunities as everyone else and can live independently and free of barriers.

People with disabilities face many barriers, one obvious example being physical barriers. This includes anything that physically restricts them from doing something because there is not accommodation for their disability. Examples include the lack of accessibility to certain buildings, public areas, and transportation systems. Physical barriers are also sometimes obstacles that most people wouldn't even think about. For example, as "Common Barriers to Participation Experienced by People with Disabilities" states, physical barriers can even be found at a doctor's office where there is the "absence of a weight scale that accommodates wheelchairs or others who have difficulty stepping up" (CDC). These barriers affect people's day-to-day life by making it impossible for them to visit certain areas or access help that they need. One way to combat this barrier would be implementing universal design standards in infrastructure. That way, no company could claim that their infrastructure does not adhere to people with disabilities. Other ways to avoid physical barriers include improving accessibility in public transit and all newly built housing.

Furthermore, people with disabilities also face communication barriers. This includes social situations and digital communication. The normal everyday conversations we have may be unheard of to them. Certain websites may not be accessible to them because they lack text-to-speech or captioning; they may also not be able to have a face-to-face conversation without an ASL interpreter. This could present trouble in job interviews, interactions with strangers, and online applications. One solution to communication barriers is ensuring that digital content is accessible to those

(See Cox p15)

District 1 First Place



Aubrey Cox is a senior at Ripley High School. She is the vice president of National Honor Society, member of YLA, Mu Alpha Theta, Rho Kappa and the captain of the track team. Aubrey is dedicated to giving back to her school and community. She has volunteered at elementary and middle school track meets, supported local 5K races, and participated in community initiatives like Adopt-A-Family and Trunk-or-Treat. She also took the initiative to launch a recycling program at her high school.

Aubrey plans to attend West Virginia University (WVU) to pursue a degree in Public Relations, with plans to continue on to law school and specialize in environmental law.

Aubrey spends her free time reading books, writing, staying active with regular workouts, and exploring new places through travel.■





District 1 Second Place



Haven Tomblin, a senior at Scott High School, has maintained a 4.5 GPA. She is a member and the secretary of the Tri-M Music Honor Society, a member and the secretary of the National Honor Society, the student body vice president of the Student Council, the alto section leader in chorus, the captain of the varsity basketball team, and the left fielder of the varsity softball team. Haven is a multi-time All-State Chorus honoree and represented her school on the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Pilgrimage for Youth to New England and Canada in 2023. A dedicated community volunteer, she has helped distribute 5,000 Thanksgiving meals annually for Boone Memorial Hospital, supported American Red Cross blood drives, assisted with Special Olympics events, and read to elementary students through the Hawks Huddle program. Haven's summers are spent working as a lifeguard at Water Ways and job shadowing at local physical therapy centers.

She plans to pursue a bachelor's degree in health science and become a part of the physical therapy program at Marshall University, allowing me to own and operate Safe Haven Physical Therapy in the future. ■

Haven Tomblin Scott High School

According to the United States Census Bureau (2024), approximately 14 percent of individuals living in rural West Virginia under the age of 65 live with a disability. That population includes my grandfather, which is why this topic is so important to me. Although the spread of the opioid epidemic and the decline of the coal industry combined to devastate our rural community and decimate our economy for much of the past decade, the leaders of the area in which I live have remained committed to assisting one of our most vulnerable populations — people with disabilities. To eliminate barriers and enhance independent living and employment opportunities for West Virginians with disabilities, we must first understand the challenges these individuals face. Barriers include but are not limited to physical, attitudinal, communication, economic, and social challenges.

The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024) noted some physical barriers are obvious, such as structural deficiencies that prevent or block mobility access, including steps or curbs that block a person with mobility impairment from entering a building or using a sidewalk. Others are less obvious, such as medical equipment, including x-ray or mammography equipment that requires a person to stand; weight scales that do not accommodate a wheelchair; lack of elevators in multi-floor buildings; or a limited number of handicap parking spaces.

Attitudinal barriers often contribute to other barriers. For example, some people might not be aware that difficulties in getting to or in a place can make it difficult for a person with a disability from participating in everyday life and typical daily activities. Stereotyping is a common attitudinal barrier people with disabilities often face. People sometimes stereotype those with disabilities, assuming their quality of life is poor or that they are unhealthy because of their impairments. Other attitudinal barriers include stigma, prejudice, and discrimination. Some people might see a disability as a personal tragedy or something that needs to be cured or prevented.

Society's attitude toward individuals with disabilities appears to have improved because of increased awareness of their contributions to society and their abilities to overcome enormous challenges. It is more widely recognized that a disability is what occurs when a person's functional needs are not addressed in their physical and social environments. If a disability is viewed as a social responsibility in which everyone can be supported to live independent and full lives, it is easier to recognize and address challenges that everyone, including those with disabilities,

(See Tomblin p16)



Addison McCormick

North Marion High School

In 2006, a group of young people in West Virginia made a big difference by helping pass a law that created Disability History Week. This law ensures that public schools in the state teach students about disability history. It is an important step toward raising awareness and promoting understanding and inclusion. However, people with disabilities still face challenges every day. By addressing these challenges, we can help improve their lives and open up more opportunities for independent living and jobs.

Many places, like buildings and public transportation, are not fully accessible. Missing ramps, elevators, or accessible restrooms make it hard for people with disabilities to get around and participate in daily activities. In the United States, an average of 65% of curb ramps and 48% of sidewalks are not accessible (Eisenberg et al., 2020). Some people have negative attitudes or stereotypes about disabilities, which can lead to discrimination and make it harder for people with disabilities to get an education, a job, or even be included in social activities. People who have hearing, speech, or cognitive disabilities often struggle to access information because tools like sign language interpreters or easy-to-read materials may not be available. It can also be expensive to get the resources people with disabilities need, like assistive devices, healthcare, or transportation. Fewer job opportunities make it even harder to afford these things. On top of all this, laws that are supposed to protect the rights of people with disabilities are not always enforced properly, and there may not be enough funding for programs that provide support.

To remove these barriers, we need to make places more accessible by adding ramps, elevators, and other features to public spaces and transportation. Existing buildings should be checked and updated to ensure they are accessible to everyone. 70% of people with disabilities have reported being unable to access public buildings due to their disability (Burns et al., 2023). Although this isn't in compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act, many cities don't have the infrastructure to accommodate or don't care enough to do so. Raising awareness and educating people is also important. Disability History Week can include events and workshops to teach the community about disabilities and fight stereotypes. Teachers, employers, and public officials should get training on how to create an inclusive environment. Communication barriers can be addressed by providing tools like text-to-speech devices, captions for videos, and materials in formats that are easy to understand. Businesses and public services should also use inclusive communication methods.

District 2 First Place



Addison McCormick is a senior at North Marion High School. Throughout high school she maintained straight A's and a 4.0 GPA. She is a member of the student council was the vice president during her freshman and junior year of high school. She was the secretary for the senior class. She is a Health Sciences and Technology Academy (HSTA) graduate that involves creating a research project each year and presenting it at a symposium.

She plans to attend West Virginia University and major in Neuroscience. After earning her bachelor's degree, she intends to attend medical school and specialize in pediatric neurology.

Addison has had a passion for reading since elementary school, and that love has only grown over the years. So far this year, she's already read 58 books. In addition to reading, she's passionate about gardening. She has 30 plants in her room and takes great pride in caring for them. Her love for plants began in 2020 and has only grown since, as she frequently adds new ones to her collection. Her most recent addition, a Swiss cheese plant, is currently her favorite. ■





District 2 Second Place



Allie Ellyson is a senior at Gilmer High School. Since her freshman year, she has been a varsity basketball player. This season, her team won the state championship, and she was honored to be named MVP. She also participated in the varsity track this year. In addition to her athletic commitments, she has dedicated significant time to her academics. She is a member of the National Honor Society, the National Thespian Society, and serves as treasurer for Mu Alpha Theta. She ranks near the top of her class.

Allie plans to attend the University of Rio Grande, where she will play college basketball and major in diagnostic medical sonography with a concentration in cardiovascular sonography. After completing the two-year program and earning her associate degree, she will continue her studies for an additional two years in the general concentration to earn a bachelor's degree in both areas. Allie aims to enter the workforce while also pursuing her passion for basketball by training young children who want to learn the game.■



Allie Ellyson Gilmer High School

In 2006, a significant step forward was made in West Virginia for the rights of people with disabilities when a group of young activists successfully influenced the establishment of Disability History Week. This required that all public schools in West Virginia incorporate disability history into their curriculum, acknowledging the long history of discrimination, resilience, and contributions of people with disabilities. By mandating the teaching of disability history, empathy and awareness is taught among all students. However, while Disability History Week has helped raise awareness, there is still a long way to go in addressing and understanding the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from living fully independent and equitable lives. We should consider the barriers faced by people with disabilities, and strategies to help eliminate these barriers to improve independent living and employment opportunities.

People with disabilities encounter several obstacles that can significantly impact their quality of life and access to opportunities. Physical barriers are one of the most common forms of discrimination. Often going unnoticed to many. Several public spaces, workplaces, and even educational institutions are not fully accessible to individuals with mobility impairments. These physical barriers might include a lack of ramps, inadequate signage, or inaccessible transportation options, which limit the independence of individuals with physical disabilities.

Another significant issue is attitudinal barriers. People with disabilities often face stigmatization, bias, and stereotyping, which can influence the way they are treated and perceived by society. The internet is often a harsh and inappropriate place to be due to lots of inappropriate and offensive jokes. Many people still hold misconceptions about the disabilities and contributions of individuals with disabilities, assuming they are less capable or dependent on others. These attitudes can be discouraging, making it harder for individuals with disabilities to access employment, education, and social engagement opportunities.

Communication barriers affect people with hearing, speech, or cognitive impairments. A lack of accessible communication methods, such as sign language interpreters, captioning, or alternative communication devices, can isolate individuals with disabilities and prevent them from participating fully in both social and professional interactions. Additionally, a lack of universal design in technology can make digital spaces inaccessible to many, further excluding people with disabilities in an increasingly online world.

Catherine Glodowski

Weir High School

Barriers faced by individuals with disabilities are as diverse and unique as the individuals themselves. These challenges can range from environmental obstacles making daily activities difficult to larger, systemic issues like limited or inappropriate access to healthcare and education. Four years ago I gained a deeper understanding of the struggles faced by those with special needs, when my aunt, who has severe disabilities, came to live with my family. She is entirely dependent on others, as much of her cognitive and physical development stopped progressing around the age of two. She faces significant challenges in communication due to being nonverbal and requires constant supervision to ensure her safety, attend to her personal needs, and manage her epilepsy. To ensure she has a fulfilling life, my mother has become her full-time caregiver, providing support in areas such as feeding, bathing, dressing, and mobility assistance.

Laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) made great strides in protecting individuals with disabilities and ensuring greater access to educational and employment opportunities. However, the needs of individuals with disabilities are varied, and my aunt's needs are especially complex. This makes it difficult to create universal care plans, as each person's needs must be considered individually. For my aunt, an effective plan would require the involvement of family members and a focus on what is meaningful to her. Others might need a totally different approach.

Participation in daily activities is crucial to her well-being. She enjoys eating out, attending sporting events, and listening to live music. However, there are often obstacles that hinder access to these activities. For example, there is frequently a lack of accessible parking, physical barriers like curbs or broken elevators, and restaurants that do not serve soft foods or have ways to puree meals. Additionally, many restrooms fail to accommodate the space needed for a wheelchair, the individual, and a caregiver.

The concept of independent living differs for each person. For my aunt, independence involves having a reliable schedule, access to the community, and time spent with peers in a safe and supportive environment. A year ago, her day program facility closed unexpectedly, disrupting her routine and cutting off access to community trips and social interactions. The closure occurred

District 3 First Place



Catherine Glodowski is a senior at Weir High School. She is an honor student who has maintained a 4.0 grade point average and earned 20 college credits. Throughout high school, she has been a dedicated member of the varsity soccer and swim teams, serving as co-captain of the swim team. She has also been actively involved in school leadership and service organizations, including student council, the National Honor Society, and the Girls' Athletic Association. She has a strong passion for music, particularly jazz, and was honored to be a member of both the Governor's School for the Arts and the WVU High School Honor Jazz Band. Community service has been a significant part of her high school experience. For the past 10 years, she has served as an altar server at her church. Last year, she mentored young swimmers in a community swim league, and she has also contributed her musical talents at community events such as First Fridays and swing dances. In addition, she has volunteered with local charities that support individuals in need, including those with visual and physical impairments.

Catherine plans to continue her education at West Virginia University and intends to major in music and health, followed by an advanced degree in physical therapy. ■





District 3 Second Place



Addison Duffy is a senior at Weir High School. Starting in her junior year, she has taken both dual credit and Advanced Placement (AP) classes to prepare for college. Addison has played volleyball throughout high school and earned a varsity letter for three years. In both her junior and senior years, she had the opportunity to compete at the state level with her team. She has also been an active member of the school's Pep Club and the Girls Athletic Association (GAA) for three years.

Outside of school, Addison has volunteered her time with several local programs. She helped with Energy Express, a summer reading program for children, and volunteered at both the local Food Truck Festival and her church's annual festival. This summer, she plans to begin volunteering at the local animal shelter and hopes to continue helping there during school breaks.

Addison will attend West Virginia University, where she plans to major in biology. Her long-term goal is to attend veterinary school and eventually open her own clinic. She has always had a strong passion for animals and plants and wants to give back to her community by caring for animals. Through her time at the animal shelter, she hopes to learn more about different breeds and how to help animals find loving homes. ■

Addison Duffy Weir High School

In 2006, West Virginia became a pioneer in disability advocacy by passing a law that requires the teaching of disability history in all public schools, making a significant step towards disability awareness and foster inclusion. However, while this law shows progress, people in West Virginia still face barriers and blockages in their full participation in society. These barriers, which are physical, attitudinal, communication, and economic challenges, continue to limit access to education, employment, and independent opportunities. Addressing and fixing these barriers is essential for creating a more inclusive society where individuals who are classified as "normal" and individuals who are disable can thrive and co exist together. This essay will bring up the various challenges faced by people with disabilities in West Virginia and talks about ideas on how to end these obstacles, making the probability of independence and employment opportunities for people with disabilities much higher than what it is.

People with disabilities face several physical barriers that can significantly limit their independence and access to public spaces, services, and employment opportunities. These barriers can be found in daily life some examples are inaccessible public buildings and workplaces, transportation challenges, and inaccessible housing. Many older buildings lack features like ramps, elevators, or wide doorways that people with disabilities may need to safely use the building. The solution to end inaccessible public buildings and workplaces would be to newly construct and meet the Americans with Disabilities Act standards. This will include ramps, elevators, wider doorways, and accessible restrooms to be installed. Getting around can be difficult for people with disabilities due to the lack of transportation accessibility. Explaining and improving accessible public transportation should be a priority. To solve this problem, there should be more buses, trains, and other forms of mass transportation are equipped with ramps, lifts, and designated spaces for those with disabilities. Affordable housing in areas where physical barriers are lacking should accommodate people with mobility impairments. Governments should incentivize builders to include design principals in housing projects to ensure they are able to accommodate people with disabilities.

People with disabilities often face various challenges, attitudinally, within society. People with disabilities are always stereotypes as being dependent, less capable, and pitiable. We should raise awareness and educate the public about the diversity of disabilities and how individuals can help challenge stereotypes. Another solution is to highlight successful individuals with disabilities in



Joshua Copley

Tug Valley High School

In the ever so rapidly advancing society that is the 21st century United States people are still being marginalized, specifically individuals with disabilities. A disability is defined as a condition, either body or mind, that keeps an individual from being able to participate in activities or limits what they can and cannot do in the world. Within West Virginia, approximately 33% of the population (584,123 people) have a disability (CDC). Having a disability should not limit a person's ability to thrive and become a productive member of society. Barriers such as lack of inclusion in work environments, discrimination faced by the public, accessibility of buildings, education issues, and many other things keep people with disabilities from living the normal human life everyone deserves. Transforming this state into a more inclusive area for people with disabilities will not only attract more people to this state but will also create an effect that will cause other states within the United States to join the change. A declining population within West Virginia will also be changed to an increasing population due to the inclusion that would be introduced for people with disabilities. So, the best step forward is to improve upon physical barriers, attitudinal barriers, communication barriers, economic barriers, and educational barriers.

Furthermore, eliminating the physical restraints placed on people with a disability will be one of the biggest helps towards a more inclusive society. Ensuring that all public buildings have a wheelchair-accessible ramp makes a step towards a society where people can easily enjoy the basic right of entering buildings. Also providing funding toward paratransit services and adaptive equipment within public transportation will increase the ability for a person with a disability to be able to perform daily activities with ease. While also providing a universal design for all future buildings that will be accessible to everyone no matter their disability.

Moreover, changing the public view and attitudes towards the disabled will be able to spark a much-needed change today and create a safer environment for everyone. Launching more awareness campaigns and community inclusion events that will educate a community or group of people about a disability, creates an environment where someone sees someone else's struggle and begins to imagine life through their eyes. This creates a safe space for a person to retreat to when they are in their lowest of lows and offers trust within a community that would spread to further places. Respecting someone's differences such as ID/DD (intellectual and developmental disabilities), mental health condition, or physical health condition should be the utmost

(See Copley p12)

District 5 First Place



Joshua Copley, a senior at Tug Valley High School and Valedictorian, earned three associate degrees through the Early College Academy at Southern WV Community and Technical College. He has served in student government for three years, is Vice President of the National Honor Society, and captain of the Academic Team. A dedicated leader and volunteer, Joshua has helped organize community service events, led school discussions, and participated in a service trip to Northport, NY. He represented West Virginia in the U.S. Senate Youth Program and is both a Grow Your Own participant and an Underwood-Smith Teaching Scholar. He also played baseball for three years and served as a school sports broadcaster.

Joshua plans to attend Marshall University to study Secondary Education, focusing on General Science or Biology. He's been accepted into the Honors College and hopes to become a teacher in West Virginia.

In his free time, Joshua enjoys reading—currently *No Son of Mine* by West Virginia author Jonathan Corcoran—spending time with friends and family, playing pickleball, following world news, and staying active in his community.■





District 5 Second Place



Courtney Curnutte is a senior at Chapmanville High School. She has a 3.8 GPA and has passed the Advanced Placement (A.P) Language exam to qualify for college credit while also completing English 101 and 102 college credits. She is part of the National Honor Society as well as the National Technical Honor Society. During her high school years she won the overall WVAA Doubles State Championship in 2023, overall Singles Tennis State Championship in 2024 and Team Championship in 2024.

Courtney plans to further her athletic and academic career at West Liberty University, where she will major in speech pathology.

She greatly enjoys spending time at Eagles Nest and being with the kids. Courtney often volunteers at Dignity Hospice, where she brings gifts to residents. She also gives tennis lessons to younger kids eager to learn the sport, helps with her class's homecoming float each year, and looks for every opportunity to support her community. Courtney is dedicated to helping others and supporting her friends, family, and community. ■



Courtney Curnutte Chapmanville Regional High School

Disabilities can be difficult to understand, especially for those who do not experience them firsthand. There is a vast range of disabilities, each with its unique challenges. However, what is often more difficult to grasp are the invisible barriers that individuals with disabilities encounter daily. Unfortunately, the task of overcoming these barriers is often viewed as invincible by many. I believe the true conflict lies in society's lack of openness and its limited dedication to ensuring equal opportunities and access for all. If we develop a more open mindset and genuine belief in the potential of every person, regardless of their circumstances, overcoming these obstacles is not only possible, but within reach.

It is often experienced that students with disabilities are not taken seriously in professional environments, such as schools and public spaces. Many administrators hold the belief that a disability somehow diminishes the value of these students' desire to learn, presuming that they are unlikely to succeed in the broader society despite their educational efforts. This perspective is misleading. The educational system itself often serves as a barrier for students with disabilities. The lack of faith in their potential, with the low expectations set by many administrators, leads to a severe lack of support and quality of education these students receive. This lack of investment in their success contributes to the view of harmful stereotypes and undermines their opportunities for meaningful achievement whilst education being the first step and foundation to employment and future opportunities.

Employment rates for individuals with disabilities remain persistently low, regardless of various circumstances. According to the West Virginia Developmental Disabilities Council (WVDDC), the employment rate for individuals with non-severe disabilities is 74%, which is comparable to the rate of 75% for those without disabilities. In contrast, the employment rate for individuals with severe disabilities is significantly lower, at only 25%. This low rate highlights the ongoing challenges faced by people with disabilities in securing meaningful employment opportunities. Provided from the same source, it is evident that some individuals with disabilities come to decide not to work because of their lack of self-esteem and independence. To my knowledge and opinion, this issue is also based on the thought that they don't have as much of a chance as they would without whatever disability they may face, whilst this thought is based on societies views of disabled people of various kinds to be less affective in the work force.

Societies' view on disabled individuals has an affective impact on

(Wolfe continued from p2)

people with disabilities together will help West Virginia tear down the walls that make people feel lonely by showcasing that people with disabilities have a village of individuals willing to learn how to properly support them. A community is stronger when its citizens understand each other, and programs, such as classes on people-first language and team-building exercises that combine people with disabilities and people without, will help them achieve that goal.

Furthermore, I believe a requirement for smart-home technology to be installed in all housing facilities will help break physical barriers that currently separate people with disabilities from people without them. When a group of West Virginia youth helped establish Disability History Week, it broke many educational barriers and brought awareness to people with disabilities inside the classroom. However, many physical barriers still remain outside the classroom. For example, many new housing facilities are not properly equipped with helpful technology to enhance independent living for people with disabilities. In 2024, technology is so complex that almost anything can be done with it, but far too many physical barriers for people with disabilities seeking to live independently still exist. There are countless unique people with disabilities, so one piece of technology will not work for everyone, but an increase in the construction of houses with smart-home technology will provide more opportunities for enhanced independent living for people with disabilities. Claire Perlman, a person who has a disability and uses smart-home technology, calls it “life-changing” and gives a testimony of how the technology has given her much more independence (Wirecutter, 2023). West Virginia is not known for being wealthy, but I believe the investment in smart-home technology for housing for people with disabilities is a worthwhile purchase. Humanity cannot put a price on independence, and implementing this technology would be a major step in breaking down physical barriers.

Moreover, job training programs and support services specifically for people with disabilities can be created to provide better and more equal-employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Disappointingly, several employers in West Virginia are much less willing to hire individuals with disabilities because they are concerned they cannot do their job. However, we can assuage this concern if the community programs implemented in West Virginia involve job training. West Virginia ranks last in the percentage of working-age people with disabilities employed at 28 percent, which is another barrier that needs to be broken expeditiously (West Virginia Developmental Disabilities Council, n.d.). My idea to overcome this obstacle is to provide more networking opportunities, specifically designed job training

(See Wolfe p13)



Sydney Wolfe, the 2025 Disability History Essay Contest State Winner, received her certificate from West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services Counselor Lisa Vinson during the Senior Awards Ceremony at Chapmanville Regional High School. ■



Addison McCormick, the 2025 Disability History Essay Contest District 2, First place winner, received her certificate from West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services Counselor Rich Ward during the Senior Awards Ceremony at North Marion High School. ■

Will you be next?



(Copley continued from p10)

priority of everyone and will enrich the community's well-being. Planting the seeds of change within a community will foster the growth of everyone and ensure that everyone achieves their best.

To continue, communication is a major problem that affects people with different types of difficulties. Interpreting speech or reading is a major barrier placed upon people with disabilities (ADA). Creating a wider availability of American Sign Language (ASL) will help those who are deaf be able to live a normal life without constantly needing to adapt to whatever location they are in. Then creating materials in multiple ways such as Braille (universally accepted writing system for the visually impaired), large print, or audio to cater to many different needs of different disabilities. Training staff in these different communication skills will take away the intimidation someone who has communication difficulties faces when going out in public. No person should feel uncomfortable going to perform a normal human task of going to the bank or getting groceries from the local store. This will be able to make everyone feel like a normal person instead of feeling like a lesser of a human because of something they have.

In addition, the barrier of finances and lack of employment that is placed upon someone with a disability should be something of the past. Creating job development training that is tailored for individuals with disabilities will help bring them into the workforce. Then providing a tax incentive to companies that hire people that have disabilities will increase the ability for them to get a job. Also, offering financial education to help individuals manage their finances can also lead to building the opportunity for people with disabilities to start their own businesses. This would cradle original ideas that have not been able to be expressed in society due to it being overlooked. Effectively creating a society where everyone's idea is heard in a more accepting way.

Likewise, another overlooked barrier that affects people with disabilities is the lack of educational opportunities for those who struggle with ID/DD or something else that affects learning. Advocating for more inclusive classrooms that also strongly respects the individualized learning plan

Page 12 (See Copley p19)

(Cumutte continued from p10)

their own views of themselves as well as their self-esteem. If everyone surrounding said individuals' views being different than the average human being as weird, less than, or incapable, how are they supposed to think and feel any differently about themselves? Referencing to the National Library of Medicine, during childhood, there is evidence that children with disabilities experience higher levels of psychological distress (e.g., depression) compared to their peers without disabilities and that those who experienced a childhood disability exhibit more depressive symptoms at age 50 compared to those who did not experience this stressor. As someone with type one diabetes, I can confirm, having a disability is a significant emotional and mental burden. A stern wall between individuals with disabilities and their success in employment and independence is the lack of confidence they confide in themselves as well as from society that surrounds them. Being judged and commented on by those who have not experienced what others have, comes off as mentally puzzling and damaging, especially to those of a young age, causing said mental issues to stick and lead to further, much more intense problems.

Another immense issue tied to having a disability and increasing opportunities is the variety of technological aid and consideration of those who don't have equal capability for job requirements that are a primary economic source in West Virginia such as coal mining etc. In my opinion we need an advancement in technologies to aid those that have disabilities and help them fulfill job requirements. Employers could invest in accommodation for people with disabilities of all kinds so they could become successful in their work environment. This would create equal employment opportunities for those with a disability and change societal views on equality considering accommodation would be normalized and provided for those who need it.

The persistent barriers faced by individuals with disabilities, both in education, employment, independence, and mental health are primarily a result of societal misunderstandings, low expectations, and a lack of systemic support. By promoting a more inclusive mindset, investing in proper accommodations and technology, and challenging damaging stereotypes, we can create a more equalized society that supports individuals with disabilities to reach their full potential and thrive in both educational and professional environments. ■



due to a combination of there being a shortage of highly trained staff and short retention of staff due to low wages. Since the closure of her day program, she has lost much of her social interaction and the daily activities that brought her comfort. Without these, she engages in self-stimulatory behaviors, such as scratching, grinding her teeth, chewing, and pacing. These actions are how she copes with the disruption of her routine.

Access to appropriate healthcare is another critical factor in my aunt's ability to live independently. Because she is nonverbal, autistic, and has severe cognitive and physical impairments, finding healthcare providers who can meet her needs has been a constant challenge. For example, when attempting to acquire assistance to ease the transition process of my aunt moving into our house many mental health professionals turned her away because they were not trained to handle her specific needs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she missed another opportunity to be included in her day program because the facility required everyone to wear a mask, which created sensory issues that she could not tolerate. Her most recent challenge is breast cancer, and she is unable to follow instructions for tests like mammograms or scans. She does not understand the effects of treatment, nor can she sit still for long periods, making medical procedures and treatments difficult.

Problems faced by those with disabilities are often unique to the individual and should be addressed individually as much as possible. However, critical pieces of action planning might benefit a large part of West Virginia's total population. First, it would be helpful if all professions and services offered in our state were required to participate in some type of educational training so that they were better prepared to support people with disabilities. This training should be ongoing and evolving. Next, facilities whose main purpose is to support individuals with disabilities will need much more support than what is currently allotted to them. These facilities need to have access to appropriate education in order to provide better services and once this education is acquired, their staff should receive a wage sufficient enough to attract and retain employees. Most importantly, allow the person with disabilities and their families when appropriate to play a major role in identifying what is most needed for their independence and best quality of life.

In conclusion, ensuring supports for people with disabilities so they can live as independently as possible presents complex challenges that require personalized, consistent care and adequate resources. Laws like ADA and IDEA created a strong foundation to supporting and protecting the rights of individuals

(See Glodowski p16)

exercises, and support services to people with disabilities. In a society where many opportunities come from people you know, networking conventions specifically for people with disabilities could be vital in their success in the workforce. They deserve to have the same employment opportunities as everyone else, and establishing meetings for employers to interact with job-seeking individuals with disabilities is the best way to accomplish that. By pairing networking opportunities with targeted job training, I am confident we can eliminate that barrier.

Disability History Week has been essential in breaking down attitudinal and physical barriers for people with disabilities, but more work needs to be done. I know from my brief time as a person with a disability how lonely it can feel, how much it can limit your independence, and how it can affect the way others treat you. I am passionate about removing the barriers that make individuals with disabilities feel unequal and form unnecessary roadblocks on their paths to success. My ideas to host community programs, apply smart-home technology, and create networking opportunities would be valuable steps toward breaking down all of the barriers that still stand in the way of people with disabilities from living to their fullest potential. No obstacle is too big to prohibit people with disabilities from accomplishing any and all of their goals, but it is the work of West Virginia as a whole to prove it.

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(Duffy continued from p8)

(McCormick continued from p5)

different fields to show that disabilities does not define capability. Another problem is segregation, many people with disabilities face exclusion from social, educational, and employment opportunities because of the assumptions that are not capable to succeed. To solve this, we can encourage mentorship and support programs that connect individuals with disabilities to those who can help guide and share experiences.

People with disabilities often face communication challenges, this can vary depending on their disability. For example, hearing impairments can make someone face challenges in environments where spoken communication is essential. Providing access to sign language interpreters or services in meetings or events. Or minimizing background noise or offering quieter environments can help hearing impaired individuals. People with mental health disabilities, such as depression or anxiety, can have troubles communicating their emotions or needs. To help people with mental health disabilities we can create environments where people feel safe to share their concerns without fear of judgement. We can also encourage them to use therapy or counseling that can help people express their feelings in a controlled and supportive environment.

People with disabilities experience higher unemployment rates compared to the general population and even if they are employed, they experience underemployment and lower wages. The solutions to these are quite simple. As they are to pay equal and to activate policies that encourage inclusive hiring. Access to education and skill development are also issues, economically, for people with disabilities. Due to the lack of accessibility and insufficient support this limits their ability to gain the skills necessary to advance their careers. Schools should create scholarships and financial aid programs for students with disabilities, they can expand access to online educating programs, or they could fund inclusive educational practices at all levels to make sure that schools are accessible and provide necessary support.

In conclusion, West Virginia has made progress in disability awareness, but barriers still limit the full participation of people with disabilities in society. These barriers,

However, many of these accommodations are too expensive for people with disabilities, so helping with jobs and finances is another key step. Businesses can be encouraged to hire people with disabilities by offering tax credits or help with workplace accommodations. More job training and support programs should be created specifically for people with disabilities. Strengthening laws and advocacy is also crucial. Disability rights laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act need to be enforced, and funding for programs that offer personal assistance, affordable housing, and assistive technology should be increased. 81% of people with disabilities with low income in the United States are eligible for housing assistance but do not receive it (Sloane, 2024). To help people with disabilities live independently, it's important to build support systems that let them thrive where they want to live. This includes having accessible homes, reliable transportation, and personal assistance when needed. For jobs, government agencies, nonprofits, and businesses can work together to create opportunities. Programs like job coaching, internships, and mentoring can help people with disabilities build skills and gain confidence. Workplaces should value diversity and support employees with disabilities so they feel included and empowered.

People with disabilities face barriers in their daily lives that no one should have to deal with. From inaccessible buildings to blatant discrimination, their lives can be difficult at times. Many groups have come together to try to negate these challenges by advocating for equality. By tackling these challenges and taking action, West Virginia can build on the success of Disability History Week and create a more inclusive community where everyone has the chance to succeed.■

Blake Huffman
2015 State Winner
Winfield
High School



Lindsey Beane
2016 State Winner
Hurricane
High School



Lydia Andlinger
2017 State Winner
The Linsly School
High School



with disabilities; this includes having closed captioning and text-to-speech. Another way to prevent communication barriers is ensuring that there is always an ASL interpreter and braille present at public events.

People with disabilities also face attitudinal barriers. This type of barrier can be the most impactful on the happiness and self-image of those with disabilities. This includes being discriminated against, being perceived negatively, having stigma placed around them for their disorder, and not being given equal opportunities due to their disability. As a society, we need to ensure that people with disabilities do not go through life with a fear of being judged and mistreated. Ways to combat these attitudinal barriers include raising awareness and creating support groups for individuals with disabilities. Raising awareness can begin with schools educating students on disabilities and teaching children how to include people with disabilities. By teaching students from a young age to have positive attitudes toward people with disabilities, it will eliminate attitudinal barriers in the long run. By taking these steps, we can ensure that people with disabilities feel safe in their environment.

Lastly, people with disabilities face economic barriers. This is arguably the most significant obstacle that people with disabilities face when it comes to living independently. Economic struggles are a result of trouble finding employment and dealing with expensive healthcare. The attitudes that employers may have towards people with disabilities can make it harder for them to find jobs. There is an assumption that they cannot perform certain tasks due to their disabilities. Some people with disabilities are never even given the opportunity to join the workforce. Affording healthcare is also a struggle for people with disabilities. As National Library of Medicine States, the cost of medical care for people with disabilities is approximately 3.3 times higher than that of a person without disabilities (Hong). Having a costly disorder while also having difficulty finding a job to support oneself makes it very economically difficult for people with disabilities to thrive. Ways to combat this include training people with disabilities for jobs, adding incentives for employers who will hire them, and offering improved, cheaper healthcare options to individuals with disabilities.

In conclusion, people with disabilities face various barriers, and it would take many steps to eliminate them. However, it is worth it. As a society, we are more than capable of creating an environment where people with disabilities can thrive alongside everyone else. This is key to them living independently and finding employment. Involvement from lawmakers, employers, healthcare providers,

(See Cox next column)

and average citizens is needed to make all the adjustments to tackle barriers.

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This is a great honor for our winning student, and for the school as a whole. Having read the essay myself, I was very proud of the position she took on the essay. Anytime a student wins something, whether academic or athletic, it's exciting. However, for one of our students to win and be recognized in such a meaningful contest, makes the school, community and I'm sure her family -- all the more thrilled.

*Principal, Luke Swiney
Ripley High School*



(Glodowski continued from p13)

(Tomblin continued from p4)

with disabilities. My aunt's story is a testament to the difficulties that people with special needs face and highlights the importance of accessible services, compassionate and educated caregivers, and the need for more systemic changes in healthcare and support systems.

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Allie Ellyson, the 2025 Disability History Essay Contest District 2, Second place winner, received her certificate from West Virginia Statewide Independent Living Council's Chair person Dave Sanders during the Senior Awards Ceremony at Gilmer County High School. ■

experience.

Communication barriers are experienced by people who have disabilities that affect hearing, speaking, reading, writing, and or understanding, and who use diverse ways to communicate than people who do not have these disabilities. Examples of communication barriers include health promotion messages or warning labels written with small print that prevent people with vision impairment from receiving the message. A lack of Braille for people who use screen readers is another example. Auditory health or warning messages might not be accessible to people with hearing impairments, including videos that do not including captioning and oral communications without providing interpretation or American Sign Language. Using technical language, long sentences, and words with several syllables is a significant barrier for people with cognitive impairments.

Social or economic barriers are related to the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, learn, work and age that can contribute to decreased functioning among people with disabilities. People with disabilities are far less likely to be employed, which is an example of a social or economic barrier. People with disabilities often are limited to low-skilled, low-paying jobs, and they might not have access to the same training opportunities as individuals without disabilities. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024), in 2023, 23 percent of people with disabilities, age 18 to 64 years, were employed, while 66 percent of people without disabilities were employed. The unemployment rate for people with a disability was 7.2 percent in 2023, while the rate for those without a disability was 3.5 percent.

My grandfather has been challenged his entire life with physical impairments that affect his ability to walk and talk. I have witnessed his strength and determination, which enabled him to overcome physical, attitudinal, communication, and economic barriers to thrive in a career with the United States Postal Service. His experiences illustrate the need for all buildings to be designed to accommodate people with physical disabilities. Although his ability to speak is impaired, his ability to think is unlimited and inspiring.

I also have another relative who has aphasia and is non-verbal, but she is very accomplished and academically successful. Her disability presented a challenge, but with a good support system, she has flourished and shown the world she is intelligent, worthy, and talented. She is not defined by her disability. I have witnessed firsthand the need for improvement of communication for people who have disabilities.

(Ellyson continued from p6)

Economic barriers are also persistent. According to research, people with disabilities are more likely to experience poverty and have limited access to job opportunities (“2023 Progress Report: Toward Economic Security: The Impact of Income and Asset Limits on People with Disabilities”). In West Virginia employment opportunities are limited. The lack of accommodations and inclusive hiring practices can make it even more challenging for individuals with disabilities to find stable, well-paying jobs. This economic insecurity can lead to a cycle of poverty, as individuals with disabilities may struggle to afford accessible housing, healthcare, and essential services.

Eliminating these barriers requires a broad approach that combines policy reform, education, and community engagement. One of the primary ways to promote physical accessibility is through stronger enforcement of accessibility laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). West Virginia could benefit from state-led programs that impel institutions to improve their accessibility, like providing grants for installing ramps, elevators, and other features. Ensuring that transportation is accessible would make it easier for people with disabilities to commute to work, attend school and participate in community activities.

Addressing attitudinal barriers requires investment in public education and awareness programs. Disability History Week is a great start but expanding it to include community events and awareness campaigns could further encourage inclusivity. As well as teaching, schools should incorporate programs that foster understanding toward people with disabilities.

To overcome communication barriers, investing in accessible technology and communication tools is essential. Schools and businesses should prioritize having alternative methods available like text-to-speech programs and digital accessibility tools. Additionally, West Virginia could establish partnerships with technology companies to create affordable devices and software, ensuring that individuals with disabilities have access to the tools they need for independent communication.

Economic barriers can be reduced by creating employment programs and training opportunities specifically designed for individuals with disabilities. West Virginia could expand training programs to include adaptive skills and assistive technology, to help people succeed in various fields. Additionally, employers should be encouraged to provide reasonable accommodations to employees. State-funded job placement programs could also be established to connect individuals with disabilities to meaningful employment, helping to break the cycle of poverty.

(See Ellyson next column)

(Ellyson continued previous column)

Establishing more affordable housing options in West Virginia would allow individuals with disabilities to live in communities of their choice without financial strain. Furthermore, expanding community-based support services, such as in-home care and accessible health clinics, would help people with disabilities to manage their daily lives and healthcare needs with more ease.

Employment opportunities for people with disabilities can be enhanced through collaboration between the public and private sectors. Mentorship programs connecting individuals with disabilities to successful professionals in their fields could help build networks, improve skills, and increase employment prospects.

The establishment of Disability History Week in West Virginia was a significant milestone in the complete inclusion of people with disabilities. By tackling physical, attitudinal, communication, and economic barriers, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals with disabilities. Through policy reform and community awareness, West Virginia has the potential to become a state where people with disabilities can thrive independently and live with dignity and equality. The journey toward a barrier-free society is ongoing, but with concerted effort, West Virginians can pave the way for a future that embraces diversity and empowers all its residents. ■



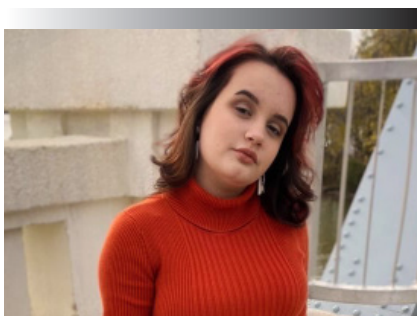


(Tomblin continued from p16)

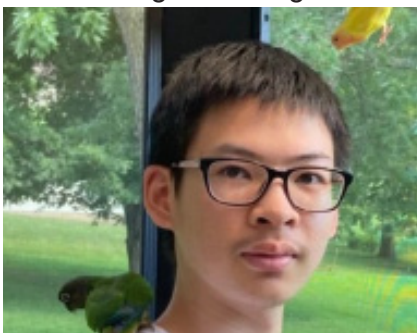
Hannah Casey
2021 State Winner
The Linsly School



Mattelyn Lamp
2022 State Winner
St. Marys High School



Lingjian Zheng
2023 State Winner
Parkersburg South High School



Caleb Messer
2024 State Winner
Scott High School



As a society, we must search for every opportunity to create a better physical environment for individuals who are physically impaired. Elevators, ramps, and slanted curbs should be the norm and not the exception in all buildings. We must continue to raise awareness and foster a more inclusive attitude toward individuals with disabilities in every area of life, embracing their abilities and focusing on their capacities. We must become more educated in how we can assist people with impairments. We must celebrate their successes, resilience, and strength. When communicating with someone with a disability, we must be respectful and patient; we must use straightforward language and a suitable method, such as sign language, pictures, or user-friendly technology. We must be more inclusive socially, academically, and professionally. Social, academic, and workplace environments must be designed to ensure accessible equipment for individuals with disabilities. Minimum accessibility standards need to be established and enforced. Skill development training needs to be enhanced and more available to people with disabilities.

Ultimately, we must raise awareness! My involvement with the Special Olympics at my high school has inspired me to become more aware of the gifts those with disabilities have to offer. Their strength, resilience, determination, courage, and accomplishments are to be celebrated. It is our social responsibility to be supportive of those with disabilities so they too can live independent and full lives!

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**WEST VIRGINIA DIVISION OF
REHABILITATION SERVICES**

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

(IEP) of someone. When a student has an IEP then that means the student has a disability or barrier that affects their learning ability which will cater to their needs to make sure the student gets the same quality education and support as everyone else ("Individual Education Plans – National Council for Special Education"). Also, creating after-school programs that can help with the needs of the students that have a disability. Adequately establishing a more inclusive learning environment that fosters the growth of the students and prioritizes the learning and success of all students.

In conclusion, creating a more inclusive West Virginia breaks the barriers that are placed upon people with disabilities. When this is reached new potential is unlocked for those who are excluded from normal life. There will be growing pains because change is not easy, but this is necessary to better the future. Opening new doors of success to those who have never seen these barriers broken. So, making steps to break the barriers of physical, attitudinal, communication, economic, and educational can help improve the future of West Virginia and the United States.

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(Duffy continued from p14)

physical, attitudinal, communication, and economic, still restrict access to education, employment, and independence. By raising awareness, we can create a more inclusive society and by addressing these challenges West Virginia can help people with disabilities thrive and contribute to the community. Making a more vibrant future for all. ■

(History continued from p19)

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 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 concurrent 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,

(See History p21)



Josh Copley, the 2025 Disability History Essay Contest District 5, First place winner, was presented with a check, a certificate and a key chain at Tug Valley High School’s award ceremony by DRS Counselor Lisa Vinson. ■

Congratulations!

To all the winners of the 2025
Disability History Essay Contest

(History continued from p20)

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



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. ■