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Youth in Action! – Learning Disability History

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Are you interested in:

- learning about the people, events, and movements that shaped the world we live in?
- becoming a force for change in the disability community?

If so, take some time to learn about disability history!

Tip: If you come across an unfamiliar word as you read this, don't just skip over it, look it up! This will help you get the information you need AND build a strong vocabulary.

What is Disability History?

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Disability history is the study of the history, culture, contributions, social and civil movements/activism, and film and media representations of people with disabilities as well as disability-related policies, laws and practices.

Why Should I Learn Disability History?

Disability has always been part of the human experience, and to understand how the disability movement needs to progress, we must understand how it came to be. The study of history is crucial to understanding the events that shaped the world we now live in. If we understand our history, we are better able to learn from it and avoid mistakes made in the past so that we can focus our energy on continuing to change the world in positive and meaningful ways.

Getting to know disability history can empower you to take action in your own life and influence the lives of others. It also helps you to better understand your civil rights and responsibilities, and can also improve your self-confidence and sense of identity, as you'll find many individuals who faced obstacles, but persevered to reach their goals.

Disability History can also help you connect to influential leaders, both within and outside the disability community. For example, it can help you build relationships with people from other marginalized communities that face similar challenges. It also can help you to educate individuals and groups who shape public policy, and to find role models and mentors to include in your network. Finally, learning about and sharing disability history helps bring people with disabilities and their allies without disabilities together, which has led to the development of a burgeoning disability movement and culture.

Steps for Getting Started

1. Learn from a variety of resources: You can learn about disability history in many different places. While the internet is full of information on the subject, you can also visit your local or school library. Talk to people with disabilities in your community. There's no better way to learn about disability history than from someone who has lived it, and fortunately for you many of the disability movement's leaders are still alive today. You can watch movies and documentaries and visit museums with disability history exhibits, including the online disability history museum, <http://www.disabilitymuseum.org>. Learning from a variety of places gives you a better overall sense of a subject, and it's a lot more fun!

2. Focus on a few areas to learn more about: There are so many aspects to disability history; you won't be able to learn about them all at once. Try to think about what aspect of disability history interests or means the most to you. You can research the history of people with specific disabilities, or about people with disabilities in employment, education, and independent living, or you can learn about how people with disabilities contributed to major moments in American history, like the Revolutionary War. At some point, you can learn about the disability rights movement and how it fits into other civil rights movements.

Places to start include:

- **People:** There are many famous people in **disability history**, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Harriet Tubman, Frida Kahlo, Wilma Mankiller, and Helen Keller. Others don't have disabilities themselves but had significant impact on the lives of people with disabilities such as Alexander Graham Bell and Clemens von Galens.
- **Leaders:** There were many leaders in the Disability Rights Movement; two important ones to know about are **Edward Roberts**, who started the first independent living centers, and Roland Johnson, who fought for people with disabilities to have the right to speak for themselves.
- **Events:** For example the American School for the Deaf was established in 1817, and in the 1940s Hitler carried out widespread extermination of people with disabilities under Nazi Germany's **Aktion T4** program.
- **Representation:** Disability has been portrayed in films and on television from old black-and-white films such as *City Lights*, to more recent depictions such as *My Left Foot*, and *The Sessions*, as well as on television shows like *Glee*.
- **Policies and Laws:** In addition to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), there are many other **disability-related laws** including the Rehabilitation Act, The Air Carrier Access Act, the Voting Rights Act, and many more.
- **Disability Movements/Activism:** Examples include the **League for the Physically Handicapped 1935 sit-in** at the office of the Emergency Relief Bureau in New York City to protest their unwillingness to refer people with disabilities to the Works Progress Administration (WPA) for employment or the **sit-ins for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1977**.
- **Connections with other communities:** Disability history, culture, and the disability rights movement parallels and intersects with other communities that have faced discrimination (e.g. gender, race, sexual orientation). Examples include **the connection between the Disability Section 504 Sit-in and the African American community**, a **threads of commonality in Transgender and Disability Studies**.

Things to Think About

Organize your information: As you learn new things about disability history, find a way to keep that information in one place. Do it in a way that makes sense and is fun for you. You could write a blog, create collages, keep a journal, write essays, organize your notes, create a web page, make a video, record a podcast series, or use social media to share everything you've learned!

Share your knowledge with others: One of the most important things about learning disability history is passing that knowledge on to others. Tell friends, family members, colleagues, classmates and others about the interesting and important new information you've learned.

Make your own history: Work with your peers, school, or community leaders to start a disability history month/day, club, or advocacy group. You can invite guest speakers, create informational posters, hold events, visit government leaders, and more. For tips and resources, check out *Youth Organizing! Disabled and Proud's* website at <http://www.yodisabledproud.org/organize/>.

Resources

Disability History Timeline: The National Consortium on Leadership and Disability for Youth (NCLD/Youth) created this timeline. It shows major events in disability history from the 1700s through today. You can also take five **“Disability Knowledge and Identity Self-Assessment”** quizzes to keep track of your progress.

National Disability Employment Awareness Month: National Disability Employment Awareness Month is observed every October. The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy helps coordinate activities for this month.

“Blazing the Trail: A New Direction for Youth Development: A Youth Call to Action”: This short report outlines ten actions that youth can take to enhance their development and become leaders in their community and the nation.

Taking action!

Now that you know:

- What disability history is and why learning about it matters,

- Resources and approaches you can use to learn about it, and
 - Some aspects of disability history you could choose to focus on...
- ...Start learning about disability history today!**

Youth Development and Leadership

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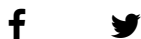
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