



July 26, 2025

Dear Congressmember:

We invite you to join us in honoring the 35th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) by learning from the stories of disabled people and committing to actions that will uphold the rights of people with all types of disabilities nationwide.

The passage of the ADA was a critical civil rights milestone, promising fairness and equality for people with disabilities in all facets of life. To honor the thirty-fifth anniversary of the ADA, we present these stories of Americans nationwide who have been impacted by the ADA. Through their stories, it is clear that you and your colleagues in Congress must protect and expand the rights of people with disabilities.

The [Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities](#) (CCD) is the largest coalition of national organizations working together to advocate for federal public policy that ensures the self-determination, independence, empowerment, integration, and inclusion of children and adults with disabilities. CCD has been around for over fifty years and comprises over a hundred advocacy organizations. The organizations advocate for the whole spectrum of people with disabilities, and this anniversary reminds us how the ADA truly does impact every aspect of American life.

Therefore, as you drive legislative and budgetary changes, which directly or indirectly impact people with disabilities, please reach out to CCD or our membership organizations to gather needed input and perspectives from people with disabilities. We have task forces that cover the following topics:

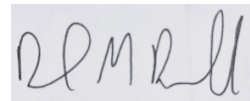
- Developmental Disabilities, Autism, and Family Support
- Education
- Emergency Management
- Employment and Training
- Financial Security and Poverty Ad Hoc
- Fiscal Policy Ad Hoc
- Health
- Housing
- International
- Long Term Services and Supports
- Outdoor Access, Recreation and the Natural World Ad Hoc
- Rights
- Social Security
- Technology and Telecommunication
- Transportation
- Veterans Ad Hoc

Please read the attached stories of Americans with disabilities across the country who the ADA has impacted.. The stories cover transportation, education, services, housing, and more. We hope that by sharing these stories, we can provide a glimpse into the lives of people with disabilities and illustrate the impact the ADA has had on their lives.

Sincerely,



Claire Stanley, CCD Chair  
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Dan Berland, CCD Vice Chair  
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*This stories were collected by the [Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities \(CCD\)](http://theconsortium.org) in honor of the 35th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. To learn more, contact [allie@thekelsey.org](mailto:allie@thekelsey.org).*



**Sarvesh Chandran**

**21 years old**

**Chandler, Arizona**

My name is Sarvesh Chandran. I am 21 years old. I have moderate autism and severe apraxia. I use an augmentative communication device for intelligibly expressing my thoughts and feelings. I type my responses for college courses. I live in Chandler, Arizona.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has been instrumental for community inclusion and accessibility for me. I have been able to fully participate in City of Chandler Programs due to ADA. For example, I have participated in City of Chandler Parks and Recreation programs and classes since I was eight years old. I have participated in camps, educational classes, art classes, and excursions. I have volunteered for Mayor's Youth Council, various activities at the Chandler Nature Center, and the Chandler Library. I regularly attend art classes and shows at Vision Arts Gallery, Chandler Museum, and Chandler Center for the Arts. I have been participating in adaptive recreation classes since I was five years old. I am thankful to City of Chandler for consistently providing ADA accommodations for me. I have been able to be fully included in the community because the ADA accommodations have enabled my parents to accompany me as my communication partners and facilitators. Moreover, the ADA accommodations have enabled my parents to teach me critical thinking and social skills in natural, community settings. Furthermore, the ADA accommodations have enabled me to use my augmentative communication device in the community. The experiences have provided me confidence, empowerment, and transferable skills that I use in college courses and life. Additionally, the ADA disability parking decal enables my parents to park in designated, disabled parking spots in order to keep me safe in crowded parking lots. Therefore, ADA is an irreversible and invaluable lifeline for both me and the disability community. To conclude, I implore the honorable members

of the Congress of our great country, The United States of America, to not only continue funding ADA but also to increase funding for the ADA.



**Joseph Damiano**

**Belfast, New York**

“I think we made great strides when it came to all the advocacy that went into the ADA. I do think if we didn’t do all of the advocacy for the ADA, we might not be where we are today in regards to people with disabilities.” – Joseph Damiano, Self-Advocate.

Joseph Damiano of Belfast, New York has never known life without the Americans with Disabilities Act, the ADA.

“I myself was able to go to college and you never heard about a lot people with disabilities going to college prior the ADA,” said Damiano.

As we mark 35 years since President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act into law, we reflect on the momentous fight for rights for people with disabilities, like Joseph Damiano and millions more. We give thanks to advocates everywhere who never gave up. We consider how the ADA can be improved and we envision what we want the future of the law’s promise to be, as advocates continue to demand better.

Joseph Damiano is preparing for a new chapter of his life. He’s making plans to start in an employment training program while continuing his advocacy as chairman of self-advocacy group the Collaborative of New York.

“We shouldn’t stop advocating for the ADA right now even though the ADA is passed. We still need to fight for that and make sure the ADA stays in place,” said Damiano.



**Dielle De Noon**

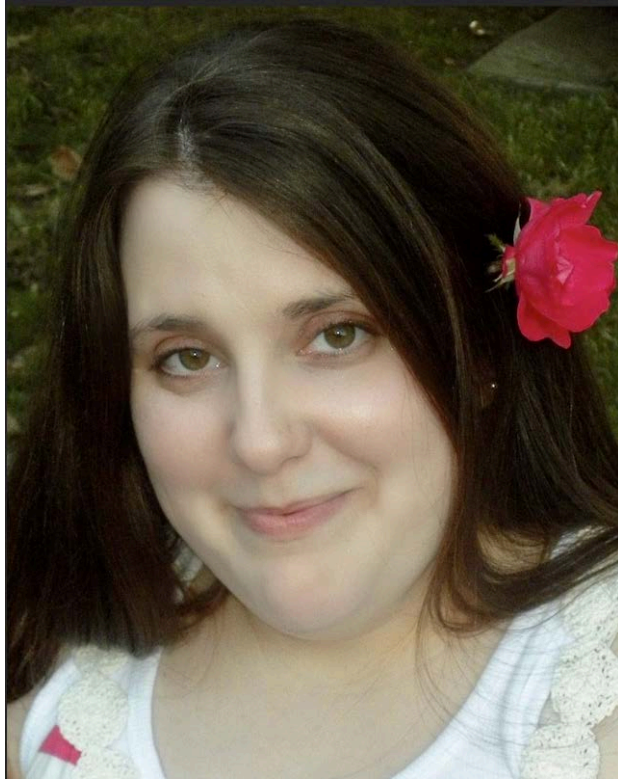
**24 years old**

**Dover, Delaware**

Dielle De Noon is a 24-year-old from Dover, Delaware living with dwarfism. She is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree (her second) in Cybersecurity and Information Assurance from Western Governor's University.

Thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act, Dielle has access to a variety of supports that make her life possible. The ADA has made it possible to live in her own apartment with Home and Community Based Services supporting her; it also provides accessible transportation to everything from doctor's appointments to grocery stores. These supports allow her not just to live in her community, but to be a part of it as well.

Without the ADA, Dielle says "my life would basically be the opposite of what is now." She notes how the law has supported her throughout her life, from schooling, to healthcare, to accessible transportation. Without the ADA, Dielle and millions like her would be denied both the opportunity and the ability to contribute to society, succeed in their careers, and thrive in their communities.



**Kasondra Farmer**

**42 years old**

**Nashville, Tennessee**

My name is Kasondra Farmer, and I am a lifelong resident of Tennessee. I was born with Cerebral Palsy in 1982, and I utilize a manual wheelchair for daily mobility. I was 8 years old when the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990. It still seems crazy to me that, in my lifetime, I have experienced the world both before and after the ADA.

I moved around a lot as a kid. I guess that's to be expected when you're a kid being raised by a single mother who was often working two or three jobs. In my lifetime, I've lived everywhere from apartments to single-family homes to converted mother-in-law suites, essentially splitting a house. All of my living experiences up until my current experience have been in private sector housing and were not truly accessible. However, because we were renting throughout my whole life, we were never allowed to make the kind of changes that would've made these living spaces more accessible. This meant often living in places where doorways were too narrow for my wheelchair causing me either cause damage the door frames, risk damaging my wheelchair, or both. Bathroom were often inaccessible to the point of having to take doors off of hinges and put up shower curtains and other creative measures. I even lived at a home for several years that required me to have assistance getting in and out of the shower.

I want you to close your eyes for just a second and imagine experiencing some of your most personal moments without a door or needing assistance to complete them. This is too often the case for individuals with disabilities in regards to housing.

I went away to college and experienced for the first time what living with some ADA standards might be like. However, even that was not without its limitations. My dorm was a very old building and while my dorm room and bathroom were in themselves accessible, because there was no elevator I could not access the second floor kitchen or anything beyond the first floor of the building. For me that wasn't the end of the world because I had never lived in a place that was fully accessible to me and I had the dining hall. I could meet my friends in the library or other common spaces to study or just hang out.

But looking back now, I think what if I had had a severe food allergy or other complex healthcare needs that would've required access to a kitchen or other private spaces.

Upon graduating from college, I moved back into the family home. I graduated in December 2019 and in May 2010 my family and I experienced the 2010 Nashville floods.

This experience derailed my plans to live independently, and once again, in my life, left us in a wild scramble to find somewhere to live that was even remotely accessible. We were lucky enough to find a new place to rent relatively quickly; however, once again, concessions had to be made in terms of privacy, independence, and safety. Are we seeing an ongoing theme here?

Just last year in May 2024, at the age of 41, was I able to move into an accessible and affordable apartment on my own for the first time in my life. There are still some things that are a compromise here, I have whole cabinets in my kitchen that I can't reach, I have an incredible lack of storage in general, and I've given up the privacy of living in a home for the ease of not having to provide repairs and lawn care but I want you to understand that I also know that I am one of the lucky people in our community across the country. I have the ability to live independently, I've been blessed enough to work full-time jobs since I got out of college, and I have a great support network. I also work full-time in the disability field and so I know just how lucky I am. I hear stories every day of people who are struggling to find access to accessible affordable, living arrangements in our country. People who want, just like you, to be a part of their community. Communities that are more vibrant, resourceful, diverse for having us in them. After all humans as a species, see not just to survive, but to thrive and the disability population is no different. Even when we often face a world that is inaccessible to us from birth.

Whether we are talking about places that fall under section 504 of the Rehab Act, or living arrangements that must meet the 2010 ADA Standards here is the simple true Congress must protect these standards, improve them, and expand the types of housing covered by the ADA. Here's why I hope that you take my words to heart. If you are lucky enough to age, you will join our population. In fact, the disability population is of, if not the only population that individuals can join at anytime. When that time comes for you, as it does for everyone, some of us just got a head start, you will want to be able to stay in your home, to be able to navigate your home, and to be a vibrant part of your own community. You'll have those rights to achieve those things under the ADA and the expansions you can make possible.



## **Steve Ferreira**

### **Renton, Washington**

My name is Steve Ferreira, and I was born with cerebral palsy in Taipei, Taiwan in 1988. I graduated from Bellevue College in 2013. In November 2011, I started a non-profit called [Beyond Disabilities](#) to further my goal of disability awareness. As a motivational speaker, I aim to raise disability awareness within every community I address. I have competed in international competitions in the United States and Europe, earning the bronze medal in shot put in 2008 and the gold medal in discus in 2010.

In 2016, I contacted my hometown, the City of Renton, Washington, to put in signs at a dangerous crosswalk close to my home where I had almost been hit by a car. But nothing happened at the time.

Two years later, while crossing the street in my wheelchair, I was hit by a car that made a right turn onto the road. There was a red light, but no warning about watching for pedestrians. I was okay, but my legs would be gone if my wheelchair had not had a leg guard.

I shared my story with the city multiple times and utilized the ADA to back me up. Using the ADA, I was able to get the city to install a turning light at the crosswalk.

The ADA is important to everyone, not just people in wheelchairs or who use other mobility aids. All of us may at some point have a “temporary” disability, and some people have “invisible disabilities”, and the ADA protects them as well. It is a **social justice issue**.

Disability is unique because it is the only minority group that a person can join at any time in their life. People need to know that people with disabilities are just like other people. Allies should make sure they know about the ADA and what people need to do to comply with the law – and not take it for granted!



**Kalyn Heffernan**  
**Denver, Colorado**  
**38 years old**

My name is Kalyn Rose Heffernan. I live in Denver, Colorado. I was born three years before the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed. I was born with a disability called Osteogenesis Imperfecta, also known as OI or Brittle Bones. I have used a power wheelchair since I was five years old. The chair allows me to navigate the world independently; it gives me freedom. Most of my childhood, I lived in inaccessible housing, having to crawl or be carried upstairs. This was the case for the first 20 years of my life. Things that most people take for granted, like privacy in using the restroom, are things I have never had since the bathroom was never big enough for me to close the door. In and outside of housing, I confronted constant physical barriers, limiting my freedom.

When I left home and attended college, I was able to experience slightly more accessible housing. Still, it wasn't until I moved into publicly funded housing that I had the most accessible experience yet. This is because the housing is required to have higher levels of accessibility since it is covered by the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design. For the first time, I could more easily cook for myself, host friends and family, and care for myself in ways I had never experienced before.

Living in housing covered by the ADA Standards for Accessible Design has supported me as a teacher, artist, and activist. Even though there are ways that my apartment can be even more accessible, I see the stark difference between publicly and privately funded housing: publicly funded housing has higher standards for accessibility because of the ADA. Congress must protect these standards, improve them, and expand the types of housing is covered by the ADA Standards for Design.



**Alex Hitzelberger**  
**22**  
**Louisville, Kentucky**

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), signed into law in 1990, remains a cornerstone of civil rights for individuals with disabilities. Its enduring impact is reflected in countless lives across the country—lives like that of Alex, a young individual who is deafblind. Thanks to the protections and provisions established by the ADA, Alex is not only included in society but empowered to thrive in it.

One powerful example of this is Alex’s experience at **Camp Freedom**, an inclusive outdoor adventure camp designed for people of all abilities. Camp Freedom embodies the ADA’s vision by ensuring its facilities and activities are fully accessible. As a result, Alex was able to take part in exciting, confidence-building experiences such as **zip lining, archery, and fishing**. Using adaptive equipment, and support from trained staff, Alex experienced the joy and adrenaline of soaring through the air, the focus and achievement of hitting a target, and the peace of connecting with nature—all in a setting that prioritized safety, dignity, and inclusion.

Beyond recreational opportunities, the ADA has also helped create spaces for health and wellness for individuals with disabilities. One such space is **RISE Fitness**, an adapted fitness program that gives Alex the chance to engage in regular physical activity alongside peers. Through accessible equipment, personalized support, and an encouraging environment, RISE Fitness provides more than just a workout—it fosters **motivation, friendship, and a healthy lifestyle**. Programs like RISE are a direct reflection of what the ADA has made possible: a society where everyone, regardless of ability, can pursue physical wellness and community engagement.

The importance of the ADA cannot be overstated. It ensures that individuals like Alex have access not only to buildings and programs, but also to opportunity, dignity, and belonging. It mandates the removal of physical and societal barriers that once kept people with disabilities isolated from public life. Through this legislation, public spaces, schools, employers, and

recreational facilities are held to a standard that affirms the rights and humanity of all individuals.

Alex's story is a clear example of why we must continue to uphold and strengthen the ADA. Whether zip lining at Camp Freedom or breaking a sweat at RISE Fitness, Alex is not limited by disability—because the ADA has helped create a world where inclusion is the norm, not the exception.



**Isabel Hodge**  
International Task Force Co-Chair  
Executive Director, US International Council on Disabilities  
**Virginia**



**Marcie Roth**  
International Task Force Co-Chair  
Executive Director, World Institute on Disability  
**Maryland**

As disabled American advocates working internationally, we've seen how the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) transformed not only life in the United States but also global disability policy. When negotiations began for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), many countries lacked comprehensive disability legislation. The ADA became a powerful model, and our dear friend, Judith Heumann, one of its architects, helped carry its vision to the world stage.

Judy believed that the ADA was not just a U.S. civil rights law; it was a blueprint for global justice. As the first Special Advisor for International Disability Rights at the U.S. Department of State, she worked tirelessly to ensure that the principles of accessibility, equality, and dignity were embedded in the CRPD. Her vision was clear: *nothing about us without us*, everywhere.

During CRPD negotiations, advocates and diplomats alike referenced ADA language when shaping treaty provisions. Judy's leadership and lived experience gave the movement credibility and heart. Thanks to her, the CRPD reflects not only legal protections but a deep commitment to participation, intersectionality, and community-led change.

Thirty-five years after the ADA's passage, its legacy lives on in every country that has ratified the CRPD. It proved that inclusive policies can change lives, and that when disabled people lead, the world follows.



### **Artus Huffman (AJ) Jr. And Sharonda Huffman**

#### **Abingdon, Maryland**

When my son Artus Huffman (AJ) was diagnosed with autism, my husband and I made a promise to give him the same opportunities as any other child to be included, to feel safe, and to live with dignity. As a 25-year-old Black man with developmental disabilities, AJ faces unique challenges, but the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has been a powerful tool in making sure some challenges do not become barriers.

Because of the ADA, AJ can go to the gym and use public pools like anyone else. He is allowed to bring an aide with him, free of charge, so he can enjoy his workout safely and with support. He is not segregated or sidelined. AJ also has taken advantage of swim lessons because of the ADA. Individuals with autism are at higher risk of drowning. He is part of his community and this kind of normalcy every family wishes for their loved one.

Thanks to ADA guidelines, AJ can fully participate in the same fun activities many take for granted. Public recreation centers, libraries, and parks are required to provide reasonable accommodations, and that has made a world of difference for us. Even at amusement parks, AJ is respected and accommodated. Because he gets anxious in large crowds and long lines, he can access alternative queuing systems something that keeps him calm and allows him to enjoy the

experience, rather than be overwhelmed by it. That small but crucial accommodation gives him the freedom to make joyful memories without fear or stress.

ADA protections have also ensured AJ has access to accessible, affordable, and inclusive housing and services. Through HUD 811, Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA), and Maryland Inclusive Housing, he can live in a home that fits his needs with the supports in place to help him thrive. His brother is his live-in aide. This would not be possible without laws that require fairness and inclusion, and a system that recognizes the value and dignity of people with disabilities.

The ADA has helped AJ access his community in Abingdon, Maryland, take part in activities, and live more independently. We need to continue enforcing and strengthening these protections, so that all people with disabilities can belong.



## **Emmanuel Jenkins**

**41 years old**

**Greenwood, Delaware**

Emmanuel Jenkins is a 41-year-old from Greenwood, Delaware, with cerebral palsy. Emmanuel lives independently, and has since he was 18 years old, with the ADA providing support that allows him to live on his own in his community. Although he can't remember what life was like before the ADA, he can imagine it well. "I would be like a fish out of water. I wouldn't be able to do anything," he says. "I would be alive, but I would not be living? There's a difference between being alive and living."

To Emmanuel, the ADA is the foundation of everything: it helped provide him with access to education and employment, which allowed him to live independently in his community and eventually meet his wife. "The ADA is the Constitution for people with disabilities," he says, "It's what gives us our rights. Rights mean 'I deserve this.'" Despite that, he is not done fighting for people with disabilities: "We have 35 years behind us, but we still have 60 or 70 years to go."

In addition to how the ADA has helped him, Emmanuel often thinks about how it has impacted other people, "Not having the ADA doesn't just impact my life, but all the people I've met. I wouldn't have met my wife. I wouldn't have my son. I wouldn't have met the people I work

with.” He also stresses that unlike many political issues, disability touches every family in America sooner or later. “Disability is the only community that if you live long enough, you’ll be part of it one day.”



**Alex Miller**  
**Chesapeake, Virginia**

Alex has received services through Chesapeake Public Schools since he was 2 years old, following early signs of developmental delays. Alex was diagnosed with Autism, ADHD, and later epilepsy. These diagnoses have required a broad range of educational and medical supports over the years. Thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Alex has been protected and empowered throughout his educational journey. We first learned about the ADA while helping to develop his first IEP, and it quickly became a critical tool in advocating for his right to access education equally. One key moment was in third grade, when Alex’s new school resisted implementing sensory accommodations and personal care supports already in his IEP. We had to fight hard—citing the ADA and working with an attorney—to ensure the school met his needs. That experience taught us the power of knowing and asserting Alex’s rights. While Alex receives some of his behavioral supports outside of school due to systemic constraints, his school-based team—teachers, paraprofessionals, and case managers—works hard to support him in inclusive classrooms. Still, there are challenges, especially with staffing shortages, which highlight the broader issue of underfunded IDEA mandates. Despite obstacles, Alex has grown into a strong

self-advocate. He's participated in the I'm Determined Youth Summit and is excited for his senior year of high school. He's on track for a standard diploma and is receiving vocational rehabilitation services to support his dream of working on a farm or ranch. Alex's story shows that the ADA is not just a law—it's a lifeline to opportunity, inclusion, and dignity in education.



**Kevin Nunez**

**38 years old**

**Willingboro, New Jersey**

Kevin Nunez is a 38-year-old from Willingboro, New Jersey, who lives with cerebral palsy, having been diagnosed with the condition after birth. He uses a wheelchair and has caregivers who assist with daily tasks such as bathing and dressing. However, with home and community based supports made possible by the Americans with Disabilities Act, he is able to live independently in his community, has worked as an activist, and has written and published two books.

Kevin sees disability rights as a human issue, rather than a political one. The ADA allows him the ability to not just live in a community, but access and participate in it as well. With accessible transportation in his area, he can go to the bank, to see doctors, or out to restaurants. However, he is also aware that this an opportunity that not everyone has; accessible transportation is much rarer in the rural parts of the state, which leaves many people with disabilities stuck in their homes, saying “Transportation is one of the most unrecognized issues, on both sides of the aisle.” Without the ADA, Kevin believes that he would be “either dead or locked away

somewhere,” adding “I can do all these great things, but I need help getting out of bed in the morning.”

Kevin also recognizes that the ADA not only supports people with disabilities, but the entire country as well. Because it allows people with disabilities to live independently, which is less expensive than housing them in institutions, it also supports them and allows them to contribute to both local and national economies. “It’s a symbiotic relationship that helps our country grow,” he says.



**Sean Pevsner**

**Arlington, Texas**

**Sean Pevsner** is a disability rights lawyer and founded a law firm with his best friend, Mark Whitburn. Sean has cerebral palsy and operates a motorized wheelchair using head movements. Due to his quadriplegia, he cannot write and must rely on an interpreter or a specialized computer to communicate.

People have underestimated Sean since the moment he was born. He was born clinically dead, and an anesthesiologist had to administer CPR for 45 minutes until Sean could breathe on his own. The anesthesiologist likely thought Sean wouldn’t survive, but Sean proved him wrong.

Sean began his schooling just as the IDEA was passed into law. When he wanted to leave the segregated private school to attend mainstream public school, he and his family had to fight to demonstrate that he could thrive there.

When his high school threatened to put him in remedial classes despite his excellent grades, Sean, his family, and Mark fought for his right to attend the same classes as his peers. They fought against teachers who thought he couldn’t handle the workload and administrators who thought he wouldn’t graduate. Despite doubters, Sean graduated from the University of Texas in 1998 with majors in Greek and Latin and, later, from the University of Texas Law School.

The ADA means that individuals with disabilities have an equal opportunity to live and contribute to their community. It has broken down many barriers to community-based services, such as community attendants, education, and employment.

As someone with severe cerebral palsy, the ADA has helped me in many ways. My personal life has improved in terms of getting a quality education and becoming a licensed Texas attorney. I have equal access to public accommodations, such as hotels, office buildings, restaurants, and other public establishments. I have equal access to both state governmental and private entities' programs and activities as well.



**Austin Ries**  
**9 years Old**  
**Dana Point, California**

My name is Kait Ries, and my son Austin is 9 years old and entering 4th grade. Austin is a bright, curious child full of personality. He is nonspeaking and lives with autism and epilepsy. To communicate and engage with others, Austin relies on an AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) device. Before receiving proper support, Austin struggled to participate in class. Without reliable communication tools, he had difficulty expressing his needs, which affected his behavior, learning and ability to connect with peers. It was heartbreaking to see his frustration when he couldn't communicate like other children. Early in Austin's education, while navigating the special education process, I learned about the rights and protections under the ADA. This knowledge empowered us to advocate for his communication access and inclusion. A breakthrough came when the school provided Austin with an AAC device and encouraged its use not only during speech therapy but throughout the school day—in the classroom and beyond—including with our private therapy team. This device unlocked his voice and transformed how he connects with others. Thanks to the ADA, Austin received essential accommodations that removed communication barriers and affirmed that nonspeaking students deserve equal access. He now has consistent support, his device is recognized as vital to his education, and he is communicating in full sentences. Austin has grown more confident, engaged, and independent, and most importantly, he has been able to make friends. This progress

would not have been possible without the ADA's protections. This journey has reshaped our relationship with the school. Understanding our rights has helped us collaborate with educators to create meaningful goals for Austin. When the system works, kids like Austin don't just attend—they truly belong.



**Wendy Vance**  
**48 years old**  
**Tallahessee, Florida**

My name is Wendy Vance. I am a 48-year old resident of Tallahassee, FL. I am an individual with multiple disabilities, with my primary disability being legal blindness. As an individual with legal blindness, I will never be permitted to drive, therefore, I rely on public transportation resources to carry out daily activities such as work, shopping and medical care.

While I am personally blessed to live in a city that provides access to public transportation through a fixed route system which is supplemented by paratransit (door to door transportation) as mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (Sec. 37.121), not everyone in our nation have such access. Not having this access limits an individual's ability to live and work

independently in their communities. This is not a statement of conjecture or a talking point, this is the on-the-ground reality of everyday Americans living with disabilities.

And how, you may ask can I make such a definitive statement? Not only am I an individual with a disability, I am a Vocational Rehabilitation professional with 20 years experience helping individuals with disabilities to find employment. In those 20 years, I have had the privilege to serve individuals with a variety of disabilities living in communities of varying sizes. By and large one of the biggest barriers to employment for the individuals that I have served is transportation.

In the more rural communities, there are typically no transportation options beyond dependence on family and friends. Such dependence limits the individual's availability, dependability and reliability for work as their availability is dictated by the schedule of their family and friends. This dependence may also serve to increase vulnerability to abuse and exploitation as those on whom they depend may use the situation to extract what they want from the individual with a disability - i.e. "if you don't do x or give me y, I will not take you to work, shopping or to get medical care". For more context on how dependence may breed abuse and/or neglect please see my presentation related to this subject - Relationship Violence: Teaching Youth about Healthy Relationships which can be found on the Disability Rights Florida YouTube channel.

"But what about ridesharing services, isn't that an option", you may ask. This too, is not that simple. For starters, rideshare services are not available in every community. One may be able to take a ride from a larger city to rural community, however, one may find themselves trapped in said community as there are no drivers signed up to provide the service in that area. I personally have experienced becoming stranded in a rural community due to lack of service in the area. Although I was eventually able to get home, my trip involved engaging the services of a local "cab" run by one woman who drives people from time to time to supplement her income. This was by far not a safe option but at the time was my only option. Unlike rideshare there is no mechanism to track the ride or to share your status with others. Additionally, this is a private, under the table driver that is only known about through word-of-mouth. Honestly she could have been a serial killer for all I knew but I had literally no other choice. I have since hired a driver for work that takes me into rural communities.

Availability is not the only prohibiting factor. Cost is a huge barrier to using rideshare services. Trips for short distances can cost \$5 to \$10 one way or \$10 to \$20 for a round trip and more long distance rides may cost hundreds of dollars. Now imagine doing this everyday, that cuts into the funds one has for essentials such as food, clothing and shelter much less even the idea of discretionary spending. And this is an even greater truth for those on fixed incomes such as Social Security, which for most, is barely enough to keep a roof over their head, especially given the skyrocketing cost of everything including rent.

Lastly, accessibility limits the use of such services. Rideshare vehicles are the personal vehicles of the gig worker and have no mandate that I am aware of which requires them to be accessible to non - ambulatory riders. I have been using rideshare services for about 8 years and I have yet to encounter an accessible vehicle.

For individuals who live in these rural communities their choices are to stay and hope for the best or move and leave behind their familial support systems. While this may appear on the surface to be an easy choice, it is not due to a variety of factors such as financial barriers and/or fear of the unknown.

I personally made such a choice when I left my rural, small town in South Georgia which had no access to transportation, to pursue my education and eventual career. It was scary but I had the benefit of having been raised to be fiercely independent, which is not always the case for those born with disabilities. For me, the move became a grand adventure into the mist of the unknown of the wider world of opportunity and hoped for elevation of a girl from the wrong side of the tracks to prosperity. I was answering the call of the American Dream of rising above my poverty and a desire to offer others to hand up as they too attempted to climb out of the quicksand of poverty. And although I have since lost my belief that the American Dream is a reality especially as the hand of support is being chopped away finger by finger by the current push to sacrifice support for those in need in favor of tax cuts for the wealthy that the wealthy do not need, I do not regret my decision. Prior to this period of the sacrifice of those in need on the altar of greed for money and unchecked power, I have been blessed to help countless individuals to chase their own dreams. For that opportunity, I am eternally grateful that the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed into law as it was the key to the door of freedom I would have otherwise never known. I ask you today to reinforce these protections which are so vital so that every American can at least have a possible chance at opportunity to succeed and be productive/vital members of their communities.



**Diana Vilá,**

**Rego Park, New York**

The photo shows a smiling, olive-skinned woman with short salt-and-pepper hair and hazel eyes, wearing a turquoise shirt and holding a small black and white dog.

Diana Vilá lived in a large institution in New York City called an "adult home" that housed primarily people with mental health disabilities. After more than twelve years there, she was able to transition to her own apartment with the services she needs due to an ADA class action settlement between individuals with mental health disabilities and the state of New York. Diana provided these remarks at a recent briefing:

Individuals like myself with severe mental illness and like my fiancé Ruberto and friends with additional physical and developmental challenges are dumped into institutions and left to languish and die. An adult home never felt like my home.

Like many residents, I longed to escape but didn't have enough money for a rental deposit or to pay New York City rent. With help of my fiancé Ruberto, and my important special friend Tasha [a service dog], it is possible for me to be here today. My good friend likens her disability to wearing a heavy blanket as she walks through her day and her life. It is exhausting and invisible

to others. I would like to add to the metaphor. The blanket is very cold. It covers my brain and clouds my eyes. Many with mental disabilities tend to hide it very well. Most of the time.

Some days I struggle very hard and cannot even access my vocabulary. On other days I work hard at my full mental capacity. I'm driven and focused. On good days I give 150% not only to move forward and get ahead, but to make up for the days when I cannot.

Leaving the community college where I worked 20 years was not a good thing for me. I had a job where I felt fulfilled, creative and knew that I made a difference every day. I felt fulfilled and honored to be there. But I fell far and hard when I left. I didn't want to struggle any more. I lost hope and purpose. Living in the adult home was a sad life. Two people in a small room barely big enough for the furniture. I felt broken and defeated.

It wasn't always safe to socialize outside the room and the food provided was barely edible. Some residents were overmedicated while others were out of control, fighting and yelling. The police came to the home often. This atmosphere was not kind to my disability.

Tending to my plants in the small window helped me escape the darkness in my mind and the chaos outside the room. There was rampant neglect in the adult home. My partner and then-roommate Jose died of complications from diabetes and renal failure. I noticed my health had begun to decline also.

When I met Ruberto, my fiancé, he traveled on two buses in a manual wheelchair a great distance to pull me out of my grief. I helped him obtain a power wheelchair like I did for Jose and others.

With greater mobility and independence we were able to go on longer trips to the movies on discount days once a month, to free museum days, in the park and window shopping at the mall. I helped him get into training that enabled both of us to work at CIAD nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering adult home residents. For eight years in this role of peer advocate, I helped residents fight for their rights and prepare for independent living through well-received workshops.

I jumped at the chance to live on my own again with support, with support, very important. These two court cases made it possible for us to finally move into a wheelchair-accessible and bright sunny apartment after eight years on the list. Now Ruberto can move freely throughout the space, cook and help manage our affairs with relative ease.

For me, the bright, open environment has been transformative. My home is filled with flowering plants that lift my spirits and offer a sense of peace and renewal each day. Watching cherry tomatoes and seedlings grow makes me so happy. On restless nights when insomnia keeps me awake, I find solace and watching the sunrise from my windows, a reminder of new beginnings, as the seedlings are. My disability knocks me down but doesn't have to define my potential. With help and support, I keep getting back up.

Now I have choices, responsibilities and freedoms that I wasn't allowed in the adult home. Now I can afford to eat better. I have lost 40 pounds. I fell far when I got really sick but I hope to return to teaching and counseling. I want to return to supporting students through their challenges of getting a degree in the field of their choice and creating better lives for themselves and their families. With the right support, I can live independently in a safe environment in my own home,

not an institution where my rights and dignity are stripped away. I can make a positive contribution to society. But the right support is critical.



## **Amelia Wong**

**20 years old**

**Columbus, Ohio**

My name is Amelia Wong, and I am a 20-year-old pre-law student at The Ohio State University. I was diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy when I was just 2 years old, and I use a power wheelchair and a service dog to maintain my independence. On campus, my power chair is my primary means of getting around, but that mobility would be impossible without curb cuts and accessible sidewalks. When my destination is beyond reach in my chair, I rely on accessible public buses and paratransit services to get where I need to go.

Accessible transportation makes it possible for me to commute to my off-campus internship, attend aquatic therapy, receive an education, and stay engaged in my community. These supports aren't luxuries—they're what allow me to live, learn, and contribute.

The Americans with Disabilities Act has been instrumental in making this access possible. While there is still work to be done, such as investing in sidewalk repairs and strengthening paratransit services, we've made meaningful progress in the 35 years since the ADA became law. I urge Congress to protect and improve accessible transportation, especially through the upcoming Surface Transportation Reauthorization.