

Heroes of the Disability Arena

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Annie Sullivan

“Keep on beginning and failing. Each time you fail, start all over again, and you will grow stronger until you have accomplished a purpose - not the one you began with perhaps, but one you’ll be glad to remember.”

Born in 1866, Annie Sullivan began teaching student Helen Keller, who was blind and deaf, in the 1880s. She became highly acclaimed for her abilities to assist Helen. In her early years, Annie was blind, but regained useable sight after a series of operations. She eventually lost her sight in her older years. The movie, “The Miracle Worker,” documents how Annie taught Helen.

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Ludwig van Beethoven

“I shall seize Fate by the throat; it shall certainly not bend and crush me completely.”

Ludwig van Beethoven was a classical composer born in Bonn, Germany in 1770. He was regarded by many to be a musical genius. He gave his first public concert at age 7-1/2. Early on he developed a hearing disorder that eventually claimed his hearing. Despite his disability, Beethoven continued to compose music.

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Helen Keller

“Never bend your head. Hold it high. Look the world straight in the eye.”

Helen Keller was born in Alabama in 1880, and lost her vision and hearing at age 19 months. Just shy of age 7, she began with educator Annie Sullivan, who taught her to communicate with others using her hands. She was a well-known author and scholar. Helen graduated cum laude from Radcliffe College, and received honorary doctoral degrees from Temple University, Harvard University and numerous European universities.

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Vincent van Gogh

“As we advance in life it becomes more and more difficult, but in fighting the difficulties the inmost strength of the heart is developed.”

Artist Vincent van Gogh lived from 1853-1890 in The Netherlands. Some of his most famous works include “Starry Night” and his series of “Sunflower” paintings. Vincent was believed to have had epilepsy, and may also have suffered from mental illness throughout his life. He was a prolific artist and vibrant colors were a constant in his works.

—

Michael J. Fox

“Medical science has proven time and again that when the resources are provided, great progress in the treatment, cure, and prevention of disease can occur.”

“One’s dignity may be assaulted, vandalized and cruelly mocked, but cannot be taken away unless it is surrendered.”

Film and television actor Michael J. Fox is known for his TV role, Alex Keaton, in “Family Ties,” and for his role in the hit movie, “Back to the Future.” Born in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada in 1961, Michael is also known as an advocate for medical research. He was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in 1991.

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Montel Williams

“Not every person with MS is disabled to the point where they can’t communicate or function. I’d like to try and start making people think differently about it when they hear someone has MS they don’t automatically stereotype them into some picture.”

Montel Williams, born in 1956, is an Emmy Award winning talk show host who has also had careers in the military, motivational speaking, and acting. His “Montel Williams Show” is watched by millions. In 1999, he publicly announced that he had Multiple Sclerosis. Montel is also an advocate for affordable healthcare and prescriptions.

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Stephen Hawking

“Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change.”

Physicist Stephen Hawking was born in Oxford, England, in 1942. In 1963, he was diagnosed with motor neurone disease, also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. Even though his future looked bleak, he continued with his education and completed his doctorate in 1966. His research has included the study of black holes in the universe.

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Tony Coelho

“When I authored the Americans with Disabilities Act, it was because of my own experiences.”

Tony Coelho served in the U.S. Congress from 1978 to 1989, and authored the Americans with Disabilities Act. He also served under President Bill Clinton as chairman of the President’s Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities. He also served as chair of the board of the national Epilepsy Foundation. He was

diagnosed with epilepsy as a young man and personally experienced discrimination due to his disability.

—

Franklin D. Roosevelt

“We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.”

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was born in Hyde Park, New York in 1882, served in the New York State Senate in the early 1900s, and as governor of New York. He was then elected the 32nd President of the United States in 1932, and remained in that role until 1945, the only U.S. president to serve more than two terms. In the early 1920s, he was diagnosed with polio and used a wheelchair throughout his presidency.

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Justin Dart, Jr.

“Lead on.”

Justin Dart, Jr. was a long-time advocate of people with disabilities and was present at the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act. He was regarded as the father of the ADA. He was also known for his trademark cowboy hat and boots, which now reside in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. along with his pen that signed the ADA, and his Presidential Medal of Freedom, which he received in 1998. He served five presidents in the area of disability policy. Justin had post-polio syndrome and used a wheelchair. Justin died in 2002 at the age of 71.

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Ed Roberts

“I’m tired of well meaning noncripples with their stereotypes of what I can and cannot do directing my life and my future.”

Ed Roberts, known as the father of the Independent Living Movement, began the Berkeley Center for Independent Living in the early 1970s. In the 1960s he had been turned away from the vocational rehabilitation agency in California after being deemed too disabled to be employable. In 1975, California Governor Jerry Brown appointed him as director of the state rehabilitation agency. He died in 1995 at age 55.

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Marlee Matlin

“Every one of us is different in some way, but for those of us who are more different, we have to put more effort into convincing the less different that we can do the same thing they can, just differently.”

Actress Marlee Matlin was born in 1965 and became deaf at 18 months due to a bout with Roseola Infantum. Throughout her life she pursued acting and received an Academy Award for her film debut, “Children of a Lesser God” in 1986. Throughout the years she has advocated for people with disabilities, and recently took part in the TV program, “Dancing with the Stars.” She serves as a spokesperson for the largest provider of TV Closed Captioning in the country.

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Josh Blue

“I want to give a little education about having a disability, about treating other people with disabilities like everybody else, that kind of stuff. I’m not the first, but I’m certainly one of the folks trying to do that. It takes more than one person. I hope that I’ve knocked some bricks out of the wall and shown a bit of the mainstream U.S. that people with disabilities are still that—people.”

Comedian Josh Blue, born in Cameroon, Africa in 1978, grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota and now lives in Denver, Colorado. He was the 2006 winner of NBC’s “Last Comic Standing.” Josh has cerebral palsy, and frequently talks about living with a disability in his comedy routines. Josh is also a Paralympics soccer player.

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Alexander Graham Bell

“Sometimes we stare so long at door that is closing that we see too late the one that is open.”

American Alexander Graham Bell, born in 1847 in Edinburgh, Scotland, was most noted as the inventor of the telephone. He also was the first to conduct research into heredity, and why people are born deaf. His mother and wife were both deaf. Alexander also studied why sheep are born with irregularities. Another of his inventions was an early precursor to the iron lung, a machine that later, in the 1950s, aided people who had polio. Some believe Bell may have had dyslexia. As he aged, he also lost his hearing.

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Wilma Mankiller

“Individually and collectively, Cherokee people possess an extraordinary ability to face down adversity and continue moving forward.”

Even though Wilma Mankiller was diagnosed with the muscle disease myasthenia gravis, in 1980, five years later she became the principal chief of the Cherokee

Nation. She remained in that position until 1995. She was presented the Presidential Medal of Freedom by then-President Bill Clinton in 1998.

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Judy Heumann

“Independent Living is not doing things by yourself, it is being in control of how things are done.”

Judy Heumann grew up with a mobility disability, and had to fight in order to obtain an education that was equal to that received by children without disabilities. She later became Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services in the United States and was a vice president of the World Institute on Disability, the first research center to focus on disability issues.

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Ray Charles

“Learning to read music in Braille and play by ear helped me develop a damn good memory.”

Musician and singer Ray Charles, born in 1930, lost his sight by age seven due to glaucoma. Despite his disability he became a famous musical icon with his music spanning the genres of R&B, soul, gospel, blues, rock, country and jazz. Some of his most popular songs include, “Georgia, On My Mind,” “America the Beautiful,” and “What I’d Say.” He died at age 73 in 2004.

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Itzhak Perlman

“Access means getting to a place where everybody else gets to, so you don’t have to make special calls to warn them of your arrival.”

Violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman was born in Israel in 1945, and has appeared on nearly every stage with every symphony in the world. A four-time Emmy Award winner, Perlman contracted polio and lost the use of his legs at age of four. He speaks and performs on behalf of people with disabilities.

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Ronnie Milsap

“See with your heart. Music is not just my passion, it’s my companion.”

Ronnie Milsap is a popular country musician and singer and became country music’s first superstar who was blind. Ronnie has had a career that includes 40 number one hits primarily during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, but he continues to make music today. Some of his most popular songs include, “(There’s) No Gettin’ Over Me,” “Smokey Mountain Rain,” and “Lost in the Fifties Tonight.”

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Christopher Reeve

“A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.”

Actor Christopher Reeve, born in 1952, found himself recast as an advocate for people with disabilities when in 1995 he had a horseback riding accident that resulted in quadriplegia due to a spinal cord injury. He is best known for his title role as “Superman” in the 1978 film. His speaking engagements helped raised millions of dollars for research and nonprofits representing the interests of people with disabilities. He died in 2004.

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Casey Martin

“Without the ADA I never would have been able to pursue my dream of playing golf professionally.”

Casey Martin, born in 1972, is a professional golfer from Oregon who won a courtroom victory over the Professional Golf Association in 2001. The case revolved around an athlete’s ability to use a golf cart during competition. He has Klippel-Trenaunay-Weber Syndrome, a degenerative disorder that causes his veins to rupture. He graduated from Stanford with a degree in economics, but he pursued his dream to play professional golf.

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Oscar Pistorius

“Competing at the Olympics has become my purpose in life. Running has become my calling.”

Oscar Pistorius is a world-class Olympic hopeful born in 1985 in Sandton Gauteng, South Africa. Both of his legs were amputated below the knee when he was 11 months old. Oscar is a double amputee and just won an appeal against the International Association of Athletics Federations to take part in the Olympic trials that decide 2008 Olympic competitors. He has won the bronze medal and several gold medals in several Paralympic events. Oscar is known as “The Bladerunner.”

—

Jim Langevin

“Madam Speaker, I rise in strong support of the ADA Amendments Act.”

U.S. Congressman Jim Langevin, born in 1964, has risen through the ranks of Rhode Island government as a member of its legislature and as the youngest Secretary of State in the nation. He was elected to Congress in 2000, and is the first person with quadriplegia to serve in that elective office.

—

Bob Dole

“Vocational Rehabilitation represents a critical part of what we pride ourselves on as a great nation: opportunity for all.”

Former Republican Senator Bob Dole represented his state of Kansas in both the U.S. House of Representatives and in the U.S. Senate. A disabled World War II veteran, he was badly wounded in 1945 and was awarded two Purple Hearts, and a Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster. The injuries paralyzed his right arm. He ran briefly for president in 1980, and then again in 1988 when he secured his party’s nomination.

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David Paterson

“I have confronted the prejudice of race and challenged the issues of my own disability. I have served in government for over two decades. I stand willing and able to lead this state to a brighter future and a better tomorrow. Let me reintroduce myself. I am David Paterson and I am the Governor of New York State.”

David Paterson, born in 1954, became New York State’s governor in early 2008, and is the nation’s first legally blind governor. Previous to the governorship, he served as Lieutenant Governor, and State Senator in New York. He is recognized as an advocate for people with visual and physical disabilities.

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