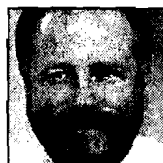


Don't see problems. I see problem-solvers'

20 years after the ADA was signed into law, it remains a work in progress.

MARK WILLIS
COMMENTARY



This year marks the 20th anniversary of

the Americans with Disabilities Act. Twenty years is significant, not because it's a round number, but rather, because it represents a generation of experience gained since the law was passed.

Many of us who lobbied for the ADA believed at the time that it could take a generation or more, as it had with the Civil Rights Act before it, to fulfill the ADA's promise of equal opportunity for Americans with disabilities.

I remember the day 20 years ago tomorrow, July 26, when I went to the White House to watch President George H. W. Bush sign the legislation. The event was held outside on the South Lawn, between the White House and the Ellipse. Everyone had to pass through metal detectors to enter. The Secret Service surely had a crash course in disability awareness, because it



President George H. W. Bush signs the Americans with Disabilities Act on July 26, 1990. The ADA signing ceremony was held on the South Lawn because the White House was not fully wheelchair-accessible. Associated Press file photo

was the smoothest security check I ever had.

As I walked through the wrought-iron gate, I looked around and marveled, "Wow, they let me in here!" They let me in, and a thousand other people. We had every kind of disability in the human condition, and we used every kind of assistive device available at the time. I like to think we were the most diverse group of citizens ever gathered together at the White

House.

The ADA signing ceremony was held outside, not because it was a beautiful summer day, but because the White House itself was not fully accessible. Many in our diverse group of citizens could not have entered the building. Long gone were the wooden ramps installed five decades earlier to accommodate President Franklin D. Roosevelt's wheelchair. On its anniversary, pun-

into law, and it remains an unfinished project today. It depends on all of us, and the work we will do, to carry it to completion.

My own work has been greatly influenced by Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and philosopher of liberation. He taught non-literate poor people how to read by first convincing them that, through the daily work they did with their hands, they had culture and made culture. He believed culture to be an unfinished project that he called "the struggle for human completion."

Listen to that expansive phrase again. "The struggle for human completion." That is a worldview large enough to include *all* of us, whether we have disabilities or not. That is a project in which all of us are engaged. That struggle makes us human.

In the years since the ADA became law, we've begun to talk about something called "the culture of disability." I do not think that disability is a fully evolved culture in the same sense that we speak of Mayan culture or even deaf culture. But I do believe that the work of disability is a significant form of cultural production.

By "work of disability," I mean the daily problem-solving involved in living with a disability — mak-

ing adaptations and negotiating accommodations — according to principles set forth in the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The work of disability is creative work. It's work that addresses the impairments of individuals, to be sure, but it's also work that strives to make society more flexible and tolerant. Many of us, disabled and non-disabled, have significant experience with this work, but it seldom shows up on a job resume.

Recently I was invited to talk about the ADA with graduating students with disabilities at Wright State University. I told them, "As you venture forth in the world, you will have to negotiate with people who see the disability, not the person. Some will look at you and see one more hassle, one more problem added to *their* plate. When I look at you, I don't see problems. I see problem-solvers.

"So go out there and get it done, this unfinished project called the struggle for human completion. Claim your rightful place in the public sphere. The Americans with Disabilities Act has got your back."

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