

MORE than you think.

THE INITIATOR

JULY 2010

How Far Have We Come? Thoughts on the 20th Anniversary of the ADA

Where were you 20 years ago? Perhaps opening doors to all kinds of experiences, thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA).

Looking back, Ruth Stegeman, Executive Director for Disability Network/Lakeshore, remembers an initial rush to learn and implement the law. “We went to a lot of seminars to learn how the law defined disability, what the Titles of the law were, and what they required,” she says. “It was a fun, exciting time, and it seemed like there were all kinds of possibilities.”

According to Stegeman, many disability advocacy groups initially thought of themselves as co-enforcers of the law. Eventually, she says, “It became clear that the Department of Justice had a lot of work to do, and they were not going to monitor this issue. People found out that unless you had a big lawsuit that might end up at the Supreme Court, you had to figure it out in your own community.”

“We took the approach that the law is good for business,” she adds. Disability Network/Lakeshore became their advocates, showing them low-cost changes they could make to improve business, enhance diversity, and provide more options for people with disabilities to take part in community life.

However, progress was slower than people had hoped, according to Stegeman. “Many of the historic buildings like Holland City Hall required

years of planning and budgeting to move forward with ramps and reconstruction,” she says. “A lot of businesses didn’t even know the law had passed – and still today, we have to initiate the conversation with businesses who don’t know about the ADA.”

While some businesses were slow to implement the law, others, such as forward-thinking Herman Miller, experienced a cultural shift. Ed Nagelkirk, Herman Miller’s Senior Manager of Workplace Solutions and Services, recalls, “When the ADA was first enacted, we attended lots of workshops to learn what it was and how it would affect our business. I spent many hours with checklists and templates, changing knobs on faucets, adjusting knee clearance on counters, and adding bars or handles for restroom partitions.”

Since then, Herman Miller has taken a broader view of the ADA. Nagelkirk says, “Today, we have a better understanding of how to accommodate and advocate for people with disabilities. We have changed our design standards to meet the requirements, often in areas where it’s not mandatory. Even with our products, there’s an awareness about making it easier for people to reach things or open a drawer. As a company, that’s just part of our focus on human-centered design.”

While organizations like Herman Miller lead the way, others still lag behind. Stegeman says, “The ADA was an



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important catalyst for change, but there’s still room for improvement. For example, unemployment rates for people with disabilities have not changed significantly. There are also groups who’ve been exempt from the ADA and need to catch up.”

Among those are places of worship, as Terry DeYoung, Disability Network/Lakeshore Board member, confirms. In his role as the Reformed Church’s Denominational Coordinator for Disability Concerns, he says, “It’s taken my church fully 20 years to be in a place where it’s making concrete investments to include people with disabilities. People of every race, gender, economic level, and ability deserve to be welcomed and allowed to share their perspectives. We’ve made progress, but as Disability Network always says, the ADA is a platform, not a ceiling.”

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Electronic Newsletter

Did you know that Disability Network/Lakeshore has an electronic newsletter that includes: more info, pictures, video, links and upcoming events? Visit www.dnlakeshore.org to register!

Join Us on the Web

Disability Network/Lakeshore is now on Facebook and Linked-In.

Volunteers

We rely on our wonderful volunteers for so much of what we accomplish. To find an opportunity that fits your skills, interests and schedule, please contact Annie Hilchen at 616 396 5326.

Donations

As a non-profit organization, we welcome gifts of all sizes. You may make a tax-deductible contribution by mailing a check (payable to Disability Network/Lakeshore) to:

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Who we are

Most people equate disability with limitations. It's our job to change the perceptions and realities that prevent people with disabilities from sharing in the community. Every year, we provide training, mentoring, and referrals to help people with disabilities and their families live productive lives. Because disability touches so many people, we also work on a larger scale, helping governments and businesses make changes that benefit not just those with disabilities, but everyone in the community.