

# Life Before And After The ADA | CPD Blog

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When I was asked to write a blog post that could help commemorate the 30th anniversary of the passing of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), I was hesitant. I mentioned to an acquaintance of mine that I was asked to do this and she said, "Has it even impacted your life?" I paused for a moment and immediately began reflecting on just how my life has changed since its passage. I knew I had to write something. I will divide this into two sections—my life before the passing of ADA and life after.

## Life Before ADA

I have mentioned in previous articles that I was involved in a farming accident at the age of 2, which left me a paraplegic (paralyzed from the waist down). As a result, I used crutches and leg braces for most of my life. I do not really recall much of those early years. My first recollections of really noticing that I was different from others was when I began school. We lived in a very rural area and every day a school bus would pick us up outside our home. Mind you, this was decades before ADA (1967, to be exact) so there was no such thing as a "specialized bus" (i.e., busses with lifts). I used the same ol' yellow school bus that everyone else used. My mom would walk out to the bus with me and my brothers and sister, and physically pick me up in her arms and lift me onto the bus. Once I got to school, the bus driver would physically pick me up in his arms and carry me off of the bus.

The process would be repeated when I left school (I had amazing bus drivers who were extremely compassionate and caring). Once I got to the third or fourth grade, I had figured out how to get myself on and off the bus without any help—except when the roads were covered with snow. My brothers or sister would have to stand by me and put their feet next to my crutches so as I lifted myself onto the bus, they would not slide out from under me.

There were no automatic door openers at the school, so if another student happened to be within the vicinity when I got to the door, he/she would usually open it for me. If not, I soon learned how to open it myself. Recesses were kind of lonely. There was no play equipment that was really accessible to me. I could swing in the swings or watch the other kids jump rope, play on the monkey bars, slide down the slides, or just run around playing tag or dodge ball. As I got older and more daring, I would try to climb the steps of the slide. I would be pretty slow so other students would climb past me and go down the slide before I finally got to the top and was able to slide down. I broke a lot of braces and crutches that way—it was kind of a rough landing at the bottom! My teachers would often call my mom—frantically—exclaiming that I was playing on the slide or trying to climb on the monkey bars. Mom would tell them to let me—if I fell, I fell—I would either get myself up or they could go out and help me—just like they would any other child. Mom always said that she did not know how to raise a daughter with a disability, so she just raised a daughter.

High school was another exciting adventure—I was going to school with "the big kids!" The bus ride was about 30 minutes and our bus driver always saved the front seat for me. Again, there were no automatic doors at the school (either in the junior high or high school buildings). But I had mastered the opening of doors so that was no problem. The only problem I had was when I had classes in the high school—there was no elevator and half of my classes were on the second floor. Even the main level of the high school was "split level" (there were stairs once you got in the door to get you to the classrooms). It obviously took me longer to go up the stairs, with the students passing by me and often pushing against me as they tried to pass so they would not be late for their classes. I made arrangements for my teachers to let me out of class 10 minutes early so I could get to my next class on time. There were several times that I missed the bus because it would leave before I got to it and I had to find another way home (luckily, there were a couple teachers who lived not too far from me who would take me).

From high school, I ventured out to college. Again, only one of the buildings I had classes in actually had an elevator that I could use—however, it was broken down quite often and I would still have to use the stairs. I recall one day as I was going up the stairs to one of my classes, a professor passed me as he was going down. He stopped, turned around, and watched me as I made my way up to the top of the first landing. He called out to me, “Hey, you with the crutches.” I turned and looked around—I was the only one with crutches so I figured he was talking to me. He asked, “Can you show me how you do that—climb the stairs I mean? I’m a physical therapist and I teach a lot of individuals how to use crutches and climb stairs, but I have never taught them the way you are doing it.” I laughed and came down the stairs basically the same way I went up the stairs and then turned around and explained to him just how I would position my crutches on each stair—and why. He was fascinated and said he was going to teach his patients how to do it. He then asked why I was not in his adaptive physical education class—you can find out all about that experience in the earlier [Sink or Swim blog post](#).

After I graduated from college, I moved to Logan to find a job. I began working at Utah State University in 1984. The first job I was offered was on the second floor of a building that had no elevator. Going up and down the stairs in good weather would be no problem, but if you have ever used crutches when the floor is wet, you know that the crutch tips slip incredibly easily and it is very dangerous. I actually turned down the offer for that job because I did not want to fight the stairs during the winter and risk the chance of slipping and falling down the stairs, not only embarrassing myself but probably being hurt, or even breaking a crutch or brace. I then focused my attention on applying only for jobs that were in buildings that either had an elevator or were only one story—which were few and far between. Luckily, I happened on a job opening at the Exceptional Child Center (now the Center for Persons with Disabilities), which was all on one floor. I have been here ever since.

Finding an apartment that I could easily get into was another challenge. Everywhere I looked, there were stairs. My first apartment, which was on ground level, was kind of run down. I was constantly fighting with bugs, spiders, and water seeping in under the living room door. I stayed there as long as I could and then was forced to find someplace else. The only place I could find was a basement apartment with steps. The apartment itself was wonderful—I lived there for almost 5 years. But I had to figure out a way to shovel the snow off the steps in the winter. In addition, the laundry room for that unit was also down another set of stairs...making doing the laundry a very unpleasant and challenging experience.

Six years later, in 1990, life began to change with the passage of The American with Disabilities Act.

## Life After the ADA

I began noticing that things were starting to change around town and on campus with the passage of the ADA. Buildings on campus and in the stores around town were installing automatic door openers! Doorways were wider. Elevators were going into all new buildings and some older buildings were being retrofitted. Ramps led up to entrances, rather than stairs. Sidewalks had curb cuts. Apartments were going up that had units that were accessible—without stairs! The list goes on. But it was not just the buildings and physical environments that were changing—other wonderful things were happening too!

I was called to jury duty in the middle of winter. At the time, I was still getting around primarily with crutches and braces—and winters here in Cache Valley can be pretty horrendous. I wanted to serve so badly, but I did not want to use my crutches and braces because I was afraid that I would not be able to (a) get over the snowbanks and (b) safely get from my car to the courtroom because of the slippery floors. I wanted to use my wheelchair, which was not portable, so I could not get it in and out of my car by myself. But Cache Valley has this AMAZING para-transit bus that actually came to my house and had a wheelchair lift. I was able to use my wheelchair and they took me right to the door of the courthouse and I was able to do my civic duty...just like anybody else.

Another wonderful thing that happened was in the theaters. Prior to the ADA, there were no wheelchair accessible seats in the theatres around town. An individual in a wheelchair would often be parked in the aisle in everybody’s way, or tucked in a corner where they were out of the way so people would not bump into them. Suddenly, theaters began removing seats and replacing them with wheelchair accessible seating, so that I was actually able to sit next to my friends and family and enjoy the theatre together.

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Once I began using a wheelchair permanently, these changes became more important and life changing. I was no longer “trapped” in a world where I sat by and watched others enjoy life because it was too hard for me to get around with my crutches and braces. I was able to go shopping, to movies, to campgrounds, on vacations with my family...the possibilities were endless! The world is now mine to explore. Is the world perfect with the passage of the ADA? Absolutely not! We still have a long way to go—but we are progressing.

A few years ago I wrote an article about my [first ever family vacation](#) and the accessibility issues I encountered while exploring our nation’s national parks and monuments. This article shows the progress we have made in only 30 years—it also shows what we have yet to accomplish.

HAPPY 30<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY, ADA. May you continue to improve the lives of ALL individuals with disabilities for many years to come!