

forum



Kara and Adam Ayers of Mason are photographed with daughter Hannah, 5, and son Eli, 8. Kara and Adam have a form of dwarfism called osteogenesis imperfecta. They hope that the Ohio Revised Code will be changed to eliminate discriminatory language when it comes to parental rights.

The ADA: 25 years of opportunity

How the Americans with Disabilities Act has improved local families' lives and the work that's still needed

A quarter-century ago Monday, the Americans with Disabilities Act changed how millions of people with disabilities live. Doors literally opened – to education, employment, transportation and entertainment options that weren't previously accessible to people with physical or developmental impairments.

"The continuing existence of unfair and unnecessary discrimination and prejudice denies people with

disabilities the opportunity to compete on an equal basis and to pursue those opportunities for which our free society is justifiably famous," says the law, signed President George H.W. Bush.

The ADA not only forbids discrimination, it also requires "reasonable accommodations" so our friends, relatives and neighbors with disabilities can enjoy the same opportunities and activities as everyone else.

For the law's 25th anniversary, more than a half dozen Cincinnati and

Northern Kentucky families are sharing with Enquirer readers the changes they've seen – and also the progress yet to be made. Mason residents Kara and Adam Ayers, for instance, worry that Ohio law allows their children – Hannah, 5, and Eli, 8 – to be removed from them because of their dwarfism.

Turn to Pages F2-F3 to read both about the good the ADA has done and its limitations, all from the mouths of those who've lived it. Also, visit cincinnati.com to see Enquirer photo-

journalist Carrie Cochran's video of how the Ayers family came together. You don't want to miss it.

Lastly, join the anniversary celebration Downtown on Monday. It will begin at 9:30 a.m. with a march from City Hall to Fountain Square, and festivities will continue on the Square from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. For more information, search for "Cincinnati ADA 25th Anniversary" on Facebook or contact committee co-chair Debbie Moorehouse at dmoorehouse@cilo.net or 513-241-2600, ext. 123.

FORUM

Living with the ADA: Families share

On the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky families write about its benefits and also the opportunities for improvement



ADA opens doors, builds elevator

John David Brolley is an Erlanger resident. His daughter Maria (pictured), 25, lives with severely to profoundly disabling cerebral palsy.

The Americans with Disabilities Act has impacted our family in concrete, tangible and overwhelmingly positive ways – here is just one example. Early in her primary school years the special education campus in our district was a two-story building with only stairway access between floors. This prevented our daughter and other wheelchair-mobile students from engaging in such standard educational activities as using the library.

My wife and I regularly asked whether an elevator could be placed anywhere in the building and were regularly told it could not. Eventually a stair-tracking device was installed but proved inefficient and unsafe, so once again we approached the school

board – but this time we referenced specific sections of the ADA and the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, and it was amazing how smoothly things went from that point to the actual elevator installation.

Our only concern with the ADA has been that the term “reasonable accommodation” seems to offer too many loopholes to individuals and businesses who still want to dig in their heels. However, that does not reflect any flaw in the ADA so much as it demonstrates how necessary a piece of legislation it is. Until more people open their minds and hearts about the rights of the specially abled, the ADA is absolutely essential to a level playing field.



We need more accessible housing

Marvin Moss has lived life with a disability on both sides of the Americans with Disabilities Act. He is a member of Envision's Board of Directors.

The passing of the ADA has improved many lives, but more can be done.

The law has helped teenagers with disabilities go to school and get a diploma. Some are even able to go on to college. It also helps people with disabilities to get better jobs. And, transportation in my city has improved a lot.

But we need more accessible and affordable housing in safe neigh-

borhoods. Communities need improved access to sidewalks and more ramps. Restaurants should be more wheelchair-friendly and should have picture menus available for those who need them. Exam tables in doctors' offices all need to be able to be lowered so people with limited mobility can get up on them. And, I'd like the media to cover more positive stories about folks with developmental disabilities.



Independence for new generation

Kris Jones is a Fort Wright resident and the mother of Taylor (pictured), a client at Redwood.

In 1955, when he was 26, my father contracted polio. I never knew him without his full leg braces and crutches or in his wheelchair. He died in 1983. Twenty-eight years with polio. Twenty-eight years with no ADA.

No curb cut-outs meant no way to cross a street using crutches and braces. No ADA. No freedom.

No push buttons to open and close public doors meant someone else had to be with Dad to manually open each door. No ADA. No independence.

No handicap-accessible restaurants meant no family dinners out. No ADA. No inclusion.

No handicap-accessible hotels meant no family vacations. No ADA. No fun.

No handicap-accessible restrooms meant – I don't know what because

my brothers handled that area. No ADA. No dignity.

In 1985 my daughter, Taylor, was born. She has cerebral palsy and a whole host of other medical conditions. Thirty years old. Twenty five years with ADA.

Curb cut-outs almost everywhere mean she can cross almost any street. ADA. Freedom.

Push buttons to open and close almost any public door mean she can let herself in and out of almost anywhere. ADA. Independence.

Handicap-accessible restaurants mean too many family meals out. ADA. Inclusion.

Handicap-accessible hotels mean family vacations. ADA. Fun.

Handicap-accessible restrooms in most places mean peace of mind. ADA. Dignity.



Wish inclusion didn't have to be legislated

Amelia "Amy" Auberger, mother to Addie, a 6-year-old with cerebral palsy, is a supervisory team lead with the CITE program at Envision.

My husband and I have a beautiful 6-year-old daughter, Addie. She happens to have cerebral palsy. Addie was born at only 23 weeks gestation and after fighting in the NICU for 119 days, she has been fighting for her quality of life ever since. When you look at what it takes to support her in reaching her highest potential, I cannot begin to describe how impossible this would be without resources. Thanks to the ADA, Addie will continue to grow up in a world where she will have the resources and accommodations she needs to thrive: equal opportunity for employment, accessibility in all places open to the public, and the inability for anyone to discriminate. I can't imagine what her future would look like if she were born 25 years ago.

While I am so thankful for what the ADA has done in terms of promot-

ing an acceptance and culture change for those who are different, I have to admit that it bothers me, and in some ways hurts my heart, to think that laws and codes would be necessary for our Addie – and others – to be able to be a part of their community. In addition, some stipulations still exist to exclude children who reside in households exceeding income guidelines. Yes, my husband and I obtain employment with medical benefits; however, as any parent of a child with a disability can attest, medical insurance does not begin to cover the cost of what Addie needs to have the highest quality of life possible.

As we move forward in celebration of all that has been achieved, especially in the past 25 years, I look to a future in which every person is welcomed and accommodated, regardless of income, disabilities or even because of a law that must be created.



A lovely day at the ballpark

Robert Shuemak of North Avondale is an advocate for Hamilton County Developmental Disabilities Services and vice chair of the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council.

I like to attend Reds games, and the ADA has made that possible. I remember when a friend and I took the bus to a Reds game. From the bus stop, we drove our power wheelchairs down to the ballpark, and I asked one of the attendants if I could borrow a manual wheelchair because I was concerned I would hit someone in the crowd. The attendant pushed me all the way to our seats

and, when I needed to use the bathroom, he pushed me there, too. I would like to have another lovely experience like this.

The ADA is a wonderful law but like all laws it needs to be expanded. For example, bathroom stalls and doorways in some place could be widened for easier access, even though they now comply with the ADA.



Yay for the ADA

Deanna Lewis is a receptionist at Cloverbrook Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Cincinnati. Her poem won the top prize in the writing contest sponsored by the Cincinnati ADA 25th Anniversary Committee.

Being blind can be a drag,
But I just have to brag
Thanks to the ADA
I am able to go on my way.
If I head to the museum,
My guide dog is free to come,
On a college campus,
While riding in a city bus
Whether out to eat,
Or on a spa retreat
Riding in a taxi cab,
Or in a hospital lab
At any place of retail,
While walking on a nature trail
In a shopping mall,
Or at a stadium watching football

Inside my local pharmacy,
Or at the nearby library
While out to see a movie.
I'm free to have my guide dog with me
In a swanky resort,
And waiting in an airport
Daily trips to the gym,
And at the city pool for a swim.
Anywhere the public can be,
So can my guide dog and me.
At work, I can get the software I need,
To do my job well indeed.
The ADA gives me these rights,
So that I can avoid many fights.
So the most important thing I can say is,
Yay for the ADA!

FORUM

AMERICAN DREAM NOT COMPLETE YET



THE ENQUIRER/CARRIE COCHRAN

Kara and Adam Ayers of Mason say goodbye to daughter Hannah in July 2014 before heading to the airport to adopt Eli from China. Hannah, who was born without a disability, calls it a "possibility." Often parents with disabilities have an easier time adopting children outside the U.S. because of beliefs regarding disability.



THE ENQUIRER/CARRIE COCHRAN

Eli attends his first baseball game after Kara and Adam Ayers, who have a form of dwarfism called osteogenesis imperfecta, adopted him from China. Eli has a form of dwarfism called achondroplasia.



KARA AYERS

Mason resident Kara Ayers was born with osteogenesis imperfecta, a type of dwarfism that causes her bones to break easily. She is the advocacy coordinator for the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities at the University of Cincinnati.

It was 25 years ago on the blazing hot lawn of the White House that the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law. At the time, I was enjoying the summer before fourth grade. I was oblivious to the law, but all too familiar with the ease in which I could be denied access to places or programs.

It was considered completely reasonable that my mom should carry me if I wanted to go to summer camp or attend a gifted writing program. But in only a few years, the ADA would dramatically impact my life. My high school constructed an elevator so that I could access science labs and, most important, remain with my friends in my school district.

That hands-on access to science labs sparked an interest that carried me through my doctorate program in clinical psychology. The ADA supported my acceptance to practicum and internship programs when directors and hospital administrators were initially concerned about my safety in environments like psychiatric units and schools.

Blazing trails isn't easy for anyone involved in a new venture. The ADA has provided a starting point and a minimal set of standards. The spirit of the law emphasizes equality in every facet of life. The ADA doesn't provide extra or special accommodations. Instead, it offers an equal shot at achieving the American Dream – however you might define that dream.

My husband and I are both proud people with disabilities. We've defined our American Dream by completing our educations, launching into careers that we love, and starting a family. It is thanks in part to the ADA that we roll with our kids to take in a Reds game or hop out of our wheelchairs for the newest coaster at Kings Island. I don't take it for granted when I pull up to an accessible parking space or push my daughter in the swing at one of Cincinnati's beautiful parks. These accessible options are due in part to the ADA but even more importantly they are due to the people who have upheld these standards and recognized the importance of involving all members of our community in all facets of society. It is within these people that the true spirit of ADA resides.

On July 27, we'll celebrate policy as well as people when we gather in the heart of our city. We'll look back at how far we've come and celebrate the achievements of today. People with disabilities are able to live, work, love, and play in our community more than ever before.

Still, there's so much work to be done. Outdated laws and mindsets continue to serve as barriers to full inclusion. Ohio is one of 35 states in which a child can be removed from a parent's custody due to the parent's disability status alone. As I watch my children play, it's almost too terrifying to consider the potential impact of such discrimination. I feel the fiery need for change that I imagine the advocates for ADA felt decades ago. My American Dream won't be complete until I can enjoy it without the concern that the ones I love most could be taken from me for no other reason than the way I was born. Disability rights are without question civil rights. Change demands work in the form of policy and – again – people.

In the next 25 years, I hope to celebrate many more anniversaries for freedom, inclusion and equality.

WE'D LIKE YOU TO KNOW, INCLUDE US



KAT LYONS

Kat Lyons is advocacy coordinator for The Center for Independent Living Options Inc. in Cincinnati.

Although people with disabilities are among the largest minority groups in the U.S., our rights are considered an inconvenience by some people, pushing us to the fringes of society. When a major human and civil rights conference took place in January, disability rights were overlooked until the outrage of advocates shamed organizers into including a few speakers on the topic.

The ADA has provided people with disabilities the right to access em-

ployment, government, commercial facilities, telecommunications, transportation and other places of public accommodation.

Inclusion, however, did not magically happen when President George H.W. Bush signed the ADA into law and uttered the words: "Let the shameful walls of exclusion finally come tumbling down." So inclusion remains an ongoing battle.

People with disabilities are still among the most socially and physically isolated in the world. Often we are excluded even in decisions about our own lives, which gave birth to our motto: "nothing about us, without us." Sometimes we speak slower or less intelligibly than other people or have less energy, so seeking our ideas and insights may seem just too time consuming for some people or not worthy of inquiry.

Because we look different, children are told not to stare and rushed away. Because we are vulnerable, we are targets for bullies. Because some of us can't walk, some people think we can't work. Because we have mental health problems, some people might think we're violent. Because we are wheelchair users, we are called "wheelchair bound," even though we think we are "wheelchair mobile."

Because we might have low vision or are hard of hearing, others might shy away from talking or looking at us. Because we can walk to our car, we are thought to be cheaters in the accessible-parking placard game. When there is a party, we may not even be invited because there are steps. Because we have disabilities, we are seen as imperfect, needing medical attention – or repair.

Some disabilities, like mine, are invisible, which many take to mean nonexistent. When I developed chronic, body-wide pain in 1994 after a car accident, even doctors were skeptical about diagnosing me with fibromyalgia. A variety of treatments failed to bring relief. I was no longer the woman my husband married, so he left me. Years of struggle ensued, and new treatments helped enough to allow me to go back to school, and eventually become an advocate for people with disabilities. But I am not, nor am I ever likely, to be "cured."

We see ourselves as fully human, with strengths and weaknesses like any human. We know that any human may, in an instant, join our ranks.

We are not unable, just because we are disabled. We are just people, and we'd like to get to know you. We'd like for you to know and include us.