

Email Interview with Arlene Mayerson
March 11, 2015

Mila: I'm focusing on all of the different people involved in the effort to create and pass the Americans with Disabilities Act. I know that you have had a major role as a key advisor to Congress for disability rights legislation. What do you believe the significance of your role and the role of other legal advisors to Congress and to activists was in relation to the Americans with Disabilities Act? What was it like to work with legislators, activists, and many other contributors to the Act?

Ms. Mayerson: I am honored to have been able to contribute to the development and passage of the ADA. My role was to draft and review language to promote the central theme of the ADA- equal opportunity for people with disabilities to participate in society based on the 1964 Civil Rights Act for minorities and woman, using concepts of equality developed in the regulations implementing Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. I was able to apply those legal concepts with the grounding of experience working for DREDF, an organization of and by disabled people. For example I added the need for curb cuts in city streets because I had experience first hand of what it is like to try to cross a street with friends and colleagues who use wheelchairs.

Mila: You worked with not only legislators but also activists for the disability rights movement throughout the drafting of the Americans with Disabilities Act. What was the importance of the social movements and events like the Capitol Crawl that occurred leading up to and throughout the drafting and passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act? Do you believe that social movements were of paramount importance in the negotiations and workings of this particular Act?

Ms. Mayerson: Yes, the movement was the moral voice and this could not have been done without the thousands of people with disabilities that wrote letters, came to D.C. to lobby and the actions of ADAPT, such as the Capitol Crawl.

Mila: The theme for this year's competition is "Leadership and Legacy." What do you believe these two concepts mean in terms of the drafting and passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act?

Ms. Mayerson: The Leadership of the ADA was a core groups of activists, advocates and lawyers who met weekly. Pat Wright, from DREDF is called the "general" of the ADA because of her role in tying all the pieces together to develop legislative strategy. It was also critical that we had the leadership of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and its director, Ralph Neas.