



Winning

The WAITING GAME

Disability Awareness Month: Disability History in Schools

Did you know that Harriett Tubman, who led hundreds of slaves to freedom through the underground railroad, had a traumatic brain injury as a slave which left her with narcolepsy?

Did you know the phrase "ship of fools" comes from ships that carried people with disabilities to distant port cities where they were abandoned?

Did you know, as late as the 70s, there were "ugly laws" on the books in America, which said that if you had a visible disability, you could not be seen in public?

Disability is a very natural part of life. According to the Governor's Committee on Disability and Employment 932,000 Washingtonians have a disability. There are 109,796 students in special education programs in Washington, and an even greater number of students who have disabilities but don't receive special education services. People acquire disabilities as they get older. Many veterans returning from war have acquired disabilities. Medical advances enable premature babies or people with injuries to live longer lives.

To promote the full inclusion of people with disabilities, we need to expand the knowledge, awareness and understanding of the history of disability and the disability rights movement. Youth of today need to understand the efforts and contributions made by people with disabilities so that the civil rights movement moves forward, so that they are connected to and understand their own culture, and so that history does not repeat its mistakes.

Designating October as Disability History Month provides the opportunity to learn about the contributions made by people with disabilities throughout history. People with disabilities have been viewed with fear by those who lack an understanding of their differences. This fear has led, historically, to bullying, segregation, institutionalization, mutilation and even death for people with disabilities. Youth with disabilities are often not familiar with concepts like "disability pride." Nearly one-fourth of students with disabilities don't finish high school, and a recent sample study indicates the unemployment rate for youth with disabilities in Washington to be around 41%.

Youth in Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and now Washington want to change this. They believe an understanding and awareness of disability history and culture will reduce the incidences like bullying and promote more acceptance in public schools. They recognize the need for youth to be connected to their own culture in a way that is meaningful and instills pride. These students have led efforts to create legislation that incorporates Disability History curriculum in the public schools.

The Disability History Awareness Month will not create a fiscal, administrative or time-consuming burden on teachers or district personnel. This piece of legislation will, for the first time, include an important and often overlooked piece of the civil and human rights movement in public education.

**"If you believe people have no history worth mentioning,
it's easy to believe they have no humanity worth defending."**

William Loren Katz