



A conversation with Lex Frieden

Voice Over:

(Hip-Hop music plays)

Mary Morder:

Hello, everybody. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and the ADA National Network, welcome to "504 at 50." I'm Mary Morder, responsible for materials development at the Southeast ADA Center. The "504 at 50" is a special interview series created in recognition of the 50th anniversary of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. In this series, Dr. Peter Blanck, PhD, JD, speaks with leaders of the disability rights movement who advanced the cause of equal rights through their tireless work. On today's episode, we welcome preeminent disability activist and leader of the Independent Living Movement, Lex Frieden. Lex is an American educator, researcher, disability policy expert, and disability rights activist. He's often referred to as the architect of the ADA. He is also a Professor of Biomedical Informatics and Professor of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston. He's also adjunct professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Baylor College of Medicine. Mr. Frieden is joined today by Dr. Peter Blanck, professor and chair of the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University. Peter, I turn it over to you.

Peter Blanck:

Well, thank you for that great introduction as usual, and Lex Frieden, what a treat to be with you. It sure is a long way from Alva, Oklahoma. How are you?

Lex Frieden:

Peter, I'm fine. And it's only about 10 hours from Alva, Oklahoma, so it's really not that far, but it's great to be here on the show with you here today.



Peter Blanck:

Yeah, thank you. And of course, I was speaking symbolically, but you always put me in my place and I appreciate that. For our listeners, Lex is a dear American, I don't know how else to say it. One of our mutual, dear friends, Dick Thornburgh, put it that democracy is not a spectator sport and Lex has never been a spectator in his life. He's been in the fight, in the front of things, and is one of the foundational individuals involved with the development of the modern disability rights movement in the United States and the world. So Lex, again, it's a great pleasure to be with you.

I thought I'd start, Lex, as we have talked about, 2023 is the 50th anniversary of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which in many ways was a springboard for subsequent civil rights legislation. It was a time of racial justice rights, it was a time of civil rights, the beginning of the women's movement. Tell us a little bit about if in those 70s, in those times when you began in the disability rights arena, were you thinking about this as a bigger movement or were you really just trying to take it a day at a time and did you have a place you wanted to end up?

Lex Frieden:

It's pretty clear that when the '73 Rehabilitation Act passed, people with disabilities recognize that it was a profound statement about our value to society, and that included all the aspects of the '73 Act. It provided vocational rehabilitation services for people. In fact, the act originally, the proposal included sections for independent living, which were really futuristic. Unfortunately, the president at that time, Nixon, vetoed two versions of the bill that included independent living. But those were exchanged for perhaps more importantly, Title V, which was the first real statement. The '68 Act included a reference to physical facilities owned by the government. But the 1973 Act expanded considerations of rights of people with disabilities to include our rights in public services, education, and so forth. That, that was important. And in fact, Peter, shortly after the law was passed and signed, there was a magazine that many of us subscribed to called Rehabilitation Gazette.

And the Rehabilitation Gazette was published by a woman named Gini Laurie out of her home in St. Louis, Missouri. And Gini had had a dear friend who had polio and she started the Polio Gazette, and then called it the Rehabilitation Gazette, in order to support her friend, who by the way passed away about that time. But in the Rehabilitation Gazette, the headline that I recall was, "Our Civil Rights are Here."



The idea for an ADA started way back. Some people with disabilities thought the '73 Act and the 504, 503, 501 continuum were in fact our civil rights law.

Peter Blanck:

Tell us, Lex, about how the '73 Act came about, particularly some of the unsung or some of the heroes of that effort that we normally don't speak about. For example, you don't hear about African American engagement coming off of the African American Civil Rights Movement or women and Title IX. How did that all come together and who were really the heroes of that era that represented this broad base of leaders in this area?

Lex Frieden:

It's an interesting question. The '64 Civil Rights Act included amendments in the sixties made by people like Hubert Humphrey that would have extended the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to people with disabilities. We've documented amendments to the act that were made, proposals of amendments that included people with disabilities in the listing of covered folk. And those amendments were obviously never included in the civil rights law. And part of that was because the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement at the time did not believe that the type of discrimination people with disabilities faced was equivalent to the discrimination they faced.

And furthermore, the women at that time had not made a very good case to be included. In the early 70s, the disability movement kind of merged away from the Civil Rights Act because we'd been pushed aside and the women's movement the same, and those two threads were moving forward at the same time. But Peter, I never recall any kind of coordination or collaboration or even discussion in the 70s beyond a kind of casual at a national meeting or something, "Look, can we cooperate?" And the other groups saying, "No, you are on your own."

Peter Blanck:

And some of the unsung heroes, I know we've talked about that from time to time, several congressmen and other leaders in making sure that the 1973 Act came about. Does some come to mind?

Lex Frieden:

Ted Kennedy, probably the most significant actor there, because he's the one that put the Title V provisions on the floor of the Senate right before final passage of



that bill. There wasn't any debate to speak of, wasn't any controversy about it. The members of the Senate and the House who didn't understand it; just made the assumption that Kennedy knew what he was talking about. They were tired of this bill having been vetoed twice and now here it comes again. They just wanted to get it done. So that sort of slipped through, I think. But other heroes included the Senator from West Virginia, Jennings Randolph, and there were some other old-timers whose names I don't recall now, I could probably look them up in the library, but they were keys to the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, which really was, as I said before, a very significant piece of legislation at that time. In fact, I'm sorry that many of the provisions in that act have now been folded into other laws, and it's not nearly as significant in my judgment as it might have been.

Peter Blanck:

The 504 language itself was drawn in many ways from the Civil Rights Act and Title IX, which preceded it, which involved educational issues for women. Was there any discussion of how that language came about? For example, there was new language, qualified individuals and individuals with disabilities and definitional components of that. Was there a discussion of that early on?

Lex Frieden:

Well, I mean, I was engaged in the so-called Independent Living Movement and corresponding with and talking with leaders of the community-based, consumer run centers for independent living, of which there were just a few at the time, and we never did discuss those things. But by the same token, none of us were academic lawyers or anything of that nature. So it may well have been discussed, but not among what I would refer to as the disability movement.

Peter Blanck:

Now of course, Judy Heumann was working on the ground then and other leaders. Who were the folks that come to mind, you said at the Independent Living Centers, at that time, who were working towards this end?

Lex Frieden:

Well, I would say the seminal moment and the awakening, and perhaps the beginning, if you had to date the beginning of the disability rights movement was in Boston, Massachusetts in about 1974 when a man named Fred Fay... Fred Fay was a



paraplegic. He'd broken his neck in a fall from a trapeze when he was a student at the University of Illinois. Fred went on to become a faculty member at Tufts University, and he got a small grant from the Rehabilitation Services Administration to sponsor a meeting in Boston. And part of his process was to identify leaders around the country who could come together and talk about coalition. And so he invited Ed Roberts and Judy Heumann, a woman named Diane Latin from Washington, DC, woman named Sigi Shapiro was there I think, a few other players from Massachusetts. Elmer Bartels, we met at that time, but he was not involved in the meetings.

I was there, and a woman named Eunice Fiorito, who was the director of the mayor's office on disability in New York, which was at that point in time, the only city that had a so-called mayor's office. So we all met in Boston and decided to form the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities. And our objective was to work together, groups united around the country, to be sure that the regulations to Title V were written so that they were enforceable and so that people with disabilities could indeed obtain the rightful place in the programs that we were concerned about, which were primarily public services and education at that point. Then, so we did. We incorporated ACCD. Eunice Fiorito was elected president, I think John Lancaster from the PVA was the Vice President. Judy may have been the treasurer. I was the secretary. The group that we wanted to form was intended to be cross-disability, and we went to a lot of efforts to assure that we had representation from virtually every disability group.

We were joined at that time by the founder of the National Association of the Deaf, Fred Schreiber, who was a member of our board. We had a woman who was working with the intellectually disabled people, at that time, retarded people and excuse me, for using the reference, but that's what it was called. We tried to get broad representation and I think we're generally successful in doing that. And we formed the organization to be an organization of organizations, which enabled us to go to the Congress and to the administration and say, "We represent X million people with disabilities." Had we chosen to make it a membership organization of individuals, it would've been much more difficult for us to make that argument. But because we had all these large national organizations working together, we simply added up all their membership and pointed out that we were clearly representing them in our coalition.

We also formed state coalitions to be sure that we had had representation from every state and territory. We had a model for doing that. We had a template, a plan,



those of us on the board, and we hired a director, Frank Bowe, went all over the country, promoting this idea of organizing state disability rights coalitions. We still have the Texas Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities, for example. Some of those organizations are still alive. That I think was a very important initiative that led to the modern disability movement.

Peter Blanck:

And that at that time was novel. There hadn't been a coalition across disability, at least that to that degree of effect prior to that.

Lex Frieden:

Exactly right. And there was little need for it. And we've drifted back to the pre-coalition days, frankly, and in my opinion, the groups representing different types of disability are reinforced to behave as individual groups and not as collectives or in coalition because the way the law works, each of these groups seeks funding from the federal government, and the federal government chooses, for a number of reasons, to divide up the funding at the federal level. So there are streams of funding that support different groups, and there are laws that are promulgated to support the interests of individual groups. And because of that, there is little incentive for all these groups to work together. They're conditioned by the legislation and the funding streams, and by the way, they raise money in the private sector, they are conditioned to be independent from one another and not to work together.

And so during the late seventies and the 1980s, we were able to use everybody's demand that there be a civil rights law protecting people with disabilities from discrimination, we were able to use that theme to bind all these groups together. And for that moment in time, 10 or 12 years there, we had an effective national coalition that included virtually every type and represented every type of person with a disability in the United States. But as soon as ADA passed, that coalition began to break down because the groups drifted back to self-representation, to survival of their own specific personal public interest groups.

Peter Blanck:

I don't want to get ahead of ourselves, but that's such an important observation. Why did that happen after the ADA and then we'll come back to the seventies and 80s?



Lex Frieden:

Well, we set it up. In a way, we're responsible for casting that future those of us who were advocating for ADA in the 70s and 80s, because we set one goal, one objective. Our moonshot was the ADA. President Kennedy said, "The nation should come together to put a person on a moon by a certain date." And we patterned our approach, our call after that kind of message. Our moonshot, our call to action was the ADA.

Peter Blanck:

You made that analogy at the time, you actually thought that?

Lex Frieden:

Absolutely we did. It was an obvious analogy, and it worked. It brought people together, it made them make the ADA the priority and as soon as the objective was met, we tried to engage people in the importance of the rules and regulations, but we had been so effective in our lobbying with the administration that they were ahead of us on that. You mentioned Thornburgh and Bush, they were ahead of us on the regulations. When the president signed the law, he said, "I expect to have regulations within a year." Clearly he was familiar, and we had made him so of our history with the '73 Rehabilitation Act where it took five years and a lot of effort by advocates even to get the regulations and rules signed, and that was a difficult chore. We did not want to be left with passing an ADA that had no teeth because there were no rules and no regulation.

And by the way, you know this, Peter, a lot of laws are passed just to mollify people with no intent that they will ever affect behavior or the court action because there's never any rules written. That happens all the time at the local and state level, less often I think at the federal level, but we did not want to be dragging feet with the rules. So the president, when he signed the bill, said he expected to have every agency provide their rules for review within a year. And in fact, on the first anniversary of the ADA, every agency except transportation had their rules ready to go and to be signed. When that happened, the disability movement sort of lost its purpose, its reason for being. Of course, we said, "Look, this is not a done deal. We're going to have to defend this law forever," but by that time, people were tired of working on the ADA. They'd achieved their objective, we'd had big celebrations, there was no clear path forward together so, in my opinion, people just drifted off back to their own groups and their comfort zones.



Peter Blanck:

Now, let's go back in time. So the regulations were set forth eventually. We know about the protest. John Lancaster, for example, has talked about that with us and the drafting of the regulations. What was going on from the late seventies to the passage of the ADA? In the eighties, we had a profound impact on America, the AIDS epidemic and the LGBTQ community seemed to co-engage with the disability community in some ways. As a matter of fact, the first ADA cases before the United States Supreme Court involved HIV Disease. Was there this new connection that was emerging given this new health crisis called the AIDS epidemic in the 80s? And how were you moving towards your ultimate moonshot?

Lex Frieden:

First of all, I think it's important for the audience to understand that you and I skipped from the rules and regulations of the ADA back to the '73, the Rehabilitation Act and Title V and after Secretary Califano signed the rules, there was, again, kind of a drifting of the interests and the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities, which had been so effective, began to break down. Again, we did not have a clear goal for the ACCD and that organization just kind of drifted apart because the board and the staff never could agree on a common vision going forward. And so things drifted apart. But in the early eighties, a number of us were called to testify to support reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act.

And we went to Washington, and we said, "Title V is important, but we need to provide support for Title V, we need to provide enforcement of Title V, and we need to develop community-based organizations to help folks in the community who are not as well connected as the disability leadership is, help them achieve their rights under Title V." That was all in testimony before the Congress and most of it around the reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act. Well, given that Senator Lowell Weicker, who was head of the committee that was dealing with the reauthorization in the Senate, decided that he would create a National Council on the Handicapped and that it would be people appointed by the president who would in fact oversee the Rehabilitation Services Administration, including the National Research Program on Disability and oversee the implementation of the Rehabilitation Act. And so that became part of the Reauthorization Bill in 1983. And the House had similar provisions that were intended to support the independent living centers to support this notion of a national review of disability rules and laws and policies.



So that passed. And the next thing to follow, again, from my perception, which is obviously limited to my own experience and what I've read and the people I've talked to, the next thing was significant because Reagan, who was not viewed as a civil rights advocate, appointed a number of outstanding leaders to this 15-member counsel. And these leaders were primarily parents of people with disabilities, powerful parents. I mean, the first woman to own a bank in California was appointed by the president. His son happened to live in her garage apartment, and he appointed her to this panel. And why did he appoint this woman? Because she had children who were of short stature and she was concerned that they were not doing well in school because the schools would not provide accommodation for them, and they had no means of recreation with other kids and on and on and on. So the president appointed her to the panel. The president appointed a woman, the wife of a doctor from New York, very successful physician, and Mrs. Parrino had a child with a severe physical impairment. She was appointed chairman of the panel. Movie actress who had been in movies with Reagan, Nanette Fabray, who happened to be deaf, was appointed to this panel. Jeremiah Milbank, who had been the treasurer of the Republican Party and of the Reagan campaign, was appointed to the panel. And Mr. Milbank and his family had been supporting philanthropy for people with disabilities literally for decades. And all these people had an interest in disability, and they hired me to be the executive director and Justin Dart was appointed to be the vice chair of this panel. And these people didn't want to sit around and just have tea parties, as you might expect. They actually thought the President appointed them to do something important and to do something good. And Justin and I basically convinced them that that would be the passage of a bill that would eventually be called the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Peter Blanck:

What year was that Lex?

Lex Frieden:

That was 1984. I was an academic. I mean, I didn't know how to lead a presidential panel, but I knew how to write reports and I knew the government loved reports, and I knew it took reports to get much done in the first place. So I suggested we write a report to the President and Congress and Weicker supported that by including a reference to it in the bill that created the council. And we made our first report, it was scheduled to go to Reagan in 1986, and the principal



recommendation in the report was to have a law to prevent discrimination on the basis of disability. Now, it's important, Peter, to know that we did not call that an anti-discrimination or civil rights law. In our report and in our rhetoric, we called it that an equal opportunity law. And that was kind of a euphemism. Everybody knew what we were talking about, including the president, but he felt more comfortable with a reference.

Peter Blanck:

What was your organization called at that time?

Lex Frieden:

That was the National Council on the Handicapped. We wrote that report and there were 12 primary recommendations. The report was taken to the White House. We were supposed to meet with Reagan. We had set up a Rose Garden press conference where the president was going to receive the report and welcome it and say it all should become law. Unfortunately, the Space Shuttle Challenger blew up at the morning we were supposed to do this, and the press conference was canceled and yada, yada. Another point I should mention here is that some of these things sound like they were smooth and done easily. I can tell you that the two days before that meeting was to occur, I got a call from the White House and was told to be in the White House by eight o'clock that morning to meet with the chief of the Domestic Policy Council about our report.

And they did not want us to give this report to the president nor to make it public because they, the Domestic Policy Council, were concerned about the potential cost of some of our recommendations. Now convinced... And it wasn't hard to do. The Chief of the Domestic Policy Council, it turns out was a man named Bill Roper. And before I went to meet him, I learned that he had studied medical rehabilitation at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and he was a rehabilitation doctor. And I said to him, "You and your colleagues do a lot of work to keep people like me alive and to make us as independent as we can be, and what do you expect us to do, sit home and watch television because we can't use the public services and we can't get work?" He said, "Is that what you're saying in this report?"

I said, "You read it again and that's what you're going to read." And he said, "Well, as far as I'm concerned, the president will be very happy to receive this report." So we had to talk our way through a lot of barriers in those days. That was just one example. But we wound up meeting with the Vice President because the President's



calendar was full for weeks after that. Happily, George Bush, who had not been involved to that point, read the report before we brought it to him. We were told that we had a photo-op with the Vice President, and it turned out that the Vice President intended to spend time with us. And he told us, "You can have your photo taken with me, but I want your time." And he told us that he and Barbara had read that report and decided it had substance in merit because they had a child who died who had a disability that they were concerned about.

And they had a son, one of their boys, who had difficulty reading and henceforth difficulty in school. And they didn't think that he was receiving a good school education because the schools weren't prepared to accommodate him. And so they understood what we were trying to do, and the Vice President said he would pass it along to the President, who he was sure supported it. But more importantly, he said, "If I can help you further in the future, I'll be glad to do that." And just coincidentally, he, two years later, became president, and that was the first thing that he mentioned in his first speech before a joint session of Congress.

Peter Blanck:

Bob Dole was on the scene then. Was he aware of what was going on?

Lex Frieden:

Bob Dole and Lowell Weicker and Orrin Hatch were three Republicans, actually, Weicker was a centrist, but they were three Republicans who understood what we were doing, and we briefed them routinely through the process of writing the report, through the process of advocating for the ADA. And Dole had influence because he was the leader of the Senate. Whiter had influence because he had a child with a disability and people were well aware of that. And Orrin Hatch had a brother with a disability, and those three members of the Senate sort of greased the wheels with the other members of the Senate. They played vital roles. On the House side, we ran into Steny Hoyer, who it turns out his wife had a disability. We learned that from the Epilepsy Foundation. And Steny Hoyer became a leader and an advocate along with Steve Bartlett, a Republican from Dallas who always thought he was my congressman and felt obliged to support the ADA.

But Bartlett understood more clearly the economic sense of the ADA. And Bartlett, a strong Republican, was concerned about federal costs of compensation programs, social security, and so on. And his objective was to provide an opportunity for people to earn more money and keep more money and have more



money. And he thought the ADA would enable them to do so. And he was one of the first members of Congress to see the ADA in that economic plight. And he became a great spokesman for us, particularly on the conservative side. Through that period between 1986 when we first finished our report and 1989 when Harkin eventually introduced the ADA that passed... A footnote here, Weicker actually introduced the first version of the ADA in 1988. It did not have time. He introduced it late in the session and there were no hearings, but make the record clear, the first ADA was introduced by Senator Lowell Weicker from Connecticut.

When the Democrats became the majority in the elections in the fall of 1988 in the Senate, he passed the bill to Tom Harkin, who became the ultimate hero of the ADA. The Democrats were easier to manage on this build and the Republicans, so Harkin had an easier time with the Democrats than he did with the Republicans. But thanks to, again, you mentioned Bob Dole and Orrin Hatch and Weicker who was behind the scenes, they were all seriously important in convincing their colleagues to support this bill. And Peter, let me just go back to another point you made if I may. We weren't thinking of AIDS. As I reflect now, and I'd be surprised to find many of my colleagues who ever thought of AIDS in the context of the ADA until it came up in the House as a point to argue against the ADA.

That's where that issue came up. We hadn't thought of it, it never occurred to us, but some members of the House and one member in particular in the Senate did not want the ADA to pass under any circumstances. And they kept searching for reasons why it shouldn't. And somebody caught onto this AIDS thing and said, "Look, if this bill passes, everybody in the world is going to have AIDS. And these people who are so infected by this horrid disease are going to be working in restaurants and cafeterias." And you know the history of the bill, there's actually language in the bill originally that covered restaurant workers. So it was a legitimate fear that they managed to raise. Well, that added then to our coalition. That's when the LGBTQ groups began to come forward and say, "Look, we are being attacked here as well, so we have to join you."

When we originally worked on this, we weren't thinking about that particular group as being people with disabilities. But then it occurred to us when this discussion started on the Hill that these people were natural allies because they could be affected by the same kind of discrimination that was affecting other people with disabilities. So that made a very strong union between those groups and it was good for us because the LGBTQ community managed to bring forward some really,



really good attorneys who helped us work on the final versions of the bill and who helped us get the regulations written clearly.

Peter Blanck:

I have two lingering questions, cognizant of time, and they are not hiding the ball. Number one, what have you told us that you haven't told anybody else and that is something we really needed to know? And secondly, why is there still this sense that the ADA has been a failure? And I'll just tell you how I answer that question, and that's by using my "It's A Wonderful Life" analogy, the movie. What would our gosh darn had there been no 504 and no ADA...? But I'd be interested in your take in our last few moments on those questions.

Lex Frieden:

The second question, Peter, to me is quite frankly, and I don't mean to offend anybody, but it's laughable. I mean, when you consider what has occurred since 1990... Yesterday in Houston, I was with a group of members of Congress celebrating 2,500 brand new universally accessible bus stops. Every one of these bus stops have sidewalks leading back into the community so that people can actually get out of their homes and down to the bus stop. They all have accessible shelters, they all incorporate well-marked and highlighted ramp.

And the people who joined the members of Congress to celebrate with us included women who couldn't lift their baby carriage with the twins up the step before that ramp was there. It included older people who had difficulty picking their feet up high enough to get up that step. It included people with all sorts of disabilities, people with intellectual disabilities who appreciated the new signage that was clear and made it clear which direction each bus was going when it left the stop. We've had a profound impact on our society and that celebration yesterday could be replicated a hundred times over in the United States. Some people would say, "Well, it took 33 years to get those bus stops." Well, we had bus stops there before. They simply weren't as accessible as the ones we've updated now. And we have 9,000 accessible bus stops in Houston, but some of them are broken down and they're old and they don't work very well.

So our community's investing tens of millions of dollars in upgrading systems, sidewalks, parks, to make them fully accessible, not just accessible, but universally accessible so they reach the whole community and not just a few people in wheelchairs or blind people or people who have other sorts of obvious disabilities.



The ADA has changed the way people look at our environment and it's changed the way we looked at other people. And I would hasten to say that the current push toward diversity and equity, I think that was all spawned by the Americans with Disabilities Act, the changes in attitude and perception that were a result of the Act. It's hard for me to imagine the ADA as a failure.

Peter Blanck:

I agree with you on that, well stated point, but people do point to the employment situation and what's your take on that, that in fact, the employment rate of people with disabilities has not dramatically increased since the ADA so the argument goes, I'm not pushing that argument. What's your take on that?

Lex Frieden:

Well, I actually think the data supports the argument. My answer to that question is that employers are just not thinking when they affect the kind of primal prejudice against people with disabilities. I don't think the ADA eliminated discrimination or perception. I think it changed perception, particularly when it comes to participation in society, generally speaking. And it actually did change the environment because we have places that people couldn't get into years ago, they can now. But the employers are ultimately the ones who make the decisions about who goes to work for them. And if they have some kind of a primal perspective, and I think there is evidence that certain employers do have... It doesn't matter the rhetoric that goes on up in the corporate office, it's the hiring officials who make decisions.

In 1980, I spent the summer at Cornell University in the ILR School there, the Industrial Labor Relations School as a visiting scholar. And I observed one thing that was very interesting and that is that ILR School were training hundreds and hundreds of people of color to work in human resources departments, to work in hiring departments in companies. They were effectively flooding the market with well-trained and skilled people of color to get into these hiring jobs in companies. And it's my belief that after those people began to manifest their own biases and to, in effect, right the wrongs that had been done in the past by ensuring that people who had been discriminated against in the past were hired at a higher rate than before. And I think you can see that the rate of employment of people of color actually did not go up immediately after the '64 Act, but indeed it went up literally decades later. And it probably hasn't reached equity at this point, but I don't know.



I'm not surprised from that standpoint that employers continue to discriminate on a basis of disability because they don't know better and it's hard for them to understand how to accommodate and the cost of accommodation.

And we haven't done a very good job of convincing them that accommodation can be made easily and cheaply because they look at people one at a time and they look at the rules and they say, "People have to be addressed one at a time." And they think about hiring a hundred people with disabilities who all have individual accommodation needs, and it never occurs to them that the accommodation needs while varied, are cheap and easily provided. And so they just ignore the question by not dealing with it and not hiring the people. That's my theory, and there's no evidence to support that. I think there are probably reasons why that employment rate hasn't gone up more than it has.

Peter Blanck:

We're studying that at the Burton Blatt Institute's National Center on the Future of Disability Employment Policy. Let me say, Lex, recently, as you know, I gave a talk and wrote an article titled something like "Why America Is Better Off Because of the Americans with Disabilities Act." And even though I happen to think you're a prophet, you may not think so. Where are we going now? It's such a course political environment, the world economic scene is disabled. We have war. What's the future for the next generation of young advocates? What's the message for them and what hopes do you have for them?

Lex Frieden:

Well, the message for them is work together. Young advocates have more tools than we ever had. When we started, the only way you could communicate was by a letter that took five or six days or by a phone call that most of us couldn't afford to make. Simple as that. Now people can Twitter one another, text one another, do whatever they want to be in touch with one another. real time, and they need to use that power and they need to be working together. And the organizations like the American Association of People with Disabilities and their leader who should be well known to all of us, Maria Town, have the knowledge and skills and the gumption to effectively make our world a better place for all of us here in the United States and around the world. So I think we should be supporting collaborative, working collective, representing organizations like the American Association of People with Disabilities.



And I think that the young leaders are perfectly capable of moving us forward at a faster rate than we have been in the past. So I think it's a matter of choice. What direction do they choose to take? What do they choose to solve in the first place, and how much can they manage at one time? I have high hopes for that kind of leadership, and I can mention a dozen other people here, just thinking of them right now. I won't do that but I do believe that there are leaders in every disability group, probably leaders in every community, and if those leaders would begin to talk and get their members and colleagues to begin to talk better, communicate better, to relate around policy issues, then they can have an effective impact on the future. Peter, I'm concerned about people who have limited income, people living in communities that are not well-served, communities that don't have enough food nearby, that don't have good housing.

I'm concerned about people who are not able to get healthcare who need it, and I think we need to reach those people. We need to represent them. I think we're too often moved to represent people who are more like some of us who have had achieved the opportunity to get good jobs. And I think we need to reach back and bring the whole community with us. And that's why I'm happy about the new emphasis on equity, diversity, and inclusion, because that means we have to teach people, we have to reach them, we have to include them, we have to understand their lives, and we have to engage them in setting the priorities for tomorrow. I'm optimistic. I mean, I think the roadmap is there. We just need to get on the pavement.

Peter Blanck:

One of the great honors of my life has been to know you, has been to watch you, and learn from you and with you and so many other great Americans that you named, and many that you didn't have a chance to name, in this movement. I am optimistic as well, and I'm optimistic that as an American, we will work together to further improve the situation of all people, particularly at this very, very complicated time that we're in now on so many dimensions. I want to thank you on behalf of our listeners, I want to thank you from the community, and I want to say it's a great privilege to know you and to learn with you about the past, but more importantly, how we move forward together in a very positive American way. Thank you, Lex.

Lex Frieden:



Peter, it's been a pleasure today. As always, regard for one another is mutual, and I appreciate this opportunity to share time and reflect on the past and also on the future with you. I look forward to the next opportunity to do so. Thank you.

Mary Morder:

Thank you, Lex and Peter. We are really grateful to you spending so much time today with us and sharing your experiences and your thoughts about the history of disability rights. Listeners, you can access this and other 504 at 50 interviews at its website, section504at60.org. The "504 at 50" series is produced by the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and in collaboration with the Disability-Inclusive Employment Policy Rehabilitation Research and Training Center.

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