



OUR DECADE OF CHOICE

Selected Remarks
by Larry Johnson,
President CTD

DEDICATED TO:

Members and friends of the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities on the occasion of its Sixth Annual Delegates Assembly, October 21-23, 1983, El Paso, Texas.

To people everywhere who listen to and care about the problems and dreams of all disabled persons, and to the 1.7 million Texans- -“Disabled But Able”.

CTD'S 5TH YEAR IN REVIEW

EL PASO, OCTOBER 22, 1983

By Larry Johnson

To borrow a phrase from the 1960's national Civil Rights Movement, "We are better off today than we were yesterday, but we're not as well off as we will be tomorrow."

We can look back with considerable pride and satisfaction at this fifth year of growth and accomplishments of our Coalition of Texans with Disabilities. There are more member organizations with us today than ever before. We began with 11. Our present roster lists 92 CTD organizational members. That's something we can truly be proud of.

Our strength in numbers and influence is ever-increasing. Our "Disabled but able to vote" Campaign, launched in the early months of 1982, has caught the interest and enthusiasm of other organizations of disabled persons throughout the country. In May of this year, the campaign and our slogan were formally adopted by the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities Board of Directors and has become a national focus of that organization's efforts during this coming year of national elections.

In July, the American Council of the blind, at its national convention in Phoenix, passed by unanimous vote a resolution calling upon ACB to join with ACCD and similar disability advocacy organizations in a national nonpartisan "Disabled but Able to Vote" campaign aimed at promoting and encouraging all citizens of voting age with disabilities to register for and participate in the 1984 national elections. And other state and local organizations and coalitions are picking up the standard as well.

Texas is seen today by many groups and individuals within the disability rights movement across the United States as having one of the most cohesive, dynamic and successful coalitions in the country. If that is true, and I believe it is, then the credit and thanks go to you.

On the state level, CTD co-sponsored and co-participated in the celebration of "Disability Rally Day", a singularly historic event which generated statewide awareness of disability rights and our organizational unity. More than 1500 Texans gathered at the state capitol last February to lend testimony and credibility to our commitment to improve the quality of life opportunities to all disabled Texans.

Significant progress was also made during the 67th state legislature. The laws related to parking and disabled persons were greatly strengthened and clarified. Polling site accessibility provisions for disabled citizens were expanded and improved, with specific target dates for compliance now formally and firmly established. A state sales tax exemption was approved on certain equipment used by visually impaired persons. A Council on Disability was formally established to advise on the implementing of recommendations set forth by the Governor's Long Range Planning Committee—recommendations which came out of the statewide series of public hearings held last year and involving the testimony of hundreds of disabled Texans, our friends and adherents.

CTD and its member organizations successfully supported a line item in the Texas Rehabilitation Commission's budget calling for state funding for consumer-directed independent living centers in Texas. The results are that the five disabled consumer operated independent living services in Austin, Dallas, El Paso, Houston and San Antonio are assured of critical financial support for the next two years.

In addition, CTD's efforts helped to assure funding for the Texas Commission for the Deaf's deaf-blind pilot project. And our many letters and calls on behalf of the Southwest Collegiate Institute for the Deaf contributed to the successful appeal by that institution to the Texas Legislature for a higher level of funding during the next bienium.

A number of notable appointments of disabled Texans to state boards and commissions was also achieved. Under Gov. White's executive order to reconstitute and rename the Governor's Committee for Disabled Persons, provision was made for a requirement that half of the 16-member committee be persons with disabilities.

An unexpected bonus during the special session in late June occurred when the legislature approved the establishment of a Human Rights Commission to protect the Civil Rights of those minorities most frequently discriminated against. Among the protected classes which were specifically mentioned was "the handicapped". This Act is modeled after Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and places our state in the vanguard of those states most sincerely interested in upholding the rights and opportunities of all its citizens by equal treatment in employment.

We did not accomplish all that we set out to accomplish. And yet, we are better off today than we were yesterday, but not as well off as we can be tomorrow.

Our VISTA project, to our pleasant surprise, has been extended through March, 1984. This vital network of 30 community volunteers has served CTD and its member organizations well in spreading the word of cross-disability cooperation and communication to all parts of Texas. Although the future of our VISTA program beyond March of next year remains in serious doubt, owing to the mood of the present Reagan

administration, we must acknowledge the tremendous benefits we have received during these past two years and express warmest appreciation and applause to the talented individuals who have served, and continue to serve, as VISTA volunteers to CTD—a living tribute to the important social value and human significance of this program.

In early August, CTD went on-line, joining the age of computer technology, when we became the recipient of a generous gift of a T99 computer from Texas Instruments. This will allow us greater speed, flexibility and efficiency in our central office operations and the potential for enhancing our communication network all across the state.

This will be the first year that CTD has held its Delegates Assembly in the western regions of the state. We are deeply proud of and very grateful to the disability advocacy organizations of the host city of El Paso for their warm hospitality as well as for their outstanding efforts during the past year on behalf of the rights of disabled persons everywhere. We salute you El Paso, and we are proud to be your amigos y hermanos.

It is, after all, the awareness and involvement of disabled people their families, friends and adherents, at the local level, which really counts. The true strength of our organization—the power of our influence—comes from you. We are the architects of our own future. We can shape the world by our actions and our attitudes as individuals and as organizations. We can make a difference in this decade—the decade of disabled citizens. It is our decade—our decade of choice.

DISABILITY RALLY DAY

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

February 2, 1983

By Larry Johnson

We are gathered here to look back on a decade of change. Down through the course of American history, our nation has been confronted with the eternal conflict for change. Each change represents a new plateau in the march of history-the achievement of aspiration. for equality and opportunity by minorities seeking human rights and dignity. Each of us views differently the degree of success or failure of our efforts for change - each to our own philosophy and understanding.

We look back to the bright promises of the 1973 Vocational Rehabilitation Act, to the 1975 Education of All Handicapped Children's Act, to the Whitehouse Conference on Handicapped Individuals of 1977 and to the 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons, and we feel frustration and disappointment that reality has not kept pace with our expectations. With unemployment among working age disabled persons still at around 50%, with only about half of all handicapped children receiving an appropriate and useful education, and with scores of public buildings and local transportation systems still inaccessible or unavailable to disabled citizens, we may most certainly conclude that progress indeed has been slow. And with the growing conservative mood of our federal government and the increasing stresses and strains upon our national economy, even these small gains which we have attained appear now to stand in great jeopardy.

Today is a day for somber reflection, and for honest appraisal of our aspirations - fulfilled and unfulfilled - of our progress and our potential. It is a time for humility, and a time for pride. For it was as much the vote of disabled Texans which helped elect a new governor and chose the representatives and senators who join us here today. And it is the creative potential

of disabled Texans which can make a significant impact upon the quality of life in this state in the years to come.

Those of us called "handicapped" who are gathered here on this hill today, represent thousands of other Texans with disabilities who seek the same "quality of life opportunity" as you and I - the opportunity for transportation, employment, for education, and for all those other meaningful, commonplace, taken-for-granted activities of normal every day living.

Disabled people are people with limitations, just as all people are people with limitations. These limitations present barriers, obstacles to the achievement or accomplishment of our goals. America is known as the land of opportunity. But for 200 years Americans have been building barriers and obstacles for persons with disabilities. We must see that each of us has played, and continues to play a role in creating these barriers, and that each of us must contribute to their removal. Many of these barriers are visible, tangible, and can be removed by a simple application of brick and mortar, or by computer technology. However there are other, even more imposing barriers - those which are invisible, those which are in the minds and hearts of millions of able-bodied and, yes, of many disabled Americans, whose attitudes of prejudice and fear keep us isolated within our own society. The world must come to recognize that people with disabilities are also people with abilities - people who are able to work and to learn, to lead and to participate, people who are able and eager to make important contributions to their communities. Among us there are poets, lawyers, writers, musicians, architects, teachers, truck drivers, salesmen, managers, computer programmers, artists, printers, and accountants. Each of us, in his own way, possesses a reservoir of creative potential. . . . And it is from this vast resource of human energy and creative potential that change will inevitably come.

Our disabled population represents a wide spectrum of different needs for individuals and for disability groups. Together we must work and plan for our future - using as our

tools rational practical persuasions of economic facts, sincere dedication and commitment to human and moral values, and a creative and participating partnership involving all elements within the community. Divided we will see the continued erosion and total disintegration of all human service programs for disabled persons.

It is not enough simply to say that the system has failed. Nor does it serve any positive purpose to portray ourselves as helpless victims of cruel society. We are in charge of our destiny. We have in our hands the power for change. We cannot afford to waste our time or our energy in blaming society, politicians, administrators or our friends for the state of affairs we are in. Things will get better for disabled people in America - in Texas, only when disabled Texans themselves are convinced that it is up to us to make them better.

The women's movement found it necessary to raise the consciousness not of men but of women. That is something which we, disabled people, must now do. We need to help each other accept responsibility for ourselves and for our circumstances. We must educate, advocate and communicate our issues and our concerns.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of passage of the most significant legislation to affect the lives of disabled Americans. It may well take yet another decade before we see that promise become reality. It is up to us to make it happen. And there already is in Texas a plan - a ten-year long-range plan - framed by disabled people for disabled people, to guide us to the achievement of our goals. For successful implementation of that plan there will be required cooperative partnership and commitment from all sectors - our state and local governments, service provider agencies, schools, community employers and disabled consumer representatives themselves.

Let me make it clear, volunteerism cannot do it alone. Roads are not built, oil wells are not drilled, factories are not run by volunteers. Schools need teachers. Rehabilitation agencies

need placement specialists; and consumer-based independent living programs require adequate public funding support.

As long as disabled people remain the world's most poorly represented large minority, we and the programs designed to help us, will suffer the consequences. Independent living was once only a dream. Now it is becoming a reality. What we as individuals do in the next few years will affect the quality of life for generations to come for all Texans with disabilities.

We are here not to celebrate but to dedicate this day to the hundreds of thousands of our fellow disabled Texans who could not come. With them, we can make a difference, if we believe we can. Our potential is too great to refuse to accept the responsibility and obligation to work together to build a better future for all Texans.

Let this be our second beginning.

“DECADE OF CHOICE”

By Larry Johnson

President of CTD in a keynote address to the Deaf-Blind Multihandicapped Association of Texas meeting held on June 11, 1983 in Austin, Texas on the celebration of DBMAT'S Tenth Anniversary

It was Helen Keller who said this a long time ago, quote: “A handicapped person never knows his hidden sources of strength until he is treated like a normal human being and encouraged to shape his own life.”

To be treated like a normal human being, means to receive the respect of those around us, our friends, our families, our neighbors. It means to be treated as equals, to receive the same chances as everyone else. To go to school, to work, to enjoy TV, to marry, to raise a family, to be a responsible person in the community.

Whether we are deaf or blind or both, we all want respect and dignity and equal treatment. Yes we do have limitations, but all people have limitations. We must convince the world and ourselves, to look beyond our limitations to our abilities.

Blind persons, for example, can read in the dark, operate a computer with their eyes closed, or play a game of chess by touch. Blind people can roller skate, ride a bicycle, dance, swim, play baseball, and bowl. We can cook, type, tune-up a car, even upholster our own living room sofa. A few daring blind persons I have read about, have even tried mountain climbing, sky diving, and water skiing.

I personally have not been that brave, but I did drive a car once on a freeway in Chicago, and I was not drunk either. Fortunately, we were not stopped by the police. I'm not sure how we would have explained it to the judge or if he would have believed us. He might have requested that the patrolman be given a sobriety test.

A lot of embarrassing things can happen to you when you are blind. I remember one time when I was living in Mexico City, and I was standing on the corner trying to flag down a cab. To get a taxi to stop in Mexico, all you do is hold out your hand like this. If the cab is empty, he will stop. Well, I had been waiting only a few minutes, when a car stopped in front of me. I yanked open the door and jumped in. I told the driver, "take me downtown". We drove along for about 10 minutes, when I noticed I did not hear the meter of the cab "click". I was thinking: "Is this taxi driver going to try to charge me too much because I am blind?" Feeling a little angry now, I asked, "Is there something wrong with your meter?" "I don't have a meter", he answered, "I'm your neighbor, and I just stopped to give you a lift."

Sighted people worry about blind people falling over things, breaking things, spilling things, burning holes in the rug, and about what they would do, if they were blind. Blind people worry about being stared at, being pitied, about burning holes in the rug, falling over things, breaking or spilling things, and about being accepted by the sighted world. Disabled people want to help nondisabled people, just as much as we want to accept help from them.

I remember one time wanting to be helpful to my wife by making her lunch to take to work. We were both in a hurry. I found some meatloaf in a pan in the refrigerator. I scooped out some with a spoon and put in on a slice of bread, spread a little mustard on top and added some lettuce. When she got to work and opened up her lunch to eat her sandwich, she saw the meatloaf and called me. I learned then, that she had not had time to cook the meatloaf the night before. What I had given her and myself, was well-seasoned raw meat.

Frequently I am embarrassed when talking with deaf people. It happens when the deaf person thinks our conversation is finished and walks away without telling me. And then, I think of

something else I want to say, and begin signing to empty air. It's also hard for a blind person like me to speak to a quiet audience, because I can't see you, you may all have fallen asleep, or got up and left. Are you still there?

An opportunity is the right moment to take action for a definite goal. We are beginning a new decade of opportunity. Opportunity to advocate, promote, and support each other in our efforts. And with opportunity, comes choice, the single most important right which belongs to every human being. The choice to act or not to act. The choice to pull together in a strong and cooperative effort, or to act separately, individually, or in small fragmented groups in a competitive, disjointed, and disruptive manner. The choice is ours, and the consequences of our choice, be we disabled persons, or parents or educators, or professional rehabilitation specialists. The road we choose to follow will have major repercussions on the civil rights and individual opportunities of those disabled persons in years to come.

We can look back from where we have come in the past ten years. We can surely say, as civil rights leaders have said: "We are better off today, than we were yesterday, but we are not as well off as we will be tomorrow."

It is appropriate to take time to appreciate and enjoy those triumphs which have come as a result of a long struggle. The hard work, the dedication and commitment, and the significant growth of the DBMAT has earned for it a reputation which extends nationwide.

I am deeply honored and very pleased, that I was asked to be with you this morning on so an important and historic occasion, on this tenth anniversary celebration of the Deaf-Blind Multi-handicapped Association of Texas. Allow me to pay my warmest and most sincere congratulations to each and everyone of you on the completion of a "Decade of Triumph." I applaud you.

Disabled people all too often are set apart from the rest of society...not measured by the same measuring stick or provided the same opportunities to grow, to learn, to work, to be. We are not expected to be equal, and so we are not treated as equals, by teachers, parents, rehabilitation professionals, or our friends. Often times they believe they know more about us than we do. There is a lot of over-protecting of severely disabled children and adults by well meaning parents and patronizing service providers. People need to be given a chance, to take a chance, to be wrong, to make a mistake.

No, it's not easy to stand back and watch, not easy for a loving parent or caring friend or teacher. But, over-protection can and does stifle human potential, and destroys self-image. Children must be allowed to grow, helped to grow, at their own pace. Not all plants require the same amount of light or water, or plant food. Nor do they all thrive in the same kind of plant soil. And yet, when it comes to people, educators, rehabilitation specialists, want to find a single standard formula to follow. But there is no one right way to teach a deaf-blind child. There is no one perfect work training program, which is guaranteed to work with every deaf-blind client.

The best programs, the best teachers, are those which permit flexibility and change; those which take into account the past that they are dealing with people; that word, "people", is itself a collective noun, and perhaps instead, we should use the word, "individual". Each one of us is an individual uniquely different from everyone else. We know this, and yet sometimes we forget.

Disabled people too are individuals. Each one uniquely different. Each one having different needs. Different abilities, different potential. The challenge lies in correctly identifying those needs and abilities, and matching them to the appropriate community resources.

Parents, educators, work trainers, rehabilitation specialists, grow a lot of grey hairs, experience a lot of doubt. Doubt over whether they have made the wrong decisions for this child, their student, their client. Or maybe it was not a wrong decision, but an unpopular one. It's a pretty heavy responsibility being in charge of someone else's life. It's almost like playing God. Some people take relish in that power experience, others resent it or simply feel overwhelmed by it. And thus, choose to turn over the responsibility to the state or some other institution.

It is the most cherished dream of every parent, teacher, and rehabilitation person, I think, to see that the disabled child becomes an independent adult. It is best for them, and it is best for us. But getting to that point is not easy. It takes a lot of trial and error. And if it is to be done best, it is best done with the participation of the individual concerned. There is a great temptation to do for disabled people. It's quicker, it's safer, it's the way we've always done it. Mother knows best, teacher knows best, work trainer knows best. Sometimes that's true, but the learning process for growing and maturing flourishes most in an environment where there is opportunity for freedom of choice. And that, is what "independent living" is all about... The right and human privilege of an individual to practice self-determination and to make his or her own choice of experiences that will develop a life-style in accordance with his or her needs and desires.

Independent living for severely disabled individuals is a relatively new concept brought about by the activism of individuals with disabilities and their adherents. Appropriate services to this population have been seriously lacking; and the quality of established services has been in many instances, far from adequate. The term independent living is defined differently by each person. The attainment of independence will also be different. However, in that freedom of

interpretation, lies the essence of what it is. Just as it is true for people not having disabilities, independent living is a concept for disabled individuals that one must have an unlimited number of choices to experience life to the extent that we, society, provide severely disabled individuals information and opportunity about those choices to that extent, will they, will we, become independent.

Communication is the key. Communication is imperative in order for us to understand and respond to the needs and aspirations of one another. Traditional forms of communication are not always defective. Vocabulary is meaningful only if the speaker and the listener share in their understanding of the words being used.

Non-verbal communication presupposes that both parties are the product of similar social, cultural, and psychological backgrounds. In the case of severely disabled deaf-blind, multi-handicapped persons, communication often is the major obstacle to overcome. (Editor's Note: at this point, Mr. Johnson spoke in a voice of one who has severe cerebral palsy). "How can you know what I want, what I am capable of, what I am really thinking, if you can't or won't understand my language? It may appear at first to you to be a baffling series of grunts and grimaces, accentuated by arm wagging and body twitching, but it is me, and it is my language. And I am trying to say something. All too quickly my teacher, my parents, my family, try to get me to learn their way of communicating. They seem to be not much interested in mine. I asked myself, "Do they really care about me?"

How hard are you really trying to understand the language of severely, expressively disabled persons? And how hard are you really trying to involve them in making decisions which are going to affect their lives? What is best done, is best done with the participation of those who are to be affected.

Our responsibility as disabled leaders, parents, and educators, is to maximize opportunities for choice, and to remove the barriers to those opportunities created by the circumstance of disability. This is called "advocacy". We must advocate for change at all levels. We must not allow ourselves to be handicapped by preconception of how things should be done. We must not be blind to the miracles made reality by modern technology. We must not be deaf to innovative ideas and approaches set forth by dedicated professionals in the field of disability. We must keep an open mind to all new information. We must remain alert to all new opportunity.

Our world of modern technology is ever changing, offering the promise of new opportunities and independence for severely disabled persons in employment, in education, and in communication.

The computer, I am convinced, will become an increasingly vital tool for disabled individuals to achieve greater independence. It is extremely adaptable, and very "user friendly", to use an industry term. It can compensate for almost any limitation. The computer does not discriminate against disabled people.

The United Nations General Assembly recently proclaimed 1983 to 1992 as the "Decade of Disabled Persons", and unanimously approved a resolution adopting a world program of action for disabled persons. This world program of action calls upon government, international, and national organizations and people everywhere, to increase the participation of disabled persons in national and community life.

It is up to us to seize upon this promised opportunity to assure that what lies ahead for severely disabled individuals is indeed an improved quality of life opportunity.

A reality of political process is that if you don't have dollars, you've got to have the numbers. The value of an organization

is that it provides access. Without access, you will never get to the decision makers. Numbers provide that access, and organization provides those numbers. To para-phrase Sol Olensky, one of the masterminds of community organizers in the United States, "People create organizations, organizations create power, and power creates change".

The significance of numbers, was clearly demonstrated by the headlines and TV stories which appeared all across the state last February describing the events which took place on February first and second in Austin. Some estimates placed the crowd, on Disability Rally Day, at over 1500. It was attended by many of the most influential state legislators, the Lt. Governor, and the Speaker of the House. It was described by the media as a very positive and important experience.

Some things are better done in a quiet way, behind closed doors. Others require an outpouring of letters and telephone calls. We know the value of both. The legislative record of achievement by organizations of and for disabled persons in Texas has been encouraging. We are better off today, than we were yesterday, but are not as well off as we will be tomorrow. That is if we are willing to work together, if we are not too proud, too apprehensive, too frightened, to enlist each other's support.

Divisiveness and conflict between and among service providers, parents, and disabled consumers, can only serve to impede our progress toward equal quality of life opportunities for disabled Texans.

We are indeed at a cross roads, at a point at which we must ask ourselves: "Do we wish to move toward a society of minorities with group rights, or a society of one majority, with individual rights?"

The choice rests with us, the decade ahead is *our* decade of *choice*.