**American Experience:**

**Change Not Charity: The Americans with Disabilities Act**

Accessible Descriptive Transcript

[Visual and audio descriptions: Text over a black background: American Experience Films. Change, Not Charity: The Americans with Disabilities Act. Now, a panning shot of the capitol building. Inside, police stand by as protesters fill the building, pumping their fists in unison with their chanting. Some stand while others sit in wheelchairs.]

PROTESTERS [chanting]: A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now!

POLICE OFFICER [over speaker]: I order you to please dismiss!

PROTESTERS: A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now!

NARRATOR: On March 13, 1990, disability activists from across the country occupied the rotunda of the Capitol to demand the passage of the A.D.A., the Americans With Disabilities Act.

PROTESTERS [chanting]: A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now!

NARRATOR: One in four Americans was living with a disability. Pent-up anger over discrimination, segregation, and isolation had led to this moment.

[Black and white protest photos. Police officers pull men in wheelchairs through the bustling crowd.]

LAWRENCE CARTER-LONG: Did they get to have a career? Did they get to have a spouse? All of these questions, which we had for nearly a century shoved away, they weren't going to accept second-class status any longer.

PROTESTER: Up with access!

STEPHANIE THOMAS: We will ride! We will ride! We're going to be part of this country. We're going to be part of the community, just like anybody else.

CYNDI JONES: Who'd ever thought that people with disabilities would actually be arrested for demonstrating? Aw, poor little cripples, right? That coming of the movement said, "We're not going to hide in the shadows. We're coming out." Access is our civil right!

[A protest sign: We will not go away. We are here to stay. Articles read: Blank check for the disabled? Those costs could be monumental. Low instrumentals play.]

PROTESTERS: Access is our civil right!

NARRATOR: For the protesters, access and opportunity should be a birthright. But opponents of the A.D.A. lambasted it as unrealistic.

STEVE BARTLETT: This was a civil rights bill that required massive amounts of changes that somebody had to pay for.

[A political cartoon. Dollar bills create a ramp. On the other side, a figure in a wheelchair sits at the base of a staircase. An American flag, its stars illustrating a wheelchair symbol.]

NARRATOR: If passed, the Americans With Disabilities Act would be one of the most consequential civil rights bills in the nation's history.

ANITA CAMERON: Civil rights aren't given. You have to fight to get them, and then you have to fight to keep them.

[Text: American Experience is made possible in part by: Major funding: Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. Funding for Change, Not Charity: The Americans with Disabilities Act: Corporation for Public Broadcasting. GBH Voices and Equity Fund, Corey Thomas and Anya Phillips-Thomas. Additional Funding for American Experience: Robert D.L. Gardiner Foundation. The American Experience Trust, The 1772 Foundation. Rita J. and Stanley H. Kaplan Family Foundation Inc. And viewers like you. Now, split screen footage of families gathered around their home TV sets. Text: Edited by Sandra Christie, ACE. Narrated by Peter Dinklage. Produced by Hilary Klotz Steinman and Sarah Keeling. Written and Produced by Chana Gazit. Directed by Jim Lebrecht. Now, Jerry Lewis in a tuxedo takes a dazzling stage, a full band behind him. The audience cheers and applauds as fanfare music plays.]

TELETHON HOST: We are live. We are coming to you from the resort and convention center of the world, Las Vegas, Nevada. This is the Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon.

NARRATOR: At its height, the Muscular Dystrophy Telethon, hosted by beloved comedian Jerry Lewis was watched by nearly half of the country. Broadcast over 21 nonstop hours, it raised hundreds of millions of dollars towards finding a cure for muscular dystrophy.

MAN ON STAGE: Here's $100,000 for good luck.

[The audience cheers.]

NARRATOR: But not everyone welcomed the telethons.

[Cyndi Jones, Publisher, Mainstream Magazine. Cyndi has wire-rimmed glasses, shoulder-length gray hair, a sharp blue blazer, and sits in a mobility scooter.]

JONES: My husband and I both had polio. We would hide-- I mean, we didn't want to go anywhere on Labor Day weekend, because everyone assumes that you had muscular dystrophy. Everyone assumes that you're part of the telethon. It was terrible.

A child featured on the telethon: We need lots of money, lots of love. Every penny you send in adds up to dollars.

HOST: As a matter of fact, if you want to give $100 or more...

[Mary Lou Breslin, Co-Founder, Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund. Mary Lou sits in a wheelchair sporting short gray hair, dark frames, and a bright blue and purple scarf.]

MARY LOU BRESLIN: The telethon was really detested as a tool of using pity as a way to collect money. "If you give us money, we're going to cure this poor, helpless kid of whatever their disability is."

[Audience cheers and applauds.]

NARRATOR: In 1981, after more than two decades of huge TV ratings, a disabled lawyer named Evan Kemp published an editorial that stunned readers. With its emphasis on poster children, he wrote, telethons equate disability "with total hopelessness."

[Article: Aiding the Disabled: No Pity, Please. Playing to pity may raise money, but it also raises walls of fear between the public and us. A parade sign: Keep the Wheel Chairs Empty. News articles: Polio Poster Girls on Parade. They wear signs reading: We need you for mother’s march on polio, Friday January 31st. Stars Helping Dimes Drive. A young Cyndi grins in a photo. Low instrumentals play.]

JONES: When I was five-and-a-half, I was chosen to be a poster child for March of Dimes. I was chosen because I was blonde, blue-eyed, and braced. I was, like, queen for a day. I was in the parade and on the float. I was in first grade, and March of Dimes had used my photo for a flyer to promote polio vaccines. My teacher says, "Oh, we have a flyer with Cynthia's photo on it." So she passes it back. And I wondered, what photo did they use? Was it the party photo? Was it this photo? That photo? And I got the flyer on my desk, I thought, "Oh, my gosh." They used a photo of two kids running through a field. And it said, "This," and me in my party dress, and it said, "Not this." I was shocked. I, even now when I speak it, I am horrified. I wanted to crawl under my desk. So in an instant, I realized nobody wanted to be like me.

[In a new scene, a bell tolls in black and white footage. The Notre Dame Cathedral. Grand spandrels and arches. The Hunchback of Notre Dame, his shoulders wide and round, his face asymmetrical.]

WOMAN: What's the matter? That eye. Staring at me.

MAN: Somebody's in there!

WOMAN: It's an animal!

[They gasp and yelp.]

NARRATOR: The blockbuster 1939 movie "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" underscored the impossibility of blending into an able-bodied world.

[The crowd shouts in the movie scene.]

JONES: When we see "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," what you see is someone who wants to participate, but is pushed out, and he hides in the shadows. If you have a disability, is that what you're supposed to do? You're supposed to hide in the shadows?

[Materials from a Fitter Families Contest read: Some people are born to be a burden on the rest. From San Francisco Order Number 783: Any person who is diseased, mutilated, so as to be disgusting, not allowed in public places. Black and white photos of men on the street, one with an eye patch, another blind, a third with crutches.]

NARRATOR: Negative attitudes toward the disabled were formally sanctioned more than 100 years prior, with the eugenics movement, an ideology that viewed disability through the distorted science of Social Darwinism. Over half the states in the country had laws allowing compulsory sterilization. Alongside the rise of eugenics, cities across the United States began to pass what became known as the ugly laws.

[Lawrence Carter-Long, Disability Rights Advocate, with cropped gray hair and a light gray blazer.]

CARTER-LONG: In San Francisco, the law said if you were diseased, mutilated, that you shouldn't be on public display. It was "out of sight, out of mind" as public policy.

[News footage of a street lined with trees on an overcast day. Low instrumentals continue.]

NARRATOR: Doctors often advised families that the best place for the disabled child was in an institution, even encouraging them to never mention the child again. At dinnertime on February 2, 1972, millions of Americans watched in horror as TV reporter Geraldo Rivera exposed the conditions at the Willowbrook State School in Staten Island. Willowbrook was the largest institution in the country for children with developmental disabilities.

[Inside the institution, individuals sit along a wall appearing despondent. In a dark bathroom, patients lay on the ground under a row of sinks, rocking back and forth.]

RIVERA: We toured building number six. They were making a pitiful sound, the kind of mournful wail that it's impossible for me to forget.

[Arlene Mayerson, Directing Attorney, Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund. Arlene has long white hair in soft waves, pearl hoop earrings and a matching pearl necklace.]

ARLENE MAYERSON: Disabled people being treated... I don't think it would be allowed in a zoo for the animals now. It was a shock to the nation.

[Chatter as people on the street protest Willowbrook. Signs read: Willowbrook Death Toll: 90 in 1970, 130 in 1971. Please help give our children a chance at life.]

NARRATOR: The Willowbrook exposé ignited a national movement that would lift disability out of the shadows. In California, a group of disabled college students began to envision a new way forward. With a $250 donation from the local Rotary Club, they formed C.I.L., the Center for Independent Living, in Berkeley.

[Cars on the Golden Gate Bridge. A young Mary Lou answers a corded telephone. Instrumentals pick up in pace.]

WOMAN: This is about your membership. Yeah? Are you gonna be able to...

CARTER-LONG: If you needed government assistance, there were people that could help you navigate that byzantine system.

WOMAN: We find attendants for disabled people in our target area. We have counseling, transportation service...

CARTER-LONG: If your wheelchair was broken, there were people who could teach you how to fix it. So for the first time in many people's lives, they were given the opportunity to dream, where someone would ask, "What do you want to do with your life?"

NARRATOR: The center became a magnet for young people across the country. Mary Lou Breslin immediately saw the potential of the organization.

BRESLIN: I quit my job, gave up my retirement plan... [chuckling] ...and went to work for C.I.L.

NARRATOR: There, she met Pat Wright, who was legally blind.

[Pat Wright, Co-Founder, Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund. Pat wears large glasses, a collared shirt, a colorful striped scarf, and gray hair tied back.]

WRIGHT: I did the trek that a lot of disabled people do. I went from an East Coast lifestyle to living in Berkeley during the '60s.

[Shouting and chanting in footage.]

WRIGHT: The civil rights movement, the women's movement, and that's how I became radicalized about ownership of disability.

NARRATOR: In the cauldron of political awakening, another C.I.L. member, Judy Heumann, would inspire the burgeoning activists to demand entry into the mainstream of American life.

[A young Judy Heuman in a wheelchair, wearing a polka dotted blouse and dangling earrings. In a candid photo, Judy points to a chalkboard. Instrumentals slow in pace.]

HEUMANN: I had this image of the American dream-- if I worked hard at school and if I really studied and if I did everything that I was told to do, I would be able to go out and then get a job.

NARRATOR: When Judy was denied the right to teach, despite her qualifications, she sued the New York City Board of Education and won. Eager to make an impact beyond the classroom, a few years later, she became C.I.L.'s deputy director.

HEUMANN: C.I.L. is run by persons with various kinds of physical disabilities: blindness, deafness, persons with mental retardation. Disabled people have begun to band much more closely together to form what I would define as the movement.

NARRATOR: The start of that movement would coincide with an unforeseen development for people with disabilities. On September 26, 1973, President Richard Nixon signed what most considered a modest update to the 55-year-old Rehabilitation Act, providing services for veterans. But at the very end of the 190-page document, in a section marked 504, was a surprising addition. A staffer added 46 words that barred discrimination against the disabled in federally funded institutions. The innocuous language went mostly unnoticed, except by the disability community.

[President Nixon sits at his desk to sign documents, a group of individuals standing behind him. Section 504: Nondiscrimination under Federal grants and programs. No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States, as defined in section 7[20], shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.]

MAYERSON: 504 was the first time that the word "discrimination" and "disability" were linked. But same treatment, which was the model for race and sex discrimination, was not going to work for people with disabilities. In order to have equal opportunity, there had to be accommodations.

BRESLIN: Everything was architecturally inaccessible virtually everywhere in the world. [chuckles] The restrooms in my high school were not accessible, so...[chuckles]...it wasn't possible, actually, to use the restroom during the day. But I finally figured out that I could go into a parking lot, put my foot up on a bumper, slide out to the edge of my chair, and pee on the ground. [laughs] And I did that for years and years. There were barriers every single step of the way.

[Black and white protest photos. A black and white class photo. Dozens of students sit together on bleachers lifted above the ground. One student, in a wheelchair and unable to ascend the bleachers, sits alone at the bottom of the photo.]

NARRATOR: Translating the concept embodied in the 46 words into practice would be up to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare-- H.E.W. Within months, staffers readied a broad set of regulations for approval by the head of the department. But nothing happened. Disability activists would watch in dismay as two successive administrations, Nixon and Ford, did not move forward on implementing Section 504.

[Article: HEW Guidelines Will Aid Disabled. A crowd cheers at a Jimmy Carter rally. He smiles and shakes hands.]

JIMMY CARTER: I love everybody here. You've been great to me-- thank you very much!

NARRATOR: When Jimmy Carter was elected president, hopes were raised once again.

[John Wodatch, Disability Rights Attorney, with short gray hair and a suit jacket. Article text reads: Signing ‘504 Regulations’ Could Cost Billions.]

JOHN WODATCH: Joe Califano was the secretary of H.E.W. They had promised us they will sign this regulation. Joe Califano takes a look at it. And I worked for him, I know he said, "Why should I issue something "that the Republican administration wrote, "and they wouldn't even put it out? "What do you want me to do? I'm not going to do this right now." And the disability community... [chuckles] ...um, had had enough.

[Chanting protesters over low instrumentals.]

NARRATOR: On April 5, 1977, activists representing a full range of disabilities came together for a historic show of unity. They held demonstrations at H.E.W. headquarters in Washington, D.C., and at regional offices from coast to coast.

[Chanting]: 504!

NARRATOR: Their demand: that Joseph Califano sign the 504 regulations immediately.

[Chanting]: Sign 504! Sign 504! Sign 504!

[Dennis Billups, Disability Rights Activist. Dennis has short white hair and wears dark sunglasses and a green long-sleeve shirt.]

DENNIS BILLUPS: I told my mother, "I'm just going to this rally about disabilities." I got there, started listening to Judy and the other people, and they started talking about different disability rights, and I was hooked.

[Young Dennis speaking into a megaphone. Instrumentals gain traction.]

NARRATOR: The protests lasted at most a day or two, except in San Francisco, where over 100 activists marched inside the Federal Building, occupied the fourth floor, and refused to leave.

[Activists, many in wheelchairs, occupy and fill entire hallways and rooms. Individuals help each other in and out of wheelchairs and administer medications. They sleep in rows on mattresses lining the office floor. One occupier blows bubbles and smiles. A protest sign: CALIFANO SIGN OR RESIGN.]

WOMAN: It's the first really militant thing that disabled people have ever done. We feel like we're building a real social movement.

BILLUPS: We didn't know if the police were going to come. We didn't know where we were going to get our food, our blankets. We didn't know who was going to turn me over, or who was going to make sure I took my medicine. Churches began to come out and help us. The Black Panthers brought food, they brought clothing, they brought medical supplies.

WOMAN: This is what happens after you've been inside the, uh, H.E.W. for how long? What, there are 12 days? 13 days. 13 days. 13 days.

WODATCH: Joe Califano was hearing from members of Congress, "What are you doing? This is not a good image." But Califano was adamant. He was not going to be bullied by this. He was gonna take his time. And so we were at loggerheads.

WRIGHT: It was time to be "mad as hell and I can't take it anymore." We decided to send a delegation to Washington. We flew to Dulles Airport. We didn't have a way of getting anywhere, so the International Association of Machinists rented a huge truck. They loaded us all in and we rode in the back of the truck to a church in Washington, D.C.

BILLUPS: The first night that we got to D.C., I said, "We got to do something now! "Let's have a candlelight vigil. Let's get in Califano's face and let him know." They said, "Well, he's not at his office." I said, "Well, we're not going to his office. We're going to his house." [chuckles] Judy said, "That's a great idea." So we went to his house. I've never heard so many sirens. Everybody came out, and they watched us do a candlelight vigil for 504, and it blew everybody's mind.

[From the vigil - Candle light glows in dark black and white photos, protesters gathered outside Califano’s two story home. Officers stand by. Instrumentals continue.]

WODATCH: I get summoned to Califano's office. He's furious. He said, "In the worst days of racial discrimination, "no one ever protested at the home of all these terrible racists, and they come to my home to protest." It, it just infuriated him.

[Onlookers pass demonstrators.]

PROTESTERS [chanting]: One, two, three, four, what'll we get from 504? One, two, three, four, what'll we get from 504? One, two, three, four...

JOURNALIST: I was gonna ask why you did not meet with the demonstrators this week.

EVAN WHITE: Well, there's an illegal demonstration going on -in San Francisco, and I just, uh... -[murmuring] ...don't think it's appropriate to do that.

JOURNALIST: I understand you agreed to meet with them and canceled that-- is that true?

NARRATOR: Having reached an impasse, the protesters returned to San Francisco determined to continue the sit-in. It was now the longest non-violent occupation of a federal building in U.S. history.

MAN [on speaker]: We want our civil rights!

PROTESTERS: Sign 504!

MAN: We want our...

NARRATOR: Finally, after nearly a month, the bad publicity forced Califano's hand. With approval from the White House, he signed the 504 regulations.

[He smiles while signing. Demonstrators cheer, smile, and embrace.]

NEWS ANCHOR: 35 million handicapped Americans won a big victory today. From now on, every institution, every school or hospital or college which gets money from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare will have to provide full facilities for the handicapped. They will have three years in which to do this. Ultimately, all institutions receiving any federal support will have to do the same thing.

[Crowds cheer and applaud. Hopeful instrumentals play.]

MAN: I'm very happy. Yes, this shows that the country is waking up.

BILLUPS: When I heard it was signed, it was like a great relief. We had finally opened the door to make sure disabled persons were actually heard. It was so memorable that I can tell you when the sun was, and I can tell you how the wind was, and I can tell you all of that stuff.

NARRATOR: The euphoria over the 504 victory, however, would be short-lived.

NEWS ANCHOR: The Supreme Court handed what may be a major legal setback to handicapped Americans today. The court ruled that educational institutions are not required to make significant changes in their programs to accommodate the handicapped.

[Articles read: Supreme Court to Hear Handicapped Pupils Case. Supreme Court Rules Against Handicapped. Supreme Court Decision: Handicapped Lose Court Fight. Ruling is Posing New Obstacles for Disabled. Handicapped Children, Housing Industry Dealt Blows. Handicapped Bring Discrimination Suit. Supreme Court Rule Slows Handicapped. Supreme Court Hands Handicapped Key Setback.]

NARRATOR: Within two years, it became evident that the 46 words in the Rehabilitation Act would not be enough to protect the regulations from a barrage of lawsuits. Activists, already shaken by the legal defeats, viewed the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 with foreboding.

[A crowd cheers. Ronald Reagan smiles and waves as he enters a spirited Reagan rally. Signs read: This is Reagan Country. How do you spell relief? R-E-A-G-A-N. Ralph Neas, Executive Director, Leadership Council on Civil Human Rights. Ralph has dark gray hair pushed back, wearing a suit coat and button up shirt.]

RALPH NEAS: Ronald Reagan's philosophy of government was limiting government as much as possible. And Section 504 was one of the first targets.

NARRATOR: Wasting no time, Reagan established a task force aimed at slashing regulations and put Vice President George H.W. Bush in charge.

BUSH: But we really believe that the American people are saying with a rather united voice, "We've gone too far in the federal government regulating things."

NEWS ANCHOR: The task force listed 27 existing regulations it wants to open up for review and possible change. Some examples: education of handicapped children. There is no cost estimate, the task force noted. Requiring cities to adapt buses and subways for the handicapped-- very expensive.

WODATCH: I recall the day that I was asked to go to a meeting where my job was to defend Section 504 from people who wanted to get rid of it. I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders.

[A younger John Wodatch in his office. In a photograph, a man in a wheelchair looks directly into the camera. He sits in front of the steps of a bus, a sign taped to his chair reading: Home should not be a prison!!! Low instrumentals play. Another sign: Separate is never equal.]

MAYERSON: People with disabilities all over the country were, like, "Wait a minute. We just got our civil rights"... I have the chills just even saying it. "We just got our civil rights, and you're saying we, we, "we're going to go, go back? "No. We're not going back."

WRIGHT: We realized that the only way to stop it was to show that people with disabilities could be a political force.

MAYERSON: We recognized that there needed to be a national defense fund for people with disabilities.

[Upbeat music gains traction.]

NARRATOR: In Berkeley, a small team spun off from the Center for Independent Living and formed DREDF, Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, teasingly calling themselves "the Dreadfuls."

WRIGHT: That was part of the reputation we wanted to develop. And not only were we into law reform and policy, but we were a political reckoning that you had to deal with.

NARRATOR: In short order, DREDF brought on attorney Arlene Mayerson.

MAYERSON: We had a warehouse across the street from Center for Independent Living. It was just as grassroots as you can possibly imagine.

[An office full of cubicles. Team members sit at desks and smile. Over 20 people smile and pose together at the office, some in wheelchairs, others standing.]

NARRATOR: DREDF began conceiving of an overarching piece of legislation that would cement the rights of the disabled in the same way civil rights laws had done for race and gender, expanding beyond federally funded organizations into every aspect of American life.

BRESLIN: We realized if we wanted to make a difference in terms of advancing civil rights, we would need to open a Washington office.

WRIGHT: It was the first problem we have. We all loved living in Berkeley. So we decided I had blonde hair and Arlene had pearls.

[On a sunny day, people pack an outdoor event. Many lounge on the grass listening to a guitarist play. Someone throws darts at a portrait of Ronald and Nancy Reagan, their faces imposed onto an American Gothic artwork. A sign reads: Reagan is Crippling the Disabled. Groovy music plays.]

MAYERSON: I had pearls. [Arlene smiles and touches the string of pearls around her neck.] And you're presentable in a way that would be useful in Washington.

NARRATOR: The DREDF team arrived in D.C. on a shoestring budget with no place to live, no office, and no access to the corridors of power. In a lucky break, Evan Kemp, the man who had written the scathing op-ed against the Jerry Lewis telethon, came to their aid. More than a decade older, Kemp was part of the D.C. establishment.

[A photo of Kemp. A younger Pat kicks her feet up in a photo, laughing. Instrumentals conclude Then, the Capitol Building at night and close up footage of a card game.]

WRIGHT: He was a strong Republican out of Cleveland, Ohio. He showed up for work every day in a suit and tie. No one quite knew what to make of us, but Evan found us very entertaining.

NARRATOR: In a surprising twist, it was Evan Kemp's hobby that gave DREDF entrance into the highest ranks of Washington politics. Kemp played bridge with Boyden Gray, White House general counsel and a close confidant of Vice President Bush.

BRESLIN: The bridge games really facilitated the deepening of the relationship. Boyden's understanding of disability, I'm absolutely convinced, came about as a result of those conversations. Evan Kemp helped us build relationships with people who proved to be key players in Washington.

NARRATOR: It wasn't long before the back-channel connections paid off. In January 1982, DREDF received leaked information confirming that Section 504 programs were on the chopping block. The team quickly mobilized.

[Instrumentals gain suspense.]

MAYERSON: We sent out alerts, and when I say, "We sent out alerts," I mean we, you know, typed them and then Xeroxed them. [chuckles] You know, there weren't a lot of mechanisms to get the word out. I, I say to my students, "You put a stamp on and then you put it in a mailbox."

[Hands place envelopes into mailboxes. Boxes of envelopes fill the floor of a mailroom.]

NARRATOR: Tens of thousands of letters arrived at the White House.

MAYERSON: So one time, we were walking into a meeting at the White House and they said, "Whoa! "We've gotten 40,000 letters about a deregulation that we've never even announced." [people talking in background]

NARRATOR: Faced with a deluge of letters and phone calls, Vice President Bush relented. Section 504 was declared off-limits. Although DREDF had thwarted an attack on the regulations this time, the need for a fail-safe civil rights bill became more urgent. The young activists had no experience getting legislation off the ground, let alone a bill of such magnitude. Then they joined forces with Justin Dart.

[In old footage, Justin Dart, Advocate, Justice For All. On top of a red ramp on an otherwise white set, Justin sits in a wheelchair wearing a cowboy hat, an oxygen tube, and glasses at the tip of his nose.]

DART: Well, I always believed in fighting for civil rights. I've done that since I was 20 years old. Nobody is going to give us rights. We are going to take rights.

NARRATOR: Justin Dart, the son of a major Republican fundraiser, was in a unique position to navigate Washington's inner circle.

[Steve Bartlett, former U.S. Representative, Republican, Texas. Short parted gray hair and an American flag pinned on his lapel.]

BARTLETT: Justin just had a way of getting in to see anybody he wanted to see. He always had a cowboy hat, light-colored suits, and boots. And he would always look you straight in the eye. I mean, when you got the Justin look, you knew you better pay attention to what he was saying.

NARRATOR: As vice chair of the National Council on the Handicapped, Dart reached out to Steve Bartlett, a first-term Republican congressman from Texas, who was overseeing a committee with jurisdiction over disability rights.

BARTLETT: We laid out an agenda to identify barriers to people with disabilities and present a report for what to do to remove these barriers.

[Road signs for Colorado, New Mexico, Alaska, California, Idaho, and Florida.]

NARRATOR: On his own initiative, Dart and his wife, Yoshiko, crisscrossed the country in an old beat-up pickup truck to hold town meetings with people with disabilities, a grueling undertaking in a country that was mostly inaccessible.

WODATCH: He went to every state in this country and met with people with disabilities and asked them questions about discrimination that affected them in their everyday lives.

DART: We would sit there and listen till they got finished. Nobody got turned away. We'd sit there till 9:00 at night.

[Text: Disabled tell firsthand of their discrimination. Disabled people are human. They have certain basic rights. The ability to navigate without physical barriers in their communities. Everyone has a right to a job if he wants it. Disabled fight for own ‘bill of rights’.]

NARRATOR: Dart's team wove thousands of examples of hardship and discrimination into a groundbreaking road map for disability legislation. In 1986, he presented the report to Vice President George H.W. Bush, hoping he would bring it to President Reagan's attention. That report, named "Toward Independence," made clear that in order to achieve equal opportunity, the world would have to change.

[Toward Independence: An Assessment of Federal Laws and Programs Affecting Persons with Disabilities - With Legislative Recommendations. A Report to the President and to the Congress of the United States. Text inside reveals an emphasis on physical and social barriers.]

MITCHELL KRAUSS: For the handicapped, most big-city subway and rail stations are a jungle of insurmountable stairs and gates. And, with the exception of the relatively few buses that kneel at the front to lower the first step, surface transportation is not much better.

[Anita Cameron, Disability Rights Activist, with long dreadlocked hair gray at the root, sitting in a wheelchair. Then a photo, people in wheelchairs line up outside of a Greyhound bus with signs reading: It’s a DOG of a policy. Low instrumentals play.]

CAMERON: The biggest arguments were that the lifts would cost way too much, or that they couldn't design a lift for the type of bus they use. And a lot of it was about money. A lot of it. That's sadly the thing about us as disabled people: there is a cost to our existence.

NARRATOR: The "Toward Independence" report sat on a shelf for the next two years. It had been more than a decade since Secretary Califano signed Section 504, and many of the regulations had yet to be enforced.

[In downtown Cincinnati, wheelchair users gather.]

-What do you want?

-PROTESTERS [in response]: Access!

-What do you want?

-PROTESTERS: Access!

-We will...

-Ride!

NARRATOR: Angry activists took to the streets. The most militant group was ADAPT, American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit. Its members were infamous for chaining their wheelchairs to buses and forming blockades at bus depots.

[People in wheelchairs roll out in front of a braking bus. Protests continue, protesters are apprehended.]

MAN: Let's go! Let's go! [protesters shouting, officers talking indistinctly]

BILL BOLTE: It's the only way that can be gone about by people with very little money, no rights, and being ignored. Help! Come on, let's go.

MAN: Down with APTA! Up with access!

NARRATOR: The disability movement was becoming bolder and more resolute.

[An officer, a baton gripped firmly in his hand, rolls the wheelchair of a protestor. The crowd shouts and calls.]

NARRATOR: In March of 1988, members of Congress were confronted with a massive protest just a mile from the Capitol. Students at Gallaudet University, the premier university for the Deaf, were outraged that a hearing person had been selected to lead the institution.

[I. King Jordan, Dean, Gallaudet University 1986 - 1988. In glasses and a suit and tie, Jordan uses American Sign Language simultaneously while speaking.]

I. KING JORDAN: Right away, they closed the gates. They hot-wired buses and blocked the gates. It was huge. Everybody on campus was part of the protest.

[Large scale protests of students who hold signs and chant, some speaking, others signing.]

NARRATOR: In its 124-year history, the university had never appointed a Deaf president.

ELISABETH ZINSER: I believe that once we have someone who can help me learn the sign language, and as I continue to learn and read about the education of the Deaf, I will be in a position of engaging with the campus community.

[In a bustling gymnasium, protestors sign and shout over a woman in red standing at a podium. She walks off. Fire alarms ring, the crowd jeers and shouts.]

JANE SPILMAN: The process leading up to that selection...was careful and reasoned. The board will...listen…

STUDENT: You can't teach someone what it feels like to be Deaf. You can't teach that, and a hearing person can't learn.

[A banner: We still have a dream.]

STUDENTS: Deaf president now! Deaf president now! Deaf president now!

MAN: We Deaf need to have our rights. And now is the time that we need a Deaf president.

WOMAN: Right.

-We don't want one, we need one. [chant continues]: Deaf president now! Deaf president now!

NARRATOR: I. King Jordan, a dean at the university who was Deaf, had been a leading candidate for the job. Though he was ultimately not selected, he was expected to back up the board's decision.

JORDAN: I was in a difficult position. They wanted me to say that I support the board of trustees. It was very emotional to realize that D-E-A-F is a lot more important than D-E-A-N. And so that... I knew that I had to support the students.

JORDAN [on film]: Yesterday, I gave a statement recognizing the legal authority of the board to name the president of Gallaudet University. My personal reaction to the board's decision was and is anger. I publicly affirm my support. The four demands are entirely justified.

JORDAN: I looked out at all the students and staff and people cheering.

[I. King Jordan hugs and shakes hands at a podium as cameras flash. Cheers and applause.]

JORDAN: Everybody was delighted. So I said to myself, "You, you made the right decision."

NARRATOR: After a week of nonstop news coverage, the board of trustees reversed course and appointed Jordan to be the university's first Deaf president.

JORDAN: And now I must give the highest praise to the students of Gallaudet for showing us exactly, even now, how one can seize an idea with such force that it becomes a reality.

[The crowd cheers and applauds.]

NARRATOR: The message sent by the Gallaudet victory did not go unnoticed on Capitol Hill. Soon after, Justin Dart persuaded two legislators to introduce a landmark bill called the Americans With Disabilities Act, the A.D.A.

LOWELL WEICKER: So it's with great pride that I join with all those in this room today to announce the Americans With Disabilities Act.

[The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1988. To establish a clear and comprehensive prohibition of discrimination on the basis of handicap.]

NARRATOR: Vastly more far-reaching than the 504 regulations, this legislation would demand compliance from private institutions across the country. The reaction to the bill was fierce and immediate. Opponents called it "the bankruptcy bill."

[Text: Law for disabled prompts concern from businesses. Now all of a sudden we’re talking about bankrupting the industry. Now, Carolyn Osolinik, Chief Counsel to Senator Edward Kennedy 1985 - 1992, with sandy blonde wavy hair and a floral blouse.]

OSOLINIK: The idea of how much would a business have to spend to make its property and its services accessible, the answer in the A.D.A. was to the point of bankruptcy. That was a bridge too far.

[The American Bus Association calculated the industry would lose $200 million annually, “a virtual death sentence”. Then Tom Harkin, Former U.S. Senator, Democrat, Iowa, with short white hair and a suit jacket. Low instrumentals play.]

TOM HARKIN: Did we think the bill had a realistic chance of passing when we introduced it? We didn't care. [chuckles] We wanted to get it out, and so that was sort of our pie in the sky.

NARRATOR: The bill never even made it to the floor.

ARLENE: But it was very important that it be introduced. Why? Because there was about to be a presidential campaign.

[A child holds a sign that reads: Bush Fever - Catch It.]

NARRATOR: At the start of his campaign, George H.W. Bush set himself apart from Ronald Reagan by promising a kinder, gentler conservatism.

[A crowd cheers at a packed campaign rally.]

BUSH: I'm going to do whatever it takes to make sure the disabled are included in the mainstream. For too long, they've been left out, but they're not gonna be left out anymore.

[Crowd cheers and applauds.]

NARRATOR: Bush's embrace of disability rights was heartfelt. His favorite uncle was a polio survivor. But it was also smart politics. People with disabilities made up a potential voting bloc of more than 40 million people. Raise your right hand and repeat after me: I, George Herbert Walker Bush, do solemnly swear...

NARRATOR: With a public nod from the president, activists pressed for the relaunch of the A.D.A. Two Democratic senators, Ted Kennedy and Tom Harkin, agreed to sponsor the new bill. Pat Wright took the reins of the negotiations.

OSOLINIK: Pat Wright was the general for the Americans With Disabilities Act. She had an amazing Rolodex that she would work tirelessly to convince people to do what she thought they had to do. And it was tough.

WRIGHT: It was a chess game. So you try and figure out what the actual move is. What's the fear, what's the stereotype, and you move your piece that addresses that.

[Text: Bus owners say handicapped bill to slash service. The Unfriendly Skies, FAA Curtailing Rights of the Handicapped. The bill’s scope will impose requirements that affect thousands, if not millions, of businesses. Costly fine print in law for disabled. Low instrumentals continue.]

NARRATOR: The challenge now was how to avoid the pitfalls that had brought down the first A.D.A.

MAYERSON: Over the summer, the business community, the Chambers of Commerce, all the groups coalesced to say, "Whoa." And they organized, and then we had opposition.

HARKIN: It was those mom-and-pop, National Federation of Independent Businesses that were told they were gonna go bankrupt.

NEWS ANCHOR: The Americans With Disabilities Act would require new restaurants, stores and other public accommodations to be accessible. Small businesses complain the bill's requirements are too vague.

JOHN MOTLEY: The uncertainty of the bill, the uncertainty in terms of what they have to do and what the costs are and the possibility of, of ending up in endless litigation, uh, is what we find most frightening.

NARRATOR: Negotiations in the Senate went on for months. The stumbling block always came down to the specter of overwhelming cost.

NEAS: "Reasonable accommodation" became the magic two words, and two of the most important words in the Americans With Disabilities Act, because you could accommodate as long it was a reasonable accommodation.

SENATOR: Are there any other senators who have not yet cast their vote?

NARRATOR: Opposition crumbled in the Senate. By the fall of 1989, the Senate submitted a draft of the bill to the House for their approval. The House will be in order.

NARRATOR: Democrat Steny Hoyer and Republican Steve Bartlett agreed to helm the bipartisan effort.

BARTLETT: There were four committees. Each of those committees had their own opinions on their section of the bill. It was like standing at the base of the Himalayas and said, "Okay, now we're going to climb Mount Everest. You guys get started." [laughs] It was a massive effort, that everything had to be negotiated, every word.

[Officials read papers and have discussions. Two news articles face off. One reads: Give the disabled bus-riding equality. The second reads: Don’t let ‘equality’ kill bus system. Now, Steny Hoyer, U.S. Representative, Democrat, Maryland in a suit and a red patterned tie.]

HOYER: The number of people watching were very large, whether it was the airline industry, the food industry, transportation industry. The stakes were high because the interest was high and the consequences were high.

NARRATOR: Still alarmed by the potential cost, outside groups for both the public and private sectors sent in scores of lobbyists to derail the bill. Once again, the legislation was in limbo. Frustrated by the inaction, ADAPT summoned protesters to Washington.

[A sign on a mobility scooter: The wheels of justice will roll. Demonstrators in wheelchairs make their way down a road. String instrumentals gain strength.]

NARRATOR: On the morning of March 12, activists led a crowd of over 500 protesters on a march to the White House.

-WOMAN: What do we want?

-PROTESTERS: A.D.A.!

-WOMAN: When do we want it?

-PROTESTERS: Now!

-When do we want it?

-PROTESTERS: Now! What do we want?

PROTESTERS: A.D.A.!

-WOMAN: When do we want it?

-PROTESTERS: Now!

CAMERON: Like, I was seeing, you know, like, crowds, just, crowds, crowds. I was almost overwhelmed by it.

[Chants continue in footage.]

-WOMAN [on speaker]: What do we want?

-PROTESTERS: A.D.A.!

-When do we want it?

-CAMERON: I felt like, oh, my gosh, I'm a part of an organization that... ...is moving mountains, making change.

NARRATOR: The protesters, now numbering more than 700, proceeded to the Capitol.

[Instrumentals fade.]

DART [on speaker]: We are here today representing 43 million Americans with disabilities. A.D.A. will pave the way for the emancipation of hundreds of millions throughout the world from the bondage of segregation.

[Cheering, whistling, applauding.]

CAMERON: We chanted, "Access is a civil right. Access is a civil right."

PROTESTERS [chanting]: Access is a civil right! Access is a civil right! Access is a civil right!

NARRATOR: At the base of the Capitol, protesters parked their wheelchairs, dropped to the ground, and started dragging themselves up the 83 marble steps.

[Protesters scoot, crawl, and drag up the steps together. Hopeful instrumentals play.]

PROTESTERS [chanting]: Access now! Access now! Access now! Access now! A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now!

CAMERON: I sat down, and I back-butted up the rest of the stairs. Going up, it released those feelings of anger, of...

PROTESTERS: Access now! Access now!

CAMERON: "Dammit, I'm in a position that I got to do this."

PROTESTERS: Access now!

CAMERON: “That we have to do this as disabled people. That we have to do this to make y'all see."

[Protesters chanting and talking in the background of the footage, their impassioned crawl continuing.]

JORDAN: One of those people was a little girl, who I think was about eight years old.

JONES: She's a cute little kid, and she's crawling up those steps.

JORDAN: And her mom was next to her, and her mom kept telling her, "You don't have to do this. You don't have to keep going." And she said, "Oh, yes, I do. I want to do this."

WOMAN: Take your time, Jennifer.

GIRL: I'll take all night if I have to!

JONES: And you could see the-- oh, I got goosebumps-- you could see the future of America.

[People cheering and applauding. The young girl reaches the top step.]

WOMAN: All right!

CAMERON: Once I got up to the top, I'm, like, "Whoa, we're doing it. "We're really doing it. We're, like, crawling into history." That's what I felt.

NARRATOR: But while images of the crawl were still fresh in the public's mind, their next plan was set for inside the Capitol.

CAMERON: Like, we was just tourists going in. Basking in it all: "Wow. The Capitol. People's House." Till we got to the rotunda. At that point, we stopped-- that was it, there was no going... It was, like, okay, the ruse is over.

[Under the tall rotunda of the Capitol building, protesters fill the entire floor.]

MAN: Are we here to take a tour?

PROTESTERS: No!

MAN: Say it loud now.

NARRATOR: ADAPT members formed concentric circles, handcuffing themselves to wheelchairs and chaining them together.

HOYER: They couldn't be moved, which Speaker Foley got very upset about. And he said to me, "This is just going too far." And I got that.

[Hoyer in archival footage.]

My name is Steny Hoyer, and I'm, uh, one of the principal sponsors of the A.D.A. bill, as I think probably some of you know.

HOYER: You know, I wasn't enthusiastic about it, either, because it made members angry: "Who do these people think they are?" But after you get by the, "Who do these people think they are?", then you get to, "What are they saying?"

[Tom Foley, Speaker of the House.]

FOLEY: First of all, welcome to the Capitol. On the question of the A.D.A. bill, it is a priority for passage in this session of the Congress, and it is proceeding through committees at this time.

MAN: What I would say is that you already had time to do that. What we're here to say is that if 24 hours isn't a proper amount of time, what is?

FOLEY: I would probably give you an estimate that the bill will be passed some time in late April or early May.

MICHAEL WINTER: Our time has come-- pass this bill now!

[Crowd cheers and applauds. Horns honk.]

WOMAN: Now!

-PROTESTERS: A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now! -A.D.A. now! A.D.A. now!

-I advise you the actions that you are engaged in...

NARRATOR: The Capitol Police were sent in to arrest the protesters, but the one accessible elevator only fit one or two wheelchairs at a time. Ironically, it took the Capitol Police hours to remove the protesters one by one.

[Police lift protesters and their wheelchairs into vans.]

CAMERON: When the dust cleared, there was 104 of us arrested. I was number 81.

NARRATOR: In the wake of the protests, Hoyer and Bartlett could sense something had changed.

HARKIN: It was sort of the one real boost that we needed to get out of the slump that enabled Congressman Hoyer on the House side to tell these committee chairmen, "Did you just see that?" "Yes, we got to get this done."

NARRATOR: Three months later, a House version of the bill was ready for a vote.

MAN: This will be a five-minute vote.

[“Yea”s take an early lead over “Nay”s early on between both democrats and republicans.]

JORDAN: People started voting, and the numbers were changing so fast, it was like looking at a gas pump when you buy gas. You know... [imitating spinning] They were just spinning.

HOYER: We are on the brink of enacting an independence bill for the disabled of America. They will henceforth, I think, look to this day and the day when the president of the United States signs this bill as the Independence Day for those who have been disabled.

NARRATOR: The next day, the House version was sent back to the Senate for ratification, the final stop before it went to the president for his signature.

[Whispering]: Mr. President... [continues inaudibly] [In Senate floor footage, Tom Harkin addresses the room using ASL.]

NARRATOR: Senator Harkin addressed his fellow senators in American Sign Language, a first in the history of the Senate, dedicating his speech to his Deaf brother.

NEAS: Pat and I said, "You know, this is so monumental, "this is so far-reaching, "if we enact this bill, it will be the most important civil rights bill since 1965."

NARRATOR: When the final votes were tallied, the Americans With Disabilities Act was approved by a resounding vote of 91 to six.

[Cheering and applause. People shake hands, hug, smile, and kiss.]

SHARON MISTER: My life starts tomorrow, in terms of my legal rights.

[The crowd cheers and applauds. Hopeful instrumentals begin.]

NARRATOR: On July 26, 1990, a huge crowd of invited guests filled the White House lawn for the A.D.A. signing ceremony.

JORDAN: The South Lawn of the White House was just packed with people. Thousands of people. Every disability imaginable was there. And the spirit, I mean, it was just very, very celebratory. Everybody was having a ball.

JONES: It was hot and humid, and we'd been waiting and waiting and waiting for the ceremony to begin, and all of a sudden, a cool breeze blew across the gathering. And I imagined this breeze blowing discrimination away.

BUSH: And on your behalf, as well as the behalf of this entire country, I now lift my pen to sign this Americans with Disability Act and say, "Let the shameful wall of exclusion finally come tumbling down." God bless you all.

[A standing ovation as President H.W. Bush signs the ADA. Attendees wave small American flags. Now, a peaceful residential street on a sunny day. Tender instrumentals chime.]

JORDAN: After the A.D.A. had passed, I was getting dressed, and the TV was on. And all of a sudden, I realized I could understand the local news. That was because it was captioned. It was a moment when I realized that life is gonna change.

[A man in a wheelchair enters an elevator.]

BRESLIN: So every time I go into my bank and there's an automatic door opener...

[voice trembling] ...I always think of Pat. The various people who were really in the trenches every single day, organizing the community. It was one of those once-in-a-lifetime chances.

CAMERON: I'm grateful for the A.D.A. I pushed for it, I fought for it, I went to jail for it. But the A.D.A. is the floor. It's not the ceiling.

DART: When I go out in the streets, I may be a representative of the president of the United States, but the taxis pass me by just the same as everybody else who's in a wheelchair.

[Text: Chronic underemployment of the disabled persists. And strict rules surrounding Supplemental Security Income (SSI), including a marriage penalty, can limit the people the program is meant to help. Instrumentals fade slightly.]

HARKIN: Almost two out of three adults with disabilities are not in the workforce. Think about that. That's a blight on our national character.

BARTLETT: We still tell people that they cannot have more than $2,000 in their checking account at any one day, and that is barbaric. That is the one that kind of gets my goat more than anything else, because that's a government decision that the government refuses to change.

WRIGHT: A.D.A. is not perfect. It's far from perfect. It is up to the next generation after mine to make it better.

[Hopeful instrumentals swell once again. Disabled people painting and working.]

CARTER-LONG: I remember once seeing a bumper sticker on the back of somebody's wheelchair that simply said, riffing off of "Star Trek," "To boldly go where everybody else has gone before." At the end of the day, that's all we're asking for.

[The banner in reference reading: Disability Rights: The Final Frontier. To boldly go where all others have gone before. Screen fades to black.]