

7-26-00
10th Anniv ADD

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

July 26, 2000

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT AND THE FIRST LADY
AT 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT

FDR Memorial
Washington, D.C.

10:55 A.M. EDT

MRS. CLINTON: What a way to begin -- I just think we ought to give Beth another round of applause for that fabulous rendition of our National Anthem. (Applause.) Some of you may know that Beth just competed in the Miss Arkansas contest, and was one of the top 10 finalists. And she's going back next year, and I'm so proud she could be here.

Thank you, and welcome to this celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Etched in the walls of this memorial is our nation's promise to scrupulously guard the civil rights and civil liberties of all our citizens. And you notice that this quote from President Franklin Roosevelt doesn't say "all men," or "all white people," or "all people without disabilities." It says "all citizens." (Applause.)

And, today, we continue the civil rights journey led by those who gathered in Seneca Falls to open the doors at Little Rock Central High School, who marched through Selma, who fought tirelessly to enact the Civil Rights Act of 1964; and, yes, the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990. (Applause.)

With the ADA, we as a nation said we cannot have civil rights without disability rights, and we promised to replace fear and ignorance and discrimination based on disability with opportunity based on ability. Now, none of this would have been possible without the people gathered here today. It would not have been possible without strong, bipartisan leadership from the Congress and the White House. And we'll be hearing in a few minutes from Senator Harkin and Senator Hatch, and I want to thank them and all the other members who have shown that guaranteeing the rights of people with disabilities is not a Democratic or Republican issue, it's an American issue. (Applause.)

We are so fortunate to be joined by present and former members of Congress, and I'd like to recognize them, including Senators Kennedy and Jeffords. (Applause.) And Senator Specter and former Senator Metzenbaum. (Applause.) Congressmen Weicker and Hoyer, and Coehlo and Bartlett -- (applause) -- and Levin and McNulty and Morella. (Applause.) And I'd like to

ask the present and former members of Congress, the House and the Senate, who made this day possible to please stand so we can show our appreciation. (Applause.)

Now, as all of you know, the ADA was a product of the courage and commitment of the disability rights community and its leaders. Some have since passed away in the last 10 years; others are part of celebrations across the country. But many of you have come here today, and we are so delighted to see you.

We're going to hear from someone in just a few minutes who has really been the heart and soul of this movement. Now, when we think of Justin Dart, we think of his classic cowboy hat and cowboy boots, his contagious grin, his eloquence and his love of all humanity. But, mostly, we think of his lifelong commitment to ensuring the rights and dignity of every single American. And, Justin, we thank and honor you today once again for your leadership. (Applause.)

In addition to Beth Gray, who began this program on such a beautiful note, I want to welcome the young people up here who remind us of how far we've come and why we must recommit ourselves today to the work that is still undone. I remember very well when I first went to work for the Children's Defense Fund in the very early 1970s, and I went door to door as part of a survey to try to find out why so many children were not in school -- this was 1973. And I remember going into a small apartment and seeing a child with a very bright and eager look on her face, but because she was in a wheelchair, she had never been in school.

And house by house, apartment by apartment, I met so many children like her who were kept out of school because they couldn't hear, because they couldn't see, because they had some medical problem that needed to be tended to during the day, who were kept out of school and kept away from an education solely because of a disability.

I know that Judy Heumann, the President's extraordinary Assistant Secretary for Education -- (applause) -- could not attend public school until the 4th grade; and I can only imagine how proud she is 25 years after the IDEA was enacted to see how it and the ADA have helped young people like those on the stage and in the audience today live and learn like all children should be able to.

And I want to salute Judy and other members of the President's administration and Cabinet, Secretary Herman and Secretary Mineta, Director LaChance, Secretary Herschel, Secretary Ramirez, Commissioner Apfel, Chairwoman Castro and Secretary McCabe. I'm so grateful for all of you being part of this day today.

I know that there are many stories that we could tell to commemorate this anniversary. I think of Meira Kirschbaum, who plays in an integrated sports program with sign language; Aaron Kaufman, who, in getting ready for his bar mitzvah, managed to educate more than a dozen synagogues about the dignity of accessibility. At age 13, he even wants to be in the House of Representatives. Meanwhile, Alisa Rodriguez, who is the lead in a new PSA campaign, wants to be the first woman President. So we have a lot of ambitious and energetic, motivated young people. (Applause.)

But as Judy's story and as my memories from 1973 make clear to me, it's not so long ago that young people, growing up with such hope, could not even imagine those kinds of opportunities. They couldn't take for granted watching a movie or going to a concert, or learning in a classroom or eating in a restaurant.

Now, the changes did not happen by accident; it happened because people demanded that we knock down the barriers of laws and attitudes that have held people back for far too long. And it happened because many of us, and particularly this administration over the last eight years, knew that passing the ADA was the beginning, not the end, of our commitment to ensure that all people have the rights they're entitled to. (Applause.)

We can look back and we can say that we're a fairer country because we are vigorously enforcing disability laws so that discrimination in housing, schools and workplaces is punished and stopped. We're a more prosperous country because we're giving people with disabilities the training, opportunities and health care they need to get the jobs they want and keep the jobs they require. We're a smarter country because we reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and put quality education and training within reach of far more young people.

So because of all these changes that so many have fought for, we have a new generation of Americans who want to work, expect to work, are graduating from high school, going to college, preparing to work, and dedicating their skills and abilities at a time when employers need them desperately to improving the quality of their own life and the quality of life in our country. (Applause.)

Today, I'm pleased to announce three new steps that will help create a seamless web of support so that no young person with a disability falls through a crack in our laws, in our attitudes, and in our openness to the talents they bring to all of us.

First, we are more than tripling the amount of money students can earn without losing any of their SSI or Medicaid benefits. (Applause.) This is long overdue, as the reaction from the young people certainly shows us. The increase in the maximum monthly earned income exclusion for students who receive SSI is going from \$400 to \$1,290, and the yearly exclusion from \$1,620 to \$5,200, and thereafter, we will have automatic annual increases in the cost of living index. (Applause.)

Young people with disabilities should never have to pay the price for working; and with this change, I hope they will never again have to choose between getting a summer job and keeping their health and disability insurance. Second, we are expanding the mandate of the Presidential Task Force on the Employment of Adults with Disabilities to focus on young people, as well. That means working across the government to launch a public awareness campaign, conduct research and increase access to health care. And it means teaming up with companies, such as Microsoft and Ford, to give young people everywhere the kinds of after-school and summer jobs that not only build confidence, but also their resumes.

And, finally, the Department of Education is going to reach out to schools to help them stop the harassment of students with disabilities -- (applause) -- and to ensure that all children feel respected and protected. And I want to thank one of our special guests, Peter Yarrow, from Peter, Paul and Mary fame, for all he has done with his "don't laugh at me" campaign. Peter, it's been wonderful that you have taken this challenge on, and I thank you. (Applause.)

You know, we can change all the laws in the world in all the workplaces, but we'll never fully open the doors in America unless we open our hearts and change our attitudes, as well. Only we can decide if we're going to teach our children to treat each other with respect and not to demean anyone, and to relish the differences between us.

I am very proud of a young man named Mathew Cavedon. He was instrumental in persuading Maryland to create Hadley's Playground, a one-acre space without boundaries, where children can play together free from fear and stereotypes and discrimination. Now, Matthew is only 10, and he was born in the same year as the ADA, and in many ways, the vision that the ADA has and Matthew's are the same.

The ADA torch of leadership that many of you carried through decades, and even through Washington, DC yesterday, is being passed to Matthew's generation. It comes steeped in the rich civil rights tradition, with painful reminders of the sacrifices that have been made by the pioneers who came before.

No one has worked harder to keep that torch moving and held high than our next speaker. Ten years ago, Senator Tom Harkin stood in the well of the Senate and said it was his proudest moment in his entire public service. Proud because his leadership, along with Senator Kennedy's, resulted in such a historic victory for people with disabilities, and our fundamental sense of what is right in America.

He was proud also because, like so many other members, he came to the debate with deep personal, as well as professional and public convictions. It was Senator Harkin's brother, Frank, who inspired him in his fight for the ADA, who reminded him of the daily struggles and indignities that people with disabilities still face.

Senator, I was sorry to hear of the loss of your brother. But I can only imagine how proud he was to the end of his life -- and I am sure still is -- to watch you as you continue to champion the rights and dignities of all Americans, especially those too often forgotten.

It is my great honor to introduce Senator Tom Harkin. (Applause.)

* * * * *

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. And thank you, Justin, for all you said, all you've done; how you've been a conscience to me and to Hillary and to the Vice President and our entire administration, and to the country.

I want to thank all the members of Congress who are here, especially, obviously, Senator Harkin and Senator Hatch. But, thank you, Senator Kennedy, Senator Specter, Senator Jeffords;

Senator Metzenbaum, it's good to see you back. I'd like to thank Representative Morella and former Representative Bartlett; and Secretary Mineta, former Representative Mineta, thank you for what you did on this; and recognize that Tony Coehlo, I'm not sure that he's here, but for all he did, along with -- and I thank all the members of the administration who are here: Secretary Herman, Secretary Gober and Commissioner Apfel, Director LaChance, the EEO Chairwoman, Ida Castro and many others over there.

But I'd like to especially thank the people that Justin Dart recognized, the Americans with disabilities who have made our administration the most diverse in America, and I think the best, because of their contributions in terms of reflecting America's values. Thank you, Paul Miller, Bob Williams, Marca Bristo, Judy Heumann. Thank you, Becky Ogle, and all the others who are here for what you did for our administration. (Applause.)

I finally think I've carried this too far -- there is an article in the Washington Post this morning on Becky Ogle, if you haven't seen it, you ought to. I've been here eight years and I have never gotten that good of press in the Washington Post. (Laughter.) It was amazing, so we're really making progress.

I'd also like to thank young Beth Gray, from my home state in Arkansas, for singing the National Anthem. Didn't she do a wonderful job? I thought she was really terrific. (Applause.) And all the other young people that are here.

One of the things that Tom Harkin didn't tell you about his brother, Frank, is that when we celebrated the first anniversary of the ADA, that I had a chance to celebrate as President in 1993, we made the first -- Tom and I did -- made the first and ever phone call from the White House to the nationwide relay service which allows people who are deaf to use the phone. We called Frank at home in Cumming, Iowa. And guess what? Here we were, the whole national press, we're in the Oval Office, Tom and I -- the line was busy. (Laughter.) Frank couldn't wait for us; he was already calling his friends to say hello, because he was so excited to be on the phone for the first time.

Eventually, Frank found time to take our call, and we had a wonderful visit. I say that to make this point: a lot of what the Americans With Disabilities Act is all about is making sure people can live like people, can do things that other folks take for granted. The Americans with Disabilities Act -- and I thank all these members of Congress from both parties who are here, and those who couldn't be here today -- is basically a statement by human beings that they want sympathy, no; self-determination, yes. (Applause.) That they don't want excuses; instead, they want opportunity in terms of jobs and careers.

The FDR Memorial is a pretty good place for us to be having this because, as all of you know, it is more than a monument to one of our nation's leaders. It's a symbol of who we are as a nation and what we can overcome.

Tom told me before I came up here, Senator Harkin said, you know, my father used to say that Roosevelt became President at the darkest time of our country's history; it took a disabled man to lead a disabled nation. They both forgot they had a disability by making it go

away in their common endeavors. (Applause.) If we could just remember a few basic things: that everybody counts, everybody deserves a chance, everybody has a role to play, we all do better when we help each other. That's what this Memorial represents, that's what the ADA represents, that's America at its best.

You know, the ADA has changed America in ways we have, I think, forgotten to be conscious of: curb cuts, braille signs, closed captioning -- these things are part of everyday life now. It's also changing the way, I think, many Americans see one another, and dropping a lot of those invisible barriers to progress.

I was proud last year to come here to sign the Jeffords-Kennedy Work Incentive Improvement Act, last December. It was the last bill signing of the 20th century. (Applause.)

But on this 10th Anniversary, as others have said, I want us to look ahead. In the midst of the longest economic expansion in history, more Americans with disabilities are working than ever before. But far too many who want to work are still not working. So on this anniversary, we're looking forward. Yesterday, Vice President Gore announced a number of new steps we're taking to promote real choices in home and community-based services and supports, especially with technology.

Today, I thank Hillary for what she said and for her commitment. I'm the first person that ever heard that story about her going from door to door finding out why kids weren't in school 27 years ago. I've heard it several times over the last 27 years, and I never get tired of it. Because the things that happen to us along life's way -- sometimes something simple and unexpected, that make a searing impression -- are the things that really enable us, sometimes many years later, to make a real difference.

Here's what we want to do today to help more Americans lead productive, self-sufficient lives. First, we must do more to remove barriers to work. Last year, we raised the limits people can earn while still keeping Social Security disability benefits. From now on, the earnings limit will be automatically adjusted every year, based on the national average wage index. (Applause.) Now, this will reward work and help as many as 400,000 Americans with disabilities.

Second, the federal government must lead by example. Our federal work force is the smallest in 40 years. But as we make new hires, we need to ensure that we're tapping the deepest pool of talent. Today, I will sign an executive order calling on the federal government to hire 100,000 people with disabilities by the 15th anniversary of the ADA. (Applause.) Now, one of the people on stage today is Mark Moore. He's a law student who helped to draft that executive order. I want to thank him, all of the people at the Office of Personnel Management. Give Mark Moore a big hand. Thank you. (Applause.)

Third, members of the Senate and the House have introduced the first bipartisan Family Opportunity Act, to ensure that children with disabilities can keep their Medicaid coverage even when their parents return to work. I plan to work with Congress to enact legislation to achieve

those goals this year. We can do it this year. I thank the members who are here who have done that. (Applause.)

Fourth, we're going to have a new web site to be a one-stop electronic resource link for people with disabilities to log-on and get the latest information on tax credits and deductions, the nearest employment and training center, to learn more about civil rights and protections guaranteed by the ADA. It's called Access America, www.disability.gov.

And, finally, I ask Congress again to act on important pending legislation to improve the lives of people with disabilities. We must be vigilant in defending the rights we have already secured, and our budget increases funds for ADA enforcement. I also asked Congress to pass our \$1,000 tax credit to help workers with disabilities pay for support services and technologies needed to stay on the job, and our \$3,000 tax credit for Americans of all ages with long-term care needs. (Applause.)

I also say the disability community in America needs a strong hate crimes bill that protects people with disabilities and a real patients' bill of rights that covers Americans, all of them, in all health plans. (Applause.)

More than 60 years ago, President Roosevelt marked the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. He said it was an occasion for recalling great progress, and a time for remembering that in the truest sense, freedom cannot be bestowed, it must be achieved. Because of all you have done, America has achieved greater freedom.

We've liberated not only Americans with disabilities, but as Martin Luther King said of the civil rights movement so long ago, when people find their own freedom, those who have denied it to them for too long are, themselves, made more free. We are all a freer, better country because of the ADA and what you have done. (Applause.)

When you look at the young people on this stage, you know that you have given them a better today. When we leave here, we should leave committed to giving them a much better tomorrow.

Thank you, and God bless you. (Applause.)

END

11:45 A.M. EDT