

Devastate/Celebrate

by Steven E. Brown

Abstract: A poem written for the 2011 Abled Hawaii Artists celebration of the signing anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which fits well with the presentation, “Power, Pride and the Road to Freedom: What Can We Say about the Americans with Disabilities Act?” made at the 2015 Pacific Rim Conference.

Keywords: Americans with Disabilities Act, Abled Hawaii Artists, Disability culture

In Hawaii, for over a decade now, the premier--usually the only celebration of the signing anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act has been Abled Hawaii Artists--on the Big Island of Hawaii for the past eight years (www.cds.hawaii.edu/aha). The event began in 2003 as a team project of a course I co-taught and for many years I served as an advisor for the event. As a result, in 2011, I had an opportunity to travel to Hilo and be a presenting artist. I chose to debut my call-response poem, “Devastate/Celebrate.”

At the 2015 Pacific Rim Conference on Disability and Diversity, I presented “Power, Pride and the Road to Freedom: What Can We Say about the Americans with Disabilities Act?” as part of the “Disability Studies” topic area. The PowerPoint from that presentation is available at: <http://www.slideshare.net/SteveBrown17/power-pride-andtheroadtofreedom5102015>.

While I did not read the poem at the conference, I believe it fits well with both the topic area, the 25th anniversary celebrations of the ADA and this forum.

Please enjoy the poem below.

Devastate/Celebrate

Hello, my name is Steve

And yours?

Hello....

Have you ever been told you couldn't vote?

I have!

Have you ever been told you couldn't work?

I have!

Have you ever been told you couldn't play?

I have!

Have you ever been told you couldn't buy insurance?

I have!

Have you ever been told you couldn't live where you wanted?

I have!

Have you ever been told you couldn't love?

I have!

Have you ever been told you couldn't live?

I have!

My brothers and sisters and I have been labeled and re-labeled. We've been called:

Cripple

Handicap

Unable

Freak

Deformed

Spaz

Retard

Tragic but brave

Useless eater

We've been incarcerated, killed, maimed, and experimented on.

Devastated.

But!... We've also

Survived centuries of isolation and abuse

Claimed our words: disability, cripp, gimp.

Written discrimination diaries

To demand our rights!

Taken over buildings and courthouses

To demand our rights!

Marched for the passage of laws

To demand our rights!

Climbed and crawled the steps of the Capitol

To demand our rights!

Sung our songs on the streets where we blocked buses and buildings

To demand our rights!

Twenty-one years ago Congress passed and the President of the USA signed the

Americans with Disabilities Act

After we marched in the streets

Filled our diaries

Crawled up the steps of the Capitol

Testified:

A young girl's story of being barred from a movie theater shattered Beltway hearts.

Congress passed a law

The Americans with Disabilities Act

Saying we had a right to vote, to work, to play, to live, to love.

And we have a right, a time, today, to celebrate our victories.

To cheer

Our heroes—there are so many—here are some of mine:

Ed Roberts—a newspaper called him a “helpless cripple.” I call him a “wheelchair genius,” who broke college barriers in 1962 in Berkeley;

Helen Kutz, first leader of Oklahoma disability rights, my mentor, my friend, compassionate and provocative;

Justin Dart, today known as the father of the ADA, collector of discrimination diaries, and pioneer of “Justice for All;”

Laura Hershey reminded us “You Get Proud by Practicing.”

Paul Longmore re-discovered the League of the Physically Handicapped,” a piece of our forgotten history--1930s New Deal protestors;

Judy Heumann, first lady of the disability rights movement, once told by New York City she couldn't teach because her wheelchair was a fire hazard. Today, she works for the Department of State and has traveled the world over.

Leroy Moore, creator of Krip Hop, emcee with a disability;

Ron Mace, architect, created the concept and coined the term, Universal Design; and

Sarah Triano, co-founder of the National Disabled Student Union and the longest ongoing Disability Pride Parade, in Chicago, and another in San Jose.

Too many more to name, to cheer, to celebrate,

But celebrate we must. Emma Goldman declared:

“If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution.”

And we are dancing today!

We are showing off our art

And we are dancing today!

We are hundreds of millions strong

And we are dancing today!

We are sharing our stories

And we are dancing today!

We are chanting our own tunes

And we are dancing today!

We are claiming our spaces

And we are dancing today!

We are performing our lives

And we are dancing today!

We are having AHA moments

And we are dancing today!

We are dancing today!

Written by
Steven E. Brown
and read at Abled Hawai'i Artists (AHA), Hilo, Hawai'i, July 23, 2011
Copyright 2011, 2015, All Rights Reserved

Historian Steven E. Brown is a retired Professor and Disabilities Scholar, Center on Disability Studies (CDS), University of Hawaii (currently Affiliate Faculty); Co-Founder of the Institute on Disability Culture, and 2015 Diversity and Inclusion Fellow for the Association of University Centers on Excellence in Disabilities (AUCD) Diversity and Inclusion Initiative. Brown, a former editor of the *Review of Disability Studies*, has published many articles about disability rights and disability culture and is a national and international speaker. His books include *Movie Stars and Sensuous Scars: Essays on the Journey from Disability Shame to Disability Pride* and *Surprised to be Standing: A Spiritual Journey*. Brown relocated to the California Bay Area in 2014, where he continues to write, advocate, and teach. A Middle Grade biography, *Ed Roberts: Wheelchair Genius*, will be published in 2015. Brown blogs at <http://www.instituteondisabilityculture.org/manifesto> and is on Twitter @disculture.