Electronic barriers for global participation

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How did you start your activities for fair and equal treatment of people with disabilities under the law?

As a person with a lifetime hearing loss - who has had years of speech and lip reading lessons - I first became active in cross-disability issues while I was studying for my Juris Doctor degree at Santa Clara University School of Law. By cross-disability, I mean the entire spectrum of disability issues impacting people with visual, hearing, speech, mental and mobility disabilities. At that time the ground-breaking Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) had just been enacted by Congress. I found that it was not enough to learn about disability rights laws and how they sought to protect people with disabilities from discrimination. I wanted to know more- what was the practical application of these laws in society? What were the real public policy challenges of government and the private sector in meeting these requirements? Did people with disabilities really benefit from this effort? Did their quality of life improve?

As a pragmatic person seeking practical solutions, I sought out venues to learn more and tried to put myself in the position to understand the challenges. Every employment and volunteer position I have had addresses civil rights for people with disabilities. When I served as a public interest scholar at the Employment Law Center, I learned about employment issues and wrote a training manual for lawyers on how to litigate under the ADA. In my work as an ADA consultant for higher education, I learned about issues concerning the built environment, faculty access to the work environment and student access to learning. This was my training ground for eventually serving as an ADA compliance officer for local government and as an ADA Mediator for discrimination complaints filed with the U.S. Department of Justice. At one time I even held local, county, state and federal appointments — all dealing with access for people with disabilities! Those appointments provided a reservoir of information as I worked with and alongside people with disabilities.

Perhaps my work in ICT became known when I wrote the first accessible web design

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standard for a local government. This work was prior to the W3C Web Accessibility Initiative and was the result of an ADA complaint filed in my office by a blind city commissioner claiming that she could not access the content of the City of San Jose website. Since San Jose was known as the capital of Silicon Valley, it was a serious issue. Her complaint led to a web design standard that was recognised by the U.S. government as a best practice and adopted by jurisdictions both here and abroad. From then on, my work intensified for barrier removal in the built environment as well as barrier removal in cyberspace and ICT. In fact, the accessible web design standard contributed to the passage of federal legislation strengthening U.S. procurement laws and requiring the procurement of ICT products and services designed to be accessible.

How do you visualise their problems and how do you plan for them?

In the field ICT, the best way to understand the problems is to consult the community of people with disabilities and hear what they have to say. In my paper, The Growing Digital Divide in Access for People with Disabilities: Overcoming Barriers to Participation (*http://www.icdri.org/ CynthiaW/the_digital_divide.htm*) I talk about the ICT barriers experienced by people with disabilities. This paper was commissioned by the White House through the US Department of Commerce and the National Science Foundation for the first national conference on the impact of the digital economy in 1998. First translated in Chinese, the paper went on to be published by the World Bank/IMF Summit in September 1999 and for the United Nations Economic Forum in Geneva in

June 2000. Still relevant today, the paper points to standards for the accessible design of ICT and also discusses open source and the need for accessibility to not be proprietary.

Can you please share in brief the objectives and activities of your organisation (ICDRI)?

Our overarching vision is the equalisation of opportunities for persons with disabilities. As an internationally recognised public policy centre organised by and for people with disabilities, ICDRI seeks to increase opportunities for people with disabilities by identifying barriers to participation in society and promoting best practices and universal design for the global community. ICDRI's mission includes the collection of a knowledge base of quality disability resources and best practices and to provide education, outreach and training based on these core resources. ICDRI makes this information available in an accessible format through our web site at *http://www.icdri.org*. In addition, we provide Accessibility Oversight Professional Consulting Services for government and private sector clients. Our clients include U.S. and foreign governments, higher education, major corporations and the United Nations.

Can you please highlight some of your major activities for the disabled people which have kept major impact on society and the people concerned?

ICDRI is active in ICT standards setting activities and sponsored the free online web accessibility checker and portal, CynthiaSays™. This project was endorsed by the American Council of the Blind and is a joint education and outreach project of ICDRI, The Internet Society Disability and Special Needs Chapter, and HiSoftware. Take a look at *http://www.cynthiasays.com*.

The past several years ICDRI has served as the accessibility consultant (built environment and ICT) for the United Nations ad hoc committee that drafted the terms of the international treaty on rights of persons with disabilities.

Our Accessibility consultancy projects have provided expertise for the launch of award-winning accessible government Internet portals; public policy and legislative consultancies for state and federal governments, Congress, the White House (Clinton and Bush administrations), and foreign governments; and Section 508 ICT expertise for businesses seeking to conform their products to U.S. requirements for procurement.

One of our current projects impacts a 23 campus university system in the State of California. We are providing policy, procurement, implementation, education and outreach assistance for compliance with a State Statute that codified Section 508 and the accessibility of ICT.

What are the specific activities of ICDRI solely for the disabled people?

ICDRI enables people in every country to post best practices resources on our web site. We also facilitate meetings on public policy such as the Pacific Rim meeting in Manila, the Philippines on accessible ICT, and the annual presentations held during the Technology and Persons with Disabilities International Conference in Los Angeles, California, sponsored by California State University Northridge (CSUN).

ICDRI also employs people with disabilities for the testing of ICT products for conformance to the Section 508 U.S. Electronic and Information Technology Accessibility Standards. (36 CFR Part 1194)

Do you think that ICT can help the differently abled people to develop themselves?

Unless society removes physical and electronic barriers to participation, people with disabilities will not be able to participate and society will not benefit from their diverse contributions.

How can ICT be useful for increasing the efficiency and ability of differently able people?

It is our experience that when ICT and mainstream technology conforms to accessibility standards, then we reduce the need for expensive customisation of products for people with disabilities. We have also learned that a person does not need to have a disability to benefit from accessible ICT. When it is dark, a person who cannot see will benefit from a screen reading software that reads the page out loud. When a person cannot hear because the room is noisy, captioning of video enables content to be used. When a person cannot even use a keyboard because their hands are busy, speech input enables access. Or if a person cannot use a mouse for some reason, keyboard equivalents enable access. The list goes on. Building universal design into ICT provides the greatest flexibility and interoperability for everyone.

With your expertise in disability legislation and technology, which areas do you think that major works need to be initiated for more success and achievement?

I believe we are at a crossroad where technology and ICT is impacting our daily life in complex ways and our choices will determine whether or not everyone will be able to participate. For example, VOIP will be a challenge as traditional telecommunications blur with the Internet. We need to keep user functionality at the forefront so that the technology adjusts to user preferences. Technology standards for accessible design and interoperability will continue to be critical factors so it is important that the international dialogue continues to move toward a common standard.

Apart from the organisational activities, what other activities you are currently associated with?

My current activities include assisting corporations in their ICT product design cycles for conformance with U.S. Section 508 accessible design requirements. As discussed earlier, I am also assisting a major university system in their compliance with a State statute requiring the procurement and development of ICT conforming to Section 508. This involves the development of policy, procurement, implementation plans and education and training.

I am also a frequent writer and speaker at many government, university and industry forums in the U.S. and abroad. For example, this year I gave a keynote for the National Association of Secretaries

of State and provided an update on the State impact of Section 508 and my work on the accessible design of electronic voting machines. I also assisted the government of Ontario, Canada, in their planning for implementation regulations of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. And just last year, I gave a keynote at a side event of the UN World Summit on the Information Society in Tunis, Tunisia. It was entitled 'Bridging the Divide: Accessible ICT and Persons with Disabilities'. Other international activities are discussed at *http://www.icdri.org/CynthiaW/cynthia_d.htm*.

In the publishing arena, I have just published my second book as a co-author in July 2006,'Web Accessibility: Web Standards and Regulatory Compliance'. One of my chapters contains the latest research documenting 26 countries and jurisdictions around the world that have adopted accessible web design as a policy or law. My first book, Constructing Accessible Web Sites, is still very popular. For more information, see our website at *http://www.icdri.org*.

What can be the ideal way of helping mentally handicapped people with the help of ICT?

The ideal way to help people with mental disabilities is to address their needs on a case by case basis. For example, people with specific learning disabilities will thrive in education if they have access to screen reading software.

To provide education and professional consulting services for access to ICT for persons with disabilities in developing countries, what strategy and policy might be helpful?

Poverty and lack of education and access to the technology itself, is one of the most significant barriers in developing countries. Cultural barriers are also an issue in societies where it is not commonplace to see people with disabilities at work and play and participating in every aspect of society. The ideal strategy and policy that would be helpful depends on the particular community and developing country discussed.

How can the policies and strategies be more effective for the beneficiaries?

No policy or strategy can be effective unless the effort is informed by the beneficiaries themselves. People with disabilities need to be part of the decision making and planning effort alongside disability experts or the entire project will fail ■

e-Accessbility day: International Day of Disabled Persons, 2006

'E-Accessibility Day', International day of disabled persons 2006 observes its theme that falls on 3 December. United Nations with its concerted efforts and collaborations with like minded organisations aims to raise awareness among world governments, private bodies and the public on the significant benefits of access to Information Technologies for persons with disabilities, to make them self sufficient, confident, emotionally balanced, economically productive and intellectually transparent in the society.

Information and Communication Technologies have equipped to create opportunities to everyone in society, No longer do the socio cultural barriers of inaccessible formats like age, gender, languages, physical borders stand in any way to participate. Once scaled to the heights to foster every individual choice, Information and Communication Technologies, for persons with disabilities no longer remains an hindrance in playing their part to best of their potential in the society.

The annual observance aims to promote an understanding of disability issues and mobilise support for the dignity, rights and well-being of persons with disabilities. It also seeks to increase awareness of gains to be derived from the integration of persons with disabilities in every aspect of political, social, economic and cultural life. The theme of the Day is based on the goal of full and equal enjoyment of human rights and participation in society by persons with disabilities, established by the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons was adopted by the General Assembly in 1982.

How the 'day' observed

- **Involve:** Observance of the Day provides opportunities for participation by all interested to focus upon catalytic and innovative measures to further implement international norms and standards related to persons with disabilities.
- **Organise:** Hold forums, public discussions and information campaigns in support of the Day focusing on disability issues and trends as
- **Celebrate:** Plan and organise performances everywhere the contributions by persons with disabilities to the societies in which they live and exchanges and dialogues and aspirations of persons with disabilities.
- **Take Action:** A major focus of the Day is to translate all the rolling momentum into practical action to further implement international norms and standards concerning persons with disabilities and to encourage their participation in social life and development on the basis of equality.

Source: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/disiddp.htm