Electronic barriers for global participation

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 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 2006. 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

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
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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.

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.