10-19-2011

50 Years of Disability as a National Priority

Center for Persons With Disabilities

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Developmental disabilities were on John F. Kennedy’s mind long before he became President of the United States. The president’s sister, Rosemary, was born with intellectual disabilities.

In 1947 his parents started the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation, in memory of their oldest son. Its purpose was to seek the prevention of intellectual disabilities and improve the way society deals with them. Another of the president’s sisters, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, became a high-profile advocate. President Kennedy took all that family history with him into the White House, and in October 1961 he convened the President’s Panel on Mental Retardation.

The panel’s name is archaic now, but its historical significance is huge. It brought together scientists and doctors, and by the end of 1962 it had come up with a set of specific recommendations. With those in hand, President Kennedy called for a dramatic reduction in the number of people institutionalized because of disability. The idea of keeping people with disabilities within their communities was revolutionary at the time—they were often life-long residents at institutions.

Another recommendation—the forming of university-based centers for people with disabilities—was signed into law less than a month before the president was assassinated. The CPD (or the Exceptional Child Center, as it was known at the time) was established because of that legislation. While the earliest university-affiliated centers were associated with medical schools, the CPD was connected to a college of education. People who worked to make it happen remember it as a tricky approval process, selling the Federal Government on the idea that education could be as central as medicine in a university center for children with disabilities. In the end, the Exceptional Child Center had its own medical component, but it was established within Utah State University’s college of education. It was the first to operate outside of a medical school, and its mission was to serve people with disabilities in rural areas.

The CPD’s very existence reflected changes in the philosophy that drove disability studies. The focus continues to broaden. People with disabilities are now stakeholders who help set the agenda.

The CPD played its own part in that history. In its earliest years it provided opportunities for children and adults who could not have received an education without moving away from home.
But it all grew out of events that happened ten years before the building was completed, when a President of the United States made disability a national priority.