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DISABILITY FILM SCREENING AND PANEL PROVOKED DISCUSSION

January 23, 2012 by JoLynne Lyon

at the film and panel discussion in the Merrill-Cazier Library

On Friday, a panel sponsored by the Center for Persons with Disabilities took a look back at the events that marked the history America's largest minority group: one that has fought its own battles for independence, acceptance and equality.

Attendees started by viewing the documentary Lives Worth Living, produced by the PBS series Independent Lens. The film traces some of the significant events in disability and advocacy. Its images were dramatic, from the obvious neglect at institutions for people with intellectual disabilities to a stair-crawling demonstration up the steps of the US Capitol by people who couldn't enter the building in their wheelchairs.

After the film, the panel answered questions on the future for people with disabilities. The event ended with a reception by the poster exhibit in the Special Collections area of the Merrill-Cazier Library. Here's what we heard:

Andy Curry, Chair for the Utah Healthcare Subcommittee: Though the ADA passed, it wasn't instantly embraced, even by university campuses. He began using a wheelchair at the time it passed, and a year or two later he began scouting out college campuses. "It was clear that some of these universities didn't even want me there." After graduating from New Mexico state he began the job hunt and found he could not physically enter the buildings of some prospective employers. "If they're not accessible, they're not going to hire you."
Keli Babcock, education coordinator and peer mentor at the Tri-County Independent Living Center in Odgen, Utah: "With all this accessibility that's slowly coming about, the result is obvious. People with disabilities are able to get out more and attend universities and get jobs... People are seeing us, where back years ago they did not see people with disabilities out in the community. ... I think that's big. There's still a long way to go but we've come a long way... It's exciting to see the acceptance that's taking place."

Panelist Tom Brownlee, self-advocate and chair of the CPD's consumer advisory council: "Things are getting better, we're getting there but there's still a lot of advocating work to do... Everyone has a right to have their dreams come true."

Sachin Pavithran, interim director of the Utah Assistive Technology Program at the CPD: "We have really a long ways to go to get equal access which we all deserve. ... Everything is on the web now. A lot of information is not available to someone who is blind because its not accessible."

Likewise, he said, many appliances now have touch screens that can't be operated by people who are blind. "It is possible to make it accessible, but manufacturers don't care about it. ... It's not just a luxury. If you can't cook, if you can't wash your clothes, how are you going to go to work?"

Scott Ferre, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Salt Lake County, commented on how important it was when the students of Gallaudet University—a university that had been established for people who were deaf and hard of hearing. Since its inception it had always had a hearing president, but in 1988 students demanded a university president who would better represent them. The protest helped them to be recognized as people, he said, and they realized they shouldn't just "sit down and shut up."

Andrea Pitts, who currently serves on the Utah Independent Living Council, offered this advice to people who are working to make good changes: "Keep on plugging." The beginning stages are often more discouraging than the middle and end stages.

Tina Peck, who works for the Disability Resource Center at USU: "For me, the fact that buildings are accessible and they did that for me... it really hits home for me because before any of this, I wouldn't have been able to go to school. I just finished my first semester of my masters degree."

Moderator and CPD Training and Development Specialist Jeff Sheen issued a challenge to the attendees. "We want you to take this information and go out and change the world." Start by striking the "r-word" from your conversation, he said, and gently remind others that it's a hurtful word.

For more photos of the event, visit our Facebook page.

Former CPD director Marvin Fifield with his wife, Diane, at the exhibit