

Chapter Twelve

Considering the Impact

Island Sunshine

“Oh, my island
My beautiful Sunshine Island
Where the sun never ceases to shine
Its glory

Animals bountiful
Riding on elephants
Befriending rabbits
And wild animals

Trees overgrown
Grass up to your thighs
Special paths where grass
Is beaten under
By so many footfalls

Water abundant
Swimming in wild waters
Strengthens and refreshes

Walking sticks aplenty
Helping me walk the long miles
To my destination
Making bonds with birds
Who entrust me with their newborns

Sitting high on a grass top
Reading my books
Under the shade of huge trees
Small creatures
Come slowly up
To say their “hellos”

There’s no communication barriers
No boundaries
Just me and the Sunshiny Island
And all my furry friends
Squirrels, monkeys, elephants, rabbits,
You name it, I have it!

My furry friends, big and small
Protect me from the fiercer breed
Warning me when one is close
Or elephant friends lift me
With their massive trunks
Onto their backs
And away we gooooo!

My Sunshine Island
Many places to explore
Caves, little niches
To keep me safe

I bathe in
The beautiful sun
Soaking up
All the Vitamin C
That one person can
Ever get off a SUNSHINY Island

Oh how, I love my Sunshine Island!
I feel such a belonging
With all my befriended animals galore!”

- Marcia McDermott, 2006

Considering the Impact of Recent Disability Legislation in Special Education and Vocational Rehabilitation on Future Employment Outcomes for DeafBlind Students

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Without a doubt, the past quarter century has seen tremendous challenge and progress in the area of disability legislation. New advances in the area of telecommunications thanks to the leadership of the FCC, the telephone industry, particularly providers of state-operated relay services have helped. Without a doubt, consumer leadership within communities for individuals who are Deaf and those with partial sight or total blindness will continue to have significant impact on the quality of life for persons with combined vision and hearing loss for years to come. Compared to 25 years ago, deafblind people have many more choices, options, and opportunities for improved education, employment and living environments than ever before. However, to judge the true impact of these key pieces of education and employment legislation on the lives of deafblind students with disabilities is far too much to tackle within the margins of this closing chapter. Such a detailed analysis would require a more extensive review of these individual pieces of Civil Rights legislation for persons with disabilities and their broader impact on daily practices in local communities, corporate life and the classroom.

In short, the reality is that true impacts are difficult to measure objectively. The fact that a government passes laws such as those witnessed during the past quarter century shows its humanitarian side. *But passing laws and implementing them is not the same thing.* The former is far easier than the latter, especially in the case of legislation purported to assist students with disabilities. For example, there are the unintended consequences of academic integration in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the reauthorized IDEA, which for deafblind students may deprive them of teaching expertise and special facilities that can enhance their education. Too often 'inclusion' for students with extreme disabilities means they are in the hands of well-meaning teacher assistants and itinerant resource personnel who cannot provide necessary programming even for students with single disabilities let alone deafblind students. Notwithstanding, it is clear that laws which mandate the education of *all* students, regardless of disabilities, can potentially have a positive influence on the educational outcomes for deafblind students.

However, over the past decade, the rehabilitation and special education fields have been forced to concentrate too much energy on the problems of the moment, and have neglected to assign the required attention to the potential crises looming on the horizon. Judging from the sampling of stories written by and about the numerous successful, bright students and adults who are deafblind shared in this monograph, it is clear that while the passage of key disability legislation like IDEA have impacted where students with disabilities receive education, the overall impact on quality of life for students has been nominal. Isolation during school years and self-imposed or forced segregation into communities with other similarly disabled persons upon completion of their secondary education programs is evidence that laws that are mandated can not affect attitudes or guarantee acceptance. Instead, if greater efforts are put forth to better educate intelligent and capable deafblind students, like those showcased in this monograph, and if the education system affords such intelligent deafblind students access to the qualified personnel and programming they deserve, it is likely that the future for the next generation of deafblind students will truly be limitless. Moreover, employment opportunities offering students with disabilities livable wages should be a top priority to combat the post-school temptation to rely on government funded services for survival.

Only time will tell if No Child Left Behind (NCLB) does the right thing for deafblind students. To date, the movement for education and employment standards brought forth by NCLB has yet to result in positive outcomes for a significant number of students with disabilities. The fear of many is that unfunded mandates such as NCLB could potentially tax our already overburdened service delivery system. It also could mean that more emphasis on academic achievement will overshadow the need for life-skills training to address daily needs, which may result in more students with disabilities becoming dependent on SSI and other related *safety net* programs. In recent years, every citizen has come to learn how such dependence on uncertain future resources can have the potential to create staggering burdens on the nation's entire social service system and other entitlement programs for the disadvantaged. Thus, the long-term prospects for students with disabilities, who do not receive a quality education or the skills to function independently, may be more adverse and at-risk than we may realize at this point in our history.

Because all the diverse segments of our nation's population are aging, there are certainly significant implications for the funding, planning, and provision of medical, social, and related human services for *all persons with disabilities* in the coming years. There is no question the correlation between aging and disability becomes stronger the older people become. One of the consequences of this strong correlation notably will be the increase in

the number of Americans with both difficulties with hearing and vision. This will have tremendous impact on numerous sectors of our public and privately operated post-school service delivery programs and agencies. The impact is potentially a negative one. There are increased risks that funding priorities for certain subgroups which are often depicted as *vulnerable* members of the community will be pushed further down on the government's priority list. For Americans with disabilities, including those who are deafblind, such marginalizing will call for increased self-advocacy to ensure that post-school programs and services remain a high priority within governmental appropriations. It is not practical or feasible to acquiesce to the idea of *inclusion* or *one size fits all*. There will always be a strong need for appropriate specialized programs and services. However, in order for students to receive exposure to advanced education or to develop the strong literacy skills needed to succeed in our global economy, options within integrated educational settings will also need to be a part of the continuation of instruction offered in segregated programs. Often the specialized skills training, upon which future independent-living skills are built, are only available within segregated programs but do not exist within integrated educational programs. As a result, deafblind students who are intellectually capable of performing on or above grade level in public school programs are habitually left with very minimal training in functional skills of daily living; or sadly exit the education system unable to independently carry out basic daily responsibilities. Any future consideration for education or training programs for deafblind students must consider the benefits associated with both segregated and integrated programs as opposed to the one size fits all approach.

Given the reduction in specialized personnel preparation programs in rehabilitation, special education and research for students with disabilities versus the increase in unfunded mandates from the federal government in relation to those areas of interest for students with disabilities, the degree to which this reduction will impact services available for adults with congenital and acquired vision and hearing loss is staggering. Unfunded mandates levy a burden on all programs; however, the greater demands for specialized services makes the lack of government support less justifiable for programs aimed to assist students who are disabled – particularly those who are deafblind.

After investing more than 25 years for research projects on behalf of the education and employment of deaf, hard of hearing and deafblind individuals, the federal government's reduction in funding for these research centers and personnel prep programs threatens to reverse the achievements that such training projects have brought forth for this population. The cutback and elimination of programs coming about at a time in our nation's history when economic indicators suggest that a more competitive and component

workforce is needed in order for the United States to effectively compete in the global market is worrisome.

The Future Is Now

Given the rapid increase in the number of adults over the age of 60 who are at risk for age-related vision and hearing loss, the repatriation of employment-aged veterans who have been severely wounded in wars, the current substandard quality of the education and social-service systems for persons with disabilities, our nation is ill-prepared to accommodate the intensifying demands from a community of persons with disabilities whose membership is steadily on the rise. Many within this group of newly disabled persons, specifically wounded veterans of working age, will find that the information technology which was once their lifeline to information, services and the community will present a mixed blessing. As the high price of assistive and adaptive technology, prescription medication and reasonable healthcare marginalizes more of these new members of the disability community from what remains of the American dream, it is hoped that the United States will make the adjustments that are needed. Specifically what is required by policy makers is the opening of doors to quality education and employment opportunities offering a livable wage, along with independent-living-skills training that all persons with disabilities will require to fully access the community of their choice. An important first step, of course, will be for our elected officials to revisit previously considered goals for the future. By using the lessons of the past shared by the bright students in this monograph, new avenues of education, employment and independent living for deafblind students can be paved.

A practical approach for law makers to consider is to begin with current personnel prep programs which focus on the education and employment of students with disabilities. Improving course offerings at graduate-level preparation programs – such as 1) literacy development, 2) technology-access options, 3) employment training, 4) basic independent-living skills, and 5) communication-access skills for a global economy -- are but a few of the indispensable skills identified by family members, professionals and students who have contributed to this monograph as being conducive to post-school success for deafblind students. Deafblind students who exit educational programs with these core skills will be better prepared to survive and thrive in the competitive market place of the future.

Outcomes Measurable Throughout the Life Span

Mere survival should not be the *only* goal of education, as most will certainly agree. Technology can deliver great aid to education and employment outcomes for deafblind

students. However, without proper instruction on how best to effectively provide individual students with access or adaptations for existing and future technology the full benefit of technological advances will not be realized. Cochlear implants and braille-access technology present established examples of critical technological advances that will impact education outcomes for deafblind students. Educators deserve the contributions of research into how to make best use of what is available now and of what will undoubtedly emerge in future years. Consumers, parents and educators should demand continuing education for all students as the Twentieth-First Century is likely to bring radical changes in all aspects of life. Education should be a continuous option to help deafblind students adapt to these changes. Primarily, this continuing education should include instruction and practice in the use of presently available technology, communication and literacy skills, and functional daily living skills.

Finally, educators and rehabilitation professionals must recognize that deafblind students may continue to need assistance with travel and socialization throughout their lives and that some may be unable to hold white-collar jobs, as is true among nondisabled students. These realities should serve to guide educators and substantiate the ongoing need for individualized programming. *The more disabilities students have, the more specialized should be their education.*