Will the Next Generation Please Step Forward?
A Legacy for the Next Generation of Troublemakers

Megan A. Conway, Ph.D.
Center on Disability Studies
University of Hawaii at Manoa

Abstract: The author reflects on how several mentors, including the late Dr. David Pfeiffer, shaped her awareness of the Disability Rights Movement, her own identity, and the need for the next generation to carry forth the Movement.

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The recent death of David Pfeiffer made me reflect on the legacy that is left behind by people like David, who lived and breathed the Disability Rights Movement of the 1970s and carried the Movement forward to this day. As a thirty-something who, until I attended UC Berkeley in the 1990s, had no concept that people like me would not have gone to college at all if it had not have been for people like David, this reflection does not come easily. It is very easy for my generation to sit back in our armchairs and enjoy the luxury of a semi-social existence without sticking our necks out and questioning why "semi" isn't good enough. Learning about the Disability Rights Movement, learning about my place in the world as a human being, came from meeting people who, like David, will someday be legacies. These people taught me to recognize when I was being humiliated, trampled on or left out in the cold, and not to take it. To quote my favorite line from Simi Linton's *Claiming Disability* (1998), borrowed from Crosby, Stills and Nash, I learned to "let my freak flag fly" and to prosper well under it. The challenge for my generation is to take the flag forward onto the next battleground.

My first introduction to the Disability Rights Movement came from my mentor in Berkeley, Susan O'Hara, who somehow still manages to live there. In days long past, Susan was a history teacher at a Catholic school in Illinois. Her sister came out to Berkeley in the 1970s and brought back tales of the amazing electric wheelchairs that the wild Californians were using. When Susan arrived at Berkeley, her "dorm" was a ward at the University hospital. Expecting to be greeted by a bunch of sick people, instead she was greeted with a paper cup of Scotch. After that, the story about "all the fun they had" grows quite vague.

When I arrived at UC Berkeley, Susan was the Director of the Disabled Student's Program. She formed a student advisory board. I am sure the University administration, to have approved such a measure, had images of the lot of us parked around the table spilling cups of tea (those darn blind students) and discussing the joys of student support services. Instead, the group became a war band aimed at people who rode their bicycles on campus. People who rode bicycles on campus at high speed or parked them along handrails were endangering the lives of the blind, deaf, mobile-y slow and distracted, and we vowed to bring them all down. We posted flyers. We wrote letters to the editor. We met with the Chancellor. We cheered when the Vice-Chancellor nearly incurred a head injury after being hit by a bicycle on campus. We smeared Vaseline on the empty seats of unsuspecting cyclists. We even spent our lunch hours actually counting the number of bicycles that passed by Dwinelle Hall for a week and submitted a report to the Campus Police. My point is not to trash people who ride bicycles, but to say that somehow an advisory group turned into an advocacy group under Susan's tutelage. She didn't just nod her head and say, “Are you being served?” She told us her stories. She encouraged us to address things that we saw as wrong. And we thrived under her example.

Susan also introduced me to the *Disability Rag*. The first issue that I read had an article by Rob Kocur called, “The Thorn In Our Side” (December, 1995), in which the author takes the perspective of a Red Neck who offers, among other priceless observations, a “final solution” for getting rid of that “mutant army of welfare riffraff”. Among Kocur’s suggestions are to send everyone with a disability to Montana, where they could “breed to their heart’s content with each other” and allow paying visitors to “intermingle with these special people.” I still can’t read through the article without laughing until I cry. But what I recognized when I first read it was that there are people who really do think like that. Many people regard people with disabilities as troublemakers who want more than they deserve and who are best kept with their own kind. Realizing that made me understand how far people with disabilities have come, and what a long, long way we have to go.

I had another mentor at Berkeley named Sandy Muir. Sandy is very nice, despite being a Republican. Sandy taught Political Science and he also taught me that I should expect normal things from myself despite the fact that I am normally-challenged. I remember when I went to Sandy to ask his advice about which major I should choose for my undergraduate degree. “I am not sure if I want to be an elementary school teacher, a lawyer, a journalist, an English Professor, or a genetic counselor,“ I moaned. “Well,” said Sandy, “I think two of the best majors that will prepare you for Law School or just about anything are History and English. You would like the History program here because all of the students are required to write an undergraduate Thesis and none of the other majors require that.” Besides the fact that I have Sandy to thank for helping me to choose English as my major, he also constantly steered me towards thinking of personal success as an option defined both me and by my possibilities. He said that I could be a “big fish in a small pond” or a “small fish in a big pond” but that my choices were mine to make.

My choice brought me to Hawaii and to another mentor in David Pfeiffer. When I took a job with the Center on Disability Studies (CDS) I heard stories about David. They were very conflicting. He was the mythic editor of the *Disability Studies Quarterly*. He was a sweet old guy who was nice to everybody. He was the blaster of often enraged and caustic emails sent to the CDS list-serve in reaction to things like the description of anyone with a disability as “inspirational”. I often found myself turning to David when I needed a reality check or advice about negotiating life among the Normals. Because we shared the experience of having a disability, somehow my concerns, large or small, were safe with David. I worked with him on his plans to start a new journal and to bring a disability pride library to the University of Hawaii. I was looking forward to learning so much under his tutelage.

About a year ago, David and Steve Brown and Lillian Gonzales Brown had lunch at my apartment. Lillian was quite upset over an incident at a recent Disability and Diversity Studies Institute where she had made a soapbox speech about people without disabilities using the accessible bathroom stall. It turns out the person who had incited her speech told Lillian after the fact that she had a bad back. Lillian said that a number of people had told her the speech was “out of line” and “lacked Aloha” and Lillian was tending towards believing them. David listened very carefully and very quietly and then suddenly he roared, with the hint of Texas in his voice that still lingered, “BULL-SHIT.” Those words still ring in my ear every time I find myself starting to believe that somehow my expectations of fairness and equality are wrong.

When David died, I thought, "Oh no, who will edit the new journal? Who will bring the library to Hawaii, who will push the University for better access, who will nail people when they say goofy, stupid things? " – I am sure David would have said, "*You* will."

References

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DR. MEGAN A. CONWAY is Assistant Professor of Disability Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. She is also Associate Editor of the Review of Disability Studies. Her interests include disability rights policy, postsecondary education, and the integration of disability studies into the field of education.