

“Possibilities”

The Connecticut Judicial Branch and the 20th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act

July 2010

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen, advocates and artists, and other distinguished guests. On behalf of Chief Justice Chase T. Rogers and the Connecticut Judicial Branch, I would like to welcome you to the Branch's commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

I am honored to be here today to share a few words about the ADA, considered by many to be the greatest piece of civil rights legislation for Americans since the landmark 1964 Civil Rights act outlawed segregation and discrimination based on race, gender, religion or ethnicity.

The Americans with Disabilities Act was years in the making, thanks to the tireless efforts of disability rights advocates like the late Justin W. Dart Jr., who contracted polio in 1948 at the age of 18. Mr. Dart left the hospital two years after his diagnosis and attended the University of Houston, where he earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in political science and history with plans to be teacher. Yet, despite his degrees, the University withheld his teaching certificate, because Mr. Dart was a wheelchair user. Thankfully, that **would not happen** today. Mr. Dart never gave up fighting

for what he knew to be his right as an American citizen, the right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. Mr. Dart ultimately came to be known as the “Architect of the ADA!)

With Mr. Dart at his side, when President George H. W. Bush signed the ADA into law, he spoke about the **“shameful wall of exclusion”** that had kept millions of Americans from enjoying their fundamental rights. The wall of exclusion that left so many people behind, simply because they had different abilities. **Not inabilities, just different abilities.**

Interestingly enough, the ADA grants no special rights, and favors no man or woman over another. The Americans with Disabilities Act simply guarantees **the inclusion** of all people, regardless of their physical or intellectual abilities. It requires equal access to education and employment; to housing and transportation; to public facilities such as courthouses, hospitals and libraries; to services previously only available to the able-bodied; to museums, art galleries, amusement parks, movie theaters, restaurants and beaches.

In other words, the ADA ensures that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as their non-disabled friends, family and neighbors. To have access to all the possibilities that life has to offer.

It is appropriate that today’s event is titled, **“Possibilities.”** The artists

whose works are featured here clearly have embraced the possibilities that live within them, whether they are living with cerebral palsy, or autism or Down's Syndrome. The beauty in these paintings — and they will be on display through September, so please, feel free to tell your friends about the exhibit — demonstrates that the human spirit knows no limits, and bows to no challenges.

Although a prior commitment has kept Chief Justice Rogers from today's commemoration, I can say on her behalf that **access to justice** is a priority within the Judicial Branch. In 2007, shortly after her swearing in, Chief Justice Rogers began a process to ensure that the Branch develop a long-term blueprint for the future, by creating the Public Service and Trust Commission. I was one of the 42 members of the Commission, and in 2008 we proudly delivered to the Chief Justice a Strategic Plan for the Branch.

Access was first among the five goals of that Strategic Plan, and the **Access goal** is this: **The Judicial Branch will provide equal access to all of its facilities, processes and information through the identification and elimination of barriers.**

In the two years since the Strategic Plan's creation, there can be little doubt that the Branch is meeting its obligation to maintain compliance with the ADA by assuring ACCESS and by providing a litany of services and accommodations to people of varying abilities. Chief Justice Rogers

approved more than a dozen of the recommendations made by the Plan's ADA Committee to improve access for people of differing abilities. For example:

- There are now **ADA Coordinators** in every Branch courthouse and facility **who each year provide assistance to hundreds of court users**, including jurors and parties to cases, with everything from sign language services to assistive listening devices and CART, or Real Time Transcription.
- A page on the Branch website is now dedicated to providing clear and concise information about the ADA, including links to Branch ADA coordinators, lists of auxiliary aids, directions and photographs of wheelchair accessible entrances at our courthouses and other Branch facilities, information about other services we can provide.
- This year **we took the simple step of installing magnifying glasses for people with limited vision** to use in each of our clerks' offices, Court Service Centers, Public Information Desks, and Law Libraries.
- To help ensure that people with hearing or language impairments can access our phone services more easily, the Branch has adopted the national free **7-1-1 telephone relay service**.

- Currently the Branch, with the assistance of the New England Assistive Technology Center at Oak Hill, is piloting the use of Microsoft Accessibility features on public-use computers in Court Service Centers at 90 Washington Street in Hartford and in New Britain Superior Court. The technology helps users with limited vision and those with mobility issues to easily navigate the internet.
- Of course providing accommodations to people with disabilities is only one piece of the Branch's commitment to the Americans with Disabilities Act. At the request of our Strategic Plan focus group participants, we're also now providing disability awareness training to our staff, beginning with our judicial marshals.
- One more note: The Chief Justice this spring formed an **Access to Facilities Committee**, composed of 15 Judicial Branch staff members. This Committee has begun its work of assessing the vast array of signage in our 78 facilities, and to make recommendations to address and eliminate any barriers that may impede entry to and movement within those facilities.

These are just a few examples of the Judicial Branch's commitment to the Americans with Disabilities Act and to ensuring access to justice for all people. To commemorate the passage of the landmark act, Chief Justice Rogers has asked me to present this proclamation that she has signed on

behalf of all of the judges and staff of the Judicial Branch. It reads:

Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act
A Proclamation of Recommitment to Maintain Compliance with
the ADA

On July 26, 1990, President George H. W. Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to ensure the civil rights of people with disabilities. This legislation established a clear and comprehensive national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities.

The ADA has expanded opportunities for Americans with disabilities by reducing barriers and changing perceptions, increasing full participation in community life. However, the full promise of the ADA will only be reached if public entities remain committed in their efforts to fully implement the ADA.

On the 20th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, we, the State of Connecticut Judicial Branch, celebrate and recognize the progress that has been made by reaffirming the principals of equality and inclusion and recommitting our efforts to maintain full ADA compliance.

NOW THEREFORE, I, Chief Justice Chase T. Rogers, on behalf of the Connecticut Judicial Branch, do hereby reaffirm our commitment to maintain full ADA compliance in the Connecticut Judicial Branch on this, the 26th day of July, 2010.

Chief Justice Chase T. Rogers

You know, one of the wonderful things about having a job such as mine, is the fact that you have access to several very talented individuals who assist you in the preparation of comments for events such as this. In the preparation of these comments today, I was very ably assisted by such an individual. When she delivered this speech to me she noted that she hoped that it wasn't too "passionate" but she told me that as the sister of a man who was quadriplegic for 20 years, she had deep feelings about the ADA and the hope it gives to people of differing abilities. So join me in recognizing and thanking Heather Collins for her work on these comments

today and for her passion for the ADA and for her love for her brother!

In closing, I would again like to thank you all for being here and I'd like to especially thank every artist who has made today's celebration so special. With equality, the "Possibilities" are, indeed, endless.