An interview with author, Diana Henriques
Several years ago, I was at a meeting in Las Vegas and had a lovely meal with a blind friend who happened to be a lawyer. We were walking back to the hotel when we suddenly heard our table’s server yell out to us while running breathlessly to catch up.

My friend, it turned out, had left a $100 bill as a tip on a $60 meal!

He was lucky. An honest server recognized the mistake for what it was. My friend intended to leave a $20 bill, not a $100 bill, and the server didn’t want the mistake on her conscience.

In many countries, a blind person can identify cash money without assistance. Bills have different textures or colors or both. Some have tactile markings to identify one bill from another. In the United States, though, a one dollar bill feels exactly the same as a hundred dollar bill.

People who are blind have addressed the cash identification problem in a variety of ways. They sometimes fold their money in different ways – a five in half horizontally, a ten vertically, a twenty in fourths. That works for a while but not always. Imagine you are blind and are standing in line at a Starbucks and you don’t want to hold up the line while folding money to put it away, so you forget which bill is which and have to ask someone the next time you need cash. Maybe that person is honest and maybe not.

The American Council of the Blind addressed this problem when the organization filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Treasury, citing the lack of tactile differentiation in currency as a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. ACB won that suit, and the U.S. Treasury has plans to address the problem when the next generation of currency is designed and distributed. The problem is that no one knows for sure when that will happen.

When you are a person with a disability and a human rights advocate (which includes disability rights), there are times when you wonder if you make any difference at all. At times, understandably, you probably think the answer is no.

The marginalization of people with disabilities in this country has gone on for years. At times, the denial of our equal rights is anything but disguised. In New York state, for instance, there is a group called “The Lever Lovers.” Seriously – I’m not kidding. This is a group that protests against the existence of accessible voting machines.

Then, too, as many of you already know, this country is rich with buildings and structures that cannot be accessed by many in the disability community. One wonders what, exactly, the ambulatory population would do if, by a wave of some magic wand, the steps to houses and businesses and schools and, even more fun, government buildings, were removed. Just imagine the reaction in Washington, D.C., if the Capitol steps were removed! There would no doubt be a symphony of indignant foot-stomping and whining. Perhaps, however, it would dawn on those people that steps are, in fact, reasonable accommodations for the ambulatory.

Obviously, the struggle for equality runs far deeper than the right to accessibility and reasonable accommodations. The struggle for equality runs into very rough waters when it comes up against the mindset that people with disabilities are incapable of having their own voices, a view that would’ve surprised FDR and Helen Keller and would astonish Stephen Hawking. To be treated as if we are somehow less human or not human at all is, perhaps, the deepest wound of all.

As an advocate, you find yourself facing a system that is in and of itself a major part of the problem. When a March 12th, 2011, article in The New York Times laid out, in horrifying detail, the abuse suffered by people with disabilities living in group homes run by New York state, it is easy and understandable to wonder about the difference we advocate are making.

We’d do well to remember that there was a time when abuses like those detailed in the Times’ article would never see the light of day.

Even now, one wonders how many members of the
For Writer, a Very Sound Reason to Change the Path of Her Career

By Amy Halloran

Diana B. Henriques is the author of “The Wizard of Lies,” a New York Times bestseller about the Bernie Madoff scandal. Her investigative journalism has focused on white-collar crimes, and she has written three other books on business. Fifteen years ago, her long, award-winning career was interrupted by carpal tunnel syndrome.

The injury came upon her suddenly. At the end of 1997, she was working with a team of writers on a project about the ways wealthy Americans reduce their tax burden. It was a stressful period and one morning, when she went to pour herself a cup of coffee, she almost dropped it. She didn’t touch a keyboard for three weeks and used over-the-counter anti-inflammatories for the discomfort, but as soon as she went back to typing, she had great weakness and pain. Worse than the physical symptoms was the threat to her life as a writer.

“How was I going to manage a career where I couldn’t type?” she wondered. At the time, she had a book contract in addition to her job at The New York Times. “If I had to restrict my typing in order to maintain my health, then I was going to have to save whatever keystrokes I had every day for my job. I was in a pretty bad quandary. It was a very tough time.”

Henriques found the tools she needed through her literary agent, whose assistant saw a software demo at a technology show. A salesman read a newspaper story into a microphone, and the words came up on a screen. The technology department at The New York Times tracked down Dragon Naturally Speaking version 1.0 and set her up with a powerful computer to handle its demands.

“I remember the day -- September 12th, 1998 -- that I sat down to use it for the first time, and it was just thrilling to see what it could do,” Henriques said. “I got tears in my eyes. I got a lump in my throat. It was like someone handed my beloved career back to me. I will confess I didn’t anticipate how rocky the road to come would be.”

The technology was simple to use, but adapting to it was psychologically tough; it took about six months. To work well, the software has to get to know the speaker’s voice, so she practiced speaking dutifully, dictating grocery lists and daily reports about meetings with interns. The paper set her up with a mentoring job while she adjusted.

Her experiences as a young reporter helped her write out loud. She recalled racing to a pay phone to call in a verdict from the courthouse.

“I used to have to compose a story on the fly to a dictation taker on the other end of the phone line, or phone into our radio line to do an on-the-spot news item,” she said. Though she knew she could talk out a story, she remained tentative.

“A part of me was still holding back out of the fear that whatever made me a good writer resided somewhere in my hands,” she said. “That somehow I wouldn’t be the writer I was if I didn’t do it the way I’d always done it.”

A small book helped her overcome her reluctance. “The Diving Bell and The Butterfly” was composed blink-by-blink as Jean-Dominique Bauby, paralyzed by a stroke, worked with a transcriptionist to read off the alphabet and stop when he indicated. That book, she said, was written in such a distinctive voice that she realized that whatever it is that makes you a writer comes from so deep inside you that every muscle in your body can be paralyzed and it will find its way out. Reading his soul delivered through such a labor-intensive, nontraditional route convinced

Henriques
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Author:  U.S. History of Disability ‘Pushes us to Examine Ourselves’
By Kathi Wolfe

If you want to clear a room, mention history and disability. Outside of a university lecture, mention of this topic likely will produce yawns, even from people with disabilities themselves. Yet, in the right hands, history can be as exciting as the latest hit movie, and learning about the interplay between disability and history is vital to understanding the story of the United States and disability advocacy.

Too often, the stories of people with disabilities have been omitted from history books. In school, not everybody learned, for instance, that FDR used a wheelchair or that wounded Civil War veterans guarded President Abraham Lincoln’s body when he was laid to rest.

Historian Kim E. Nielsen, professor of disability studies at the University of Toledo, is one of an emerging group of historians who is telling the stories of people with disabilities, from famous icons such as Helen Keller to ordinary folks. Nielsen, in her new book “A Disability History of the United States,” has written the first history of disability in this country from before 1492 to the present.

From a disability rights perspective, she examines the relationship of disability to immigration, feminism, racism, the labor movement and other issues throughout the history of the United States. Nielsen engagingly and insightfully analyzes complex issues important to everyone, with or without disabilities.

“I love history — the captivating stories and the satisfying bite of a vigorous analysis,” Nielsen writes.

In her book, Nielsen relates captivating stories about the farmers, soldiers, slaves, teachers, mothers, fathers, children, politicians and many others who were a part of the history of disability in the United States.

She writes: “I’ve learned that disability pushes us to examine ourselves and the difficult questions about the American past: Which peoples and which bodies have been considered fit and appropriate for public life and active citizenship? How have people with disabilities forged their own lives, their own

Robots ‘Picking Up’ the Slack for Individuals with Disabilities
By John M. Williams

Robots are coming to the aid of people with disabilities. They are being used to provide daily assistance in schools, homes and hospitals.

A robot can be defined as a programmable, self-controlled device consisting of electronic, electrical or mechanical units. Generally speaking, it is a machine that functions in place of a living agent. Robots are especially desirable for certain work functions because, unlike humans, they never get tired, they can endure physical conditions that are uncomfortable or even dangerous for humans, they can operate in airless conditions, they do not get bored by repetitive tasks, and they cannot be distracted from the task at hand.

The concept of robots is a very old one, yet the actual word “robot” was not coined until the 20th century. It comes from the Czechoslovakian word robota, or robotnik, meaning “slave,” “servant” or “forced labor.” Robots don’t have to look or act like humans, but in order to perform different tasks, it generally helps if they are flexible.

For example, Toyota has developed the Partner Robot and the Human Support Robot. VGo Communications has developed VGo, and the Center for Healthcare Robotics at Georgia Tech in Atlanta is developing a robot called Elevated-Engagement (El-E for short).

The Partner Robot has a compact, cylindrical body, so it can turn around in small spaces, as well as folding arms, which can do tasks such as fetching objects and opening curtains. The robot is easily controlled, either by using the touch interface on a smartphone or by speech recognition. It also can be controlled remotely by a caregiver while communicating with the user. The robot’s height can vary between 32.7 inches and about 51 inches (4 feet 3 inches), so it can reach objects in high places. The robot also has a suction mechanism that can allow it to pick up objects. It can even handle thin objects such as paper.
Commentary
GOP Senators Showed Blurry ‘Vision’
By Mike Piekarski

There is a great quote from chapter 29 verse 18 of the Book of Proverbs in the Bible, to wit, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Maybe the line should be, “Where there is no vision, a greater good perishes.”

If you haven’t heard the news amid all the bluster, finger-pointing and hand-wringing over the recent “fiscal cliff” negotiations, you might have missed a significant news story pertaining to disability rights advocates. This past December, the United States Senate voted on a treaty designed to end discrimination against the disabled worldwide. Who could possibly oppose that? The answer: 38 Republican senators.

On Dec. 4th, the Senate voted on whether to accept the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a treaty that, to that point, had been signed by 154 nations and ratified by 126. Despite the fact that all 51 Democratic senators voted for it – as had 8 Republicans and 2 independents – the measure failed to pass. Although the final tally was 61-38 in favor (one GOP senator, Mark Kirk of Illinois, was absent), a two-thirds majority was required for ratification – in this case, 66 votes.

So why did those Republicans reject it? Good question.

The standard conservative objection, voiced by Sen. Jeff Sessions, R.-Ala., is that the treaty’s passage would embolden “international hypocrites,” who would then “demand the United States do this or that all the while their countries will have been in full violation of virtually every provision” of the convention. The treaty, he added, “is unnecessary” and “dangerous to our sovereignty.”

The sovereignty theme was echoed by a fellow Republican senator, Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma, who said he opposed “the cumbersome regulations and potentially overzealous international organizations with anti-American biases that infringe upon American society.”

And then there was Sen. Mike Lee. The Utah Republican, who led the opposition to the treaty, claimed that it would prohibit parents from deciding for themselves what was in the “best interest” of their own disabled children, such as home schooling. And, according to the Associated Press, he was “concerned” that language in the treaty guaranteeing people with disabilities equal access to reproductive health care could lead to abortions. “I applaud the Senate for preserving our sovereignty,” he said.

There’s that “S” word again.

The only problem with that argument is that the treaty doesn’t affect American sovereignty: It is nonbinding and would not challenge or alter federal law. Even had America ratified it and later been found wanting on some part of it, there would have been no adverse effects on U.S. soil. The committee created by the treaty has only an advisory role.

Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., anticipating GOP opposition, told one and all before the vote that the treaty would have “no recourse in American courts and no effect on American law.” And it wouldn’t cost taxpayers a penny.

But conservatives, whose mistrust of the United Nations stretches back decades, wouldn’t listen. It’s no secret that Republicans, in general, view the global organization as generally anti-American and a venue for smaller nations to get back at a country they see as “unchecked.”

Now, no one is saying that the U.N. is a paragon of justice in the world and that its members are unstained by jealousy or unmotivated by politics. But this matter has nothing to do with any of that. For those who didn’t get it, Kerry, President Barack Obama’s nominee for U.S. secretary of state, spelled out the convention’s purpose. “It just says that you can’t discriminate against the disabled,” he said.

In case conservatives don’t know it, that isn’t news. The United Nations, in fact, adopted the treaty in 2006, and Obama signed it three years later. The measure, however, was not presented to the Senate, which must ratify all treaties, until May of last year. In July, a hearing on the treaty was held by the Senate Foreign
‘Sessions’ Director: Film’s Intimacy Seems to Have a Universal Quality

By Kathi Wolfe

You don’t expect to see played out on the silver screen the story of how someone you knew lost his virginity (especially if you and he were only writer pals). I didn’t until I saw “The Sessions,” due out on DVD/Blu-ray on Feb. 12th. The film is based on the true story of the late journalist, poet and Massachusetts native Mark O’Brien, who contracted polio at age 6, spent much of his time in an iron lung, and died at age 49.

In Berkeley, Calif., at age 38, O’Brien, the subject of Jessica Yu’s 1996 Oscar-winning documentary short “Breathing Lessons,” spent six sessions with sexual surrogate Cheryl Cohen Greene so that he could experience sex and intimacy. (O’Brien, who earned a B.A. in English from the University of California, Berkeley, and authored three poetry collections, died in 1999.)

John Hawkes plays O’Brien, a beloved member of the disability community, and Helen Hunt plays Greene. The film won the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 2012, and at press time, Hawkes and Hunt had received Golden Globe Award nominations for best actor in a drama and best supporting actress, respectively.

Viewing “The Sessions,” at a screening for the disability community at the AFI Silver Theater in Silver Spring, Md., I wondered if “The Sessions” would be just another “inspirational handicapped” movie that might generate Oscar nominations for nondisabled actors. Would the movie reduce O’Brien, who wrote prose and poetry on everything from love to baseball to Stephen Hawking, to “the 40-year-old virgin in the iron lung?” To my surprise, I found that I needn’t have worried. “The Sessions,” based on the article “On Seeing a Sex Surrogate” that O’Brien wrote about his sessions with Greene, is a movie that is engaging, touching, and by turns funny and poignant. Hawkes, Hunt and William H. Macy (as O’Brien’s priest) give stellar performances.

Recently, “The Sessions” director and writer Ben Lewin talked to Independence Today by phone about the film, poetry and rediscovery. Our conversation is as follows:

Q: How did it feel to make a movie about a real person?

A: Having collaborators helped me. I got close to Susan (O’Brien’s girlfriend) and to Cheryl (the sex surrogate) – so that I could really absorb their view of Mark and what had happened. Because Susan is herself a writer, she was keeping an eye on what I was doing in a helpful way – giving me permission to speak in Mark’s voice.

It was important to me to
Universal Web Accessibility?
Cerf’s Up for the Challenge
By John M. Williams

To the world, Vinton Cerf is one of the two founding fathers of the Internet.

Cerf is the president and CEO of Google Special Services Inc. as well as vice president and chief Internet evangelist. The latter title suits him because he has been evangelizing about Internet usage since 1973, when he developed the Internet along with Robert E. Kahn.

The Internet is a massive network of networks. It connects millions of computers together globally, forming a network in which any computer can communicate with any other one as long as they are both connected to the Internet. Information that travels over the Internet does so via a variety of languages known as protocols.

Few people realize that Cerf is an evangelist for Internet access for people with disabilities and proud of it. He is the executive sponsor of Google’s accessibility team, which is working on tools to design accessible interfaces. To ensure that the access needs of blind and deaf people are being addressed, representatives from the National Federation of the Blind and the Alexander Graham Bell Association are on the team. Cerf is hearing impaired, and it is this condition that motivates him to make the Internet accessible to people with disabilities.

Outside of Google, Cerf is president of the Association for Computing Machinery. Established in 1947, ACM, the world’s largest educational and scientific computing society, delivers resources that advance computing as a science and a profession.

Recently, Cerf said that many user interfaces “are not well adapted to make it easier for people with disabilities to gain access to content.” To address that issue, he advocated new principles for the design of interfaces that lend themselves to adaptation to address the needs of people with disabilities. ACM accepted the challenge.

“It is easy to build interfaces that are hard to use, and it is hard to build interfaces that easy to use,” Cerf said. “Even harder to build are interfaces that can be adaptable to meet assistive needs.”

At Google, Cerf has promoted the implementation of more infrastructures to support the Internet. He also has spent a lot of time defending an open Internet.

These policies, Cerf believes, benefit everybody, including the 650 million people with disabilities worldwide.

Cerf lauds Google’s mission to make the world’s information more accessible to all users, including people who are blind, visually impaired, deaf or hearing impaired, cognitively challenged or with limited dexterity.

Google Inc. is an American multinational corporation that provides Internet-related products and services, including Internet search, cloud computing, and software and advertising technologies. Advertising revenues from AdWords generate almost all of the company’s profits.

“I sometimes think that, of all the disciplines, ours ought to be the most effective at adapting to the varied needs of users, including those that are challenged, to interact with computing systems in one way or another,” Cerf wrote. From low to no vision, to deafness or hearing loss, to carpal tunnel syndrome and various other physical limitations, “we really should be able to configure our software to adapt,” he wrote.

He believes that improving the state of accessibility is not only important from the purely ethical perspective but is also pragmatic given the demographics of American society and the increasing need for accessible applications. One reason accessibility is difficult is that software has unlimited variations, and interfaces to applications can take virtually any form. “Moreover, we are extending the modalities of interaction to include speech, gestures, mice, touchscreens, other pointers, keyboards, and so on.”

There are web-based applications that take advantage of a wide range of presentation and interaction choices. Not all applications take into account the need to offer distinct and configurable user interfaces; even when some or many such adaptations are offered, some work a lot better than others. The other side of the coin is that the users also manifest unlimited variations in their abilities, and it seems unlikely that programmers can be fully cognizant of the nuances of each.
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Henriques

her to unplug the keyboard forever and commit to this new way to write. She recalled thinking, “I’ve got to start training my brain to let the writer in me out through a different door.” It worked. “In fact, I would almost argue that I’m a better writer than I was because (when) dictating, you invariably feel when sentences are getting cumbersome. There are words that you would never in a million years write once you hear yourself saying it.”

Because of this shift, her writing has become more conversational. She can also work much more quickly than she could when typing. She recommends dictation as a composition method to other writers for both of these reasons and, also, to prevent injury.

“I’m one of the few reporters who doesn’t worry about getting carpal tunnel,” she joked. “I worry about getting laryngitis, and laryngitis will go away.”

At first, she didn’t consider her struggle a disability; she considered it a catastrophe. After all, Henriques had wanted to be a newspaper reporter since she was 12 or 13 years old. After getting carpal tunnel, not only was there no question that she would lose her job, but she was bereft of her career. Once she began to coach other people in transitioning to dictating composition, she came to think of her situation within the workplace-disability framework.

Henriques helped journalists at her paper and others to use the voice-recognition software. Although she knew that the Times was terrific in supporting her as she adjusted, she was shocked to learn how unaccommodating other organizations were, rejecting the software as incompatible with the company’s firewall, or refusing to provide beefy hardware to support Dragon Naturally Speaking. (The software does have its limits within the industry. For instance, copy editors cannot use it.)

Sessions

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They understood that it was a dramatization of a true story – not a documentary. There was a different (set) of parameters. It was quite a challenge to deal with historical fact – to have an obligation to living people. I cherry-picked. I read everything that Mark had written – especially his poetry.

Q: I’m a poet. So I can say this: A poet’s life is often boring. How did you make Mark’s poetry an engaging part of “The Sessions”?

A: The poetry was a way of turning Mark’s story into a dramatic experience. Mark’s poetry was used as the connective tissue of the narrative; it was something resembling a poem in itself. There was a poetic rhythm. At one point, Mark speaks in the film after he’s dead. This isn’t the usual way with a script. But it’s something Mark might have liked if he were a critic of the movie.

Q: You have polio. How did having a disability influence you in making “The Sessions”?

A: I had to put it (the disability) aside to deal with the film professionally. It had more impact on me as a filmmaker. I think that with it (“The Sessions”) I’ve been able to get a much closer connection to the audience and how they feel than with any other film.

I’ve probably matured as a filmmaker. I’m starting to be a little more introspective.

It’s odd at my age (65) to have this rediscovery. I began as a working artist and craftsman. To have had this

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The Human Support Robot, which weighs 70 pounds, is designed to help the elderly and people with disabilities around the home. The tablet-and-voice-controlled unit can open curtains, fetch items and even pick up after its owner, thanks to its single telescopic arm that stretches up to 2.5 feet. A tablet slot on top of its head lets a user feel as if he were present at a place other than his actual location.

VGo can replicate a person in a distant location (tele-presence), allowing him to see, hear, talk and move around as if he were there. It can be used by doctors, nurses, teachers, students and remote workers, among others.

If an El-E user wanted something picked up and brought to him, he would simply point a "Star Wars"-like green laser at the object. When the robot “saw” the beam of light, it would say, “Detected laser pointer.” Once it located the correct object, it would make a “Ding” sound and grasp it with its laser-equipped hand. Once the object was placed where desired, the robot would return to the user’s side to await the next command. El-E is guided by laser commands that can pick up objects of varying heights and navigate in a room it has never been in before.

Professor Charles Kemp, director of the Center for Healthcare Robotics at Georgia Tech in Atlanta, leads El-E’s creative team that includes students from his university lab and professors from other universities. The group has been working closely with Jonathan Glass, a neurology professor at Emory University in Atlanta and director of the Emory ALS Center.

El-E, which stands five feet seven inches, can see, hear, push, pull, open doors, respond to voice commands and speak. It has a built-in camera and four sensors to detect objects. The prototype El-E is being tested in the homes of disabled people, particularly those with ALS. The trials have been successful, enabling people with disabilities to live more independently.

In 94 percent of homes, El-E picked up and delivered a requested object. Kemp’s team is working on enabling El-E to find and retrieve objects among clutter. El-E comes with options for disabled people who have partial or no arm and hand control. Users may choose to use a touch pad or a head-mounted laser to give commands to the robot.

Injuries, extended illnesses, immune deficiencies and other physical challenges may prevent a student from physically being able to attend school. School districts try to accommodate these special needs by providing on-line courses, in-home tutors, special busing, video-conferencing and more. But these are expensive and very limiting because students miss out on the classroom experience and social life that comes with attending school. Now they can participate in classroom discussions and share in the social aspects of chats near lockers, the lunchroom experience, and moving from class to class.

Lyndon Baty attends high school in Knox City, Texas. His illness prevents him from attending school. VGo attends classes for him. In the morning from his home, Baty gets on his computer instead of the bus. VGo interacts with his teachers and classmates. Baty operates VGo with an Internet-connected computer with audio capabilities and a Web camera. “Without VGo, I would not be in school, and there would not be a future (for me),” Baty said.

VGo has helped to open social and educational environments that
I'd like to offer one way of doing so.

Some years ago, I was trained in behavior management techniques. We learned about verbal techniques and then, of course, as a last resort, physical interventions. There was one technique called “close proximity,” which means that your very presence may be all that is needed to help calm a volatile situation.

To illustrate this, the instructor drew two parallel vertical lines on the board a few feet apart from each other. On the top of each line he wrote the number 10, and on the bottom of each line he wrote the number 1. He said 1 represented absolute calm and 10 represented physical violence.

So, he went on, “Let’s say you’re called to a room somewhere and you encounter someone in a highly agitated state. Let’s say they are yelling and threatening to throw things at people. So, we’ll say they’re at an 8. Now, you’ll be feeling a bit wound up yourself on the inside, so let’s say you’re at a 3. After 10 minutes or so, you’re still at a 3 and the person you are trying to help is still at an 8. The question is, Are you helping? Are you making a difference?”

Almost all of us said no.

“You’re wrong,” he said, smiling at us. “The very fact that you stayed at a 3 may well be the very reason this person didn’t go to a 10.”

And so, we as people with disabilities, as advocates for people with disabilities, deserve to know that the very fact that we are taking part in life, the very fact that we are taking on those who seek to deny us our rights is very likely the reason that things are slowly but surely getting better and, on most fronts, the very reason they are not getting worse.

Yes, you make a difference. You make a real, positive difference simply by giving yourself permission to be you. I promise. If ever you doubt that, read this again.

Peter Kahrmann writes a blog on disability issues. He resides in Massachusetts.

There are two problems with this summation. First, the Heritage Foundation’s concern about “legislators of binding international norms” is unfounded because the treaty cannot bind the U.S., or any signatory nation, to its articles. And second, America is not out to “convince the international community” that it “protects the rights of its disabled citizens.” People around the world already know that.

Kirsten Gillibrand, the Democratic senator from New York, certainly does. Not long after the document’s rejection, she wrote to a reporter that the treaty “is modeled on the Americans with Disabilities Act and would give the U.S. tools to be the leader for change in other nations’ treatment of people with disabilities.”

Lest anyone forget, the ADA was passed in 1990 by the U.S., making it the first country in the world to declare comprehensive equality for all of its citizens with disabilities. Despite that time, when equality was still a partisan issue, the ADA was signed into law by a Republican president, George H.W. Bush.
There have been a variety of devices on the market to identify U.S. currency, but all were expensive or not portable.

Orbit Research, a small company in Delaware, designed a product in 2009 called the iBill that was truly groundbreaking in the field of identifying currency. The product was affordable and portable, and it boasted a 99.9 percent accuracy rate. Although the first iBill enjoyed a reasonable degree of success, the company listened to consumer feedback and set out to make a good product even better. In 2012, Orbit Research released its second-generation iBill — still portable, still affordable and even easier to use.

The new iBill is exactly the same size as the original model (3 by 1.6 by 0.7 inches) and is made of the same rugged plastic. You can still hold it in one hand, and it is still 99.9 percent accurate, but its look has been redesigned.

First, the slot for inserting a bill is wider so that people with limited dexterity can easily insert the short end of a bill. They can simply slide the short end of a bill — either end, facing up or down — and press a button for identification of that bill in about one second.

Second, the buttons are slightly recessed so that the device won’t be inadvertently activated while traveling in a pocket, purse or briefcase. There is just one button at either end of the device; either one can be pressed to activate it.

Third, a small key ring has been attached so that the device can be attached to one’s keys or a lanyard.

And, finally, and perhaps best of all, the iBill now sports a headphone jack for private listening.

The new iBill can identify currency in three distinct ways. The most popular will probably be its clear, synthesized speech announcements. A user can insert a bill, press a button on either end of the device and hear a simple announcement of “one,” “five,” “ten,” etc., up to and including “one hundred” for a $100 bill. When using the device, with the addition of a simple earphone, you can identify your cash in a noisy environment or when you don’t want others to hear what you are doing.

Alternatively, the iBill can use beep tones or vibrations to identify the various denominations so that it can be used by a person who is deaf and blind.

I’ve used the iBill with a variety of bills in a variety of conditions, and the 99.9 percent accuracy rate seems a reasonable claim. If a bill is badly crumpled, simply flatten it or try the other end, and the iBill will usually read its denomination. And when it can’t, it simply says “error.”

The U.S. Bureau of Engraving has been conducting a variety of focus groups to test how best to design currency in the future to render it recognizable by touch. But the wheels of government can be slow indeed and, again, there is no clear prediction of when new money will be distributed.

In the meantime, there is a product that addresses the problem nicely, fits in any pocket and costs only $119.

For more information on the second-generation iBill or to order, visit www.OrbitResearch.com or call (888) 606-7248.

Deborah Kendrick is a writer and editor. She is currently working on a biography of Dr. Abraham Nemeth.

Is equality even an issue now? If not, what’s the problem?

To be fair, some Republicans, to their credit, sided with the Democrats on the convention. Two of the most prominent were a pair of combat veterans: John McCain, senator from Arizona, and Bob Dole, the former senate majority leader from Kansas who lost the use of his right arm in World War II.

Despite being confined to a wheelchair after a recent hospital stay, Dole asked to be taken to the Senate floor to demonstrate his support for the treaty. The longtime advocate for the rights of people with disabilities tried to persuade recalcitrant senators that the treaty would not force America to accept international standards. Rather, because of America’s standing in the world, he told the assembled senators, the convention would encourage other nations to raise their own standards to match that of the U.S. as they relate to the rights of the disabled.

The treaty, from a U.S. standpoint, is not about following what other countries are doing. As Vietnam veteran McCain phrases it, “That’s what this is all about -- American leadership.”

Leadership has a lot to do with vision. So maybe 38 Republican senators should get their eyes checked.

Mike Piekarski is an associate editor of Independence Today.
The recent report issued by the National Council on Disability, "Rocking the Cradle: Ensuring the Rights of Parents with Disabilities and Their Children," illustrates in stark anecdotal and statistical terms the depth and breadth of the painful discrimination faced by people with disabilities (PWDs) trying to be parents.

Some revealing statistics are as follows:

- Removal rates of parents with psychiatric disabilities are as high as 70 to 80 percent.
- Removal rates of parents with intellectual disabilities are as high as 80 percent.
- Removal rates and loss of parental rights for parents with sensory or physical disabilities are extremely high.
- Sixty-six percent of dependency statutes allow courts to reach the determination that a parent is unfit (a determination necessary to terminate parental rights) on the basis of the parent's disability.
- In every state, disability may be considered in determining the best interest of a child for purposes of a custody determination in family or dependency court.

According to the report: "These parents are the only distinct community of Americans who must struggle to retain custody of their children ... Parents with disabilities are more likely to lose custody of their children after divorce, have more difficulty in accessing reproductive health care and face significant barriers to adopting children."

The report estimated that 6.1 million children -- nearly one in 10 -- in the U.S. have parents with disabilities.

Marc Fagan is the director of the Thresholds Mothers' Project in Chicago, which helps women with mental illness become better mothers, capable of taking care of their families and themselves.

"We work with a population of homeless mothers who often do have the fear of their children being removed due specifically to their mental illness or their homelessness -- neither of which has taken into account their strong connection with their children or how they've managed to care for their children despite these life challenges," he said.

According to Fagan, the project was started in 1976 because "much of the mental health sector is focused on single adults, and there has historically been a stigma associated with parents that, because they have mental illness, they cannot adequately sustain a family. We believe and have demonstrated that, with the right support, mothers with mental illness can and do have better outcomes.

"Providing strong mentorship from successful people that are like them is a big piece" of the program's success, Fagan added. "Another big piece is to understand
communities and shaped the United States? How has disability affected law, policy, economics, play, national identity and daily life?"

Recently, Independence Today chatted with Nielsen over the phone about her latest book, her passion for history, and the effect disability has had in her own life and work. Some excerpts of the conversation are as follows:

Q: What spiked your interest in the history of disability?
A: I didn’t intend to be an historian of disability. It wasn’t on my radar at all. Disability wasn’t a personal interest for me. If I had thought about it (disability), I’d have understood it to be something that nice people did.

I didn’t think it was part of the large questions of history -- around politics. (For instance,) how does social change happen in the world? I thought it was connected to something “soft” -- to benevolence, to people “caring” for people with disabilities. My training is in women and politics. I was interested in how women justified themselves as political figures.

I got interested in disability and disability history through learning about Helen Keller. In the 1920s, there was anti-feminism from the far right in this country. I learned about a list that (the anti-femi-
Another theme is the proliferation of platforms through which users may interact with computer-based services and applications. It becomes increasingly difficult to design in detail every mode of interaction, including accessibility variations, for every platform and application imaginable. And even if that were possible, someone is bound to invent a new application requiring assistive responses that people have not thought about before.

One popular tactic has been to try to create general-purpose tools such as screen readers to assist blind users or automatic captions to help deaf users. Another tactic is to adapt interface parameters so that users can pick and choose the variations best suited to their needs. In Cerf’s experience, the range of parameters devised is fairly large, and it is easy to get lost in the process of selecting configurations or even anticipating how well they will fit user needs. Still, these tactics seem important for practitioners to apply when appropriate. Cerf said the challenges are fundamental given the range of needs and potential interface designs.

This is by no means a new problem. There cannot be much debate that programmers, as well as user interface (UI) and user experience experts, need to think fairly broadly and deeply about potential use cases before settling on an interface design. Although the use of libraries intended to confer “accessibility” on arbitrary applications may be helpful, it seems to Cerf that no amount of automatic adapting will make a poorly designed interface accessible. For some of the same reasons that security ought to be “built in” to the initial design, so should accessibility. If UI designers had to try their designs while blindfolded or use their applications with the sound off, they might gain insights into the nuanced demands that accessibility places on good design.

One feature of good interface design is anticipating what the user is likely to need and to prepare for that. A similar notion might inform thinking about accessibility. The challenges faced by blind users and those who design programs for them are daunting. In the Web-based world, two-dimensional displays, touchscreens, pop-up windows, drop-down menus, color highlighting, and other signals seem utterly out of reach for blind users. Cerf believes that ways must be found to enable users with a richer combination of design principles, pragmatic tactics and artful implementations than have occurred so far.

Google discovered that providing alternative access modes such as keyboard shortcuts, captions, high-contrast views and text-to-speech technology helps people with disabilities. For example, keyboard shortcuts help power users get things done more quickly without using a mouse, speech-to-text technology enables people to skim and search audio content, and custom product themes give people more opportunities to personalize their overall user experience.

Cerf rejects the criticism that Google ignores the needs of individuals with cognitive disabilities. He said that he wants his nephew, who has been diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, and others with cognitive disabilities to use the Internet. “The products and services Google offers are relatively complex tools,” he said. For many people, sending emails, organizing photographs with Picasa or uploading videos to YouTube “are not trivial tasks. Because these activities require a lot of features, it is challenging to design a usable system for people with a range of cognitive impairments.”

According to Cerf, Google is pushing the frontiers of research and development to further enable people with disabilities to benefit from Internet access.

Google has a three-step approach to products and services available to people with disabilities, as follows:

- Building accessibility into some of its key products.
- Developing accessible APIs (application programming interfaces) and services for its Android and Chrome operating system platforms.
- Supporting open standards to ensure that the greater Web is accessible to all adaptive technologies.

YouTube Captioning

YouTube has numerous ways to make videos closed captioned. “Users can add their own captions with a written script, work with a vendor to create a caption file, or allow YouTube to auto-caption your video, which you can then edit for accuracy,” said Vinton Cerf, president and CEO of Google Special Services Inc.

Google worked with the Described and Captioned Media Program to identify a list of qualified YouTube-ready vendors for user reference.

For developers, the YouTube Data API makes it easy to interact with and upload captions. Cerf urges people to investigate the open source YouTube Captions Uploader project. This is an example of how to use the API to interact with captions in YouTube and can be used by anyone.

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Cerf

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John M. Williams can be reached at jwilliams@atechnews.com.
to upload multiple-caption tracks for videos on a channel that they own.

**Aids for low-vision users**

The Android platform includes a built-in text-to-speech engine and a screen reader that enables phone manufacturers to deliver accessible smartphones. The wide variety of Android hardware options available gives blind and deaf users the flexibility to choose a phone with the features that best meets their needs.

Android phones can be customized by downloading third-party accessible applications that make nearly every function possible without the need for sight, including phone calls, text messaging, email, web browsing and more.

The Chrome browser supports some screen readers and magnifiers. It offers people with low vision a number of tools, including full-page zoom and high-contrast color. In addition, Chrome extensions are extra features and functionality that allows users to customize their Chrome browser for the functions they need. There are many extensions that improve accessibility or which help developers create accessible web applications, such as ChromeVox, Chrome Shades and Chrome Vis.

Google is making ChromeVox available to developers as an extension for Chrome on the desktop. This extension allows developers to test their Web apps with a screen reader inside the browser so that they can experience their products as a blind user would.

The standard HTML view of Gmail (Google email) has been enhanced to enable blind and low-vision users to use it on the Web to send and receive email. Users who prefer a desktop client also can sync their email account with an existing desktop program such as Microsoft Outlook.

New enhancements now enable blind, low-vision users and individuals with cognitive disabilities to view and edit the contents of their Google Calendar on the Internet with their existing screen reader. Users who prefer a desktop client can sync with an existing desktop program such as Microsoft Outlook.

Blind and low-vision users can use the Google Docs suite of applications to edit, view and collaborate on documents, spreadsheets and sites.

To ensure that Internet applications are accessible on Chrome and on the Internet at large, Google outlined best practices using HTML5 and ARIA at its annual conference, described on the Google Chrome developer site.

“The goal of all Internet users should be to maximize their abilities to their benefit,” Cerf said.

**John Williams**

“I had this six-lane asphalt highway that went from my fingertips, with touch typing, to my creative center, so that was a very well-worn path,” she said. “This little path that took my creative thoughts to my speech center and out into the microphone -- that was brand-new. I was bushwhacking through the jungle. The path got easier and easier the more I did it, but it feels different in your head.”

The writer compares it to the distraction someone feels while learning to play the piano. Learning the technology prevents you from paying attention to the melody, and you can’t infuse it with the emotion it should have or feel the wonderful curlicues. Eventually, the keyboard disappears and there’s just music. For Henriques, that is how it happened with the software, too. One day, she stopped noticing the tool and was again only aware of her writing.

That invisibility became obvious when a new workmate moved into her cubicle.

“I had a headset that allowed me to toggle between my microphone and the telephone,” she said. “At some point, this fellow learned that I was using voice-recognition software to dictated my stories, and he started to laugh. He said, ‘When I first started sitting next to you, it seemed that you were doing all the talking during your interviews, so I couldn’t figure out how you get any information.’ We had a great laugh over it. He couldn’t tell any difference (between) when I was chatting on the phone, or when I was talking to my computer to create a story. It really will become so much second nature, you’ll wonder why you didn’t do it earlier.”

**Amy Halloran, a writer, lives in upstate New York with her sons and husband.**
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the trauma that our mothers have experienced in their own lives and their own childhood. Helping to think of our mothers as those who are still healing and still learning how to be a whole person, as well as a parent, is very important."

The NCD report includes a recommendation that Congress appropriate funding to establish a national parenting network for parents with disabilities. “Additionally,” the report said, “peer support groups could be located in independent living centers and in programs that specialize in parents with disabilities or deafness. These local parent support groups could provide the ongoing peer connections that are important to alleviate isolation in communities.”

The NCD also called upon centers for independent living to “make serving the needs of parents with disabilities a national priority” and for Congress and the Rehabilitation Services Administration to appropriate additional funding to support this unmet need.

“Of course, helping to support safe, affordable housing initiatives is key to parents,” Fagan said. “The few housing opportunities that are available for a similar population are unilaterally focused on the individual and ignore those with children.”

The NCD also had others recommendations, as follows:

• The Department of Housing and Urban Development should 1) require public housing authorities to provide at least 50 percent of their accessible units in family housing developments, 2) develop a national modification fund to pay for reasonable modifications to make private units accessible, and 3) create a program for parents with disabilities who are first-time homeowners.

• The executive branch can be a part of the solution if the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services would expand its definition of activities of daily living to include parenting activities so that government-funded personal assistance services can help consumers with their parenting responsibilities. According to the report, the governments of Canada and Sweden already have taken this step.

History has shown that activism can make positive changes on the state level, too. The report detailed campaigns coordinated by the state independent living councils in Idaho and Kansas that, among other things, removed from state laws references to disability as a factor to be considered in custody determinations. In California, activists collaborated with the state’s protection and advocacy agency to get legislation passed that requires the state’s Medicaid program to include adaptive baby care equipment in the list of durable medical equipment it covers.

The full report, with its many recommendations, is available on NCD’s website at:

www.ncd.gov/publications/2012/Sep272012/.

Mike Ervin is a writer who lives in Chicago. His blog, “Smart Ass Cripple,” appears at smartasscripple.blogspot.com.

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journey is a euphoric experience.

Q: How are audiences reacting to “The Sessions”?

A: In every audience there’s someone who resonates very personally with the movie. When I’ve been with audiences after the movie, there are always people who feel compelled to tell me something intimate — both men and women. I hear voices quavering as in the midst of five hundred people they’re (talking) very personally about themselves.

Q: How do you feel about characters with disabilities in movies?

A: Characters have to have characteristics. To my way of thinking, you’re inventing characters — they can be disabled in the same way that they could be, say, Latino. There’s no reason for a character not to have a disability. It’s just part of their personality. There should be a sense of diversity in one’s cast. And disabled characters don’t have to be good guys. One colleague in the Writer’s Guild had a guy in a wheelchair in a murder mystery. No one suspected that he committed the murder — because of his disability.

Kathi Wolfe writes frequently about disability and the arts. Her poetry chapbook “The Green Light” is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.