

Becoming the ADA Sign Lady

Most people who follow Disability Rights probably don't know that it was President Eisenhower who brought that topic with him into his administration. It was the wounded soldiers returning from World War II who concerned him. He wanted them to have jobs and he established the "President's Committee to Employ the Physically Handicapped" to address that. One of his projects was a national essay contest for high schoolers, and I won that contest, first for the State of Oregon, and then a year later, as one of four students nationally. The prize was a check, handed to me by the President, and an eye-opening trip to Washington DC. The research I did for the essay, and the Exposition I visited in DC, a huge hall filled with veterans with all kinds of disabilities, working away and using equipment that had been refitted in some cases to accommodate them, made a lasting impression. And when my first child was born with multiple disabilities, I knew where to turn to find out how to get the assistance she would need.

Another factor in my journey was that at Reed College, where I graduated in German Literature, research and writing were emphasized and I had completed a graduate thesis. Reed's education model of small conference groups taught me how to interact in exactly the type of atmosphere I would later experience in ANSI and on several committees and boards for the State of California. I also had been trained as the assistant of the U.S. Documents Librarian, so I was thoroughly familiar with state, federal and even United Nations documents and how to read, index and use them. Later, I spent a year as the Acting Documents Librarian for Reed and went on to establish the first documents library for General Motors in New York City. Without that background, getting through the initial publication of the ADA Standards in the General Ledger would have been daunting.

In the field of disability, due to work with a couple of my adopted children, I did a lot of work with cognitive disabilities, specifically dyslexia and dysgraphia, and established a program that worked with adults who had not learned to read due to these disabilities. It was awarded a grant by President Johnson's administration, and I became the director. For this work, I was chosen as Portland Oregon's youngest "Woman of Accomplishment. Later, after moving to the new town of Irvine California and being elected to the first school board, I continued to bring the topic of cognitive learning disabilities forward and became a teacher who addressed that in my classrooms. Finally, when my school closed, I entered the graphics business started by my husband, Hitoshi Toji, taking over the design department and doing research for any code signs that were required. Even before the ADA was passed, I approached our design work from the premise that it had to work for getting people to their destinations with minimal problems.

So, forward to 1991: I started to hear that the Americans With Disabilities Act, a long awaited Civil Rights law that would hopefully bring persons with disabilities into the mainstream, was going to have a major impact on the signage industry. After doing some research, I called the U.S. Access Board in DC and began a conversation with them that has now continued for close to thirty years.

I had lots of questions for Jim Pecht of the Access Board staff, as well as for Michael Mankin, lead architect for disability issues at the California Division of the State Architect. It was obvious that the very sparse standards for signs had not been written with the help of people who knew much about them, nor was there much input from people who were blind or had serious vision conditions. After my discussions revealed what the intent had been for the standards, I wrote an article for a sign magazine, and from that point on, my phone did not stop ringing.

A major part of my initial work on the standards was completed by working closely with the blindness community. The two large national organizations actually

comprised of people with a whole range of vision impairments, the American Council of the Blind and the National Federation of the Blind, both meet annually, as well as at various regional meetings and that is where I could meet, talk with and observe hundreds of blind people. I paid for tables at these meetings and spread out signs designed and manufactured by various sign companies in response to the new ADA standards. Then I invited people to come and read them and I listened carefully to their comments and responses. I was also part of study to find if people could read incised characters as well as raised characters, and lower case letters as well as uppercase. After these experiences, every suggestion I made to improve the ADA Standards was based on my observations of the blindness community, in all its variety, as they read signs, both visually and by touch.

After I was asked to represent the signage industry on the ANSI Committee that writes the standards for accessible buildings and facilities for the United States, and our Sign Committee had completed a very detailed and well organized rewrite and augmentation of the standards for signs, President Clinton ordered the formation of a Committee to do a complete analysis of the original standards and improve them as necessary. I was appointed to the Subcommittee on Communication and worked, with others, for months by flying to Washington for working meetings. The result of that work was a completely rewritten set of standards, including scoping. Unfortunately, when it was completed just prior to the year 2000, a new administration took over that was anti-regulation, and the much improved standards languished for several years. Now, although some of them are outdated by technology advances and new knowledge, we are fortunate that they are in place.

What this all means, in terms of the way that I approach my work as a consultant, is that when someone asks about the placement of tactile signs in relationship to doors and doorways, I can answer them based on my participation in writing the standard. I can recount the story of how our committee cut out a piece of cardboard

to represent the space where the reader could stand, and how committee members of different sizes and shapes stood in that space while someone else opened and came through the door from the other side. Instead of just knowing the words of the standard, I know the intent of those words, because I was there, at the table, when a group of us, including people who are blind, discussed them at length before making them a part of the record. And from a practical standpoint, as a working member of a company that actually designs, fabricates and installs accessible signs, I know the pitfalls of using certain materials and fabrication techniques and the advantages of certain layouts of the text.

So this is the story of how I became the ADA Sign Lady, a title I am proud to have. Now, our ANSI Committee is beginning a new cycle and after several years of detailed work, we will publish a revised ANSI Standard. We made one important change in the last cycle by adding a measurable gloss standard, but it may take a new administration in the White House before we will see any changes reflected in the ADA Standards for Accessible Design. I will, once again, bring up the importance of an actual contrast measurement standard. Perhaps I will fail once again, but you can be sure of one thing: I will be at the meetings, eyes and ears open, ready to bring the latest discussions back to those of you who want to do the best possible job in providing accessible signs for buildings and facilities all over the country.