

The President's Committee on
Employment of People with Disabilities
1331 F Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20004-1107
(202) 376-6200 Voice (202) 376-6205 TDD (202) 376-6219 FAX

Justin Dart, Chairman

THE REVEREND WADE BLANK, 1940-1993

Disability rights leader Wade Blank died on February 15 in rough seas off of a beach at Todos Santos, Mexico. He was trying, unsuccessfully, to save his drowning eight year old son, Lincoln.

It is always a tragedy when great lives are cut short by apparently preventable events. But to dwell on the tragedy of Wades Blank's death would be a very large disservice to the future. Wade's life is the message. His existence was a towering triumph that demands to be shouted, to be heard, to be acted on.

Unlike others who participated in the sixties revolution for a rational society, Wade did not give up the struggle when it became unfashionable. In 1974 he founded the Atlantis Community in Denver - a radical program to enable people with severe disabilities to leave the isolation of nursing homes and live in the mainstream. Atlantis was a success. But it soon became apparent that the mainstream itself was polluted by devastating discrimination which prevented people with disabilities from fulfilling their humanity.

In the tradition of Martin Luther King, Wade made equal access to bus transport the symbol of full equality: "Rosa Parks protested the indignity of being forced to sit in the back of the bus. We can't get on the bus at all." On July 5th and 6th, 1978, he and nineteen people with disabilities illegally detained an inaccessible bus at the intersection of Broadway and Colfax in Denver. ADAPT was born - American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit. During the next twelve years hundreds of ADAPT activists blocked buses, streets, hotels and government buildings across North America. They filled the police records of the jails of Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, Houston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Little Rock, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Reno, Montreal and Washington, DC. Wade, Mike Auberger, Bob Kafka, Mark Johnson, George Roberts, Larry Ruiz, Rick James, Stephanie Thomas and Anita Cameron were arrested 15-30 times each. Molly Blank, Babs Auberger, Frank McComb, Lori Eastwood, Bobby Simpson, Melvin Conrady, Beverly Furnice, Joe Carle, Karen Tarnley, Ann Sawtel, Sue Davis, Diane Coleman and many others were co-heros in the long struggle.

In March of 1990, with the fate of the ADA hanging in the balance, Wade organized the historic march of disability rights leaders from the White House to the US Capitol to demand a law that would provide full equality, "with no weakening amendments."

People with severe disabilities crawled up the Capitol steps and were arrested demonstrating in the rotunda. ADA passed in July - with no weakening amendments. Without the courage and inspiration of Wade Blank and his colleagues, the world would not have its first comprehensive civil rights law for people with disabilities.

After the passage of ADA, knowing that the job of justice was far from completed, Wade and the members of ADAPT refocused their advocacy. They demanded that the federal government provide funds for personal assistance services that would enable persons with disabilities now trapped in nursing homes to live free in their communities. The demonstrations - and the arrests - continue. Progress is being made. President Clinton has promised to form a task force that will create a national program of personal assistance services.

Some - mostly those that didn't know him - have said that Wade's methods were "extreme." They said that civil disobedience in the eighties and nineties is "passe," "obsolete," "inappropriate." The same kinds of things were said about Washington, Jefferson, Gandhi and Martin Luther King. What is extreme, what is inappropriate is millions of human beings living with less dignity than we accord to our pet dogs and cats. What is inappropriate is American citizens imprisoned without due process of law in oppressive institutions and rat infested back rooms. What is inappropriate is people with disabilities living and begging in the streets. What is inappropriate, what is unspeakably immoral, is a society that cannot be bothered to make the simple changes necessary to give its own children the opportunity of full humanity.

It has been my privilege to work closely with Wade Blank during the last several years. He demonstrated against a meeting I chaired - when HHS Secretary Louis Sullivan spoke at the 1991 PCEPD annual conference in Dallas. We counseled together by telephone at all hours of the day and night. We served together on the ADA Congressional Task Force and in negotiating ADA with the President of Greyhound. We marched together for equality in San Francisco, Philadelphia and Washington. We were together in the freezing midnight outside the barricaded Department of Transportation in Washington. I never put myself in a position to be arrested. Wade said that was alright, because I could play a positive role within the system. I was never sure in my heart that I was on the right side of the bars. I knew he was.

Wade Blank was a sensitive philosopher of Democracy. He was a superb organizer. He was a mature, sophisticated politician. He had total honesty and total follow through. You could take his promises to the bank.

These are rare and good qualities, but they alone would not have enabled him to use an unfashionable method to lead an unfashionable cause to an historic victory.

Wade had a magic sword. It was love. Unlike many with religious labels, he understood and lived the central commandment of his God, "that ye love one another as I have loved you." He understood that love is not just smiling at nice people, but passionate, lifelong action to preserve and enlarge the joy, the dignity, the quality of every human life. He understood that love does not smother with criticism, care and control; it encourages, emancipates and empowers. He understood that love for all means justice for all.

Wade's leadership of love made ADAPT the family for those who had no family, the family with justice, with hope, with transcending fulfillment. Wade's love warmed and empowered us all. It breached the defenses and won the respect of Congresspersons, businesspersons, policepersons, jailers, judges and mayors. Again and again, it lifted my heart and my mind from self-centered desperation of Washington politics to the dream.

Before he died, Wade planned a series of demonstrations for personal assistance services to be held in Washington, DC, on May 9th, 10th and 11th. These will go forward in his honor. There will be a tribute to him on Sunday, May 9th, at the Lincoln Memorial.

Let us join together in memory of Wade - on May 9th, today, tomorrow, as long as life remains - to continue his struggle for a truly human society. Let us pick up his sword of love and truth and courage, and use it - each in our own way - to cut the chains of all who are slaves to pity, prejudice and paternalism. Let us join in one voice to shout his shout - "free our people." Let us embrace his golden heritage of responsible action for life, enlarge it in our own lives, and invest it in the lives of all who will come.

Wade, we love you. That's easy. We will try our best to love each other as you loved us.

Justin Dart