

STATEMENT OF JANET RENO
Third Anniversary of the ADA Signing
July 26, 1993
Takoma Park, Maryland

Pat Wright: Well, good afternoon. What a wonderful time to be in my home town of Takoma Park.

[applause]

I'd like to welcome all of you to Takoma Park those of you who do not live in our community and hope you do spend a little time to see what a wonderful community it really is, and to enjoy it.

Today, we are here and I am joined by various selected officials which I would like to take a few moments to introduce. First of all, Senator Sarbanes is here.

[applause]

And Senator Ida Rubin, State Senator.

[applause]

My mayor, Ed Sharpe.

[applause]

Also joining me on the podium today is Bobby Silverstein who is going to be representing Senator Tom Harkin, who is unable to attend today.

[applause]

Bobby has a very warm place in the hearts of the disability community because he was the lead staffer in the drafting of the Americans with Disabilities Bill. So, if any of you businesses have any problems with that law, you should see the man behind me

after this session.

I really would first like to say welcome -- to say to you who don't know that this is a very important day for us, July 26th, because it is the day that the ADA was in fact signed. The ADA ends second class citizenship for the 43 million people with disabilities in this country. That second class citizenship was given to us as a result of inaccessible buildings, inaccessible signage, discrimination in employment, in public accommodations, in city and state government. The ADA seeks to end that discrimination.

So, I first would like to thank you for joining us on this celebration. I would also like to thank Attorney General Janet Reno for joining us today to celebrate the Americans with Disabilities Act.

[applause]

Historically, the enforcement of civil rights in this country goes to the Attorney General of the United States. Some have risen to the challenge, and others have failed. I believe that President Clinton, in this case, has chosen an eagle.

[applause]

[At this point the tape picks up with a segment of the statement of Tom Harkin, United State Senator (D. Iowa) which was being read by Bobby Silverstein. The statement, in its entirety, read as follows:]

For people with disabilities, the Fourth of July comes twice a year. On July 4, we break out fireworks to celebrate America's Independence. And today, on July 26, we celebrate the day when America said no to fear, no to ignorance, no to paternalism, and yes to inclusion, yes to empowerment, and yes to independence for all people with disabilities.

Today we celebrate the third anniversary of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. And we will commemorate the day with speeches and ceremonies, tributes and handshakes. But the real celebration will come later, when a person in a wheelchair leaving here is able to ride a public bus on his way to meeting friends at an accessible restaurant, or a deaf person returns home to a message on their TTY machine from a tailor that their suit is ready to be picked up, or a blind person stops by a local braille-equipped ATM machine before shopping. The real celebration will come in the quiet acts of everyday life now enjoyed by people with disabilities that most of us take for granted.

The message of the ADA is simply this: that disability is a natural part of the human experience that in no way diminishes the right of an individual to live independently, enjoy full inclusion in all aspects of American society, enjoy self-determination, make choices, pursue meaningful careers, and contribute to family,

community, state, and country. Today, that is our celebration as well as our challenge.

I have called the ADA the 20th century Emancipation Proclamation for people with disabilities. But the law benefits more than just people with disabilities:

For business, it means customers, increased profits, and additional qualified workers;

For government, it means more taxpayers, and fewer persons on welfare, social security, and other programs.

And for all Americans, it means a society that is more open, just and dignified than before.

The ADA was signed into law because of broad-based bipartisan support. But it will only succeed if we all work together to make it a reality.

Remember, three years after the Emancipation Proclamation passed, there was still a lot of work left to be done, as there is today. You can't just pass a law and expect to change people's attitudes overnight. But working together, we can create an America as good in practice as in promise, and make sure all Americans have equal access to the American Dream.

And that's really what this day is about. The Fourth of July is the day when America celebrates the American Dream. But the 26th of July is the day we're reminded that the ADA also stands for American Dream for All.

Working together, we can help make that dream a reality.

[The tape then picks up with the applause and the following speech of Attorney General Janet Reno]

Attorney General Janet Reno: This has been one of the best days I've spent in the Washington area since February the ninth, 1993. And the reason it is, is because you have confirmed my faith this morning, today after lunch, and today again, and again, and again, in people -- in the strength and magnificence of all Americans. And Patrisha, and Mark, and all of those who have met with me today; all of those who have made me feel welcome in Takoma Park -- thank you. It has been an incredible day that I hope I can continue to share with America.

I want to thank you for joining me on this important anniversary. I'd like to thank the city of Takoma Park and Mayor - - this is America, and this is the American community that people dream of.

[applause]

The first senator I ever knew, long time ago -- and I don't think he and I ever thought we'd be standing here together -- but thank you Paul Sarbanes for being here, and State Senator Ida Rubin for helping us honor the business and advocacy groups which have worked to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities. It's fitting that we meet in a community that's been chosen as a model for others across the country as to how we can become accessible for all Americans.

Three years ago today, the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act began a new era of opportunity, promise, and

dignity for the 43 million Americans with disabilities. In these three years it has been so extraordinary for me, coming from my perspective as State Attorney in Dade County, to learn what every single agency, what every business can do to open a new life for a person. A person with developmental disabilities joined my office, and for that young woman, she was an angel for us, and we were a new vista for her. And the enrichment that she has given to us, what she has done for us in the State Attorney's office in Miami, and I hope what we have done for her, has enriched us all.

Here in Takoma Park, and across all America, doors that have shut out people with disabilities are being opened -- ramps are being installed, aisles are being widened, and interpreters are being provided.

What we see on the main street of this small town demonstrates how easy it is and important it is to comply with the law. When the Women's Health Clinic up the hill added a ramp and installed an accessible examination table, it meant access to affordable health care to women with disabilities, and it made a difference in people's lives.

[applause]

And when the local gift store offered a portable ramp to people using wheelchairs, it meant new customers for the owner.

[applause]

Each small step can make such difference.

What we also see here is how reasonable and flexible the ADA is. It takes into account the resources of each individual business. Some people have referred with fear to the regulations.

To all America I say, "Don't be fearful. Don't be afraid of what it takes to comply with the ADA. Be reasonable, be thoughtful, be caring, and you can comply" -- and we want to help you comply in every way we can. Barriers must be removed only when it is readily achievable -- that is, when it can be easily accomplished without much difficulty or expense. And clearly, what is readily achievable for T.G.I. Fridays around the country is different than what's doable for Taliano's Restaurant in Takoma Park.

The ADA calls on every one of us to do what we can to remove barriers to access. I met today with leaders of the disability rights community and with business leaders to talk with them about how the entire country can heed that call -- not just in complying with the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law as well. I want to send a message throughout all America, that United States Attorneys, the Department of Justice, want to work with businesses large and small, with local government, with state government, to make sure that all Americans have access to opportunities -- that no doors are foreclosed. And I want to exchange the feelings that I had here in Washington, with all Americans, of businesses who said, "It was wonderful when we got together with the disability rights community and had them tell us how we could work together, and of the partnership that we could form." People have been hearing me talk about partnership, but it's time that all America came together -- the public and the private sector, large business and small business, state and local government and the federal government -- not in an adversarial confrontation, but in working together to make sure that we do not leave one American behind.

[applause]

President Clinton has ushered in a new era of inclusion in America -- one which seeks to end discrimination and cast out prejudices.

To that end, we must rely on the ADA to break down not only physical barriers but social barriers as well -- the barrier of feeling unsure about how to relate to a person who uses a wheelchair, the barrier of not knowing how to talk to a person who is deaf, the barriers that keep a person with a disability out of the work place, off of Main Street and out of the mainstream.

And I would add the voice of a person I heard when I chaired a social services task force for the governor of Florida. I held nine public hearings from Pensicola to Miami a little over two years ago. I heard from people throughout Florida. And the most compelling people I heard from were those who had been in mental institutions, but who by the strength of their personalities and by the resources given to them to come back to the community as independent, self-sufficient people who could lead their ~~own~~ lives -- if given half a fighting chance. All of us can be included, and all of us can make a difference.

[applause]

We are beginning to see evidence of these changes in attitude. Until recently, businesses viewed people with disabilities as objects of corporate giving. Now, they are starting to view them as targets of corporate marketing and recruiting. Television advertisements prominently feature wheelchair users, and clothing catalogs highlight models with disabilities. And the business community that I talked to today, was not talking about corporate

giving. They were talking about corporate futures.

Today we talked about those efforts being made in the world of advocacy and the world of business, and what we could do together to break down the barriers that still make our worlds too separate and prevent us from all being treated equally. The members of the business community I met with today have shown outstanding leadership in making architectural and attitudinal changes. Let me introduce them now:

- Robert Thacker, Vice President for Advertising for Target Stores

[applause]

- Randolph Aires, Vice President of Governmental Affairs and Robert Buxton from Sears

[applause]

- Barry Scher, Corporate Vice President for Public Affairs for Giant Food Inc.

[applause]

- Kathleen Alexander, Vice President for Human Resources of the Marriott Corporation

[applause]

- Peter Connolly, Senior Vice President and General Counsel of Hyatt Hotels

[applause]

- Rogercarole Rogers, Staff Director for Employment Development of McDonalds

[applause]

- Gwen Sheard, Director of Equal Employment Opportunities of

Friendly's Restaurants

[applause]

- Nick Galanos, Executive Vice President for Operations of T.G.I.

Fridays Restaurants

[applause]

- Barbara Blum, President and CEO of Adams National Bank

[applause]

- Stephen Richard, Executive Director of Arena Stage

[applause]

I did something I usually don't do. I would have usually said, "Hold your applause," but these people so impressed me today that they deserve that and thank you. Each has overseen in their industry efforts to bring about important change. Target Stores, Marriott Hotels, Friendly's Restaurants and McDonalds Corporation have developed policies and programs to make hiring persons with disabilities a priority and to also provide accessible customer services. T.G.I. Fridays went beyond making their own facilities more accessible. They negotiated with landlords in shopping centers surrounding their facilities to make walkways, parking and curbs easier to use. Hyatt Hotels have involved people with disabilities in mapping out both changes in architecture and policies to make their facilities more accessible. Sears has done more than what is "readily achievable" in restructuring the layout and eliminating barriers in many of their stores. Adams National Bank and Giant Foods have provided sensitivity training for employees to improve services to people with disabilities. And I may tell you, you

should have heard the lady from (off mic) if given only half a chance. Arena Stage, here in Washington, has opened up theater performances to persons who are deaf, hard of hearing or blind.

I commend these business representatives for all they have done, as well as the many others who have made great strides who are not here today. I call on them, and they've already promised me, to urge their colleagues large and small to follow their lead.

But they've done more than that. They have told me that their companies will work with us throughout the communities of America, with United States Attorneys, in trying to develop in every community an understanding that in partnership we can do so much to give independence to all Americans.

Today, we have walked one short block to see how far we have come, but we still have a long way to go. Because, unfortunately, too many businesses are not yet complying with the law.

Knowing the law and what is expected is a step to compliance. The Justice Department plays a critical role in educating businesses and the public about the ADA. It's a job we take seriously.

I am pleased to announce that the Department will begin a public service campaign to publicize the law and what it means. Two famous people with very different talents and backgrounds have agreed to be our spokespersons -- virtuoso violinist Itzaak Perlman and former New York Jets football star Dennis Byrd. They will help us ensure that businesses understand their responsibilities and that persons with disabilities understand their rights.

But the Justice Department must also do more than educate the millions of businesses and thousands of state and local governments

which must comply with the law. We must also use all the enforcement tools that Congress provided in the Act.

We seek to resolve complaints first -- short of litigation. Nobody likes litigation. And, that approach to date has been to some extent successful. In the past 18 months, we have won access for people with disabilities in over 100 cases. We would rather see businesses spend their dollars on ramps and TDDs than on court costs and legal fees.

There are those who think that our commitment to public education and voluntary compliance means that we are unwilling or unable to enforce the ADA through court action. Let me make clear that we are earnest about our enforcement responsibilities and we will take people to court when they thumb their nose at us.

[applause]

If independent living is our dream, then full enforcement of the ADA's promises must be a reality.

We are pursuing and will continue to pursue ADA litigation when it is the right thing to do. And when we sue, we are authorized to seek compulsive orders and to levy, ask the court to levy serious fines.

As of today, the ADA's three-year phase-in period is over. It's time to finish the job of turning the ADA's promise into reality.

I look forward to working with the heroes and heroines that I have met with today and in these four months past, and who I worked with in my office at home in Miami, to make these dreams come true.

Thank you.