



Disability Rights online News

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Disability Rights Online News

is a monthly update about the Civil Rights Division's activities in the area of disability rights. The Division enforces laws prohibiting discrimination based on disability in employment, housing, access to businesses serving the public, access to government programs and services including voting and public transportation, and unconstitutional conditions in institutions of confinement.

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CITY OF BALTIMORE AGREES TO EXPAND HOUSING FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

On September 29, 2004, the Justice Department announced the settlement of a lawsuit alleging a pattern of discrimination by the Housing Authority of Baltimore City (HABC) against low-income people with disabilities. The agreement, the first of its kind, enforces regulations issued by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for public housing authorities. Under the agreement, the housing authority will implement changes to its housing facilities, programs, policies, and practices; will commit several million dollars to provide over 2,000 new housing opportunities for individuals with disabilities; and will pay \$1,039,000 in damages.

This lawsuit was filed in the U. S. District Court in Maryland to enforce both the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Specifically, the suit alleged that HABC discriminated in both its public and

(Continued on page 2)

DEPARTMENT BEGINS PROCESS TO REVISE ADA STANDARDS BY SEEKING PUBLIC COMMENT

On September 30, 2004, the Justice Department published an Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking in the Federal Register announcing that the Department plans to change its Americans with Disabilities Act Standards for Accessible Design (ADA Standards) to make them consistent with the ADA Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) that was published by the Architectural and Transportation Barrier Compliance Board (also known as the Access Board) in July. These accessibility requirements, which cover new and altered facilities, apply to businesses and state and local governments nationwide. The Department's ADA Standards must by law be consistent with the ADAAG, which is developed independently by the Access Board.

(Continued on page 3)

(Baltimore Housing, continued)

Section 8 subsidized housing programs by refusing to admit non-elderly people with disabilities; by failing to make its public housing units, their common areas, and its administrative offices accessible; and by failing to provide sufficient assistance to people with physical or mental disabilities who sought to rent private units through the authority's Section 8 housing subsidy program.

"Housing is a basic building block of community life and participation," said R. Alexander Acosta, Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. "The law protects the right of individuals with disabilities to access public spaces, services, and accommodations, yet without accessible housing, individuals with disabilities can hardly avail themselves of these wider opportunities."

The Department's lawsuit was resolved together with a lawsuit filed by three individuals with disabilities who were represented by the Maryland Disability Law Center. "We are very pleased that the Housing Authority of Baltimore City was willing to work with the Civil Rights Division and the Maryland Disability Law Center to formulate a realistic plan for ensuring that Baltimore's citizens with physical and mental disabilities have access

to HABC's programs," noted Assistant Attorney General Acosta.

The lawsuit and the consent order resolving it were filed simultaneously. Under the consent order, which is subject to court approval, the housing authority is required to establish a \$1,000,000 fund to compensate individual victims of discrimination who will be identified through a claims process and to pay a total of \$39,000 to the individuals who filed the private lawsuit.

In addition, the ten-year agreement requires the housing authority to take several steps to reform the ways it provides public and subsidized housing. Under the agreement, the housing authority will provide 830 accessible public housing units; will create 1,850 new affordable housing opportunities for non-elderly people with disabilities through both public housing and Section 8 rental subsidy programs; and will provide extra assistance to people with disabilities seeking to use Section 8 subsidies to rent privately owned housing units in Baltimore. HABC has also agreed to:

- identify privately owned housing units in the City of Baltimore that have accessibility features useful for people with physical disabilities and encourage landlords

to rent these units to low-income people with disabilities;

- implement an effective system for responding to tenants' and applicants' requests for reasonable accommodations

in HABC's rules or practices as well as modifications to public housing units if needed for disability-based reasons;

- adopt and implement effective nondiscrimination policies and procedures;

- implement training programs for HABC employees to ensure compliance with the consent order and with federal civil rights laws prohibiting disability discrimination; and

- develop procedures for effective communications with persons with disabilities.

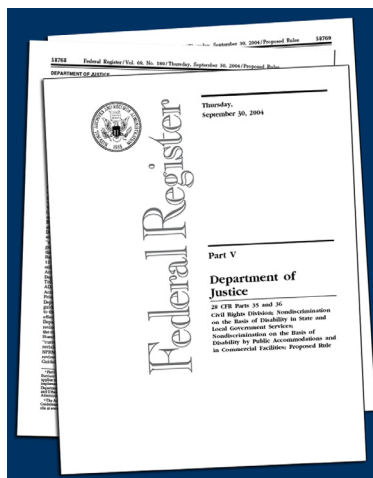
People with disabilities who believe they are victims of discrimination by the Housing Authority of Baltimore City should call 1-800-896-7743 and select option 3 to obtain information on how to file a claim for monetary damages.

A copy of the consent decree may be obtained on the Department's website at www.usdoj.gov/crt/housing/caselist.htm.

(ADA Standards, continued)

The notice alerts businesses, state and local governments, and people with disabilities of the pending changes and seeks input on how the new standards should be implemented. In the notice, the Department poses a variety of issues and questions on how the new requirements should apply to existing facilities. The Department also seeks advice on the date for implementing the new ADA Standards and on the methodology for conducting the regulatory assessment that must be prepared in connection with them.

Copies of the notice may be downloaded from www.ada.gov or ordered through the voice mail system at 1-800-514-0301 (voice) or 1-800-514-0383 (TTY). Interested parties may submit comments on line or in writing to the postal address listed in the Notice. The deadline for comments has been extended to May 31, 2005.



A CONVERSATION WITH OLLIE CANTOS

Olegario “Ollie” D. Cantos VII, former General Counsel for the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), has been named Special Assistant to Assistant Attorney General R. Alexander Acosta, serving as the Civil Rights Division’s point person on disability issues. He advises Assistant Attorney General Acosta on key Justice Department strategies to enhance enforcement of the ADA, the Fair Housing Act, the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act, and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Ollie’s responsibilities also include enhancing physical and program accessibility of cities and towns through Project Civic Access, working with the private sector to promote greater ADA compliance through the ADA Business Connection, expanding collaboration with state governments to have their building codes become ADA Certified, and creating and broadening new partnerships with other federal departments to minimize duplication of effort.

Please tell us a bit about your personal background?

I grew up in West Covina, California, the son of Filipino

immigrants and blind since birth. I am the first attorney in my family. I attained my Political Science degree from Loyola Marymount University and later earned my law degree from Loyola Law School in Los Angeles. I am also a member of the Alpha Sigma Nu National Jesuit Honor Society.

When did you decide to go to law school? Why?

My decision to go to law school actually has its roots in experiences I had when I was 10 years old during a first-time trip I took with my mother to the Philippines, her place of birth. While there, I spent time with my uncle, my father’s oldest brother. He took me to a country club whose membership fee, he boasted, was 90,000 pesos at that time. I met provincial political leaders who were friends of his. I was struck by how these leaders enjoyed such lavish lifestyles while other Filipinos lived in abject poverty, with little hope of advancement. That bothered me, and I remember how I grew to have a deeper appreciation for the incredible opportunities available in the United States to allow anyone to succeed or fail on his or her own merit.

(Continued on page 10)

COURT APPROVES SETTLEMENT OF CASE AGAINST CITY OF HANFORD, CALIFORNIA

On October 14, 2004, the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California approved a settlement agreement between the Department and the City of Hanford, California, resolving the Department's lawsuit alleging discrimination on the basis of disability. The case, filed on October 7, was referred to the Justice Department by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The Department alleged that Hanford violated the Fair Housing Act by attempting to close a home for people with disabilities because neighbors did not want people with disabilities living in their community. The settlement agreement provides for the continued operation of the

home as a residence for people with disabilities and prohibits the city from engaging in housing discrimination based on disability. The agreement also clarifies that people with disabilities and group homes for people with disabilities need not seek permission from the city to continue operating housing so long as they comply with applicable zoning and land use laws. The city also agreed to pay a total of \$55,000 in compensatory damages to current and former residents of the home.

The Department's lawsuit was resolved together with a lawsuit filed in January of 2003 by individual residents of the home.

COURT APPROVES SETTLEMENT OF CASE AGAINST VANCOUVER HOUSING AUTHORITY

On October 15, 2004, the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Washington approved a settlement agreement between the Department and the Vancouver Public Housing Authority, the Department of Social and Health Services of the State of Washington, Coldwater Springs Assisted Living Community, LLC, Emeritus Corporation, Sunwest

Management, Inc., and James D. Reed. The agreement resolves the Department's lawsuit, filed September 24, 2004, alleging discrimination on the basis of disability in violation of the Fair Housing Act.

Specifically, the Department alleged that the defendants discriminated against disabled residents by forcing people who required assisted living services to

either move to an inaccessible apartment or to give up their assisted living services in order to stay in their current home and by evicting people because of their disabilities. The Department initiated its investigation after a referral from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

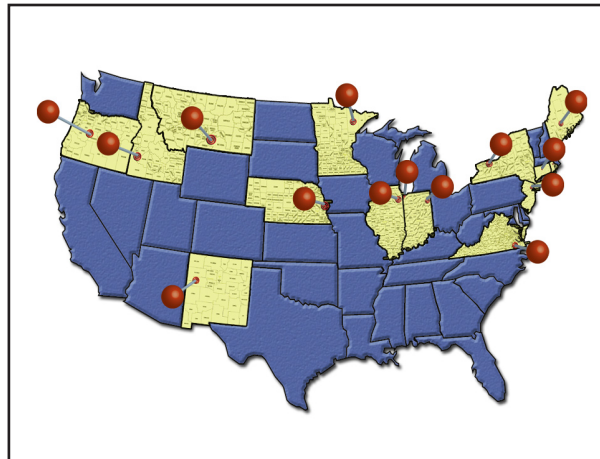
Under the settlement agreement, the defendants will pay \$100,000 in damages to several victims of the alleged disability discrimination, including the estates of two victims who are now deceased. In addition, the Vancouver Housing Authority will renovate two apartments in a Vancouver building for seniors and people with disabilities to make the units fully accessible. The agreement also ensures that residents who receive assisted living services in this building and those who do not can both have meals in the building's cafeteria and participate jointly in on-site activities such as lectures and social events. The resolution of the lawsuit, which also alleged retaliation against people who filed complaints with HUD, requires housing authority staff to receive training under the Fair Housing Act and requires all parties to report certain housing discrimination complaints to the Department.

MORE PROJECT CIVIC ACCESS SETTLEMENTS ANNOUNCED

Through Project Civic Access (PCA), the Justice Department works cooperatively with local governments to expand access to public facilities, services, and programs. The Department recently announced the signing of the 100th agreement under Project Civic Access. Since then, the Department has entered into settlement agreements with the City of Bend, Oregon, the City of Suffolk, Virginia, and the City of Gallup, New Mexico, setting out steps to improve the accessibility of these cities' facilities, programs, and employment practices.

In other PCA news, the Department has recently conducted full-scale reviews of government facilities and services in the following cities and counties: Monroe County, NY; Ada County, ID; Omaha, NE; Billings, MT; Paterson, NJ; Newark, NJ; Hartford, CT; Allen County, IN; Will County, IL; Gary, IN; Barnstable, MA; St. Louis County, MN; and Providence, RI.

Project Civic Access is the Department's wide-ranging initiative to ensure that people with disabilities have an equal opportunity to participate in civic life, a fundamental part of American society. It is designed to improve access to local government programs, services, and facilities for people with disabilities.



Map of the United States showing locations of recent PCA settlement agreements and on-site reviews

KENTUCKY PLANS FAR REACHING IMPROVEMENTS AT RESIDENTIAL FACILITY

On September 21, 2004, the Department entered into an agreement regarding conditions of resident care and treatment in the Communities of Oakwood in Somerset, Kentucky. The agreement resolves an investigation that began in June 2001 under the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act. The Commonwealth of Kentucky owns and

operates Oakwood, which is a residential facility that serves nearly 400 persons with developmental disabilities.

The Department made the following findings: a history of severe staff abuse at the facility that led to an indictment and guilty plea, neglect of residents including a pattern of resident deaths involving severe bowel impactions, inadequate supervision that

resulted in several residents seriously injuring themselves, and excessive and incorrect medication practices that resulted in great harm to residents. The Department also found evidence that the state kept Oakwood residents institutionalized who were appropriate for community placement, even after the residents expressed a desire to live outside the institution.

(Residential facility, continued)

The agreement requires the state to implement a program that provides for person-centered care and improved services in the areas of psychiatry, neurology, medical and nursing care, psychology, nutrition, speech, and physical therapy. The agreement requires Oakwood to provide a safe, secure and humane environment for residents; to provide adequate medical and nursing care; to improve behavioral treatment practices and physical and nutritional management; and to provide adequate therapeutic activities for residents. The agreement also requires Oakwood to ensure that residents are served in the most integrated setting appropriate to meet their needs consistent with the mandate of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Supreme Court's 1999 decision in *Olmstead v. L.C.*

Commonwealth officials and Oakwood staff have cooperated with the Department throughout the course of the investigation and have made a commitment to provide the continuing resources necessary to effect the required reforms.

ADA MEDIATION HIGHLIGHTS

Through the ADA Mediation Program, the Department refers complaints to professional mediators who have been trained in the legal requirements of the ADA. Cases are initiated when both the complainant and the respondent agree to participate in an attempt to mediate a case. This program has proven to be an effective way to resolve ADA complaints at less cost and in a shorter period of time than traditional investigations or litigation. Over 75% of complaints mediated have been resolved successfully.

This month's focus is on complaints from people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Highlights of recent mediations include:

- In Illinois, two individuals complained that a company refused to rent jet skis to them because they are deaf. The company agreed to change its policy and rent water sport equipment to customers who are deaf or hard of hearing. The company also paid the complainants \$200.

- In Maryland, a person who is deaf complained that a hospital failed to provide a sign language interpreter while he was being treated in the emergency room. He

also complained that, once he was admitted to the hospital, the hospital failed to provide closed captioning on the patient room television. The hospital agreed to respond immediately to requests for interpreters, ensure that all televisions were closed-captioned, and post information in all examination rooms notifying patients of the availability of interpreting services, TTYs, and closed-captioned televisions.

- In Ohio, a person who is deaf complained that a county court failed to provide interpreters for a hearing as he had requested. The county agreed to provide interpreters upon request for all court proceedings, including administrative hearings, mediations, and arbitrations.

- A deaf individual complained that a California hotel failed to provide closed captioning for televisions in guest rooms. In mediation, it was discovered that the hotel did have closed captioning, but that staff did not know how to use it. The hotel trained its staff on how to make this service available to guests.

- In Tennessee, a deaf couple complained that three different doctors had refused to provide

(ADA Mediation, continued)

them with a qualified sign language interpreter for their medical appointments. Each doctor agreed to provide sign language interpreters for all current and future patients who are deaf.

■ In Nevada, a person who is hard of hearing complained that a casino and adjacent hotel were inaccessible to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. The complainant alleged that the casino did not provide assisted listening systems in its meeting rooms and that the hotel did not provide amplified telephones in guest rooms. The respondent installed an assistive listening system in its meeting rooms and amplified telephones in guest rooms designated as accessible for individuals with hearing impairments. The respondent also obtained TTYs and visual alarms and purchased new registration cards stating that accommodations for guests with disabilities are available.

■ An individual who is deaf complained that an Iowa dental office failed to provide a sign language interpreter for a scheduled appointment as requested. The dentist agreed to hire an interpreter for the complainant's future office visits and to train staff on disability and sensitivity issues. The dentist also wrote a letter of apology to the complainant and refunded her \$128, the cost of the office visit.

■ An individual who is severely hard of hearing complained that she was not allowed to bring her service animal with her into the offices of a Georgia eye doctor. The doctor agreed to place signs at the building entrance and at the front desk welcoming persons with service animals, to train his staff about service animals and how to ensure effective communication with patients who are deaf or hard of hearing, and to maintain a list of qualified sign language

interpreters. The doctor also agreed to write an article for his professional organization's newsletter outlining the obligations of doctors under the ADA and to recommend that a disability advocate make a presentation on service animals at the organization's next meeting. Finally, the doctor agreed to make a donation to Dogs for the Deaf.

■ A person who is deaf complained that a Maryland restaurant repeatedly refused to accept phone orders by TTY. The restaurant reaffirmed its policy to respond to TTY calls in the same manner as all customer calls and informed the complainant that the employees involved in the denial of service had been fired. The restaurant agreed to inform all employees of the TTY policy and offered to donate food to an organization with which the complainant is associated.

OUTREACH AND TRAINING HIGHLIGHTS

■ The Department staffed a booth at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation National Conference in Washington, DC, on September 8-11, to answer questions about the ADA and hand out regulations and explanatory materials. The conference was

attended by approximately 10,000 participants from across the United States.

■ The Department also staffed a booth to answer questions about the ADA and hand out materials at the Tennessee State Fair held in Nashville,

Tennessee, September 16-19. The fair attracted an estimated 400,000 fairgoers.

■ Department staff spoke on "Emergency Planning - Legal Issues and Disability Rights" at a Conference on Emergency Preparedness for People with

(ADA Outreach, continued)

Disabilities in Arlington, Virginia. The September 22-24 conference was sponsored by the National Capital Region in partnership with the National Organization on Disability and with support from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

- On September 27-28, Department staff spoke about ADA lawsuits and the new accessibility guidelines developed by the Access Board at Franchise Appreciation Day, the legislative/ regulatory conference of the International Franchise Association, held in Washington, DC.

- On October 6, Department staff spoke about the ADA at the Annual Conference of the National Organization of Human Rights Workers, held in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

- Ollie Cantos gave the keynote address at an ADA conference sponsored by the Northwest Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center in Portland, Oregon, on October 7-8.

- The Department staffed a booth to answer questions and hand out materials at the World Congress on Disability held in Orlando, Florida, on October 7-9. The conference was attended by approximately 8,000 participants from across the United States.

- On October 13-14, Department staff gave presentations on the provisions of the ADA and the responsibilities of ADA Coordinators at a workshop and breakout sessions of a conference on accessibility hosted by the Paralyzed Veterans of America in Des Moines, Iowa.

- Department staff made ten presentations on behalf of the Center for Independent Living of Broward on October 18-29, reaching multiple audiences in Tamarac and Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Topics included emergency preparedness for disaster planning and recovery, ADA errors and omissions in alterations and new construction, and how to file ADA complaints.

- At the request of Congresswoman Lois Capps' office, Department staff gave the keynote presentation at an ADA workshop in San Luis Obispo, California, on October 19, sponsored by the Economic Vitality Corporation, a non-profit economic development group funded by local governments and private businesses from the area. The workshop addressed ADA requirements for small businesses.

- Department staff gave two presentations at the fall conference of the National Association of ADA Coordinators in Miami, Florida, on October 25-27. Staff spoke on the contents

of the new ADA Accessibility Guidelines in conjunction with representatives from the U.S. Access Board and also served as a resource panel member for a workshop on accessibility.

- On October 26, Department staff gave the keynote presentation at a one-day training on the ADA titled "Advanced ADA Workshop: Beyond the Basics" sponsored by ADA Minnesota, the Great Lakes ADA and IT Center, and the Minnesota Departments of Employment and Economic Development and Rehabilitation Services, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Topics included an update on new court cases and decisions, the status of the new ADA Guidelines, and information about other title II requirements.

Did you know...

The ADA requires the Department to provide technical assistance to people and organizations affected by the Act. These outreach and training activities help people become aware of the law and the Department's technical assistance services.

(ADA Outreach, continued)

- Department staff participated in a panel discussion and a question-and-answer session at the 11th Annual ADA Update Conference presented by the ADA and IT Information Center for the Mid-Atlantic Region in conjunction with the Maryland Coalition for ADA Education on November 4 in Timonium, Maryland. Staff reviewed the Section's work during the past year and discussed our current priorities.
- Department staff gave a three-hour presentation on the ADA as part of a program with continuing education credits offered by the Network of Executive Women in Hospitality, Inc. (NEWH) in Seattle, Washington, on November 4. The seminar was intended for interior designers, architects, product vendors and owners/operators of hotels. A local architect specializing in the Washington State Accessibility Code also participated.
- Department staff made an ADA presentation to a class of physical therapy students at the George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences in Washington, DC, on November 16. The presentation provided a general overview of the law with practical applications for the students.
- On November 17, Department staff participated in an educational panel during the monthly meeting of the Society of Government Meeting Professionals (SGMP) in Arlington, Virginia. The panel provided ADA information to meeting planners.
- Department staff gave a presentation on the ADA before the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions meeting in Orlando, Florida, on November 18.
- On November 17-20, Department staff co-presented a session titled "Resolving Excessive ADA Test Accommodation Requests: Doing the Right Thing" at the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA) annual conference in Miami, Florida.

RECENT LEGISLATIVE AND REGULATORY ACTIVITY

On October 25, President Bush signed the Assistive Technology Act of 2004. The Act revises and extends the existing Assistive Technology Act of 1998, which provides funding for state-sponsored programs that provide assistive technology for people with disabilities.

The United States Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (better known as the Access Board) convened the first

meeting of its Courthouse Access Advisory Committee on November 4 and 5. The Committee's purpose is to explore best practices and design solutions for providing accessibility in courthouses. The 31-member committee is made up of design professionals, advocates, judges, lawyers, court administrators, code developers, and government agencies, including the Department, which was represented by staff.

The full Access Board met on November 9 and 10 at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, DC. The first day was devoted to strategic planning for future Board initiatives. On the second day, the Ad Hoc Committee on Public Rights-of-Way met and a formal meeting of the Board was held. Staff represented the Department, which is a member of the Board.

(Ollie Cantos, continued)

As I grew older, I learned about how upholding the law can make a difference in someone's life. It is the rule of law that ensures that the rules of the game are fair - that equality of opportunity under law is possible. Before I even graduated from high school, I was certain that I would become an attorney and play a part in upholding the laws of this country. I focused like a laser beam on that goal until it ultimately became a reality.

What do you most enjoy about being an attorney?

I have learned that being an attorney is far more than knowing how to put together oral arguments or draft pleadings. I am fortunate that my practice can and does also involve the ongoing opportunity to enhance disability rights law enforcement. I have long focused on putting into place the kinds of policies and programs that promote cross-organizational collaboration that creates win-win partnerships for all. I greatly enjoy getting to use my knowledge of the law in such a way that enables people with disabilities to take greater control of their own lives and realize their fullest potential through exercising both the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

What accomplishments are you most proud of in your career to date?

My ongoing motto is, "Make a difference that lasts for generations." This driving philosophy is what motivates me to put into place new initiatives that will continue to flourish and grow, long after I



Ollie Cantos, Special Assistant to Assistant Attorney General R. Alexander Acosta

have gone. One such source of pride is the Southern California Disability Rights Leadership Conference, which I took the lead in founding in 2000 as an innovation of the Los Angeles-based Western Law Center for Disability Rights (WLCDR).

The collaborative initiative has since grown to become the California RespectAbility Conference, and it is still thriving today. The Conference continues to be led by WLCDR and to bring together "movers and shakers" representing

physical, psychiatric, developmental, and learning disability constituencies to plan and execute collaborative partnerships that prevent reinvention of the proverbial wheel and initiative duplication that results in a waste of precious time and financial resources.

I am also proud to have built a career-oriented mentoring effort through Disability Mentoring Day, which is still led by my former employer, the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD). Disability Mentoring Day is dedicated to enhancing internship and job opportunities for students and job seekers with disabilities through one-on-one job shadowing and hands-on career exploration, ideally lasting far beyond merely a day. I headed the team that, in only 26 months, built a program from serving just 1,600 people with disabilities in 32 states and 2 countries to encompassing worldwide participation of more than 6,000 people with disabilities in all 50 states, 3 territories, and 18 foreign countries on 5 continents. These mentoring efforts continue to take on a life of their own as they expand to become more of a year-round effort.

(Ollie Cantos, continued)

Can you tell us a bit more about your career before you came to the Department?

I have been in the disability rights field for almost 15 years, tackling issues in the areas of the arts, assistive technology, community-based living, criminal justice, emergency preparedness, employment, government benefits, housing, special education, telecommunication, transportation, and voting rights. Over the years, I have built strong relationships with organizations and agencies of and for people with physical, psychiatric, learning, and developmental disabilities. I have delivered remarks before thousands of people with and without disabilities, spreading the message of empowerment, the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and full participation in every facet of societal life. I have also taught key networking strategies for strengthening ties between leaders and pooling together people and resources to achieving common and concrete measurable outcomes.

What is your vision for the future of disability rights enforcement?

I envision broader knowledge of the disability rights and the enforcement work of the Justice Department and stronger collaborative partnerships among those

wishing to enhance physical and programmatic accessibility. I envision our being in a better position than ever to identify strong cases where we can make the greatest difference.

I want fellow members of the disability community to feel a true sense of empowerment as they seek to resolve their complaints through the most effective means possible, and I want them to see how DOJ is responsive to their needs. I want the business community truly to see DOJ as a valuable partner, as we show business leaders that people with disabilities are valuable customers and employees, not mere legal burdens. I want state and local government to see the value in working hand in hand with the Department. I also see DOJ continuing to play a vital and leading role against unnecessary institutionalization so that people with disabilities may rightfully live in the community among their families and friends.

You have spent your career as a disability advocate and you, yourself, live with a disability. Have you ever faced any particular challenges because of disability?

The biggest challenge I faced as a person who is blind were the limiting beliefs that were held by those around me and, in certain instances, myself. Even though I knew there were

other blind attorneys who did well in the profession, there were moments when I doubted that I had a place in the field. Sometimes I thought those blind lawyers must have been blessed with strengths that I lacked. There were times when I felt like I had bitten off a bit more than I could chew when I decided to enter law school.

Despite all of this, my key sources of strength remained. Back in my moments of doubt, I was sustained, and still am today, by my abiding personal faith in God, the love and support from my parents and my sister Jennifer, the incredible and ongoing friendships with thousands of colleagues and friends within the disability rights field, and my never-ending commitment to finding ways to do things better and more effectively than ever before.

Whenever I come across someone who does not believe in himself or herself as much as is otherwise possible, I think back to all the times when I felt the way they do, and I do everything I can to match the person up with the people and resources they may use to take their lives to the next level. It is so easy to see someone who is a success without seeing what it took for that person to get there, and that perception may lead folks to thinking that success is open to everyone else except himself or herself.

(Ollie Cantos, continued)

I am eager to openly talk about my struggles whenever asked, because I am just like everyone else. I have my doubts and fears, my hopes and dreams. But, for anyone who is a success in any given area, the question is not whether one has the ability at any given moment to succeed, but rather how much he or she is willing to persist. Persistence is the key. As we continually rededicate ourselves to constant and never ending improvement in upholding and defending our civil rights while asserting a commitment to fulfill the responsibilities that accompany those rights, we will individually and collectively place ourselves in a better position than ever to pave the way for the next generation.

How do you think the experience of Americans with disabilities today has changed from the past?

More than ever today, people with disabilities have greater access and opportunity.

We have more employment options, are better able to get around via accessible transportation, enjoy access to more goods and services, are better able to utilize telecommunication possibilities that were merely an ideal just a few short years ago, and can move our way through places of public accommodation such as restaurants, hotels, malls, recreational facilities, museums, and meeting halls. Students with disabilities of all ages are receiving greater support and opportunity to pursue wide varieties of careers. Architects of houses are utilizing universal design principles, more people with disabilities own their own homes, and our community is better able to acquire assistive technology in order to live full, productive, and independent lives.

But these successes are just the beginning. We must remain ever vigilant and must play an active role in shaping the future of life in this country for people with disabilities.

We must strive to educate our colleagues (both with and without disabilities) about obligations under existing laws, and we must continue creatively to determine how laws may be implemented at a systemic level. We must continually educate ourselves, empower those around us, and show the world by our example what it means to be full contributors to our society as a whole and all its facets. In short, we must work to continue to change societal paradigms to eliminate old and outdated stereotypes about disability and to replace negative attitudes with a more empowering and uplifting approach that embodies great optimism for the future and the deep commitment to settle for nothing less than our reaching our greatest potential.