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History

What We Have Done: An Oral History of the Disability Rights Movement
Fred Pelka
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Although most Americans have some knowledge of the history of the civil and women's rights movements, comparatively few possess awareness of the trials and tribulations and subsequent self-determination of this country's largest minority—people with disabilities. *What We Have Done: An Oral History of the Disability Rights Movement* by Guggenheim fellow Fred Pelka, author of a previous encyclopedia on the subject, successfully fills this gap for the uninitiated. His book includes viewpoints of people with a variety of conditions, including deafness, dwarfism, mental retardation, psychiatric illnesses, and physical disabilities, as well as the narratives of a few able-bodied allies who assisted in the struggle.

The author states that his goal is to "recount the political struggle for disability rights in the United States, focusing on the decades immediately preceding the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990." Using an interview-based format, excerpted segments are grouped into short chapters based on common overarching themes rather than a strict chronology. Prior to collaboration on the ADA, the history of the disability rights movement was characterized by various disability groups fighting independently for the rights of that group's membership and thus requires some shifts back and forth in time to be fairly represented. Because of his emphasis on political struggle, Pelka chooses narratives of discrimination that propelled people into activism and stories that led to the birth of influential organizations or the development and enforcement of landmark legislation to integrate people with disabilities.

In a scholarly, meticulously footnoted introduction, Pelka concisely describes the convergence of social attitudes and legal actions that led to the emergence of the empowerment of people with disabilities. Each short chapter has an introduction to provide context for the excerpted interviews that follow, and each narrative is preceded by a brief biography of the disability-rights icon featured. Attention-grabbing quotations capture the essence of each

individual's story. Because the book consists entirely of first-person accounts, it possesses a sense of immediacy often hard to capture in history texts written in the third person. Presented with the truth of an individual's story, instead of analysis by historians, the audience is invited to feel as though they too are reliving the events being recounted. Pelka's detailed footnotes continue throughout the book, establishing this manuscript as a rigorously researched monograph. Although this volume is easily read from beginning to end, its format of short chapters consisting of brief excerpts also facilitates dipping into any section on its own.

While it is published by a university press, Pelka has written *What We Have Done* to introduce a variety of audiences to the disability experience. The people interviewed speak in vernacular instead of jargon so that everyone can understand them. For readers who want to know how people with disabilities lived prior to being integrated, there are stories of discrimination and isolation at home or in institutions. Those interested in demonstrations can read about various protests spurred on by various groups. Law buffs and attorneys will be interested in the bipartisan negotiation and coalition-building that led to the passage of the ADA. People interested in the rights of other oppressed groups—women, gays, and African Americans—will be fascinated by the stories in which disability rights and the rights of other marginalized peoples converge. Readers with disabilities will discover that they, too, have a rich and storied legacy. In sum, so many need this account that no library or bookseller can afford to be without it.?

Jill Allen