

## **Justin Dart**

**Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient  
“Father” of the Americans with Disabilities Act**

I love you. I love the human family. I love the human dream. We must unite to defend the dream, to make the dream real in our lives and in every life. America for all. Freedom for all. No forced treatment ever.

I congratulate each one of you here. You are expanding the horizons of humanity. . . .

I do not represent a federal agency or any kind of an agency, and I speak to you simply as a passionate consumer advocate.

America stands at an historic crossroads. The decisions of 2000 and the first years of the 21 century will determine the quality of the lives of people with and without psychiatric disabilities for decades to come.

America today has the knowledge, the money, the productivity and the technology to create a life of profound quality for all of our people. But there is still a great and growing gap between the haves and have-nots. Millions lack adequate rights, food, housing, education, health care and security for their senior years. In spite of the historic victories of our movement, people with disabilities — especially those labeled mentally ill — are still the oppressed of the oppressed.

The problem? Obsolete perceptions, practices and politics, inherited from millennia of pre-democracy, pre-science culture. The problem is in all of us.

Most of us struggle to go forward. But we are blocked by a powerful minority that would lead us in retreat from the inclusive democracy of Jefferson, Lincoln, FDR and Martin Luther King. They would take us back to power and privilege for the few. They oppose the authority of government to protect and empower. They attack our rights under the ADA, IDEA and in every area of society. They organize massive resources to sweep the elections of 2000. God help us if they win.

America needs a fresh vision — a forward vision that includes all. unconditionally. We have that vision: individualized empowerment for all. Individualized empowerment: empowerment that is molded to the individual characteristics, to the individual abilities of each person.

We of the disability community have proved absolutely that individualized empowerment can transform the lives of people thought to be physically, mentally and economically hopeless. Personal empowerment has produced miracles in the lives of those few lucky enough to benefit from our pioneer initiatives.

We can't empower all people with psychiatric disabilities until we enlighten and empower ALL Americans. You cannot have islands of authentic freedom and prosperity in an ocean polluted by prejudice and poverty.

The individualized empowerment of every person is the first and only legitimate responsibility of human culture. Now is the time to create that responsible culture. We must empower all to achieve their full potential to govern self and all, to create the best life for self and for all, and to enjoy the security of a life of dignity.

Individualized empowerment. Sheilah Hill defined it well at your Portland Summit: to take responsibility and to take charge of my life. To be able to utilize the abilities I have. To be able to help others and be a contributing member of society. And that's a beautiful statement.

One of the first priorities of the empowerment society will be real rights for all — including people with psychiatric disabilities and psychiatric survivors. We must create and enforce laws that abolish the persecution which we suffer every day in every aspect of life. We must abolish involuntary confinement, physical and psychological abuse, coercion, outpatient commitment, and forced treatment of any kind.

But rights are only the beginning. We must guarantee to each person — with and without a psychiatric disability — the tools to create the good life. I speak of the obvious: quality food, shelter, education, technology, and comprehensive health care, INCLUDING FULL, CONSUMER-CONTROLLED SERVICES FOR PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES. And much more: we must guarantee a society of choice and of reinforcement for positive contributions. WE MUST CREATE A SOCIETY OF PROFOUND LOVE FOR EACH HUMAN LIFE. LOVE, EMPOWERS A THOUSAND TIMES MORE THAN ANY DRUG EVER MADE.

Colleagues, this is a powerful agenda. But can we win against the forces of ancient stigma and billion-dollar politics? Not quickly, not easily, and not simply by appealing to government. We must BECOME GOVERNMENT through elective and appointed office and voluntary action. We must create a politics in which government will be forced to empower. WE must carry the fight to the media and to the people in every community. We must reframe the public dialogue. We must make the empowerment of all the first issue of American politics. The time has come to shout, "NO MORE SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS!" "AMERICA FOR ALL!"

Colleagues, I know that YOU are already good soldiers. But we must increase our tiny army 10 thousand percent. And we can do it. A relatively small constituency of people with HIV-AIDS overcame massive stigma to become a real force. If they can do it, we can do it.

The community of people with psychiatric disabilities and of psychiatric survivors is by far the largest constituency among people with disabilities. There are tens of millions of us. We have members who are geniuses, who are millionaires, who are stars of sports and

entertainment, who are leaders of government, business, science, academia and religion. We have the potential to be one of the most powerful forces in the culture. But it's not going to happen until WE unite and until WE organize.

Colleagues, this is very personal to me. I have suffered depression, still do. My beautiful mother, my only brother and two other members of my family with psychiatric disabilities have taken their own lives rather than face the daily persecution.

Each one of you has experienced atrocity — many far worse than I have. We experience physical and psychological holocaust.

Let us rise above our differences. Let us lift our eyes to the dream. Let us embrace each other in that most profound love for the sacred value of each human life. Let us unite in passionate action. No soldier ever died in a better cause.

Colleagues, the world is watching our movement. The world is watching America. The world will follow what we do. Failure is unthinkable. Get into politics as if your lives depended on it, because they do, and the lives of billions in the 21st century. Solidarity forever! Together, we shall overcome. I love you. Lead on.