

THESIS

“TO BOLDLY GO WHERE EVERYONE ELSE HAS GONE BEFORE”: THE ROAD TO  
ADAPT

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## ABSTRACT

### “TO BOLDLY GO WHERE EVERYONE ELSE HAS GONE BEFORE:” THE ROAD TO ADAPT

During the 1970s, residents of the newly established Atlantis independent living center used civil disobedience tactics to sway the city to provide accessible transportation services. Their strategies worked, and by 1983, Denver had one of the most accessible public transportation systems in the country. After their success, members of Atlantis decided to expand their cause by founding the activist organization American Disabled for Accessible Public Transportation, now American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today (ADAPT), which not only gave disability activists a national platform to draw attention to the issue of inaccessible transportation, but also gave them the opportunity to integrate disabled individuals into a world that denied them access to mainstream services. This story not only illuminates the success that direct action protest had on influencing public policy on a local scale but highlights how this activism empowered activists and members of the disability community by occupying public spaces, therefore challenging the idea that disabled people are unable to advocate on their own behalf and live independently.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the support of numerous people rooting for this story to be told. First, I would like to thank Rachael Storm, *History Colorado's* chief oral historian, for teaching me how to foster a genuine connection with the many narrators who participated in this project, and for creating a space in the archive for those stories to live. I would also like to thank Leisl Carr Childers for guiding me through the intricacies of collaborative research and for teaching me how to make my findings accessible to students and other members of the disability community. To Rosemary Kreston, thank you for not only giving me invaluable feedback on drafts of this project, but also for exposing me to disability culture and inviting me to participate in our community as a scholar-activist. Thank you to Susan Hepburn for encouraging me to engage my research with new audiences and for teaching me how to communicate my ideas to people outside my field. I am also incredibly grateful to Barry Rosenberg, who not only generously shared his story with me, but lent his time to review parts of this project. I owe a special thank you to Jared Orsi for combing through every draft I've sent to him with so much care and for nurturing my voice as a writer over the last several years. Thank you for your unrelenting belief in me and for pushing me harder than any other mentor has. I appreciate our friendship so much and look forward to laughing with you for a long time. Lastly, I would like to share my deepest gratitude to my partner, Josh. Thank you for grounding me with every hug, cup of hot chocolate, and Saturday morning drive. Thank you for helping me untwist every messy sentence until it worked. Thank you for making my life beautiful. You are so special. I love you.

## DEDICATION

*Dedicated to all those institutionalized against their will.*

*We will get you out.*

*Free our people.*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
DEDICATION .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Part I: Heritage House.....	9
Part II: The Kids Fight Back.....	19
Part III: The Lost City of Atlantis.....	25
Part IV: Sue the Pants of ‘Em.....	37
Part V: The Gang of 19.....	41
Part VI: Drilling RTD .....	45
Part VII: The Birth of ADAPT .....	68
Part VIII: ADAPT Since the ADA .....	77
Part IX: Conclusion and Personal Reflections .....	87
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	92



*Figure 1 Bryn Macleod and Brian Macleod lay together in front of a bus during the Gang of 19 protest. Glen Martin, The Denver Post, July 5, 1978.*

## INTRODUCTION

On July 5, 1978, Bryn Macleod, whose name was Renate Rabe at the time, was on the way to a job interview when she suddenly heard a man from the street bark in her direction. When she looked over, she saw him lying on the pavement in front of a city bus. She knew him—his name was Brian Macleod, or Bob Conrad at the time. They went to the same high school together at the Boettcher School for Crippled Children, but they were just acquaintances, if that. She never thought twice about him, but there he was, laying in front of a bus at the intersection of Colfax and Broadway, one of the busiest and intersections in Denver, calling out

her name. Civic Center Park, Colorado's Supreme Court, and the Capitol Building hugged the blockage and cast their shadows as cars clogged up the city's arteries. Drivers became irate and shoved their way through the lane adjacent to the bus that Brian and seventeen other wheelchair users were keeping at a standstill.<sup>1</sup>

Bryn was stunned. Again, Brian shouted, "Get over here!" She couldn't help her curiosity, so she headed over, and Brian gave her a rundown of what was going on. Regional Transportation District (RTD), Denver's public transit organization, had a woefully low number of public buses equipped with wheelchair lifts, and those buses that were accessible were typically in disrepair or were operated by drivers who did not know how to work the lifts. If he and the rest of his gang could not access the buses, then they would make sure the buses couldn't access the road. Again, Brian asked Bryn to stay, but she declined. She was on her way to a job interview, after all. Brian dismissed her excuse and replied, "no you're not!" She smiled. In nothing more than an instant, Bryn reset the trajectory of her life. She laid down next to Brian and the couple didn't budge for over two days. That, Bryn said, was the start of a thirty-five-year long romance. And, as Brian remembers it, it was the first time he got to sleep with his wife.<sup>2</sup>

That wasn't the only friendship forged that day. With the addition of Bryn to the team, the crew became known as the Gang of 19, famous for bringing national attention to the problem of inaccessible transportation and for later founding American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit (ADAPT),<sup>3</sup> the most aggressive disability rights protest organization since the start of the

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<sup>1</sup> Bryn Macleod and Brian Macleod, phone interview by author, Schuyler, Nebraska, September 30, 2021, Disability Activism in Colorado Collection, History Colorado Special Collections, Denver, CO.; Credit to Bill Scarborough for coming up with the phrase, "To Boldly Go Where Everyone Else Has Gone Before."

<sup>2</sup> Bryn Macleod and Brian Macleod, phone interview by author, September 30, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Now American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today (ADAPT)

independent living movement in the early nineteen-sixties. The pan-disability community<sup>4</sup> profoundly reveres the Gang of 19 for their courage of having put their bodies in harm's way. It credits the 1978 protest as being a watershed moment in the fight for accessible transportation, a key pillar of independent living, especially for those who need but do not have access to modified personal vehicles.

Despite these successes, the community's notion that collective activism had a deep effect on expanding the rights of disabled individuals is in tension with the string of political narratives that argue that protest activism was merely reactionary in regards to swaying politicians in Washington, D.C.<sup>5</sup> According to Doris Zames Fleischer and Frieda Zames in their book, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation*, even the championed Section 504 sit-in failed to compel the federal government to honor its promise to protect the civil rights of disabled individuals.<sup>6</sup> Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, which stated that any public entity that received federal funds must make its services and infrastructure accessible, was the first disability focused civil rights legislation ever passed by Congress. Though passed in 1973, the department of Housing, Education, and Welfare (HEW) refused to implement the act due in large part to the financial burden it would impose on organizations subject to compliance. This enraged disabled individuals who were depending on the

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this project, I refer to disability rights activists using identity-first language. I do this to emphasize how these activists regarded their disabilities as a point of pride and a fundamental part of their personhood.

<sup>5</sup> Histories of the disability rights era through the Americans with Disabilities Act default to building stories around the creation and implementation of federal policy, tending to downplay the role of activism in creating change. In *Enabling Acts: The Hidden Story of How the Americans with Disabilities Act Gave the Largest U.S. Minority its Rights*, Lennard J. Davis has notes that although ADAPT was successful at winning policy battles in Denver and similarly creating a muck throughout the country, their protests never created change on a large scale. Lobbyists, on the other hand, did the heavy lifting by pushing through federal laws and civil protections. David Pettinicchio echoes this in *Politics of Empowerment: Disability Rights and the Cycle of American Policy Reform*, stating that "protest did little to directly shape the policy agenda, but agenda-setting and policy making processes shape direct action."

<sup>6</sup> Doris Zames Fleischer and Frieda Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 50-51.

implementation of Section 504 for the expansion of accessible services. So, in 1977, after four years of inaction by the federal government, the activist organization Disability in Action (DIA) decided to draw attention to the issue by occupying the Federal Building in San Francisco. Although there were several sit-ins across the country, they were short-lived. The San Francisco sit-in lasted for twenty-six days and was accompanied by a team of activists, led by Judy Heumann, who traveled to Washington, D.C., to confront Joseph Califano, the Secretary of HEW, and Congress personally.

While members of DIA defiantly maintained their stay in San Francisco and rushed around D.C., James Cherry, a law student at Howard University, quietly and confidently waited on Califano to bend.<sup>7</sup> Unbeknown to most, Cherry, who accused Howard of discriminating against him due to his disability, had just won a lawsuit in U.S. District Court against HEW for the department's failure to enforce the 504 regulations. Federal enforcement was inevitable. When Califano finally caved, he was primarily responding to the court's legal coercion. The congressional hearing, building occupation, food strikes, and media coverage associated with the sit-in were secondary influences.<sup>8</sup> As Leonard Davis writes, when it comes to passing and implementing federal policy, lawyers and lobbyists are the real activists.<sup>9</sup>

But crises of accessibility discrimination are lived, and policy alone cannot promise compliance. Much of 1960s-era disability history concerns building a traditional political framework as a means of assigning political and academic credibility to the movement. Consequently, authors rarely fully engage with small-scale community stories, where change

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<sup>7</sup> James Fleischer and Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement*, 50-51. Judy Heumann and Kristen Joiner, *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 133-46.

<sup>8</sup> James Fleischer and Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement*, 50-51

<sup>9</sup> Leonard J. Davis, *Enabling Acts: The Hidden Story of How the Americans with Disabilities Act Gave the Largest US Minority Its Rights*, Reprint edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 15-17.

was targeted on a granular level and the diversity and rate of activist accomplishments swelled. This was particularly the case in Denver, where this brand of activism was central to compelling the city's transit system to provide comprehensive accessible services. By 1983, during a time when Section 504 enforcement remained murky and seven years before the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990, all of Denver's buses were equip with wheelchair lifts, making it one of the most accessible systems in the country. But more importantly, by participating in radical acts of civil disobedience, members of the Gang of 19 and ADAPT played a crucial role in, as one *New York Times* reporter wrote, "shattering stereotypes of how meek and pliant 'cripples' are supposed to act, stereotypes often held by many disabled people themselves."<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, the story of Denver disability politics illustrates that the impact of this kind of activism was not limited to creating local change, but rather had a much greater effect on empowering local activists and disabled people within their community.

Because there was so little written about ADAPT and the Atlantis independent living center, where the idea for ADAPT was conceived, the majority of this narrative is built upon primary sources, most of which are either newspaper articles pulled from ADAPT's online museum, or documents featured in the Wade and Molly Blank Collection at Denver Public Library. To fill in the remaining cracks in this story, I also partnered with *History Colorado*, Colorado's state historical society, to facilitate a series of oral histories with several veteran activists, who either lived through the movement's formative years or have an intimate knowledge of the disability scene in Denver over the last few decades. The interviews featured in this narrative include those of Bryn Macleod and Brian Macleod, Barry Rosenberg, who was a

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<sup>10</sup> Steven A. Homes, "Militant Advocates for Disabled Revel in Their Role as Agitators," *The New York Times*, October 10, 1991, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/875/search/917>.

co-founder of Atlantis independent living center, LaTonya Reeves, a prolific ADAPT activist and survivor of institutionalization, Julie Reiskin, the director of the Colorado Cross-Disability Coalition, Gil Casarez, who began protesting in Los Angeles in 1985, Tim Thornton, who became the director of Atlantis in 2002, and Dawn Russell, another survivor of institutionalization and organizer of dozens of ADAPT protests in Colorado and the rest of the country, including an occupation of Colorado Senator Cory Gardner's office in 2017 to protest Congress's attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act. In addition to placing the disability rights and independent living movement within the historical cannon of civil rights protest movements generally, I hope this project helps current and aspiring disability rights activists feel closer to their community like it has done for me.

This narrative chronicles the birth of Denver's direct action movement at Heritage House nursing home in the early 1970s to the inception of ADAPT a decade later. Part I provides context for the institutionalization of children in state schools throughout Colorado prior to the 1970s and discusses the process by which the state began funneling them into nursing homes after the press and governor's office publicized the widespread abuse that residents regularly endured by their caretakers. It also introduces the subsequent creation of a youth wing at Heritage House, a nursing home in Lakewood, Colorado, by activist Wade Blank to accommodate the influx of children and teenagers leaving state schools. Part II talks about how children and teenagers at the youth wing began to organize protests to draw attention to the lack of funding and poor conditions still prevalent in nursing homes. Part III discusses Wade Blank's and his fellow activist Barry Rosenberg's successful efforts to found an independent living center called Atlantis, which was designed to provide disabled individuals in the state services so they could move out of nursing homes and live independently. Part IV examines how the

residents at Atlantis began to turn their focus toward drawing attention to the lack of accessible transportation in the city of Denver by suing the city for its discriminatory policies. Part V and VI explores how the residents at Atlantis began to organize direct action protests to pressure the Regional Transportation District, Denver’s transportation system, to purchase new buses with wheelchair lifts, and highlights the impact that the Gang of 19 had on kickstarting the movement. Part VII subsequently introduces the group’s decision to found ADAPT, which not only gave disability activists a national platform to draw attention to the issue of inaccessible transportation, but also gave them the opportunity to integrate disabled individuals into a world that denied them access to mainstream services. Section VIII and the conclusion discusses what ADAPT has done since the passage of the ADA in 1990 and includes a personal reflection regarding the impact of Atlantis and ADAPT’s activism.

Over two decades after the Gang of 19 took over the streets of Denver, Brian would also come to reflect on how liberating his work was. It happened during a commute, while the bus he was riding on rattled across Denver’s city grid. He would sometimes think back to when he was a teenager pining for the chance to get into a little trouble. Unlike many other teens, he didn’t have a car. But back then, riding city buses was also out of the question. As a wheelchair user, he was either refused entry because there were no lifts to get him onto the bus, or, as he recalled in 1977, he had to suffer the embarrassment of taking minutes to climb up the bus steps due to the pain in his legs.<sup>11</sup> It was socially and psychologically degrading.<sup>12</sup> He thought back to all the protests and all the adventures that he and Bryn bravely joined to change it all. Even by 1983, almost a full decade before the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed—and in no small

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<sup>11</sup> Claire Cooper, “Handicapped Seek Ruling on RTD Service,” *Rocky Mountain News*, Friday 2, 1977, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/480/search/930>.

<sup>12</sup> Claire Cooper, “Handicapped Seek Ruling on RTD Service,” *Rocky Mountain News*.

part due to the couple's activism—all of Denver's buses had lifts. Brian could finally travel wherever he desired.

And because he commuted often, he had the privilege of watching other wheelchair users take advantage of the public transit system, too. Once while riding a bus, he ran into a teenager whom he recalled being about fifteen years old. The teen was glowing. Curious, Brian asked the boy why he was grinning. According to Brian, the boy replied “this is the first time I've ever been able to be out on my own without my mom taking me somewhere. This is a sense of freedom I've never had. I can finally direct my own life.”<sup>13</sup> The boy, who had no idea who Brian was, was living the life Brian always wished for. Now, Brian was glowing.

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<sup>13</sup> Noel Black and Tyler Hill, interview with Bryn Macleod and Brian Macleod, *Lost Highways*, podcast audio, March 2020-January 2021, <https://www.historycolorado.org/lost-highways-season-2>.

## PART I: HERITAGE HOUSE

Even before the Gang of 19 took on Broadway and Colfax, Denver was a hotspot for hellraising. It all began when a few punk teenagers, an ex-horticulturalist, and an excommunicated hippie priest stuffed themselves in a purple and white VW van to go watch a concert. Several times a month between 1973 and 1974, the lot would sneak out to the Denver Coliseum to watch a show. Before parking, Barry Rosenberg, who had just quit his job at a tree nursery after serving for Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), and the ex-reverend, Wade Blank, would pull up right up to the front doors of the concert hall. The two would hop out, slide the doors open, and prop up a ramp between the van and the concrete. Six-or-so Dead Heads in chairs would then roll out onto the pavement, stabilizing themselves onto sweet, sweet ground after having rattled against each other inside the van. Sometimes Blank got lucky and smooth-talked the staff enough to get everyone in for free. The two were so successful at shuttling the teens to shows that some would pass on going out due to rock-concert fatigue, opting instead to hang back at the Heritage House nursing home in Lakewood, Colorado, where they and about sixty other residents ranging from the ages of ten to eighteen were also institutionalized.<sup>14</sup>

While it might seem odd that a nursing home designed to institutionalize elderly patients was exploding with an influx of young people, it was a typical trend of the 1970s. Due to a reallocation of funding and bad press, many state institutions and residential schools that housed young disabled people nation-wide began siphoning off their inmates to private institutions. The abuses state residential schools inflicted on their residents began to surface publicly during the

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<sup>14</sup> Barry Rosenberg, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, September 1, 2021, Disability Activism in Colorado Collection, History Colorado Special Collections, Denver, CO.

mid-1960s, beginning with Robert Kennedy's report on Rome and Willowbrook State Schools in New York in 1965. After his visit, Kennedy reported to the New York State Legislature his observations of seemingly abandoned residents shuffle around, many times half naked, smothered in their own feces and urine.<sup>15</sup> In 1972, reporter Geraldo Rivera released a TV documentary exposé that brought the conditions at Willowbrook to national attention. Exposé after exposé at other state schools, including at Sonoma State School in California, the Lincoln State School in Illinois, and Belchertown State School in Massachusetts, revealed similar (if not identical) conditions. The resulting public pressure forced lawmakers to scramble and find a way to transfer residents to a safer living environment.<sup>16</sup> Because institutionalization had been the standard for disability care since the nineteenth-century, mainstreaming disabled people into their communities likely did not register as a viable solution. Instead, state and federal lawmakers designed the newly minted Medicaid program to pay for resident relocation into private institutions like nursing homes.<sup>17</sup>

Colorado's state institutions were no exception. In 1949, a public debate bubbled up over whether it was more appropriate for the Grand Junction school to kill or sterilize those deemed as "hopeless[ly]" insane.<sup>18</sup> When a journalist infiltrated Colorado's other state school, Ridge, as a resident two years later, they reported being brutalized and witnessing other residents being tied

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<sup>15</sup> James W. Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in the United States*, Second Edition (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 244.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph P. Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 161.

<sup>17</sup> Wade Blank, interview by Sylvia Danovitch, Denver, Colorado, November 16, 1992, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Oral History Project, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Box 1, Folder 15, Denver Public Library, Denver, CO.

<sup>18</sup> "Milt Andrus Urges Death for Hopeless Insane in Mental Hospital at Grand Junction," [*Denver?*] *Post*, 1949, Western Subject Index, Denver Public Library, <https://digital.denverlibrary.org/digital/collection/p15330coll27/id/17325/rec/19>; "Sterilization, Not Mercy Death, Urged for Mental Defectives at Grand Junction," [*Denver?*] *Post*, 1949, Western Subject Index, Denver Public Library, <https://digital.denverlibrary.org/digital/collection/p15330coll27/id/17325/rec/19>.

up in chains. By 1960, the reputations of Ridge and Grand Junction became so synonymous with abuse and destitution that the Governor Stephen McNichols appointed a committee to investigate charges of mistreatment at the schools.<sup>19</sup> By the early 1970s, the Grand Junction school was deemed so decrepit that the Citizens Public Interest Research Group (COPIRG) recommended the state shut the institution down.<sup>20</sup> While lawmakers, the press, and parents of institutionalized children worked to condemn Ridge and Grand Junction, the process of removing children from the state schools into nursing homes picked up steam. One such home in Lakewood named Heritage House tried to address the unprecedented influx of disabled children and teenagers by creating a youth wing.

Those in the disability community remember Wade Blank, who died unexpectedly in 1993 after trying to save his son from drowning at a beach in Todos Santos, Mexico, as a radical, but in truth, he began school at McCormick Theology Seminary in Chicago with a conservative bent.<sup>21</sup> His early years at the school were spent juggling academics with volunteering for Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign. His perspective only shifted in 1965 when his classmate, Alexander Barton, jokingly accused him of being racist if he didn't travel with him to Selma, Alabama, to march with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>22</sup> Blank took Barton up on the dare and tagged along. Unbeknownst to Blank, the trip would not only transform his sense of justice

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<sup>19</sup> "Committee Appointed by Governor McNichols Investigating charges of Mistreatment," [*Denver?*] *Post*, 1949, Western Subject Index, Denver Public Library, <https://digital.denverlibrary.org/digital/collection/p15330coll27/id/18140/rec/4>.

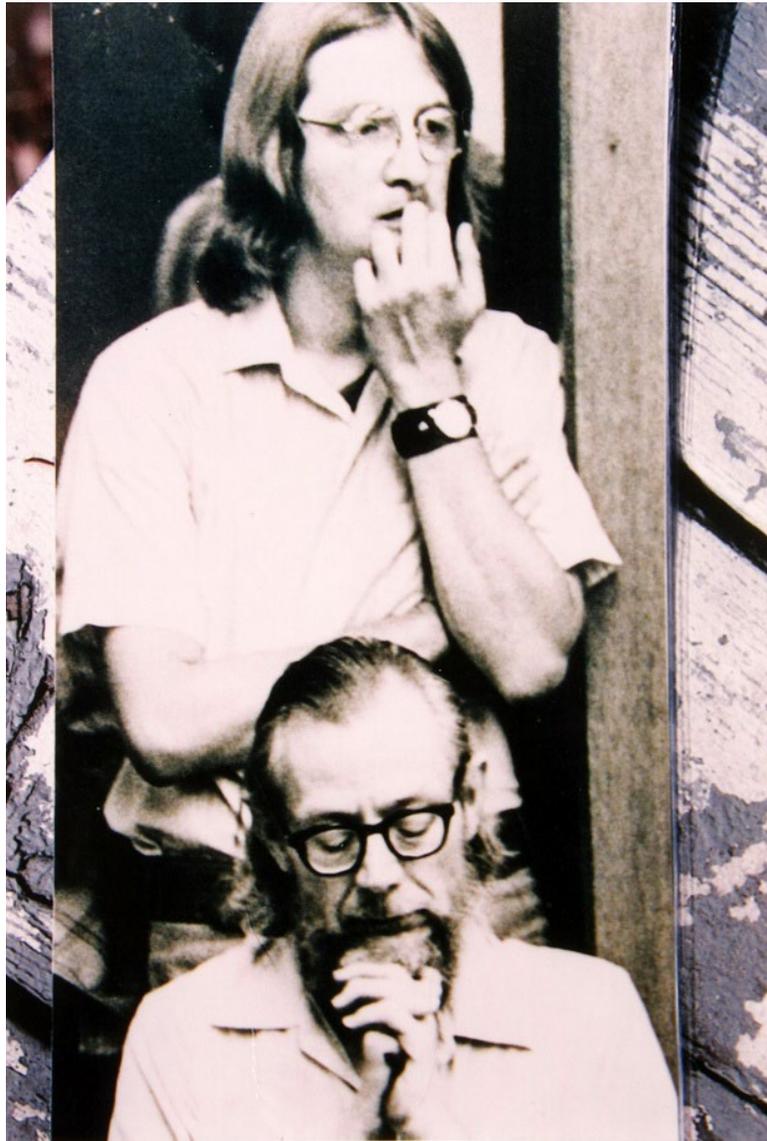
<sup>20</sup> "Citizens Public Interest Research Group Urges Shutdown," [*The Denver?*] *Post*, *Rocky Mountain News*, August 21, 1973, Western Subject Index, Denver Public Library, <https://digital.denverlibrary.org/digital/collection/p15330coll27/id/18036/rec/44.;>

"Inflation Threatening Completion of \$2 Million Building Project at the School," [*The Denver?*] *Post*, April 8, 1973, Western Subject Index, Denver Public Library, <https://digital.denverlibrary.org/digital/collection/p15330coll27/id/18181/rec/35.>

<sup>21</sup> Barry Rosenberg, interview by author, September 1, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Wade Blank, interview by Sylvia Danovitch, Denver, Colorado, November 16, 1992, 1-2.

and role as a community minister, but his identity as a leader, as he'd later emphasize his status within the disability rights movement by comparing himself to Martin Luther King, Jr.



*Figure 2 Wade Blank stands behind Glenn Kopp, who would become the co-director of Atlantis, courtesy of the ADAPT Museum.*

His activism blossomed after he moved to Akron, Ohio, in 1966, where he began using his status as a minister to protest the war in Vietnam. The anti-war movement was personal to Blank. In 1959, his brother and naval pilot, Lieutenant Junior Grade Doug Arthur Blank, drowned during a routine flight from the USS Midway to the Marine Corps. Air Facility in Iwakuni, Japan, when a storm overtook the planes. The downpour caused an engine blowout, and it was presumed that Doug drowned after he and his plane were swept up by the ocean.<sup>23</sup> The death was needless, and while Blank never directly cited his brother's death as a cause for his activism, he was still badgering the Navy for more details on his brother's death over twenty-five years later.<sup>24</sup>

He started his activist work by founding a bookstore and church-network to support other disaffected priests called "Alice's Restaurant," after the Arlo Guthrie song (1967). Just a year before the Kent State massacre in 1970, Blank doubled-downed on his politics by opening his church doors to the university's Students for a Democratic Society, who were banned from holding meetings on campus for protesting the campus Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) and defense research—despite protests from his mostly white, middle-class suburban congregation. The fallout between him and his congregation caused the Presbytery of Cleveland to remove Blank from the parish and strip him of his priesthood.<sup>25</sup> Blank tried to recover his momentum by directing an anti-poverty program under the Office of Economic Opportunity aimed at installing plumbing and water access to three-hundred families in Twinsburg, Ohio.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Western Union Telegram notifying Jan and Arthur Blank of Douglas Arthur's Death, October 5, 1959, box 1, folder 1, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.  
Unnamed Soldier to Jan Blank, October 11, 1959, box 1, folder 1, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>24</sup> Correspondence between Wade Blank and Jane Healy and Sen. Gary Hart regarding Freedom of Information Act Request, May 29, 1985 box 1, folder 1, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>25</sup> "Church is Closing in S.D.S. Dispute: Minister in Ohio Who Aided Student Loses Post," *The New York Times*, June 15, 1969.

<sup>26</sup> Wade Blank's Resume, box 1, folder 7, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

Unfortunately, likely due to the burnt out from losing Alice's Restaurant, his parish, and offering spiritual support to those who lived through the Kent State massacre, Blank left the project incomplete—a choice that Rosenberg indicated that would haunt Blank forever.<sup>27</sup> In 1970, Blank and his wife, Molly, decided to escape to Denver. Blank recalled picking Denver because it was the most bland, uncontroversial, and “apolitical” city they could think of. A city where, they naively thought, they could live quietly, and avoid trouble.

As Blank and his wife settled into town, it didn't take long for him to find his crowd. Just months after the move, Blank found half a dozen fellow ex-priests shooting the breeze at a bingo night. As he chatted with them over the noise of scooting chairs and shuffling bingo cards, he discovered they were all nursing home administrators-- and that most homes in Denver were run by ex-clergy.<sup>28</sup> One of them, Tom O'Halloran, ribbed Blank by telling him that if he wanted back into the church, he could make him an orderly. Blank recalled fondly that “[it] was the joke, you know. They knew I was a minister, so we all put it in terms of like a Jesuit priest, doing his mission.” A year later in 1971, O'Halloran called Blank with a job offer. Heritage House was bursting at the seams with new young people flooding through their doors. “You're young, you're hip,” Blank recalled O'Halloran saying over the phone. “Could you start a youth wing for us?” So, Blank started a youth wing.<sup>29</sup>

Barry Rosenberg hopped in on the job shortly after. He also saw himself as an activist, having started his career as a Volunteer in Service to America (VISTA) in 1966. He was trained in Chicago and served in New Jersey and Houston, Texas before moving to Denver with his

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<sup>27</sup> Wade Blank, interview by Sylvia Danovitch, Denver, Colorado, November 16, 1992, 12. Barry Rosenberg, interview by author, September 1, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Wade Blank, interview by Sylvia Danovitch, Denver, Colorado, November 16, 1992, 15.

<sup>29</sup> Wade Blank, interview by Sylvia Danovitch, Denver, Colorado, November 16, 1992, 15. Full quote: “‘You're young. You're hip. Could you start a youth wing for us?’ So I started a youth wing.”

pregnant wife. Just like Blank, the two moved to Denver to live at a slower pace, away from the twists, turns, and constraints of VISTA organizing. Rosenberg was looking forward to living simply and becoming a horticulturist, but his plans shifted after his wife got a job at Heritage House and met Wade Blank. She was eager for them to meet since both were once upon a time involved in civil rights activism and somewhat disaffected by their experiences. And she was right—the two hit it off and Blank quickly hired Rosenberg as another youth wing specialist.

Blank and Rosenberg tirelessly worked to create an environment in the youth wing that encouraged independent living and choice—and some youth wing residents thrived because it was such a supportive community. Rosenberg recalls how he and Blank did everything they could to make the residents' lives as normal as possible. They hosted pizza parties, coordinated camping trips for the younger residents, organized wine nights for the older members of the youth wing and the other adults who lived at the home, and even let some residents keep cats and dogs around the home. The two, however, often faced resistance from the nursing home's administration, in part because the average age of residents in the youth wing was about twenty-years-old (although there were some residents who were as young as ten and as old as thirty-five), but the services the home was legally required to provide were tailored to meet the needs of their elderly residents.



*Figure 3 Youth wing resident at Heritage House smokes a pipe, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.*

Blank and Rosenberg had difficulty resisting the systemic troubles ingrained in institutionalization. Growing up in a nursing home meant losing one's autonomy: being subject to constant surveillance, not having any say what care a person receives or which attendant they received it from, and being denied choice in ordinary situations, like meal selection.<sup>30</sup> When Beverly Beckman, a Jefferson County nursing home inspector, visited the home in 1974, she

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<sup>30</sup> Heritage House Menu, box 1, folder 17, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

classified the sanitation in the wing as “deplorable.” Beckman also, however, pointedly noted that the orderlies weren’t entirely at fault. Some of the teenagers, for example, were refusing to let attendants enter their rooms so they could maintain some semblance of privacy.<sup>31</sup> Still, there were some instances of neglect. One resident, for instance, complained about how his attendants would attach his catheter incorrectly, writing “Does water run up a hill? No—How can a catheter work if the drainage bag is higher than the kidneys?... Please think and be ‘Carefall.’”<sup>32</sup>

The house also had an outstanding problem of high staff turnover due to the insultingly small contributions the state made to subsidize the staff’s salaries. The results meant that new staff were unfamiliar with the youth’s needs.<sup>33</sup> Other members of the youth wing accused the orderlies of punishing them by turning off or confiscating their mobility aids and neglecting to clothe, bathe, or dress bedsores.<sup>34</sup> Even Mike Smith, the wing’s beloved poet and pothead, found himself caught up in the crossfire. What happened was a bit fuzzy-- while Blank recalled that an attendant beat Smith, who was terminally ill with muscular dystrophy, with a flashlight, Rosenberg remembered hearing that the attendant only threatened him. Regardless, withstanding abuse was just a part of living in the home.

Residents also complained about the youth wing being woefully underfunded. In an appeal for private donations, one resident, Daryll Clark, half joked in the *Heritage House Herald* newsletter that the wing’s Coke machine was their greatest source of outside funding.<sup>35</sup> What

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<sup>31</sup> “The Heritage House Nursing Schism,” Victoria Lohf, p.4, box 1, folder 17, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>32</sup> Heritage House Shared Diary: Property of the Youth Wing, Youth Wing Residents, box 1, folder 18, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>33</sup> “Wheel-Chair Group Gets Capitol Sympathy: Not Far Enough,” Excerpt from *The Denver Post* in *Heritage House Herald*, box 1, folder 18, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Dedmon, “Late Poet was Plaintiff in Nursing Home Lawsuit,” *Rocky Mountain News*, March 22, 1976, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/411/search/52&slideshow=+play-false>.

<sup>35</sup> “Statement on the Youth Wing,” Daryll Clark, *The Heritage House Herald*, November 1973, box 1, folder 18, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

stung the most was that the home was turning a profit, even despite the neglect.<sup>36</sup> Blank and Rosenberg tried to fight the system by trying to make the wing a transitional stop between institutionalization and assisted home care—a task that proved near impossible because the central administration resisted dropping patients. Since the home’s Medicaid contribution was dependent on the cost each resident incurred per year,<sup>37</sup> the most efficient way for Heritage House to make a profit was to keep a full house of residents and artificially inflate the cost spent on each person in the home.<sup>38</sup> The lack of money created tension between those, like Blank and Rosenberg, who felt it necessary for the home to fund activities for the youth population, against the orderlies, who were burnt out, swamped with to-dos, and were only trained in geriatric care, and who regarded the extra consideration as frivolous. Ultimately, although Blank and Rosenberg tried to fight institutionalization by organizing social activities like concert outings, they came to recognize that no number of excursions could ever make up for the lack of privacy, lack of choice, and lack of autonomy the residents had growing up in a nursing home.

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<sup>36</sup> Wade Blank, interview by Sylvia Danovitch, Denver, Colorado, November 16, 1992.

<sup>37</sup> Frank E. Moss and Val J. Halamandaris, *Too Old, Too Sick, Too Bad: Nursing Homes in America* (Germantown, MD, 1977), 141-43.

<sup>38</sup> Frank E. Moss and Val J. Halamandaris, *Too Old, Too Sick, Too Bad: Nursing Homes in America* (Germantown, MD, 1977), 141-43.

The Independent Living Movement in the Denver Area Denver, pg 1, box 1, folder 18, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.; Wade Blank, interview by Sylvia Danovitch, Denver, Colorado, November 16, 1992, 15

## PART II: THE KIDS FIGHT BACK

The slow simmer of resentment started to boil by the youth wing's second birthday as the quality of life deteriorated further and those in the wing began to recognize the systemic issues pinning them down,<sup>39</sup> Several residents, including some future members of the Gang of 19, began to mobilize politically. One of the first moves the group made was to create a club called Mobility Among the Disabled. Out of MAD grew, another, albeit short lived, organization called The Organization of Disabled Adults and Youth (TODAY), which would focus on implementing the issues discussed in MAD through civil disobedience and lobbying.<sup>40</sup>

Founded in 1974, TODAY's first mission was to convince then governor John Vanderhoof to improve conditions in nursing homes by increasing state contributions to the salaries of nursing home orderlies. They also came with a secondary goal of convincing the governor to end an employee strike at the Colorado State Hospital in Pueblo by similarly providing state funds to supplement and raise their pay. This, TODAY argued, would decrease employee burnout, and increase nurse retention, therefore improving the care the residents and patients throughout the state received.<sup>41</sup>

Although it is unclear whether TODAY tried to obtain a meeting with Vanderhoof through conventional channels or not, they must have decided that doing so would either be moot

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<sup>39</sup> "Alter Nursing Home Rules," Unknown Publication, 1975, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/415/category/14>.

<sup>40</sup> Barry Rosenberg, "Historical Perspective of the Independent Living Movement with an Emphasis on Colorado," 2012, Personal Records.; Barry Rosenberg, interview by author, September 1, 2021.; Barret Shaw, Mary Johnson, and Tom Olin, *To Ride the Public's Buses: The Fight that Built a Movement*, (Louisville: Avocado Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>41</sup> Rykken Johnson, "Wheel-Chair Group Gets Capitol Sympathy," *The Denver Post*, August 2, 1974, as featured in *Heritage House Herald*, 1 no. 10, September 1974, box 1, folder 17, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

or take too long because they instead opted to occupy the steps of the State Capitol to appeal for an immediate meeting.<sup>42</sup> About two-dozen wheelchair users in their teens and early twenties congregated at the steps. Darrel Clark was also present but laid on his stomach in a Stryker frame bed due to complications from a surgery that fused his lower spine.<sup>43</sup> The occupiers waited two days at the steps for the governor to return from the Western Governors' Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where they planned to block him on his way into the building and demand answers. When Vanderhoof returned, he had no choice but to address the crowd. He listened solemnly for about forty minutes, offered his sympathies, and provided a vague statement about how the state had "come a long way in the last eight to ten years, but [hasn't] come far enough or fast enough," ultimately promising he'd pay more attention to issues of the disabled.<sup>44</sup> The group, who hoped that Vanderhoof might become a champion for their cause, listened with stern faces, clearly agitated by his empty promises. Blank, who attended the protest, told *The Denver Post* that he was not "enthusiastic about the chances Vanderhoof [would] support 'a good medical program.'"<sup>45</sup>

TODAY, of course, was not the only organization demonstrating to sway policy makers, although it is not likely that they drew strategies and inspiration from other groups throughout the country before executing their own stunt. Demonstrating did not become a popular tool in the disability rights and independent living movement until the 1970s. Even Ed Roberts, one of the movement's most lauded activists credited for founding the nation's first-ever independent living center in Berkeley, California, in 1972 (and known for exercising his advocacy through political

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<sup>42</sup> Rykken Johnson, "Wheel-Chair Group Gets Capitol Sympathy," *The Denver Post*.

<sup>43</sup> "Handicap' lies in for Medicaid," *Rocky Mountain News*, August 2, 1974, as featured in *Heritage House Herald*, 1 no. 10, September 1974, box 1, folder 17, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>44</sup> Rykken Johnson, "Wheel-Chair Group Gets Capitol Sympathy," *The Denver Post*.

<sup>45</sup> Rykken Johnson, "Wheel-Chair Group Gets Capitol Sympathy," *The Denver Post*.

strategizing rather than direct action organizing), planned a small-scale demonstration at Sproul Hall on the University of California, Berkeley's, campus. The goal was to draw media attention to the Department of Rehabilitation's antagonistic behavior toward accommodating university students in 1969.<sup>46</sup> Though Roberts participated in demonstrations organized by other movements out of solidarity, he soon stepped back, realizing that his most powerful activism was aimed to change the system from within. He began by creating the Physically Disabled Student Program (PDSP) as a mechanism to make Berkeley's campus accessible, repeated this tactic again in 1976 when he was appointed as the director of California's Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, and yet again when he co-founded the World Institute on Disability, a non-profit public policy research group, with Judy Heumann and Joan Leon in 1983.<sup>47</sup> His career trajectory was indicative of trends in the disability rights and independent living movements.

The biggest trigger for the wave of protests in the early 1970s, however, was President Richard Nixon's veto of the Rehabilitation Act of 1972, which first introduced Section 504. After the veto, members of the organization Disability in Action (DIA), led by activist Judy Heumann, swarmed the streets in front of the federal building in Manhattan and Nixon's campaign headquarters on Madison Avenue, where they halted traffic for an hour.<sup>48</sup> Regrettably, Disability in Action's demonstration garnered little media attention, let alone did anything to catch the Nixon administration's eye.

One demonstration that drew greater attention to Nixon's neglect, however, was the President's Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped's occupation of the Lincoln

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<sup>46</sup> Scot Danforth, "Becoming the Rolling Quads: Disability Politics at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1960s," *History of Education Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (November 2018): 528-31.

<sup>47</sup> Danforth, "Becoming the Rolling Quads," 528-31.

<sup>48</sup> Fred Pelka, *What We Have Done: An Oral History of the Disability Rights Movement* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 188-89.

Monument. The committee, which was known for its community cross-coalition building and yearly meetings in Washington D.C. since 1948. The goal of this committee was to highlight the accomplishments of notable disabled people and employers of disabled individuals and broke its conservative stature as a mainstay networking organization to stir the pot and draw attention to the injustice of Nixon’s veto. After their first demonstration in 1972, the committee continued to rally the year after by directing about a hundred and fifty of their conference attendees to march down Connecticut Avenue.<sup>49</sup> Despite the possible national coverage and of this event, however, the youth wing’s newsletter—and guide to protest events—never referenced the rally. It’s more likely that the youth wing group’s occupation bubbled up from personal frustration and lived experience rather than being a copy-cat event.

But did TODAY’s civic engagement achieve anything? Historians including Richard K. Scotch, Leonard Davis, Doris Zames-Fleischer, and Frieda Zames are quick to point out that Disability in Action and the President’s Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped, which targeted national issues, never directly swayed policy makers into passing or modifying any sort of legislation. In the case of the committee, for instance, Scotch emphasizes that “all of those interviewed from the House and Senate committee staffs provide the same account of the genesis of Section 504—that it was an initiative of liberal congressional staff and not done at the request, suggestion, or demand of outside groups.” Further, Scotch quotes Nick Edes, a staffer for New Jersey Senator Harrison Williams, who went so far as to claim that the Senate staff were “the Martin Luther Kings of the disability movements on Capitol Hill,” not those who ever marched or demonstrated.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Richard Scotch, *From Good Will to Civil Rights: Transforming Federal Disability Policy*, 1st edition (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 56-58.

<sup>50</sup> Scotch, *From Good Will to Civil Rights*, 56-57.



*Figure 4 Bill Peters, "Protesters Cross Intersection at Colfax Ave. and Sherman St. En Route to Capitol," The Denver Post, July 31, 1974.*

Compared to these instances, however, TODAY's occupation was not a complete failure. Finally, members of the youth wing were moving past trying to affect change internally, within the house. They began to recognize that because the problems they faced were systemic, they had to draw attention to inequities and attack the greater system by embarrassing those politicians, programs, and corporate entities who stood in the way of change. Nothing could whip up bad press faster than neglecting a crowd of disabled people sitting outside the Capitol

Building, or forcing their removal, for that matter. It was a strategy in which they used their bodies to both create discomfort among their targets and normalize their presence in public—a tactic their successors would use time and time again in years to come. Ultimately, their plan forced Vanderhoof’s hand. Although he might only have paid lip service to TODAY, their demonstration prompted a direct response from the powerful politician and coverage by a sizable news outlet, the *Denver Post*, which had never happened before.<sup>51</sup> What might have been considered a flop on a national scale was not so much of a defeat at home. TODAY was onto something.

Unfortunately, TODAY’s days were numbered, and the organization fell apart shortly after the Vanderhoof demonstration. But as many organizations, including Disability in Action and American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities increasingly turned to litigation to bolster the effectiveness of their national advocacy, the youth wing’s graduates, who thus far had little guidance in political maneuvering, would double-down and fine-tune their approach under the leadership of Barry Rosenberg and especially Wade Blank, who soon became the movement’s charismatic leader.

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<sup>51</sup> “Protesters Cross Intersection at Colfax Ave. and Sherman St. En Route to Capitol,” *The Denver Post*, July 31, 1974, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/448/search/913f>.

### PART III: THE LOST CITY OF ATLANTIS

Although the two all but swore off activism after their initial moves to Denver, Blank and Rosenberg's itch to organize began to return after their frustrating experience working at Heritage House. The two recognized that though those in the youth wing were incensed and prepared to lash out against the system, the environment of the nursing home inherently restricted their right to freely assemble and leave the home to demonstrate or lobby legislators. When in 1975, for instance, the young adults still left at Heritage House traveled to the state legislature to communicate the lack of individualized care for youths incarcerated within the nursing home system, they tearily shared some of the intimidation tactics the home used to prevent their attendance, including withholding timecards from the staff members who transported the residents to the meeting.<sup>52</sup> Still early in his career, representative Wellington Webb, who chaired the House Committee on Health, Environment, Welfare, and Institutions and would later in 1991 become the Mayor of Denver and ally to the cause for accessibility following the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, appeared stunned and outraged, promising the group that the administration's actions would be dealt with.<sup>53</sup> No clear plan, however, was developed. The best solution to freeing the residents of the wing, Blank and Rosenberg figured, would be to evacuate the house. So, the two hatched a plan to establish a completely sovereign living space for disabled folks in Denver called Atlantis Independent Living Community, named

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<sup>52</sup> "Alter Nursing Home Rules," Atlantis Independent Publication, 1975, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/415/category/14>.

<sup>53</sup> "Alter Nursing Home Rules," Atlantis Independent Publication.; Brynn Macleod and Brian Macleod, phone interview by author, Schuyler, Nebraska, September 30, 2021, Disability Activism in Colorado Collection, History Colorado Special Collections, Denver, CO.

such, according to Rosenberg, as an allegory for the “plight of persons with disabilities as being lost in the system.”<sup>54</sup>

The plan for Atlantis was conceived by Blank in 1974, though the community would not become a reality until 1975 after Blank took a leave of absence from Heritage House and Rosenberg resigned all together. In order to secure funding and political support from the city of Denver, the two contacted staff from Model Cities, a Great Society era program initiated by President Lyndon Johnson through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Although Model Cities usually focused on extinguishing poverty by providing jobs, civics training, and political power to racial minorities in urban spaces,<sup>55</sup> Blank and Rosenberg were able to convince two of the project’s staffers that disabled people in Denver should also be served by the anti-poverty program. The first staffer, Ingo Antonitsch, who had lost a few fingers and a leg during World War II by fighting on behalf of the Germans, used his combined sway as a staffer and first director of the city’s Commission on the Disabled to gain the support of others, one of whom was Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder, who in turn lobbied Denver Mayor William McNichols for a political endorsement.<sup>56</sup> The second, Steve Campbell, crucially wrote up a HUD grant on behalf of Blank and Rosenberg in 1976, which made it possible to employ full time attendants for clients in the community.<sup>57</sup> Governor Dick Lamm, who visited Heritage House in 1974 to gain the support of elderly registered voters and witnessed firsthand the deplorable conditions of the nursing home, also became an early ally and appointed Hank Foley

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<sup>54</sup> Barry Rosenberg, “Historical Perspective of the Independent Living Movement with an Emphasis on Colorado,” 2012, Personal Records, 3.

<sup>55</sup> Amanda Wallace, and Bret A. Weber, “Revealing the Empowerment Revolution: A Literature Review of the model Cities Program,” *Journal of Urban History* 38, no. 1 (2012): 174.

<sup>56</sup> Patricia Schroeder, Congressional Endorsement of the Atlantis Community Proposal (Washington D.C.: Congress of the United States, January 27, 1975), ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/420/search/921>.

<sup>57</sup> Barry Rosenberg, interview by author, September 1, 2021.

at the recommendation of Congressman Tim Wirth, another powerful Heritage House ally, as the executive director of the Colorado Department of Social Services (now the department of Health Care Policy and Financing). Foley helped the two obtain eight fully accessible housing units in the Las Casitas housing project in Denver at the corner of 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Federal Boulevard.<sup>58</sup>



*Figure 5 Left to Right - Ingo Antonitsch, Exec Director Denver Commission on the Disabled, Nan Campbell, first Chairperson of Atlantis, Barry Rosenberg, co-founder of Atlantis and founder of HAIL and Personal Assistance Services of Colorado (PASCO), Glen Kopp, co-Exec Director of Atlantis, courtesy of Barry Rosenberg.*

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<sup>58</sup> Barry Rosenberg, interview by author, September 1, 2021.

In 1975, Atlantis also received a grant from HUD to facilitate a needs assessment to get an idea of how many disabled people there were in the area and what their needs were. The needs assessment was a collaborative project, and Rosenberg, who took charge of the initiative, worked closely with other professionals, including the sociology department at Denver University, to produce a four-hundred-and-fifty-page report that would later be used to obtain more local federal funding. Although Atlantis knew of other burgeoning independent living centers in the country, neither Blank nor Rosenberg engaged with other centers until 1975, when Rosenberg stumbled across Berkeley's center in his research.

After learning about Berkeley Center for Independent Living, Rosenberg, Brian Macleod, and Carolyn Finnell, another member of the Gang of 19, immediately visited Berkeley to take notes on Atlantis's predecessor. It was everything Rosenberg had dreamed of. He saw quadriplegic and blind individuals working together to go white water rafting, he saw wheelchair users at restaurants, he saw disabled people simply living life to their fullest. Upon reflection, he remarked: "I've seen God!" The strength of the community was palpable and something that Rosenberg in particular wanted to replicate. Within a year, the Atlantis community supported fifteen consumers, including Mike Smith, the youth wing's soft-spoken poet. Rosenberg recalls Mike's last days, finally living in freedom:

"Mike was well aware of his imminent death and preferred to die living independently rather than be in a nursing home. I remember on one occasion when we had some kind of party in the community that Mike wanted to go to. He was so weak (with [muscular dystrophy]) that he could no longer sit in his

power chair. So we transported him in his bed on the back of a pickup to attend the party. All things seemed so possible then.”<sup>59</sup>

Though Blank and Rosenberg came from different backgrounds, the philosophical foundation for both their strategies came from Saul Alinsky’s method of advocacy, which represented the gold-standard of community organizing through the mid-twentieth century. In 1940, Alinsky helped found the Chicago-based Industrial Areas Foundation, which taught disenfranchised communities how to band together and use nonviolent tactics to demand change from a common adversary, often landlords or politicians. While neither received training directly from Alinsky, they did closely associate with other activist leaders who learned and lived the playbook.

Rosenberg, for instance, received Alinsky training as a VISTA volunteer in Chicago and practiced tactics of community uplift while stationed in New Jersey.<sup>60</sup> Blank, on the other hand, honed the practice as he grew Atlantis, but did not explicitly receive training until around 1983, when he paired up with Rich Male, a giant in the Colorado non-profit world and the creator of the Community Resource Center. Male was the organizer behind the Colorado Association of Nonprofit Organizations and Community Shares of Colorado, and an instructor at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and founded the Access Institute, which, beginning in 1983, would become ADAPT’s bootcamp for novice activists seeking to join chapters throughout the

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<sup>59</sup> Barry Rosenberg, “Historical Perspective of the Independent Living Movement with an Emphasis on Colorado,” 2012, Personal Records, 5.

<sup>60</sup> Barry Rosenberg, interview by author, September 1, 2021.

country.<sup>61</sup> Still, Blank's involvement with the Students Democratic Society and the New Left prior to his dedication to the disability rights movement indicate he was well aware of Alinsky's model. More importantly, though, was his increased dedication to Alinsky's methods as he obtained more power through his leadership at Atlantis.

His first rule was to create a consciousness of community among disabled people in the Denver metro area. That's why before Mobility Among Disabled (MAD), which was now being run out of Atlantis, began striking against the Regional Transportation District for their discriminatory bussing policies, Blank and Rosenberg had to focus on making Atlantis both a place to congregate and a mechanism for which people could both obtain services and learn how to advocate on behalf of themselves and others. Mirroring the mission of the Berkeley CIL, Atlantis would prioritize advocacy as a necessary and leading component of independent living by literally writing both health and personal advocacy into Atlantis's philosophy and objectives. These objectives would in turn inspire organizations like the National Council for Independent Living, founded in 1982, to add advocacy as a function required by centers for independent living within their network.<sup>62</sup>

The kinds of community building advocacy initiated in Atlantis ranged greatly, but all had the common goal of spreading awareness of Atlantis and imbuing a sense of unity among new and old members of the movement. First, Atlantis would conduct internal educational programs like the Adult Education Center, which taught the residents basic life skills, such as basic academics, speech therapy, Braille, and Home Training Classes. These skills would assist

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<sup>61</sup>Barry Rosenberg, interview by author, September 1, 2021.; "Access Institute has Grant to Train 12 Disabled Activists," *The Handicapped Coloradan*, December 1983, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/269/search/923>

<sup>62</sup> "About Independent Living," National Council on Independent Living, accessed September 4, 2022, <https://ncil.org/about/aboutil/>.

residents in learning how to organize and maintain an apartment, budget, and buy food and clothing so they could truly live independently and do things like structure their free time or consider new career options.<sup>63</sup>

Atlantis also intervened in the schooling of its youngest residents, which often attended Denver Opportunity School, Boettcher School for Crippled Children, Red Rocks School, or other nearby colleges including Metro State University, to ensure they were receiving an appropriate education. In 1977, for instance, Atlantis filed a companion suit on behalf of eleven of its residents along with Debby Tracy, another resident, who was denied schooling after turning twenty-one years old. Until moving to Atlantis, Tracy relied on the United Cerebral Palsy Center to receive an education. According to Tracy's mother the services the center provided were abysmal. The center never even taught her the alphabet, the names of different colors, or how to tell time, and was most concerned with preparing Tracy for working her entire life at a sheltered workshop rather than finding a lasting career. After moving to Atlantis, the community helped transfer her to Boettcher School for Crippled Children, where she learned how to read. According to her mother and Blank, her IQ jumped forty-five points in the five years she spent at Boettcher, and she was quickly functioning at a fourth-grade level. But rather than receiving a high school degree, she was pushed out of school and awarded an attendance certificate for her progress due to her inability to complete her class requirements in a timely manner. She and Atlantis's lawyers, Nathan Davidovich and Charles Welton, argued that Tracy and the eleven other plaintiffs should be compensated by receiving schooling that equaled the "number of years during which an adequate education was denied to them." The suit was so contentious that

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<sup>63</sup> "Atlantis Philosophy and Objectives," Atlantis Independent Community Inc., c. 1974-76, box 2, folder 23, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.; *The Atlantis Story* (Denver, Colorado: Atlantis Community Inc.). <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?432/category/14>.

Denver’s school board president, Omar Lair, shouted at Davidovich to “shut up” as he addressed the rest of the school board representatives. The eleven other plaintiffs from Atlantis booed down Lair, who remained vicious even after the school board voted to allow Tracy and the other members of Atlantis to continue attending school by remarking that the case was “not a precedent set by [the] board in any way, shape, or form.”<sup>64</sup>

Atlantis’s oversight wasn’t just to resist in school discrimination, but served to set up graduates for meaningful employment, as opposed to letting them fall down the usual path of taking jobs in sheltered workshops that compensated employees with less than minimum wage for performing menial tasks like counting fishhooks or untangling old phone cords.<sup>65</sup> The school oversight also served useful because it encouraged students to connect with other disabled peers, which was important considering that five of the eight original residents were secondary or post-secondary students.<sup>66</sup>

Atlantis’s networking among other members of the community subsequently kickstarted the telephone Crisis Hotline, funded by the Colorado Vocational Rehabilitation Division, to respond to the emergency needs of disabled people all over Denver, whether they were associated with Atlantis or not.<sup>67</sup> In truth, however, the hotline expanded its mandate once it was established and it soon became a way for existing community members to draw attention to independent living services, and, crucially, as a method for inviting more people to join Atlantis,

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<sup>64</sup> Art Branscombe, “Debbie Wins School Board Vote: She’ll Stay at Boettcher School,” *The Denver Post*, August 19, 1977, ADAPT Museum, [https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/454/category/16&slideshow=+play-false](https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/454/category/16&slideshow=+play-false;); Sue Lindsay Roll, “Debby Tracy Fighting to Acquire Knowledge,” *Rocky Mountain News*, June 30, 1977, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/452/category/16&slideshow=+play-false>.

<sup>65</sup> *The Atlantis Story* (Denver, Colorado: Atlantis Community Inc.), <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/432/category/14>.

<sup>66</sup> “Atlantis Residents Train for Hotline,” *The Denver Post*, c. 1974-75, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/402/search/909>.

<sup>67</sup> “Atlantis Residents Train for Hotline,” *The Denver Post*.

which accepted self-referrals as a legitimate alternative to other referring agencies.<sup>68</sup> By 1977, Atlantis had grown from serving fifteen residents at Las Casitas to forty, seventeen of which lived in the Early Action site, a transitional living center where prospective residents waited for other apartments throughout the city to be retrofitted by the Colorado Division of Vocational Rehabilitation under the supervision of Atlantis to accommodate their needs. Meanwhile, the cause for accessible transportation began to surface—so much so that the administration listed it as a central motive for advocacy, along with equitable housing, finance, and litigation, in a charter-like document detailing Atlantis’s business philosophy.<sup>69</sup>

While it is obvious that obtaining accessible transportation was and still is important because it allows disabled people the means to obtain services and engage in recreation outside their homes, thus allowing them to live independently, it is not necessarily obvious why the group became so singularly captivated by that specific area of advocacy instead of, for instance, rallying for the expansion of independent living in the rest of the state. There are a few possible explanations for this. First, Atlantis did not have the financial means to expand its reach past the Denver metropolitan area, as their state and federal grant funding just barely kept their operation afloat. This is evidenced, for instance, by Blank’s manipulation of employee wages in which he would pay his workers under the poverty line so Social Security services would compensate for the rest of their wage and he could use the money saved to fund programs in the organization.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, Atlantis was becoming adept at helping people evacuate nursing homes in and

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<sup>68</sup> “Atlantis Philosophy and Objectives,” Atlantis Independent Community Inc., c. 1974-76, box 2, folder 23, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.; “Atlantis Community Inc. Operational Review 1976-1979,” box 3, folder 25, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>69</sup> “Atlantis Philosophy and Objectives,” Atlantis Independent Community Inc.; “Atlantis Community Inc. Operational Review 1976-1979,” Atlantis Community Inc., box 3, folder 25, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>70</sup> Wade Blank, interview by Sylvia Danovitch, Denver, Colorado, November 16, 1992, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Oral History Project, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, box 1, folder 15, Denver Public Library, Denver, CO.

around the city by taking advantage of tools like the Crisis Hotline. Plus, the group would not have been incentivized to protest housing inequities since their cooperation with the Colorado Division of Vocational Rehabilitation to obtain more Section Eight housing throughout the city was going smoothly.

Transportation, on the other hand, seemed to be one of the only services outside of Atlantis's domain of control. What would be the point of living independently if disabled people couldn't get to school, the store, a bar, or church? The ability to travel would also shrink the number of unemployed disabled people, which would in turn decrease nation-wide government spending on disability and welfare subsidies by over a billion dollars annually.<sup>71</sup> And of course, there was the added bonus of association with the Civil Rights Movement, which had also used the symbolism of inaccessible transportation to emphasize the effects that segregation had on their community.<sup>72</sup>

The Regional Transportation District's (RTD), which was created by the city of Denver in 1969 and was still a relatively new service, buses were inaccessible. Thus far, wheelchair users in the city were limited to either using Denver's door-to-door service, HandiRide, or private transportation services. While HandiRide, which was introduced as a subscription service in 1973, was a desirable option for some travelers due to its relative convenience, it remained inaccessible to most because the program was only capable of serving about 133 subscribers, thus leaving thousands of disabled Denverites without the ability to travel.<sup>73</sup> Private services

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<sup>71</sup> Frank Bowe, *Handicapping America: Barriers to Disabled People* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 83.

<sup>72</sup> *Colorado Experience: The Gang of 19- ADA Movement*, season 5 episode 14, aired February 15, 2018, Public Broadcasting Service, Online Streaming, <https://www.pbs.org/video/the-gang-of-19-ada-movement-hxrjxw/>.

<sup>73</sup> Brad Martisils, "Handicapped Protestors Forcibly Ejected from RTD Offices," *The Denver Post*, September 14, 1978, ADAPT Museum, [https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/477/search/825](https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/477/search/825;).; *Colorado Experience: The Gang of 19- ADA Movement*.

were also inaccessible because they were often cost prohibitive. At one of the many Regional Transportation District (RTD) hearings, the members of Heritage House and Atlantis attended to provide testimony, and a seventeen-year-old girl told the board about her experience being price-gouged by a private service after attending a baseball game. The service charged the crew ten dollars each (which was half their monthly allowance) for the four-mile round trip from Heritage House to Mile High Stadium.<sup>74</sup> After adjusting for inflation, the tickets would have costed about forty dollars each in 2022.<sup>75</sup>

The most important part of mainstreaming transportation, however, was making disabled people visible to the non-disabled public, a critical aspect of normalizing the concept of independent living for all Denverites. Years later, in 1983, Wade Blank would make the importance of this tactic clear while visiting Billings, Montana, to evangelize Atlantis's recipe for local persuasion. He emphasized building public awareness by encouraging wheelchair users to occupy every single bus in the region for days at a time to hand out brochures calling for equal access and expose other riders to their presence.<sup>76</sup> He would often liken special transportation services to the kind of segregation that black Americans endured prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, arguing that the only way for disabled Americans to truly be accepted in their communities would be total integration of all services, beginning with bussing. Installing wheelchair lifts was so much more than getting to ride the bus—it was an issue of civil rights.

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<sup>74</sup> Howard Pankratz, "Wheel Chair Delegation Accuses RTD Board of Ignoring Them," *The Denver Post*, c. 1979-1980, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/475/search/931>; "RTD & the Handicapped," *Heritage House Herald* 1, no. 5, March 1974, Box 1, Folder 17, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>75</sup> CPI Inflation Calculator, U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, accessed October 11, 2022, [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm).

<sup>76</sup> Roger Clawson, "Disabled Learn Persuasion Tactics," *Billings Gazette*, June 15, 1983, ADAPT Museum <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/504/search/780>

The tactics of using civil disobedience to draw attention to transportation inequities was initially spearheaded by the youth activists in MAD and TODAY rather than Blank, who at first worked in the background quietly in a supporting role. This began to change, however, beginning with Denver's participation in the nation-wide 1977 protest to reverse the director of Health Education and Welfare, Joseph Califano's, unwillingness to enforce section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. While the San Francisco protest got the most media coverage due to the length of their occupation, Denver's participation was not insignificant. Even though the protest only lasted about a day in Denver, the event quickly became a who's-who of disability politics in the area and provided valuable networking opportunities for local activists. Speakers included Ingo Antonitsch, who was still director of the Denver Commission on the Disabled, Don Galloway, executive director of the Governor's Advisory Council on the Handicapped, Diane McGeorge, president of the National Federation of the Blind of Colorado, George Brown, state lieutenant governor, and, finally, Wade Blank, co-director of Atlantis independent living community. It was the first time he fully represented the disabled community in a public capacity picked up by the media. After this, Atlantis would strategically dispatch Wade as their media handler, using his status as an able-bodied white man as a means of amplifying their often-neglected voices.

## PART IV: SUE THE PANTS OFF ‘EM

Atlantis had a bit of a rocky start. The years 1976 through 1978 proved to be particularly turbulent. By 1977, Rosenberg decided to leave Atlantis following an administrative falling out with Blank, to focus on creating a different independent living community, Holistic Approaches to Independent Living (HAIL), that better reflected his personal organizational vision. It is important to note that despite leaving, however, Rosenberg would continue to attend Atlantis’s protests, often playing a more integral role in community organizing by ensuring that members of the disabled community could make it to protests than Blank, who was much better at making sure activists in the city received appropriate media attention. The chaos continued when members of Atlantis initiated two lawsuits that sought justice for both those at the center that were abused at Heritage House and those disabled individuals discriminated against by Regional Transportation District’s (RTD) refusal to install lifts on all the transit system’s buses after Califano’s promise to enforce Section 504.<sup>77</sup> Those involved in the first suit decided to honor Mike Smith, who died soon after moving into Atlantis community, by naming him as a plaintiff in the case.<sup>78</sup> Though those at Atlantis were successful in winning the Heritage House case, the RTD suit went south, irrevocably souring the relationship between members of Atlantis and the administration and board of RTD.

The trial against RTD began in September of 1977. The city was set to buy a new fleet of 231 Rohrer Flxible busses buses, and although eighteen of the buses would be equipped with

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<sup>77</sup> Brad Martisils, “Handicapped Protestors Forcibly Ejected from RTD Offices,” *The Denver Post*, September 14, 1978, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/477/search/825>.

<sup>78</sup> Jonathan Dedmon, “Late Poet was Plaintiff in Nursing Home Lawsuit,” *Rocky Mountain News*, March 22, 1976, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/411/search/52&slideshow=+play-false>.

wheelchair tie-down devices, none would be outfitted with lifts.<sup>79</sup> Livid as ever, MAD began meeting with RTD officials--but to no avail. Though their presence was met with kindness, Rosenberg recalls officials trying to patronize the group by trying to placate them with tea and cookies.<sup>80</sup> There had to be another way to be taken seriously. In a 2018 documentary produced by the Rocky Mountain Public Broadcasting Station called *The Gang of 19 to the ADA Movement*, Atlantis's lawyer, John Holland, recalls asking Wade Blank if they should sue RTD in order to compel them to re-order the fleet. Blank gave the go ahead and even agreed, as Atlantis's rising leader, to be the plaintiff for the case. At first, things looked promising, as Holland was able to convince the director of RTD, John Simpson, to ensure that the new buses would at least be capable of being retrofitted with lifts, so that way if Atlantis did win the suit, it would be possible to make the buses wheelchair capable.<sup>81</sup> Holland subsequently went to work crafting a bullet-proof case, arguing that the lifts were not just technologically feasible, but easy to install. Americans could put men on the moon, he quipped, but somehow continued to fail at the simple task of making buses accessible.<sup>82</sup>

Many residents from Atlantis testified, emphasizing the seriousness of the discrimination they faced by sharing stories about the social and psychological affects that the segregation and denial to complete services had on their lives with the court. One young witnesses told the district judge, Richard P. Matsch, that he was suffering from social isolation because of the lack of transportation, and that it was difficult to go home to see family because of the barriers posed

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<sup>79</sup> Fred Gillies and Coke DeBrun, "Having 'Made Public Aware,' Disabled End Bus Barricade," *The Denver Post*, July 6, 1978, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/478/search/10.>; *Colorado Experience: The Gang of 19- ADA Movement.*; Note: in the documentary, John Holland states that RTD was going to buy 254 without any accessible buses.

<sup>80</sup> *Colorado Experience: The Gang of 19- ADA Movement.*

<sup>81</sup> *Colorado Experience: The Gang of 19- ADA Movement.*

<sup>82</sup> *Colorado Experience: The Gang of 19- ADA Movement.*

by the lack of accessible bussing. Private cabs, after all, were becoming even more expensive, with round trips jumping all the way up to eighteen dollars a ride. Glen Kopp, who had been co-director of Atlantis Community since 1975, also emphasized to the court that the segregation he endured made him feel like a second-class citizen. And finally, Carolyn Finnell, piped up to say that she did not like using people as tools for transportation—she did not want to rely on the help of others to climb onto the bus when she could do it herself using a lift.<sup>83</sup>

But most importantly, RTD was breaking the law, plain and simple. The case was timely, taking place just months after section 504 was made into law. Ordering the fleet, Holland argued, was in violation of section 504 because the federal government shelled out eighty percent of the funding that paid for the new fleet RTD, meaning that they must provide equal access to disabled individuals.<sup>84</sup> This argument was highly significant, as Holland's suit foreshadowed the way in which the debate over bus accessibility became ground zero for the fight over defining section 504 compliance.

Before section 504, it seemed like disabled activists had no chance in compelling the federal government to enforce accessibility laws where they existed. In 1970, for instance, long before section 504 was even introduced, Congress passed an amendment to the 1964 Urban Mass Transportation Act that required fleet developers to make “special efforts” to ensure the elderly and disabled had equal access to transportation, but these efforts failed since there was no Board

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<sup>83</sup> Claire Cooper, “Handicapped Seek Ruling on RTD Service,” *Rocky Mountain News*, Friday 2, 1977, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/480/search/930>.

<sup>84</sup> Sue Lindsay, “RTD Seeks to Nullify Handicap Law,” *Rocky Mountain News*, October 19, 1982, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/482/category/17>; Fred Gillies and Coke DeBrun, “Having ‘Made Public Aware,’ Disabled End Bus Barricade,” *The Denver Post*, July 6, 1978, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/478/search/10>; Richard Matsch, *Atlantis Community, Inc. v. Adams* (District Court of Colorado June 30, 1978).

to ensure compliance.<sup>85</sup> After the implementation of the Rehabilitation Act was famously stalled despite its passage in 1973, Congress passed a 1974 amendment to the Act that created the Architectural Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (ATBCB) to create standards for accessibility requirements. The Board, however, was also denied the ability to enforce compliance.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, when the Federal-Aid Highway Act was passed in 1973, there was no agency created to enforce the law's requirement that projects funded by the Highway Trust Fund be accessible.<sup>87</sup> Califano's promise to implement section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1977 should have, in theory, finally given the federal government the teeth to make accessible transportation happen.

Yet despite the sound legal argumentation and stellar witness testimony, the courts ruled in favor of RTD on June 30, 1978, arguing that the widespread application of the technology needed to make all buses accessible would place an undue financial burden on the public transit system.<sup>88</sup> It was time to buckle up and continue the job that MAD and TODAY started by attacking RTD directly. Three days after the decision, the Gang of 19 took to the streets.

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<sup>85</sup> Bowe, *Handicapping America*, 80.

<sup>86</sup> Bowe, *Handicapping America*, 80.

<sup>87</sup> Bowe, *Handicapping America*, 79.

<sup>88</sup> Matsch, *Atlantis Community, Inc. v. Adams.*; "Handicapped Set Back in Battle for Lifts on Buses," *Rocky Mountain News*, December 19, 1981, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/479/category/17>.

## PART V: THE GANG OF 19

The temperature was climbing to a high of ninety degrees as rush hour traffic slogged through the streets of downtown Denver the day after Fourth of July break in 1978. Traffic was unusually slow. Drivers in boat sized gas guzzling vehicles choked as the stagnant exhaust filled their lungs and their steering wheels scorched their hands. Their eyes must have darted around while they craned their necks looking for the accident tripping up the road. As they crept toward Colfax and Broadway, they saw something peculiar instead—two buses stuck at the side of the road, decked out with colorful signs that read “WE DEMAND A RIDE,” “TAXATION WITHOUT TRANSPORTATION,” and “RIGHT TO RIDE.” The Gang of 19, who at the time went by the less-snappy name, the Colorado Coalition of Disabled Citizens, sat adjacent to one another, wheel to wheel, spilling into a second lane of traffic.<sup>89</sup> Blank stood firmly at the end of the chain wearing a neat blue gingham button up shirt like it was just another day at the office.<sup>90</sup> And in a way, considering how frequent the group’s protests would become, it was.

The protest was unprecedented even for the Gang of 19, who took the occupation in stride. They pushed themselves to the limit, surpassing the amount of time they planned on blocking the buses. Rosenberg, who popped in on the event to show his solidarity with the movement, was instructed to fight the traffic and head back to Atlantis to collect everyone’s medication so the Gang could stay the night. Lin Chism, a disabled student at the University of Colorado at Denver, declared to the *Rocky Mountain News* that the protest would be the “first of

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<sup>89</sup> *Colorado Experience: The Gang of 19- ADA.*

<sup>90</sup> *Colorado Experience: The Gang of 19- ADA.*

many times we will have to do this to get RTD to come to some agreement with us.”<sup>91</sup> Blank followed up by stating that “these people have no place else to go” with no transportation to get there.<sup>92</sup>

The Denver police, who were baffled by the protest, hovered by the demonstration. Although their hesitation to arrest the Gang was likely what allowed the event to continue as long as it did, the lack of response rubbed the group the wrong way. The department admitted to the *Rocky Mountain News* that they did not know what to do. While they feared injuring members of the Gang by ripping them from their chairs and loading them into inaccessible police vans, one of the sergeants also admitted that they were highly concerned about tarnishing the department’s image by arresting disabled people. “We don’t want to be the fall guys on this,” one sergeant stated.<sup>93</sup> By the end of the protest, only two able-bodied sympathizers were arrested. Lisa Wheeler, an Atlantis counselor, and Bill Roem, who ran a nursing home in Lakewood, were put in handcuffs for not clearing the road and were quickly released on a hundred-dollar bail.<sup>94</sup>

Members of Atlantis would continue to unsuccessfully dare Denver police to arrest them until 1981 when they sued the department for discrimination. The case was built around the police’s response to a protest at Mayor William McNichols office concerning budget cuts to disability services. Out of the forty-three protesters crammed into the mayor’s office, only twenty were arrested—all able bodied, as usual. Livid, Holland argued to County Judge Edward

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<sup>91</sup> Gary Delsohn, “Disabled Snarl Traffic in Protest,” *Rocky Mountain News*, July 6, 1978, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/473/search/974>.

<sup>92</sup> Gary Delsohn, “Disabled Snarl Traffic in Protest,” *Rocky Mountain News*.

<sup>93</sup> Fred Gillies and Coke DeBrun, “Having ‘Made Public Aware,’ Disabled End Bus Barricade,” *The Denver Post*, July 6, 1978, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/478/search/10>

<sup>94</sup> Fred Gillies and Coke DeBrun, “Having ‘Made Public Aware,’ Disabled End Bus Barricade,” *The Denver Post*.

Simons that the police's cherry-picking was tantamount to selective enforcement of the law, and that disabled residents had the right to be arrested under equal protection. In an unusual move, Simons agreed.<sup>95</sup> The Denver police department would have to withstand the bad press from then on.

The Gang of 19's protest was also Blank's first real press confrontation. The spat was between him and a prickly John Simpson, the director of RTD. Blank masterfully put Simpson on the defensive, who dug himself deeper into a hole with every interview he took. Simpson arrived at the scene just an hour after the Gang took down their first bus. He begged them to get off the road and emphasized to the *Denver Post* and *Rocky Mountain Times* that the new fleet did not need wheelchair lifts because their HandiRide system was so progressive. Desperate for good press, he took reporters on a tour of one of the HandiRide vehicles to demonstrate their accessibility. But Simpson's version of a progressive system was a fantasy, the Gang insisted. Not only was HandiRide swamped with thousands of unfulfilled subscription requests, but a quarter of the accessible vehicles were out of commission. In response, Simpson pointed out that RTD was rolling out eighteen more HandiRide vans but admitted that their debut would be delayed due to mechanical issues. Besides, Simpson choked, equipping buses with lifts would not be worth it anyway since many wheelchair users could not access many of the city's bus stops, presumably due to Denver's lack of curb cuts and ramps.<sup>96</sup>

Blank methodically responded to Simpson through the press by casting the Gang of 19's agenda as a righteous cause. He began by responding to Simpson's request that the protesters

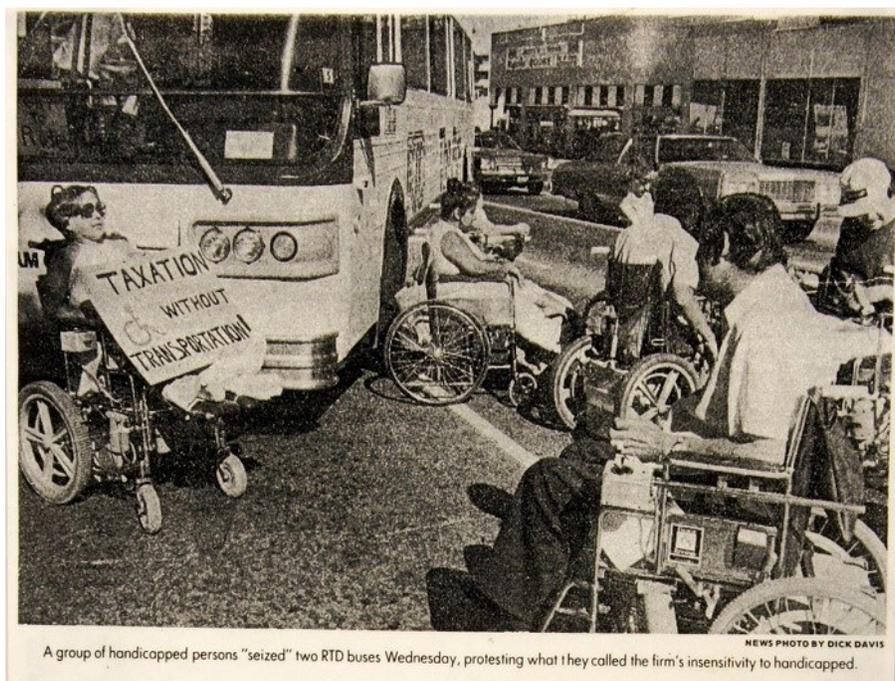
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<sup>95</sup> Jane Hulse, "Handicapped Buoyed by Judge's Ruling," *Rocky Mountain News*, September 5, 1981, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/481/category/17&slideshow=+play-false>.

<sup>96</sup> Gary Delsohn, "Disabled Snarl Traffic in Protest," *Rocky Mountain News*, July 6, 1978, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/473/search/974>.

hash out the details at his office later by noting that wheelchair users would not even be able to attend such meetings because they could not find transportation.<sup>97</sup> He then provoked the press by claiming that RTD was a “paternalistic” organization and declared that both RTD and the press should expect more incidents of civil disobedience in the months to come.

He also called out the police for giving the Gang special treatment by sidestepping their arrests. Blank punctuated his appearance by evoking the Civil Rights movement. “Like Martin Luther King. we have tried to go through the system,” Blank said. “Now, like Dr. King, we must practice civil disobedience until the judges change their minds or Congress makes new laws.” Blank won the high ground, and the occupation of Colfax and Broadway became a media success.



*Figure 6 Members of the Gang of 19 surround a bus on the Corner of Colfax Avenue and Broadway, "Disabled Snarl Traffic in Protest," July 6, 1978, Dick Davis, Rocky Mountain News.*

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<sup>97</sup> Gary Delsohn, “Disabled Snarl Traffic in Protest,” *Rocky Mountain News*.

## PART VI: DRILLING RTD

Residents at Atlantis wasted no time using the momentum from their protest and began ambushing RTD offices immediately, though they did not receive any press until the *Denver Post* covered the group's occupation of the fifth floor of RTD's office building in September of that year. This event stood out among others because both an RTD employee and a protester were injured in the chaos. This time, the group was portrayed as obstinate, as the *Post* opted to emphasize their refusal to talk to Simpson in the conference room on the main floor of the building rather than in the fifth-floor offices as he requested. Brian Macleod, who was in charge of the protest, told the *Post* that they were tired of responding to Simpson's whims and that the director had "been telling [them] the same crap for years." Again, Simpson deflected responsibility, naming the city's sidewalk accessibility as the real culprit for limiting access to transportation. The conversation went no further, and while the disabled protestors weren't arrested, they were pulled out of their chairs and forcibly removed, causing Blank to remark "We've asked to be arrested... but by the way things look, I don't think we even have the right to expect that." The protestors vigorously thrashed at the EMTs and police officers who dragged them out of the building, a group of whom dropped eighteen-year-old Patsy Castor. Onlookers argued about whether she was dropped on purpose. Jeff Frank, an able-bodied ally, was the only one arrested after he struck an RTD employee. <sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Brad Martisils, "Handicapped Protestors Forcibly Ejected from RTD Offices," *The Denver Post*, September 14, 1978, ADAPT Museum, [https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/477/search/825](https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/477/search/825;);



*Figure 7 Picture of Patsy Castor being carried out by EMTs, "Handicapped Protesters Forcibly Ejected from RTD Office," September 14, 1978, The Denver Post.*

Individuals at Atlantis also incited impromptu moments of resistance. One such incident was spurred by Beverly Furnice while she was running errands about town. Furnice, who planned her outing around traveling on one of the only accessible buses scheduled for the day,

was met at her stop with a standard vehicle. She decided she couldn't wait two hours for the next accessible bus and knew that she couldn't take a HandiRide lift because her chair was too big for the van. The bus driver, upon seeing Furnice, refused to help load her on the vehicle. While the bus was not equipped with a lift, the members of Atlantis, who happened to have accompanied her to the bus stop, ignored the obstinate driver and found an RTD-provided ramp to help Furnice onto the bus. The problem was that the rest of the bus was inaccessible and smaller than the bus she was used to, and because Furnice's chair was bigger than most, she could not navigate the tight floorplan by herself. When she made it to her stop, the bus driver refused to help her spin her chair, let alone set up the manual ramp that Furnice would have needed to roll off the bus. She remained trapped and was forced to travel from the heart of Denver to Red Rocks and back. When she arrived, Blank was waiting for her and argued with the driver who still refused to help Furnice. About two hours after Furnice returned, a swarm of members from Atlantis came to board the same bus in solidarity with their friend. It demonstrated another layer to their problem—there would be no point in making sure the new fleet was accessible if RTD refused to put them on route or if drivers refused to help work the lifts.<sup>99</sup> It is unclear whether it was because it was too late to change the order for the fleet, because RTD seemed to hold the moral high ground after the September protest, or because the unrelenting and vocal protests staged by Atlantis were simply rubbing drivers the wrong way, but it soon became clear that the city would not change their mind. There would not be any lifts on the 231 buses, and that was final.

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<sup>99</sup> Brad Martisius, "RTD Cries Foul Over 'Stuck' Rider," *The Denver Post*.



*Figure 8 Beverly Furnice flinches as an RTD employee tries to maneuver her chair on a public bus. "RTD Cries Foul over Stuck Rider," Ken Bisio, The Denver Post.*

Just when things were looking most bleak, however, Atlantis hit the jackpot. A year later, in 1979, the federal Department of Transportation issued regulations requiring that all new buses bought with federal dollars must have wheelchair lifts and that at least half of all buses running during peak service times be accessible to disabled passengers.<sup>100</sup> When RTD snubbed the guidelines, John Holland immediately negotiated a settlement which required the system to follow such guidelines.<sup>101</sup> All RTD buses were required to be accessible by 1982.<sup>102</sup> Atlantis's luck continued through 1980, when the organization used protesting to gain media attention to pressure Mayor William McNichols to install curb cuts throughout the city of Denver. While most of Atlantis's efforts were dedicated to encouraging the city to install lifts on buses, Holland's suit seemed to guarantee that any future bus purchases, including a new and upcoming order that would expand RTD's fleet by 89 buses in 1983, would be accessible. Presumably the most logical thing to do next, then, would be to expand that accessibility throughout the city's built infrastructure. Atlantis recognized that there was some truth in what the Director of RTD, John Simpson, told the *Rocky Mountain Times* following the Gang of 19 protest: lifts on buses would not do the community any good if the bus stops themselves were inaccessible.<sup>103</sup>

So that June, Blank and Atlantis's co-director Glenn Kopp, wrote a mailgram to McNichols's office thanking him for the city's past efforts to install curb cuts, while also urging him to meet with members of Atlantis to plan an initiative to make every curb in Denver accessible.<sup>104</sup> They again stressed that accessible infrastructure meant the difference between a

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<sup>100</sup> "Handicapped Set Back in Battle for Lifts on Buses," *Rocky Mountain News*, December 9, 1981, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/479/category/17>.

<sup>101</sup> "Handicapped Set Back in Battle for Lifts on Buses," *Rocky Mountain News*.

<sup>102</sup> Wade Blank and Glen Kopp, Western Union Mailgram to Mayor Bill McNichols Regarding Lack of Denver Curb Cuts, June 5, 1980, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/439/search/713>.

<sup>103</sup> Gary Delsohn, "Disabled Snarl Traffic in Protest," *Rocky Mountain News*.

<sup>104</sup> Wade Blank and Glen Kopp, Western Union Mailgram to Mayor Bill McNichols Regarding Lack of Denver Curb Cuts, June 5, 1980, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/439/search/713>.

disabled person being able to live independently or not, writing that “the lack of any procedure by the city for cutting curbs in a particular area [is important] so a disabled person can get to work, school, church, or a bus stop.”<sup>105</sup> While Denver’s Traffic and Engineering Department met with Atlantis within just a few weeks of receiving the mailgram, Rosenberg recalls that Atlantis took charge of the narrative before the city could even provide a comprehensive response to their request. Within a week of their meeting, members of Atlantis paraded along East Colfax Avenue wielding sledgehammers.<sup>106</sup> They didn’t stop until they arrived at the corner of Colorado Boulevard, where some dismounted off the curb onto the street. Drivers dangerously swerved around them as they began smashing the curb.<sup>107</sup>

Atlantis resident Les Hubbard emphasized that the erratic response from drivers was par for the course when he shared that he had to undergo back surgery after he was hit by cars on four separate occasions while trying to navigate his chair from the raised sidewalk onto the road. Brian Mcleod, who was now an administrator at Atlantis, also chimed in, explaining that although the city had been very proactive at installing cuts in downtown Denver, they neglected to install sidewalk ramps in lesser populated areas, making it difficult for the disabled community to commute.<sup>108</sup> Those smashing the curb, including Hubbard, Conrad, and other residents, such as George Roberts, were also surrounded with demonstrators who held signs that said “Down with the curbs!” and chanted “No more curbs!” over and over. Edward Ellerbrock, who was an employee of Denver’s Traffic and Engineering Department, stood dumbfounded,

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<sup>105</sup> Wade Blank and Glen Kopp, Western Union Mailgram to Mayor Bill McNichols Regarding Lack of Denver Curb Cuts.

<sup>106</sup> Bill Scanlon, “Atlantis Members Bludgeon Curb in Protest,” *The Denver Post*, June 1980, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/439/search/713>.; Barry Rosenberg, interview by author, September 1, 2021.

<sup>107</sup> Bill Scanlon, “Atlantis Members Bludgeon Curb in Protest,” *The Denver Post*.

<sup>108</sup> Bill Scanlon, “Atlantis Members Bludgeon Curb in Protest,” *The Denver Post*.

telling *The Denver Post* that he was caught off guard because Atlantis met so recently with the city. By November of 1982, it was clear that Atlantis's stunt worked, as evidenced by a follow up mailgram sent by residents thanking Mayor McNichols for all the curb cuts being installed during that month.<sup>109</sup>



Figure 9 "George Roberts, Left, and Les Hubbard, Bludgeon a Curb in Protest," *The Denver Post*, June 1980.

The true lasting success of Holland's deal with RTD to purchase accessible buses from then on forward, however, was more complicated. While Atlantis and the Gang of 19 failed to convince the city to put lifts on the 230 or so buses ordered in 1977, the suit made it possible to increase bus accessibility when the city bought yet another fleet of 89 articulated buses in March of 1981.<sup>110</sup> At first, Blank, Holland, and the residents of Atlantis remained assured that the buses

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<sup>109</sup> Bill Scanlon, "Atlantis Members Bludgeon Curb in Protest," *The Denver Post*.

<sup>110</sup> "Handicapped Set Back in Battle for Lifts on Buses," *Rocky Mountain News*.

would be accessible, per the settlement. Everything fell apart, though, that July when RTD rescinded its agreement.<sup>111</sup> All was not lost, however, because Atlantis still had about six months to convince RTD's board of directors to change their decision, as the city did not have to pay a penalty for making changes to their fleet order until November 27 of that year. There was also one more cause for optimism: shortly after the board's decision, John Simpson, who at this point had fostered an antagonistic relationship with Atlantis, was stepping down as RTD's director. This would give Atlantis the chance to start a fresh relationship with his replacement L.A. Kimball, who presumably wanted to begin his tenure as new director by appearing as supportive to his constituents as possible.<sup>112</sup>

Atlantis began testing the waters within a month of his appointment. Once again, members decided to occupy the fifth floor of RTD headquarters, where the department's executives were located. This time, however, protesters decided to suspend their plans to stay the night after Kimball walked onto the floor with RTD board members Thomas Bastien, Kathi Williams, and Mary Duty, who offered to schedule a meeting in November, about a week before RTD's order deadline, with the sole agenda of discussing whether the RTD board should reconsider ordering lifts for the new fleet.<sup>113</sup> In an unsurprising series of events, RTD's board of directors still voted not to purchase accessible buses. Purchasing the buses with lifts, the board's majority argued, would cost RTD an additional 1.1 million dollars. It is important to note,

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<sup>111</sup> Howard Pankratz, "RTD Fighting Handicapped Act," *The Denver Post*, January 1982, ADAPT Museum, [https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?490/tags/1104-colorado\\_handicapped\\_act.](https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?490/tags/1104-colorado_handicapped_act.); Jerry Brown, "Handicapped Protest Lift Vote," *Rocky Mountain News*, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?467/category/17>.

<sup>112</sup> Howard Pankratz, "RTD Fighting Handicapped Act," *The Denver Post*.; Jerry Brown, "Handicapped Protest Lift Vote," *Rocky Mountain News*.

<sup>113</sup> Howard Pankratz, "RTD Fighting Handicapped Act," *The Denver Post*.; Jerry Brown, "Handicapped Protest Lift Vote," *Rocky Mountain News*.

though, that the federal government would have covered eighty percent of the cost.<sup>114</sup> The board also expressed concern that if RTD spent funds on putting lifts on the new buses, it may have to scale back or even eliminate the HandiRide service altogether, which worried some disabled activists.<sup>115</sup>

And that fear was not unfounded. Around the time Atlantis was established, the center tried launching a door-to-door transportation service to supplement RTD's existing HandiRide system. After a few years, the project was taken over by a non-profit called INSTEAD (Innovative Systems of Transportation for the Elderly and Disabled). The program was intended to relieve RTD from spending a significant amount of its budget expanding the HandiRide system, as 60% of the project was federally subsidized by the Urban Mass Transit Association's 16(b)(2) program with another 20% funded by the non-profit, leaving RTD with only paying the remaining 20% of the bill. Initially, RTD supported the project and worked closely with INSTEAD to create dedicated routes for the HandiRide vans so that they acted more like buses rather than taxis. Consequently, the INSTEAD vehicles would then provide a door-to-door service that brought disabled passengers to the set HandiRide van stops around the city.

Unfortunately, the program fell apart due to a provision in section 5 of the Urban Mass Transit Association Act of 1970 which state that because RTD matched INSTEAD's contribution to the service, INSTEAD would have to pay its workers union wages. Neither RTD nor INSTEAD had the funds to raise the wages of their workers, so the program fell apart and set

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<sup>114</sup> "Handicapped Set Back in Battle for Lifts on Buses," *Rocky Mountain News*.

<sup>115</sup> Jerry Brown, "Disabled Riders' Flap Marks Parley," *Rocky Mountain News*, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/471/category/17>.; George Lane, "Bus Lift Decision Delayed," *The Denver Post*, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/493/category/17>.

a precedence for deprioritizing the HandiRide service.<sup>116</sup> Clearly, RTD’s board was not only firm about its decision to not put lifts on buses, but it also had no problem leveraging the possibility of eliminating HandiRide as a threat against vocal activists in the community.

But then, something miraculous happened—after twenty-five or so of Atlantis’s members staged a two-and-a-half-hour sit-in after the meeting, Kimball, backed by three other board members, decided to scrap the vote. Instead, the board would make their final decision about the lifts at its next meeting on December 10. While this gave Atlantis another chance to convince RTD to change its mind, Atlantis also knew it was an uphill battle—in part because the city would now have to pay a fine for changing its order so late in the year.<sup>117</sup> Some board members, such as Norma Anderson, scoffed at the postponement, stating that there was no point putting off the vote again “when everyone on this board knows the outcome” anyway.<sup>118</sup> Additionally, scheduling the new meeting may have been a calculated move by Kimball, who would appear accommodating while safely betting the board wouldn’t overturn its vote due to the possibility of a looming fine. Even so, his actions seemed consistent with his previous attempts to negotiate solutions with the disabled community. Either way, Atlantis gained one more chance to make its pitch.

Despite Kimball’s seemingly gracious gesture, the board stood firm and still voted to reject any plans to add lifts to the fleet. When the reconsideration failed yet again, Blank declared war on RTD by telling *The Denver Post* that Atlantis would hold civil disobedience

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<sup>116</sup> The History of the Independent Living Movement in Denver, 6, box 2, folder 17, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>117</sup> George Lane, “Bus Lift Decision Delayed,” *The Denver Post*, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/493/category/17.>; “Handicapped Set Back in Battle for Lifts on Buses,” *Rocky Mountain News*.

<sup>118</sup> George Lane, “Bus Lift Decision Delayed,” *The Denver Post*.

workshops through the rest of December and respond to this “violation...of their human rights” by returning to the RTD offices on January 4, the first Monday of 1982, for an unrelenting occupation. He told the *Post* that “Everyday during the month of January, ten disabled people will be occupying Kimball’s office... They won’t have any able-bodied people with them – and if they’re arrested, they will be replaced by 10 more.”<sup>119</sup>

But this time Blank’s bark was much louder than his bite, as the sit-in seemed to only last three days.<sup>120</sup> Even so, Atlantis was able to conjure a dramatic story for the papers. The occupation on January 4 got the most attention from the press. Once the protestors flooded into the building, they blocked the main entrance to prevent Kimball or any RTD employees from gaining access to their offices. When those at the entrance were removed by police about an hour and a half into the workday, a new wave of wheelchair users rushed in to replace them. Multiple members, including Mark Johnson and Stephan Saunders, chained themselves to railings along the spiral staircase to Kimball’s office. Kimball, who until this point had appeared to be a friend of the community, was not amused. While Kimball allowed the protestors to subsequently hold a press conference to clearly articulate their demands, someone on his team quickly posted “out of order” signs on both building’s elevators once the group arrived, thus preventing protestors from actually making it to his office. Things really heated up, however, when Blank tried to circumvent the signs by rounding up a few other fellow attendants to carry three wheelchair users up the spiral staircase, resulting in a confrontation between Blank and RTD security officer Mike Hughes, who tried to intervene. Saunders and Johnson were the only protestors issued citations, though Johnson’s charges were dropped after he decided to leave the building

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<sup>119</sup> George Lane, “Handicapped Will Protest RTD Wheelchair-Lift Ban,” *The Denver Post*.

<sup>120</sup> Howard Pankratz, “‘Talk,’ Judge Tells RTD, Atlantis,” *The Denver Post*, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/501/category/17>.

voluntarily.<sup>121</sup> Fearing further escalation by the disabled community, RTD responded to the event by threatening to file a restraining order against members of Atlantis to prevent further demonstrations in its offices.<sup>122</sup> The restraining order was dropped, however, at the urging of Denver District Judge Daniel Sparr, who told RTD and Atlantis representatives that he feared the order would just hinder the relationship between both communities even further.<sup>123</sup>



*Figure 10 "Mark Johnson Chains Himself to staircase in RTD office Building," The Denver Post, John J. Sunderland*

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<sup>121</sup> George Lane, "Bus Plan Protesters Chain Selves," *The Denver Post*, January 5, 1982, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/503/category/17>.

<sup>122</sup> Howard Pankratz, "Suit Over Bus Lifts Hits RTD," *The Denver Post*, January 19, 1982, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/489/category/17>.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

At their next meeting in late February of 1982, over a hundred disabled members of the community, including those from Atlantis and Rosenberg's new organization, Holistic Approaches to Independent Living (HAIL), attended. Other groups that possibly attended might have included members from the Center on Deafness, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and students from Metropolitan State College—all of whom had a history of coalescing with Atlantis and HAIL to lobby the state politically.<sup>124</sup> It is likely that so many people attended because by that time, it was clear that RTD was not only refusing to put lifts on the new fleet of buses but was actively working to discontinue the HandiRide service by July 1 of that year.<sup>125</sup>

Atlantis dramatically showed up to the meeting with a wheelchair and instructed Kimball to use it to ride the city's buses every week until he understood how unusable the service was to disabled citizens. Kimball all but declined, stating that he would try riding with the chair sometime, but privately and on his own schedule. While Kimball did not play along with Atlantis's stunt, he did, however, come to the meeting with a conciliatory gesture. While he could not stop RTD from eliminating the HandiRide service, he did announce that the city was going to delay its removal for another six months.<sup>126</sup> Unfortunately RTD's decision to phase out HandiRide, however, caused a significant amount of damage to Atlantis's cause, as it successfully split the disabled community in two, with many attendees expressing far more concern over whether the service would be discontinued than over whether the new buses would be accessible or not. Even though Kimball had effectively divided the community in two, Blank tried to portray the fracture with an optimistic spin, stating that "in a way, RTD did us a favor"

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<sup>124</sup> The History of the Independent Living Movement in Denver, 10, box 2, folder 17, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>125</sup> Howard Pankratz, "Suit Over Bus Lifts Hits RTD," *The Denver Post*.

<sup>126</sup> Howard Pankratz, "Suit Over Bus Lifts Hits RTD," *The Denver Post*.

because it opened a dialogue between those who preferred the door-to-door service to widely accessible busing.<sup>127</sup>



Figure 11 Atlantis and other protestors offer Kimball a wheelchair to ride on RTD's buses. "RTD Chief is Given Wheelchair," Judith Brimbert and Julia Richardson, *The Denver Post*.

Ultimately, Kimball's preferred solution was rolled out that May. Kimball, who often allowed Atlantis to air their grievances while opposing their political position, seemed to come up with a compromise: mid-summer, half of rush-hour and all of the off-peak busses in Denver

<sup>127</sup> Judith Brimberg, "RTD Chief is Given Wheelchair," *The Denver Post*, February 25, 1982, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?470/category/17>; Howard Pankratz, "Suit Over Bus Lifts Hits RTD," *The Denver Post*.

would be wheelchair accessible.<sup>128</sup> Although this compromise did not consider any negotiation over what to do about the upcoming fleet, it was a huge step forward—and possibly what seemed like the only way forward since the order for the new fleet was due the previous November. Blank told the *Rocky Mountain News* that residents at Atlantis were pleased with the compromise, and word quickly spread through the Atlantis newsletter, *Atlantis Lives!*, which proudly announced the increased accessibility services.<sup>129</sup> Colorado governor Dick Lamm even celebrated Kimball’s compromise by passing an executive order which proclaimed June 6 through the 12 as Disabled Rider’s Week. He specifically praised RTD by announcing that “[RTD] will provide accessible services to persons with disabilities; and... [RTD] and members of the disabled community will continue to work together to provide quality accessible transportation.”<sup>130</sup>

The group was especially pleased because Kimball sweetened the deal by promising to create a media campaign to promote the new service so as many members of the wheelchair using population in Denver could know about the upcoming service as possible.<sup>131</sup> One such advertisement in the *Rocky Mountain News* brags about initiating the service on July 1, a full month before the city’s scheduled roll out, and is signed by L.A. Kimball, effectively punctuating his role in personally acknowledging the disabled community. The advertisement also, however, instructs wheelchair users to call the RTD offices to learn how to work the lifts

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<sup>128</sup> Advertisement L.A. Kimball Announces RTD is “Accessible!” *The Denver Post*, January 2, 1982, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/485/category/17.>; Jerry Brown, “All RTD Routes to Serve Disabled,” *Rocky Mountain News*, May 7, 1982, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/487/category/17.>

<sup>129</sup> “DID YOU KNOW...?” *Atlantis Lives*, July 1982, box 3, folder 30, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>130</sup> Richard Lamm, Executive Order Proclamation Disabled Riders Week June 6-12 June, 1982, *State of Colorado Executive Chambers*, box 3, folder 8, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>131</sup> Jerry Brown, “All RTD Routes to Serve Disabled,” *Rocky Mountain News*, May 7, 1982, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/487/category/17.>

themselves.<sup>132</sup> While some wheelchair users might have preferred having the autonomy of boarding buses alone, this policy also implies that drivers were either not instructed how to work the lifts, or were allowed to refuse helping disabled clients, as such had been the case for Beverly Furnice.

Unfortunately for Kimball, this progress was undercut by an RTD strike. Drivers, mechanics, and clerical workers all stopped working July 12 after negotiations with RTD for a new union contract came to a halt. The strike followed news that the RTD board voted to increase Kimball's salary by ten percent which, according to the board chair, Lowell Hudson, was justified due to Kimball's success increasing district efficiency, negotiating a previous union contract, and improving worker morale.<sup>133</sup> The increase was not only retroactive to the previous September, but was also accompanied by a seventy-two-hundred dollar bonus meant to help Kimball buy a home closer to the Denver area. Bob Sebern, who had been an RTD driver for over three decades, scoffed at the idea that worker morale was up, instead bemoaning that morale had hit an all-time low since Kimball became director. Another driver, Sondra Lewis, quipped "He deserved it... he did a good job giving the royal shaft to the drivers." Kimball lashed back by organizing a public relations campaign to counter worker allegations, publicly stressing that the union did not deserve a raise because they were already overpaid. The strike finally ended on August 9 after RTD agreed to give union employees a four and a half percent yearly salary increase over three years, and an average salary increase of six percent for management staff.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Advertisement L.A. Kimball Announces RTD is "Accessible!" *The Denver Post*, January 2, 1982, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/485/category/17>.

<sup>133</sup> Norman Draper, "Kimball Hike Fuels Discord in RTD Ranks," *Rocky Mountain News*, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/472/category/17&slideshow=+play-false>.

<sup>134</sup> Norman Draper, "Kimball Hike Fuels Discord in RTD Ranks," *Rocky Mountain News*.

While the strike was successful, it left many Denver residents, especially those who were disabled, stranded for almost a month. Throughout the strike, Brian Macleod, who was an administrator at Atlantis, helped field calls from disabled people throughout the city desperately looking for rides to work, for fear of losing their jobs. Terry Fowler, who was also a member of the Gang of 19, similarly found herself in a bind when the strike impeded her ability to receive an education. Fowler, who was now twenty-six-years-old, was enrolled at the Community College of Denver at the Auraria campus to prepare for taking the GED (General Equivalency Diploma). She had attended the class for almost a year and was becoming anxious about whether her absences would cause her to fail the class. She was also especially upset because the strike occurred right when she felt like she was making significant progress on her reading comprehension. While Atlantis had no sway over ending the RTD strike, they were still able to catch the attention of the *Rocky Mountain News*, which featured both Macleod and Fowler's stories, effectively keeping the disabled community relevant in the public dialogue about RTD despite the fact that Kimball was too preoccupied with his own reputation to engage with any discussion over bus lifts or accessible scheduling.<sup>135</sup>

Once the strike was over, however, ridership among the disabled community spiked significantly. Blank was quoted in one newspaper clipping that though he found the sudden increase encouraging, it was important to not celebrate too soon because "it will take a bit more time for the word to spread to some 16,000 Denver residents who use wheelchairs."<sup>136</sup> Letters and phone calls flooded into the HAIL offices, which had worked closely with Atlantis to make accessible bussing a reality. They celebrated the new bussing schedule with gratitude, with one

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<sup>135</sup> Norman Draper, "Handicapped Hardest Hit by RTD Strike," *Rocky Mountain News*, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/492/category/17>.

<sup>136</sup> "Early Surveys Show a Positive Response to RTD Accessibility," ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/492/category/17>.

rider not only lauding RTD for increasing the number of busses with lifts, but also for a general improvement in the attitudes of drivers helping disabled residents board the buses. Theresa Preda, who replaced Rosenberg as HAIL’s executive director in part due to her positionality as a disabled woman, even referred to the evolution of RTD’s degree of accommodation as a model for other organizations, stating that “hopefully, this advancement may help indicate to others that there are still many areas that are still inaccessible, needing revision to meet the RTD initiative.”<sup>137</sup>

Just as Atlantis’s mission with RTD started to look up, however, the independent living center became embroiled in controversy. In early November of 1982, Colorado’s Attorney General office began investigating Atlantis for Medicaid fraud after a few former clients accused the administration of billing the state for services that they never provided.<sup>138</sup> While Brian Macleod blamed an innocent discrepancy in bookkeeping, Blank lashed back by accusing the former clients of seeking attention.<sup>139</sup> The investigation persisted at least through April of 1983 and hinged upon the Attorney General’s office interpretation of what constituted a sufficient service and whether Atlantis’s staff was spread too thin to properly accommodate their clientele.<sup>140</sup> Ultimately, Atlantis was exonerated. According to Rosenberg, the mix up was simply a result of a naivete regarding record keeping on the part of Blank and Kopp, who had no experience running a non-profit prior to Atlantis.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> “Early Surveys Show a Positive Response to RTD Accessibility,” ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/492/category/17>.

<sup>138</sup> Neil Westgaard, “Atlantis Probe Launched,” *The Denver Post*, December 21, 1982, box 3, folder 19, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>139</sup> Neil Westgaard, “Atlantis Probe Launched,” *The Denver Post*.

<sup>140</sup> “Attorney General Knocks Atlantis for Bookkeeping,” *The Handicapped Coloradan*, April 1983, vol 4., no. 9., box 3, folder 28, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>141</sup> Barry Rosenberg, interview by author, September 1, 2021.

While the scandal ultimately did not seem to affect the progress that the disabled community had made, at least five local newspaper articles closely reported on the subject (three of which were written by the *Handicapped Coloradan*). This media attention seems to have surpassed the coverage Atlantis received for any other protest, demonstration, lawsuit, hearings, or press conferences the organization had conducted since its conception in the early 1970s—including the Gang of 19’s blockade. Although Atlantis proudly maintained a reputation for civil disobedience tactics, in part because it effectively remained headquarters for ADAPT until around the time Mike Auberger retired as director in 2002, Blank, Kopp, and the rest of Atlantis’s board of directors remained sensitive to whether press coverage regarding their activism portrayed them as righteous rather than aggressive and obstinate. This was exemplified in a section of the center’s 1980 management plan titled “Significant Vulnerabilities,” which listed “cutting corners instead of using regular channels,” “bad publicity,” and evaluation by the “IRS [Internal Revenue Service] and other government agencies,” as some of their key weaknesses.<sup>142</sup>

Atlantis’s management plan also, however, acknowledged the impact the center made toward balancing its internal mission of deinstitutionalizing disabled folks by expanding their residential real-estate and services and their external mission of pressuring various city governmental agencies to enact policies that made independent living possible for disabled community members—not just their progress with RTD. The very first priority listed in the organization’s mission, for instance, was to “actively liberate disabled people from state and private institutions,” directly followed by the general instruction to “be a civil rights

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<sup>142</sup> Atlantis 1980 Management, box 3, folder 28, 10, box 3, folder 28, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

advocate.”<sup>143</sup> Even before Atlantis’s inception, activists associated with Blank and Heritage House’s youth wing tackled a broad spectrum of issues, including voter registration, inviting politicians to visit their disabled constituents, electric wheelchair purchases and repair, finding private vehicles, creating adult education programs and career workshops, and developing the crisis hotline. By the mid-1980s, Atlantis even found space to establish a Learning Center which not only provided recreational activities such as art classes, a rap group, exercise groups, and support groups, but even an advocacy class designed to “discuss current events, civil rights for the disabled, and upcoming demonstrations.”<sup>144</sup> In fact, prior to 1983, when ADAPT was founded, the administration at Atlantis was not looking to bring attention to the need for accessible transportation across the country but was rather aiming to duplicate the center’s independent living model in other states. This was evidenced by the 1980 management plan, which described Atlantis’s geographical scope as “national” and organizational scope as “our society.”<sup>145</sup> It is likely that Atlantis’s transportation advocacy received the most press coverage because it was publicly visible and directly disrupted the non-disabled politics. This, along with the legacy of ADAPT, likely played a large role in shaping a collective identity associated with transportation advocacy overshadowing the complex network of services that Atlantis provided internally to encourage independent living.

Ultimately, the combination of the Medicaid fraud scandal mixed with the satisfaction of Kimball’s deal to expand accessible bussing on peak-hour routes might have shifted Atlantis’s focus from challenging RTD to further improving the internal services it provided to its clients.

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<sup>143</sup> Atlantis 1980 Management, box 3, folder 28, 1, box 3, folder 28, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>144</sup> “Learning Center Schedule,” *Atlantis Lives!*, May 1986, box 3, folder 30, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>145</sup> Atlantis 1980 Management, box 3, folder 28, 1, box 3, folder 28, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

This might explain why newspaper reports and private records regarding Atlantis's RTD activism drops off after the summer of 1982. That said, it does not mean that protests and hearings didn't continue—it may have been unrecorded because newspapers perceived the compromise as the end of the conflict, or maybe because fewer people from Atlantis and other organizations were attending or attending on their own behalf. Yet despite what appears to be a six-month pause in Atlantis's quest to convince RTD to order wheelchair accessible buses, the disabled community won. In January of 1983, the RTD board voted to put lifts on the new fleet of 89 buses.

And the activists' success wasn't just political; they also seemed to have won the hearts and minds of the board, who voted 13-1 to reverse RTD's yearlong anti-lift position. The reversal was astounding since it was enacted more than a year after the order for the fleet was due, meaning RTD would almost certainly have to pay a fine to put lifts on the new buses. Kimball, who historically opposed the lifts, closed out the vote by announcing that the vote would delay the arrival of the new fleet by at least four months. Regardless of Kimball's attitude, the rest of the room was buzzing with excitement. The thirty or so disabled community members who attended the meeting cheered and applauded once the vote passed. One of the board members, Byron Johnson, matched their enthusiasm by declaring that was "...not a question of money... it's a question of federal, state, and local government recognizing that the handicapped person has been ignored."<sup>146</sup> While the comment spoke to how accessible transportation made it possible for wheelchair users to live independently, it also revealed how government policy could either validate or deny a disabled individual's personhood.

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<sup>146</sup> Burt Hubbard, "New RTD Board Oks Lifts for 90 Buses," January 11, 1983, *Rocky Mountain News*, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/524/category/17>.

The win, however, wasn't without hiccups. In the remaining seven years leading up to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, members of the disabled community in Denver still had to keep RTD in check to prevent backsliding. When RTD sought to expand its bus routes between Denver, Boulder, Longmont, and Evergreen in late 1983 and early 1984, members of Atlantis community still showed up to an RTD hearing to instruct the board to make the new routes accessible.<sup>147</sup> The community also asked Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder to remind Byron Johnson, who had since become chairman of the RTD board, that while "RTD has done quite a bit over the years to provide and maintain regularly scheduled buses for the handicapped... I now ask you that you keep your good record in mind when considering bus purchases for inner-city transportation."<sup>148</sup>

By 1985, ridership among wheelchair users climbed to 12,000 passengers a year, making the service so popular that RTD could not keep up with repairing lifts from all the wear and tear caused by such frequent usage. Exasperated and unsure of how to fund lift repairs, RTD's new general manager Ed Colby announced a plan to scale back accessible bus routes in favor of expanding the HandiRide service, which would be a cheaper solution. Furious at the possible setback, a squad of Atlantis protestors, including Bryn Macleod, George Roberts, and up-and-coming ADAPT lead organizer Mike Auberger, obstructed traffic in two back-to-back protests which, in addition to getting them arrested, awarded them a meeting with Denver Mayor Federico Peña's office to discuss reversing RTD's new plan.<sup>149</sup> Overall, however, RTD remained

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<sup>147</sup> "Handicapped Complain to RTD," Rocky Mountain News, October 19, 1983, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/263/category/10>.

<sup>148</sup> Patricia Schroeder, Notice to Byron Johnson, (Washington D.C.: Congress of the United States, August 13, 1984), ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/521/category/17>.

<sup>149</sup> Judith Brimberg, "Handicapped Block Buses," *The Denver Post*, February 16, 1985, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallerdy/picture.php?/460/category/17>.

responsive to the needs of its disabled constituents from 1983 forward, therefore shoring up Atlantis's capacity to redirect its army of advocates to pursue a new cause.

## PART VII: THE BIRTH OF ADAPT

Coincidentally, 1983 was also the year that the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), America's largest public transportation lobbying group, held one of its bi-annual conferences in Denver.<sup>150</sup> Because it was the American Public Transportation Association's job to lobby on behalf of these public transit systems, the organization worked diligently to protect cities from being persecuted by the federal government for limiting their accessible services. While public transportation might have a humble reputation, some American Public Transportation Association conferences were quite extravagant, likely in part due to funding provided by large auto manufacturers eager to market their vehicles to city governments across the country. Since these conferences were such effective networking events, many prominent politicians made a point to attend as well. The 1983 meet-up in Denver, however, was particularly high profile. Over 3000 American and Canadian public transit officials would be in attendance,<sup>151</sup> in addition to the U.S. Secretary of Transportation Elizabeth Dole, Vice President of the United States George H.W. Bush, and presidential candidates John Glenn, Gary Hart, Walter Mondale, and Alan Cranston.<sup>152</sup> Clearly, the American Public Transportation Association had some considerable political sway—so much so that the organization's lobbying played an integral role in softening the federal government's oversight over accessibility compliance.

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<sup>150</sup> "ADAPT Cordially Invites you to an Uproar," Wade Blank and Mike Auberger, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/260/category/10>.

<sup>151</sup> George Lane, "Handicapped Seek Change in Public Transit," *The Denver Post*, October 25, 1983, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/277/category/10>.

<sup>152</sup> "ADAPT Cordially Invites you to an Uproar," Wade Blank and Mike Auberger, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/260/category/10>.

This is because, in 1981, the American Public Transportation Association won a federal district case in the District of Columbia’s court of appeals that completely reshaped the landscape of section 504 compliance nationally. In the case, named *APTA vs Lewis*, the American Public Transportation Association sued Andrew Lewis, the Secretary of the United States Department of Transportation, as a means of challenging the department’s one-size-fits-all approach to defining what constituted accessible transportation. This was a response to the Department of Transportation’s decision to use section 504 to implement key provisions in the Urban Mass Transit Act of 1964 and the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1973 that made it possible to require all public transit systems requiring federal funding to satisfy accessibility compliance by purchasing buses with wheelchair lifts. The American Public Transportation Association objected to this regulation by regurgitating the familiar argument that the added cost of bus lifts was too financially burdensome for many cities already struggling to find money to keep their transit systems afloat. Ultimately, the two district judges assigned the case, Harry T. Edwards and Abner Mikva, sided with the American Public Transportation Association. Their opinion stating that, although that while cities still had to provide accessible transportation to disabled community members, the way and extent to which they provided these accommodations would be up to each locality. This is why, despite John Holland’s legal success in 1978 which compelled RTD to install lifts on all future bus fleet purchases, L.A. Kimball’s administration was still able to order the 89 new vehicles to arrive in 1983 without lifts—and why it was so difficult for Atlantis to change RTD’s mind. While *APTA vs Lewis* did not strike down section 504 entirely, it meant that it was illegal for the federal government to create national standards for accessible services.<sup>153</sup> In the case of transportation, this meant that the Department of

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<sup>153</sup> *Davis, Enabling Acts*, 54.

Transportation could no longer enforce a policy that required all public transit systems that received federal funding to meet accessibility requirements by buying buses with lifts.

This new policy was called the “local option.” Most cities took advantage of this new policy by investing in door-to-door paratransit systems that mimicked the structure of Denver’s HandiRide service. While it was true that even in Denver some disabled people found these paratransit systems to be more convenient than accessible bussing, this trend upset the members of Atlantis, who knew from experience that even though door-to-door transportation services were cheaper than buying lifts, they were not efficient or robust enough to cater to the entire disabled population in most cities including Denver. In addition to the inherent discrimination perpetuated by the local option due to its impracticality, Atlantis, as well as other disabled people nationally, began to argue that the policy also perpetuated segregation between able bodied and disabled people since it required people of differing abilities to ride separate buses.<sup>154</sup>

Members of Atlantis were highly cognizant of the profound legal implications of the *APTA vs Lewis* case and saw the decision as proof that even the most iron-clad policy gains were vulnerable to ableist notions about what disabled people realistically need to live independently. If section 504 worked as it was supposed to, after all, Atlantis wouldn’t have had to protest or demand services from RTD even once. In the activists’ experience, putting consistent pressure on local authorities seemed to be the best way to both enact change and sustain it. In the months leading up to the American Public Transportation conference, Blank explicitly stated his distrust of federal enforcement by characterizing section 504 as practically irrelevant to their cause by telling *Accent on Living* magazine that that the group’s ability to achieve fifty percent bus-lift compliance by 1982 was a result of local politicking and civil disobedience following the Gang

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<sup>154</sup> Scotch, *From Good Will To Civil Rights*, 133.

of 19's activism, not federally mandated compliance.<sup>155</sup> Similarly, when disabled activists in Denver decided to challenge the local option, they did not consider protesting the federal government to change their policy, but instead opted to attack the problem at its source by targeting and publicly demonizing the American Public Transportation Association. If change was going to happen, it was going to bubble up from the fury of forgotten communities, not from politicians in Washington.

Coming off the heels of its victory against RTD, Atlantis's opportunity to disrupt the American Public Transit Association conference must have felt like a natural extension of their cause to expand access to public transportation. Even though members of Atlantis could ride the new buses in Denver, they still couldn't get around cities like Chicago, Dallas, Cincinnati, and Syracuse independently. The fact that many disabled residents of these cities did not have the same resources that Atlantis had to mobilize against the segregated services in their cities deeply disturbed them.<sup>156</sup> By repeating their method of protesting at the American Public Transit Association conference in Denver, they hoped to call attention to the organization's discriminatory policies and convince local public transit officials all over the country to step up and cater to the needs of their disabled constituents, just as RTD had.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> "Denver Busing its Disabled," *Accent on Living*, Summer 1983, 87, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/512/category/17&slideshow=+play-false>.

<sup>156</sup> A Brief History of ADAPT 1983-86, box 8, folder 14, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

<sup>157</sup> A Brief History of ADAPT 1983-86, box 8, folder 14, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.

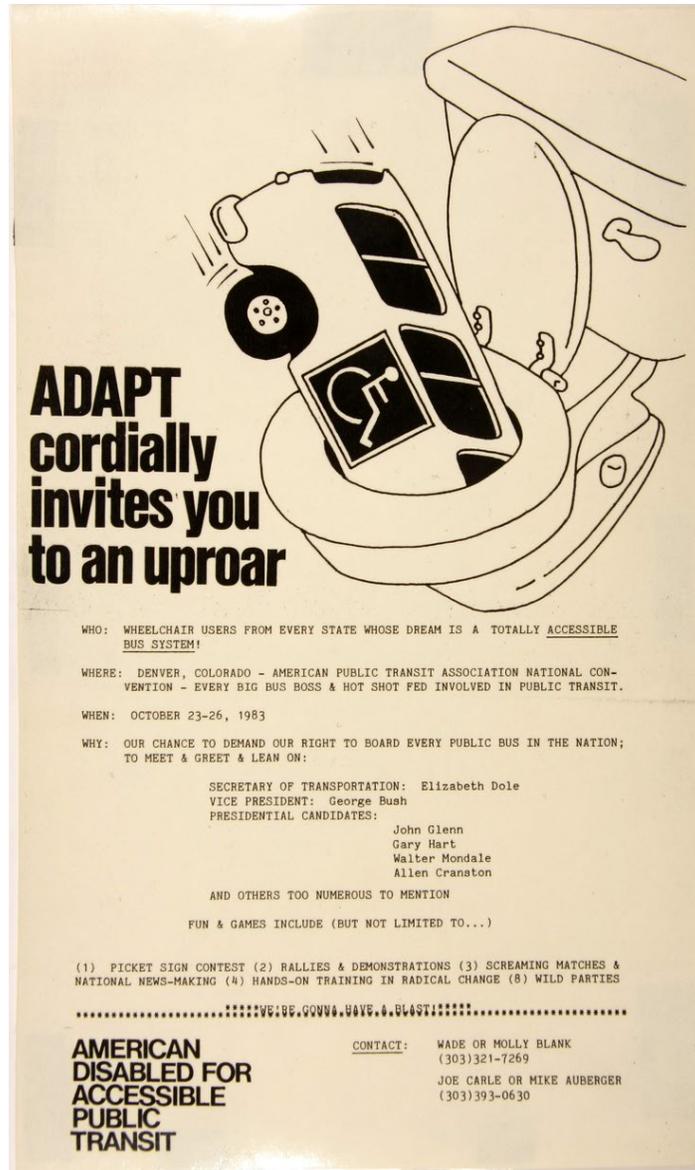


Figure 12 ADAPT Flyer for 1983 APTA Convention, Mike Auburger and Wade Blank

Until that point, Atlantis functioned as the central hub for disability activism in the state, but, as an independent living center beholden to the needs of its residents, it was not equipped to run a national single-issue movement. Realizing that the scope of the American Public Transit Association's reach gave Atlantis the chance to expand its activism into a national force,

however, the group decided to develop a new organization to advance their new cause. In the summer leading up to the American Public Transit Association conference, Wade Blank and Mike Auberger drew up a flyer to advertise the protest and sent it to disability activists around the country. It read both as a call-to-action and an invitation to a total blowout. Printed at the top of the poster was a drawing of a HandiRide bus forcefully shoved into a toilet. Underneath the picture sat a string of sentences that promised the event would be packed full of “Rallies and Demonstrations, Screaming Matches and National News-Making,” and, of course, “Wild Parties.” Most notably, however, was the stack of words arranged in the bottom left announcing the new name of their protest organization called “Americans Disabled for Accessible Public Transit,” or ADAPT.

Just as Blank and Auberger advertised, ADAPT’s first action against the American Public Transportation Association caused quite a scene. ADAPT was able to capture the media’s attention in part because it successfully gained the support of Denver mayor Federico Peña who unequivocally backed ADAPT by signing a proclamation that not only explained that accessible transportation was a major cornerstone of the disabled community’s ability to live independently, but explicitly called out the American Public Transportation Association for their discriminatory policies. The association, he wrote, “represents almost all transit authorities and has the power to encourage its members to make their systems accessible as well as to encourage bus manufactures to design and build accessible buses,” followed by a string of statements that demanded that the association “goes on record calling for 100% accessibility by all public transit systems... serves notice on all manufacturers that its members will only buy wheelchair accessible buses... and urges the federal government to reinstate the 504 regulation mandating

that all public transit system buses be accessible.”<sup>158</sup> This was the most unambiguous public endorsement that Denver activists ever received from a politician outside the scope of the inner circle of politicians that helped found and fund ADAPT.

The proclamation became somewhat controversial, however, when Colorado governor Dick Lamm publicly endorsed the American Public Transportation Association’s anti-lift policy on Tuesday, October 25, 1983-- the first day of the association’s conference. During a press conference at the Hilton Hotel, where the conference was being held, he countered Peña’s proclamation by arguing that the eight billion dollars it would cost to update buses nationally would be better spent “reindustrializ[ing]” the country, and even went so far as to claim that ADAPT’s initiative represented a “microcosm” of what was wrong with America because it would contribute to the problem of outsourcing industry to other countries like Japan. His announcement was particularly painful for ADAPT activists likely because they felt a sense of deep betrayal.<sup>159</sup> Governor Lamm had been a supporter of the community since at least 1974 when he visited Heritage House to listen to the grievances of members of the youth wing. Now even his 1982 statement lauding RTD for its accessible bussing policies felt empty. Lamm’s press conference was not simply offensive, but it set the tone for the conference by making it clear that the American Public Transportation Association and its supporters were not interested in negotiating with or even listening to ADAPT.

Though most of the protestors present at the conference were from Denver, activists from at least eleven other states came to Colorado to crash the conference. Their counterprogramming

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<sup>158</sup> Federico Peña, Mayoral Proclamation Urging the American Public Transportation Association to Endorse Accessible Transportation Services, August 18, 1983, *City and County of Denver*, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?279/category/10>.

<sup>159</sup> Peter Blake, “Mass Transit Group Applauds as Lamm Opposes Bus Lifts,” *Rocky Mountain News*, October 25, 1983, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?264/category/10>.

began with blocking the sidewalks outside the Hilton Hotel the weekend before the conference to make the size of their entourage, which included at least thirty ADAPT members, visible.<sup>160</sup>

Things became especially contentious, however, on the second day of the conference. Although representatives of the association were weary of ADAPT's presence, they allowed the group to give a twenty-minute presentation to attendees of the conference to air their grievances. While Congresswoman Patricia Schroder worked diligently to set up a private meeting between Blank, Auberger, and United States Secretary of Transportation Elizabeth Dole, there is no evidence that the meeting happened.<sup>161</sup>

Any sort of good will between the two groups, however, shattered when organizers of the meeting suggested that members of ADAPT take the freight elevator up to the banquet hall, where the convention was being held. The members of ADAPT were livid at their recommendation, causing Denver based activist, Trudy Knutson, to scold officials during the presentation by exclaiming that they "told us to ride up the elevator that will later take down the garbage and trash from your lunch."<sup>162</sup> Members of the association claimed innocence by explaining that they thought the suggestion would be helpful since the elevator was about twenty feet from the banquet hall. Regardless of their intentions, however, the relationship between the groups was rendered irreparable and set the tone for their interactions for several years to come. Bryn Macleod and Mark Johnson, Atlantis veterans, lead the presentation, which seemed to at least catch the attention of Andrew Young, the Mayor of Atlanta, Georgia, who later met

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<sup>160</sup> Burt Hubbard, "Peña Intervenes in Handicapped-Transit Spat," *Rocky Mountain News*, August 19, 1983, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/259/category/10>. ; George Lane, "Handicapped Seek Change in Public Transit," *The Denver Post*.

<sup>161</sup> Patricia Schroeder, Letter to Secretary of Transportation Elizabeth Dole, (Washington D.C.: Congress of the United States, October 5, 1983), ADAPT Museum <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/278/category/10>.

<sup>162</sup> Joseph B. Verrengia, "Freight Elevator Raises Ill Will at Meeting," *Rocky Mountain News*, October 26, 1983, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/283/category/10>.

privately with ADAPT to further discuss accessible services in his city.<sup>163</sup> It was incremental progress.

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<sup>163</sup> Joseph B. Verrengia, "Freight Elevator Raises Ill Will at Meeting," *Rocky Mountain News*.

## PART VIII: ADAPT SINCE THE ADA

ADAPT continued to hold demonstrations at every American Public Transportation Association convention until the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 when the association's resistance to endorsing accessible services became irrelevant to the cause. Though it might seem odd that ADAPT focused nearly all its energy and resources protesting the American Public Transportation Association for so many years, it was not for lack of creativity. Because the association held its conventions twice a year in different cities throughout the United States and Canada, it gave ADAPT the opportunity to draw attention to the inaccessible public transit systems in each place they visited. When they followed the American Public Transportation Association to Los Angeles in 1985, for instance, the group migrated from the convention to nearby Long Beach, dispatching demonstrators at multiple intersections to block a series of city buses to draw attention to the region's infamous inaccessibility.<sup>164</sup> A year later in Detroit, ADAPT combined the spectacle of blocking the Henry Ford Museum where the convention was being held (thus forcing over 1500 of the conference's attendees to walk half a mile to the opening reception) with a targeted media campaign to call out mayor and civil rights activist Coleman Young, who was invited to introduce the conference, for side-stepping Michigan's requirement that all transit companies receiving state funds make their busses accessible by refusing to accept financial assistance.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Gil Casarez, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, September 11, 2021, Disability Activism in Colorado Collection, History Colorado Special Collections, Denver, CO. "Gil Casarez Recalls 1985 Los Angeles ADAPT Action," April 30, 2017, <https://adapt.org/1985-los-angeles-gil-casarez/>.

<sup>165</sup> Jennefer Pittman, "Riders in Wheelchairs Push Buses to ADAPT," *In These Times*, October 22, 1983, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/604/search/770>.; "Rosa Parks Leads Detroit Protest March," *The Handicapped Coloradan*, September 1983, ADAPT Museum, 9 no. 2, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/593/search/770>.

As ADAPT grew, so did its reputation for militance. Even though the group has always been non-violent, the visual shock-value of witnessing what was sometimes hundreds of wheelchair users descend onto city streets and swarm convention centers could be jarring, to say the least. The reputation for militancy also seemed to correspond with ADAPT's fixation with demonstrating against the American Public Transportation Association. Brian who, for instance, was put on an FBI watch list after following the United States Secretary of Transportation into an elevator during one such convention in Atlanta, Georgia. On a few occasions, however, talk of ADAPT's militancy sprung from a place of ableism. This was the case in Detroit, when Blank was accused of manipulating the disabled community into demonstrating to gain personal fame. Association delegates told the local police force that Blank was an "urban terrorist" hell-bent on triggering a copy-cat Kent State shooting, a call back to his ministry activism in Akron, Ohio.<sup>166</sup> Even Rosa Parks, who initially planned to march alongside ADAPT protestors during the conference but changed her mind after meeting with Coleman Young and called Blank out for the "traumatic manner in which you choose to dramatize disabled Americans lack of access to transportation... [by using] tactics that will embarrass the cities guest and cripple the cities present transportation system."<sup>167</sup> Comments like these, of course, completely discounted the agency of disabled activists who attended these demonstrations of their own volition.

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<sup>166</sup> "Rosa Parks—Wheelchair Groups Fracture on Tactics," [*The Handicapped Coloradan?*], Fall 1983, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/586/search/770>; "Rosa Bows Out at Last Minute," *The Handicapped Coloradan*, 9 no. 3., October 1983, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/592/search/845>.

<sup>167</sup> Elaine Steele, *Rosa Parks Will Not be Participating in Counterprogramming for Detroit American Public Transportation Association Conference*, (Detroit: National Committee for the Rosa L. Parks Shrine), October 3, 1986, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/579/search/176>; Note that spelling errors are consistent with Steele's writing.

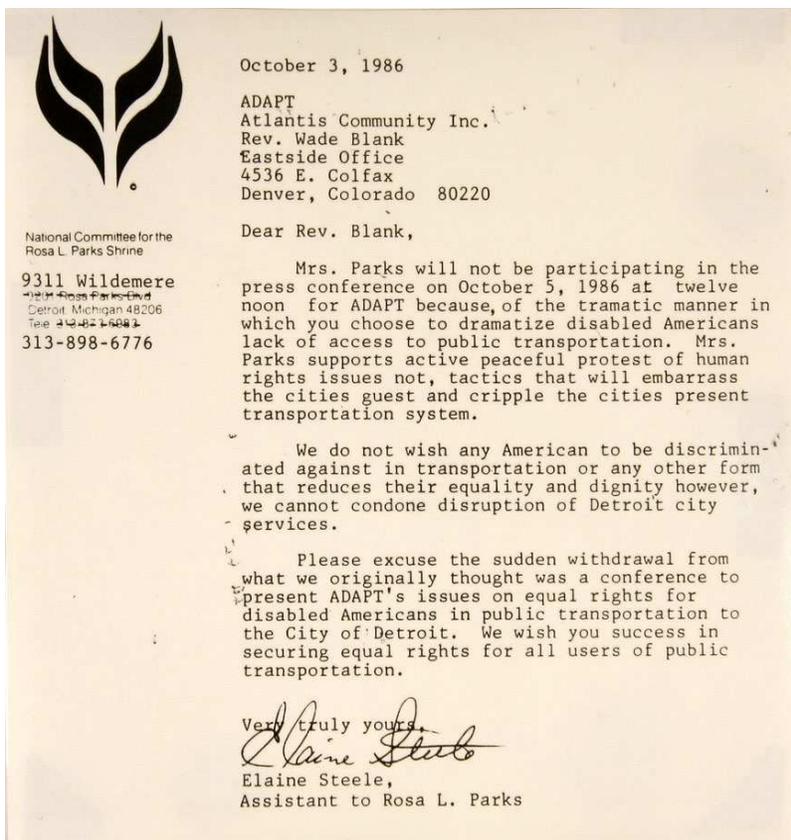


Figure 13 Elaine Steele Rosa Parks, Assistant to Rosa Parks, Announces that Rosa Parks Will Not be Participating in Counterprogramming for Detroit American Public Transportation Association Conference, National Committee for the Rosa L. Parks Shrine, October 3, 1986.

It is important to note, though, that the group has prioritized tactical organization from the get-go. Immediately after founding ADAPT, Blank obtained funding to establish an organization called the Access Institute that trained disabled activist to become civil-disobedience organizers.<sup>168</sup> Those in ADAPT additionally received mentorship from Shel Trapp, a Chicago-based community organizer trained in the Alinsky method of activism who was best known for founding the National People’s Action group, which was designed to empower

<sup>168</sup> “Access Institute has Grant to Train 12 Disabled Activists,” *The Handicapped Coloradan*, December 1983, Attachment E, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/269/search/907>.

working-class people by teaching them how to hold local politicians accountable. Logistical training was, and still is, necessary for commanding such a large group of people, as was the case for ADAPT's most famous demonstration, the Capitol Crawl. The Capitol Crawl was designed to urge Congress to pass the ADA. During the action, ADAPTERs from all over the country met in Washington D.C. to shed their mobility aids and crawl up the U.S. Capitol steps to punctuate the literal inaccessibility of democracy in America. It was exemplary of how practiced ADAPT organizers were at coordinating cross-country travel and living arrangements for protestors who required a diverse array of accommodations in a pre-ADA world.



*Figure 14 George Roberts braces himself to crawl up the Capitol steps as two people assist him. Picture taken by Tom Olin, courtesy of the ADAPT Museum.*

No other action, however, demonstrated ADAPT's capacity to organize than the Free our People March in 2003. Since 1990, ADAPT has changed their name to American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today to reflect their new mission of deinstitutionalizing the thousands of disabled people, including children and veterans, who have been placed in nursing homes against their will. The march reflected this new mission and was meant to pressure Congress to pass the Medicaid Community-Based Attendant Services and Supports Act (MiCASSA). MiCASSA was first introduced as the Medicaid Community Attendant Services Act (MiCASA) of 1997, then reintroduced as the Disability Integration Act (DIA) in 2019. Most recently, 2019, it has been renamed the LaTonya Reeves Freedom Act in 2021. This Act allows disabled individuals in need of attendant care to choose to receive those services at home rather than in a nursing home.

In a matter of two weeks, ADAPT ushered over 160 disability activists 144 miles from the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia to Washington D.C. The coordination effort included finding food, water, appropriate attendant care, pinpointing locations to rest at the end of each day (which included setting up a tent city on seven different church properties, a firehouse lawn, and an ice-hockey rink) and developing a program to present once the group arrived in Washington. The group even hauled twelve port-o-potties that they generously shared with the State Troopers assigned to escort the group.<sup>169</sup> Unfortunately, despite the grandeur of the Free our People March, the demonstration received much less press coverage than the Capitol Crawl. This was in large part because the threat of hurricane Isabel caused Congress to evacuate Washington D.C. right before ADAPT's caravan arrived.

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<sup>169</sup> "Nancy Salendra Recalls 2003 'Free Our People March,'" April 30, 2017, <https://adapt.org/2003-philadelphia-free-our-people-march-nancy-salendra/>; Dawn Russell, interview by author, Denver, Colorado. September 16, 2021, Disability Activism in Colorado Collection, History Colorado Special Collections, Denver, CO.



*Figure 15 Members of ADAPT sleep in a hockey rink on their way to Washington D.C. during the Free Our People March, courtesy of the ADAPT Museum.*

Although the Free our People March ran like clockwork, like the vast majority of ADAPT actions, it never seemed to have any real effect on public policy. Ultimately, ADAPT could not quite replicate the success Atlantis had in Denver because it never stuck around in any particular city long enough to hold local officials accountable for making their transportation systems fully accessible. ADAPT did, however, do something equally important than just advocate for accessible services—they fused together a national network of professional connections and unbreakable friendships that both tightened bonds between regional communities and empowered disabled activists individually by enforcing the idea that there is strength in numbers.

ADAPT actions were, and still are, just as much about community building as they are about making political gains. In some cases, these new relationships saved peoples' lives. Protesting was such an important part of the culture at Atlantis that through the early 2000s, it was typical for disabled board members and administrators to attend demonstrations in different states multiple times a year. This meant that those in charge of Atlantis were able to develop strong relationships with other administrator-activists at different independent living centers throughout the country. Because some of these administrators, particularly those from the South, ran the only independent living centers in their state or surrounding states, they were overwhelmed with applications from people desperately trying to escape nursing homes in their area. Consequently, Atlantis, which by the 1980s had the resources to accept new clients, began partnering with such centers to transfer clients to Colorado to make more space for new people to obtain home and community-based services. Atlantis became so involved in this process that it additionally partnered with Craig Hospital in Englewood, Colorado, to locate and process transfers to the state.<sup>170</sup>

This network became known as the “underground railroad,” a name that retired Atlantis administrator, activist, and Colorado transplant LaTonya Reeves, attributes to the seriousness and urgency of the transfer process. Reeves, who was institutionalized in Tennessee, found freedom after contacting Deborah Cunningham, the Executive Director of Memphis Center for Independent Living and a proud member of ADAPT. When Cunningham could not find a

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<sup>170</sup> Dawn Russell, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, September 16, 2021, Disability Activism in Colorado Collection, History Colorado Special Collections, Denver, CO.; Darrell Williams, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, September 18, 2021, Disability Activism in Colorado Collection, History Colorado Special Collections, Denver, CO.; Tim Thornton, zoom interview by author, August 11, 2021, Fort Collins, Colorado, Disability Activism in Colorado Collection, History Colorado Special Collections, Denver, CO.; LaTonya Reeves, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, October 7, 2021, Disability Activism in Colorado Collection, History Colorado Special Collections, Denver, CO.

permanent independent living arrangement for Reeves in Memphis, she was able to find a spot for her in Colorado through her connection with Atlantis through ADAPT. Reeves moved to Atlantis in 1991 and immediately became a prolific ADAPT activist as well, eventually becoming the namesake for the LaTonya Reeves Freedom Act. Her story underscores the need for Congress to act upon funding home and community-based services nationally, as, although Reeves was able to make Colorado her new home, she was also forced to leave her family and friends, who did not have the resources to care for her personally, for the opportunity to live independently. Many more people found freedom in Colorado through their connections with Cunningham and others like her. By 1993, almost seventy of Atlantis's clients were from states other than Colorado.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> "Atlantis Independent Inc. Audit," Atlantis Independent Community Inc., June 19, 1993, Box 4, Folder 25, Wade and Molly Blank Papers, Denver Public Library.; Darrell Williams, interview by author, September 18.; Tim Thornton, zoom interview by author, August 11, 2021.; LaTonya Reeves, interview by author, October 7, 2021.



*Figure 16 Picture taken by author, LaTonya Reeves in her Apartment, October 7, 2021.*

Because ADAPT actions also functioned as social networking events (recall the promise that Wade Blank and Mike Auberger made about there being “Wild Parties” at their first demonstration against the American Public Transportation Association), it was not uncommon for activists to make new friends or even meet their life partners during protests. One such activist, Julie Reiskin, recalled meeting her partner, Pamela Carter, right before being arrested during a 1993 ADAPT action in Washington D.C. Eight months after their flirtatious stint in jail, Reiskin moved from Connecticut to Colorado to live with Carter, where she would become one

of the state's most powerful legal advocates for disability rights.<sup>172</sup> Only three years after moving to Colorado, Reiskin became the executive director of the Colorado Cross-Disability Coalition (CCDC), which works to help disabled people in the state to find the services they need to live independent lives. In 2009, President Barack Obama additionally appointed Reiskin to serve on the board of the Legal Services Corporation, a non-profit established by Congress in 1974 that works to fund legal aid for low-income Americans.<sup>173</sup> ADAPT was a critical part of bringing people together, especially during a time when face-to-face contact was one of the only means of meeting like-minded individuals.

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<sup>172</sup> Julie Reiskin, zoom interview by author, January 19, 2022, Fort Collins, Colorado, Disability Activism in Colorado Collection, History Colorado Special Collections, Denver, CO.

<sup>173</sup> Julie Reiskin, zoom interview by author, January 19, 2022, Fort Collins, Colorado, Disability Activism in Colorado Collection, History Colorado Special Collections, Denver, CO.

## PART IX: CONCLUSION AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Through my experience of chronicling the road to ADAPT, I've learned that there's an overwhelming validation that accompanies meeting people like you. Like many others, I only began studying the history of disability after beginning the process of coming to terms with my own disabilities. In 2019, I was diagnosed as autistic and as having persistent and severe depression. While I feel strongly that disabled individuals should not have to rely on medical professionals to confirm the validity of their embodied experiences, it was admittedly a relief to have another person confirm that the alienation I've endured my whole life from being forced out of social circles and never understanding why was *real*. But in retrospect, the process was more complicated than I anticipated. Before my diagnosis, I was convinced that once I received confirmation that I was indeed autistic, I would finally be able to navigate the world as a proud and out disabled individual. Instead, I was hit with a wave of grief that I still do not understand. I underwent a period of intense regression as a consequence of abruptly realizing how painful it was to charge through the sensory complications I experience and how exhausting it was to mask being autistic by doing things like forcing myself not to engage in self stimulatory behaviors. I was also deeply disturbed and hurt by the denial that some people around me expressed when I shared my diagnoses, which, I am ashamed to confess, still sometimes makes me feel like a fraud.

When I began graduate school, I tried my best to appear proudly autistic. There was, however, an undeniable part of me that was still grappling with the shame of presenting as disabled. I was also having a difficult time navigating the pressure that came with my professors and peers looking to me as an authority on disability history, in addition to the added obligation I

felt to gently chime in every time someone said something accidentally ableist. I was dealing with the guilt of knowing I certainly must have perpetuated misinformation along the way without knowing it because I was still ignorant of so many of the intricacies of disability culture and the historical narrative more generally. That, combined with the recent failure of a personal project that was near and dear to my heart and a vicious series of transphobic and ableist remarks directed toward me by a professor I admired and respected, resulted in me becoming seriously suicidal, and in danger of being institutionalized myself. Although I still do not know what ultimately saved me (it's never one thing), I do not think it's a coincidence that my recovery coincided with my subsequent decision to study the history of disability activism in Colorado. This project gifted me community and a host of friends and mentors, both in ADAPT and academia, that have made one thing clear: my existence is resistance enough.

When I began writing this story, I wasn't planning on joining ADAPT. This changed when Dawn Russell, one of ADAPT's most prolific community organizers, invited me to record a new series of oral histories while the group visited Washington D.C. during the summer of 2022 to gather congressional and senatorial co-sponsors to endorse the LaTonya Reeves Freedom Act. After spending our days scuttling around Capitol Hill, popping into congressional offices, often unexpectedly, to lobby for the bill, I had the privilege of listening to multiple ADAPTERS share anecdotes about past actions.

Many times, I found myself sitting crisscrossed at the base of Cecil Walker's chair, a seasoned activist from Kansas who joined ADAPT after being forcibly institutionalized and sedated in New Mexico after a car accident in the mid-1990s. I listened to Cecil, who is close to seventy years old, sports a long white beard, exclusively wears overalls, and often smoked cigarillos each night, as he candidly told me about breaking out of New Mexico and all the times

he'd been arrested fighting to make sure nobody else got caught in the system—including one time when he jumped the gun and chained himself to the White House fence after ADAPT leadership called off the order to do so. He alone was charged with unlawful public assembly and got off scotch-free when ADAPT lawyers argued to the federal courts that he couldn't be charged if he was the only one to publicly assemble. Dawn would often chime in, too, and talk about her arrests (it turns out these two eat jail time for breakfast), remarking about how she lost track of how many times she's been put in handcuffs after about her twenty-fifth arrest which happened sometime in the early 2000s.

Yet despite their bold confidence, they also candidly told me stories about the debilitating effect that internalized ableism had throughout their journeys toward becoming self-empowered activists. Dawn reminded me that despite growing up proudly developmentally disabled, she almost rejected a job at Memphis Center for Independent Living, which first exposed her to ADAPT, because she didn't want to work with “those people.”<sup>174</sup> What a loss to the movement that would have been.

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<sup>174</sup> Dawn Russell, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, August 19, 2021, Disability Activism in Colorado Collection, History Colorado Special Collections, Denver, CO.



*Figure 17 Picture taken by Author, Dawn Russell at Atlantis Community Inc., October 16, 2021.*

Our conversations reminded me of a *New York Times* article I read several months back. In 1991, the paper covered an ADAPT action staged at the Peabody Hotel in Orlando, Florida, where a group of nursing home representatives convened presumably to network and discuss the innerworkings of their industry. The demonstration, which was designed to call attention to the need for home and community-based services as an alternative to institutionalization, resulted in the arrest of over seventy protestors who used their wheelchairs to rush a police barricade meant to protect the conference’s attendees. While the *Times* scolded ADAPT for their “chaotic demonstration” and “militant advocacy,” the paper also offered an unusual platform for the organization to clarify the significance of their activism by quoting Mary Johnson, an editor at

the *Disability Rag*, a weekly publication dedicated to reporting on disability news. Her voice echoed through the stories that Bryn, Brian, LaTonya, Dawn, Cecil, and so many others generously shared with me over the last year and a half. “ADAPT is about the issue,” Johnson pressed, “but it is also about showing that though you are disabled you have power already. For people who feel they don’t have any power, who are often dependent, that is such a liberation.”<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Steven A. Homes, “Militant Advocates for Disabled Revel in Their Role as Agitators,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 1991, ADAPT Museum, <https://adaptmuseum.net/gallery/picture.php?/875/search/917>.

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