

# ***The Disability History Association*** ***Newsletter*** *Promoting the study of the History of Disabilities*

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Volume 1, Issue 1  
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## ***FROM THE CHAIR:***

Welcome to the Disability History Association! This newsletter and our organization are a historic first.

Since the elections early this year the board has been working hard on two primary tasks: 1) to legally incorporate the DHA, and 2) to begin envisioning and planning DHA activities.

Much of our energy this past year has been spent researching financial and legal options for the process of incorporation and tax exemption. This is a necessary first step. We are so very pleased to announce that Emily Teplin, a Yale law student and member of Yale's Nonprofit Organizations Clinic, is now shepherding us through the process. DHA's financial obligations are limited to the filing fees (which saves us huge sums). Teplin has been a disability activist and ally for quite a few years now, spent some time at Gallaudet as a special student, and graduated from Berkeley before entering the Department of Justice—Civil Rights Unit. She's now in her second year at Yale Law School.

The Board's other agenda has been to envision activities that fulfill the stated purpose of the organization. Thanks to Audra Jennings the website is underway (<http://www.disabilityhistory.net> or

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<http://dha.osu.edu>). We've begun the three year process of affiliating with the American Historical Association. Obviously the newsletter has begun. In the next year we hope to continue recruitment of both individuals and organizations as members, initiate a disability history essay contest, and begin work with archivists to identify and promote materials appropriate for research in disability history.

We would much appreciate any input you have. Please also consider running for the DHA board.

- *Kim Nielsen*<sup>1</sup>

## ***DHA STATEMENT OF PURPOSE***

This organization promotes the study of the history of disabilities. This includes, but is not limited to, the history of individuals or groups with disabilities, perspectives on and representations/constructions of disability, policy and practice

history, teaching, theory, and Disability and related social and civil rights movement. We define both history and disability widely, acknowledging that individual members' definitions of history and disability may not include some of the studies the organization promotes. This organization is both inclusive and international and is reflected in our diverse topics and approaches. Membership is open to scholars, institutions and organizations, and others working in all geographic regions and all time periods.

This organization aims to achieve its purpose through: fostering research, publishing original work, undertaking and promoting the recording of sites visited promoting best practices and collaborating with archives, museums, and other historical institutions publishing or lodging studies or surveys in a repository for the use of students and other interested persons selectively lobbying for heritage issues, organizing meetings, lectures, events, excursions and study-tours, either as a sole organizer, or in co-operation with others.

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Nielsen is the current chairperson of the Disability History Association Board of Directors and is a professor of history and women's studies at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.

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### *CURRENT BOARD MEMBERS*

Chair: Kim Nielsen

Treasurer: Brian Greenwald

Secretary: Audra Jennings

Members at Large: Laurie Block, Susan Burch, Pat Reynolds, Penny Richards

Student Member at Large: Jessa Chupik

### *DHA BOARD ELECTIONS*

Consider running for the DHA Board! As the by-laws are currently drafted, the officers hold their positions for one year. We've asked several current board members to remain on the board (but not necessarily as officers) in order to help with continuity. **Thus we are in need!** Please consider nominating yourself or someone else for the important task of serving on the Board. Officers hold office for a year, but board membership is three. Please submit nominations by December 1<sup>st</sup> Kim Nielsen ([nielsenk@uwgb.edu](mailto:nielsenk@uwgb.edu)). Elections will be held via email ballot in early January.

## *Disability History Newsletter: “New Paradigm, New Approaches”*

Paul K. Longmore<sup>2</sup>

Disability historians reject the reigning medical paradigm of “disability” and substitute a minority-group or social model. The medical model assumes:

1. Disability is an objective, measurable clinical entity.
2. It is located within individuals.
3. There is a norm, a standard way of being, and a standard way of doing each and every thing.
4. Because other ways of being and functioning are inherently disadvantaging, “disability” is a pathological deviation from that norm.

If disability is a matter of medical pathologies, then we are presented mainly with individual case histories, rather than social or cultural or political history. The medical model fails to recognize that notions of “disability” are products of contingent historical environments. Rather than an obvious and inevitable explanation of the natural order, that paradigm reflects the modern historical context in which it arose.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Longmore is a professor of history at San Francisco State University and is the 2005 recipient of the Henry B. Betts Award from the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD).

Disability historians operate from new premises: 1. Disability is not an objective clinical entity but an elastic social category. It is not a thing but a highly mutable social role. 2. In the modern era, “disability” has been construed as incapacitation to perform typically expected social roles because of chronic medical pathology. 3. By locating the cause of this alleged incapacity within “afflicted” individuals, the medical paradigm has largely excluded consideration of cultural, social, and political factors.

The observations of the German historian Günther List regarding the modern experience of deaf people apply to modern disability history in general: “The social problem of deafness – and with it also in large part the historical fate of deaf people – is treated, is decided, is even ‘produced’ in a framework constructed by the hearing majority and defined by the paradigms . . . they accord to the deaf minority.” [Günther List, “Deaf History: A Suppressed Part of General History,” in John V. Van Cleve, ed., *Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations from the New Scholarship* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1993), 115.] Likewise, the production of “disability” as a “social problem” has occurred within a medical paradigm largely fash-

ioned by policymakers and medical, educational, charity, and social-service professionals. That production developed not only according to institutional and group traditions, interests, and imperatives within each of those domains, but from the interaction among those spheres and under

the controlling influence of cultural values.

The construction of “disability” has in turn significantly shaped, though not utterly determined, “the historical fate” of people with disabilities.

Though they always wielded significantly less power than other historical agents, they were always actors in their own history. A principal task before disability historians is to trace the complex interactions among all of these institutions and actors in order to develop a comprehensive interpretation of the ideological and cultural, the political, policy,

and legal history of disability in relation to the social history of people with disabilities.

## *Smithsonian Exhibition on the History of Polio*

Katherine Ott<sup>3</sup>

### The Disability History Association Website

The Disability History Association Website is a space where members can access the newsletter; share syllabi; and obtain information about conferences, new books in the field, and other websites of interest. If you are looking to form a panel for a particular conference or need information about disability access in conference cities, we are happy to post calls for other presenters or city information on our conference page. We will also be launching a membership directory in the near future. The website is still very new and very much a work in progress. Please email Audra Jennings at [arjenni@gmail.com](mailto:arjenni@gmail.com) with any problems, concerns, and/or suggestions. The website will be updated monthly.

Last April, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History opened a 2900 square foot exhibition entitled *Whatever Happened to Polio?*

The impetus for the exhibit was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the announcement of the Salk vaccine as “safe, potent, and effective.” The exhibit integrates medical and cultural history, current science, polio memoirs, disability activism,

and contemporary global public health.

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<sup>3</sup> Katherine Ott is the project director for *Whatever Happened to Polio?* and a curator in the Division of Medicine and Science at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

For much of the twentieth century, polio was arguably the most famous disease in the United States. Consequently, *WHTP* examines what made polio so significant and some of the lasting effects that both the people who had it and mobilization around it, created in American culture. Although the vaccine was hailed as a “medical miracle” in the 1950s, the history of polio is full of numerous controversial and contested aspects that make it difficult to present it with the simplicity that museum visitors (who come with all levels of knowledge and diverse desires) require. Knotty issues abound, such as forced quarantines and isolation of children under rigid restrictions, the role of the March of Dimes, exclusion and scapegoating of the people who had polio, clinical trials without very informed consent, animal testing, testing of the vaccine on institutionalized children, and more. The curators set out to show just how complicated a “medical miracle” can be while helping visitors to better understand history, science, disability, and the impact of collective action on society. Disability is interpreted through numerous quotations from people who had polio, interview clips with Ed Roberts and Mark O’Brien, and dozens of informal photographs of people at parties, getting married and in

the mundane activities of everyday life.

One of the educational goals, reinforced through design and content, was to encourage visitors who lived through the epidemic years to re-frame their memories. The key intellectual foundations for this were the history that has been produced over the past fifty years and the contributions of disability studies scholars. Judging from the comment cards (which already fill two file cabinet draws), the “teachable disability studies moments” are frequent. Significant objects in the exhibition include a syringe used during the clinical trials by Jonas Salk, a 1931 Emerson iron lung, a chest respirator, objects from disability activists Justin Dart, Ed Roberts, and Cyndi Jones, a gene synthesizer, equipment used today by vaccinators in India and Africa, and leg braces worn by President Franklin Roosevelt. There is a chunk of curb removed from a 1980 Denver street action by Atlantis Community members and a scrapbook of Get-Well cards sent to Ron Mace in 1951. The quirkiest object from the museum’s collections is a piece of 70 year old cake from the first of the Birthday Ball fundraisers in honor of FDR.

Appropriately, (since both Ron Mace and Ruth Lusher had polio

and were founders of Universal Design), the exhibition employs UD principles wherever possible. For example, there are audio and tactile site navigation guides, the labels are easy to find and read, content is color coded, and the video clips are audio-described.

Needless to say, the exhibit barely scratches the surface. The website can be reached at [www.americanhistory.si.edu/polio](http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/polio).

## *Disability History and Culture Collective*

Mike Gill<sup>4</sup>

In the fall of 2005 The Disability History and Culture Collective (DHCC), a new student organization at the University of Illinois-Chicago began. In the short time that the DHCC has been in existence as a group the members have participated in a variety of campus and community events. Not only did the DHCC have a presence at the 2<sup>nd</sup> annual Disability Pride Parade, but also the DHCC has planned a fall lecture by

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<sup>4</sup> Mike Gill is currently a Graduate Assistant in the Department of Medical Education and a Ph.D. Student in Disability Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago as well as the Co-Moderator of DS-HUM Listserv.

Doctoral Candidate Sarah Rose titled “Doing Disability History ‘Right’.” The DHCC also is participating in “Love Your Body Week” in November. We are going to host a screening of the award-winning documentary by Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, *Self Preservation: The Art of Riva Lehrer* for this event. Although the DHCC is a new student organization, hopefully our impact is felt on campus and more people are able to explore disability history and culture.

## *A handicapped handmaiden? Some thoughts on archaeology and disability*

Pat Reynolds<sup>5</sup>

In the discussions which led to the formation of the Disability History Association, we agreed that the society’s scope would permit differing definitions of disability and differing definitions of history.

I was happy about this, as my interest lies in the archaeology and

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<sup>5</sup> Pat Reynolds has worked in museums for nearly 20 years and currently is a Museum Development Officer for Surrey, and Lead Officer for Museum Development in Surrey, East and West Sussex. She studies part-time for a PhD in Archaeology at the University of York.

material culture of disability. The 'handmaiden' in my title refers to an infamous view of archaeology as "the handmaiden of history". One argument often advanced for a more equitable position, particularly for archaeology of historic periods, is that archaeology permits 'those without history' to become the subjects of serious academic study (or "to speak" as it is often expressed).

This argument for the usefulness of archaeology is problematical. The practice of history has not stood still: it is now common for historians to focus upon those who did not write their own histories. So, how can the archaeology of disability be more than "an expensive way of learning what we already know" as another judgement has it?

Some archaeologists have taken a phonological turn in the last couple of decades, and as a result, there is now a great emphasis on the study of landscape. Because landscape is intimately implicated in the social model of disability, the theory and practice being developed by archaeologists would seem to be potentially very powerful tools for those interested in the past of people with disabilities.

Unfortunately, disability has not, to date, attracted a great deal of archaeological attention. A medical model is often used: medically trained osteoarcheologists write specialist reports that can only include those medical conditions which leave traces in the skeleton. To many archaeologists, this is where the study of disabled individuals in the past has to begin and has to end. Disability theory remains unread by too many archaeologists working on sites and situations where disability is constructed. So, "disability theory + archaeology" ranks up a mere 364 hits on Google, whereas "gender" gets 16,200, and "ethnicity" gets 11,800. There are nearly twice as many hits for "hospital + archaeology" as there are for "kitchen + archaeology".

The research agenda for disability history should, therefore, both seek to include archaeological approaches and to alert the archaeological community to the potential for their work to inform understanding of disability.

### *Calls for Papers and Conference Announcements*

CFP: Hello DHA members! Please consider submitting proposals to the next **Society for Disability Studies conference**. The theme is "Disability Goes Public: Re-

Imagining Policy/Protest/Possibilities". The conference will be held in Washington DC from June 14th - 17th, 2006. SDS is particularly wants to see more history presentations, and is open to graduate students, scholars, activists, and others who are interested in Disability Studies. Preference will be given to full panel proposals, and it encourages panels with diverse disciplinary approaches to the theme. Questions? Please email Susan Burch, Program co-chair at [Susan.burch@gallaudet.edu](mailto:Susan.burch@gallaudet.edu).

### **Huntington Library Women's Studies Seminar**

"Women, Disability, and the Arts"  
San Marino CA  
February 25, 2006

10am-12noon

Presenters:

\*Victoria Ann Lewis, Redlands  
"The Theatrical Landscape of Disability: Domestic vs. Transcendent Geographies"

\*Helen Deutsch, UCLA

"Truth and Beauty: Women, Disability, and Literary Form"

\*Catherine Cole, UCSB  
[presentation title TBA]

Admission is free and the public is invited.

### **The Body in Medieval Culture**

10-11 March 2006

University of Toronto

The last fifteen years have pro-

duced both some of the best and some of the worst critical approaches to medieval understandings of the body. These range from anachronistic projections of modern constructions of gender and sexuality onto medieval texts to more nuanced studies that take into account both medieval and modern frameworks in assessing the representation, function, and cultural import of the body. This conference, "The Body in Medieval Culture," will focus on the ways in which conceptions of the body rooted in theological and medical discourses are manifested in the cultural production of the Middle Ages.

<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/medieval/conf06.html>

### **Practices and Representations of Health: Historical Perspectives**

28-30 June 2006

University of Warwick

Coventry, United Kingdom

The Society for the Social History of Medicine 2006 Annual Conference, "Practices and Representations of Health: Historical Perspectives", jointly organized by the Centres for the History of Medicine at the Universities of Birmingham and Warwick, will be held at the University of Warwick on 28-30 June 2006. Keynote speakers include: Susan E. Lederer (Yale University), Sir Geoffrey

Lloyd (Cambridge), and Charles  
E. Rosenberg (Harvard Univer-  
sity).

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/chm/activities/conferences/sshm2006/>