



Advancing the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities worldwide

THE RI MILESTONES (1922-2018)

“Rehabilitation International celebrates 96 Years of advancing the rights and inclusion of People with Disabilities: Proud of its past and moving forward into the Future”

How it all begun

Rehabilitation International has been a major force in international rehabilitation and disability advocacy from the day of its founding. It is a unique global organization that provided and continuous to provide a common platform in a field that is cross-cut by numerous disciplinary, ideological and political divides. Members of RI have been in the center stage and are among the known champions who advocated tirelessly almost every issue related to disability and rehabilitation. From its small-town roots in the American mid-West, it has grown and distinguished itself as one of the pioneering forces in the field of disability rights and rehabilitation. As the organization marks the 90th anniversary of its founding in 2012, let's take a journey into the early years of its work, take stock of the challenges it faced and conquered in order to appreciate its successes and help chart its course into the future.

- In 1922, Rehabilitation International was born in Elyria, Ohio out of the initiative of Edgar F. “Daddy” Allen, a local businessman and a visionary who was the epitome of a thinker, spokesperson and an organizer never been involved in disability and rehabilitation but who eventually championed these issues for over a decade.
- Having lost a son in a tragic streetcar accident in 1907, Allen thought his son could have been saved had a hospital been located nearby. Distraught, Allen immediately retired from his own business to head the citizens’ fund raising committee which worked to establish a local modern hospital. For the next ten years after the hospital was established, he served as treasurer and manager of the institution.
- A child with a disability was treated in the hospital. Seeing the challenges the child faced with the medical system, Allen realized he needed to do something for “crippled children”. But the attempt could potentially be undermined by the lack of data and statistics on children with disabilities. Working with local physicians, a survey on children with disabilities was conducted which quickly identified 200 children hidden away at home all over the country (Ohio).
- In response to growing needs, Allen has decided to set up a series of consultative clinics, effectively covering the state of Ohio, which was a true innovation in the heyday of large residential institutions where parents usually left their children for months or years visiting them only on weekend or holiday afternoons.
- The shift from hospital based services to community based services espoused by Allen was truly revolutionary that was eventually supported by the Rotary Club, a relatively new civic organization that originated in nearby Chicago in 1905 and had swept through the mid-West over the preceding decade.



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- The idea of helping local disabled children through service delivery and community fundraising efforts had strong appeal to Rotarians. Rotary members did not only raise funds locally to support the medical needs of children with disabilities. They also volunteered to venture out into the countryside in their new and still scarce automobiles to pick up children and their parents, getting them to the clinic and back. The Rotarians contributed 50 cents each to the Society, spreading the burden of fundraising very broadly throughout the community.
- On May 8, 1919, Allen and fellow Rotarians from around the state met to form the Ohio Society for Crippled Children. Interestingly, in its very early stage of founding, RI's work was envisioned of not being simply providing service but to influence disability-related policy. One of the first successes of the Society in this arena was its having persuaded the Ohio State legislature to abandon pending legislation that would have allocated \$90,000 to build a single state hospital for crippled children.
- Then Ohio Governor Cox agreed to put the money towards Allen's eight regional clinics instead. Two years later, the Society convinced Governor Davis to sign an additional bill, setting the system of decentralized clinics on a more permanent footing, with what was titled "The Ohio Plan" which later became a model throughout the United States for the next two decades. Over the next year, the "Ohio Plan" began to attract nationwide attention and "Daddy" Allen spent increasing amount of time speaking to groups of Rotarians about the success of the Plan. Even Paul Harris, then head of Rotary, came down from Chicago to see "Daddy" Allen and then became actively involved.
- On October 13, 1921, a meeting was convened in Toledo, Ohio to consider the possibility of extending the Plan into other states: the National Society for Crippled Children was born. After two meetings, the fledgling National Society decided to reorganize itself to accommodate its Canadian colleagues. On February 18, 1922, 16 delegates from 6 states met in Elyria and officially changed the name from the "National" to the "International Society for Crippled Children" (ISCC) setting a new direction in rehabilitation.

RI, a Trailblazer in the Disability Movement

- The scope of influence that "Daddy" Allen and the society wielded, particularly in the United States, grew by leaps and bounds. Allen, who travelled thousands of miles by car to speak anywhere he was invited (local Rotary Societies, civic organizations, political conventions, physicians' associations) often said that "a day was lost if he was not able to persuade someone to donate at least 10 dollars to the cause." He used the press, the pulpit and even the new medium of radio to reach an increasingly interested public. He recruited hundreds and then thousands of volunteers to help him.
- In his Annual Report to the Society in 1926, Allen estimated that between one-half and three-quarters of Americans were now familiar with the International Society and that firm contacts has been established with individuals or societies in New Zealand, Australia, England, Holland and Germany.



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- The Society's Annual Conference in Memphis, Tennessee in 1928 featured two keynote speakers: Arthur Sapp, President of Rotary International and the Governor of New York State, "the Honorable" Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who spoke on "Why Bother with the Cripples?" (The Crippled Child:1928). Roosevelt remained in close touch with Allen afterwards.
- On February 18, 1931, Roosevelt gave a national radio address entitled: "Radio Address on a Program of Assistance for the Crippled," in which he argued for better prevention, better employment and better medical services for individuals with disability.

The Crippled Child's Bill of Rights

By the late 1920s. "Daddy" Allen's ideas coalesced into the idea of a "Bill of Rights" that summarized the central demands of the Crippled Children's Movement. Drafted by Paul H. King, the bill was unanimously approved and adopted by the International Society at its 10th Annual Convention in April 1931 and by the 2nd World Congress at The Hague that same year. The Bill contained ten rights beginning with the right to good pre-natal and post-natal care to prevent or minimize disability. Acknowledging that disability is not always preventable, however, the Bill then goes on to advocate for the best medical care, the best educational and the best vocational training. It also calls for the right to self-determination and to considerate treatment (what we would call today social inclusion) as well as the right to spiritual, physical, and intellectual development.

"In brief, not only for its own sake, but for the benefit of Society as a whole, every crippled child has the right to the best body which modern science can help it to secure; the best mind which modern education can provide; the best training which modern vocational guidance can give; the best position in life which his physical condition, perfected as best it might be, will permit and the best opportunity for spiritual development which its environment affords."

(International Society for Crippled Children: 1931)

- **The First World Congress, Geneva 1929**

In August 1929, the International Society has grown large enough to hold its First World Congress in Geneva, Switzerland. Fifty people from 12 countries attended the congress. Overall, the First World Congress was considered a success. For many, it was the first time that consideration has been given to the social construction of disability. While in Geneva, the Society also broke new ground by formally presenting a Resolution to the League of Nations with the request that the League establishes a Bureau that could compile international statistics and information on child disability issues. A delegation from the Congress, with representatives from France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and Uruguay submitted a petition, requesting the "establishment of a Central Bureau on the collection of all valuable information, literature, reprints and records of accomplishments of different countries on the care, education and training of handicapped children." The League of Nations accepted the proposal "in principle" and placed it on the agenda of the League for consideration the following autumn.

"Time after time it happened that a speaker would describe some form of organization, point to its successful working and conclude that it satisfied the requirements of sound orthopedic theory, only to find that equally good results were chronicled and the opposite conclusion drawn from another country. Few of those present can have noticed beforehand how far the conditions under which they worked were determined not by the actual evils to be remedied, but by the general social conditions of their respective communities. (ISCC:1929)."



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- ***End of an era and the emergence of a new leadership***

In 1937, “Daddy” Allen died after having been ailing for sometime. His early work was amplified by his successor, Paul H. King, an active Rotarian and Federal Judge from Detroit, Michigan. His familiarity with legal issues apparently prompted King to increase the legal and policy approach of the organization.

- **Moving into the center of action**

1949 witnessed the International Society for the Welfare of Cripples moved to New York City with the loan of a small office from the Near East Foundation on 64th Street in New York City through the efforts of Bell Greve, from Cleveland who was also on the board of the NEF. She appointed Donald Wilson, who by training was a lawyer and a Social Welfare Officer in the U.S. Army during the war and staff member of Ms. Greve’s association in Cleveland, as executive director. As Wilson noted later, “the Society had 12 member organizations, \$18,000 in the bank account, no paid staff and no assured future income”.

- **Early United Nations Affiliations**

The revival of the International Society for Cripples was paralleled by the birth and growth of the activity within the United Nations. The Society was involved in UN’s early activities from the outset. In July 1950, in consultation with the International Society, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) passed a resolution formally adopting the principle of rehabilitation services for all and establishing a coordinated program for social rehabilitation of physically disabled persons, offering advice and technical assistance to numerous nations within the United Nations system. The response was immediate and almost overwhelming. Yugoslavia, the first nation to apply, hosted Henry Kessler, then President of the Society, in the winter of 1950. In 1951, the Rehabilitation Unit for the Disabled was established in New York within the United Nations Social Development Division, with the Society serving as a key consulting agency.

The 1950s

- **First international meeting after the war**

The 1951 Stockholm World Congress was the first truly international rehabilitation meeting held anywhere in the world since 1939. This Congress was specifically intended to reconstitute methodologies of international assistance and cooperation in the disabilities field that had been in place prior to the War. With 650 participants from 29 countries, it marked the re-establishment of organized international meetings as platforms for discussion, debate and networking. Konrad Persson, a Swedish expert on social welfare, who would later become President of Rehabilitation International, was Chairperson of the organizing committee. It is interesting that as early as 1951, the 7th World Congress of RI discussed subjects that would become major issues in international rehabilitation work that would dominate global thinking in the next sixty years.

- **Sowing the seeds for the Paralympic Games**

At the same landmark RI 5th World Congress held in Sweden in 1951, Dr. Ludwig Guttman of the Spinal Injuries Center in England, proposed a special “paraplegic Olympics” out of his belief that sports should be an essential component of rehabilitation. It was one of the earliest public presentations of what would eventually become the International Paralympics Games, and was



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described by Dr. Howard Rusk (1951) as “among the most heartening reports” in the conference. A major exhibit of new technological innovations by the Swedes captured the imagination of many delegates, particularly with the eloquent discussion of the new technologies by a young Swedish delegate named Karl Montan. Torra Sibbe, also of Sweden, gave a major address that emphasized the importance of including individuals with a disability as decision makers within the rehabilitation process.

Dr. Rusk later said: “We will never be the same people after the Stockholm Congress.” (Montan:1993). The meeting has been a watershed, with many who felt isolated in their rehabilitation work realizing that they were part of an international movement. Dr. Rusk was so fired up that immediately after returning to New York from the Congress in Sweden, he wrote the editorial titled: Statesmanship in the Conquest of Disability”, published in the New York Times. The editorial brought knowledge about disability issues and the International Society to the attention of millions of readers. (Rusk:1951).

- **Getting on board Hong Kong’s “rising star”**

In 1958, Society President Kenneth Coles of Australia began to identify participants to the regional conference in Sydney. The Ministry of Health in Hong Kong referred Coles to a well-trained but shy young orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Harry Fang, who would later serve as President of RI. Fang came to Hong Kong as a refugee from mainland China who was one of only 9 out of 100 in his batch, to pass the medical entrance exam. Well trained and well aware of the growing rehabilitation field in other countries, Fang helped found the Hong Kong Society and was the first physician in Hong Kong to specialize in orthopedic surgery. At the meeting in Sydney, Fang met Howard Rusk, Henry Kessler and other leaders in the rehabilitation field. Already well established, Fang did not need extensive training, but instead used the Sydney conference of RI to develop important international links that would serve him well while he was establishing a regional system of rehabilitation.

“In 1961, a fortuitous meeting occurred in Hong Kong. A young man named M.B. Lee, who has just received his Certified Public Accounting Degree, walked into Dr. Fang’s clinic as a patient, talked with him for over an hour and was enlisted to Fang’s cause. Hong Kong’s leadership in RI quickly began to make significant inroads both locally and regionally. Fund raising schemes, including a regular fundraising deal with the Hong Kong Jockey Club, subsidized innovative programs. Creative approaches to disability and rehabilitation made Hong Kong one of the centers of regional activities. Truly committed to RI’s global work in disability, Dr. Fang and his colleagues were instrumental in acquiring and donating a well-appointed condominium unit in Manhattan, New York to serve as RI’s headquarters Office – located a few blocks from the United Nations.”

The 1970s

- **The symbol of access**

By the late 1960s, the need for a symbol to designate accessible facilities became an important subject of discussion in a number of countries. Several symbols began to appear causing confusion thus the urgent need to come up with a single symbol for accessibility. Karl Montan, first director of the Swedish Handicap Institute and Chair of the RI International Commission for Technical Aids (ICTA) was asked to design a symbol of access to be presented to the 11th World Congress in Dublin, Ireland in 1969. The symbol needed to be readily identifiable from a reasonable distance, must be self-descriptive, simple yet esthetically designed with no secondary



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meaning, and must be practical. Montan agreed to take on the project and arranged for the Scandinavian Design Students Organization to tackle the assignment. Susan Koefoed, a Danish graphic design student, submitted the winning design – a simple motif of a stick figure using a wheelchair to indicate barrier-free access. The symbol was generally approved by an expert panel, especially after it was modified by Karl Montan himself who “humanized” it further by adding a circle to the top of the seated figure, thus giving it a “head.” With the addition of the “head”, the panel gave the symbol its enthusiastic endorsement. The RI Assembly adopted the access symbol designed by Ms. Koefoed as modified by Mr. Montan, and was officially introduced to the world at the RI World Congress in Dublin in 1969.

“The Symbol of Access quickly gained wide acceptance and within the decade became a universally used way of designating an accessible facility. The single largest boost to the universal adoption of the Symbol and the fledgling barrier free design movement took place in 1974, when a United Nations Experts meeting was organized by Rehabilitation International at the UN’s request, on the topic. The imprimatur of the UN provided a technical backing for the Symbol that gave it a universal stature comparable to that granted several years earlier by the International Organization for Standards (ISO).”

The 1980s

These are years when people with disabilities divided on the basis of their specific disabilities into distinct constituencies, came to realize that their shared concerns far outweighed their historic differences. With that realization, they started to cooperate among themselves like never before. Their new and united front gave them unprecedented strength.

- **The Winnipeg Conference – DPI, RI’s Charter of the 80s and the (1981) UN International Year of Disabled Persons**

RI’s 14th World Congress in Winnipeg, Canada was among its most successful. It was in this congress that Rehabilitation International’s Charter of the 80s was approved. It was there that the planning meeting of the United Nations International Year of Disabled Persons helped solidify objectives for the coming year. And it was there that a new international disability organization – Disabled People’s International, was conceived and formed with strong backing from disability groups in Sweden and Canada. The election of Dr. Harry Fang as new President helped the Society survive the tumultuous period that was to follow. Fang was a great organizer and had a clear vision of what RI should be doing.

RI’s **Charter of the 80s** espoused four key points: disability prevention, provision of rehabilitation services, equal participation and increase on public awareness. The Charter reflected the interest in having global rehabilitation concerns and the economic, social and political wellbeing of people with disability worldwide become active components of public policy. Copies of the Charter were presented to **Indira Gandhi** of India; **Margaret Thatcher** of Great Britain; **the Crown Prince** of Jordan; the **Governor General** of New Zealand; the **Prime Ministers** of Japan, Australia and China; and **Pope John Paul**.

The **International Year of Disabled Persons** has also reflected strong influences from Rehabilitation International and is linked closely to the development of the Charter. Rehabilitation International was also to play a major role behind the scenes, in drafting the World Programme of



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Action Concerning Disabled Persons, the principal product of the IYDP, designed to be a blueprint for the coming decade.

RI was also deeply involved in preparations for and the running of the first International Abilympics in Tokyo in 1981. The idea of Mr. Hideo Hori of Japan, the Abilympics were designed to highlight the vocational abilities of individuals with disability in the workplace. The strong support of Dr. Harry Fang and Dr. Yutaka Nakamura, founder of Japan Sun Industries, were crucial to the implementation of the first Abilympics in Tokyo which became a major event of the International Year of Disabled Persons.

The 1990s

Global issues continued to dominate RI as it moved into the 90s: disability as a development issue, employment, rights of the disabled child, and women with disabilities.

- **Meeting in Nairobi**

In 1992, RI held its World Congress in Nairobi, its first in Africa, drawing more than 2,000 delegates. This Congress attracted support from several development agencies, especially to improve accessibility in Nairobi and to build local knowledge in technology and self-sufficiency. Also in Nairobi, John William Scott of New Zealand, was elected President of Rehabilitation International. He was not only the youngest person ever elected President, he was also the first person with a disability to serve in that position.

End of the IDDP and beginning of the Regional Decades

At the closing of the International Decade of Disabled Persons (1993-2002), it was decided by the UN-Economic and Social Commission for Asia-Pacific (UN-ESCAP), to implement the first Regional Decade for Persons with Disabilities. RI Regional organizations played a major role in implementing the goals set for the decade. Japan was particularly supportive of the Decade, providing not only a significant amount of funding but also supplying a significant number of key leaders. A similar decade was adopted in Africa (200-2009) with focus on poverty alleviation raising public awareness, strengthening the voice of people with disability and putting disability in the social, economic and political agenda of African governments.

The quest for a Disability Rights Convention

- **Charter for the 3rd Millennium**

In 1999, RI was instrumental in reintroducing the idea of a UN Convention on the Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities helping to push again into the world stage, the need for a disability rights convention. The **Charter for the 3rd Millennium** was conceived as a vehicle for promoting both the concept of a Convention and a tool to compel development agencies to adopt accessibility standards for their infrastructure projects. The Charter was launched in London in 1999. Then RI President Arthur O'Reilly, presented copies of the Charter to **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson**, and **Chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights, Ambassador Anderson**, in rites held in Geneva. A high level group was formed



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to oversee the development of the Charter, which included **Lord Morris** who Chaired the Charter for the 80s, **Archbishop Desmond Tutu**, physicist **Stephen Hawking** and **Deng Pufang** of China. This document was specifically intended to help move forward the process for a UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

In December 2001, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Resolution establishing an Ad Hoc Committee to consider proposals for a comprehensive international convention to protect and promote the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. After 4 years of work, the Convention was adopted in the UN and was universally ratified in May of 2008.

Focus on implementing the Convention & other initiatives

With the adoption of the CRPD in December 2006, RI has set its sight into rallying countries to sign and ratify, without reservation, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Through funding from organizations actively involved in the promotion of human rights, RI implemented projects such as its Global Advocacy Campaign which provided a venue for both representatives of governments, Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) and the Legal Community, to work together for reforms in domestic laws to realize the rights of persons with disabilities as envisioned by the UN-CRPD.

- **RI's Charter for Rights Implementation**

Adopted at the RI General Assembly held in Dubai in 2009, the Charter for Rights Implementation is specifically aimed to raise awareness and empower people with disabilities worldwide, by effective and consistent implementation of the CRPD – right into action.

RI's second woman President has a disability, a self-made woman from a developing country

Haidi Zhang is RI's second woman president and the first to come from a developing country. She was elected at RI's 2014 Annual General Assembly in Warsaw, Poland and assumed the RI presidency following the 23rd RI World Congress held in Edinburgh, Scotland in late October 2016. Zhang became a paraplegic at age 5. Unable to attend school, she educated herself to university level, learning several foreign languages including English, Japanese, German and Esperanto. She started writing and translating in the 1980s, authoring her life story *Beautiful English* in both Chinese and English. She also authored a novel, *A Dream in Wheelchair*. Zhang holds a master in Philosophy from Jilin University.

A new leader with a vision to make a difference for persons with disabilities

The new RI President has a clear vision on what she wants to do as head of the organization, has a road map towards realizing that vision and she has the backing of her organization in her country which is providing her with the needed resources. Haidi Zhang knows that the work of RI under her would be guided by the CRPD, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and RI's 2017-2021 RI Strategic Plan. On her first year in office, she was able to mobilize multi-year funding for a Global Disability Development Fund (GDDF) and Africa Fund (AF), both aimed at supporting initiatives on disability and rehabilitation. Her vision is clear: that anything supported by the funds should be disability-related. She wants to make sure that persons with disabilities especially women and children, are central to the global work of RI under her stewardship. In 2018, RI is positioned to be more active and visible at various levels:



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national, regional and global. It will launch an intensified drive to bring in more members particularly from Africa, a region that is very close to her heart. The organization is also looking forward to do more work on the ground in Latin America, the region with the most number of countries that ratified the UN-CRPD. The RI President and Executive Committee have assured their support in increasing RI's engagement in Latin America. The GDDF will help ensure that deserving initiatives of and for persons with disabilities will be supported to the extent possible.

RI prepares for its 100th year anniversary, vows to continue its global work in disability, rehabilitation and development to realize the goals of the CRPD, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and RI's five-year Strategic Plan, 2017-2021

Rehabilitation International will be celebrating its 100th year anniversary in 2022, just four years away. A Centennial Committee has been created to work on the various activities to celebrate the many achievements of the organization. While we do that, we will continue to leverage the strength of our members, our ground troops who provide in-depth expertise on local and national needs. They help RI address a broad range of issues with their clear understanding of the local context. RI's Commissions or thematic working groups manned by experts in the areas of education; health and function; technology and accessibility; leisure, recreation and physical activities; policies and services; social; and work and employment, will continue to provide expertise and leadership to ensure that our members will be able to deliver high-quality programming in line with global standards. RI will also continue to play its central role in the development of the CRPD by sustaining its campaign for the convention's meaningful and effective implementation. We will create, provide and share information between and among our members, partners and others who work in the global fields of disability, rehabilitation and development. Our efforts as an organization will be anchored on the shared goal of ensuring that the CRPD's provisions are enshrined in national laws and practices that create real and tangible change in the lives of persons with disabilities worldwide.

(A compilation based from Nora Groce's Charity to Disability Rights, 1922-2012, and new texts written by the RI Secretary General, 26 January 2018).