



Kids As Self Advocates

Blue Ribbon Week

by [Christina Mills](#)

Christina Mills and others from the Independent Living Coordinator for the Access Center of San Diego Inc., North County Office go into the community and rank the "disability friendliness" of local businesses.

The thought came about last year in early April. As we were all sitting around discussing what our next advocacy move would be, it suddenly came to us. "Blue Ribbon Week, that is what we would call it," Cheryl shouted as she slapped her hand down on the table.

In the past we, had done individual advocacy, such as writing letters to those companies or organizations that were not accessible to people with disabilities. In return, several of the companies that we wrote to took our advice into consideration and changed simple architectural barriers such as, an inaccessible parking spaces and restrooms. Whether they did it out of fear of a lawsuit or sensitivity we were thrilled to see the change towards equality.



Grab-bars are nice, but how is a wheelchair supposed to fit in this public restroom?

Unfortunately, many of us are all too familiar with the fact that advocacy letters can only do so much. Although an unspecified amount of non-disabled people take our civil rights into account and actually make the necessary adjustments, to ultimately become more disability friendly, others do not. For that is why we came up with idea of Blue Ribbon Week.

When we began to brainstorm on what the week's events would include, we came up with a variety of ideas. First, we had to decide which cities we wanted to target with exact locations and times. As a group we decided that we would go to a different location each day of the week, Monday - Friday, for two hours each day. Secondly, we came up with names of individuals that we thought would be willing and available to participate. Then we made announcements at all community gatherings and put out a press release. Lastly, we created buttons made out of blue ribbon and the universal wheelchair symbol to be handed out during the week, to those who were disability friendly. When people in businesses and organizations were given the ribbons they were also asked to post a 8 x 10 sign that read; *In honor of Blue Ribbon Week, we have been awarded for being Disability Friendly.*

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Why did we use the phrase disability friendly, you ask? None of us involved in Blue Ribbon Week were professional A.D.A. consultants, but we were advocates who wanted to make people aware of equal opportunity.



For those who we found not so disability friendly, the reward was quite different. We had a short sensitivity speech for those who needed to work on there disability friendliness. At the end of each speech we would either ask for a business card or write down the name and address for further follow-up.

As paratransit began dropping people off the week of October 15th we were all full of excitement and anxious to get the ribbons rolling! We had collected a number of people from all ages who were dedicated to making the week a success as well as fun.

As the week progressed Blue Ribbon Week ended up being even better then projected. We had prepared for the worst, but instead got the exact opposite. We were worried about how people would react when we told them they were not disability friendly and could use a sensitivity training. However, most people listened to us with open minds and told us that they were glad we were coming around giving them advice.

Don't get me wrong we did come across a hand full of people who just looked at us with a glare and shook their heads. There were even those who tried to prove to us that accessibility was not a problem. For example, in the picture below you will notice a real estate office with a disabled parking place, but a step to get into the building.



All in all Blue Ribbon Week was a success. We were able to educate people on the importance of equality and give them some sensitivity training at the same time. One the greatest rewards we have gained from the event was the fact that when were now out in the community were still seeing our signs up!

Blue Ribbon Week was in October, 2001. If you are interested in starting your own Blue Ribbon Week, but need help in getting things started you may contact, Christina Mills at advocate1977@msn.com.

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