

Paul G. Hearne



Paul G. Hearne is a little known pioneer of modern days. He suffered from a disease called Osteogenesis Imperfecta which causes bones to be brittle, deformed, and break easily. Despite this, he spent his lifetime trying to help others who were disabled get the rights they deserved.

His pioneering began with his schooling. He was one of the first students of Long Island's Human Resource Center. This was one of our nation's first schools to provide a real education to students with severe disabilities. From there he went on to be the first student with a disability to graduate from Hofstra Law School. Mr. Hearne put his hard earned law degree to use when he established the first law office whose services were dedicated to people with disabilities. He went on to be one of our country's first disability employment specialists and one of the first advisors on disabilities to the New York State Legislature and Department of Education (AAPD, Paul G. Hearne). Though his "firsts" are remarkable, they are just the beginning of his accomplishments.

Mr. Hearne really established himself in the employment field when he worked as the executive director of Just One Break (JOB) in New York and wrote the employment sections of the first national handbook for attorneys on disability law in 1980. He later became the director of the National Council on Disability and helped draft and push the passage of a now critical law, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (AAPD, Paul G. Hearne).

The ADA now affects the lives of every person in America, both disabled and non-disabled. This is most readily seen in adjustments to public buildings that make them accessible to wheelchairs and other aids. In our public schools, ADA has brought recognition to the needs of the disabled and added strength to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

He was given a greater opportunity to pursue his goal of non-discrimination when he was asked by Senator Bob Dole to head The Dole Foundation for Employment of People with Disabilities. The Dole Foundation provided grants to non-profit organizations that used innovative employment programs for people with disabilities.

Though important, Paul G. Hearne's role as president of the Dole Foundation was not his greatest achievement. He took a leap towards his goal of full societal inclusion for people with disabilities when he helped form the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) on July 25, 1995. AAPD is a nonpartisan, national organization that works for the economic and political interests of the 54 million citizens in the United States with disabilities (AAPD, FAQ). "We recognized that beyond national unity for ADA and our civil rights, people with disabilities did not have a venue or vehicle for working together for common goals," said Paul Hearne. "There was nothing that represented the unified potential of [54] million people with disabilities." (AAPD, FAQ). AAPD has been compared to the AARP, the powerful lobbying group that works to see that the needs and rights of elderly Americans are considered when legislation is drafted and passed. The AAPD will work towards their goals using "economic clout and power through numbers, unity, leadership and impact" (AAPD, FAQ). With the formation of the AAPD, Paul G. Hearne's dream of full inclusion and full benefits and opportunities for the disabled took a step towards reality. It represents the interests of the disabled, by the disabled, and for the disabled.

Paul G. Hearne passed away on May 3, 1998 from complications due to pneumonia. He was 48 years old. His life was one of many accomplishments, but they were not the personal gains that we so often recognize as great. Instead, he worked to break down discrimination and build up understanding.

More information on Mr. Hearne and the AAPD can be found at:

<http://www.aapd.com/hearne/>