

Testimony of Adrian Villalobos
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Americans with Disabilities Act at 20:
Celebrating our Progress, Affirming our Commitment
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Good afternoon. Thank you, Chairman Nadler, Ranking Member Sensenbrenner, and members of the Committee for inviting me here to share my story today.

My name is Adrian Villalobos, and I'm from El Paso, Texas. I am currently an intern at the National Disability Rights Network, through a fellowship from the Southern Education Foundation. I am here in Washington, D.C. to focus on special education policy and accommodations for schoolchildren with disabilities, which is a very pertinent issue to my life.

July is a very significant month for me. I was born in July, and so was the Americans with Disabilities Act. I also had a life-changing accident in July. The ADA was three years old when my life changed and I was essentially re-born. Growing up with the ADA, I consider it my metaphorical big brother. On July 9th, 1993, the day after our eighth birthday, my twin and I were playing baseball on the sidewalk in my hometown. I threw him a hardball, and he missed, sending the ball into traffic. Wanting to show off, I darted after the ball into a busy four-lane road. I made it across three lanes safely before being struck and thrown twenty-five feet.

I was in the hospital for two months, and missed my entire summer vacation. The following intensive outpatient rehabilitation cut into the school year and I missed six weeks of classes. It was my first taste of social isolation. When I finally returned to school and the third grade, I was in a wheelchair at an elementary school that was not accessible. The right of people with disabilities to be fully included in society was a new concept, and my parents were unaware of the services I was now entitled to. They met with the school to discuss my return, and one by one the third grade teachers refused to have me in their classrooms. The intense feeling of rejection my parents experienced on my behalf fueled them to push forward.

Finally a teacher agreed to have me in her classroom. But I couldn't physically get into the school building. The only existing ramps were to some portable classrooms that had been set up at the back of the school to respond to growing school enrolment. With the insistence of my parents, and the ADA gaining momentum, the school moved all the third grade classes into the portables so I could attend school and be with my peers.

My teacher and my twin had to drag my chair through the pebbled walkway all the way around the building to get to the portables and back every day. I was still unable to get into the main school building and none of the restrooms were accessible. To get to the cafeteria and auditorium, which were detached from the main building, I had to enter through a loading dock. I remember my return to school very fondly because of the mutual excitement my peers and I

had to see each other once again. They were happy to see me, their friend Adrian, not the kid that came back in a wheelchair.

The following school year my class, now fourth grade, was again assigned to the portables. And I still had no access to most of the school building. My parents were frustrated that my school was still inaccessible, and continued to push the principal and school administration. Only this time, a year after the accident, my family was more educated about my rights and pointed to the ADA. The school administration acted.

Ramps to the school building and the cafeteria were built. A bathroom was made accessible. And I was allowed to use the elevator, previously restricted to the custodial staff. This finally gave me access to the nurse's station, located on the second floor. My parents struggled with the school's resistance to creating the most basic accommodations for me. But once they were in place, I felt like I could do what all the other kids could do, and it made me happy. In elementary school, I got a taste of basic accommodations.

The administration at my middle school had a completely different tone. They did not have accessible facilities either, but made major changes to their school to make my experience a positive one. As I was growing, the ADA was growing, and the attitude of inclusion was evolving in a positive way. Physical accommodations were made, not only to the school building, but also to other school facilities. For example, the football field was located on the other side of a busy street- the same busy street where I'd had my accident. Accommodations were made so I wouldn't have to cross that street to cheer on my school's team.

My principal wanted me to have the option to attend any school event or activity I wanted to. He insisted on a modified cello so I could learn the instrument and play in the school orchestra. A lift was built so I could get onto the stage and participate in the drama club. My principal also created a computer club- I was interested in computers. Middle school taught me inclusion.

By high school I had good friends, knew how to navigate El Paso comfortably, and felt self-empowered. I attended high school in a brand new building that was completely accessible. It was 1999, and the ADA was in full swing. Through the National Spinal Cord Association I had the opportunity to see Christopher Reeves speak, and his message about human potential resonated with me. I really understood that perceived limitations are not actual limitations, and that despite my disability, I was responsible for reaching my potential.

With that self-confidence and motivation, I enrolled in a liberal arts college in Ohio. Excited to start something challenging and new, I quickly learned that accessible is not equal. Upon reflection, I could have arrived at this same conclusion in elementary school if I'd been educated about my rights at that young age. The college disability office, with only one staff member, granted me an accessible room with an accessible bathroom and shower. I got a great room and was impressed with the facility when I arrived. The problem with my room was that it was in the lobby of my dorm. Everyone else lived on the other side of locked hallways, in the typical freshman hall setting. I was the guy who lived in the lobby. Socializing is a major pillar of college, and most people meet their friends in their freshman dorms. But I was on the wrong

side of those locked doors and freshman halls. The gratitude I'd felt for having an accessible shower quickly turned to a feeling of isolation.

As I evolved and my needs changed, accommodation was no longer adequate. I needed inclusion. The ADA recognized that, too. I didn't survive that college in Ohio. Instead, I transferred to University of Texas, El Paso, back to my friends and family and my network. I moved back into my home, the most accommodating place on earth. Under those circumstances, I did well in college. But even at the University of Texas, El Paso, where I was accommodated and included, there were obstacles to overcome. On my graduation day, for example, I was excluded from the commencement procession because, in the words of university staff, I was a fire hazard.

As I have evolved as an individual with a disability, so has the ADA. The concept of disability rights is no longer new or foreign. Many people and institutions, such as my middle school, have moved beyond the letter of the law and truly embraced its intent. For others, there are still miles to go before they reach real inclusion for individuals with disabilities. I have experienced both. I know how great inclusion is. More importantly, the people in my life have become aware of disability rights.

When I got DC this summer, a friend who lives here was excited to take me sightseeing. He wondered aloud if certain sights and attractions were wheelchair accessible. What gave me pause wasn't that he was thoughtful, but that he was educated about accessibility and knew what to look for. I attribute that to the ADA creating a general awareness of accessibility issues. The current situation for individuals with disabilities is good, but like anything, it could always be better. As the ADA evolves, it's important for policy makers to be proactive about inclusion of all people with disabilities.

I am lucky to have a family that has helped me when I needed it. But I reflect on others I've met along the way. In El Paso, many families don't speak English. I wonder how their children with disabilities fare. Independent advocates are needed to enforce the ADA. My experience with disability rights has motivated me to pursue a career in disability rights policy. I want to go beyond achieving independence and access for myself- I want to be an advocate for others as well. I am now pursuing a joint graduate degree in Public and Business Administration. My first goal is to work with my university to bring to light accessibility issues, and to participate fully in my commencement ceremonies when I complete my graduate studies. Beyond that, I feel limitless.

Thank you again for granting me the opportunity to speak before you today.