

**The Curb Ramps of Kalamazoo:
Discovering Our Unrecorded History**

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"Friday, April 25th, 1997, a ceremony in downtown Berkeley commemorated the 25th anniversary of the first curb ramp for the disabled. 'It's the slab of concrete heard round the world,' according to Gerald Baptiste, Associate Director of Berkeley's Center for Independent Living, noting that the curb ramp is believed to be the predecessor of millions of similar ramps that have been built throughout the world to enable wheelchair users to utilize sidewalks, businesses, parks and other public facilities."

When I read the preceding e-mail message in the spring of 1997, I had only recently become aware that this bit of lore from disability rights mythology was myth indeed. In January 1997, Lillian Gonzales Brown and I had the honor of being guests on the first syndicated version of *On A Roll*, a radio talk show about life and disability. The broadcast originated in Phoenix and was simulcast to Tucson and Hays, Kansas.

I called my parents who now live in Tucson to tell them about the show. After the broadcast, they called to congratulate us on the fine job we had done (what else would they do?), but then said they thought we should know that we were wrong in stating that Berkeley had been the first city to implement curb cuts. In fact, they stated that my hometown of Kalamazoo, Michigan had installed curb ramps in the 1940s - and that the man responsible was still alive, so why don't I give him a call?

I knew that Kalamazoo was the birthplace of the outdoor mall, but curb ramps? A few weeks later I did call the man my parents suggested. His is a fascinating story, reminiscent of more familiar ones of our contemporary leaders. His story is only one of a legion of heretofore unrecognized pioneers. The purpose of this tale is to transform an unknown episode into a part of our history.

Jack H. Fisher was born on September 17, 1918, in Kalamazoo, to Herman Fisher and Rose Gerber Fisher. Herman, the son of German immigrants who arrived in the United States when he was six months old in 1890, became the President of Fisher-Graff Iron and Metal Corporation. Rose grew up in Chicago with parents who had emigrated from Poland around the same time as her future husband. After their marriage, they resided in an area of Kalamazoo called Washington Square, a religiously and ethnically diverse section of newly-constructed middle class homes. Jack's parents would not permit him to cross the street as a preschooler, but that did not prevent him from meeting all his neighbors on the square block he could traverse. An outgoing child, Jack made it a point to visit every home even before starting kindergarten.

He discovered that two languages were spoken in these homes, just as in his own, and that English was the second language. Jack collected coins and paper money. He would often take his collections on visits to neighbors and request help in assembling them. Some would give him items from their native lands and tell him stories about them. Today he is a recognized expert and well-known author in the field of syngraphics, the collection of paper money.

Jack recalls that he learned more from his collections than in the classroom. He was comfortable with people of all backgrounds and cultures. He would spend hours in the Kalamazoo Public Library branch only a block from his house reading about diverse cultures. He also befriended several men at the post office who were also collectors. He would get first hand information about his collections from them as well as from the Bank of Kalamazoo where he had opened a personal savings account. People would save letters and coins that looked different for him.

When Jack was about ten, his mother insisted he attend dancing school. He did not have a great talent and at first was not too interested. But he then discovered he could perform at one or all of Kalamazoo's three theaters that used child performers, earn up to \$20 a weekend, and have a theater social life. He budgeted half of his earnings for his savings account and half for his collections.

An entrepreneur throughout high school, he enrolled at Kalamazoo College in his hometown as a freshman, but during his first two years he paid more attention to his business pursuits than his studies. He sold advertising for publications, and established his own business of direct sales of various supplies to factories,

foundries, paper mills, government units and colleges in Kalamazoo. His father eventually suggested that he sell his car, liquidate his inventory and accounts into cash and enroll at the University of Illinois, where he had always wanted to attend. While in Champaign-Urbana he went to the International House and offered to assist students having problems adjusting to the United States, the university, or new customs. Some needed help with banking and that brought up Fisher's interest in money and he would receive coins and paper money from those he helped. After Illinois, he applied to law school and was accepted at Harvard. He attended even though he had never previously been to New England. He was nine months from graduation when Pearl Harbor was bombed in December 1941.

An injury from birth, when forceps had pushed through his head and damaged his left eye, prevented him from passing an eye exam to join the Navy. He returned to Kalamazoo still determined to serve and obtained a waiver that said check everything but his left eye. Unlike most of his classmates, who had received direct commissions, Fisher enlisted in the Army in 1942.

While serving in Oklahoma he received injuries in a jeep accident in 1943. He was sent from Tinker Field, a US Air Corps Base in the Oklahoma City area, about fifty miles southwest to Borden General Hospital in Chickasha, which had a special orthopedic unit. Beds there were arranged head to toe so that no one breathed on someone else. Patients were always looking at someone else's feet. The ward he stayed on was for people who were confined to bed. He remained there from October to February.

Questions and concerns about disability were brought home in the ward he occupied. For over four months he roomed with over 40 non-ambulatory patients. While lying in full body cast and traction he leafed through the medical records of other patients to remain busy. This engrossed him during the day so he could sleep at night. When he received his discharge in February, 1944, he was in steel braces from hips to neck and possessed quite a bad limp.

While recovering from his injuries and learning to live with his residual physical problems, Fisher, at the age of twenty-five, returned to Kalamazoo for what he refers to as his "maturing period." He would not return to Harvard Law School while the war waged on. He was determined to obtain a job in a defense industry. While trying to get a job he kept getting told that with his braces and spastic right leg he could not be used, not even for the lowest possible clerkship. Companies were afraid he would fall and puncture a lung, risking worker's compensation claims. At the biggest defense company in Kalamazoo, Ingersoll, he knew the Personnel Director, but was refused there, too. Finally he tried the Michigan Employment Security Commission. Unable to find him a defense related job, they offered him a job as an employment interviewer.

Fisher did not want that job. Moreover, he contemplated the changes in his life. No more tennis, horseback riding, or other similar physical activities. What was his personal worth?

It was at this point that the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) contacted Fisher at his home. The DAV informed Fisher that they need his help. About five hundred (500) disabled veterans had submitted claims to obtain medical services, financial compensation, wheelchairs, rehabilitation, and more. Their files were waiting to be processed. Fisher facilitated hundreds of claims between February 1944 and August 1944 when he returned to Harvard Law School.

Assisting others helped Fisher to recognize his own self-worth and realize he could still play a productive role in the world. Working with his fellow veterans was important in another sense as well. Fisher socialized with those whose claims he worked and learned to be comfortable with people with all sorts of disabilities and physical appearances.

Fisher graduated from Harvard Law School in February 1945. Large and prestigious eastern firms generally sought Harvard graduates. Fisher's experience was different. Although he had graduated in the top third of his class he encountered two forms of discrimination. Some firms refused to hire him stating that his disabilities and braces made him a poor risk for health and additional injuries; others would not hire Jews regardless of qualifications.

The Dean of Harvard Law School sent Fisher a telegram that he had made an appointment for Fisher to be interviewed by a large Detroit law firm comprised of Harvard lawyers. He was interviewed by all levels of partners. In the conference room all the partners gathered to announce to Fisher that he met all the firm's qualifications. Despite his being Jewish they would make an exception to their policy and hire him.

Fisher responded by stating that he was pleased he met their qualifications, but that they did not meet his. He refused the offer.

He decided to begin his own practice. Fisher took the bar exam in June 1945. He was sworn into the Michigan bar in September of that year and opened a small office that same month. From his first day of practice, disabled veterans whom Fisher had previously assisted retained him as their attorney. He remembers his practice looked like emergency room, with clients using crutches, in wheelchairs, and using other adaptive equipment. These disabled veterans also brought their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and friends. Fisher worked on all kinds of problems with them from purchasing real estate to wills, business ventures, leases, marital concerns, and more.

People with disabilities who had not been in the military also sought his services. Throughout his career, about one third of his clients were people with disabilities. Recalling his frustrating experience looking for work after his discharge from the army with six years of college he wondered how other people who did not have that kind of education would find work? If employers had not been in the service, they would have no empathy. Fisher did whatever he could to place people whom he knew would work out and many people stayed with these companies until retirement.

Standard attorney fees were \$5.00 per hour at this time. Fisher did not charge disabled veterans when working on their disability problems with government agencies, assisting them to obtain employment, assisting with disability related marital and family problems. This resulted in about 25% of his time being pro bono. His first year in practice his secretary worked half the hours he did and received about twice Fisher's weekly earnings.

Fisher was immersed in the lives of individuals with disabilities as fellow veterans, friends, acquaintances, and clients. He learned about the problems of access, mobility, employment, the bedroom, and the bathroom.

Fisher journeyed the short distance from Kalamazoo to Percy Jones Hospital in Battle Creek (the old Kellogg sanatorium featured in the recent movie, *The Road to Wellville*) because it was the official government hospital to treat and rehabilitate amputees. A huge number of both above and below the knee amputees were in Battle Creek. Many people from Battle Creek would traverse the short distance to Kalamazoo for the bigger city's more active social life. It was not uncommon to see many people using prostheses. Unfortunately for those going downtown Kalamazoo had quite tall curbs and people would fall on them breaking stumps and injuring themselves. Wheelchair users were simply unable to travel downtown.

Fisher took it upon himself in 1945 to get curbs cut and side-pipe rails. He petitioned the Kalamazoo City Commission and testified before them. City Manager Edward S. Clark, whose adult son, used a wheelchair understood the problem first-hand. The City Commission authorized the construction of cement ramps with safety rails in the central business district. Test ramps were constructed in 1945 and placed at the corners of three or four blocks.

The Buck-Crosby Chapter #6 of the DAV, for which Fisher served as commander from 1945-1947, monitored their usage. In a March, 1946, letter to the Mayor, Fisher stated that the "ramps were instrumental in allowing disabled veterans, disabled non- veterans, aged and infirm persons and mothers with baby carriages more freedom of movement...."

He also wrote that, "These cement ramps in many instances mean the difference between disabled veterans and disabled non-veterans having employment, as with the ramps a person confined to a wheelchair, on crutches or wearing an artificial limb is able to get to a place of employment unaided. The ramps thus enables many so called unemployable persons to become employable persons, and not only benefits the disabled person alone, but benefits the community at large as well." The City Commission appropriated \$680 to install 34 additional curb cuts.

Like Paul Longmore's discovery of the League of the Physically Handicapped in the 1930s, this too is a historic discovery, which should change how we describe the Berkeley curb cuts without diminishing their impact.

Those with information about other earlier curb cuts are requested to send information to Steve Brown, 2260 Sunrise Point Rd., Las Cruces, NM 88011.