

JFK's other civil rights work: for people with disabilities

by [Access Press Staff](#) // November 10th, 2017

President John F. Kennedy's centennial is being celebrated in 2017. Born in Brookline, Mass. on May 29, 1917, he was the youngest president ever elected to office.

Kennedy is recalled for many contributions he made in just over 1,000 days in office: the space program, the resolution of the Cuban Missile crisis and his efforts to support civil rights for African-Americans. But Brandeis University scholars remembered Kennedy this fall for his contribution to the civil rights of people with intellectual disabilities.

The last piece of legislation Kennedy signed before he was assassinated in November 1963 gave the federal government a role in protecting the welfare and civil rights of those Americans with intellectual disabilities for the first time. It was a landmark moment for the disability rights movement. For the president it was deeply personal. He handed the signing pen to Eunice Kennedy Shriver, one of his other sisters.

His sister Rosemary had intellectual disabilities. After a failed lobotomy she lived out her days in a Wisconsin convent.

On October 23, Brandeis, the Heller School for Social Policy and Management and the Lurie Institute for Disability Policy hosted the panel discussion JFK and Another Civil Rights Movement: People with Intellectual Disabilities, to discuss the lasting impact of that moment on the lives of people with intellectual disabilities today. The event was moderated by Eileen McNamara, journalism professor, Pulitzer Prize winner and former Boston Globe columnist. She is writing a biography of Eunice Kennedy Shriver, founder of Special Olympics and the force behind Kennedy's intellectual disability initiatives.

McNamara spoke with BrandeisNOW. This is excerpted from that interview.

BrandeisNOW: What would you say was President Kennedy's biggest contribution to civil rights for people with intellectual disabilities?

Eileen McNamara: When John F. Kennedy was sworn in as president, in 1961, most people with intellectual and developmental disabilities were warehoused in large, Dickensian institutions, isolated from their families and the communities into which they had been born. That began to change, slowly but irreversibly, after President Kennedy signed the Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Mental Health Centers Act on October 31, 1963. The legislation for the first time gave the federal government an active role in addressing the needs of children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities who, until then, had relied on their families and inadequate state facilities to meet their basic needs.

BN: Would you say the time was ripe for those changes, or did he have to lead the nation in that conversation?

EM: Those changes were long overdue. For a decade, activist parents had been leading efforts in the states and on Capitol Hill to win funding for special educators to teach their children and for support at home for parents who did not want to institutionalize their children. Their efforts yielded some progress, but real change did not arrive until Kennedy invited the best scientific, legal, educational and medical minds in the country to form a presidential panel to assess the needs of this population, and to map out a strategy for the federal government to help meet them. More than anything, his efforts changed the national conversation. Those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, he said, “need no longer be alien to our affections or beyond the help of our communities.”

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota’s disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities.