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JADARA Conference Wrap-Up
Michelle Niehaus, Immediate Past President

A quarter has passed since ADARA wrapped up its 2015 conference and we now have new leadership. As I reflect on the event, what it meant to me, and how it impacts ADARA moving forward, I have great hope.

The conference opened with a plenary session by Claudia Gordon, Esq. Born in Jamaica, Ms. Gordon rose in the ranks of federal employment as an advocate while being rooted deeply in her history and the hard work of her mother, aunt, and the community that surrounded and believed in her. As a special assistant to the director of the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP), Ms. Gordon challenged attendees to look at those we serve as individuals and, in our own ways, to not limit them with our own perceptions of who they could become. She further challenged ADARA members to think beyond regulations or test scores and to see each individual they serve for the potential they embody. She also reminded the audience of their power as professionals in human service, and to choose to provide great opportunities or to stand in each other's way.

A thread ran through each plenary session, linking the timing of unprecedented opportunities to enforcing civil rights and employment laws hinging on individual actions to hold each other accountable. Andrew J. Imparato, the executive director of the Association of University Centers on Disability (AUCD), considers himself a second-generation disability activist, saying: "And what I mean by that is not that my parents were disability activists, but that I inherited a mantle of leadership on disability issues from a generation that came before me... The disability field has lost some amazing leaders in the last 15 years. And the work that goes onto cultivate the next generation of leaders is critically important as we continue to build on the progress of laws like the ADA."

Mr. Imparato's work for the AUCD inspires inter-disciplinary approaches to working with individuals who have disabilities. Noting the traditional hesitation for individuals who are culturally Deaf to be labeled as having a disability, Imparato encouraged people to look beyond their traditional partners to create "pipelines for talent" during this time of unprecedented enforcement of Section 503 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and other executive office initiatives at the federal level. His remarks were directly about employment and vocational rehabilitation, but could just as easily be applied to those working in mental health, education, interpreting, and/or other areas. No matter our areas of expertise, we all need to work to address the fact that "accessibility is not optional. It's a federal requirement," Mr. Imparato reminded us.

Mr. Imparato also challenged us to think about our legislative champions and the need to cultivate new leadership in that arena as well. Traditional allies such as Sen. Tom Harkin (Iowa) and Sen. Ted Kennedy (Massachusetts) have retired. As ADARA and other organizations look to the future, developing relationships with current and incoming legislators are key. They have passion and personal experiences that can help move our causes forward. Although "we don't always do a good job cultivating both sides," he said, working with both Republicans and Democrats is essential.

Mr. Imperato also noted the importance of ADARA members “leveraging a new generation of deaf leaders and the reinvigorated National Association of the Deaf under the leadership of Howard [Rosenblum] to really raise the bar, raise the expectations of what we consider possible both in education and employment for folks who are deaf and hard of hearing in this country and around the world.” He said he was inspired “by people like Claudia Gordon, Leah Katz Hernandez, Talila Lewis. There are leaders who are achieving at very high levels who are engaging with populations inside and outside the deaf community and I think this generation of leaders are well poised to take us to another level when we think about quality education, communication access, employment outcomes, leadership opportunities for folks who are deaf and hard of hearing.”

Mr. Imperato’s call to action was clear: “Dr. King said human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Even a superficial look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle - the tireless exertions and passionate concerns of dedicated individuals. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action. So friends, you are the dedicated individuals that Dr. King was talking about. If we’re going to see progress for a new generation of folks who are deaf and hard of hearing in the workplace, it’s going to happen because of your hard work.”

Justice. Vigorous and positive action. ADARA was founded by individuals committed to human progress and much has been achieved in “networking for excellence in service delivery.” In a new era of second- or third-generation activists, ADARA cannot be complacent that equality will happen because, as Susan B. Anthony said, “Failure is impossible.” Instead, we must come together around our shared concerns and work for mutual edification.

Many ADARA members received the majority of their training from other members or through relationships developed at conferences. Historically, ADARA has been open to professionals regardless of communication modality or even tenure within the field; members have been united by a common interest in furthering the quality of life for individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

Undercurrents occur at every conference or gathering of passionate people. During ADARA 2015, old debates around communication choices and philosophies bubbled to the surface during meetings and workshops. Challenging conversations took place about the roles of hearing versus Deaf professionals, ADARA leadership, and unintentionally oppressive practices. Board members and attendees were directly or indirectly confronted with issues that often pull them apart rather than bring them together as a professional community. Threats we see in our home communities, workplaces, and individual lives may have been awakened through these difficult conversations.

In discussing the importance of reaching into our prisons to find individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing and are incarcerated, Talila Lewis of HEARD (Helping Educate to Advance the Rights of the Deaf) challenged us to think in a different, more expansive and vulnerable way. She challenged:

Do not allow race, class, disability, to put you against another marginalized community. So what we know historically is the powers that be, the powers that control everything in the United States have really historically put small communities against one another so they stop working together. It really means we have a weaker community because we're not communicating with one another. What needs to happen is what I call cross-movement building. That everyone in different movements should be talking to one another and working for the other person's cause....Our collective liberation, meaning all our liberation in this room is inextricably linked to every other person's liberation.

Passionate people create passionate organizations, and for that I am grateful. The promise and potential of ADARA is that it is a safe place where people can come together to work for justice and to be edified in the process. As I complete my presidency, I look forward to what ADARA will achieve in its next chapter. May we accept Ms. Gordon's, Mr. Imparato's, and Ms. Lewis's call to action by holding each other accountable as we strive for equality in our own lives and in the lives of those we serve.

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