

KITTY CONE

b. April 7, 1944

d. March 21, 2015

DISABILITY RIGHTS ACTIVIST

In 1977 her historic sit-in helped lay the groundwork for passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990.

“For the first time, we had concrete federal civil rights protection.”

Curtis Selden “Kitty” Cone was a disabled lesbian activist who fought successfully to advance inclusivity for Americans with disabilities. She is best known for staging a historic sit-in that helped paved the way for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Cone was born to an affluent family in Champaign, Illinois. Doctors initially misdiagnosed her with cerebral palsy, leading to treatments that worsened her condition. At age 15, she was accurately diagnosed with muscular dystrophy.

Cone attended the Holton-Arms School in Washington, D.C., but the campus was so inaccessible, her cousins had to carry her up the steps. Cone’s family moved to Kentucky when she was in her mid-teens. There, she witnessed the most brutal inequities of racism. Deeply affected, she escaped back to Washington to attend Mount Vernon Seminary, a women’s boarding school.

At Mount Vernon, Cone experienced the sting of discrimination firsthand. The headmistress segregated her from the other girls for various activities. Defying her prohibitions, Cone was expelled. It marked the beginning of her activism.

In 1962 Cone entered the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, confined to a wheelchair. In her sophomore year, she joined in the Civil Rights Movement and organized for the NAACP. She protested the Vietnam War and fought for other causes. In doing so, she came into conflict with the school’s administration who imposed unfair limitations on her and the other disabled students. In the 1960s basic rights for people with disabilities were practically nonexistent.

Cone left Champaign immediately after college, moving around until 1974, when she settled in Oakland, California. She was hired by the Center for Independent Living, a disability rights organization, where she spearheaded substantive changes like the installation of ramps and curb cuts around the city.

In 1977 Cone masterminded the 504 Sit-in, demanding action on the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 prohibited programs receiving federal aid from discriminating against people with disabilities. Though the act had been passed, the law was not implemented. Protesters occupied federal buildings for a historic 28 days. As a result, the regulations were signed and slated for enforcement. The ADA was passed 13 years later.

In 1979 Cone organized the Disabled People’s Civil Rights Day. Until she retired, she worked for organizations such as the World Institute on Disability and the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund.

As publicly out disabled lesbians, Cone and her long-term partner were unable to marry or adopt children in the United States. In 1984 they moved to Mexico where they adopted a son.

Cone died in California of pancreatic cancer.



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