

The “Father” of the ADA – Justin Whitlock Dart Jr.

Justin Dart Jr. is known as the “Father” of the Americans with Disabilities Act and believed that **“you cannot be responsible for your own family without being responsible for the society and the environment in which they live.”** Dart did exactly that by dedicating his life to advocating for human rights and disability rights.

Justin Whitlock Dart Jr. was born in Chicago on August 29, 1930, to a prominent family. Dart’s grandfather was the founder of the Walgreens Drugstore chain, his father was a wealthy corporate executive and political insider, and his mother was an artist and author. Growing up, Dart had not experienced any health conditions until, at the age of 18, he contracted Polio, a viral infection that can cause partial or total paralysis of the body.

After contracting the infection and initially being told he had three days to live, Dart was transported to Seventh Day Adventist Medical University in Los Angeles for treatment. Dart was informed there that he would survive but spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. While at the hospital, Dart could feel the love the nurses expressed. This experience was the first inspiration for a change in Dart’s life. **“I found my truth in advocating a united, loving society with justice for all,”** he later said.

Dart earned his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees from the University of Houston and went into business for himself in 1956. While in school, Dart formed one of the first student organizations dedicated to combatting racism. After graduation, Dart focused his ambitions on building his businesses and providing opportunities to people with disabilities in both Mexico and Japan. During a trip to Vietnam in 1966, Dart went to a “rehabilitation center” in Saigon that housed children affected by polio. While visiting, he discovered that the children stayed in horrid living conditions and were left to starve. That image haunted him and was a catalyst for his further advocacy.

When Dart returned to Texas in 1974 with his wife, Yoshiko (whom he’d met while in Japan), they dedicated their lives to the fight for human rights and disability rights. He later joined the Texas Governor’s Committee for Persons with Disabilities, and his work in that position led to his appointment as President Reagan’s vice-chair to the National Council on Disability.

Dart was promoted to head the Rehabilitation Services Administration, within the Department of Education, in 1986. The promotion allowed Dart to create drastic changes for the betterment of people with disabilities. Despite making meaningful progress, Dart was frustrated by the government bureaucracy. Dart was later asked to resign for harshly testifying to Congress that the Rehabilitation Services Administration was **“a vast, inflexible federal system that, like the society it represents, still contains a significant portion of individuals who have not yet overcome obsolete, paternalistic attitudes about disability.”**

In 1988, Dart served as co-chair for the Congressional Task Force on the Rights and Empowerment of Americans with Disabilities, which helped lead to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, commonly referred to as the “ADA.” Dart was at President George H.W. Bush’s side on the White House Lawn when the ADA was signed into law. Following its passage, Dart focused his efforts on defending the ADA and the Individuals with Education Disabilities Act (IDEA). He later decided to travel across the states, advocating for human rights.

Justin Dart Jr. was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998 by President Bill Clinton for his notable contributions to the advancement of disability rights. Dart’s authenticity and compassion were – and still stand as – an inspiration that we all must support each other. In the words of Justin Dart Jr., **“You have the power. You have the responsibility. I believe in you. And I love you.”**