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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
ADDRESS BY ATTORNEY-GENERAL JANET RENO

INTIX 1998 Conference

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P R O C E E D I N G S

ATTORNEY-GENERAL RENO: Thank you so much, Jimmy, in so many ways.

I am so pleased to be here with you today to thank you for all that you do for over fifty million people with disabilities in this country.

INTIX is recognized all over the world. I think that's pretty special and I think it reflects your leadership and your individual commitments or its leadership in bringing the highest professional standards to box-office management.

As importantly, you are also leaders in opening the world of sports, of culture, of education to people with disabilities. I know that you take accessibility seriously and I say "thank you."

There's something pretty wonderful when you see a person who's never been able to walk into a store get into the store because of the small ramp. There's something pretty wonderful about a person who has never been able to rent a car, rent a car because of the special attachment. And there is something wonderful about what you do for people with disabilities.

As Mr. Legarreta said, I certainly do love opera. I love my Florida Marlins, but I haven't seen them yet. So I've settled for the Orioles and Camden Yard.

These events and so many other opportunities provide me with important outlets,

outlets that enable me to escape from some of the other issues that I face in our nation's capital.

Hearing Domingo in an opera or watching a baseball sail over the center field wall is often times more entertaining than what I do some of the time in Washington. But it is so very important, and, when you think about what you have done to open so many opportunities to people with disabilities, just put it in that perspective and know that you have made the difference.

Life, of course, is much more than just our hours on the job, for the hours that we spend in leisure often bring us our greatest joys. That's why I want to make sure that everyone has a chance to go to a theater, listen to a concert, or cheer their favorite team regardless of their disability.

By understanding the needs of people with disabilities, your organization has made these experiences real for millions of Americans, people who once and not very long ago could only imagine what it would be like to see their favorite band or watch their favorite athlete in person.

When Congress passed the Americans With Disabilities Act, it understood this very clearly. That's why the ADA doesn't just open doors to the necessities of life like the work place, the doctor's office, and the grocery store. It opens doors to the entire range of our wonderfully diverse and enriching cultural life.

The law opens doors to those people who, because of barriers in communication, architecture, or attitude, had previously been left out and left behind.

In 1986, before the ADA became law, the Lou Harris poll painted a very bleak picture. It was a picture of people with disabilities isolated from leisure activities. The disturbing figure showed that the large majority of people with disabilities did not go to the movies, did not go to the theater, and did not go to sporting events.

In testimony before Congress, people with disabilities explained that they did not feel welcome, that they feared being treated with contempt, and that architectural communication and transportation barriers made going out impossible.

The ADA is beginning to change all that. Day by day, our society is becoming more accessible. Doors are opening all across America to jobs, to city halls, to courtrooms, to stores, and restaurants, and hotels, to the Olympics, and, because of your work, they are opening to a life of leisure, a life of learning, a life of inspiration.

Now, when I go to a concert, it's not unusual for me to see an elderly gentleman in a

wheelchair enjoying the concert. And enjoy it he does. He sits there and keeps time and he is at home in that concert hall.

Or to see family members and friends able to sit right next to him in companion seats or to see a young person benefiting from an assisted listening device.

All of you in this audience literally have the power to open the doors of this country to entertainment and culture for people with disabilities. You don't just set ticketing policy. You don't just organize your offices the right way. You don't just make all your customers feel wonderful, whether they be Attorneys-General or somebody else. You don't just do the job.

You are the ticket to access for so many theater-goers and sports fans with disabilities. Through your work, many box offices have changed their sales policies. Now people with mobility impairments and their companions can get tickets for the accessible seats, and more and more theaters are now providing the assisted listening devices required by law for hard-of-hearing patrons.

You may have heard of our settlements with the Atlanta Olympics and the Cineplex Odeon theater chain. Those agreements have served as models for what box offices need to do on these issues.

We try as hard as we can to educate the public about our accomplishments so that we can avoid costly litigation for us and for others.

Our emphasis is on access, not litigation, and, whatever I do in the Department of Justice, I want to assume first that other people want to comply with the law. There may be questions of how we comply. I want to do my part in explaining the law and in making compliance reasonable and cost-effective. I find that when I try to reach out and educate others about the law, they respond and try to comply.

But sometimes I find, and I would find nobody in this room, some people just thumb their nose. We're going to be ready to litigate if we have to, but what we much prefer to do is use our energies to open America to people who could never walk through the doors.

And it's good business, too. Just think, if you will for a moment, in these years since the ADA has been passed, how much more often you see people with disabilities on the streets, in the bus, in the courtroom, in your concert hall, and in your baseball stadium.

We worked hard with businesses as well as governments to achieve voluntary compliance; but what we found is that many businesses will have already voluntarily complied or they'll want to know how.

It is a common-sense law. It is flexible. It is reasonable, and, as business has come to understand this, more and more choose to comply on their own.

We have tried to work with everyone not just to familiarize businesses and local governments with their obligations under the law but also to provide the tools for people with disabilities to use in their attempts to achieve compliance as well.

That's where I first learned about the law. I was a local prosecutor in Miami. A very fierce advocate would confront me from his wheelchair on a regular basis. He was forceful. He could intimidate, but I would listen to him because he made sense; and he taught me then, as so many people have taught me since, that this law can be used to help others.

I urge you, if you have somebody suddenly at your box office window fussing at you, trying to intimidate, see if you can just lower the decibels a little bit and get them to talk in a way that you can listen, and you can learn so much from them, as I have, about what we can do to make all of America more accessible.

Over the past four years, we've been blanketing the airways and filling mailboxes with information about the ADA. One most recent public service announcement featured President Clinton. Maybe you've heard it on one of the 500 or more local radio stations which have played it. We've put ADA information files in 15,000 public libraries across the country. We've mailed information packets to millions of businesses. We've also put an ADA home page on the Worldwide Web.

Education is half the battle. That's why I am so pleased that you have invited John Wodatch, the head of the Disability Rights Section of our Civil Rights Division, to participate in the ADA Session that will follow this luncheon.

John is one of the people that have taken me by the hand and educated me and helped me go to others and tell them about this law and the difference that it can make. He believes, as I do, that education is fundamental to achieving compliance. We know that you have lots of questions, and he will be more than happy to give our best understanding of what the law requires.

But, as I learned from the advocate, as you can learn from the advocate, we also want to learn from you. We look forward to your insights into how the law can best be applied, given your expertise in the day- to-day realities of box-office operation.

John's staff is developing a technical assistance document, and for it to be effective we need your insight. We need your experience. These question-and-answer-type documents or fact sheets have proven very effective in other areas ranging from law enforcement to day care.

I went to the International Association of Chiefs of Police and I asked one question: "If you were the Attorney-General of the United States, what would you do to improve your assistance to law enforcement?" And they asked me about the ADA, and I said, "Why don't we do a Q&A book for you?" And it has proven very helpful.

So talk with John today so that we can get feedback about areas that we can address and provide you with information that can be of assistance to you. We think that a similar document will have great value. Please take the time to share your views with John on this or any other idea and tell him to get me the message of if you were the Attorney- General of the United States, what would you do to improve your operations and to make government more effective in support of what you do.

We still have a very long way to go, but I am encouraged by how far as a society we have come. The ADA's approach to ending the isolation of people with disabilities is comprehensive. It will not accomplish its goal overnight.

In fighting for access, Congress recognized that disability-based discrimination can't be eliminated by attacking only one part of the problem in isolation. People can't go to the theater and to sporting events unless barriers are removed in the subways and buses that take them there. People can't afford tickets unless they have the employment opportunities to give them the financial wherewithal to attend.

We are already seeing progress. In 1996 the Census Bureau reported that the employment rate for persons with severe disabilities increased from 23.3% in 1991 to 26.1% in 1994.

These employees are so wonderful. I employed one particular person that I will never forget. She was developmentally disabled, significantly so, but she was one of the finest employees in the State Attorney's office, one of the most dedicated, one of the most hard-working. She opened worlds to me and gave me knowledge and gave me understanding of the few steps that I needed to take to make her a totally productive employee in our State Attorney's office.

When someone comes to apply for a job at your box office in your ball stadium, listen and look and think about how you can make that person an effective employee, and it may be one of the most rewarding investments that you have ever made.

It means, in terms of the number and the percentage increase, that approximately 80,000 individuals with severe disabilities got jobs in the first three years after the ADA was passed. That's significant.

Over time, as the ADA has its impact across the board, we should see ever-increasing numbers of people with disabilities at sports and entertainment events, at your box office, in the Department of Justice, in courtrooms, in trial.

Disability rights laws are about eliminating all discrimination against people with disabilities, whether it take the form of architectural barriers or archaic attitudes.

Too often, it's these attitudes as much as any structural obstacle that prevents people with disabilities from contributing the fullness of their talents, but the only way to change these attitudes is to increase the opportunities for people with disabilities and people without disabilities to interact with each other and to develop better understanding.

Interaction erodes fear and it builds understanding. It shows people that their prejudices and stereotypes about disabilities are false in a way a lecture or admonition never could. While it's no cure-all, integration is the best way we found to bring down the attitudinal barriers that had too often limited the life chances of people with disabilities.

You may say that I don't know how to respond and I feel like I may hurt somebody's feelings. The wonderful thing about people with disabilities is you finally learn you just ask them and say, "How do I handle this?" And they tell you flat out how to handle it; and you feel so much more comfortable. Talk with them. They can give you tremendous insight.

That makes your role all the more important because you're gatekeepers to our entertainment treasure, gatekeepers to wonderful recreational opportunities. Bring people together and together we'll bring down the barriers of attitude that prevent so many people from having access not just to events but to understanding.

Charles Krauthammer, an internationally-syndicated columnist for {IOOn}The {IOff} {IOOn} Washington Post{IOff}, recently wrote an op-ed called "Rampway to Heaven." In it he, who has used a wheelchair since age 22, writes about the recently-renovated Kennedy Center Concert Hall here in Washington, saying: "For the disabled, the new concert hall is a marvel. You can go in on your own; you can go out on your own, no one to ask, no one to thank, nothing to do but, like everyone else, enjoy."

For those in wheelchairs, having an everyone-else experience in a public building is a rare thing, indeed. You, each one of you, can provide that ticket, that special ticket, to that everyone-else experience.

That's what the ADA is all about, but the ADA, without people like you who care about others and want to serve the public in a can-do, wonderful way, without you, it won't make a difference. With you, it has, and it will continue to do so; and I thank you so very much for the access you give and for the joy and the pleasure you give to millions.

(Whereupon, at approximately 1:00 p.m., the PROCEEDINGS were adjourned.)

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