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How the ADA Helped Change My Tune

Charlotte Young

**WE'RE
STILL
HERE!**

I regret that I was too late to participate in this year's "We're Still Here!" contest, but I am hoping that I might share my own story in hopes that it might inspire others to reengage in activities that once excited and energized them.

When I was young, music was my escape, my joy and my way of connecting with the world. Polio robbed me of many things, but it never took my love for music. I played the piano until my mobility challenges—and the inaccessibility of rehearsal spaces and performance venues—forced me to let go of that dream. For years, my piano sat silent, gathering dust, while my heart ached for the melodies I could no longer play or share.

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The ADA didn't just enforce ramps and elevators; it opened doors to inclusion and creativity. With its standards and advocacy for accessible public spaces, music venues and community centers began to transform. Suddenly, rehearsal spaces featured automatic doors and widened pathways. Stages were equipped with lifts, and seating areas accommodated wheelchairs without segregating those of us who use them.

The first time I visited an ADA-compliant community music center, I wept. The entrance was smooth and inviting, with no stairs to conquer. Inside, I found a practice room with adjustable benches

and enough space to maneuver my power wheelchair comfortably. But the true magic happened in the concert hall. For the first time in decades, I could imagine performing again—sharing my music with an audience without the logistical hurdles that had held me back for so long.

The ADA had not only made the physical space accessible—it had made my dreams accessible, too.

With the encouragement of friends and family, I began to play again. Rolling up to a piano built with accessibility in mind, my fingers hesitated over the keys at first, rusty from years of disuse. But as the familiar notes filled the room, I felt an overwhelming sense of freedom. The ADA had not only made the physical space accessible—it had made my dreams accessible, too.

Soon, I started volunteering at the same community music center, working with children and teens with disabilities who also loved music. Watching their eyes light up as they touched the keys for the first time reminded me of the transformative power of inclusion. One young girl, also a wheelchair user, told me she'd never thought someone like her could play the piano. I told her, "You can do anything. And you belong here."

Of course, the ADA didn't magically restore my ability to pursue a professional music career—those days are behind me.

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But it did allow me to share my gift with my grandchildren, a joy I never expected. Now, the same piano that sat silent for decades fills my home with laughter and curiosity as little hands plunk away at the keys alongside mine.

We create impromptu duets, and I teach them the songs I loved as a child, passing on not just music but a part of my soul. It's a bond that words alone could never capture, made possible because the ADA gave me back not just my access to music but my ability to share it with the people I love most.

The ADA's impact goes beyond the visible changes to buildings and spaces. It's about inclusion and belonging. It's about the freedom to pursue passions and the dignity to do so without barriers. For me, the ADA gave me back my music, a gift I thought I had lost forever.

Thanks to the ADA, I'm no longer just a listener in the audience. I'm a musician again, creating and sharing melodies that remind me—and others—that accessibility isn't just about getting in the door. It's about opening a world of possibilities and ensuring that no dream is out of reach. ■

In Appreciation

Thank you for recognizing your friends and loved ones with contributions to the activities of PHI and IVUN and for your generous Membership contributions.

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