

Disabilities and Leadership Unite

Kemp, '74, Honored with Dole Leadership Prize

Two distinguished Washburn Law alumni, both worldwide leaders in the disability movement, were in the spotlight on Dec. 14, 2014, at the Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics.

John Kemp, '74, received the 2014 Dole Leadership Prize and was personally selected by former **Senator Robert Dole, '52**. The prize is awarded annually to an individual or group whose public service leadership inspires others. Kemp joins a prestigious list of prize recipients that includes Nelson Mandela, the Wounded Warrior Project, former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, and former Polish president Lech Walesa.

“As a wounded veteran and tireless advocate for disability rights, Senator Dole has taken a personal interest in Mr. Kemp’s outstanding service to the disabilities community,” said Institute Director Bill Lacy.

Kemp was born with a congenital defect that left him without arms or legs. He now has four prostheses and uses a motorized chair. His passion for inspiring others with disabilities has earned him respect in the corporate, non-profit, and political arenas. His keen perspective, personal

experience, and legal expertise have combined to make him a highly recognizable and distinguished voice for people with disabilities.

Impacting the Nation

Throughout his professional life, Kemp has worked with Dole on projects of mutual interest. Since the 1970s, Dole and Kemp have partnered to lobby on behalf of people with disabilities. Their combined efforts have, in part, resulted in the enactment of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that was passed by Congress in 1990. Additionally, they worked with the late Paul Hearne, a good friend and past executive director of the Dole Foundation on Employment of People with Disabilities, to lobby staunch opponents of expanding the rights of people with disabilities. One of their efforts included meeting with the National Federation of Independent Business Owners to ease their concerns about small businesses’ fear of going out of business because of having to meet ADA guidelines.

Kemp has learned many valuable lessons observing

and working with Sen. Dole over the years. He has learned that you can be a statesman; you can respect other people’s opinions; and sometimes you have to yield, blend, and cooperate. Kemp recalled Dole saying, as they were negotiating the ADA in 1990, “You can’t have everything you want, and still, you’re going to have to give up something to get the cooperation. And you just have to think about what it is that you really, really want.” Kemp said, “He’s always been a guy that can see both sides of the issue. He can bring people together and find common ground. And if anything, he taught me that you can get a lot more done by being willing to compromise and put yourself in the other person’s place.”

Changing the World

Today, Dole and Kemp’s efforts are focused on getting U.S. ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. According to the United Nation’s website, this international treaty states that all persons with disabilities have the right to be free from discrimination in the enjoyment of their rights. This includes the right to be free from discrimination on the



John Kemp, front and center, is pictured with students and staff from the Henry Viscardi School.

basis of disability, but also on any other basis such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status. The treaty also identifies the obligations on States' parties to the Convention to promote, protect, and ensure those rights. States that ratify the Convention are legally bound to respect the standards in the Convention. This is the first human rights convention of the 21st century and the first legally binding instrument with comprehensive protection of the rights of persons with disabilities.

During a recent phone conversation, Kemp and Dole both resolved that in 2015 they would get the resolution ratified and they talked strategy for how to accomplish this endeavor. As of April 16, 2015, the U.S. has signed, but not yet ratified the convention, and there have been 153 ratifications/accessions by States in the world according to the United Nation's website (un.org/disabilities).

Empowering Children

Kemp has selected The Viscardi Center to receive the \$25,000 Dole Leadership Prize to help further the Center's educational technology

capabilities. Located in Albertson, N.Y., The Viscardi Center provides a lifespan of programs and services that educate, employ, and empower children and adults with disabilities. Kemp has passionately served as the Center's president and CEO since 2011 and inspires others to achieve the impossible through knowledge, experience, vision, personality, and persistence.

"It's an unbelievable place here," said Kemp about The Viscardi Center, which is comprised of three main components—Henry Viscardi School; Abilities, Inc.; and

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Kemp *(cont. from page 9)*

the National Business and Disability Council.

At the Henry Viscardi School, students who are medically fragile and have significant physical disabilities are given the chance to function freely in a great environment, not be chastised or humiliated because of their disability, and learn and grow on their own. “There is a big rationale for this kind of school to exist,” Kemp said.

The school’s student profile is pre-K through age 21, non-ambulatory, wheel-chair using, technologically dependent, and/or non-verbal. Students are so ill that school districts cannot accommodate their needs. These fragile children are transported daily in climate-controlled buses from their homes that are located up to an hour away from the center. They come from the five boroughs of New York City, Westchester County, and the counties of Long Island. “It’s the parents of these children that I probably admire the most,” said Kemp, referring to their untiring efforts to care for a disabled child in addition to their other family members and daily obligations. The center is heavily staffed in the medical support area, including a doctor working



John Kemp, '74, and Chris, a student from the Henry Viscardi School.

one day a week, four full-time nurses, and about 30 therapists, all who work closely with the 170 students.

“Technology is such an equalizer for people with disabilities that we want to make sure that not only students have all of the technologies that they need to learn, grow, and develop,” said Kemp. “But also, that the staff has the technologies that they need to instruct and lead the children.”

Microsoft and IBM are among the organizations that have supported The Viscardi Center. In the future, the center is looking

at developing an “Accessible ICT” forum of companies from the information and communication technology area to discuss how people with disabilities work and learn, and what kind of technologies are and should be available. The Viscardi Center plans to be an aggregator for those companies and a test place for both the students at the school and the adults with disabilities who receive services. “We’re an incubator of good ideas,” Kemp said.

When students leave the Henry Viscardi School, they feel good about who they are as people with disabilities entering the world. “That

they have the confidence and the belief in themselves, and they rightfully belong to society — to me, that’s the empowerment part of what we do here,” emphasized Kemp. “And they need to feel that they’re not hat-in-hand begging and pleading for an opportunity, but that they have basic civil and human rights as citizens of this great country. So they come out of here not over-reaching and over-asking but knowing that they have an equal opportunity to participate in society.”

Abilities, Inc., at The Viscardi Center helps prepare individuals with disabilities for entry or re-entry in to the workplace. Specific examples of the services include training for retail sales, job coaching, office technology courses, and career exploration. Approximately 2,000 adolescents and adults are supported each year with some type of service offered at Abilities, Inc.

The third component of The Viscardi Center is the National Business & Disability Council, which serves the employer community, and works with most of the Fortune 100 companies on their hiring, customer service, and supply chain issues involving businesses owned by individuals with disabilities.

As a child, Kemp was blessed to have a Viscardi-type of influence in his life through his father, John B. Kemp. After Kemp lost his mother to cancer, Kemp’s father single-handedly raised him and his two siblings from a young age. Kemp’s father expected him to be in an inclusive school environment, accept challenges, and become self-sufficient. John B. Kemp retired after 62 years spent working in federal, state, county, and city government. He later developed Parkinson’s disease, and died in 2008. “He was the ultimate public servant. He’s with me every day...a really remarkable guy,” said Kemp of his father.

One of Kemp’s favorite memories is when he gave Washburn Law’s commencement address in May 2003, which coincided with receiving an Honorary Doctorate of Law degree. Kemp was able to introduce

his father, whose Parkinson’s disease was in its latter stages. “When I introduced him, he got up very slowly, turned around, and waved at everyone. And I still think, ‘whoa, that’s one of my great memories.’”

When Kemp’s dad developed Parkinson’s, he recalls encouraging him to use the handicapped parking pass only to get the response, “No, no. They’re for people like you. I shouldn’t take those parking spaces.” He didn’t perceive himself as handicapped in that sense, which Kemp sees as a frequent response of people as they age — they resist the identity of being disabled. “Part of our movement is to give dignity to the identity of disability. For too long, people just felt sorry for us and there weren’t a lot of options for us. Now with civil rights and getting jobs, we are really changing how people with disabilities are perceived,” said Kemp.

For more information visit:
The Viscardi Center - viscardicenter.org
United Nations - un.org/disabilities