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## Painful memory fired crusading zeal



“People with disabilities have been out of sight, forgotten. When planning buildings, buses and train stations the planners don’t think about people with impairments. Thoughtlessness, rather than cruelty, is the most common problem” – **Robert Burgdorf Jr.**

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By **LINDA NEGRO**  
Courier staff writer

Nearly 20 years ago Robert Burgdorf Jr. was kicked off an Evansville construction site by a contractor who didn't want "cripples" working on the job.

“I wanted to tell him that he couldn't do that because it was against the law,” said Burgdorf, an Evansville native whose right shoulder was disfigured by polio when he was a year old.

“In fact, it wasn't against the law then, and lo these many years later it still is not against the law.”

That may be changing, and Burgdorf is part of the reason.

He has transformed the humiliation from that moment into a crusade for the disabled and that crusade is headed for Congress.

As an attorney for the National Council on the Handicapped, Burgdorf has authored a bill designed to give the nation's 36 million disabled people the same legal rights that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 gave others who faced discrimination on the basis of race, sex, national origin and religion. “If that contractor had said I don’t want a black or woman then I could have said, ‘That's against the law,’” Burgdorf said. “But it was not illegal to fire or refuse to hire because of a disability.”

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1988 is a comprehensive equal rights bill for disabled people that would not only make it illegal to discriminate in employment but require further removal of barriers in public accommodations, housing and transportation as well.

The bill will be introduced by Sen. Lowell Weicker, R-Conn., within two to three months.

Weicker, a former chairman of the Senate subcommittee on the handicapped, has had a longstanding interest in the rights of the disabled, even years before his son was born with Down's syndrome, according to staff member Terry Muilenburg.

"His principle priority has always been to help those who have no voice in Congress," she said.

Weicker's staff gives the bill a good chance for eventual passage, although it may not happen this year.

Burgdorf, who now lives in suburban Washington, said the issue is so compelling that it will be difficult to oppose. He expects strong support from the disabled and friends of civil rights.

The bill is geared not only to protect the disabled from intentional discrimination, such as Burgdorf faced, but also addresses the more common prejudice that is unintentional, based on ignorance of the abilities of the disabled.

People with disabilities have been of sight, forgotten," Burgdorf said. "When planning buildings, buses and train stations the planners don't think about people with impairments. Thoughtlessness, rather than cruelty, is the most common problem."

The disabled occupy an inferior status in society, and are severely disadvantaged educationally, vocationally and economically, according to reports Burgdorf has written for the National Council on the Handicapped and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

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