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Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

Accessibility at the Democratic National Convention

Rochelle Dornatt remembers the significance of accessibility issues at the 1988 Democratic National Convention.

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One of the big things that happened with the disability rights group was at that convention in 1988—the one that nobody thought to invite me to go to until I invited myself—the, the, the delegates who were disabled were sort of a forgotten caucus. And the arena where the convention was being held in Atlanta was not accessible, and they had to come in—people in wheelchairs had to come in through the loading dock, the same place where they brought in all the supplies for all the hamburgers and, and food and crap that they brought in to sell people at the arena. And the same place where they took out the garbage. And, and it made the persons with disabilities furious. They were just furious over, over being treated that way. And they came to Mr. Coelho and asked for redress somehow—that they were being badly treated. And Tony turned to me and says, “Take care of it.” No direction on what to do to take care of it, but just “Take care of it.” So I, I sat down to take care of it, and, and basically held meetings all day long with the, the disability rights groups as to what is it they wanted? How could we make this better? And those meetings went on late into the night, and the only place we could hold them late at night was on the loading dock. And so here I am, I’m, I am—the loading dock is not a place to hold meetings, you know. So I had to sit on the floor with—everybody else was in wheelchairs, for the most part—in the place where—that was covered with grime and garbage, and try to work out some deal with, with these delegates, because if they didn’t get a deal they were going to stage a protest the next day in the middle of Teddy Kennedy’s big speech. And we couldn’t afford to have that happen. The Democratic Convention needed to go off without a hitch, and we needed to look like we were inclusive of everybody, and everybody’s needs were being met. And so the deal we worked out was that the committee that would—that the DNC had that would select the next venue for the next convention would include certain parameters for accessibility, and that there would be someone who was representing the disabled community on that committee. And so we worked this out in the dead of night, on the loading dock, where the garbage was being taken out while we were meeting.