

IL Movement Loses a Key Leader, Dear Friend, Bright Star

(Portions of this story come from an article published in Independence Today, and appear here with permission from the author, Janine Bertram.)

Members of the disability rights community all over the country are in shock and mourning over the loss of Linda Gonzales, well-known and highly respected leader in the movement, who passed away on July 27th, 2013 in San Luis Obispo, California.

Linda joined the disability rights movement in 1981 when she took a job as a peer counselor at Westside Center for Independent Living in Los Angeles. In 1982, she moved to New Mexico to work at New Vistas in Santa Fe, where she rose to the position of Director of Independent Living in 1988.

During her time as director, Linda started two satellite offices that eventually spun off into free-standing centers, Independent Living Resource Center (ILRC) in Albuquerque and The Ability Center in Las Cruces. Through her work at New Vistas, Linda gained first-hand knowledge of the struggles of people with disabilities in eastern New Mexico. She became keenly aware that the unique issues faced by those in rural areas were not being addressed by national disability rights groups.

In 1986, Linda and eleven other rural CIL directors founded the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL). Linda became the first APRIL director in 1994. She moved to Ohio in 1998, and worked on developing and expanding the organization until her retirement in 2007. Today, with 260 member CIL's, APRIL provides advocacy and a strong voice for people with disabilities living in rural areas of the U.S.

Recently, Linda authored a blog on CIL Funding and Development for ILRU (the Independent Living Research Utilization Project). She was also a member of the Consumer Advisory Board for



GoWoman, a project of the Center for Research on Women with Disabilities (CROWD).

Tributes to Linda:

Tom Seekins, Director of the Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities at the University of Montana: “I admired her so much. APRIL was a small organization, struggling to survive. She held it together and led the organization to the point (that) it became vibrant.”

Richard Petty, Director, IL-NET Training and Technical Assistance at ILRU, said, “Linda was a revered colleague who will be deeply missed by all of us here at ILRU, especially those of us who worked most closely with her over decades.”

Dr. Margaret (Peg) Nosek, Director, Center for Research on Women with Disabilities: “Linda was my soul sister. She was the embodiment of compassion. She always had time to help people through a crisis, bringing her genius for solving problems to every situation.

Billy Altom, Director, APRIL: “Linda set the standard for advocacy in rural America. She was a relentless advocate and always had the best interest of our brothers and sisters in mind.”

Elissa Ellis, Director of Operations, APRIL: “Linda will remain a symbol of strength and resolve... always hopeful and always loving. She cared deeply about the rights of all people with disabilities and dedicated her entire adult life to empowering us.”

Nancy Pieters, Colleague: “Linda was one of the brightest lights our world has known and really a blessing to all of us who knew her. She was so kind and caring to everyone, and such a fierce defender for disability rights.”

Sincere condolences from ILRC to Linda's husband, Jerry; daughter, Melissa; and all of the family.