



Kansas 1972 Podcast

MINI-EPISODE: Roger Williams and Disability Rights at KU

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Tracy Quillin:

This series was made possible by the Friends of Humanities Kansas.

Kara Heitz:

Welcome to Kansas 1972. A lot happened during that pivotal year, including the founding of Humanities Kansas. In celebration of our 50th anniversary, we'll be telling stories from that era of Kansas history. So tune in, chill out, and get the lowdown on Kansas 1972.

Kara Heitz:

And welcome to a special mini episode of Kansas 1972. We couldn't quite fit this story into one of the main episodes, but we felt like it was too important not to tell. So, enjoy this extra story.

EPISODE INTRODUCTION

[Courtroom SFX]

Kara Heitz:

When we think about "getting up and standing up for your rights" in the 1960s and early 1970s we usually think about demonstrations, occupations, civil disobedience. But legal channels can be just as effective, sometimes even more. In this story, social change is enacted not through protest, but through law and the courts.

Audio: Wescoe Hall, KU

In the 1960s, KU desperately needed a single large building dedicated to humanities and liberal arts. By 1969, Chancellor Clark Wescoe secured funding. A huge hole dug for the building became the gathering spot for Vietnam War protesters until construction of a four-story modernist hall began in 1971. Completed in 1973, it was named for Wescoe. The expansive sidewalks, nicknamed Wescoe Beach, are now a popular gathering spot for students to meet between classes.

Kara Heitz:

Anyone who went to KU in the past 50 years undoubtedly has memories of hanging out on Wescoe Beach. And anyone who has walked along Jayhawk Boulevard has undoubtedly come across Wescoe Hall. It definitely stands out. And while it is architecturally a "four-story modernist hall" in the Brutalist style, we had slightly different names for Wescoe when I was an undergrad there in the mid-1990s. The parking garage, the concrete block, the Soviet school, and, most popularly, the eyesore.

But some people on campus have a very different perspective on this building.

Ray Mizumura-Pence:

...the wheelchair ramp is what I would call an incontestably beautiful part of Wescoe, the exterior of it because of what it represents for people with disabilities and also folks without disabilities who might need that ramp to make going from one level of Wescoe to another a little bit easier. So, yeah, a beautiful part of Wescoe.

Kara Heitz:

That's Ray Mizumura-Pence, Associate Teaching Professor in American Studies at The University of Kansas. I talked with Prof. Mizumura-Pence about the fight for the wheelchair ramp at Wescoe Hall, and the efforts of one particular person to make the campus more accessible to all faculty, staff, and students.

But first, what was the larger context for these efforts? What exactly was happening with the fight for disability rights nationally at the time Wescoe Hall was being built?

Ray Mizumura-Pence:

There were many things going on for decades that that really started to crystallize in the late 60s and early 70s, and the African American freedom struggle was one was the major influence on a host of civil rights activism, disability rights being one of them. So, in response to the activism, there were more laws, and in response to the laws, there was more activism. In this country, around the world, laws are beginning to proliferate and activism becoming more assertive.

Kara Heitz:

This dynamic between legal change and activism is one we'll come back to later on.

But to help explain some of the legal history in the struggle for disability rights, I also spoke with Karl Menninger. Prof. Menninger currently teaches Disability Law at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Law School. Prior to that, he had a long career in federal and state agencies working with persons with disabilities.

Karl Menninger:

Until the 60s, people with disabilities were usually segregated, either purposely – they were sent to institutions – or effectively, such as people in wheelchair couldn't get to buildings that had stairs or couldn't get to bathrooms. So after the civil rights movement, people with disabilities and people who dealt with people with disabilities thought that maybe there ought to be a law to protect or to make disabled people first class citizens have an equal opportunity to live life, take work live where they wanted to.

So, one of the first laws that was passed federally was the Architectural Barriers Act, which was passed by largely an aide to a senator who himself was in a wheelchair due to muscular dystrophy and decided that he he had a difficult time getting through the museums in the mall as well as the Capitol building. So, he pressed for, in 1967-68, for a law that basically required all buildings built or altered after a certain date in 1968 –federal buildings –to be accessible. So that was the first step.

The second large legislation at federal law was the section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which most of the law didn't really have anything to do with nondiscrimination. It was basically a funding program for vocational rehabilitation. But a congressional staffer slipped in the Section

504, which said that basically no recipient of federal funds will discriminate on the basis of what was then called handicap, now disability. Otherwise fought against otherwise qualified individuals.

Kara Heitz:

And these two laws from 1968 and 1973 applied to the University of Kansas, as a public institution that received federal support.

While the story of any social or political change has many individuals that make it possible, the fight to get KU to comply with these laws is particularly indebted to one individual – Roger Williams.

So who exactly was he? Again, Ray Mizumura-Pence.

Ray Mizumura-Pence:

Roger Williams, who was born in Rhode Island and is a direct descendant of the Roger Williams, who founded Rhode Island. He didn't expect to become a major disability rights activist, but he did. He came from a very privileged background. And when he was in the Air Force, he began to develop symptoms of what turned out to be muscular dystrophy. And by the time he was finished with his service in the Air Force, this would have been in the early 60s, he was using crutches and all, and not long after he was out of the service. He met and fell in love with Michele Jones and they later married. And he decided to make Lawrence his home and to attend graduate school here.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, with his increasing disability and with these laws coming to the fore, there was a need for people like Roger Williams to... To confront KU, if you will, to make sure that the university would be accessible for people with disabilities.

Kara Heitz:

When Wescoe Hall was being constructed in the early 1970s, Williams learned the school had not included a wheelchair ramp for the building, in direct violation of the 1968 Architectural Barriers Act. So Williams filed a lawsuit. Construction of Wescoe was halted until plans for the wheelchair ramp were developed.

This was a big victory. But it was only the beginning of Roger Williams' efforts to make campus more accessible.

Ray Mizumura-Pence:

With the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, these institutions again, KU and others, they were legally required to put together a plan and implement that plan so that people with disabilities would have full as full as possible access to what takes place here. Obviously, education, but also people who would be working here on staff and so on. KU needed to be compliant and that's where the University Committee for the Architecturally Handicapped gain a lot of momentum

Kara Heitz:

Williams became an active member of KU's University Committee for the Architecturally Handicapped (known as the UCAH) and as the 1970s progressed, this Committee as well as a larger disability rights community, pressed for even more changes.

Ray Mizumura-Pence:

It was very clear that as the 70s moved forward that what UCAH was getting more attention and attracting more disabled students to campus and extending the interest in their rights. A couple of examples would be there was more of a focus on transportation after 1973, and as UCAH became more visible and more vocal, and it became known that, for example, bathrooms were being made accessible and classroom entrances and exits were becoming more accessible. The need to make it easier for students, not just students, but disabled people to get on and off campus and to get around campus when they were here, that got more attention.

Williams was hoping that students undergraduate and graduate would more and more often take the lead on agitating for disability rights. So a student organization took shape. They held various events. Fundraisers called attention to what they were doing. And, for example, concerts where Lawrence merchants would donate refreshments, including beer.

The accessible bus or van was known for helping these students have more of a social life, i.e. if they wanted to visit local bars and taverns, they could do that even though there was some controversy about that in Lawrence. There was kind of a double standard that maybe if someone's a wheelchair user that they shouldn't drink or party like other "normal" college students.

That brought that issue to the fore about the double standards that people often have for disabled people that they that someone needs to look out for them, that there needs to be some kind of paternalism that their lived experience, that it isn't an occasion for rights; it's an occasion for goodwill.

KU and the United States were moving past that goodwill approach and moving toward an empowering approach.

Kara Heitz:

This idea of an empowering approach over a goodwill approach is a critical shift that's happening in the 1970s. The more paternalistic goodwill approach operated in a system where persons with disabilities were often invisible. But the empowering approach to disability was about persons with disabilities actively making themselves visible, often as a form of activism.

Ray Mizumura-Pence explains the connection of this strategy to other rights movements.

Ray Mizumura-Pence:

Much of what What's happening in the courts and on the streets and in the media other. Groups, other historically disadvantaged groups, saw and heard read about what was happening with the African-American freedom struggle and learned from that.

People like Ed Roberts of Berkeley, California, a major disability rights activist. He was on record as being motivated by people like James Meredith, who was refused admittance to, I believe it was, the University of Mississippi. Ed Roberts was refused at first admittance to the University of California at Berkeley, so he saw a parallel between what he went through and what James Meredith went through. Roger Williams at the University of Kansas and his allies. They also drew on the language and the positioning of themselves. They're, they're putting their bodies on the line. And making their bodies visible to get attention to their cause. So, a photograph of Roger Williams, for example, in his wheelchair in the early 1970s, speaking to a

City Council meeting in Lawrence, which this was published in the Kansan. It's safe to say that a lot of people had never seen that kind of image before.

The invisibility of people in wheelchairs was and is a problem. So, when you see Roger Williams there again in his wheelchair speaking directly and assertively to the city council, this was in harmony with making Black lives more visible in the south and in the north, women's lives more visible in the second wave feminism of the early 60s.

[Music Start]

Kara Heitz:

While Roger Williams primarily used legal and official institutional channels to enact change, other parts of the disability rights movement were making their bodies visible through the tactics of civil disobedience.

So Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, states "No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States shall solely on the basis of his handicap, be excluded from the participation, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." But the federal government really dragged its feet in issuing specific regulations on things like what constituted discrimination, timelines for compliance, and how section 504 would be enforced. Without these regulations, it was really difficult for the law to actually be applied.

And for four long years, disability rights advocates pressed the Nixon, then Ford, then Carter administrations to pass regulations, but to no avail.

So in April of 1977 they took a more direct approach.

[Music End]

Audio: CBS Evening News, 504 Demonstrations

On April 5th, 1977, proud and defiant five to 600 people in wheelchairs with walking canes and hearing aids stormed the Regional Office of Health, Education and Welfare in San Francisco. Their purpose to stop discrimination against the disabled, no matter what the consequences are.

For the disabled. The signing of Regulation 504 is the difference between living and existing. We're more than handicapped. "Without these laws, we're crippled." 504 means access to public transportation and public spaces. It means free public education and no job discrimination. All basic American civil rights.

...for thousands of disabled people across the nation, the answer is now. And a grassroots movement, they stage a sit-in at 10 HEW offices across the country.

Within twenty-four hours, the demonstrators are forced out of the federal building everywhere that is, except San Francisco. Instead of giving in, they move in and what will become the longest occupation of a federal building in U.S. history.

Kara Heitz:

The San Francisco occupation lasted 28 days. And finally on April 28th, 1977, the federal government issued regulations for Section 504. This was one of the first steps on the road to the watershed moment in disability rights - the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act (or ADA) in 1990.

And on the surface, the Section 504 protest is really more in line with what we think of political activism looking like in the 1960s and 1970s. The occupation of a building, protestors engaging in technically illegal acts to make a political point. A large group of people vocally expressing their demands in a public forum. But Roger Williams' story reminds us that there are multiple routes to social change.

Ray Mizumura-Pence:

With Roger Williams, I think his reform approach, his liberal approach to disability rights was obviously very effective. But as you say, it's not the only strategy. And sometimes there is a need for something that is on the margins of the system or outside the system because of his upbringing, because of his republicanism, at least in the in the early part of his life, he became less conservative, I think, as he as he got older, which is kind of the opposite from how many people go. But Roger Williams was most comfortable working within the structure of KU as an institution and working within the letter of the law.

[Music Start]**Kara Heitz:**

At the end of the day, isn't one of the primary goals of most rights movements to change policies and laws in order to secure equality and justice? And while things like marches and protests are often necessary parts of raising awareness and putting pressure on the people who make the laws, sometimes filing lawsuits and organizing institutional committees are just as, if not more, effective. The wheelchair ramp at Wescoe Hall on KU campus is one of many visible reminders of this history and of the legacy of Roger Williams.

Ray Mizumura-Pence:

Almost everywhere you look in Lawrence and at KU, you can find physical evidence of the progress that the University Committee for the Architecturally Handicapped and Roger Williams helped achieve these things, whether it's a fire alarm that also that not only puts out a sound, but also flashing lights. These are a part of our institutional landscape that a lot of people take for granted, but they really shouldn't.

[Music End]**Kara Heitz:**

So five decades later, what does that institutional landscape of KU look like in terms of accessibility? To understand the contemporary impact of work of Rodger Williams and other activists in the 1970s, I spoke with Rebekah Taussig. Rebekah is a writer who studied at KU from 2012 to 2017, where she received her PhD in Creative Writing and Disability Studies. She is also the author of the award-winning memoir *The View from My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body* and as a wheelchair user.

Rebekah Taussig:

When I first started, in the fall of 2012, I didn't really know very much at all about how to access any of the buildings. So, I think in the early, early days it was a lot of showing up places and not knowing where to go or how to get into a building... In the early days I rode the bus around campus. And you know, one out of five times, in my experience at that time, the bus driver wouldn't know how to work the lifts and the bus would get stalled and everyone on the bus would be stuck for twenty minutes because of me.

So I stopped riding the bus and started driving my car around campus more and would have to figure out the accessible spots on campus.

I remember when, one of the first times I arrived I had to go to Strong Hall. And, it's this big stately building, and you know, pretty building, and I just could not figure out how to get inside. I eventually, like, found my way to the back of the building and there's an accessible entrance next to the trash bins in the back. So, I eventually found my way around and I think there are a lot of resources that could've helped me figure that out faster that they have in place definitely now for students with disabilities on campus and figuring out how to maneuver that, and what paths to take around campus. But in the early days, it felt like I was kind of, creating a map on my own of how to access those buildings.

Kara Heitz:

While the work of creating her own accessibility map often included out of the way ramps like the one in the back of Strong Hall, the architecture of Wescoe Hall definitely stood out to Rebekah Taussig.

Rebekah Taussig:

So, I feel lucky that most of my classes were in Wescoe. On the one hand, the building is kind of this giant cinder block and I remember making jokes about that, but on the other hand, I can still kind of remember this sensation in my body of what it felt like to whip around the ramp in front of Wescoe.

And that ramp is not tucked behind as an afterthought but is built into that building in a way that's really beautiful. There's a lot of dignity in that, in the experience of being thought of before I arrived and a space and a path that's already planned out for me to access and enter into those classrooms.

So, there's a lot of dignity and joy in being able to access that building that way. You know, it's so easy to take a ramp for granted. It's much easier to notice when there isn't a ramp, for me, and I think knowing the history and the fight that went into that is really beautiful and I think part of what it makes me think about is the implications of that. Like, "who do you want to be here, who do you want in this space, who are you inviting to your school? Your classrooms, to learning, this kind of learning?" And I know for me, and I can think of other students too who were thought of and ended up in that school, in that space learning there. And in a big way, that kind of thing doesn't happen without people fighting for it. So, how beautiful is that?

Kara Heitz:

So next time you're on KU campus, perhaps you'll look at Wescoe Hall a bit differently. And hopefully, you'll also think of Rodger Williams and all the work that went in to creating a more accessible campus and all the work that still needs to be done in making spaces like college campuses welcoming to all individuals.

Thanks for listening to this special mini episode of Kansas 1972. You can listen to full episodes, as well as find out more about the sources we used for this and other episodes on our website www.humanitieskansas.org.

SERIES OUTRO

Kara Heitz:

Catch you on the flip side!

Tracy Quillin:

Humanities Kansas is an independent nonprofit leading a movement of ideas to strengthen Kansas communities and our democracy. Since 1972, HK's pioneering programs, grants, and partnerships have documented and shared stories to spark conversations and generate insights. Together with statewide partners and supporters, HK invites all Kansans to draw on history, literature, and culture to enrich their lives and to serve the communities and state we all proudly call home. Join the movement of ideas at humanitieskansas.org.