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## INTERVIEW

### **Accessibility doesn't happen by itself: An interview with Betty Siegel, J.D., Director of The Kennedy Center Accessibility Program**

**John Grady, J.D., Ph.D.**  
University of South Carolina

With over 25 years experience in cultural arts administration, Betty Siegel has had a front-row seat in the evolution of accessibility management at cultural and performance venues. As director of the Kennedy Center's Accessibility Program, she provides leadership for a team which includes a small paid staff, volunteer employees, and student interns. Together, this office manages accessibility in both programming and venue accessibility for all of the Kennedy Center's events. In addition, Siegel coordinates the LEAD (Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability) Conference, an annual forum for the discussion and dissemination of accessibility information for cultural arts administrators and accessibility managers.

**Q** How has providing access become part of the core functions of managing a cultural venue?

**A** Accessibility, in cultural venues, doesn't happen by itself. As venues evolve, many are not integrating core accessibility structures into

the way they do business. This makes accessibility come across as an afterthought instead of being integrated into processes and procedures. Having an accessibility manager or coordinator guiding and supporting the venue can change the institutional practices so that accessibility becomes second-nature. That is what we need to strive for.

**Q How does considering the accessibility needs of patrons with disabilities impact planning and design of the venue as well as the events that will take place there?**

**A** You have to plan events and facilities with accessibility and the inclusion of people with disabilities in mind. You have to make conscientious decisions not accidental choices. In the past, venue and event managers thought they knew what accessibility meant--Build a ramp or have a sign language interpreter. Stop! Making snap decisions without consideration of the specifics of the situation, without some legitimate basis for the decision and without appropriate and comprehensive planning will result in unnecessary and wasteful expense. Ask yourself, do we need a ramp? Is there a better and more effective solution? Do we need an interpreter? Does the person attending know and use sign language or is there a more effective alternative? This applies to both facilities and programs. The original design and concept of any renovation must ensure that accessible, usable and universal design is considered from the beginning, is integral in the design, and is a priority of the venue. Someone with knowledge of accessibility and the needs of the disability community must stay involved through the building and construction.

**Q How has the Kennedy Center approached this through senior management commitment's to ensuring access for all patrons?**

**A** The Kennedy Center has integrated or institutionalized accessibility (meaning it is second-nature). They have devoted resources (staff, time, money) to ensure that people with disabilities and older adults are considered as valued members of our audience. You also see this in the inclusion of the Accessibility staff in key meetings regarding renovations and alterations, and at all stages of design and construction.

**Q How have you been able to infuse accessibility into the Kennedy Center's programming?**

**A** Looking at the history of the federal law, starting with the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968, the impact on private non-profit and for-profit cultural venues was minimal. Then Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was enacted in 1973. If the organization received federal funds, they could not discriminate. Since traditional non-profit cultural venues fairly uniformly receive grants from local, state and federal sources, they almost all fell under the non-discrimination mandate of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. Section 504 was a clear sign to the arts and cultural community that accessibility was now part of the equation as they moved forward.

**Q How did the Americans with Disabilities Act change what you were already doing in terms of facility and program access?**

**A** When the ADA was signed into law, most in the cultural arts community were already doing this because of our obligations incurred under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

**Q Was this legal evolution also true for other type venues such as sport stadiums?**

**A** Sport stadiums exist in the for-profit world, so they operate under a different business model. In the for-profit world, the ADA was brand new in 1990.

**Q Why has implementing the ADA and maintaining compliance been such a challenge for the many in the venue management industry?**

**A** Venues often do not see access (for persons with disabilities) as a human right. They still see it as an “Add on.” It has to be viewed as a human and civil right. Then, one has to also consider the core values of the organization. In the cultural arts, this idea of core values is very powerful. In the for-profit world, I am not sure how this is perceived. Venues must adopt inclusion of all people as a core value of their business practices, rather than view inclusion as some onerous burden imposed on them by society. Someone told me that that we think in terms of what we “should” do rather than what we “ought” to do. “Should”, they said, is the language of the law and “ought” is the language of values. We ought to be spending more time in the language of values, even that accessibility adds value.

**Q Is accessibility still fundamentally about perception?**

**A** Yes. People don’t understand what it means to be accessible. They don’t see accessibility until they experience it personally. They don’t integrate planning for accessibility from the beginning (at the design stage) and then act surprised when they didn’t plan it in from the start.

**Q Can you discuss the importance of staff training in general and at the Kennedy Center?**

**A** Staff training is vital. We invest time and resources in training. I do regular training of front-of-house staff. Each time I train, I remind the staff, volunteers, interns, etc. that they are the Kennedy Center’s most valuable accessibility tool. I don’t get compliments on my perfectly accessible toilets or our 1:12 ramps. I get compliments on the great customer service provided by our volunteer and paid staff. The access office has numerous volunteer staff members who are a big part of our operation. However, I am careful not to use them beyond their capacity.

**Q Do you see the Baby Boomer generation as the next big wave in terms of accessibility needs? How will venues be able to use that they already have in place to meet their needs?**

**A** Most able-bodied people are never aware of the ramp until it touches their lives personally. It is not even on their radar. Having accessibility in place and using universal design concepts, means that as our audiences age, we will retain them longer. Many people talk about having accessibility in place to build new audiences, but I think of it as retaining my existing audience longer by enabling them to continue to buy tickets and attend events. I want to put into place programs and facilities

that sustain my audiences throughout the various stages of their lives. The Baby Boomer generation carry the expectation that they will be able to continue to participate in cultural life, and with accessibility services in place, venues will be better equipped to accommodate those expectations.

**Q Given your focus in this area and because the Kennedy Center is viewed as a national model for accessibility, how have you fostered a community of accessibility professionals through the LEAD Conference and other peer education initiatives?**

**A** LEAD has grown—2010 marked the 20th Anniversary of the ADA, and the 10th anniversary of the LEAD network. LEAD started with focus on performing arts centers and theaters. It has grown into a professional network focused on expanding the breadth and scope of accessibility services and programming, and it has truly become an international network engaging cultural administrators in a conversation on accessibility, disability, and inclusion in the arts.

The LEAD conferences and network present an opportunity to look back and see how our work to eliminate barriers and create welcoming, accessible, and inclusive cultural experiences has ensured that people with disabilities and older adults can exercise their civil and human rights. It is also a chance to look forward and to discover new ways to address ongoing challenges and new questions. Legislation and regulations are updated, new technologies come and go, our audiences and their needs and wants evolve but the challenge to guide our communities and institutions in making choices that acknowledge the right of all to participate in the cultural arts – and to do so with independence, dignity and respect – remains.

**Q Why did you personally see the need for this kind of group?**

**A** I saw a lot of arts administrators who were new to the field of culture and disability, and I wanted those of us with a lot of experience to provide them with a solid base from which to start their work—sort of “Accessibility to Cultural Venues 101.” I also saw many venues still experimenting on their audiences trying to figure out what works and what doesn’t work with regard to providing access. My goal is to educate people, particularly the new cultural administrator, and provide them with the right tools and the core foundational stuff necessary to provide accessibility. LEAD is an opportunity to get people with knowledge and experience to move the field to the next level. LEAD also gives those experienced folks the opportunity to reassess what we do and how we do it, to ensure that we are still effective in meeting the patrons’ needs, and to alter what we do in response to changing technology, attitudes, and expectations. It is also time to start the conversation about quality (of the event experience).

**Q What operational issues do you think managers need more guidance about in terms of legal guidance or best practices recommendations?**

**A** Managers need to be aware that the regulations for implementing the ADA have recently changed! There are now four pages of new ticketing regulations that will have a significant impact on business practices, procedures, and policies. For example, the new regulations have specific requirements for hold and release procedures and mandate the manner in which the tickets must be sold. Other regulatory changes affect the definition of what is or is not a service animal. The design standards have also been revised. These are all issues that the savvy manager must be aware of. I think that managers need more guidance on applying the existing and new regulations. (Note: the new regulations that take effect on March 15, 2011 can be found here: [http://www.ada.gov/regs2010/titleIII\\_2010/titleIII\\_2010\\_withbold.htm](http://www.ada.gov/regs2010/titleIII_2010/titleIII_2010_withbold.htm))

**Q The ADA has typically been seen as a legal trend. Is it becoming more of a customer service issue now?**

**A** It should always be about customer service. However, most people only see it as a legal issue. I often still get calls that start with “Do we have to... (add an elevator)?” A lot of focus is still on the parameters of the law and what we have to do in order to minimally comply. But, most of the time it really is about customer service. Sometimes, I remind people that just because it involves a person with a disability, it does not make it a defacto disability or legal issue! Being accessible is about making the audience comfortable and welcome, and creating an environment where they have a good time and want to come back.

**Q Do you think that as venue managers see more people requiring accommodations and perhaps realize the potential revenue, perceptions about the ADA among venue industry professionals will continue to become more positive?**

**A** I think that because venue managers have a very narrow and stereotypical view of who is a “person with a disability” they don’t realize that they already have a lot of people with disabilities who are currently audience members--the patron who swears the actors mumble but would never been seen as deaf or the patron who struggles with the small font and low lights but who would never identify themselves as having low or diminished vision. The venue manager also isn’t factoring in the people who come with the person with the disability--their family, their friends, their co-workers, etc. Each person with a disability represents the potential ticket sale of not just one ticket, but multiple tickets. And, yes, as industry professionals start to realize that accessibility is an asset to be exploited to their benefit (i.e., to sell more tickets) then they may start to come around to seeing accessibility in a more positive light.

**Q What advice would you give to students interested in pursuing a career in arts administration as an accessibility professional?**

**A** Take every opportunity to get real life, hands-on experiences. Take what you are learning on an academic level and apply it in real life. Seek out internships, get to know the ins and outs of how venues and institutions operate from the ground up. Internships are really a win-win situation. The student gets experience - and nothing substitutes for real-life experience - and the employer gets a chance to know the student, to see what their work ethic is like, and to see if they would be a good potential employee. And, finally, I would definitely advise students to get involved with and get to know the disability community. They can start with campus clubs or activities and then volunteer with local disability organizations.

