

John Bell, Jr.: Advocacy Activities Fact Sheet

- 1970s – Served as a state lobbyist to **champion the rights of individuals with disabilities**, with particular interest in architectural barriers.
- 1970-1978 – Served as a member of the **Arkansas State Planning and Advisory Council on Developmental Disabilities**.
- 1971 – **Received the President’s Award for Distinguished Service to individuals with Cerebral Palsy**. His work with United Cerebral Palsy contributed to the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.
- 1981 – Governor Frank White awarded Bell a **Certificate of Recognition “as an outstanding Citizen of the State of Arkansas** having shown to the people of Arkansas an outstanding interest in public service to the State” (Certificate).
- 1982 – Fort Smith Rotary Club led the project **“Fort Smith Regional Playground for All Children at Creekmore Park”** with Bell as committee member and lead consultant. “John’s contribution was a major factor in the success of the project,” Jim Dunn, president of the Rotary Club at that time, states.
- 1980s: Served as **President of local “Spokes ‘n Folks,”** a nonprofit organization dedicated to the advancement of Americans with disabilities.
- 1998 – Received the **City of Fort Smith Civic Center Honors Award** for his advocacy efforts for people with disabilities.
- 2014 – Received the **Polly Crews GRIT Award** (posthumous).
- 1970s - Served as **President of the United Cerebral Palsy Association of Arkansas**.
- Served on the **Committee for the National Endowment of the Arts**.
- Fort Smith City Hall **installs wheelchair accessibility** button due to Bell’s appeal to Mayor Sandy Sanders.

Bell’s Advocacy Communications and Accomplishments:

October 6, 1988 – Bell received a letter from C.D. Lassiter, Resident Engineer with the Department of the Army, Little Rock District, Corps of Engineers. This communication **thanked Bell for bringing campsite access problems at Shoal Bay Park** to Lassiter’s attention, and Lassiter stated that he forwarded Bell’s letter to the Chief of the Recreation-Resource Management Branch.

October 11, 1988 – Bell received a letter from Representative John Paul Hammerschmidt thanking Bell, as a representative of Spokes ‘N Folks, for informing him about access issues at certain Corps of Engineers recreational sites. Rep. Hammerschmidt informed Bell that he was bringing this issue to the attention of the Little Rock District Engineer.

October 26, 1988 – Bell received a letter from Rep. Hammerschmidt in which Hammerschmidt **assured Bell that steps were being taken to alleviate access problems.**

November 7, 1988 – Bell received a letter from Sen. Dale Bumpers in which he tells Bell that **the Corps of Engineers was taking action to improve access and that he commended Bell for his advocacy for these access problems.**

Letters above and articles below are available in pdf form via email.

Newspaper Articles on Bell's Advocacy:

“Ceremony Celebrates Arkansas’s First State Park Cabin Featuring Its Own Barrier-free Fishing Pier and Boat Dock for Easy Lake Access by Visitors with Disabilities” (2004) – this article details the opening of the first Arkansas state park cabin to offer its own barrier-free fishing pier and boat dock allowing disabled guests lake access; this is also the only cabin with a hydraulic lift to help those with severe disabilities get in and out of bed. Bell and his wife Maxine attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony, and Bell donated two pieces of his original artwork to the park (one to hang in the cabin).

The article further discusses how Bell had previously enjoyed a stay in a barrier-free cabin with lake access at Greenleaf State Park in Oklahoma. Bell told his friend Polly Wood Crews (a member of Arkansas’s State Parks, Recreation, and Travel Commission) of his stay, and Crews toured the Greenleaf cabin with two Arkansas State Parks managers. Plans then took root for the design and construction of the Lake Catherine cabin.

“Representatives of Lake Catherine State Park and the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism held a ribbon cutting Friday at the park’s newest cabin. It’s the first of its kind in Arkansas – fully accessible with a private barrier-free fishing pier” (Malvern Daily Record. June 14, 2004) – this article details how Crews was first inspired to build this cabin by Bell when Bell asked, “Why do I have to go to Oklahoma for vacation?”.

June 19, 1974 – Bell received a letter from Sen. Bumpers informing Bell that he was selected for reappointment to the Arkansas State Planning and Advisory Council of Developmental Disabilities (set to expire on June 30, 1978).

June 27, 1974 – Bell received a letter from Representative Bernice L. Kizer congratulating him on his reappointment to the above referenced council, and she added it was a pleasure to have a Fort Smith citizen assume the responsibility.

Photo (Southwest Times Record, date unknown) – Bell (captioned as president of Spokes ‘N Folks) presented a wheelchair to Juda Heister of Van Buren. Spokes ‘N Folks is noted to be a non-profit organization operated and managed by challenged people for challenged people which promotes the capabilities of those with physical handicaps.

“World of ‘brick walls’: How society ignores the handicapped” (Zander, Betty. Southwest Times Record. August 10, 1975). The article contains photos of both Bell and his wife and the obstacles they face daily, such as stairs.

- No sidewalks, so JBJ and Maxine utilized street to reach Westark Community College.
- JBJ travelled by wheelchair from his home on Victory Circle to his studio on N B Street; JBJ did not own a vehicle since there are none on the market he can drive in his chair (cabs were not usable either); JBJ could not get into half the public buildings in the city.
- JBJ was past president of the state United Cerebral Palsy Association, district director of the national UCPA, and member of the state Advisory Council for Developmental Disability Services (he helped review grants on the basis of service to the handicapped).
- Even though federal law had been created nearly 10 years prior, there was not much “noticeable compliance with regulations requiring cities to make public buildings accessible”.

- Maxine to continue her education at Westark CC, but the campus was “a maze of steps”, and the Student Union was not wheelchair accessible; new buildings under construction at Westark, but no plans for ramps or wheelchair accessible elevators; JBJ talked to Dr. Kraby (Westark’s new president), but he said the architects said “it would cost too much”
- JBJ shared stories:
 - Home hit by lightning, which caused the house to catch fire, and they had to evacuate their infant by wheelchair with no lights.
 - JBJ tipped out of wheelchair in abandoned building he was exploring and had to crawl through broken glass to get out, and once he was outside, no motorists would stop.
 - The family’s electric golf cart died in a drive-in movie theater parking lot on a cold night, and they had to wait until morning for a maintenance crew.
 - JBJ shared that in public some people thought he was incapable of speaking and would want his friends to talk for him.

“Special Car Goal for Bell” (*Southwest Times Record*, December 19, 1971) – this article details Bell’s plans to develop a vehicle for people with handicaps. This article contains photos of Bell working on his design.

“Legislation could open doors” (Schafer, Shaun. *Southwest Times Record*, 1992) – in this article, Schafer discusses the enactment of the American with Disabilities Act of 1990. Bell is quoted as saying he is happy to see equal access come about but notes that a society cannot legislate change unless attitudes evolve as well. Bell, as president of Spokes ‘N Folks, specifically noted that the Braum’s on Roger’s Avenue in Fort Smith did not comply with ADA accommodation standards, despite opening less than a year before the enactment of the ADA. Braum’s officials promised to remodel the store to meet the ADA’s specifications and did so.

