



"Fighting for Disability Rights: Supplier Certification Is a Key Step to Accountability" DiversityInc.com Article Featuring John D. Kemp

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WASHINGTON, DC (May 6, 2010) - The US Business Leadership Network (USBLN®) today announced that an article published by *DiversityInc.com* features an interview with John D. Kemp, USBLN® Executive Director & General Counsel. The article entitled, "Fighting for Disability Rights: Supplier Certification Is a Key Step to Accountability" was written by Sam Ali on May 3, 2010.

The article is as follows:

[John Kemp](#) knows all about the power of expectations, the power of positive persistence, and most of all, the power of being given a chance. Kemp, the executive director and general counsel of the [US Business Leadership Network](#), a Washington, D.C.-based organization that promotes employing, marketing and purchasing supplies from businesses owned by [people with disabilities](#), was born in 1949 without lower arms and legs.

Kemp's mother died from ovarian cancer three months after his younger sister, Mary, was born. His father single-handedly raised three kids on a federal civil-servant's salary. "I was 15 months old and my oldest sister, Kathy, was 5 and my youngest sister was three months old," says Kemp, now 60. "My dad raised the three of us kids with the help of a housekeeper, who lived in our basement." His father, John B., died two years ago at age 90. "My dad was a tremendous influence on me," says Kemp, who graduated from Georgetown University in 1971 and from Washburn University School of Law in 1974. "He taught me to accept challenges and social commitments. He was a strong, principled person and as good an advocate as there ever has been."

[Click here to see The DiversityInc Top 10 Companies for People With Disabilities.](#)

Kemp says his father's advocacy began early in his life. "I grew up in North Dakota [where] everyone takes care of their own and each person is expected to do what they're capable of doing," Kemp says. "That was always the philosophy my dad had about me. He said, 'You are going to go to regular schools. You're going to learn to be self-sufficient. You are going to be able to dress yourself someday. You are going to go out and work. You will be expected to take care of yourself financially so you can be independent.' And it was an expectation from the day I was born that this was the way it was going to be and that was going to be my life."

A Segregated World

In the 1950s, [disability](#) law, as it applies today, did not exist. People firmly believed that the presence of children with disabilities in regular classrooms hindered the education and development of children who didn't have disabilities. That world view would not change until the 1970s, when children with disabilities in the United States finally gained the right to go to a public school and get an education alongside their peers.

As such, Kemp was the only child with a severe and visible disability in his school district. "Later, there was one other guy who had polio, and we were the only two kids in high school who had disabilities, so it was very unusual," he says of his presence in the classroom. "But by the persuasion of my dad and the willingness of the Catholic schools to take me, I went through an inclusive school environment ... and that was a significant decision for the rest of my life. I always felt that I rightfully belonged. There are so many people who are marginalized based on their race or gender or disability or sexual orientation or something, and they feel they don't have the dignity or pride in who they are to expect to be treated as equal or even demand it."

A Supplier-Diversity Breakthrough

Kemp's latest challenge: The US Business Leadership Network (USBLN) recently launched a [certification program](#) for businesses that are owned by people with disabilities.

Certification is a validation process by a third-party certifying agency that ensures a business is actually owned, controlled and operated by the applicant. Kemp says the certification enables businesses that are owned by people with disabilities—including veterans with service-acquired disabilities—an opportunity to increase their access to potential contracting opportunities with corporations, government agencies and one another.

[USBLN's certification program](#) is fashioned after other certification programs such as the one run by the Women's Business Enterprise National Council, which is recognized by more than 1,000 U.S. companies.

The idea is to give these businesses a competitive advantage while enabling large companies and government to achieve their diversity goals and increase their [supplier diversity](#). Many corporations set aside millions of dollars in vendor and procurement contracts to small businesses that have been certified as minority-owned or women-owned. Some corporations include veteran-owned businesses in their supplier-diversity programs, while others such as [IBM](#), No. 8 in [The 2010 DiversityInc Top 50 Companies for Diversity®](#), or [Xerox](#), No. 48, include LGBT owned businesses certified by the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce.

Corporations that have supplier-diversity programs require certification in order to prevent fraud and to prove that they are using diverse suppliers, especially in instances where government contracts mandate that a portion of business be directed to MWBEs.

Until now, that same advantage was not available to businesses owned and operated by people with disabilities, Kemp says. "This is the first of its kind," he says of USBLN's certification program. "I could see this was not getting done for people with disabilities, and it needed to be done. Business opportunities for economic development of disabled-owned businesses were not occurring. Much like [discrimination](#) occurs in the marketplace and employment, disabled business owners were not getting a fair shake with supplier opportunities."

So far, USBLN has certified 20 businesses, and Kemp believes the organization can certify 50–100 more businesses by year's end.

"We think there are thousands and thousands of businesses," he says. "We are having little trouble finding disability-owned business enterprises, because there are a lot of people out there who could not get jobs and were not willing to sit on the couch and watch television all day, so they became entrepreneurs as a result of discrimination in the marketplace, or personal choice."

[Click here to read about one organization, Raise Hope Capital, that applied to the program.](#)

Kemp says he has always been an advocate for [people with disabilities](#), but "not a hell-raising, chain-myself-to-the-bus kind of guy."

"I have never been afraid of speaking up when I believe injustice is occurring, and I think this was all about my dad building pride in who I was," he says.

Self-Acceptance

Kemp recalls his college years at Georgetown fondly. He dated and "specialized in socializing." But all of that changed dramatically when he went to law school at Washburn University in Topeka, Kan.

"Topeka [has] a fine school, a good school, but it was a culture shock going from a big city like Washington, D.C., to Topeka," says Kemp, who is married. "I was very accepted socially by girls in Washington, no problem. But going to Kansas, it was like going back in time. And I thought, gosh, I can't believe I'm being rejected by people because of my disability. It was just a very bad social time."

In an interview with [New Mobility](#), a magazine that encourages the integration of active-lifestyle wheelchair users into mainstream society, Kemp says that all through high school, he was trying to pass as "nondisabled." It wasn't until his early 20s that he "found his true identity as a person with a disability" when Easter Seals asked him to go on the road to speak on behalf of the organization. (At age 10, Kemp also traveled around the country on behalf of Easter Seals with actress Hedda Hopper, who was the National Easter Seals campaign chairman in 1960.)

"I began to listen and think," Kemp says. "I began to pay attention to ways of discrimination and I became offended by things. Eventually, I came to see myself: 'I am one of those people. I've got to get proud.'"

Kemp has spent his entire life advancing this country's commitment to hiring, retaining and promoting qualified people with disabilities and to value them as important customers and consumers in the marketplace. In 2007, Kemp was awarded the national New Freedom Initiative Award by U.S. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao, which recognizes exceptional commitment to helping Americans with disabilities succeed in the workplace and build careers. And in 2006, he was the recipient of the Henry B. Betts Award, considered the highest honor for disability leadership and service in the United States.

"The way my father sold me basically and my inclusion in the school system was that the other kids needed to realize there are many kids with disabilities in their own communities and this is a lesson for them to learn," Kemp says. His father's argument was that "as helpful as that is for [the other students] to realize, it's also helpful for John to be in the schools and learning and modeling and keeping up and doing bad things and good things along with everyone else."

This same philosophy applies to corporate America. "You can do all the awareness training you want for all the protected classes, but unless everyday people sit side by side with each other and see how similar they are yet how different they are, you don't get that acceptance and understanding for the differences we all bring," he says.

Kemp, who uses prosthetic hands and legs as well as a scooter, says in the *New Mobility* interview that he can gauge people by the way they react to his shiny metal clamps when he extends his hands to greet them. Those who reach for his arm above the clamp, or those who start bowing, are "uncool," he says.

Kemp went to college in the late 1960s and early 1970s—years of great social change when many marginalized groups were questioning basic social inequities and came forward to demand concrete changes.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973—the greatest achievement of the disability-rights movement until the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990—passed two months after he graduated from law school. The act, particularly Title V and, especially, Sections 503 and 504, confronted [discrimination against people with disabilities](#) for the first time and ultimately formed the framework for the passage of subsequent federal laws, such as the ADA, he says. "The law says that in 180 days, regulations shall be issued and promulgated that carry out these legislative statements," he says of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. "It took four years to get the regulations out and a lot of protests and people with disabilities being civilly disobedient."

With his law degree in hand, Kemp went on to become a lawyer for the Environmental Protection Agency, then with a law-school buddy started a consulting firm to help companies comply with emerging disability laws. Along the way, he met the leaders of the disability-rights movement who nurtured his disability pride, including Judy Heumann, Marlee Matlin and Tim Cook.

In 2004, Kemp published a book, "[*Reflections from a Different Journey: What People with Disabilities Wish All Parents Knew*](#)," co-authored with Dr. Stan Klein. The book is a compilation of 40 inspiring and realistic essays written by successful adult role models who share what it is like to grow up with a disability.

"What I'm doing today is building on what I started to do in 1977," he says. "So here I am 33 years later, loving the fact that I can educate and inform and help grow employment opportunities."

Source: DiversityInc.com

Full article: <http://diversityinc.com/article/7553/Fighting-for-Disability-Rights-Supplier-Certification-Is-a-Key-Step-to-Accountability/>

About the US Business Leadership Network (USBLN®)

The US Business Leadership Network® (USBLN®) is the national disability organization that serves as the collective voice of over 60 Business Leadership Network affiliates across North America, representing over 5,000 employers. The USBLN® promotes the business imperative of the preparation and inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace, marketplace, and supply chain while supporting the development and expansion of its BLN affiliates. The USBLN® recognizes and supports best practices in hiring and advancing employees with disabilities, marketing to consumers with disabilities, and encourages contracting with vendors with disabilities through the development and certification of disability-owned businesses. www.usbln.org

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