

Wade Blank's Liberated Community

By Laura Hershey

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The death of the Reverend Wade Blank on February 15, 1993, left a profound emptiness in the hearts of many people who loved and respected him. But any void in the disability rights movement is only momentary, for Blank left behind scores of human values, a keen analysis – and scores of skilled, committed leaders ready to carry the movement forward.

American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today (ADAPT) and its mother, the Atlantis Community in Denver, both embody the spiritual, organizational and strategic lessons Blank carried over from the 1960s black civil rights movement. He had been a Presbyterian minister, a War on Poverty field organizer and a disciple of Dr. Martin Luther King, jr., before becoming an orderly, then an assistant administrator, in a Denver nursing home.

Early in his career as a iconoclastic minister and civil rights worker, Blank developed the concept of a "liberated community" – a society where human beings could live in equality and develop the power to effect change. When, at the Heritage House nursing home, he found himself in the midst of a "community" of people with severe disabilities, whose only community structure was one of oppression – the confines of the institution – he took on the challenge of making the "liberated community" a reality.

It all started when Blank came to Denver seeking a change. "The nursing home industry in Denver recruited its nursing home administrators from the ranks of ex-ministers," he recalled recently... A nursing home executive called Blank. "They said, 'You're young. You're hip. Could you start a youth wing for us?' So, I started a youth wing."

Hired by Heritage House in December 1971, Blank went to visit the residents the evening before he began his new job. "I remember for dinner that night we had baked potatoes, applesauce and scrambled eggs, and that was near Christmas. The place was like a morgue. The food was cold." Blank chatted with severely disabled individuals, some of whom would later become ADAPT organizers. "Little did I know," Blank recalled, "that I was to enter the most important moment of my life.

"I had 60 young people I recruited. Every morning at 7:30, they'd get dressed and get on a school bus, and go to a workshop and count fish hooks. Called it (a) work activities program."

At council meetings of the young people, the residents made simple requests, and an idealistic Blank tried to implement them. "I let them evaluate the nurses," he said. "They wanted co-ed living. They wanted to have pets. They wanted to have rock 'n' roll bands. So three years into this experiment, the nursing home is just like a college dorm on a crazy weekend all the time.

"I was trying to change it from inside, and I didn't understand the monster I worked for," he recalled.

In 1975, Blank proposed "that we move a few of them out into apartments, and we let the aides and orderlies punch in at the nursing home, then go to the apartment and give them service." That idea got Blank fired. "The nursing home saw where I was going, and they couldn't let me go in that direction."

Once Blank was fired, the nursing home erased all his reforms. "They came in and they took all the stereos and TVs out of everybody's rooms, had the dog pound come by and get all the animals and in one day it went from everything I'd built for four years – to that."

But Blank wasn't about to give up. Thinking to himself that he'd "recruited all these people to this hell," he decided simply to move them out "and do the care myself..."

"Within the first six months, I'd moved 18 severely disabled people out. So now I was wed to the concept. You know, I couldn't walk away from it."

That exodus laid the foundations for the Atlantis Community and its political-action offshoot, ADAPT. "We began to learn about power and what empowerment is, and how to use it," Blank said. While Atlantis was liberating people from nursing homes, ADAPT (which then stood for American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit) took on discrimination in Denver's, and then the nation's, bus systems. Using non-violent, direct-action tactics similar to King's movement, ADAPTERs made bold demands and achieved extraordinary results.

Blank had found himself at the center of another civil rights campaign, similar to the one he had seen African Americans wage. "All the issues are the same," Blank asserted. "The black movement wanted to ride the buses equally. The black movement wanted to eat at the Woolworth's counters. The black movement wanted the right to vote. The black movement wanted the right to keep their families together. The black movement wanted the right to be integrated into the school system. That's what the disability rights movement wants, exactly..."

"My members are into confrontation. We'll tell somebody what we want, and we'll talk about it once or twice, but that's it. Then we deal with you. Either we'll shut you down or whatever."

Confrontation worked, Blank believed, because it took society's fears – those fears we're always trying to dispel in disability awareness workshops – and turned them to a new use...

"So I said," (Blank explained, recalling earlier successes in the black civil rights movement), "... 'Let's take 25 wheelchairs and go out and surround a bus and hold it and see what happens.' Bam! Just like magic. It worked. Total power. Police couldn't move the wheelchairs because they were afraid. The mayor said, 'Don't arrest disabled people.' We win..."

Blank's focus on fundamental human rights and on the most impoverished members of the disability community distanced him from more affluent groups. In this, too, he emulated Martin Luther King. "King involved the poorest in the community," Blank said, "and a movement cannot really change things unless they address the poorest, the least. When King was shot, he was beginning to attack the ghettos." For Blank, "Our ghettos are the nursing homes, and we need to address the ghetto."

Blank attacked not only the mainstream disability movement's economic hierarchy but also its disability hierarchy. "You go around to independent living centers and you'll see a lot of post-polios and a lot of spinal cord injuries," he said. "But you won't see people that slobber and can't speak clearly..." These are the people often excluded or left behind by more "respectable" advocacy organizations, he pointed out...

Blank found leadership qualities in people who had never before thought of being leaders: former nursing home residents, people with speech impairments, people labeled retarded and others typically disenfranchised both by society at large and by traditional disability organizations. Blank had little patience for people who put their own egos or their own careers above the movement.

But more people were and are being empowered every year to free Americans with disabilities from institutions. All are encouraged to help plan protests, identify issues and targets, hold press conferences, and become a part of the "liberated community."

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