Ramping Up

Civil rights boosters celebrated Disability Rights Advocates’ 10th anniversary, amassing $620,000 from its first fund-raising party. By Karen Coleman

Five hundred civil rights boosters from the Bay Area and beyond chambered up the ramp of San Francisco’s Palace Hotel on Oct. 16 for a long night of celebrating the 10th anniversary of Oakland’s Disability Rights Advocates.

By the end of the night, the group had amassed $620,000 from its first fundraising party, all going to establish a permanent fellowship fund for the organization. The event’s biggest underwriters were LD Access Foundation, Westrec Marinas and Bank of America.

The nonprofit organization focuses on litigation, research and education to enforce and protect the rights of people with disabilities all over the world. The agency’s lawyers recently lost a case in nearby Alameda County Superior Court against the Hayward department store chain Mervyn’s Inc.

Their clients, customers who use wheelchairs and other mobility devices to get around, alleged that they couldn’t shop effectively by themselves because the store’s aisles were crammed with too much merchandise. California v. Disability Rights v. Mervyn’s California Inc., 2002011753.

The case, for which the court will finalize its verdict on Nov. 21, was still pending during the 10th anniversary dinner, and the irony of inviting people into a packed auction hall that wasn’t lost on the group’s director of development, Pat Kirkpatrick.

Above: Disability Rights Advocates board member Peter Blanch, left, and Disability Rights advocates executive director Larry Paradis

At right: Keynote speaker Christy Smith

At left: Disability Rights Advocates director of development Pat Kirkpatrick, left, Gohshott, Pitts, Simon & McCarthy award winner Joe Cottrill with his wife Victoria and Disability Rights Advocates director of litigation Sid Wolinsky, right

Below: Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe partner Bill Uderman, left and Public Utilities Commissioner Lorrie Lynch

Above: Equal Justice Works fellow Stephen Tolare, left, and Equal Justice Works CEO David Stern
Kirkpatrick said she had gone between the tables with a yardstick beforehand to guarantee room for everyone to move.

In the Mervyn’s case, the organization demanded the Mervyn’s keep 32 inches of aisle space between displays, but Judge Henry Needham found the evidence unconvincing and ruled that the change would “fundamentally alter” the nature of Mervyn’s business.

Unlike the allegations against Mervyn’s, the jokes at the Palace Hotel were accommodating. The unspoken theme of the night was making everything accessible to everyone. The room included a stage with ramps and microphones in easy reach of short, tall and seated speakers, volunteer sign-language translators amplified by a giant video screen and staff paralegals strategically placed to explain parts of a video that wouldn’t be obvious from the soundtrack alone.

Instead of putting themselves on the back for a job well done, the group’s members dedicated most of the night to honoring the fellowships, fellows and funders who support disability rights work.

Disability Rights Advocates presented trophies to two organizations behind the fellowships, New York-based Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom and Equal Justice Works of Washington, D.C., formerly known as National Association for Public Interest Law.

“We all talked about leveraging our investments,” Disability Rights Executive Director Larry Paradis told the lawyer-heavy crowd. “Well, Skadden leverages its investments in people.”

Paradis pranked the firm’s prestigious and long-running program that places 25 young lawyers a year in public interest law fellowships.

Disability Rights Advocates has been happy host to three Skadden fellows, including 2001 fellow Brian Dimnick, who is working on the organization’s employment project. Dimnick and the other fellows, who are on stage as San Francisco partner José Albo accepts the firm’s award,

Albo congratulated the group on its 10 years of advocacy.

“The work you do is vital,” Albo said, “and I look forward to continuing with you on your 20th anniversary.”

He said Skadden’s goal in giving money to its own fellowships for the past 15 years was “to create the world’s largest public-interest firm without walls.” Mary have focused on disability rights; he said, and the vast majority of fellows have continued to eschew corporate law.

Salt attorney Rhoda Benedetti presented the second award, to Equal Justice Works, the organization that provided the fellowship that first brought her to Disability Rights Advocates.

“It’s just a tremendous honor for the work that we do, especially because it comes from Disability Rights Advocates,” a bearing David Stern, chief executive officer of Equal Justice Works, said as he raised the award in the air and whirled with pride.

Four other Equal Justice Works fellows have also worked for the group, including current fellow Stephen Tolkoff, who has been working on behalf of disabled kids in California who say they are being discriminated against by public-school testing requirements and incoming fellow Sara Zimmerman.

Sara Wolinsky, Disability Rights Advocates’ much-promoted director of litigation, took the mic next to honor longtime attorney Joe Cutchet.

“Sure the three or four of you who don’t know Joe Cutchet, the first words used to describe him are usually longer than life, fills the room,” Wolinsky said, introducing the night’s only individual honoree.

Such descriptions were not for the