
Reviews

An Independent Man: Ed Roberts and the Fight for Disability Rights. By Scot Danforth. (Oakland, University of California Press, 2025. 401 pp.)

Who is the first person you think of when you hear the phrase “disability history”? Most Americans tend to think first of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt or activist Helen Keller. Disabilities studies scholar and inclusive education specialist Scot Danforth’s book, *An Independent Man: Ed Roberts and the Fight for Disability Rights*, aims to elevate activist Ed Roberts’s place among the most well-known disabled people, at least from recent history. Indeed, Danforth said Roberts had “bec[ome] the most recognized and celebrated disabled person on the planet” (p. 9). Regardless of whether Roberts truly reached that level of celebrity and has maintained that status is up for debate. But, as Danforth shows, Roberts’s importance to the Disability Rights Movement is not.

Ed Roberts (1939–1995) was disabled by polio when he was a teenager. He became a wheelchair user, and he also used an iron lung. Roberts is perhaps best known for spearheading—with the help of collaborators—the development and spread of Centers for Independent Living (CILs) in the United States and abroad. But this book is more than just a character sketch of Roberts and his accomplishments. In his biography, Danforth weaves the twentieth-century history of disability rights into Roberts’s biography, providing readers with insights into Roberts’s role in and relationship to the Disability Rights Movement and the larger Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth-century United States.

Danforth’s book is divided into twenty-eight chapters. He tells Roberts’s story using sources such as oral histories, newspapers, and archival collections at a variety of repositories. We learn about Roberts’s involvement with important disability rights projects ranging from CILs (which originated at UC Berkeley, where Roberts earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees and completed PhD coursework) to the signing (but not before a nearly month-long sit-in in 1977) of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

We also learn about some losses. In 1980, against the wishes of environmentalists, Congress voted to dam California's Stanislaus River, which was a popular outdoor recreation destination among disabled people. Before the vote, Roberts took a rafting trip down the Stanislaus to bring attention to the cause, a story that highlights an understudied intersection of modern disability history and environmental history. The book also begins to unravel histories of disability-related non-profits and governmental entities. These topics deserve more scholarly attention as well. Danforth does not sugarcoat Roberts's entire life or character, though. He noted, for example, that Roberts "did little to address charges of sexual discrimination [against women] in the CIL" (p. 167) and "passively endorse[d]" (p. 273) the World Institute on Disability board when it promoted him to chief executive and "demoted" (p. 272) his two co-founders, Judy Heumann and Joan Leon.

An Independent Man is accessibly written and features a snazzy hot pink, black, and yellow cover design. It would be useful in classroom or reading group contexts. The readability of the book will help elevate Roberts's story and disability history more generally. Given the author's inclusion of the concept of interdependence toward the end of the book, Danforth might have included a discussion about the intersection of disability rights and disability justice, interdependence being a tenet of the latter. (See Sins Invalid, "10 Principles of Disability Justice," accessed March 16, 2026, <https://sinsinvalid.org/10-principles-of-disability-justice/>.) The author could have also put Roberts's story into the context of an even longer disability history in the United States that goes back well beyond the nineteenth century. Overall, the book is a needed contribution to the field that will help readers see the importance of researching and writing disability history.

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