

**Jim DeJong Life Time Career Awardee - Lee Henson Award
October 12, 2015**



Jim DeJong celebrates with his Great Plains ADA Center Staff

Introduction by Ruth Tofle, Nominator

“It gives me great pleasure to introduce Jim DeJong, the 2015 Lee Henson Life Time Career Awardee for his work in promoting access. On this Columbus Day, or Discovery Day as it also is called, it is fitting to have this celebration. Today we recognize discoveries and moreover going beyond discovery with the tenacious follow-up of steadfast work by Jim DeJong for civil rights.

Jim’s accomplishments are many, his impact is great, and arguably his tenacity supersedes most of us. I could give you a lot of statistics to verify why he is so worthy of this award... But, I really want to tell you more about Jim as a person and why he is so motivated. I want to tell you his story.

The accident happened when he was 25 years old. A vehicle landed on top of his body--crushing his spine, breaking 8 ribs and his left femur.

Jim flat lined on the way to the hospital but was too stubborn to leave us at that early point in his life. In the grim health care environment, he was told what he could not do. Now, the real story begins. When Jim is told what he cannot do, he is empowered to prove this ridiculous untruth. I'm reminded of the Billy Ocean's 1986 song, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." By nature, Jim is a fighter, a networker, and a "can do" person.

Jim was told he should choose a nursing home to live when exiting the rehabilitation hospital as it was explained that there was no accessible housing or public transportation, and the inaccessible built environment would be too hard to negotiate. Jim demanded the person to leave his room and WITH THE HELP OF FRIENDS moved to a modified apartment and a mission to change that dismal situation... not for himself alone, but the many he had met with all types of disabilities during his 6 month stay in the hospital. Frequent visits to the pediatric floor solidified his commitment to change the world of opportunity for his group but more importantly for the future generations of Americans with Disabilities.

Jim started changing the built environment and public attitudes in Chicago appearing on the Phil Donahue Show and a new showing just beginning called the OPRAH Show. He was given the opportunity to expand his efforts statewide by the Governor of Illinois and linked with other Disability Right advocates from across the country to change our nations laws. He was the co-founder of the National Council on Independent Living and was selected by his legislative mentor and friend Senator Paul...bowtie...Simon of Illinois to serve on the US Congressional Task Force on the Empowerment of Citizens with Disabilities.

The Task Force created, proposed and steered the ADA to full passage in Congress and was at the White House for President Bush Sr. signing

the ADA twenty-five years ago. I've seen the photo—he was there—albeit unrecognizable with a full head of hair. 😊

While originally from Illinois, he brought his good graces to the University of Missouri to begin the federally funded Great Plains ADA Center. His work as director of the Center has been amazingly successful. As one example at the local level, Jim reviewed the plans for the multi-million dollar Mizzou Arena. Due to this early review, critical problems were discovered and accessible design adjustments were made before construction. The final product put MU in a leadership position, showcasing one the most accessible stadiums in the nation and SEC.

Demonstrating his national impact, he instigated the National ADA Symposium. This is the premier annual event provides education on ADA regulations, guidelines, and best practices. 100% of attendees surveyed reported learning information and skills that they will use on the job and in their communities.

Jim has told me more than once, his true mission. It is all about capacity building for universal design. Because of this, Jim's Center created The ADA Coordinators Certification Program. Since then certification has been awarded to 300 individuals and has over 900 members nationwide. In addition, to demonstrate the impact of his leadership, in 2014 the DOJ began requiring this certification developed by Jim's crew as an element in satisfying their disability settlement agreements.

While this meaningful award recognizes Jim for life time achievement, on the 25th anniversary of the ADA, I for one, am hoping he has a continuing very long life. The ripples of his work are continuing to make a huge impact in promoting access for all... locally, nationally, and arguably beyond for many years to come. When each of us are told what we cannot do, I want you to remember Jim's story as

he is a role model for us. And, remember the lyrics to the song “ When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”

I'm gonna put this dream in motion
Never let nothing stand in my way
When the going gets tough
The tough get going.”

Christopher Columbus and many other explorers spent their lives seeking a discovery. On this Discovery Day, Jim DeJong is recognized for his personal and professional discoveries and accomplishments when times are tough. We can all be proud of what Jim has done, and what can be done, in promoting equality for persons with disabilities and access for all. Congratulations Jim to you, your family, and your team at the Great Plains ADA Center. We love you and thank you!”