

Ride or Die

Tyler: This episode of Lost Highways is being released by History Colorado as many of us are staying home in an effort to keep our community safe during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. To those of you out there who are unable to stay home, whether it's because you're working to keep people safe, provide healthcare, or provide supplies, thank you.

Underwriting: Lost Highways, from History Colorado, is made possible by the Sturm Family Foundation, proud supporters of the humanities and the power of story-telling for more than 20 years.

Tyler: On March 12, 1990, a diverse group of over 1,000 disability rights activists from 30 states gathered at the bottom of the steps of the United States Capitol.

Noel: At that time, only 30 years ago, the Capitol was STILL inaccessible to the physically disabled, and many of the activists that day arrived in wheelchairs, or other mobility devices.

Tyler: The plan was for the activists who could to leave those mobility devices and crawl up the 84 steps to the Capitol building to show how difficult it is for the disabled to participate in public life.

Noel: Jennifer Keelan-Chaffin was just 8 years old at the time. She became a disability rights activist at the age of 6.

Jennifer Keelan-Chaffins: The very first chant that I learned was "The people united will never be defeated." And that was my absolute favorite, because it was the first time as a young child

that I ever saw all these adults fighting for their right to be recognized as equal members of society. And I absolutely loved it.

Tyler: Even though she was only 8, Jennifer knew she wanted to participate in what was being called “The Capitol Crawl”.

Jennifer Keelan-Chaffins: A lot of times, you know, people hear about the barriers, but they don't always see how difficult it was. And so I thought that it would be very empowering.

Noel: Here's Jennifer's mother, Cynthia.

Cynthia Keelan-Chaffins: Now, originally, they didn't want Jennifer to do it for two reasons: because she was too young. They felt that it was not safe for her and they were concerned about how the people with disabilities were consistently being portrayed as children. You know, there was that stereotype and everybody was concerned about that. And so, you know, when it came time for everybody to leave their chairs and start climbing. You know, she was told, no, you can't do it.

Jennifer Keelan-Chaffins: And I did start crying because I... I really, really wanted to climb those steps. I was determined to do it.

Tyler: That's when a tall, able-bodied disability rights organizer from Denver, Colorado named Wade Blank came up and asked her why she was crying.

Jennifer Keelan-Chaffins: And I told him, I said, well, some of the adult organizers don't want me to do it. And I really, really need to climb those steps. And, you know, he said, you need to do what's in your heart.

Cynthia Keelan-Chaffins: And I remember him grabbing me by the arm and saying, don't look back, mom. Let's go for a walk. And the next thing I know, I hear this roar from the crowd and I look back and there is my daughter climbing.

Tyler: From History Colorado, this is Lost Highways: Dispatches from the Shadows of the Rocky Mountains. I'm Tyler Hill.

Noel: And I'm Noel Black. On each episode, Tyler and I explore overlooked stories from our home state of Colorado and the American West.

Tyler: On this episode: The Gang of 19 -- How a group of young people with disabilities escaped neglectful and abusive nursing homes, built independent lives for themselves, and helped spark a new civil rights movement. They would revolutionize how we think about accessibility.

Noel: Their actions would make Denver the first city in the United States to have a fully wheelchair-accessible public transit system, it would culminate in the Capitol Crawl in Washington, DC, and eventually, with the passage of one of the most important pieces of civil rights legislation of all time, the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Tyler: It's a cold, overcast, day in January and I'm in Schuyler, Nebraska to meet up with Bob and Renate Conrad for an interview.

[ambient sound -- Tyler opening the van, 'There's a latch here']

Tyler: It's in the single digits, and I've barely walked from the car to the sidewalk in front of the Conrads' house before there are icicles on my moustache.

[ambient sound – Tyler opening the van]

Tyler: Schuyler has a population of around 6,000 and is about an hour away from both Lincoln and Omaha. I was already on my way here from Denver when I got a call from the Conrads saying we might have to cancel. They were afraid that between the bitter cold and the inch of solid ice that covered the sidewalks, their electric wheelchairs wouldn't be able to make it into town to meet me for the interview.

[ambient sound -- door opens]

Tyler: They have an old, beat-up modified minivan that they sometimes use to get around. But they couldn't find anyone to drive it, so I offer. I pop the hood and attach a cable to the battery - they have to disconnect it every time they're not using it, otherwise the car won't start. Then --

[ambient sound -- ramp clangs on the ground, Bob and Renate roll up the ramp]

Tyler: I pull down the ramp, Bob and Renate load themselves into the car, and we're off.

[ambient sounds -- car starting, quieter casual conversation about how cold it is]

[Renate Conrad: Is it cold enough for you today?]

[Tyler, laughing: It is FREEZING.]

[Bob Conrad: I'll take that as a yes.]

[Tyler: You guys were NOT kidding about the cold.]

[Renate Conrad: Yeah.]

[Tyler: You said take a right on Denver?]

[Bob Conrad: Yeah.]

[Renate Conrad: Well, it's below zero for the last two weeks.]

[Bob Conrad: And you can see why we didn't want to travel on the ice.]

[Tyler: Yes, uh, I can see that.]

[Renate Conrad: And then there's the wind.]

[Tyler: Right. So it's been below zero for two weeks..]

[Fade into Tyler's narration]

Tyler: The Conrads tell me they haven't been out of the house in over a month because during the winter, it's too cold to roll all the way into town, and their electric wheelchairs have trouble on the ice.

[ambient sound -- Tyler driving and saying 'Sorry, I'm going very slow because of the ice.']

[ambient sound – unloading from the van]

Tyler: We get to the local bank where we've reserved a quiet back room to do the interview, and go through the whole process all over again as Bob and Renate get out of the car and go inside.

[ambient sound - ramp clank]

Tyler: After loading and unloading Bob and Renate from the modified van in the freezing cold, and watching their wheelchairs slip and spin in the ice and snow, we finally sit down for the interview. And they tell me about the night of July 5th, 1978, which they spent *lying in the street* at one of Denver's busiest intersections.

Bob Conrad: Yeah, having a rock for a pillow is not the best thing to have. She and I joke about it because I say, "That's the first time I slept with my wife." (laughs) It's funny how it worked out.

Renate Conrad: Yeah! (laughs)

Tyler: Bob and Renate were joined by 17 other disabled protesters that day, none of whom are still alive. Their names were Linda Chism-Andre, Willy Cornelison, Mary Ann Sisneros, Carolyn Finnell, George Roberts, Mel Conrardy, Bobby Simpson, Debbie Tracy, Jeannie Joyce, Kerry Schott, Jim Lundvall, Lori Heezan, Glenn Kopp, Larry Ruiz, Cindy Dunn, Paul Brady, and Terri Fowler.

Noel: They used their bodies to block several buses and caused a 24-hour traffic jam at the corner of Colfax and Broadway in downtown Denver. All in the hopes that someday it might be easier for them and other people with disabilities to get around the city they called home.

Noel: For people without physical disabilities, mobility is perhaps the easiest of our freedoms to take for granted.

Tyler: Few of us ever think about how difficult it *could be* just to leave our homes, commute to our jobs, go to the grocery store, the doctor, or even meet up with friends.

Noel: And transportation frustrations were running high when the disability movement started to percolate in the mid-1960s and early 70s. People with disabilities had seen the power of activism and disobedience during the civil rights movement and wanted to advocate for change.

Tyler: But many were stranded in nursing homes or various other institutions that kept them separate from the public, which made it difficult to organize. Here's Joe Shapiro, a reporter for NPR and the author of *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement*.

Noel: He says that historically, people with ALL kinds of disabilities have been institutionalized.

Joe Shapiro: You didn't have a choice of who you lived with, you didn't have a future. You weren't going to go to school, you weren't going to get a job. You were going to be treated like somebody who was expected to die. You were in a hospital-like setting. It wasn't living in the community.

Noel: And not living in the community meant...

Joe Shapiro: They were told they wouldn't go to school, that they couldn't have jobs, they couldn't marry, they could not have the things that all the other people in their families had.

Tyler: Shapiro says that the attitudes of people without disabilities toward those WITH disabilities STILL remains problematic.

Joe Shapiro: We often look to disabled people to either inspire us, or be objects of our pity.

Noel: But early disability activists didn't want that, says Joe Shapiro.

Joe Shapiro: People were saying, no, that we don't want pity. We want the same opportunities as everyone else. We want access to American life. We don't want charity. We're not here to

inspire you. We're like anyone else. We want all the same things that anyone else wants in life. So if there's steps to a building, then I can't take a job there or I can't go to a college class there. If I can't get on a bus, then I can't even get to that building or to that college in the first place.

Tyler: And that's how independent living and transportation became some of the key issues that the disability rights movement started to focus on when the institutions began to shut down in the 1960s and 70s.

Lydia X.Z. Brown: Many people like to think of institutions as artifacts from the past, and that's not actually the case. There are institutions that are alive and well today, including large scale institutions. But it is true that between the 1960s and 1970s, we saw a mass deinstitutionalization movement to shut down many of those institutions

Noel: This is Lydia X.Z. Brown.

Tyler: Lydia is a disability rights activist and works at Georgetown University. They use they/them pronouns.

Noel: And they say that though there are a myriad of issues that come with institutionalizing people with disabilities, one of the major ones is that it robs them of the opportunity to participate in public life.

Lydia X.Z. Brown: One institution that I was aware of was located in a place that was so remote that not even the fire department knew how to get there. And that's pretty horrifying. So like for one thing, just from a pure safety perspective, but secondarily, what that speaks to is a larger issue of ableism that is so pervasive and so profound in how transit and

institutionalization have often functioned in tandem to isolate and to segregate disabled people out of the community.

Noel: Ableism can refer to all kinds of interpersonal or systemic oppression of people who are disabled. And Brown says ALL forms of oppression are interconnected and dependent on each other.

Tyler: That's why they emphasized the diversity of the burgeoning disability rights movement at that time, and the fact that many activists came out of other civil rights movements. People with all kinds of disabilities, both physical and mental, as well as people of all genders, races, and sexualities were starting to work together.

Lydia X.Z. Brown: Sylvia Rivera, who is one of the two trans women of color who started the Stonewall riots, was also a disabled trans woman of color. And she spoke very openly about her madness, about her disability.

Noel: Just one year prior to the Gang of 19 protests in Denver, there were the Section 504 sit-ins across the country. Brown says those protests are a great illustration of the intersectional nature of the disability rights movement. And the sit-ins sought to enforce regulations laid out in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Tyler: That section said that federally funded programs couldn't discriminate against people with disabilities.

Noel: But four years after the legislation had been passed, the regulations had yet to be put in place.

[News clip, Section 504 sit-in, ambient sounds – crowds in the background]

Newscaster: On April, 5th, 1977, proud and defiant, five to six hundred people in wheelchairs, with walking canes and hearing aids, storm the regional office of Health Education and Welfare in San Francisco. Their purpose? To stop discrimination against the disabled, no matter what the consequences.

[Fade out news clip to Tyler]

Tyler: The sit-ins involved disability activists from all over the country occupying government buildings for extended periods of time.

Noel: The longest sit-in took place in Northern California.

Lydia X.Z. Brown : Disabled activists in San Francisco occupied a federal building for over 30 days, and that occupation was made possible by the leadership of many black disabled activists like Brad Lomax and of black non-disabled activists, many of whom were part of the Black Panther Party of Oakland, California, who brought in food and other supplies to the protesters who occupied that building.

[Second news clip, Section 504 sit-in, ambient sounds – crowds in the background, chanting]

Newscaster: For the disabled, the signing of regulation 504 is the difference between living and existing.

Activist: We're more than handicapped without these laws. We're crippled.

Newscaster: 504 means access to public transportation and public spaces. It means free public education and no job discrimination. All basic American civil rights, unless...

[Fade out news clip to Tyler]

[Music fades in]

Tyler: All of these protests contributed to a change in self-perception for the disability community.

Mary Johnson: Well, when I first got involved, it was a time when a lot of disabled people, mostly young people, I would say people in their 20s, 30s, had seen around them the civil rights movement, they'd seen the women's movement. They thought, you know, I think it's our turn, too.

[Music fades out]

Noel: This is Mary Mary Johnson. She was the editor of a publication called "The Disability Rag." It started in the late 70s as an effort to get news about the disability rights movement to people who couldn't leave their homes because of accessibility issues.

Mary Johnson: Some of the ones that I knew were people who actually were very lucky in that they actually lived at home, but always with their parents, even though they were in their 30s, some of them in their 40s. They didn't want to live that way. They wanted independence.

Tyler: Mary Johnson says that the change in self-perception that the disabled community was starting to experience was a key factor in getting the movement off the ground.

Mary Johnson: They understood that they wanted to be participating members of society. And they felt that society was telling them that they had to accept the beneficence of others and did

not consider them to be contributing members of society. They were supposed to be grateful for help, but not do anything on their own.

[Music fades in]

They wanted to shrug all of that off and be part of society. They wanted a meaningful role in society.

[Music fades out]

Noel: To further emphasize why the movement made transportation one of their primary focuses, Mary Johnson points to a quote from disability activist Stephanie Thomas:

Mary Johnson: I remember her saying that transportation was the key to linking with others, and that's absolutely true. It's the ability to get out. The ability to connect. The ability to be part of the public.

Tyler: Here's Lydia X.Z. Brown again. They say that transportation is not ONLY an important part of CIVIC life, but of having any sort of social life as well.

Lydia X.Z. Brown: It doesn't have to be tied to work or school to know that if you live somewhere, it's important to be able to connect with people on your own terms and in a way that works for your body and your brain.

Noel: Joe Shapiro:

Joe Shapiro: I talked to one of the founders of the disability civil rights movement, a woman named Judy Heumann. And she told me, she said, disability only becomes a tragedy for me when society fails to provide the things we need to lead our lives. It is not a tragedy to me that

I'm living in a wheelchair and that got to the core principle. Disability civil rights movement, that the issues of people with disabilities are not medical issues, they are issues of civil rights. Do we have the same opportunities as other people to be full participants in American life?

[Music fades in]

Tyler: That desire, to simply *be part of the public*, was not unlike the demands being made by other civil rights movements focusing on issues of race, gender, and sexuality.

[Music fades out]

Noel: And as that desire was turning into action across the country, it was also manifesting in Denver as a rag-tag group of activists started taking their need for independence into their own hands.

[music fades into History Colorado PSA]

History Colorado Public Service Announcement: As the number of cases of COVID-19 grows in Colorado, History Colorado wants to hear from you about how the outbreak is changing your daily life. Tell us about what you're doing to navigate work and family needs. Has your place of work reduced hours or been forced to close? What steps have you and your family taken to prevent the virus's spread? What will you remember about this moment?

History Colorado Public Service Announcement: Help History Colorado document this important history in the making. We've set up multiple ways for you to share your stories, photographs, and videos with us. You can call us at 720-466-8215 to record your story. Or you

can email a voice memo, photo, or video at curator@state.co.us. You can get more information on how to participate at www.historycolorado.org/covid-19/ or in the episode description for this episode. Thanks for doing your part to care for our community

[Fade into Tyler narrating]

Tyler: Renate Conrad says that prior to the Gang of 19 protest, Denver was sorely lacking in transportation options for people with physical disabilities. There were SOME, but they were unreliable at best.

Renate Conrad: Well, they had what they called a handi-ride system and you had to call at least two days in advance, sometimes a week. And a lot of times they were late. Sometimes they didn't even show up. Sometimes it was very difficult. Like if you had to, like if you canceled for any reason, then you may not get a ride for, I don't know, two weeks?

Bob Conrad: And they would charge you 30 dollars one way to go somewhere. And most people can't afford that. So, you were stuck.

Tyler: The handi-ride system and similar para-transit options across the country were *sometimes* adequate for things like doctor's appointments that you knew about in advance.

Noel: But as far as the ability to "be part of the public," as Mary Johnson put it--to see your friends on short notice, or have the independence to do ANY sort of recreational activities, it was a nightmare.

Tyler: The inability to get around and live an independent, self-determined life was even more discouraging to those people with disabilities who had been relegated to nursing homes.

Noel: A lot of them were neglectful, or even abusive.

Tyler: Here's disability activist Latonya Reeves, talking about a so-called "rehab center" where she lived for a while as a kid in Tennessee.

Latonya Reeves: There was a therapist there. If you didn't do what she would say, she would abuse you. For instance, I cried because she hurt my legs and she took me in the bathroom and stuck my head underwater and told me she would drown me if I didn't stop crying.

Noel: Being a YOUNG person in a nursing facility especially could be especially difficult at a time in life when most kids start to make their own decisions and experience freedom for the first time.

Latonya Reeves: They tell you what to eat, they tell you when to go to bed.

Noel: Latonya Reeves says her experience in nursing homes as a kid is part of what made her become an activist.

Latonya Reeves: That turned me into a real fighter. I decided then, I never will go anywhere else that I don't want to go to.

[Music fades in]

Tyler: This kind of abuse was happening to young people with disabilities in nursing homes across the country, often accompanied by appalling neglect.

[Music fades out]

Noel: Here's civil rights attorney John John Holland describing a particularly bad nursing home called Heritage House in Denver.

John Holland: One guy was amputated above his waist, described as the shortest human being in Colorado, all because of untreated festering bedsores. It was a litany of abuse.

Tyler: John Holland sued Heritage House over the neglect and abuse that was happening to the residents there.

Noel: And it was during that time that John Holland met a young Presbyterian Minister named Wade Blank.

Tyler: Blank was a civil rights activist and organizer who'd been working with the residents at Heritage House.

Noel: He, and a handful of residents, would make Denver one of several epicenters of the disability rights movement in the U.S.

[Music fades in]

Noel: Here are John Holland, Joe Shapiro, and activists Anita Cameron, Mary Johnson, and collaborator Barry Rosenberg describing Wade Blank.

John Holland: ... blonde, long haired guy who, I would, don't think you would describe him as a flashy dresser. He was a major Cleveland Browns fan.

Anita Cameron: Big, big, big, big time. He'd wear his Cleveland Browns jacket and his Cleveland Browns hat. Actually, he was buried in his Cleveland Browns jacket and hat.

Mary Johnson: Sure, Wade was tall and lanky. He had long blond hair, often somewhat tangled. Sometimes he would pull it back. Sometimes he wore a bandana. I think he like to effect the mystique of a 60's organizer.

Anita Cameron: And these kind of square glasses. So he looked like a hippie. He literally did. But he was a Presbyterian minister.

Mary Johnson: He walked with long strides. I remember that. And it was very hard to keep up with him both. Both physically and intellectually.

Joe Shapiro: And he'd been active in the civil rights movement, in the anti-war movement, actually he grew up...

[Fade into Anita Cameron]

Anita Cameron: He had a black roommate who accused him of being a racist when he found out that Wade was a supporter of Barry Goldwater. And Wade's like no, no. So, if you're not racist, I dare you come with me to Selma. And so, Wade went down and marched on Selma on Bloody Sunday.

John Holland: He was blown away by the killings of the students at Kent State, where he'd been working. He basically just went on the road and needed to think about everything and ended up in Denver.

[Music fades out]

Joe Shapiro: And he gets a job at this nursing home, at Heritage House. And he works there for a while on the wing with the young people with disabilities.

Mary Johnson: I remember him saying, like the Janis Joplin song that freedom's another word for nothing left to lose. And these people had absolutely nothing left to lose.

[Music fades in]

Barry Rosenberg: People in a nursing home had a personal care allowance of ten dollars a month. The cheapest transportation was like 30 dollars a trip. Now, turned out I had a Volkswagen Van. I took out the back seats and I could fit in at times four at times five wheelchairs, usually two or three. And we would go places, we would go, we went we went rafting up in the mountains, camping in the mountains, doing a lot of things that people have never done before. We used to go to the movies and do, you know, tried to normalize. People have never been to a movie theater.

Joe Shapiro: He would take them to rock concerts. He would serve wine at dinner. He would register them to vote.

Barry Rosenberg: We'd order out pizza, the food there was very bland institutional food. We didn't know about the legality. We didn't ask, but we got dogs and cats, something that would never happen if we asked into the nursing home. So a lot of people had their own pets. We tried to get people to knock on doors. You know, it's like their apartment. So, you know, they wouldn't barge in.

[Music fades out]

Tyler: Eventually, Wade's various agitations would get him fired from Heritage House.

Noel: But his dream of helping the young people he worked with get out of the nursing home didn't die.

[Ambient noises - crowd talking]

Barry Rosenberg: So Wade came up with the concept of Atlantis and it was a lost civilization where people had greatness and they were forgotten. And what Atlantis was trying to do is get people out of the nursing home into their own independent living. You know, they're in apartments living independently as possible.

Barry Rosenberg: And we got a twenty-thousand dollar grant to make eight units, I believe it is, have a public housing project on 11th and Federal, wheelchair accessible. So people moved out from the nursing home, 14 people. And we had an office there. And that was the start of it was the first program in the United States to get people out of nursing homes into their own apartments.

[Music fades in]

Noel: For a lot of the residents who left Heritage House and moved into Atlantis when it opened in 1974, it was their first opportunity to live on their own.

Tyler: For the first time, they could decide when to come and go, WHERE to come and go, what to eat, who came into their home and when...all the freedoms that constitute life as an independent adult.

Noel: It was there, in that community in Southwest Denver, that the people who had moved out of Heritage House started creating a new identity for themselves. They started believing that they had the right to be “a part of the public.”

Renate Conrad: He always said, you know, take your power and run with it. They would direct their questions, a lot of their questions and a lot of their opinions toward Wade, and Wade said “I’m not the one you need to talk to! It’s him!” We got a lot of respect because Wade forced it.

Mary Johnson: Yep, that was Wade. Wade was very much interested in putting disabled people in the forefront. It was their movement. He was never in any doubt about that. He was enabling people to put themselves front and center.

[Music fades out]

Tyler: Being out of the nursing home not only gave the people of Atlantis a newfound sense of freedom, but of self-determination as well.

Noel: Their identity as activists continued to grow. And some of the residents formed a coalition called ADAPT, which originally stood for Americans Disabled for Accessible Public Transit.

Tyler: But even before ADAPT was its own organization, the members of the Atlantis community were pushing for better accessibility in all aspects of transit and mobility across the city.

Renate Conrad: When they started doing the curb cuts, one of the first protests that was done, disabled people took sledgehammers to the curbs to make people visually see that, you know, the curbs have to be broken down.

Tyler: And those curbs DID get broken down. The ramps from the sidewalk to the street that are so common today were the direct result of the work of disability activists like those from the Atlantis community.

Noel: At the same time, John Holland was suing nursing homes and various inaccessible institutions left and right.

Tyler: One of the issues he was working on had to do with RTD -- Denver's Regional Transportation District.

John Holland: They had announced they were buying all these inaccessible buses and there was a lawyer at RTD.

[Music fades in]

John Holland: I called him up and I said, "I'm going to sue you to enjoin all of these buses unless you agree to put lifts on." And he said, "well, I can't do that because that'll cost us a lot of money." I said, "well, you could have them designed to be a but can configured so they could accept a lift retrofit." And he said, "We'll design them to accept a retrofit." And then I said, okay, we'll sue you to force you to retrofit them.

Noel: But he needed a plaintiff.

Tyler: So he called Wade Blank.

John Holland: Wade didn't take but minutes to go, "We'll be plaintiffs. We'll sue."

Tyler: They put together what they thought was a really strong case.

John Holland: So we did our best and we thought we won. And so it's just a question of will and desire and interpretation of statutes that already existed. But the court was conservative and with tears streaming down his face, he said, "No. Go to Congress."

Noel: They had lost the case. And that's when Blank called a press conference.

[Music fades out]

John Holland: So Wade went outside right out to 19th and Stout and said not until the judges in the north learn like the racist judges in the south, that these people have a right to ride buses, just like those people had the right to go to public restaurants and anywhere they wanted and to ride anywhere they could find a seat, will we be back in court.

[Music fades into underwriting]

Underwriting: Support for History Colorado comes from Colorado State University. CSU embraces the critical role that History Colorado plays in preserving and telling the stories of our state and the West. As Colorado's land-grant university, CSU is proud to be a partner in programming an outreach statewide. As they celebrate 150 years of education, research, and service, CSU remains committed to preserving the past and creating a brighter future. Learn more at colostate.edu.

[Music fades out to Noel]

Noel: It was the morning of July 5th, 1978. Having lost the case that would've forced RTD to retrofit their public busses with wheelchair lifts, residents of Atlantis knew they'd have to force the issue.

Bob Conrad: We said the only way to change this is to do a protest, and the easiest way to do that is pick a location that's central to Denver and where all the buses actually go by. And so we said, "this is what is going to happen."

Barry Rosenberg: So the ideal spot was Broadway and Colfax, epicenter of the city, right by the capital, etcetera. So a bus comes by on going east on Colfax.

Bob Conrad: It didn't take many people to stop a bus. I mean, it's ridiculously easy to do. (laughs) You actually only need three people. So the bus driver pulls up. And if you time it right, it's going to be, you know, a red light. So you put one guy on the door of the bus. So the bus ain't gonna move. And then you get somebody in front of the bus. And then you get the person on the other side of the bus, to stop the bus from turning.

Renate Conrad: Well, one of us would move out in front of the bus and then the bus would try to get around the first bus. And at that point, everybody ran out in front of the bus, not ran, but wheeled out in front of the bus. And we were lined up all across Colfax and Broadway.

Noel: The Gang of 19, as they eventually became known, actually started out as the Gang of 18.

Tyler: They had blocked several buses that morning and were holding their ground.

Noel: That's when Bob noticed Renate, an old acquaintance.

Renate Conrad: So I'm going down the street because I'm going to a job interview and I have to get on -- It was a number 15 bus at the time. And I'm going down the street, just minding my own business, and this voice comes out of nowhere. "Raby, get your butt over here." Well, it was him. (laughs) My maiden name was Raby, and he says, "get your butt over here." And I said, "well, I'm going to a job interview." He says, "no, you're not."

Bob Conrad: And so she ended up staying for the protest.

Renate: And I didn't get a job, didn't go to the job interview.

[News clip from Gang of 19 protest begins]

Wade Blank: These buses are being controlled by the physically disabled since they have not had control over use of any buses in most of their lifetimes. They have a few buses, twelve of them in town, but there's no way twelve buses can handle 2,400 severely disabled young people.

Interviewer: What brought it about today?

Wade Blank: Well, we just lost a court ruling..

[News clip fades out]

John Holland: The Atlantis community, basically, the nursing home residents that had moved out of heritage house were in the streets. And the police didn't know what to do. Think about where the protest is: the mayor or the city attorney, the chief of police headquarters are just a block or two away.

Bob Conrad: Then the city had to deal with what are we going to do with these disabled people if we arrest him? Jails aren't accessible. They didn't know what to do with us, you know, and and and they didn't want to, you know, I mean, we don't like the attitude, but people can be very paternalistic towards disabled people even when you're protesting.

John Holland: The police in Denver and the city attorney and the mayor of Denver did not want to appear as fall guys. Instead, the geniuses for our government, they decided they would arrest the attendants. Arresting the attendants because they didn't want to be seen carting people away in wheelchairs because that just makes Denver look like shit.

Tyler: When all was said and done, the Gang of 19 would stay in the street blocking those buses for a full 24 hours. Chanting and holding signs that said, "We Will Ride."

Renate Conrad: It was a demand we will ride. Yeah, and the access is a civil right. And you're not going to stop us.

Noel: Mary Johnson:

Mary Johnson: They had a chant they would always use, "we will ride". And I think that that encapsulated a whole lot more than riding. It encapsulated a desire to be out and among people to be part of the public.

Noel: When the dust had settled, the fact that the police had arrested their able-bodied attendants and not the actual protestors would come back to bite the city of Denver.

John Holland: It certainly raised a lot of funny questions because who was guilty? Who was guilty of the crime of interfering with public transportation? Was it the attendants or the disabled folks that were protesting? And obviously the system didn't even respect them enough to arrest

them. Raising the question, how do you have a civil rights movement if you can't even be arrested?

Tyler: Holland used that to his advantage.

John Holland: So there's a constitutional principle that goes back over 100 years on equal protection of the laws, which prohibits the selective enforcement of the criminal law. So I filed a motion to dismiss all of the claims, all of the charges against the attendants.

Noel: The Atlantis Community had earned the right to be arrested.

Bob Conrad : Now, that may seem very insignificant, why? Why would disabled people want to be arrested? But what it says about us is that we have the power and we're willing to take whatever risk we have to to get what we want. And now she and I have been arrested in so many cities, I can't even tell you.

Renate Conrad: Internationally *and* in the United States.

Tyler: Joe Shapiro says that the actions of the Gang of 19 did a lot to change the perceptions of people both inside AND outside of the disabled community.

Joe Shapiro: So, here you had 19 people who had been told their whole lives that they couldn't do things. And now suddenly they were forcing a transit system to back down by putting their wheelchairs in front of buses. So that was striking, it was counter to the image that people had of disabilities, and it was counter to the image that people with disabilities had of themselves.

Bob Conrad: You know, the original 19, you have to understand, literally came out of those nursing homes and had no purpose, no validation, no nothing. And then from there, they began

to see, okay, I have some value here. And I guess they saw their value in their protests because they began to understand they could change things and do something for themselves as well as other people.

[Music fades in]

Noel: And once the Atlantis Community convinced the police that they were worth arresting, they started getting arrested. A lot.

John Holland: It was a powerful demonstration that this movement had begun, that it was going to be public, that it was going to be visual, that it was going to make people itchy, that it was going to bother things, that it was going to win. So there was literally a cacophony of demonstrations. Demonstrations became the thing.

Noel: The Atlantis Community and other disability rights activists staged all sorts of protests.

Bob Conrad: It was all theatrics. I can remember one time we all came in with beards. Before I had a beard, came in with beards and said that disabled people are gonna be so old by the time you decide what to do. And next time we came in with you actually came in with a casket, and said.. (deep breath)

Renate Conrad: People are dying. People are dying, waiting to get on transportation.

Bob Conrad: And actually, people have died. I mean, it just... when you see that happen, when it gets so personal to you, the fight gets stronger.

Bob Conrad: From the Denver experience at Colfax, we began to literally - RTD was our target and the American Public Transit Association, which is their union - we began to, every year they would have their meetings, and we would go to those after meeting.

Renate Conrad: By any means necessary, we would get into those meetings somehow. I have slid down an escalator, running escalator, on my stomach to get into one of the meetings.

Bob Conrad: Because once we got there, then we could say what we need to say. And APTA represents all the transportation districts in the nation.

John Holland: And it infuriated RTD. And so Denver was increasingly facing the question, who are we? Who do we want to be? And do we want to look like this?

Tyler: RTD's union, APTA, or the American Public Transportation Association, was national, the movement started to spread.

Renate Conrad: At that point, it was a national movement. And there were people coming from all over every city and state and town.

John Holland: And RTD couldn't handle it. They made peace. We made a compromise. And the compromise was we got everything we wanted. Every single bus was equipped with a lift. And instead of fighting the movement, Denver decided that they would join it and become the most accessible city in the world at the time.

[Music fades in]

Noel: It took a while to implement. But in June of 1982, RTD ordered 89 accessible new buses, and agreed to retrofit all existing buses with wheelchair lifts.

Tyler: And by 1985, five years before the ADA was passed, Denver became the first major metropolitan area in the country to have a fully wheelchair-accessible bus system.

Noel: Over the years, Denver would become one of several hubs for the disability rights movement, with other disability groups and activists working alongside ADAPT to push for ultimately became the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Tyler: The ADA is widely considered one of the most important pieces of civil rights legislation of all time. And the activists who fought to get it passed say that it wasn't just about them. Here's Renate Conrad:

Renate Conrad: You know, anybody, you can be disabled, I can be disabled, at any minute, at any given time, you know, get in a car accident or have an illness and suddenly you're not able to get where you needed to go.

Noel: And as more and more people realized the importance of accessibility, the movement grew beyond the few small pockets of the country where it had started. In the following years, there were more reports, more advocacy, more lobbying...

Tyler: And more demonstrations, which finally culminated at the steps of the US Capitol in Washington DC in 1990. Here's Jennifer Keelin-Chaffins again, who was 8 years old at the time.

Jennifer Keelan-Chaffins: I remember that during that day it was really, really hot. And, you know, for an 8 year old, that's like Mt. Everest. But I was determined. And so one of the things that I'm famous for, you know, is saying "I'll take all night if I have to."

Noel: The crawl was grueling. And the heat from the pavement that had been baking in the DC sun all day didn't help.

[Newsclip from 1990 Capitol Crawl begins]

Jennifer Keelan-Chaffins, 8 years old: I'll take all night if I have to!

Activist: Alright!

[Newsclip fades to Tyler]

Tyler: Finally, she made it.

Jennifer Keelan Chaffins: I remember once I reached the top, and I looked up and I saw this man and we all had a leaflet in the back of our pockets as to why it was important to pass the ADA. And I remember grabbing it out of my pocket, handing it to this man, and saying, "Can you please give this to the president and tell him that it's important that he pass the ADA?"

Noel: Robert Dinerstein, director of the Disability Rights Law Clinic at American University in Washington, says the crawl helped speed up what had been a slow legislative process.

Robert Dinerstein: The crawl, I think, was a way to make, you know, palpable just what it meant to be excluded.

Noel: Ultimately, congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act and George H.W. Bush signed it on July 26, 1990 with wide bipartisan support.

[News clip from 1990 of President George H.W. Bush speaking on signing the ADA, ambient sound -- clapping in the background]

George H.W. Bush: Three weeks ago, we celebrated our nation's independence day, and today we're here to rejoice in and celebrate another independence day, one that is long overdue. And with today's signing of the landmark Americans for Disabilities Act, every man,

woman, and child with a disability can now pass through once-closed doors into a bright new era of equality, independence, and freedom.

[News clip fades out to Robert Dinerstein]

Robert Dinerstein: Until the ADA, really, there were really disability groups tended to be pretty divided and oriented more towards the particular disabilities of their members. So you had, you know, people who were advocates for blind people, people were advocates for deaf people, people who were advocates for people who use wheelchairs. But what was really impressive about the ADA and has carried over is groups coming together and forming a kind of a coalition consortium that said essentially, “well, even if this is a particular concern of yours and not mine, I’m going to support it so that in turn you can support my concerns.” And that kind of cross-disability advocacy was critical, I think, to getting the ADA passed.

Noel: But the fight for disability rights didn’t end with the passage of the ADA.

Tyler: For the last 30 years, there have been ongoing legislative and legal battles over its implementation.

Noel: Not to mention the societal challenges that still make life hard for people with disabilities.

Tyler: For example, rideshare apps like Uber and Lyft have changed the way people get around their cities. But because rideshare companies claim to be technology companies and *not* transportation companies, they say they don’t have to be ADA compliant.

Noel: Here’s Lydia X.Z. Brown again. They say that there’s a long way to go in terms of truly addressing these kinds of systemic problems.

Lydia X.Z. Brown: To end ableism requires us to end all other systems of oppression that harm marginalized and targeted communities. That to end ableism requires understanding that disabled people at the margins of the margins are always, already, and now still are those who are most harmed by ableism in all of its forms. That it is, in fact, disabled people who have always been leading the fights and leading the work and consistently had our contributions erased. And that's still true today, unfortunately.

[Fade in ambient noises of cars passing by]

Tyler: It's a rare warm February day in Denver, as I walk to meet ADAPT activist Dawn Russell, who's going to give me a tour of the new Atlantis community and ADAPT headquarters, which has just moved to a new location in the Denver neighborhood of Baker to give them room to expand.

Dawn Russell: We're at the center of everything as it relates to Denver for ADAPT. We're at Colfax and Broadway and we're getting the number 52 to Atlantis. The mother and home of ADAPT.

Tyler: The bus arrives, and Dawn waits patiently for everyone else at the stop to board before the driver can put down the ramp. Most people are patient, but some...

[ambient sounds - person yelling at us for holding up the line, 'You're blocking f*ing door']**

Dawn Russell: Right here at Colfax and Broadway, all the flavor you can imagine. So you work around the other customers and you wait your turn and the driver will let the lift down. And I will go on the bus.

Tyler: The driver gestures at Dawn to see if she's waiting to get on.

Dawn Russell: Yes, yes. Please, please. And thank you.

[ambient sounds - bus lowering, beeping]

Tyler: Then he pushes a button for the lift to come down.

Dawn Russell: You wanted a description, and as you would have it, they just lowered the bus so that the ramp would come out and it just got stuck in midair. They'll fix it.

Tyler: Does this happen to you a lot?

[ambient sounds – bus beeping]

Dawn Russell: No, not that often, not that often, but something always happens at the bus stop. Okay, he's gonna pull it up and see if it might be the slope that is not allowing us to go all the way down.

Tyler: The driver readjusts the angle of the bus, but it still doesn't work. So he gives the lift a firm push with his hand.

Bus Driver: Come on in.

Dawn Russell: Yay! Yay! That's a good driver that'll finish that manually. Thanks a lot. Thank you, driver.

Tyler: Despite the fact that it's not perfect, Dawn is still thrilled that she can get around Denver on her own. Bob and Renate Conrad echo that, and are still proud of the legacy of what they accomplished with the Gang of 19.

Bob Conrad: I had an experience, I was on an RTD bus, and the bus holds two chairs. So another guy got on the bus. Younger kid. Had to be 15 years old. And he had the biggest smile on his face. And he was just thrilled to death to be on the bus. And we were headed towards a shopping center. I said, "Why are you smiling so much?" He said, "this is the first time I've ever been able to be out on my own without my mom taking me somewhere." He said, "this is a sense of freedom I've never had. I can finally direct my own life." (deep intake of breath)

Renate Conrad: And that happened over and over and over again.

Bob Conrad: And he had no idea who I was, what I've done. And it didn't matter. He was able to do what he needed to do, which is what we wanted.

[Music fades into credits]

Tyler: Lost Highways is a production of History Colorado and History Colorado Studios. It is made possible by a generous grant from the Sturm Family Foundation, with particular thanks to Stephen Sturm and Emily Sturm.

Noel: If you enjoyed this podcast and want to support it, please become a member of History Colorado. You can get 20% off your membership at [historycolorado.org/podcastdiscount](https://www.historycolorado.org/podcastdiscount). Plus you get all kinds of great benefits like free admission to our 8 museums around the state, where you can learn more about the stories we tell on Lost Highways.

Tyler: And even if you don't become a member, you can still get \$2 off admission to any of our museums just by mentioning the podcast.

Noel: Special thanks to Susan Schulten, our History Advisor on this episode, and to Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson, our editor.

Tyler: The music for this episode was by Earth Control Pill. And our theme is by Conor Bourgal.

Noel: Many thanks to our editorial team: Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson, Sam Bock, Shaun Boyd, Brooke Garcia, Steve Grinstead, Kimberly Kronwall, Jose Ortega, Julie Peterson, Angel Vigil, Marissa Volpe, and Zach Werkowitch.

Tyler: And to our Advisory Group, which includes: Stephen Sturm, Emily Sturm, Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson, Thomas Andrews, Jonathan Futa, Charlie Woolley, Susan Schulten, Tom Romero, and Cara DeGette.

Noel: Finally, thanks to the entire staff at History Colorado. I'm Noel Black.

Tyler: And I'm Tyler Hill. Thanks for listening.