

# David Gray, PhD: Researcher, Teacher, Advocate



David B. Gray's résumé speaks for itself. A PhD in psychology and behavioral genetics from the University of Minnesota. Former director of the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research. Former deputy director of the National Center for Medical Rehabilitation Research. Currently associate professor of occupational therapy and neurology at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. Also participating with two Rehabilitation Research and Training Centers.

It would have been a far different résumé had Gray not fallen from a roof in July 1976 and broken his neck. A C5/6 quadriplegic, with use of his arms and wrists but not his fingers, Gray spent, as he puts it, "one year to the day" in the hospital following his accident.

During that hospital stay, Gray's physiatrist advised him to replace his lost physical abilities with cognitive abilities, and Gray, 66, still thinks that was good advice.

But when he got out of the hospital, Gray says, he found no services, few disability role models, no good information sources. "I didn't want that to happen to other people," he says.

One thing Gray has learned along the way since then, he emphasizes, is that the built environment and people's attitudes impose as many limitations on him as does his actual disability.

After returning to his job at the Rochester (Minn.) Social Adaptation Center in 1977, and over the next several years, Gray applied for positions at 40 potential employers around the country. "They wouldn't even invite me for an interview," he says.

Recall that this was years before the Americans with Disabilities Act, and note that Gray always mentioned his disability on his résumé. "I don't believe in surprising people," he explains.

A former professor's recommendation helped Gray get a post at the NIH's National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) in 1981. That was his biggest professional breakthrough, Gray says, and it kicked off more than a dozen years serving in federal agencies involved with disability and rehabilitation.

Appointed by President Reagan in 1986 to head the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation

Research (NIDRR), Gray spent 19 months in that post. He acknowledges that the appointment would not have happened, absent his disability. Gray was also invited onto many committees in that period of his life, "and I know why," he says without rancor.

Back at NIH in 1987, he helped put together the National Center for Medical Rehabilitation Research and in 1993 received the NIH Director's Award. "That was a big deal for me," he says.

In 1995, Gray returned to his native Midwest to join Washington University. Nearly 20 years earlier, the experience of becoming disabled, or as he phrases it, "impeded and limited," had sparked his interest in community-based research.

Such research has the potential to illuminate issues in ways that clinical studies can't. However, Dr. Gray notes, "It's been pretty difficult to follow the usual rules of scientific research, to say the least." One result, he explains, is "You can't get funds, because they don't call it 'research.'"

It's also difficult to publish the findings from community-based research. "It just takes forever. The university doesn't particularly like that," he chuckles.

One of Gray's strengths as a researcher, says CROR director Allen Heinemann, PhD, is that "he knows what it's like to live with a disability."

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Dr. Gray's work online at  
[www.communitychange.info](http://www.communitychange.info)

He also "brings a wealth of research experience to the table," says Heinemann, including very good experience in experimental design.

Gray's current work with the Great Plains Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center (DBTAC) includes a project that studies people with disabilities who've been successfully employed for more than two years. Forty videos of such individuals are already done and will be available online in the future at [www.communitychange.info](http://www.communitychange.info).

If employers see success stories like these, Gray says, "maybe they won't be so afraid" of hiring people with disabilities. "My goal in life is not to annoy people, but to make things accessible."

In a typical day, Gray works from 9:00am till 7:00pm, goes home to eat and then is back working by 8:00pm. His time is filled with managing and doing research, teaching, and advising students.

"I'm not going to retire till they haul me out of here," Gray says with a laugh. "I can't imagine what I'd be doing if I weren't working."