



Disability History and Awareness Month 2023

Stephen Hawking

Stephen Hawking was a world-renowned English theoretical physicist, cosmologist, and author who, at the time of his death, was director of research at the Centre for Theoretical Cosmology at the University of Cambridge. In 1963, at age 21, Hawking was diagnosed with an early-onset slow-progressing form of motor neuron disease that gradually, over his lifetime, paralyzed him. After losing his speech, he communicated through a speech-generating device, initially through a handheld switch and eventually by using a single cheek muscle.

For his Undergraduate degree, Hawking decided to study Physics and Chemistry at Oxford against the wishes of his father, who felt that pursuing medicine would be more financially stable. After graduating with first-class honors, Hawking immediately went to a graduate study program in cosmology at the University of Cambridge. In graduate school, Hawking went on to obtain his Ph.D. degree in applied mathematics and theoretical physics, specializing in general relativity and cosmology, in March 1966; and his essay "Singularities and the Geometry of Space-Time" shared top honors to win that year's coveted Adams Prize.

After his college years, Hawking became a global sensation. In his lifetime, he wrote and contributed to countless papers, taught at prestigious schools, lectured in front of thousands, and made some of the most groundbreaking contributions to the field of theoretical physics ever documented. Throughout his life, Hawking steadily began to lose more autonomy over his physical body as his illness progressed. Still, he always retained his edge and continued contributing to academia until his passing in 2018.

Although his brilliance as a theoretical physicist is undisputed, Hawking had a more ambiguous relationship with disability advocacy. Hawking ultimately wanted to distance himself from his disability. Notably, though, he had a dispute with the university over who would pay for the ramp needed for him to enter his workplace. Hawking and his wife at the time, Jane, campaigned for improved access and support for those with disabilities in Cambridge, including adapted student housing at the university.



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