



Disability History and Awareness Month 2023

John Lewis

John Lewis was born on February 21, 1940, near Troy, Alabama, and was the third of ten children. After growing up and attending school in a majority-minority community, Lewis was steadily exposed to the woes of racism. After he was denied admittance from the University of Troy based on his race, Lewis opted to attend a historically black college, earning a bachelor's degree in religion and philosophy from Fisk University.



Lewis was a pioneering civil rights activist; he participated in the 1960 Nashville sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, was the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1963 to 1966, and was one of the "Big Six" leaders of groups who organized the 1963 March on Washington. Fulfilling many critical roles in the civil rights movement and its actions to end legalized racial segregation in the United States, in 1965, Lewis led the first of three Selma to Montgomery marches across the Edmund Pettus Bridge where, in an incident which became known infamously as Bloody Sunday, state troopers and police brutally attacked Lewis and the other marchers in full view of the public.

Lewis was also a strong advocate for disability rights; after being elected to congress in 1987, Lewis was an avid supporter of the Americans with Disabilities Act as an initial sponsor of the legislation. He continued to support the ADA during his long tenure in congress through its many legal challenges; in 2018, Lewis gave an impassioned speech in defense of the ADA as it was on the precipice of being severely weakened. Lewis also supported the Disability Integration Act. During his time in Congress, John Lewis earned the nickname "the conscience of congress" – a title he lived up to until his untimely passing from complications related to pancreatic cancer. Lewis was widely celebrated by politicians, civil rights activists, and disability rights organizations. His legacy is that of a champion who fought for the well-being of others and a faithful public servant.

Profiles by Andrew Caruana, Policy and Research Intern, Office of Senator Sara Gelser Blouin

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