

Disability Community Member with NM Roots Makes Impact In DC

Kathy Martinez' mother and father were both New Mexicans. As a young couple, they moved to California to pursue work, and there they raised their family. Kathy grew up in California, but returned to her birthplace every year to spend 3 months on her uncle's ranch in rural New Mexico. There, she loved working outdoors bailing hay, and feeding and grooming horses. During her childhood, she was treated as a valued member of the family, and had responsibilities like everyone else.

It wasn't until she started kindergarten and was the only blind child in her class that Kathy found out she was different. Her mother's refusal to send Kathy away to a blind school brought her face to face with full inclusion early in life. Kathy says, "At that age, kids know no limits. They don't believe you can't do things and they would include me in ways that kids can. I feel very blessed to have had that experience."

Kathy's first paying job was in a lock factory where she was a punch press operator. She was channeled into factory work, as opposed to anything that required education. But in fact, she did graduate from college and then began work in Blind Services at the Berkeley Center for Independent Living. She has, over the years, been appointed to a number of high-level governmental bodies, and today is an internationally recognized disability rights leader.

Kathy was appointed by President Bush in 2002 as one of 15 members of the National Council on Disability. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice appointed her to the State Department Advisory Committee on Disability and Foreign Policy in 2005. That same year, she was appointed Executive

Director of the World Institute on Disability (WID), where she created and led several innovative programs designed to increase opportunities for people with disabilities. In 2007, Kathy was appointed a board member of the U.S. Institute of Peace, a Congressionally-created agency dedicated to research and projects in conflict management.

Most recently, Kathy was nominated by President Barack Obama to be the Assistant Secretary for Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) and was confirmed by the U.S. Senate on June 25, 2009. In this position, Kathy advises the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). She manages a staff of 53 and works with all DOL agencies to lead a comprehensive and coordinated national policy regarding the employment of people with disabilities.

As a member of the disability community, Kathy is passionate about improving the statistics on employment of people with disabilities. Under her direction, ODEP staff are engaged on issues related to veterans, recipients of Worker's Compensation, small businesses owned by people with disabilities, accessible technology, and accommodations that benefit both people with disabilities and women who are caregivers for young children or aging parents. ODEP has developed a toolkit for employers to help their employees stay in the workforce if they acquire a disability, as well as a curriculum targeted at youth covering soft skills that are important in the work place, such as how to act and dress, teamwork, and critical thinking. To learn more about ODEP's programs and tools, visit www.dol.gov/odep.

"Hiring people with disabilities is a win-win situation because by working, very often we can get off benefits and pay taxes. Simply by being in the workplace and succeeding, we show our colleagues that it is possible to contribute as a person with a disability. We also show that there are different ways to do things - not the same way they have been done in the past. We have to be strategic, which adds to creativity and innovation in the business world."

Kathy Martinez
Assistant Secretary, Office of Disability Employment Policy

