



THOMAS & KATHERINE DETRE

LIBRARY & ARCHIVES TREASURES

By Tina Calabro and
Sierra Green, Archivist

“You Put on Your Suit of Armor and Move Ahead”: Disability Rights Advocate Patricia Clapp

The late Patricia “Pat” Clapp was a Western Pennsylvania native and advocate whose work contributed to a key chapter in the Disability Rights Movement. Clapp’s records reflect her leadership in local and statewide efforts to ensure the human and civil rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including the right to education and the right to live in the community.

Clapp’s advocacy began in the early 1950s when she joined the Junior Section of the Wilksburg Women’s Club of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC). This local club learned that a child was denied entry to public school because the child had Down syndrome. Galvanized to address this need, Clapp and fellow Junior Section members raised funds to support a preschool for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities overseen by the Allegheny County chapter of The Arc (then known as ACC-PARC) a disability rights organization.

When Clapp’s son David was diagnosed with

Down syndrome in 1955, her civically derived advocacy became personal. Like most parents of children with Down syndrome in that era, Clapp and her husband Harry were advised to institutionalize their youngest son. When they reached out to the American Medical Association for information about the best services for him, they received a letter telling them there was “no chance that the condition can be improved.” “That was a dark letter,” Clapp said in a 2019 interview. “I just decided [institutionalization] was not going to happen to my child.”

Seeking out other parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, Clapp became involved with ACC-PARC and The Arc of Pennsylvania. Dedication and persistence soon began to bear fruit. By the late 1960s, Clapp’s kitchen table served as the drawing board for “Crusade for Change,” a program of ACC-PARC and GFWC that developed multiple preschool programs for children with disabilities, an early building block of educational rights for children with disabilities. David Clapp attended the first preschool that his mother and fellow GFWC members started and maintained in Wilksburg’s South Avenue Methodist Church.

This program, and others like it—also women-driven and many hosted by churches—quickly went national.

In the 1970s, the institutionalization of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities began to be challenged, and the concept of community-based living took hold. These changes were not accomplished without opposition, some of it quite strong. A major effort and



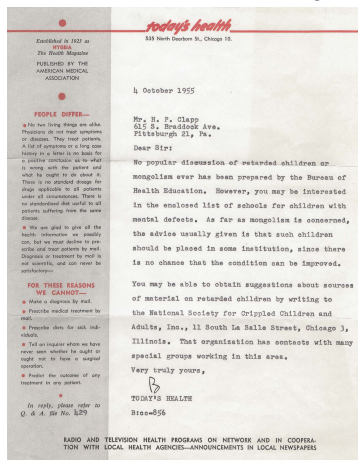
Pat Clapp, standing before a podium with a bouquet of flowers in April 1971.

HHC Detre L&A, Patricia Clapp Papers and Photographs, MSS 1196 B01.F33.105.

accomplishment in this era involving ACC-PARC and the state Arc was the exposure of horrid conditions at Polk State Center in Venango County. Clapp and other advocates went into the facility, where they personally witnessed adults in enclosures they described as cages and restrained in other ways. Although ACC-PARC advocates were appalled by conditions in institutions, many parents of institutionalized people did not want a change in the status quo. Clapp and others received “nasty letters from parents,” she said. In addition, some leaders within the statewide Arc advised her not to “rock the boat.”

Disturbing as it was to be singled out, she stayed the course and as president of the statewide Arc, Clapp did just that. She was “one of the first to show leadership in advocacy,” Bob Nelkin, a staff member at ACC-PARC during those years and fellow advocate, said in an interview.

Pat Clapp passed away in November 2021 at the age of 92. Before her passing, she expressed hope that her advocacy would serve as an inspiration for younger generations.



Letter from the American Medical Association reflecting an inaccurate and grim medical prognosis for children with Down syndrome in the 1950s.


HHC Detre L&A, Patricia Clapp Papers and Photographs, MSS 1196 B01.F05.104.



In response to the work Pat was doing with the GFWC, she was asked to speak to a group of older parents of children with disabilities. As a young mother and activist, Pat represented a new generation in the quest for change. This is the dress worn for that lecture. When she walked in, Pat overheard one of the older parents exclaim, “Who is THAT?” Little did they know...

HHC Collections, gift of Patricia Clapp, 2021.83.1. Photo by Nicole Lauletta.

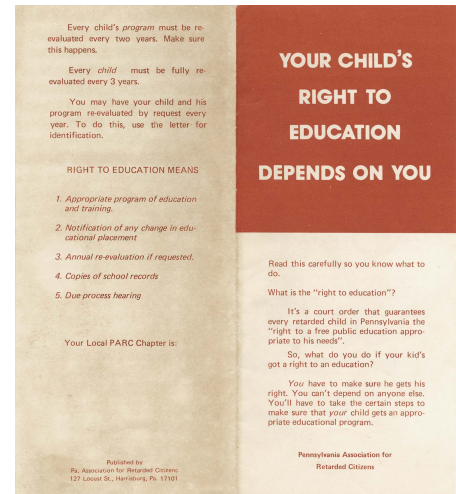
Preserved at the Heinz History Center’s Detre Library & Archives, the Pat Clapp Papers and Photographs collection is an invaluable window into the early work of local grassroots advocates for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The online collection can be found on the Historic Pittsburgh website.

Funding for the processing and partial digitization of the Patricia Clapp Collection was provided by the Western Pennsylvania Disability History and Action Consortium. 



As the concept of community-based living took hold in the United States, Clapp joined an effort led by Rabbi Walter Jacob of Rodef Shalom Congregation to establish Horizon Home, Allegheny County’s first group home (now referred to as “community” homes).

HHC Detre L&A, Patricia Clapp Papers and Photographs, MSS 1196 B01.F22.I06.



Clapp was president of PARC when they distributed this pamphlet to inform citizens and parents of the new ruling and policies regarding their children’s education rights following the settlement of the case, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*.

HHC Detre L&A, Patricia Clapp Papers and Photographs, MSS 1196 B01.F09.I02.



Smithsonian Connection

Model K35 Westinghouse streetcar controller, patented 1908.

Westinghouse Electric Corporation supplied turn-of-the-century streetcars with heaters, motors, and controllers. George Westinghouse had opened a sprawling electric manufacturing plant at East Pittsburgh in 1894 to build products that generated, transmitted, or used alternating current. Controllers such as the K35 used a combination of switches to start, stop, reverse, and regulate the speed of electric streetcar motors.

The Philadelphia Company, which George Westinghouse had founded to distribute natural gas, had evolved into a massive utility company. By 1903, the company controlled every electric lamp and gas line in Greater Pittsburgh, along with most every streetcar and 500 miles of track, under the umbrella of Pittsburgh Railways Company. By 1917, the U.S. had 45,000 miles of transit track served by thousands of streetcars. However, streetcar systems were rarely profitable, and over the next few decades, the limitations of tracks and overhead wires, government and corporate policies, and the development of cheaper and more convenient alternatives—especially the bus and the car—helped make trolleys obsolete.



Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, L2007.33.4.