Disability is an unexpected gift.” This conviction reflects the spirit and direction of the work of Catherine Kudlick, professor of history at San Francisco State University and director of the Paul Longmore Institute on Disability.

Legally blind, Kudlick comes to her work with “knowledge and experience of the world of disability. I was fully formed and nurtured in California public schools and universities,” she said in an interview, describing herself as “the product of special education . . . from the late 60s and early 70s. Since then, things have changed and things haven’t changed. My teachers were a mixed bag. Some were great, and others were terrible because of the low expectations they had for me. They didn’t see me for who I was. They saw the label and the thick glasses.” But Kudlick doesn’t seem interested in dwelling on any less-than-perfect part of her K–12 education. And she’s certainly not complaining about living with a vision impairment, despite the fact that her life has been a routine round of surgeries to restore and maintain the 20-percent of typical vision that she currently has. In fact she has taken the opposite tack and through the institute has become an advocate for Disability Culture.

The answer to the question of “what exactly disability culture is” can vary with every person who’s asked. One useful definition comes from Steven Brown, the co-founder of the Institute on Disability Culture:

People with disabilities have forged a group identity. We share a common history of oppression and a common bond of resilience. We generate art, music, literature, and other expressions of our lives and our culture, infused from our experience of disability. Most importantly, we are proud of ourselves as people with disabilities. We claim our disabilities with pride as part of our identity. We are who we are: we are people with disabilities.

Another comes from Carol Gill, associate professor of disability and human development at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who describes disability culture as . . . an acceptance of human differences, an acceptance of human vulnerability and interdependence, a tolerance for lack of resolution of the unpredictable in life and a humor to laugh at the oppressor or situation, however dire.

The elements of [disability] culture include, certainly, our longstanding social oppression, but also our emerging art and humor, our piecing together of our history, our evolving language and symbols, our remarkably unified world view,
beliefs and values, and our strategies for surviving and thriving.”

In Kudlick’s words, “Our main goal is to get people to think differently about disability—to turn it into this source of ingenuity, excitement, and engagement, to walk away from all those stories about overcoming adversity or pity or any of them and just say, ‘Look. We’re here, and let’s enjoy the parts we can, and let’s learn from everything.’”

In a blogpost, Kudlick writes about the “damage that’s done when pathetic and tragic images of disabled people are used to raise money.” While she readily acknowledges the benefits of the money that telethons and similar events have raised—to purchase essential equipment for people with disabilities and to pay for medical procedures and research—she sees these efforts as having “eclipsed other stories, other images, other possibilities for living as a person with a disability.”

She wants to “put disability in the foreground—and not just as a ‘feel good’ thing. We want to put it out in the culture” to help the world see “disability as a source of creativity, not creativity despite it. The best way to think about disability is that it leads to creative thinking and creative change.”

Creativity in Access

Emily Beitiks, Kudlick’s colleague at the institute, shares this belief that disability is central to creative change for the broader culture. She talks about the benefits for all of society when it “considers disability first”—when buildings and streets, for example, are designed for optimal physical access. There is no question that ramps and curb cuts benefit countless individuals without disabilities—those pushing strollers or shopping carts, those on bicycles, those pulling luggage. And the massive and ever-growing world of “electronic curb cuts” were designed with disability at the center and, again, ended up benefiting countless individuals without disabilities: “Caption decoders for the deaf wound up benefiting tens of millions more consumers than originally intended. . . . televisions with decoders are simply better than those without,” enabling people to watch their favorite program while someone in the same room is sleeping, for example, or to watch (and read) programs in noisy sports bars; and they help children learn to read at an earlier age by showing the words while they’re being spoken (e.g., Sesame Street).”

Disability History

The progress of accommodations and access for individuals with disabilities was not easily realized. People with disabilities have suffered centuries of persecutions and have worked hard in this country and elsewhere to secure their civil and social rights—a story that few people know about. Kudlick and Beitiks are committed to addressing this gap and
have devoted the past four years at the Longmore Institute to creating Patient No More: People with Disabilities Securing Civil Rights, an exhibit that highlights a key moment in history—April 5, 1977, when American people with and without disabilities showed the world the power of grassroots activism—that contributed to establishing a national disability rights movement in the United States and paved the way for passing the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).5

Certainly the past half century has seen progress in increased access for people with disabilities. Along with the physical and technological, this access includes educational access, both through law (e.g., the various iterations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]) and theory, as articulated in the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which contributes to making education accessible and engaging for all children, whether or not they have been identified as having a disability.

However, those who embrace Disability Culture want more than just access. Disability justice advocate Mia Mingus, who will be giving the Longmore Lecture at San Francisco State in February 2017, writes, “We cannot allow the liberation of disabled people to be boiled down to logistics. . . . This work is about shifting how we understand access, moving away from the individualized and independence-framed notions of access . . . and, instead, working to view access as collective and interdependent.”7

Interdependence

“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”—Helen Keller

At the heart of Disability Culture is this idea of interdependence, which Beitiks believes is one more gift that individuals with disabilities bring to everyone else. It turns out that this idea has been gaining worldwide traction for some time. In his keynote address in 2004 to the Physical Disability Council of Australia, Erik Leipoldt said, “I want to emphasize interdependence over independence; people over consumers; and connectedness over separateness. Such a different vision may reinvigorate the disability movement as a contributor to and advocate for genuine community where diversity is the breath of a good life for all citizens.”8 Kudlick describes this interdependence as “at root, appreciating what every side brings to a relationship, thinking about the other as having value so that the relationship is not just unidirectional. Having the ability to acknowledge that the other person made me say, ‘I never thought of that before.’”

Celebrating Diversity and Difference

Disability Culture ultimately promotes a world “that blurs the lines between ability and disability,” says Beitiks. In this world, Kudlick adds, “Disability is not a negative. It’s not condescended to. Disability Culture puts a positive spin for everyone. It flips the thinking. It’s not just acceptance; it’s an openness to new ways of doing things.”

Kudlick expands on how “disability allows us to be creative—in art, in literature and autobiography, in music. Disability art,9 for example, is not just rehabilitation. Not a condescending ‘therapy’ so people can feel good. It’s an expression, a reflection, a unique take on things that helps everyone see differently.” She talks about artist and painter Katherine Sherwood, who recently retired from the art

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department at UC Berkeley. Kudlick calls Sherwood's work "beautiful, innovative. She takes what most people could only see as a negative and changes it to a positive."

Sherwood, who experienced permanent physical and perceptual changes following a stroke, writes about her disability as "a challenge and an opportunity rather than a loss."

**Benefits for All Students**

"People often conflate knowledge with information," says Kudlick. "While knowing information, about facts, is important, knowledge is something deeper, a more profound understanding of your relationship with the world." Knowing people with disabilities and having them as friends from the earliest possible age provides the most effective kind of instruction in "your relationship with the world."

Kudlick is convinced of the practical value that children with disabilities bring to the classroom when school systems facilitate true inclusive practices. "One problem in schools," Kudlick says when talking about attitudes toward disability, is "the old assumptions that people with disabilities have zero resources and zero knowledge. In fact, no one ever believed the kind of things people with disabilities can do. Difference keeps the edges sharp. Growing up around people who are different," she says, "when difference is the norm, will make a person better able to respond to new and unexpected situations." Creative response becomes second nature to children who are practiced in adjusting to the unfamiliar and to the different.

As well, "people with disabilities are tremendously resourceful—they're used to figuring out the system and figuring out how to make things work." They are "models of flexibility, ingenuity, and resilience." They can share their "pride, engagement, sense of possibility, and vision for the future"—and show the rest of us "how to make this world more just and more beautiful."

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**The Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability**

The Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability at San Francisco State University works to challenge stereotypes of disability by showcasing disabled people’s strength, ingenuity, and originality. The institute sponsors educational and cultural events to fight disability stigma with disability culture; co-hosts the Superfest International Disability Film Festival; and sponsors an annual Longmore Lecture, which features speakers who blend scholarship and activism. Learn more at http://longmoreinstitute.sfsu.edu

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1. From http://www.independentliving.org/newsletter/12-01.htm
2. From https://drc.uic.edu/disability-culture-2/
5. For more about Patient No More, go to http://longmoreinstitute.sfsu.edu/patient-no-more
6. For more about UDL, go to CAST: Center for Applied Special Technology. http://www.cast.org
8. Erik Leipoldt’s full address is at http://www.alternate-energy-sources.com/disability-article-1.html
9. For examples of disability art, go to Disability Arts International: http://www.disabilityartsinternational.org/artists/