

A Champion for NCDE: Bob Persiko

Champions in the U.S. Department of State were key to accessing federal funding for MIUSA's work and eventually the grant that established the NCDE. In addition to David Levin's consistent backing over the years, Bob Persiko, Director of the Youth Programs Division of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in the late 1980's, was an early and stalwart supporter.

As he reflects:

“I was involved in international educational exchanges at the US Information Agency (USIA) At some point in the 1980's I was introduced to Susan Sygall, whose passion and support for the participation of people with disabilities in international exchanges was contagious. We explored ways to use federal funding to support MIUSA's fledgling work. Later this resulted in grant funding for the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE)....It was not always an easy sell to get the bureaucracy onboard with a commitment to the participation of people with disabilities. Susan had a way of persuading people through her efforts. I remember one meeting where Susan, in her enthusiasm, rose dramatically from her wheelchair to make a convincing point to State Department officials.

Often it took bringing decisionmakers into contact with participants to demonstrate the importance of reaching people with disabilities. I spent a weekend in Eugene, Oregon, observing one such program, which had a profound impact on me. I also recall meeting with MIUSA's German counterpart and learning about their difficulties getting government support. I was proud that my engagement in these activities demonstrated the commitment of the federal government to MIUSA's mission.

My interaction with MIUSA participants gave me a profound understanding of and appreciation for how the exchange experience favorably impacted those who otherwise might have been excluded from programs. It became an important contribution to government-sponsored educational exchanges, and a vital element of how the US is perceived abroad.”

