



JOHN D. KEMP
President and CEO of
The Viscardi Center

Ever since it was founded in 1952 by Dr. Henry Viscardi Jr., The Viscardi Center in Albertson has been effectively working to eliminate the many barriers that people with disabilities all too often face at school, work, and elsewhere. John D. Kemp, who was named president and CEO of this network of nonprofit organizations in 2011, recently spoke with us about the organization's mission, what makes it unique, how it uses technology, the challenges it's facing, and several other subjects.

Q: What makes The Viscardi Center unique?

JK: We are unique in the fact that our educational and employment-related programs and services assist individuals with all types of disabilities through the full life span – PreK to senior citizens. What truly makes us special is our staff. Each staff member has wholeheartedly chosen professions that positively change lives each and every day.

Q: What is the mission of The Viscardi Center?

JK: The Viscardi Center educates, employs, and empowers youth, adults, and veterans with disabilities or similar needs, so we can all discover the love of learning, the power of work, the freedom of independent living, and the self-confidence to fulfill our dreams.

Q: How do you use technology to accomplish that mission?

JK: We have a state-of-the-art, fully accessible conference and production facility that we use for meetings, video production and distance learning. The Henry Viscardi School has more than 300 personal laptops in each classroom. All rooms are now equipped with interactive white boards and FM loops, when needed, to enhance the learning experience of all students. We've created a "backpack-less" learning environment for students by implementing cloud storage for class and homework assignments. A fully accessible on-campus SMART home is currently being constructed, in which young people with disabilities can experience independent living in a safe environment. We've enhanced our school's digital media and art classes by introducing laser engraving and 3D printing.

Q: How have things changed at your organization since Viscardi started?

JK: In late fall 2019, The Viscardi Center launched a National Center for Disability Entrepreneurship, which is a strategic pathway to combat the many barriers that lead to widespread unemployment and underemployment within the disability community. Through its program modules, it will educate, transform, and empower its members to achieve self-employment success.

Q: What else is new at The Viscardi Center?

JK: We're in the early stages of building out a universally designed health and wellness center with a completely renovated, fully accessible indoor pool that will offer community programming, as well as being used by those we serve and our staff.

Q: How did you get started in the work that you do?

JK: Born without arms and legs, I have tried to be a champion of the disability community nearly my whole life. At age 7, I attended an Easter Seals camp and began speaking about its impact. My role as a disability ambassador heightened when I was named the 1960 National Easter Seal poster child. My path to becoming a national leader in the disability community started in 1990 when I became CEO at United Cerebral Palsy and in 1995 when I co-founded the American Association of People with Disabilities with Paul G. Hearne, a graduate of Henry Viscardi School. We met in Washington, D.C., at a time when we as people with disabilities had little political and/or economic power. We drew upon our experiences and challenges, creating an organization made up of thousands of individuals with disabilities to drive forward progress in these two critical areas. When I was approached to lead Viscardi, I was a partner in a D.C. law firm advocating for federal disability policy improvements. Once I visited Viscardi, it was easy to accept the role at our organization founded by a renowned leader with a disability, Dr. Henry Viscardi Jr., an international role model. He was that role model for me when I saw him deliver a powerful keynote address as a young boy.

Q: What is your favorite part of your job?

JK: I love to know and watch the development of young people we serve in our school and program participants in our adolescent and adult services.

Q: What is the biggest challenge of your job?

JK: Finding the essential resources to fuel our

next generation of programs and services, and maintaining the necessary support of our critical, core programs of education, employment and empowerment is my biggest challenge.

Q: What major trends are you seeing?

JK: Changes in public policy priorities might have a tremendous impact on Viscardi, from sufficiency of New York State school funding, to youth transition and at-risk youth programs, to federal and state tax policies. These are trend factors we watch very closely.

Q: July marks the 30th anniversary of the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). What's significant about that to your organization?

JK: We mark the annual anniversary through a variety of activities, including participating in the Disability Pride Parade each July in New York City. This year, we'll focus a bit more on raising awareness about the unemployment crisis for those of us with disabilities and continue to develop our next generation of disability rights advocates and leaders.

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John is in his office with the Henry Viscardi School Class of 2019 Valedictorian and Salutatorian. Uriya(left), now attending Hofstra University and Phillip(right), now attending Stony Brook University.