



**For Immediate Release:**

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**AbilityFirst™ Celebrates 95 Years of Service**

*The organization kicks off its anniversary with “95 Reasons to Love AbilityFirst”*

**PASADENA** (February 23, 2021) - In 2021 AbilityFirst celebrates 95 years of supporting children and adults with disabilities through various programs including after school enrichment, college coaching, adult day and community integration programs, supported employment and residential housing services.

Between 1926 and 2021 there have been monumental changes in AbilityFirst but also in the disabilities industry at the federal, state, and local levels across the country. In 1926, a group of businessmen from the Los Angeles Rotary Club reached out to help children affected by the pre-vaccine polio epidemic. These visionary men, looking beyond crippling physical disabilities, saw children and capabilities first and sought ways to help these children flourish and thrive. Out of this seed of compassion and concern, AbilityFirst—with all the promise of its cornerstone belief in capability—was born.

Originally named the Crippled Children’s Society of Southern California, AbilityFirst and its founders were cutting-edge advocates for disability rights. AbilityFirst went on to pioneer some of the very first community services in California for children with disabilities.

In 1947 Crippled Children’s Society received permission from the US Forestry Service to open a camp in the San Bernardino Mountains and Camp Paivika opened in Crestline as one of the very first camps in the country that is fully accessible, enabling children with disabilities to enjoy a true camp experience. Paivika means “dawn” in the Cahuilla Indian language.

In 2000, we adopted the name AbilityFirst to better reflect our mission, vision, and commitment to celebrating the unique abilities of every individual. Today, AbilityFirst is distinguished by: evidence-based services, exceptional leadership and management, longstanding experience and community roots, and outcomes-based program evaluation with measurable results. That tiny seed—looking beyond the disabilities of polio to see children and capabilities first—has grown strong, deep roots.

*“I thank all the AbilityFirst participants, their families, our donors and volunteers as well as AbilityFirst staff; it is because of these wonderful people who have devoted their time, money and careers to serving people with disabilities that AbilityFirst shines today” shares AbilityFirst CEO Lori Gangemi. “I know that the next 95 years will be filled with even more milestones for AbilityFirst as we continue to create a society that values each individual and provides the opportunity for all people to lead full and productive lives.”*

The 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration will take place all year long and kicks off this month with a digital campaign, “95 Reasons to Love AbilityFirst” featuring videos, photographs, along with throwback photos and stories shared by participants, families and friends all while encouraging supporters to donate \$9.50, \$95.00 or \$950.00 to support AbilityFirst programs.

A quarterly e-newsletter will highlight historical milestones throughout its 95-year history for both AbilityFirst and the disability community and the campaign will culminate with a holiday celebration in early December.

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AbilityFirst provides a variety of programs that have a common mission: to help people with disabilities realize their full potential throughout their lives. As we celebrate more than 92 years of service, we are focusing our efforts on programs that are proven to have the greatest impact on a person’s success: basic life skills enhancement through our children’s and adult programs; higher education and employment readiness; and, independent living and social and recreational programming.

AbilityFirst looks beyond disabilities, focuses on the capabilities of each individual and breaks through any preconceived limitations, opening up a world of possibilities. Preparation, socialization, communication, education – all leading to helping people achieve their personal best. More at [www.abilityfirst.org](http://www.abilityfirst.org)