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## Michael Ashley Stein

### STRIVING FOR DISABILITY RIGHTS AROUND THE GLOBE

AS A STUDENT AT HARVARD LAW SCHOOL, Michael Ashley Stein was aware of how privileged he was. But as someone with a disability (a rare illness had left him in a wheelchair at 14), he was also deeply conscious of what it meant to be an outsider. Because of a lack of elevators, he had to push himself through the snow and ice during the winter while classmates stayed warm in underground tunnels; as the first person with a disability on the staff of the *Harvard Law Review*, he dragged himself up stairs to the office. “I certainly learned what it was like to live as someone semi-deprived,” Stein says. At the same time, “I never quite lost the perspective of how lucky I am relative to many people not only in this country, but in the developing world.”

The 49-year-old didn’t set out in law school to become a disability advocate, but in retrospect it was almost inevitable. “I came to law school and learned all about rights and justice,” he says. “But there was very little access for me.” After graduation in 1988, he worked as an attorney in New York and became active in disability civil rights. Later, as an academic, he moved on to international disability rights and participated in the drafting of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities. Now he takes an elevator to a third-floor office at his alma mater as a visiting professor of law and director and cofounder of the Harvard Law School Project on Disability, which was started in 2004 and aims to help implement the convention around the world.

Stein and others from the project have worked in some 36 countries, from Vietnam to South Africa. They often partner with local organizations for people with disabilities. In some places, the Harvard group has advised on constitutions and new laws.

The stigma of disability still runs deep. In Vietnam, Stein set out to work on a national disability law but learned there were more basic priorities. In that country, the very word for people with disabilities means “useless mouths.” Stein says he was told by locals that “the first thing we want in a law is to have a word with dignity.” In the Philippines, Stein discovered that children who are blind or have other disabilities are frequently barred from elementary school by principals. During the past two years, his group helped organize parents to reverse those practices for some 300 children.

The challenge now for Stein, who lives in Cambridge with his wife and daughter, is to educate people throughout the world on the contributions and inherent worth of people of all abilities. “We are slowly reaching the point where we have a shared understanding on why people add value to a society, regardless of productivity or any other calculus, but just by being,” he says. “That has been marvelous to see.”

—Michael Blanding