Little People of America Celebrates Its 50th Anniversary
By Meg Dedman

Fifty years ago, actor Billy Barty invited people of short stature across America to join him in Reno, Nevada. In a landmark event, Mr. Barty and 20 others gathered for a week – sharing their hopes, ideas and experiences, and Little People of America, Inc. (LPA) was born.

The first LPA meeting was monumental for a group of people who were severely mislabeled and misunderstood by society. Media coverage reflected the attitude of the times...“the small people here today are endowed with that good quality that takes them out of the realm of oddity into the realm of humanity...” (San Francisco News, April 1957). Clearly, Barty and his colleagues had a lot of work to do.

Whether it be dwarf, midget, little person, small person, person of short stature or the wealth of other haphazard descriptives, public understanding of what it actually meant was incomplete and inaccurate. So much so that revising dictionaries was an action item in LPA’s first meeting minutes.

Barty’s belief in recognizing people with dwarfism as people first and his desire to promote awareness about the challenges presented to people of small size guided LPA on its mission of education and advocacy. Though not without challenges, each decade of LPA’s existence was marked by progress – within the organization itself and society as a whole.

In the 1960’s, LPA established its constitution, formed Committees to support key initiatives - adoptions, education, employment and resources for new parents/LP children. They also established their motto, “Think Big”. LPA’s involvement with the medical community began - bringing much-needed medical expertise to LP families and laying the foundation for today’s Medical Advisory Board.
On its 10th anniversary in 1967, Art Linkletter invited all LPA Convention attendees to his CBS show *House Party*, for a discussion about the issues facing little people.

*LPA membership nearly doubled from 663 in 1966, to 1071 in 1969.*

The 1970’s saw continued growth in membership, development of the LPA Foundation and the first Short Stature Symposium. Local chapters also began to emerge.

In 1972, LPA conducted the first employment survey of little people. Results revealed that LPs were employed in a broad range of occupations in many career fields - further proof that people of short stature were people first, capable of pursuing any profession.

The newly founded LPA Foundation awarded its first scholarship. Baltimore’s Johns Hopkins Hospital held the first Short Stature Symposium in 1972. They continue to be one of LPA’s strongest medical partners and one of the few hospitals with expertise on dwarfism. Alfred I. duPont and Cedars-Sinai hospitals are among the select few others that have such expertise.

*LPA membership grew to over 2,100 members in 1974.*

The 1980’s were a pivotal decade for LPA largely due to the beginning of efforts to support LP organizations throughout the world, as well as mainstream media coverage. Membership also increased.

The 25th Anniversary of LPA was celebrated in 1982 with a return to Reno, Nevada with 600 people in attendance. The value of LPA’s contribution to self-esteem was evident. Lillian Johnson, Charter Member, then 74, said of LPA: “There are so many more things Little People can do with their lives. When I was a child, it was either the circus or fairs. I’m very thankful for LPA.”

*There are an estimated 30,000 people with dwarfism in the United States, and 651,700 in the world. LPA membership is offered to people no taller than 4'10" in height. Their short stature is generally caused by one of the more than 200 medical conditions known as dwarfism.*
The First International Conference of Little People was held in 1982, in Washington D.C. Delegates from seven nations and the U.S. attended the conference. In 1985, Puerta Vallarta, Mexico was the site of the first LPA Conference held outside the United States. And Italy was the host of the International Conference on Achondroplasia (the most common form of dwarfism) held in 1986.

LPA member Ginny Foos recalls her experience in Italy, “When a group of us went to Rome in 1985 to protest the newly introduced Extensive Limb Lengthening surgery, I understood why the Europeans were resorting to changing their bodies, even if it meant years of costly surgery and pain. On the streets, people stared and snapped photos. In churches, we were blessed by people whose sorrow for us was undeniable. It made me realize how fortunate we are to have LPA.”

On the television front, Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey featured people with dwarfism on their programs, spurring inquiries for information about LPA as well as LPA membership growth. Despite these positive developments, there were setbacks. Dwarf tossing was introduced in Florida and some other states. However, a strong response from LPA and its members resulted in a ban of this activity in Florida and other states.

Membership rose from 2,150 at the beginning of the decade, to 4,734 by the end of 1989.

In the 1990’s, LPA membership continued to climb. Crucial medical study findings regarding dwarfism were released, along with legislation that benefited people of short stature.
The American’s with Disabilities Act became federal Law in January of 1990 and was enacted by many states to provide access to services, buildings, and employment for disabled individuals including individuals with short stature. Later in the decade, the American National Standards Institute adopted 48 inches as the standard height in new and remodeled structures.

The practice of limb lengthening was introduced into American medical practice and immediately resulted in questions and concerns from the leadership of LPA. A position statement authored by LPA’s medical advisory board, “Extended Limb Lengthening – Setting the Record Straight”, reviewed the pros and cons of the procedure as well as recommendations for those considering it.

In the mid-1990’s, scientists discovered the gene responsible for achondroplasia, the most common form of dwarfism. This revolutionary discovery raised concerns about when and how such information would be used. LPA reviewed the findings and immediately presented a position paper “Little People of America Comes to Terms with Genetic Testing.”

A major focus of LPA activities during this decade has been fundraising to support key programs and initiatives. In the public arena, the launch of a reality show featuring an LP family active in LPA has made an enormous impact on public perceptions across the globe.

“Little People – Big World” debuted on The Learning Channel in 2006 and is now in its third season. It follows the lives of the Roloff family – the parents (little people) and their four children (1 LP and three average height). The series is a milestone for people of short stature because it appears on mainstream television and presents LPs as people first, just as Billy Barty and his fellow Charter Members intended.
Today, LPA has almost 6,000 members.

The world’s foremost advocate for individuals with dwarfism, LPA provides educational scholarships, medical assistance, adoption resources and social opportunities for its members. LPA also offers invaluable emotional support and medical expertise for people of short stature and their families.

Through its 50-year history as a volunteer organization, countless members and officers have selflessly given their time and talent, working together to achieve a common vision – support, acceptance and tolerance for physical differences.

What has been LPA’s greatest accomplishment? Long-time LPA Members John and Nancy Mayeux say it best, “When our daughters were young, there was no Internet. We were in the dark. LPA provided the light to get us through those early years of struggling with medical issues, legal and school issues, accessibility and adaptations, insurance challenges and even dwarf-tossing. Now that our daughters are both 21 and college graduates, we look back with gratefulness on all that LPA has meant to our family.”

What began as a casual conversation among friends gave birth to an organization that serves as an invaluable source of information, support and hope for people with dwarfism.