



The Girl in the Orange Dress

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Minister for Disabilities and Mental Health Justice

Lois Curtis was a Black artist born in Georgia in 1967, who at the age of 11 was institutionalized by her family because they were no longer able to provide for her care. In the hospital, instead of getting support and care for her neurodevelopmental disabilities and schizophrenia, Lois was subjected to frequent sedation and isolation.

Lois may have lost her freedom, but she didn't lose her voice. At the age of 19, she picked up the telephone in the hallway and called the Atlanta Legal Aid Society for help. She kept calling every day, until one day, a staff member agreed to come visit her in the hospital. Lois wanted to be free from the institution and to live in community, where she could focus on being an artist.

Lois used the power of her voice, one voice, to help change the law. With help from the Legal Aid Society, at the age of 27, she filed a lawsuit against the state of Georgia and its Commissioner of Human Resources Tommy Olmstead. Lois made the case that by keeping her institutionalized, the state was discriminating against her, which was now illegal under the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Lois's discrimination case went all the way to the Supreme Court where the justices ruled six-to-three in her favor. On June 22, 1999, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg announced the court's decision in the case: the Georgia Department of Human Resources and Georgia Regional Hospital violated the ADA. The landmark Olmstead Decision found that segregation



of people with disabilities was a violation of the law. It paved the way for more equitable treatment not just in psychiatric hospitals, but all institutions receiving state and federal funding.

Free to be herself, with the support she needed to live in her own apartment, Lois loved to paint and described her art as her connection to God. About her art, Lois said, "Drawing pretty pictures is a way to meet God in the world like it is." During the Obama Administration in 2011, Lois's artwork appeared in the White House [when she presented President Barack Obama with a work called "Girl in Orange Dress."](#)

The United Church of Christ celebrates the power of the stories and voices of disabled people to build a more just world for all. We give God thanks for the life of Lois Curtis, who died in 2022 at the age of 55. We honor all who champion people with disabilities and mental health justice. We renew our commitment to keep working for the day when all will be free from discrimination and injustice.

Join us in celebrating Access Sunday, a time to honor and renew our commitments as an Accessible-to-All (A2A) church. Thanks especially to the United Church of Christ Disabilities Ministries Board for creating worship resources to use in your congregation for Access Sunday, celebrated on the second Sunday of October, or any and every Sunday where God's people gather in the spirit of love and inclusion.

Access Sunday worship resources here: <https://www.uccdm.org/accesssunday>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Dr. Sarah Lund serves as the Minister for Disabilities and Mental Health Justice for the United Church of Christ.

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