

# State honoring S. Lake Tahoe disabled advocate

By Kathryn Reed

Becoming an advocate for the disabled wasn't something David Kelly aspired to be. There is not one defining moment that led him on this 30-plus year mission.

"I saw what I thought was people being treated unfairly," Kelly said. That was in South Lake Tahoe in the early 1980s. The 70-year-old has been on a mission ever since to fight for equality.

He's never received a dime for his efforts – of which he is extremely proud.



David Kelly with his son, Jason. Photo/Provided

"I do it because it needs to be done," Kelly told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Today, the state of California is recognizing his efforts. The South Lake Tahoe resident has been named one of the state's 50 Notable People in the Disability Community. The Department of Rehabilitation on its website is honoring the 50 people with their profile being the main feature for one week, and then remaining there. Kelly's week starts Sept. 12.

People selected are “individuals who inspire others by their advocacy, leadership, accomplishments, achievements, and/or dedication to the disability movement and to employment, independence, and equality of Californians with disabilities,” according to the state website.

John Pillsbury, who works for the Department of Rehabilitation and is the secretary of the Tahoe Area Coordinating Council for the Disabled, of which Kelly chairs, nominated Kelly.

“I am continuously moved by his honesty and courage to move on issues to help our residents,” Pillsbury told *Lake Tahoe News*. “He has done a great job. He does the right thing.”

Kelly has post polio syndrome. He has far exceeded the life expectancy many doctors told him he would have. He is a fighter. And “no” is not a word in his vocabulary even when people say it to him.

Former South Lake Tahoe City Councilmember Kathay Lovell remembers having an immediate connection with Kelly. In large part this had to do with Lovell’s dad having polio and never thinking of him as handicapped – the word that was in vogue when she was growing up.

“I find David to be an incredibly astonishing man. He has accomplished many things in our community,” Lovell told *Lake Tahoe News*. “He has persevered to do projects that by anyone else’s imagination were probably impossible to do.”

Kelly is the man behind Tahoe Senior Plaza, Kelly Ridge (named in his honor), and Sky Forest Acres. These three developments are affordable housing for seniors and those with disabilities.

“A lot of people were involved, but without Dave they would not have gotten off the ground,” Pillsbury said.

Kelly is not done. He is working on creating another

affordable housing complex in the city.

Other goals are to develop a shelter and build transitional housing for the disabled.

He will be in Minden on Friday because he received a call from a concerned citizen about the plans to change things at the courthouse there that could affect the disabled.

A couple phone calls a week come in from people asking for his advice or help with matters. While he is not an attorney, he knows the law, people to call and how to make change happen.

"My biggest gripe with politicians is they make up laws and not one of them is disabled. They don't see what is really needed," Kelly said. "They have all the best intentions in the world, but half of them are not needed or are useless laws. They should have rethought how the law is used. It makes it harder on businesses, harder on recreation and harder on everybody."

Kelly was one of the first people to criticize disabled attorney Scott Johnson when he came through town suing businesses. He said that is not the way to bring about change. It's the way to make money.

Besides being chairman of TACCD, Kelly is also on several other boards related to the disabled.

And while Kelly has received numerous awards in his lifetime, to be named one of the top 50 advocates for the disabled in California is the crowning achievement. He said he is humbled to be in the company of the 49 others.