

# How Frank D. Lanterman changed my life

*... this is his legacy: that people like me have a voice . . .  
we have rights and protection . . . and to be treated like other citizens.*

**By Rebecca Liu**

**2009 winner of CCHS History Day paper award**



*Rebecca (MeiMei) Liu (center) is from Sierra Madre Middle School in Los Angeles County. She is a young girl with severe autism and does not speak. All verbal communication must be typed onto a keyboard, which is then read by her full-time aide. She wrote a wonderful historical paper titled "How Frank D. Lanterman Changed My Life." Not only did she place as an alternate to the National competition in the junior division but also won four special awards: A People's History Award; CCHS Recognition of California History Research Award; Gloria T. Hirsch Award; and Kudos for Kids Award.*

Frank D. Lanterman was a name I had always known but I really didn't know what it meant. I had heard my parents say the name referring to something called "Regional Center." I came to understand the "Regional Center" funded programs that I needed, desperately, because I am autistic. I learned that the name of "my" Regional Center was Frank D. Lanterman Regional Center. It never occurred to me that the name referred to a real person. For National History Day I decided to find out who Frank D. Lanterman really was.

In my initial research on the Internet, I saw that a regional center, job center, high school, freeway, street, hospital, series of laws and a historical house were all named after Lanterman. I found out that Lanterman House, in La Canada, has an archive with thousands of documents about the Lanterman family. As I am unable to speak, I had my mother call for an appointment with the archivist, Mr. Brooks. On a wintry day my mother, my aide and I went to Lanterman House and browsed through boxes and boxes of old newspaper articles, interview transcripts, wills, personal and professional letters, photos, chapters of books and copies of state laws. We selected about a dozen documents and had them

photocopied to take home. It took me several weeks to go through the documents with my aide, who reminds me to pay attention when I read and supports me when I take notes. I type using one finger with some physical support; the process is very slow. After many hours of work, what I learned from my research changed the way I look at my life and made me realize how one man can change the lives of so many.

In 1875 Frank Lanterman's grandfather, Dr. Jacob Lanterman, came from Michigan to California and bought Rancho La Canada. He built a house he called "Homewood," which is now the historical landmark known as the Lanterman House.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Lanterman was active in community service and instilled his dedication to public service in his family. In 1914 Frank's father, Dr. Roy Lanterman, a dentist, moved to La Canada with his wife.<sup>2</sup> They had three children: Frank, Harriet and Lloyd. Frank, born on November 4, 1901, was the oldest.<sup>3</sup>

Frank Lanterman became an accomplished organist and majored in music at the University of Southern California. He never received his degree in music. He had promised the university's glee club that he would accompany them on a concert tour. When his department scheduled his final organ recital during the glee club trip and refused to reschedule it, Lanterman left USC without his diploma.<sup>4</sup> For Lanterman, keeping his promise was more important than receiving his degree. This dedication to honesty, to doing what is right, became the hallmark of his life and career.

After college Lanterman played the organ as accompaniment to silent movies. His ambition was to score motion pictures when sound was added. Before he could follow his musical dreams, his family needed someone to take over the management of their landholdings.<sup>5</sup> Frank became a businessman, managing real estate and the family's land development business.<sup>6</sup>

However, Lanterman's legacy is not found in his musical or business career. Frank Lanterman became one of the strongest, most vocal and colorful of California's state legislators. In 1951, at age 49, Frank was a successful businessman who headed his family's small water company. Provoked by the actions of the Los Angeles Metropolitan Water Department, he decided that La Canada needed its own water district.<sup>7</sup> He ran for office and became the Republican assemblyman from the 47th District.<sup>8</sup> In 1951 he co-authored the Municipal Water District Act that created the Foothill Municipal Water District of La Canada, La Crescenta and Altadena.<sup>9</sup>



Frank D. Lanterman

Frank D. Lanterman, 47th District. Republican. Born in Los Angeles, November 4, 1901. Attended grammar and high schools of Los Angeles and Glendale; and the University of Southern California College of Music. Unmarried. Land developer. Has resided at 4420 Encinas Drive, La Canada, since 1914. Honorary member, La Canada Kiwanis; Member of Pi Kappa Lambda; La Canada and Pasadena Chambers of Commerce; Red Cross; La Canada Church of the Lighted Window (Congregational); Pasadena Tournament of Roses, Glendale Symphony, and Pasadena Symphony Associations. Life member, Musician's Local 47, A.F. of L. Elected member, Republican Central Committee of Los Angeles County 1938 to 1950. Member, Republican State Central Committee. First elected to Assembly in 1950 and has served continuously since that time. Served as Minority Vice Chairman of Committee on Ways and Means 1967-68; Chairman of Committee on Ways and Means 1969-70. Vice Chairman, Joint Legislative Budget Com. Vice Chairman, Assembly Com. on Ways and Means. Member, Assembly Coms. on Transportation; Water.

— Reprinted from *California Blue Book*, 1971, published by the State Legislature.

Once in Sacramento, Frank “found a lot of other things that needed fixing.”<sup>10</sup> Lanterman, fiscal conservative, became the ranking Republican on the budget-writing Ways and Means Committee.<sup>11</sup> The first witness to appear before the committee was the state director of mental hygiene. He begged the committee to give mental patients something to eat other than surplus foods such as beans.<sup>12</sup> He pleaded for some fruit or fruit juice “just to give them hope.”<sup>13</sup> Lanterman was outraged! Political scientist Eugene Bardach observed, “getting a glimpse of the nutrition problems of the mentally ill prompted Lanterman to take a second look at the broader problems of their existence. He was transformed from a conservative ideologue who wanted to stop spending, no matter what the consequences, to an ardent advocate for the mentally ill.”<sup>14</sup>

Lanterman said he “found out there were 12 to 14 laws depriving mental patients of their constitutional rights.”<sup>15</sup> He recalled that he “screamed bloody murder” when he realized that the state was treating mental patients “like criminals just because they were ill.”<sup>16</sup> It would take many years to make the changes to the mental health system that Lanterman wanted. To make those changes Lanterman became the chairman of the social welfare committee in 1954.<sup>17</sup> What he learned on the committee made him “fighting mad.” When he found out that mental patients could be confined for life after a five-minute hearing, he roared from the assembly floor, “How the hell long has this been going on?”<sup>18</sup> A year later he introduced legislation to change all that. He wanted not only to end the involuntary commitment of mental patients but also to transfer care from state hospitals to community-based centers.<sup>19</sup> Lanterman took the lead in changing laws that ended “warehousing” of mental patients and provided them with community-based treatment.<sup>20</sup> The groundbreaking legislation was authored by Lanterman, in the state assembly, and by Nicholas Petris and Alan Short, in the State Senate.<sup>21</sup> Bardach hailed the act “as the outstanding accomplishment of the California legislature in its 1967 session; and in its ambitiously reformist objectives, it has been hailed as a model for all other states to look to.”<sup>22</sup> Bardach called the act Lanterman’s principal claim to immortality.<sup>23</sup>

The Lanterman-Petris-Short act has seven articles: 1) to end involuntary commitment of people with mental illness, developmental disabilities and alcoholism; 2) to secure their rights through judicial review; 3) to protect them from criminal acts; 4) to provide evaluation and treatment; 5) to protect public safety; 6) to provide supervision and treatment placement by a conservatorship program; and 7) to encourage the full use of services.<sup>24</sup> The Lanterman-Petris-Short Act has remained substantially the same as when it was enacted over 40 years ago. Other states modeled their mental health programs on Lanterman’s groundbreaking law.<sup>25</sup>

Yet Lanterman’s greatest contribution to society, and to history, was yet to come. When Lanterman went to Sacramento, people with developmental disabilities had no legal rights. They were seen as “feble-minded” and were housed as “inmates” in state mental hospitals.<sup>26</sup> Lanterman proposed that developmentally disabled persons be provided services in their home communities, where they could remain close to family and friends. In 1969 Lanterman put the Lanterman Mental Retardation Services Act into law. The act gave people with developmental disabilities rights to state-funded treatment/care services. In 1972 the act was expanded to include persons with cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism and other neurological disabilities.<sup>27</sup>

In 1976 what became known as the Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Services Act was passed, which consisted of 10 separate bills.<sup>28</sup> The act gives persons with developmental disabilities the same legal rights that all people share under the law.<sup>29</sup> It establishes an entitlement to services/support for those with developmental disabilities (or those at risk of developing developmental disabilities) and created local Regional Centers to coordinate those services.<sup>30</sup> The act stated that the state accepts responsibility for persons with developmental disabilities and will assist them throughout their lives.<sup>31</sup> These laws, collectively known as the Lanterman Act, put California at the forefront of the nation in providing services to persons with developmental disabilities.<sup>32</sup>

The act was amended to establish the right to both treatment and rehabilitation services.<sup>33</sup> Lanterman fought for people with developmental disabilities to live in the least

restrictive environments that their disabilities would allow. In 1973 he authored the California Community Care Facilities Act which established a system for licensing residential homes for persons requiring care out of their own homes. The law protects vulnerable individuals from neglect, abuse and exploitation. Unfortunately some communities tried to enact restrictive zoning ordinances to stop small family homes from serving individuals with developmental disabilities. In 1970, in response to these obstacles, Lanterman authored legislation that declared that mentally and physically disabled persons were entitled to live in normal residential settings and not be excluded on the basis of their disabilities. This law preempted local zoning, and land-use ordinances, and protected the rights of six or fewer disabled persons to live in residential properties, which are funded by the state.<sup>34</sup>

Lanterman authored legislation to implement California's master plan for special education in 1976. Prior to the enactment of that law, children with disabilities could be denied access to public education. Lanterman's legislation required local education agencies to create and implement plans in which all children with special needs, including developmental disabilities, would be able to receive a publicly funded education based on an individual education plan. Lanterman's groundbreaking special education legislation predated federal laws entitling public education for individuals with disabilities.<sup>35</sup>

Lanterman said he really never wanted to be a politician, yet he was one of the most effective legislators in California's history. This one-time musician served 14 consecutive terms in the state assembly from 1950 until his retirement in 1978.<sup>36</sup> He became known as the "work-horse of the state assembly."<sup>37</sup> In addition to his bills for mental health reform and the establishment of special education, Lanterman sponsored 400 other bills which became law, including acts to preserve the power of local government, improve transportation, and reduce noise, air and water pollution. At the age of 77 he retired from public office. He suffered from diabetes, arthritis and heart disease for two years before dying of a heart attack on April 29, 1981.<sup>38</sup>

Upon his death many newspaper articles marked his accomplishments and praised his character. He was described as an unlikely hero with his pudgy face, bald head, a scowl like Winston Churchill and an abrupt manner. Al Martinez, of the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote that Lanterman "seemed more quarrelsome than eloquent, more petty than perceptive, wrapping up 28 years in the assembly with bitter potshots at the governor, the governor's father and a half-dozen others who have darted like enemy cruisers in the path of the old battleship."<sup>39</sup>

Frank Lanterman may have been gruff and blunt but was honest and true to the people who really needed him. He was totally dedicated to his constituents and hated hypocrisy.<sup>40</sup> John Knox, speaker pro tem of the assembly, said, "He was real. He means every damn word he says!"<sup>41</sup> Lanterman stood up for

what was right, regardless of people's opinions or what was politically correct. "I never wanted to be a politician," he said, "and there are plenty to say I never was one. They call me other names, you know. But when you see something going wrong, you've sometimes got to step in and say to hell with it and turn things around!"<sup>42</sup> Lanterman was well loved by both parties in Sacramento and became known affectionately as "Uncle Frank."<sup>43</sup> Lanterman never married. "Couldn't find the right woman at first," he said, "and then I finally decided a man can't love the legislature and a wife at the same time. I was married to the government of California and I've never been sorry."<sup>44</sup>

Lanterman left a wonderful legacy, not only for the mentally ill and developmentally disabled of California, but for those in need throughout the country who cannot advocate for themselves. Lanterman would become known as the "father of mental health" and the "father of special education," but he was more than that. As Al Martinez noted, Lanterman's place in history is assured. Lanterman and his legislation served as a model for humanitarianism throughout the nation.<sup>45</sup> Martinez stated that Lanterman did more for the mentally ill and developmentally disabled in three decades in the legislature than any other individual in California history.<sup>46</sup> The Lanterman Act became recognized nationwide and was the model for reform in many states, as well as the federal American Disabilities Act. Lanterman saw to it that his legacy would continue by setting up permanent subcommittees to deal with physical and emotional handicaps, autism and retardation. "Never again," he told anyone willing to listen, "will these unfortunate people be ignored by the government."<sup>47</sup> This is Lanterman's legacy, that people like me have a voice in government, we have rights and protections and funding to allow us to live with our families in our communities and to be treated like other citizens.

If Frank Lanterman had never lived, my life would be very different today. I would not have been screened for autism at Regional Center at the age of two. Without that screening I would not have received the funding for early intervention services which were so vital to my development. Without the funding my parents would not have been able to pay for the treatments that changed my life. My behaviors would have led to me being placed in a state institution away from my family. I would have been a closed, scared child without hope. I would have lived the rest of my life unable to communicate my needs, my ideas or my love. I would never have written this essay.

Frank Lanterman's work in the state assembly not only changed the outcome of my life but that of millions of others with special needs. Due to his profound legislation, people with disabilities can live and work in their families' homes or in residential housing in local neighborhoods. They can receive a free public education and services to treat their conditions. They can look forward to fulfilled lives and a future filled with hope, not despair.

Lanterman's contribution to history was to single-handedly stand up for those who were helpless and could not advocate for themselves. Lanterman's legislation ensured that people with mental illness and developmental disabilities would share in civil rights like other Americans. As an individual, his honesty, integrity and compassion led him to create legislation that would alter the lives of many people who came after him. Frank Lanterman was not the leader of a group, or did he inspire others to do similar work. Instead his

personal perseverance brought about the legislative changes that would change my life and the lives of millions like me. His dedication to the rights of people who had no voice marked him as an extraordinary individual. Frank Lanterman's life and career are a model for what one person can do; of the legacy they can give humanity, if they have a vision, persevere and fight for what they believe is right.

Thank you, Frank Lanterman, for changing my life for the better.

## NOTES

1. Don Mazen, "Story of LCF [La Canada Flintridge] Cityhood," *Outlook*, 6 December 2001, reprinted with permission at <http://www.lacanadaflintridge.com/comm/history.htm#6>; Internet: accessed 11 November 2008.

2. Harry W. Smith, "Lanterman Remembered," *Newspaper Article*, title unknown, 30 April 1981, Lanterman House Archives; accessed 16 December 2008.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. "Frank Lanterman Dies: Legislator for 14 Terms," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 April 1981, sec. I, p. 3.

6. Mazen, "Story of LCF Cityhood."

7. "Frank Lanterman," *The Sacramento Union*, 29 April 1981, sec. A, p. 10.

8. "Frank Lanterman Dies," 16.

9. Ibid.

10. "Frank Lanterman," 10.

11. Ibid.

12. Eugene Bardach, *The Skill Factor in Politics: Repealing the Mental Commitment Laws in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 90.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. "Frank Lanterman," 10.

16. Ibid.

17. Gabrielle Morris, "Commitment to Mental Health Services," *Frank D. Lanterman: Crusades of a Republican Legislative Leader, 1951-1978 / Water, Mental Health, Education, Ways and Means: An Interview* (Berkeley: Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Governmental History Documental Project, 1977), 4.

18. "Frank Lanterman Dies," 16.

19. Eugene Bardach, *The Implemental Game: What Happens after a Bill Becomes Law* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1977), 10.

20. "Frank Lanterman," 10.

21. Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, "Lanterman-Petris-Short Act," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanterman-Petris-Short\\_Act](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanterman-Petris-Short_Act); Internet: accessed 11 November 2008.

22. Bardach, *The Implementation Game*, 9.

23. Ibid., 10.

24. Wikipedia, "Lanterman-Petris-Short Act."

25. Dennis Amundson, A Letter to Cherilyn Widell, State Historic Preservation Officer, Office of Historic Preservation (Archives

Lanterman House, La Canada, California, 14 October 1994), accessed 16 December 2008, p. 2.

26. State of California Department of Developmental Services, "History of Lanterman Developmental Center," <http://www.dds.ca.gov/Lanterman/History.cfm>; Internet: accessed 11 November 2008.

27. Amundson, A Letter, 3.

28. Ibid.

29. Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, "Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Act," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanterman-Developmental-Disabilities\\_Act](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanterman-Developmental-Disabilities_Act); Internet: accessed 11 November 2008.

30. Golden Gate Regional Center, "What is the Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Services Act?" [http://www.ggrd.org/rr\\_lanterman\\_act.htm](http://www.ggrd.org/rr_lanterman_act.htm); Internet: accessed 11 November 2008.

31. Ibid.

32. Amundson, A Letter, 3-4.

33. Wikipedia, "Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Act."

34. Amundson, A Letter, 3-4.

35. Ibid.

36. "Frank Lanterman Dies," 16.

37. Smith, "Lanterman Remembered."

38. "Frank Lanterman Dies," 16.

39. Al Martinez, "State Assembly's Uncle Frank Retires: The People Lose a Voice," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 November 1978, Metro sec. p. 1.

40. Charles Chermiss, "Thanks to Frank," *Pasadena Star News*, April 1981, sec. A, p. 10.

41. "Frank Lanterman Dies," 16.

42. Ibid.

43. Chermiss, "Thanks to Frank."

44. "Frank Lanterman Dies," 16.

45. Martinez, "Uncle Frank Retires," 1.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Amundson, Dennis G., Director of the Department of Developmental Services, State of California – Health and Welfare Agency. A Letter to Cherilyn Widell, State Historic Preservation Officer, Office of Historic Preservation, 24 October 1994. La Canada, California: Archives Lanterman House, accessed 16 December 2008.

In response to Lanterman House being added to the National Register of Historic Sites, Amundson, Director of the Department

of Developmental Services, wrote to the State Historic Preservation Office to detail the importance of Lanterman's contribution to the rights of those with developmental disabilities. The five-page letter gives a concise, detailed description of the history of the Lanterman Act and master plan for special education, a valuable primary source!

Morris, Gabrielle, "Commitment to Mental Health Services." *Frank D. Lanterman: Crusades of a Republican Legislative Leader, 1951-1978 / Water, Mental Health, Education, Ways and Means: An Interview*. Berkeley: Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Governmental History Documentation Project, 1977, 10-18.

The introduction of the interview was a good source for information dealing with Lanterman legislation accomplishments from 1954 to 1967. The interviews themselves really shed light on Lanterman's feelings toward the people he represented, the need to do right, and his disappointments in his career.

### Secondary Sources

Bardach, Eugene. "How the Specialist System Taught Wisdom." *The Implemental Game: What Happens after a Bill Becomes Law*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1977, 89-99.

Social scientist Bardach's opening chapter of his 1977 book eloquently praises Lanterman and his contribution to social history and explains the context for Lanterman's achievements.

Bardach, Eugene. "Implementing Mental Health Reform in California." *The Skill Factor in Politics: Repealing the Mental Commitment Laws in California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972, 9-13.

Bardach poetically describes Lanterman as a Don Quixote battling the mental health care system. A good source on Lanterman's achievements as well as his personality. Good source for Lanterman describing in his own words his fights in Sacramento.

Chermiss, Charles. "Thanks to Frank." *Pasadena Star News*. April 1981.

An appreciation of Lanterman by *Pasadena Star News* editor Charles Chermiss who knew Lanterman personally. Chermiss described Lanterman's blunt and gruff exterior and praised his honesty, charm, determination and hatred of hypocrisy. Very useful in relating the personality of Lanterman and how he was admired by others.

"Frank Lanterman." *The Sacramento Union*. 29 April 1981, Section A, 10.

This obituary on Frank Lanterman provided details on why he went into politics (to fix a water distribution problem) and how he ended up championing the cause of the mentally handicapped and stopped the "warehousing" of mental patients.

"Frank Lanterman Dies: Legislator for 14 Terms," *Los Angeles Times*. 28 April 1981, Part I, 3, 16.

This informative obituary gave good information on Lanterman's life, personality and contributions. Good source on Lanterman's life before politics and his accomplishments in politics.

Golden Gate Regional Center. "What is the Lanterman Development Disabilities Services Act?" [http://www.ggrd.org/rr\\_lanterman\\_act.htm](http://www.ggrd.org/rr_lanterman_act.htm). Internet: accessed 11 November 2008.

Brief article from Northern California Regional Center website explaining the Lanterman Act in summary and how Regional Centers work with their mandate from the state.

Martinez, Al. "State Assembly's Uncle Frank Retires: The People Lose a Voice." *Los Angeles Times*. 12 November 1978. Metro Section, 1, 3.

This feature article, an appreciation of Lanterman's personality, life and accomplishments, added insight into Lanterman's career and how in his last year in office he did not leave on a good note. The article helped me understand in more depth Frank's feelings on mental health.

Mazen, Don. "Story of LCF [La Canada Flintridge] Cityhood." *Outlook*, 6 December 2001; reprinted with permission at <http://www.lacanadaflintridge.com/comm/history.htm#6>. Internet: accessed 11 November 2008.

Article on the history of the city of La Canada Flintridge describes how the Lanterman family came to La Canada and their contributions to its establishment, protection and growth.

Smith, Harry W. "Lanterman Remembered." *Newspaper Article, title unknown*. 30 April 1981. La Canada, California: Lanterman House Archives, accessed 16 December 2008.

Obituary from an unidentified newspaper article found in the Archives of Lanterman House explains Lanterman's life and accomplishments. The description of Lanterman's career helped to shape my paper.

State of California Department of Developmental Services. "History of Lanterman Developmental Center." <http://www.dds.ca.gov/Lanterman/History.cfm>. Internet: accessed 11 November 2008.

This article from the State of California DDS website explains the history of the Lanterman Developmental Center in Pomona and all the benefits the center has to offer. The article helped me understand the history of how people with developmental disabilities have been treated by the government during the last century; frankly, the information was quite shocking to me! It reveals how far the rights of people with developmental disabilities have come.

Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia. "Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Act." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanterman-Developmental-Disabilities\\_Act](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanterman-Developmental-Disabilities_Act). Internet: accessed 11 November 2008.

Very short Wikipedia article describing the Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Act with exact details on the history of the act from bill introduction to passage and amendments.

Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia. "Lanterman-Petris-Short Act." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanterman-Petris-Short\\_Act](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanterman-Petris-Short_Act). Internet: accessed 11 November 2008.

Short Wikipedia article outlines the basics of the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act and details the seven articles the act provided. It helps the reader to understand the act in depth and its different components.