

## *Making Space*

### **Celebrating New Jersey's Disability Pride Month Trailblazers**

**By**

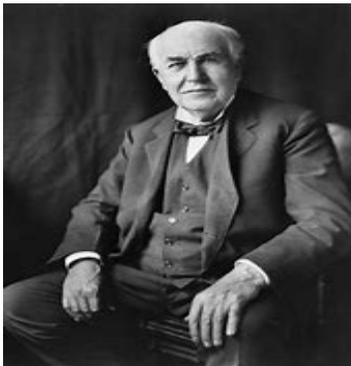
**Wafa Qureshi, Diversity Unit Intern**

New Jersey holds a thriving, vibrant community of people with disabilities who have made significant contributions across a wide range of fields. From science and technology to the arts and activism, their talents, dedication, and unique perspectives enrich the lives of everyone around them. Unfortunately, individuals with disabilities are often portrayed in a stereotypical light, with their talents and accomplishments overlooked. In reality, the disabled community is filled with innovation, creativity, and resilience. For Disability Pride month, it is important to celebrate these individuals and raise awareness of the role they play in shaping society. Some New Jersey natives to celebrate this month include:



**Eric LeGrand.** A former football defensive tackle at Rutgers University, Eric LeGrand's life dramatically changed after suffering a spinal cord injury during a game, leaving him paralyzed from the neck down. Since the accident, LeGrand has emerged as a powerful motivational speaker, author, and advocate for spinal cord injury awareness. In 2012, LeGrand was awarded the Unsung Hero Award by the New Jersey Hall of Fame and won the Jimmy V Award for Perseverance at the ESPYs. In 2013, LeGrand founded Team LeGrand, a foundation to raise funds for research for innovative

rehabilitation methods for paralyzed individuals. In 2020, he started building a coffee shop in his hometown called LeGrand Coffee House. The business opened in 2022.



**Thomas Edison.** Although Thomas Edison was born in Milan, Ohio, he spent much of his life and conducted his most famous works in New Jersey. Edison was an inventor and businessman who held over 1,000 patents, including the electric light bulb, the phonograph, and early motion picture cameras. Edison has developed hearing problems at the age of 12, leaving him completely deaf in one ear and barely hearing in the other. His deafness strongly influenced his behavior and career, providing the motivation for many of his inventions, claiming that his deafness helped him think clearer.



**Frank Sinatra.** Born in Hoboken, New Jersey in 1915, Frank Sinatra overcame a perforated eardrum since birth, which led to significant hearing loss. Despite this, he rose to become one of the most iconic singers and entertainers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sinatra's magnetic voice and cultural influence continue to resonate with audiences worldwide, shaping popular culture, men's style, and music for decades.



**Ever Lee Hairston.** Ever Lee Hairston was born and raised on a plantation in North Carolina, but moved to New Jersey to escape the segregated South. While working as a high school teacher, Hairston was diagnosed with a genetic eye disease, leaving her completely blind and unable to work. Her experiences pushed her to become involved for the National Federation for the Blind, in which she founded the Garden State Chapter in 1991 and established a mentoring program for blind and visually impaired teenagers. She currently serves on the board of directors of the Louisiana Center for the Blind.



**Christopher Reeve.** Born in New York, but raised in Princeton, New Jersey, Christopher Reeve was an actor, film director, and author best known for playing Superman. Reeves became paralyzed from the neck down after suffering a spinal cord injury from being thrown off a horse. Reeves still continued to direct films and became heavily involved with disability activism, advocating for changes in disability legislation and co-founding the Reeve-Irvine Research Center, which is now one of the leading spinal cord research centers in the world. In 1999, Reeve also founded the Christopher Reeve Foundation, which aims to fund research and use grants to improve the quality of life for disabled individuals, providing more than \$70 million to the cause.