

David W. Oaks, American activist
May 2023 two-page bio

David W. Oaks has been a psychiatric survivor community organizer and human rights activist since 1976.

All of his grandparents were immigrants from Lithuania who settled in Illinois. Both his grandfathers were coal miners for a total of 31 years. David was born in 1955 and raised working-class in Chicago's South Side. He attended Harvard on scholarships, including from his father's union.

While he was in college, David was placed in psychiatric institutions five times, where he experienced forced psychiatric drugging and solitary confinement. Harvard's student volunteer agency Phillips Brooks House placed David as an intern with one of the early psychiatric survivor organizations, Mental Patients Liberation Front.



David found mental and emotional recovery through family, peer support, advocacy, nutrition, exercise, counseling, wilderness, protest, employment, avoiding drugs, and more. In 1977, he graduated from Harvard with honors and chose to be off all psychiatric drugs. With support from other MPLF leaders, including author Judi Chamberlin, he started one of the first user-owned-and-run psychiatric survivor community drop-in centers.

David moved to Oregon in 1983 and helped start the nonprofit that became MindFreedom International, one of the main independent human rights coalitions in the mental health field. He served as MFI's Executive Director for 25 years and spoke in a dozen countries. In 2009, *Utne* magazine named David Oaks one of 50 Visionaries Who Are Changing Your World. Ever since arriving in Oregon, David has been active in Oregon Country Fair's Community Village, and is now an OCF Elder.

In December 2012, David experienced a severe accident; he fell from a ladder, broke his neck, and became a quadriplegic with a disabled voice using a powerchair. Applying decades of lived experience with disability community organizing, David continued to be active for social change. He launched a green disability consulting business, Ačiū! Institute (pronounced like a sneeze, *ah-choo*, ačiū means *thanks* in Lithuanian).

One important source of support since his fall is that David has become very involved locally and nationally with his Unitarian Universalist (UU) Church. He serves as the Co-Chair of the UU Church in Eugene Community Accessibility Task Force. He benefits from the UU's national EqUUal Access organization to enable the full engagement of people with disabilities in UU communities and the broader society.

David started and coordinates a Facebook group of 300 for Mental Health Justice UU. David launched and owns a LinkedIn group, Mind Justice.

David has won several awards, and these continue after his profound disabilities. In 2021, David won a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Coalition for Mental Health Recovery. He also won the Oregon Advocacy Award issued by the Mental Health Association of Portland. More can be found in his Wikipedia article.

David now lives with his wife Debra Nuñez in Eugene, where he is an activist for a nonviolent revolution not only in mental health, but in addressing the climate crisis.

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