Pat Figueroa was a peer who had no peers. He was one of the nation’s most inspiring, innovative leaders of the disability rights and Independent Living movements for more than four decades.

Born with spina bifida, Pat had a passion for art and was accepted to New York City’s High School of Art and Design, where he was the only student with a disability. He was eager to study architecture at Pratt Institute, but had to withdraw because of inaccessibility issues. He enrolled at the Parsons School of Design and began his role as a disability rights advocate with Disabled in Action (DIA). He participated in rallies and sit-ins, and in one memorable protest, hurtled himself into the path of a city bus at rush hour.

As a DIA leader, Pat was at the forefront of advocating for equal access in education, housing, transportation and civil rights. While enrolled at Brooklyn College, he co-founded a student organization that advocated for accessibility at Brooklyn and later at other city universities. Pat earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Brooklyn College and a master’s in urban planning from New York University.

In 1978, Pat secured funding from the National Paraplegia Foundation to start the Center for Independence of the Disabled in New York (CIDNY), the first Independent Living Center in New York state. As its first executive director, Pat managed the prototype for what would become a network of ILCs throughout the state and mentored those fledgling centers and their directors.

Pat continued his advocacy work, fighting for ILC funding and accessible mass transit. In 1980, he and the staffs of CIDNY and the Bronx ILC took over Metropolitan Transportation Authority headquarters, trapping Chairman Richard Ravich for more than 10 hours and getting lots of media attention.

In 1983, Pat co-founded the 504 Democratic Club, a New York City-based coalition of Democrats working toward inclusion of people with disabilities in the political and social fabric of society.

The following year, he left the city and moved with his family to the Capital District, where his wife, Denise, directed the Independent Living Center of the Hudson Valley. He spent 19 years as a New York State employee, first as the statewide Client Assistance Coordinator for the Commission on Quality of Care for People With Disabilities, then as contract administrator for the Office for the Aging.

Pat was one of the first to embrace the internet. He developed a website for ILCHV and also developed and managed ILUSA.org, a site by people with disabilities for people with disabilities and others interested in Independent Living. Pat and his wife co-founded the newspaper Independence Today.

After Pat’s death in 2012 at age 63, the New York State Independent Living Council created the Patricio “Pat” Figueroa Scholarship Program, which enables young adults with disabilities to attend leadership training programs. That same year, ILCHV dedicated its advocacy, arts, education and communication programs to his memory under the name Pat’s Place.

Pat was an advocate and activist, a born leader and organizer, a mentor and advisor, a master of communication and more. His passion was contagious, and because of his achievements, the world is a better place.