

## [The ARC Highlights](#)

# Elizabeth Monroe Boggs

Biography courtesy [Nora Groce](#) and World Institute on Disability

Elizabeth Monroe Boggs was born in Cleveland in 1915, and moved with her family to Rye, New York as a young child. She received her bachelor's degree from Fremont College in 1935, winning a scholarship that enabled her to study in Europe. She went to Cambridge University in 1935 intending to stay briefly, but remained until 1939, completing her doctorate in theoretical chemistry and mathematics just as war was breaking out in Europe. Despite anxious pleas from her parents to return home, Boggs, who was engaged in war related research would have stayed, save for the fact that England, flooded with refugees and fearing spies, barred foreigners from all work on war related projects. Boggs returned to the United States in December of 1939 and reported to the research project at Cornell where she had been scheduled to begin the previous September. Her laboratory space had been given to a graduate student in her absence, and she soon found herself sharing lab space with Fitzhugh Boggs, her future husband.

They were married in 1941, and the following year, moved to Cleveland to continue work on war related research. So top secret was some of their work, that Elizabeth found at times she could not mention the arrival of European colleagues to Fritz, for fear that he might guess what type of research was going on. (Elizabeth's division was helping to design the implosion device for the Atomic bomb).

David, the Boggs' only child, was born in 1945, several weeks after the close of the War. Healthy at birth, her baby ran an extremely high fever in the neonatal period and by ten days of age had suffered profound brain damage. Ironically, if he had been born only a few weeks earlier, it is probable that he would not have survived. The close of the war, however, allowed newly developed antibiotics, previously reserved for military use, to be distributed to the civilian population. The Boggs' son was among the first to receive the new drugs, although not in time to prevent his permanent disability.

The extent of David's injuries however, were not clear for some time, and they initially assumed that he would not have problems. A short time after the birth of their son, the Boggs moved to New Jersey where Fritz was scheduled to begin a job. Elizabeth planned to take a short break from work as she cared for their new baby and coped with the immediate post-War housing shortage. Months turned into years however, as

it became increasingly apparent that David was not developing normally. Moreover, the answers the Boggs sought from physicians and educators seemed more and more unsatisfactory. In the late 1940's virtually no programs existed for the care or education of retarded children, particularly those who had more severe forms of mental retardation, and parents, often fearing that they would be cut off from those few programs and professionals available, were reluctant to openly advocate on their children's behalf.

Boggs, a well trained scientist, was keenly aware that the answers she was getting were unsatisfactory and unfounded. She became increasingly active and aware. To better fit herself for the task, she returned to school while her son was still a toddler to take classes in special education and social work administration. She began to help organize classes for her son and others in her own home and in locally available church basements and boy scout halls. She and her group were trying to provide education to over fifty retarded children, their ultimate goal being to get them registered at public schools.

Her involvement locally led quickly to her involvement nationally, and a growing interest and full time volunteer involvement in issues of legislation and public policy. She was one of the founders of the National Association of Retarded Children in 1950, and in 1958 became its first woman president. She served on its Governmental Affairs Committee from 1965 to 1979.

She was a member of President Kennedy's Panel on Mental Retardation in 1961-62, of the National Child Health and Human Development Council (NIH) from 1967 to 1971, and of the President's Committee on Mental Retardation from 1975 to 1976.

Boggs was a leading national and international figure within the world of mental retardation advocacy and research and a key liaison with others in the disability rights and independent living movements. She regularly attended meetings, spoke at public forums and before Congress. Boggs was also instrumental in moving legislation forward for mentally retarded children and adults both in the United States and within the United Nation systems. Her early interest in education grew to include issues of independent living and group homes, the status and rights of adult mentally retarded men and women and to issues of guardianship for older mentally retarded individuals whose immediate family is no longer alive.

In 1988, Boggs became the Acting Director of the Office of Prevention of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities for the state of New Jersey. Her job was to coordinate public education campaigns and to promote expanded services and research. She took the temporary job

only because she had fought for the position to be created and feared that it would be abolished before a suitable candidate could be found. Although the job lasted only briefly, it was notable for the fact that it was the first paid position Boggs had ever held in the disability field.

Widowed in 1971, Boggs continues to live in New Jersey and remains active in both national and international arenas. Her son David resides in a facility nearby.