“OW,” WHISPERED first-year law student Kevin Fritz to himself, as he mingled with top administration officials at the White House. His excitement would be reasonable under any circumstances. However, for Fritz, who has spent his life in a wheelchair, the experience affirmed both years of hard work against sometimes nearly insurmountable odds and his hopes for the future—to make a difference for people with disabilities.

Fritz had been invited last fall to the American Association of People with Disabilities’ Disability Mentoring Day. He spent the morning with Bob Williams, senior adviser in the Social Security Administration and an author of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In the afternoon, he met with Commissioner Chai Feldblum of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), also an ADA author.

“I’m only where I am today because of the ADA,” Fritz notes. “If it weren’t for the ADA, I would never have been educated let alone be in law school.” Nor would he have had the opportunity to work as a summer intern for then-Senator Barack Obama, or to pursue other enriching professional experiences. So to spend a day with ADA drafters was, he says, “amazing.”

The White House reception capped the day of inspirational events. Kareem Dale, Obama’s special assistant for disability policy, and John Berry, director of the Office of Personnel Management, spoke about the president’s commitment to add 100,000 new federal jobs for those with disabilities and urged the participants to consider public service work.

For Fritz, the day was profoundly encouraging. “It’s remarkable to be living in this time,” he says, “when there are opportunities to make things better.”

“Making things better” is at the heart of Fritz’s unflagging efforts, while at every moment he is, himself, faced with many difficult challenges. Born with spinal muscular atrophy, he has crippling muscular weakness. Simple tasks take hours to perform. Still, he graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign summa cum laude and then began law school last fall at Washington University.

He readily admits his first semester of law school was exhausting. Just the ordinary morning routine takes him three hours, often depriving him of sleep. Eating is also time-consuming, reducing his study time. “But I’m still here, pushing,” he says with determination. “I’ve learned that you just can’t give up—because at the end of the day, the only person who can push you is yourself.”

Fritz says that lesson was reinforced during his 2008 summer in Washington, D.C., working for then-Senator Obama as a health policy intern. It was grueling, involving long hours getting ready for work and a difficult daily commute. Once at his internship, however, he immersed himself in preparing memos and conducting policy research. Fritz also had the opportunity to represent Obama at hearings and roundtable discussions—by far Fritz’s favorite assignments. He even spoke with Obama on several occasions and was deeply touched when the senator told him he recognized the effort Fritz was investing just to be on the job every day.

“It was the hardest summer of my life,” Fritz recalls, “but it was all worth it.”

He’ll return to Washington this summer as an EEOC disability policy and employment intern, a coveted position. “Washington is the mecca for change,” he notes. Though his interests range across employment, health, family, and IP law, he also aspires to political office. “I think I was put on Earth for a reason,” he says simply, “to be an advocate on a national level for people with immense hardships.”