Published on *University of Colorado* (https://www.cu.edu)

History & Founders [1]

History & Founders

Founders' vision:

> *"Think of a world in which everything can adapt to your abilities and disabilities in the context of where you are, what you need, and what you are doing or planning to do. For those with cognitive disabilities, this world holds the promise of being able to live mostly independent lives, to work and become productive, contributing members of society." -- Bill Coleman*

The Coleman Institute: Past, Present and Future

In 1984, Bill and Claudia Coleman gave an Apple computer to their niece Suzanne. Suzanne had been born with Trisomy 13, which meant that she lived with a host of developmental and neurological complications. As Suzanne started using the computer to play spelling and reading games, make birthday cards, and create graphics, the Colemans witnessed firsthand how technology transformed her interactions with the world.

The Colemans began to contemplate how technology could help other individuals living with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Thus, the seed of the Coleman Institute was planted.

In 1999, Bill Coleman visited the University of Colorado's Boulder campus. There, he met with graduate students and gave a lecture in Professor Clayton Lewis' freshman computer science class. Soon after, the Colemans began talking with university partners about their vision of using technology to radically transform the lives of individuals with intellectual and cognitive disabilities.

As a futurist two decades ahead of his time, Bill Coleman understood how technologies such as cloud computing, IoT, AI, and machine learning were positioned to transform the world.

The Colemans also understood that no one is exempt from cognitive disabilities, as conditions can be acquired through brain injury, circumstance, and aging.

For them, technology meant that hundreds of millions of people around the world could go to work, live comfortably in their homes, enjoy a book or some music, learn about the world, and connect with other people. As modern life was becoming increasingly digital, they felt it was crucial to maximize the ways in which developing technology could aid people with cognitive disabilities while ensuring that developing technologies did not become a new barrier, cutting people off from the world due to unequal access.

As renowned Civil Rights attorney Thomas Gilhool said at the 10th Annual Coleman Institute Conference:

> *"The access to technology and information is becoming the equivalent of access to education for our generation and for future generations, rivaling the importance of educational access for persons in our society."*

Two decades after its founding, the Coleman Institute for Cognitive Disabilities is a national and international leader in catalyzing and integrating research in its field. It has had a profound impact in raising awareness of cognitive accessibility, and it has created common ground for individuals from all sectors to engage in interdisciplinary strategic initiatives, rallying them to impact policy, invent new technology, and adopt a more inclusive and considered approach to designing products.

In its third decade, the Coleman Institute will be led by one of its original grantees, Cathy Bodine, PhD, who helped craft the Founders' vision. With Dr. Bodine at its helm, the Institute will deepen its focus on technology and its applications.

By leveraging its position at the intersection of all four CU campuses, the Institute will marshal resources from the University of Colorado Denver, Anschutz, Boulder, and Colorado Springs to integrate treatment along the continuum of cognitive disabilities.

Researchers from each campus are working on clinical translation of new technologies such as smart living, AI and machine learning, telehealth, and autonomous transportation. The Institute will seek opportunities to apply their expertise and new technologies towards serving individuals and families living with cognitive disabilities in order to create more equitable and inclusive ecosystems in which they can live, work, and thrive.

In Memoriam

A Personal Remembrance of Bill Coleman

By Enid Ablowitz, former Associate Director, Coleman Institute for Cognitive Disabilities

Meeting Bill Coleman changed my life.

Bill had been invited in fall 1999 to the University of Colorado Boulder by the College of Engineering & Applied Science (CEAS) to give a lecture in a computer science undergraduate class. As assistant dean for advancement at CU Boulder, I was part of the hosting group and

had the privilege of hearing him speak. Bill was founder and CEO of BEA Systems, which was one of the fastest companies to reach a billion dollars in annual revenue. Surprisingly, he didn't focus his talk on computer science. He spoke to the students about life lessons he had learned, about failure and success, and how he wanted to become a philanthropist in the tradition of David Packard, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard.

At dinner that evening, we talked a bit about Mr. Packard's generosity to CU. I asked Bill what he hoped his philanthropy would accomplish. He replied, "Lots of people ask me for money but no one has ever asked me that." But he knew precisely what he wanted to do: improve the lives of people with cognitive disabilities through technology.

Bill told me about his and Claudia's niece, Suzanne, who was born with cognitive and motor-function disabilities, and her early experience using a computer. He also shared his passion to create a better future through what he called "technology as a prosthesis for life." He described a world I could never have imagined. He was a true visionary, projecting decades ahead and then taking the necessary steps to make the future happen.

The first philanthropic investment Bill and Claudia made to CU was for graduate student support related to a project Bill saw during a tour of the CU Boulder computer science department. The proposal itself had a rather inelegant name, including words like "intelligence augmentation." It was an attempt to look at "innovative socio-technical environments to empower people with new cognitive artifacts." Years later, we would reflect that we had put the cart before the horse because we were describing a new way of thinking about cognitive disabilities without really understanding the culture of families and individuals living with disability. But Bill always knew that integrating the perspectives of many siloed groups would be critical to the success of his vision.

From the very beginning, the Coleman Institute's success was built on Bill's direct involvement in challenging the faculty, the administration, and the partners across the U.S. and beyond to understand the purpose and the power of his vision. Bill, Claudia, and CU began a remarkable academic and philanthropic journey together, creating an extraordinary partnership involving all four campuses of the CU system. Bill and Claudia made a commitment that, in 2000, was the largest gift ever to a public university. The 12 months from meeting Bill to a meeting of the minds was an unforgettable explosion of ideation, negotiation, bonding, excitement, and shared passion. This was a seismic shift that would test creativity and stamina. Bill led the way.

Michael Lightner, associate dean for academic affairs in CEAS at the time, and I would move from the college to become the founding leadership team at the Coleman Institute. Eight months later, David Braddock, an expert in cognitive disabilities, would become the executive director. As my role in the institute expanded, Bill's influence on me grew as well. His questions were insightful, his perspective enlightening. There was something about his manner that could gently raise expectations and, therefore, performance. His energy and his pace motivated excellence. His leadership was palpable.

My relationship with Bill and Claudia was, and is, unique. We shared a bond built on deeply personal conversations that involve gift and estate planning and profound discussions about turning success into significance. The 15 years I spent as part of the Coleman Institute family gave my life new purpose. Becoming the institute's Associate Director was one of the proudest moments of my life. When I retired after 15 years, our personal relationship

continued. It was built on so much more than my job.

From the early visit to Washington, D.C., to put the Coleman Institute on the national radar, to the annual conferences where Bill would give us all a glimpse of the future of technology with introductions to “the cloud” and “the internet of things,” he educated, inspired, and challenged me to think differently and to stretch my perceived limits. Yes, Bill changed my life. He was a force of nature, a renaissance man, a thought leader, a mentor, and a friend. He loved life and lived it with gusto. An optimist, he always exuded confidence and met challenges with determination. He had that rare quality of true generosity not only of his time, talent, and treasure but also of spirit.

I speak for all those who were privileged to be able to work with Bill, to know Bill, and especially those whose lives were changed by Bill, a man of integrity and heart.

Bill, you’ve made a difference. You’ve left a legacy that can’t be measured. You will live on in the impact you’ve had and will have for people with cognitive disabilities and, in truth, for all of us.

As you so eloquently said: “I passionately believe that we as a society have the intelligence and the responsibility to develop technologies that will expand the ability of those with cognitive disabilities to learn, to understand, and to communicate.”

Claudia added: “I speak for both of us when I say that we want to leave a legacy of hope. That is our passion. For us, that is the true meaning of philanthropy.”

Groups audience:
Coleman Institute for Cognitive Disabilities

Source URL:https://www.cu.edu/coleman/about-us/history-founders

Links
[1] https://www.cu.edu/coleman/about-us/history-founders