

Huemann Advocacy – The Story of Judith Huemann

By Trish Weaver

Judith “Judy” Heumann is an American and international disability rights activist, who has significantly contributed to the development of legislation and policies benefitting children and adults with disabilities.

Judy contracted polio at the age of 18 months and, as a result, has used a wheelchair most of her life. When Judy reached school age, her local school in Brooklyn, New York refused to allow her to attend, claiming that she was a fire hazard because she could not walk. After being forced to remain home for her first three years of education (where she received just two hours of instruction per week), Judy’s mother challenged the policy. Beginning in fourth grade, Judy was permitted to attend a school for children with disabilities, but then again in high school, the city returned her to home instruction only. Again, Judy’s mother – together with other parents – fought the policy and won. The city reversed the policy, and Judy and other kids with disabilities were able to attend high school in 1961.

Growing up, Judy attended Camp Jened, where she was able to connect with other kids with disabilities. Speaking to those connections, Judy said, “We had the same joy, the same anger over the way we were treated and the same frustrations at opportunities we didn’t have.” The 2020 documentary *Crip Camp* features Camp Jened campers, including Judy.

Beginning in college, Judy began organizing rallies and protests, demanding that college classrooms provide accessibility ramps and extend the right to live in the dorms to all students. After college, Judy was denied a teaching license because the New York State Board of Education did not believe that she could get herself and students out of the building in the event of a fire. Judy sued the Board, and following a settlement, became the first wheelchair using individual to teach in New York City.

Based on these experiences, Judy and some friends founded Disabled in Action (DIA), a civil rights organization which focused on securing protection for people with disabilities through activism and protest. After President Nixon vetoed early versions of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Judy led 80 activists to stage a sit-in on Madison Avenue, brining traffic to a halt. After the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was adopted, the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) refused to sign meaningful regulations for the enforcement of the Act. In 1977, Judy led a sit-in at the San Francisco Office of HEW that spanned 28 days (with about 125-150 people refusing to leave), which remains the longest sit-in to date. The HEW Secretary signed the regulations.

Judy was the Assistant Secretary of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services at the U.S. Department of Education during the Clinton Administration. She served as the World Bank’s first Advisor on Disability and Development, expanding the Bank’s projects that allowed people with disabilities around the world to live and work in the mainstream of their communities. In 2010, President Obama appointed Judy as the Special Advisor on International Disability Rights for the U.S. State Department, where she served until 2017 when Secretary of State Rex Tillerson abolished the Special Advisor role.

Should you wish to learn more about Judy, check out her book: *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist*, which tells the story of her fight to receive an education, have a job, and “just be human.”