

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

EUNICE KENNEDY SHRIVER

DISABILITY ACTIVIST

“If you don’t have an idea that materializes and changes a person’s life, then what have you got?”

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Background Information

Born on July 10, 1921; died on August 11, 2009
Shriver was born into the wealthy, prominent political Kennedy family. She grew up in Massachusetts, and her brothers were President John F Kennedy and Senators Robert and Ted Kennedy. Her sister Rosemary was born with intellectual disabilities

Rosemary was kept away from the public eye and eventually put in a hospital without her permission. During this time, many people with intellectual disabilities were treated poorly, a fact that later shaped Kennedy Shriver’s activism. She went on to receive her bachelor’s degree in sociology from Stanford University.

Resistance

After college, Kennedy Shriver took over the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation, her family’s foundation. The foundation was focused on preventing intellectual disabilities and improving the way people with intellectual disabilities were treated¹. This new role was the beginning of Kennedy Shriver’s activism for those with intellectual disabilities.

In 1962, Kennedy Shriver started a summer camp for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, which evolved into the Special Olympics. The goal was to empower people with disabilities rather than treat them as incapable of being successful. Kennedy Shriver fought against these attitudes. “Don’t bother with them; they can’t learn, so forget them; give them a lollypop to suck and a bench to sit on. That’s what we’ve been fighting,” she said.

Achievements

Today, more than 1.3 million people with disabilities from over 150 countries participate in Special Olympics². Kennedy Shriver has received many awards and honorary degrees, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 2002 she received the Theodore Roosevelt Award of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Her resistance against people’s low expectations for individuals with intellectual disabilities continues to make a difference and ensures a more inclusive community for all people with disabilities.

¹ Eunice Kennedy Shriver. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/eunice-kennedy-shriver>.

² Small Steps, Great Strides (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.eunicekennedyshriver.org/bios/si>.

