

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

Judith Heumann

Disability rights activist and advocate, educator

“Disability only becomes a tragedy when society fails to provide the things needed to lead one’s daily life.”

Page | 1



FIGURE 1 COURTESY OF JEWISH WOMEN'S ARCHIVE

Background Information

Born: December 18, 1947; Died March 4, 2023

Judith Heumann was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on December 18, 1947, to German American parents. Doctors diagnosed Heumann with polio as a toddler. At the time, there was no cure for the illness. Judith became a quadriplegic and depended on wheelchair support. She graduated from Long Island University with a degree in speech and theater in 1969. In 1975 Judith earned an advanced degree in public health from the University of California at Berkeley.

Heumann’s Resistance

As a child, Judith’s mother took the five-year-old to register for kindergarten. Upon seeing that Judith required a wheelchair, the principal refused her admission. The administrator claimed that Judy was a fire hazard. The decision caused Heumann’s exclusion from receiving a complete education at school. A teacher was sent to her home once a week until she was nine. Heumann then attended special education classes in a public school’s special education program. Her parents consistently pushed for wheelchair assessable buildings and accommodations for children with special needs.

Judith attended college and dreamed of being a teacher. While at Long Island University, she organized students to start demanding ramps for equitable access to classes. She continued to challenge unfair treatment when the New York City Board of Education denied her application for a teaching license because she could not walk.ⁱ Heumann sued the Board of Education for disability discrimination. The case was settled out of court, and Heumann received her teaching license. Judith co-founded Disabled in Action; a disability rights organization led by disabled people. The Disabled in Action and Heumann were active at the longest sit-in at a federal building: the 504 sit-ins. Judith led the 28-day sit-in in support of strong regulations concerning Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. It is a national law that protects qualified individuals from discrimination based on disability.ⁱⁱ Heumann helped to develop the 1990 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The act supports educational inclusiveness for children with physical and intellectual disabilities.

Achievements

She was the first recipient of the Henry B. Betts Award and the Max Starkloff Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Council on Independent Living.ⁱⁱⁱ

Essential Questions

1. How did Judith Heumann resist against the unfair treatment people living with disabilities encountered in educational spaces?
2. What did Heumann do to end discrimination against people living with disabilities?
3. Why are the IDEA Act and Section 504 an important set of laws?
4. ***“Disability only becomes a tragedy when society fails to provide the things needed to lead one's daily life.”***
 - a. What does this quote mean to you?
 - b. Why is it important for a society to ensure all its citizens have what they need to succeed?

ⁱ <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/heumann-judith>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ocr/civilrights/resources/factsheets/504.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.aclu.org/bio/judy-heumann>