



Disability History and Awareness Month 2023



Judy Heumann is another staple name within the disabled community; she has an extensive background in activism and an equally deep one in public service. When thinking about her life, one thing that always comes to mind is her constant breaking of barriers and expectations those around her put on her. Born in 1947 and a child of Jewish-German immigrants, Heumann was later diagnosed with Polio when she was 18 months old, requiring her to use a wheelchair for the rest of her life. Throughout her early years, she experienced many hurdles in accessing education because of her disability; from high school to college, she was cited as being a “fire hazard” and was consistently put in the position of having to fight the institutions that were meant to help nourish and prepare children for adulthood. Later when the state of New York denied Heumann her teaching license on the basis that she could not evacuate her students in the event of a fire, she filed suit, which prompted a local newspaper to run the headline ‘You Can Be President, Not Teacher, with Polio;’ the case was settled without trial, and Heumann became the first wheelchair user to teach in New York City.

Since her public challenge of the state of New York, Heumann focused her efforts on advocacy work, helping people with disabilities gain equal access to services through existing laws. She also organized several sit-ins in response to the government's apathy toward the rights of disabled people – specifically President Nixon's vetoing of early versions of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Heumann also spent time as a legislative aide in the U.S. Senate, where she helped develop legislation that would become the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Later in life, she served as Assistant Secretary of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services at the United States Department of Education from 1993 to 2001 and as the Special Advisor on International Disability Rights for the U.S. State Department – Heumann was the first to hold this role and served from 2010 to 2017.

These are just some of Heumann’s notable efforts and accomplishments in her life of activism. Her story often involved making a path for herself to overcome the obstacles of living in an inaccessible world, which is often the case for people with disabilities. Nonetheless, Heumann and other disabled people continue to find joy in life.

"Disability only becomes a tragedy for me when society fails to provide the things we need to lead our lives—job opportunities or barrier-free buildings, for example. It is not a tragedy to me that I'm living in a wheelchair."

– Judy Heumann

Profiles by Andrew Caruana, Policy and Research Intern, Office of Senator Sara Gelser Blouin

Andrew is a Junior at Willamette University studying philosophy. He is a lifelong Oregonian and has cerebral palsy.

Sen.SaraGelser@OregonLegislature.Gov

503-986-1708