

Judy Heumann, Who Led the Fight for Disability Rights, Dies at 75

She successfully battled to become a teacher and went on to help bring about a revolution in the government's treatment of the disabled.



Judy Heumann in 1982, with Ed Roberts, director of the California State Department of Rehabilitation. They called attention to the Reagan administration's cutbacks in funds for programs for the disabled. Credit...John Duricka/Associated Press

By [Alex Traub](#)

Judy Heumann, who spent decades attacking a political establishment indifferent to the rights of disabled people and won one fight after another, ultimately joining and reforming the very establishment she once inveighed against, died on Saturday in Washington, D.C. She was 75.

An [announcement](#) on her personal website did not specify the cause.

[A quadriplegic](#) since childhood, Ms. Heumann (pronounced human) began her career in activism waging a one-woman battle to be allowed to work as a teacher in New York City when discrimination against disabled people was not widely understood as a problem.

She went on to become an official in the Clinton administration, a special adviser in the Obama State Department and a fellow or board member at some of the nation's leading nonprofits. She was also featured in the Oscar-nominated 2020 documentary "Crip Camp."

Over time, she saw a revolution occur in the government's involvement in the lives of disabled people such as herself. And she, as much as anyone else, helped bring about that revolution.

A pivotal moment came in San Francisco in 1977.

It had been four years since President Richard Nixon had signed the Rehabilitation Act, one section of which, 504, was supposed to outlaw discrimination against disabled people by any institution receiving federal money.

"It was a very important provision because it would mean, for example, that you could not discriminate against someone with a disability in preschool, in elementary school, in high school, at universities, in hospitals, in government," Ms. Heumann [told](#) the BBC in 2020. "And if in fact discrimination occurred, you would have a remedy. You could go to court. You could file a complaint."

Yet officials repeatedly delayed implementing the measure, and Joseph A. Califano Jr., the secretary of health, education and welfare under President Jimmy Carter, said he had wanted to overhaul the regulations before authorizing them.

Activists responded that there would be national protests if Mr. Califano did not sign off on the original form of the law by April 4.



Ms. Heumann, center, with Ed Roberts, left, and Joan Leon, the founders of the World Institute on Disability in an undated photo. Credit...The Heumann Perspective April 5 arrived. Protesters in cities throughout the nation occupied federal offices. Ms. Heumann, then 29, organized the San Francisco contingent. She appeared with more than 100 other people of varying disabilities to demand action from Joseph Maldonado, the regional director who reported to Mr. Califano from San Francisco.

“No one had briefed him; he didn’t know what 504 was,” Ms. Heumann [told](#) The New York Times in 2020. “We were incredulous about the fact that nobody was taking what we were doing seriously.”

The other protest actions soon ended. But the San Francisco sit-in continued for almost a month. It has often been described as the longest nonviolent occupation of a federal building in American history.

Many of the protesters did not bring necessary supplies, or even a change of clothes. The government cut the building’s water and phone connections.

Fortunately, deaf protesters knew another way to communicate: sign language. That is how they passed messages out of the building. Other protesters knew a diverting form of amusement: wheelchair races.

The sit-in received support from San Francisco’s mayor, George Moscone, who sent over mattresses, and from the Black Panther Party, which [delivered](#) ribs and fried chicken.

Ms. Heumann later traveled to Washington and participated in a special congressional hearing. “We will no longer allow the government to oppress disabled individuals,” Ms. Heumann [said](#). “We want the law enforced. We want no more segregation.”

Then she turned to address Eugene Eidenberg, a representative of Mr. Califano. “I would appreciate it,” she said, her voice cracking but still determined, “if you would stop shaking your head in agreement when I don’t think you understand what we are talking about.”

On April 28, Mr. Califano signed Section 504. The measure’s provisions for federal institutions and activities prepared the way for the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which broadened those protections to include the private sector and many other areas of public life.

After Mr. Califano capitulated, Ms. Heumann [said](#), “We believe we have won the major issues.”



Ms. Heumann, center, in 1993 during her swearing-in as U.S. assistant secretary for special education and rehabilitative services in the Education Department. Credit...Susan Ragan/Associated Press

Judith Ellen Heumann was born in Philadelphia on Dec. 18, 1947. She grew up in Brooklyn. Her parents, Werner and Ilse Heumann, were both sent away from Nazi Germany as Jewish children, and neither of them saw their parents again. Werner ran a butcher shop, and Ilse volunteered for local civic groups.

During the 1949 polio epidemic, when Judy was 18 months old, she was diagnosed with the disease. She spent three months in an iron lung.

When her mother tried enrolling her in kindergarten, the principal said she could not attend, calling her a “fire hazard.” She was not able to properly enroll in school until she was 9 years old, and even then she took her classes with other disabled students in the basement. She was able to mix with the rest of the student body only once a week during assemblies.

She attended a special high school, graduated from Long Island University with a bachelor's degree in speech and theater in 1969, and earned a master's in public health from the University of California at Berkeley in 1975.

She first came to prominence as an advocate for the disabled in 1970, when she tried to become a New York City teacher. She passed every requirement except a physical and was denied a position, with the cited cause being "paralysis of both lower extremities." Regulations stipulated that teachers must not have physical issues that prevented them from moving on stairs quickly or from escorting students out of school in case of an emergency.

Ms. Heumann sued the city and went public, telling The Times that if a school lacked a ramp or elevator, she could teach on the ground floor, and adding that she moved faster with her electric wheelchair than normal pedestrians did walking.

Image

THE NEW YORK TIMES, WEDNESDAY, MAY 27, 1970

Woman in Wheel Chair Sues to Become Teacher

By ANDREW H. MALCOLM

Judy Heumann, a 22-year-old polio victim, filed suit in Federal District Court yesterday for the right to become the city's first teacher in a wheel chair.

Miss Heumann, who has passed the oral and written examinations required for a teacher's license here, charged that the Board of Education's refusal to give her a license discriminated against her because she was physically handicapped.

Her lawyers said the case was the first such civil rights suit ever filed in a Federal court. They hope to make it a test case for a series of suits across the country guaranteeing equal job and education rights for the physically handicapped, whom her lawyer called "one of our forgotten minorities."

The suit names as defendants the Board of Education, its Board of Examiners and Acting Superintendent Irving Anker. It seeks a judgment that the examiners' procedures, which do not permit hearings or legal counsel, are unconstitutional and that Miss Heumann be granted a license and \$75,000 in damages.

Miss Heumann, an honors graduate of Long Island University, said that in February the Board of Examiners notified her that she had failed the physical examination because of "paralysis of both lower extremities." On April 3



Judy Heumann at session with Elias Schwarzbart, lawyer

the Board of Examiners, said yesterday that Miss Heumann's appeal was "under active consideration," but that such basic studies took time.

Dr. Theodore H. Lang, deputy superintendent of schools, said Miss Heumann's case had prompted a thorough review of policy regarding employment of the physically handicapped in the city's schools. This is to be completed within about two weeks, he said. Miss Heumann's case is being delayed pending the results, he added.

It was understood that the study has included the possibility of issuing special licenses to handicapped persons.

The United Federation of Teachers is supporting Miss Heumann, and Mayor Lindsay is known to have written the Board of Examiners recently urging "a thoughtful and compassionate review" of the case.

Members of both the Board of Education and the Board of Examiners expressed sympathy for Miss Heumann's case yesterday, but said they also had to assure the safety of pupils, such as during fire emergencies.

Electric Wheel Chair

Miss Heumann uses an electric wheel chair that, she said, enables her to move faster than those walking normally.

One of her lawyers, Roy Lucas of the James Madison Constitutional Law Institute, said the case was "part of the very substantial civil rights movement of recent years." He mentioned, as one example, the recent employment by the city of several blind teachers.

Mr. Lucas said future suits would challenge unequal educational and service facilities for the physically handicapped around the country as well as discrimination in hiring.

She filed an appeal but received no further word. "I feel qualified to teach now," Miss Heumann said yesterday at a news conference at the Overseas Press Club, 54 West 40th Street, "and I don't want to wait."

Pleads for Time

She currently teaches remedial reading for the State Division of Youth, which does not require a license. She lives in her own apartment at 175 Willoughby Street in downtown Brooklyn.

Dr. Jay Greene, chairman of

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Ms. Heumann first drew national attention with her fight to become a New York City teacher. Credit...The New York Times

The Times editorial board wrote in her favor, [arguing](#) that "the blind student who takes mental notes and the paraplegic who wheels himself through school show a determination that exceeds the courage of more acclaimed hero-athletes in our society." Mayor John Lindsay urged "a thoughtful and compassionate review" of her case.

Within a few months, Ms. Heumann won her license — becoming New York City's first teacher in a wheelchair.

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She went on to found, help run or advise many organizations concerned with the rights of the disabled, including the Center for Independent Living, a Berkeley group that she called “the first organization in the world to be run for and by the disabled.”

She worked in government in the mid-1970s as an employee of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare. She returned to Washington from 1993 to 2001 as the assistant secretary of the office of special education and rehabilitation services in the Clinton administration.

In the Obama administration, she experienced a rare failure when she tried to convince the Senate to recommend ratifying an international treaty modeled on the Americans with Disabilities Act.

She also held positions as an adviser, fellow or board member with institutions like the World Bank, the Ford Foundation and Human Rights Watch.

In August 1991, Ms. Heumann attended a program of a disability rights nonprofit in Eugene, Ore., and was struck by the broad shoulders of another attendee in a wheelchair, an accountant named Jorge Pineda. Less than a year later, they were married.

He survives her, along with her brothers, Ricky and Joseph.

During her youth, Ms. Heumann was a camper and counselor at Camp Jened, a summer camp for disabled people in the Catskills that, in 2020, became the subject of “Crip Camp.”

The camp, which was founded in the 1920s, re-established by new owners as a camp for disabled young people in 1953 and closed in 1977, was exceptional for providing disabled children with experiences so common for others, like playing classic rock and furtively making out.

It wound up producing several leaders of the disability rights movement, including others who participated in the 1977 San Francisco sit-in.

In a [Q. and A.](#) published the year of the movie’s release, The Times called Ms. Heumann “the activist star” of the film. She described the camp as a “playground,” yet she saw a larger meaning in the fun she had.

“It was a liberating time,” she said. “We could be ourselves and it absolutely helped formulate our futures.”