

The Olmstead Commission’s goal is to move North Dakota towards greater integration and inclusion for individuals with disabilities.

Remembering JUDITH “JUDY” HEUMANN

Mother of the Disability Rights Movement

This December, as we mark her birthday, we honor the life and legacy of Judy Heumann. For decades before the Olmstead decision, Heumann was among the nation’s most influential advocates for deinstitutionalization, independent living, community-based services, and strong civil rights protections for individuals with disabilities. Her tireless activism helped lay the foundation for landmark civil rights legislation, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, upon which the Olmstead decision is based.



Born in 1947 to German Jewish immigrant parents in Brooklyn, Heumann contracted polio at age two, losing her ability to walk. Early on, she faced discrimination and barriers to education. Thanks to her mother’s persistence, she eventually attended a special school and a public high school, later earning her B.A. from Long Island University, where she organized students to advocate for accessible classrooms.

Early in adulthood, Heumann worked at Camp Jened, a summer camp for disabled youth, and became deeply involved in disability rights activism. After the New York Board of Education denied her a teaching license due to assumptions about her ability to evacuate during emergencies, she sued, and won, becoming New York State’s first teacher to use a wheelchair. Her early fight for inclusion helped lay the foundation for the modern disability rights movement.

In the 1970s, Heumann emerged as a leading force in the disability rights movement. She helped organize major demonstrations, including blocking Manhattan traffic to protest President Nixon’s veto of the 1972 Rehabilitation Act, being removed from an airplane for asserting her right to fly, and spearheading a historic month-long sit-in at a federal building in San Francisco that pushed the government to enforce key parts of the Rehabilitation Act. During her time in California, Heumann co-founded the Berkeley Center for Independent Living, helping spark the national Independent Living Movement. While serving as a legislative assistant to the chairperson of the US Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, Heumann helped develop legislation that became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).



She strengthened her lifelong commitment to disability rights and advocacy by earning her master’s degree in public health from the University of California, Berkeley and co-founding the World Institute on Disability (WID), one of the first global disability rights organizations founded and led by individuals with disabilities.

Heumann served as Assistant Secretary of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services from 1993 to 2001. From 2002 to 2006, she was the World Bank’s first Advisor on Disability and Development. In 2010, President Barack Obama appointed Heumann as the U.S. State Department’s first ever Special Advisor on Disability Rights, establishing a groundbreaking role in international disability advocacy. In 2020, she was the star of a documentary, “Crip Camp” about her time at Camp Jened and also published a memoir, *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist*.

Heumann remained a tireless advocate until her passing in 2023, leaving a legacy that transformed opportunities and rights for individuals with disabilities across the nation.

Source: National Women’s History Museum



Heumann and her husband Jorge Pineda, who also uses a wheelchair due to a spinal cord injury.

In her book, *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Advocate*, Heumann reflects on this reality:

“I was beginning to learn something very important: when institutions don’t want to do something, to claim that something is a ‘safety’ issue is an easy argument to fall back on. It sounds so benign and protective. How could caring about safety possibly be wrong or discriminatory?”

This insight underscores how institutions often use “safety” as a justification for limiting the freedom, autonomy, and integration of individuals with disabilities. As Heumann makes clear, when an institution wants to maintain control or resist change, invoking “safety” becomes a convenient, and often socially acceptable, way to defend restrictive or discriminatory practices.

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