

A Brief Reflection on the Legacy of Judy Heumann

Joan L. Headley, Past Executive Director of PHI

When PHI asked me to write about Judy Heumann, I wondered what I could say that already hasn't been said.

Her life's story includes polio at the age of 18 months, the struggle to attend school with non-disabled children, and the rejection by the New York City school system to be a teacher because she was in a wheelchair.

This experience and other roadblocks to involvement in family and community life initiated a trajectory that included founding an early independent living center, leading a takeover of a federal building in San Francisco, and two presidential appointments. She traveled worldwide on behalf of people with disabilities and was even featured in the Oscar-nominated film, *Crip Camp*.

Judy possessed a great intellect. She saw the big picture and realized that systems needed to change so that people with disabilities, including herself, could realize their dream.

She was unwavering in the fight and outspoken when treated as a second-class citizen. Nevertheless, Judy advocated with dignity and was gracious when pointing out one's faulty thinking.

Her heart was big. Her faith was constant. Her sense of humor, although necessarily bottled up many times, was clever, even wicked.

We stayed in touch after I retired five years ago. Our last communication was about "the so many things that we would've wanted to do but never got to do."

Upon hearing of her death, I recalled another past conversation of ours in which I complimented her on all she had accomplished for us.

She looked at me and said, "Do you really think so?"

I was shocked. She was serious. My response left no doubt.

On March 4, 2023, her advocacy leadership ended.

I call on all of us to continue our advocacy in her name. Knowing this, I'm sure she would break out that memorable great smile. ■



Joan Headley (left) and Judy Heumann prepare for a march in support of disability rights in Saint Louis, Missouri, 1995.

LEARN MORE ABOUT JUDITH HEUMANN

In Print

Being Heumann: An unrepentant memoir of a disability rights activist
(2020, Beacon Press. 240 pp.)

*Rolling Warrior: The Incredible, Sometimes Awkward, True Story of a Rebel Girl on
Wheels Who Helped Spark a Revolution* (2021, Beacon Press. 224 pp. For young adults)

Online

Polio Place—<http://www.polioplace.org/people/judith-e-heumann>

JudithHeumann.com

“A Brief But Spectacular take on the disability rights movement”
(PBS NewsHour, www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PnUza4FPz8)

“Our fight for disability rights – and why we’re not done yet” (TED Talk,
www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJr4wGcLNsA&t=18s)

On Film

Crip Camp: A disability revolution (Netflix)

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