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Women in History— Judy Heumann: Giving Voice and Creating Change

Sarah A. Hall

Judy (Judith E.) Heumann has spent her life as an advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. She contracted polio at 18 months old, which caused her lower limbs to become paralyzed. Heumann was not allowed to attend kindergarten at the local public school because she used a wheelchair (Rasky, 1989). From an early age, she learned that discrimination was a natural part of life for a person with a disability (Strohm). She was continually aware of the invisibility of people with disabilities in society. As she explains, “we were not seen as individuals who could make contributions to our society. We were out of sight and out of mind” (Heumann, 2003).

Heumann became involved in disability discussions, awareness, and activism at an early age. She met other students with disabilities at the segregated school and segregated summer camp she attended and gained strength by talking with them about their dreams of removing the barriers they faced (Heumann, 2003). She came to believe that attitudes and acts of discrimination are the biggest problems facing people with disabilities. In college, Heumann organized rallies and protests with other students with disabilities (Strohm). She also created organizations with other students with disabilities, which began to have political influence at the local, state, and national levels (Heumann). Through these efforts, people with disabilities were becoming more visible in society.

In 1970, Heumann was denied her teaching license because she used a wheelchair and was labeled a fire hazard. With the support of her friends, she set up the organization Disabled in Action. She filed a lawsuit against the Board of Education and with the support of Disabled in Action she won. Heumann became the first wheelchair user to teach in the New York City public school system (“Judith E. Heumann,” 1993).

Heumann moved to Berkeley, California where she was Deputy Director of the world’s first independent living center from 1975–1982. At the Center for Independent Living (CIL), she advocated for people with disabilities to have greater opportunities to achieve an independent lifestyle (“Judith E. Heumann,” 1993). The CIL was different because it employed people with disabilities as well as providing them with support. Since then, more than 400 independent living centers have been created (Heumann, 2003).

About the Author

Sarah Hall received her Masters of Education in 2003 and taught special education for three years. She is currently a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Email: *epeewoman@hotmail.com*.

Heumann co-founded the World Institute on Disability (WID) with Ed Roberts and Joan Leon in 1983 and was the vice president for ten years (Pfaff, 1995). The WID was the first public policy, research, and training organization to focus primarily on issues affecting people with disabilities (“Judith E. Heumann,” 1993). As vice president of WID, Heumann worked on a bill of rights in 1989 so that people with a physical or mental disability would not be denied access to employment, buildings, transportation, or communication on the basis of their disability (Rasky, 1989). Senator Edward M. Kennedy stated that the antidiscrimination legislation Heumann worked on “will go down as one of the most important accomplishments in the history of the Congress” (Rasky, 1989).

Throughout her life, Heumann was politically active. She helped develop legislation that became the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) and worked on Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Pfaff, 1995). The legislation she worked on has made a great impact in the lives of children with disabilities and their families. It has provided students with any physical and mental disability the right to a free and appropriate education. Heumann later worked on amendments to the EAHCA, which was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). She also helped to draft the Americans with Disabilities Act (“Judith E. Heumann,” 1993).

In 1993, Heumann was sworn in as Assistant Secretary of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS). OSERS is the umbrella agency that oversees the Rehabilitation Services Administration, the Office of Special Education Programs, and the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (“Judith E. Heumann,” 1993). U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley remarked that “through her knowledge, leadership, and tenacity she has helped change both laws and perceptions about persons with disabilities” as he welcomed her to her new position (“Judith E. Heumann”). Her goal as the Assistant Secretary was to “promote the inclusion, independence and empowerment of disabled people throughout society” (Pfaff, 1995).

Throughout her life, Heumann has found that people with disabilities in every country have to deal with many of the same challenges (Strohm). She became the World Bank’s first advisor on disability and development to introduce disability issues into the World Bank’s many international programs (Strohm). She travels to various countries and works with many people with disabilities around the world. The people she meets are ad-

dress the same level of discrimination and isolation and have begun to see themselves as change agents as well (Heumann, 2003).

Heumann continues to advocate for the full and appropriate implementation of IDEA, ADA, and related antidiscrimination legislation. She advocates for students to be taught in the least restrictive environment, for teachers to become more effectively trained, and for parents to become more involved in their child's education (Pfaff, 1995). She urges professionals to become more politically involved and to communicate with their members of Congress (Pfaff, 1995). Heumann is also committed to diversity. She wants to ensure that programs are more accessible to people with disabilities from minority and culturally diverse backgrounds (Pfaff).

During the twentieth century, there was a movement of confronting and removing barriers by people with disabilities. The challenge Heumann sees for this century is to continue the struggle and ensure that the poor are given the same opportunities throughout the world to define their futures and become productive members of their communities (Heumann, 2003). She emphasizes the importance of applying a "disability lens" to every situation (Strohm). Her ultimate goal is for people with disabilities "not to be seen as different, but as integrated, productive members of the community" (Pfaff).

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