

## **National Disability Employment Awareness Month Highlight –** **Judy Heumann (1947-2023)**



In celebration of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, Cowan, Liebowitz & Latman invites you to learn more about Judy Heumann, “the mother” of the Disability Rights Movement.

Judy Heumann was born in Philadelphia on December 18, 1947 and grew up in Brooklyn, NY. At 18 months old, she contracted polio and for most of her life, used a wheelchair for mobility. At 5 years old, when Judy’s parents applied for her to be admitted to kindergarten, the school deemed her inability to walk a “fire hazard” and denied her entry into public school. Judy was given home instruction for some of her school years, with her parents continuing to challenge school decisions until she was finally allowed to enter high school in 1961.

Ms. Heumann graduated from Long Island University in 1969, and in 1970, applied for a teaching license. She passed the oral and written exams, however, she failed the medical exam because she could not walk and as a result, was denied the teaching license. She sued the New York State Board of Education, and the judge recommended that the Board of Education reconsider its determination. The case settled, and Ms. Heumann became the first teacher in a wheelchair in New York State. As a result of her case against the New York State Board of Education and the press coverage it received, Ms. Heumann received numerous letters from others with disabilities about their experiences with discrimination. In 1970, she founded Disabled in Action (“DIA”), which fought for protection of civil rights for people with disabilities through political protest.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which included Section 504 prohibiting discrimination against persons with disabilities by federally funded programs and institutions, was passed by Congress

twice and vetoed each time by President Nixon. Ms. Heumann and the DIA led a sit-in in New York City to protest President Nixon's first veto. Eventually, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was signed into law, but Section 504 of the Act was not enforced and people with disabilities still faced many forms of discrimination. In 1977, when the acting U.S. Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare refused to implement regulations under Section 504, Ms. Heumann led a historic 26-day Section 504 Sit-In protest in San Francisco which resulted in the signing of Section 504 regulations into law. Implementation of Section 504 paved the way for the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and other laws which extended protections of civil rights for disabled persons to private institutions.

Ms. Heumann held a number of prominent positions in which she continued to advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities. She served as Assistant Secretary of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services at the U.S. Department of Education between 1993 and 2001, as Advisor on Disability and Development at the World Bank Group between 2002 and 2006, as Special Advisor on International Disability Rights at the U.S. State Department between 2010 and 2017, and as Senior Fellow at the Ford Foundation between 2017 and 2019. She received numerous awards, including the Henry B. Betts Award and the Max Starkloff Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Council on Independent Living, in recognition of her advocacy for the rights of people of disabilities and efforts to improve their quality of life.

Judy Heumann's lifelong fight for disability rights transformed the landscape and quality of life for people with disabilities in the United States and worldwide. Ms. Heumann passed away on March 4, 2023 at the age of 75 and was mourned by many disability rights and human rights activists and organizations. If you wish to learn more about Judy Heumann, you can visit her web site at <https://judithheumann.com/> or watch the 2020 Oscar-nominated documentary "Crip Camp; A Disability Revolution" which starred Judy Heumann and documented her activism.

Cowan, Liebowitz and Latman encourages you to recognize [diversity and inclusion](#) every month.