

Impact Statement

Sophia Schlueter, Grade 12

***Power in Protest*, 2025**

Acrylic on wood panel, 12 x 9 inches

Brownell Talbot School, Omaha, NE

Unsung Hero: Judy Heumann

The world is filled with unsung heroes, the patient and determined leaders whose names often go unrecognized yet whose actions shape the future. Judith Heumann is one of these remarkable unsung heroes. Often known as “The mother of the disabilities rights movement,” Heumann was a strong activist and leader. Even though her name is rarely mentioned in textbooks or in history classes, her contributions to history are far more significant than many realize.

At just 18 months old, Judy contracted polio, which left her paralyzed and required her to use a wheelchair. However, in the 1950s, society's view of disability was very different. People with disabilities were considered burdens and incapable of living independent lives. There were no ramps for wheelchair users, no accessible transportation, and no laws to protect the rights of people with disabilities. As Judy grew up, she faced more challenges. When she applied for a teaching license Judy was denied simply because of her disability and they claimed her wheelchair was a “fire hazard.” She fought back by protesting for more accessibility. In 1977, she was the leader of the historic 504 sit-in, a protest for the signing of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. She also contributed to other acts like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. These acts have changed the landscape for people with disabilities, ensuring that they have access to education, employment, public spaces, and more. Judy’s efforts helped create a world where people with disabilities have the right to live independently and participate fully in society. I've had the privilege of working with children and adults with disabilities and have gotten to see the progress made in communities thanks to the efforts of people like Judy. Because of her advocacy, future generations of people with disabilities now have better access to education and a larger span of opportunities. As someone with a brother who has Down Syndrome, Judy's story resonates with me. Hearing about the struggles people with disabilities faced in the past makes me especially grateful for the opportunities my brother and others have today. They have access to services, education, and activities that were once unimaginable.

For the past four years, I have volunteered at a special needs summer camp, working with children and adults of all ages who have various disabilities. Judy’s story about her time at Camp Jened, a place where people with disabilities were treated with dignity and

respect, inspires me. Through my volunteer work, I aim to create a space where people with disabilities feel accepted, valued, and empowered, just as Judy helped create through her activism. To honor Judith Heumann and her legacy, I created an acrylic painting that captures her speaking in a TED Talk, sharing her experiences and the struggles throughout her life. The painting shows her ongoing dedication to raising awareness for disability rights. I chose to use acrylics to capture the details that show her big smile and personality. While the painting focuses on her face, I also made sure to incorporate her wheelchair, symbolizing how it was a part of her, but not the thing that defined her. In the background of the painting, I filled with vibrant colorful designs that contrast with the darker tones, reflecting Judy's lively and optimistic personality. I also included the words "Sign 504" in bubble-like lettering, referencing the signs used during the 504 Sit-In. These design choices connect the painting to Judy's historic fight for equality and justice.

As I researched Judith Heumann and her life, I realized just how much progress people with disabilities have made today. Accessibility is available and people with disabilities now have more opportunities for education, employment, and community involvement. Judy's work helped make these advancements possible, but her legacy reminds us that there is still work to be done. We must continue to fight for equality, not just for people with disabilities, but for all groups facing discrimination. With this artwork, I hope to spread the message of the significance of Judith Heumann's contributions to our world. She was a strong leader, and her actions have shaped the world as we know it today. I want people to understand how important her role was. I plan to spread this message by sharing my artwork through social media and continuing to tell Judy's story. Her legacy will be remembered not only in the laws she helped pass but in the many lives she impacted. Judy Heumann is a true unsung hero whose work will continue to inspire generations to come.

References:

"Disability Rights Advocate: Judith Heumann." *Judy Heumann*, 29 Dec. 2023, judithheumann.com/.

"Heumann Nature: The Life and Legacy of Disability Rights Activist Judy Heumann." *Ford Foundation*, 5 Dec. 2023, www.fordfoundation.org/news-and-stories/videos/independent-videos/heumann-nature-the-life-and-legacy-of-disability-rights-activist-judy-heumann/.

"Judy Heumann: The Mother of Ada." *Judy Heumann: The Mother of ADA*, untoldhistory.org/judy-heumann-the-mother-of-ada/. Accessed 27 May 2025.

Our Fight for Disability Rights -- and Why We're Not Done Yet. TED, 2017.