

## Impact Statement

Eli Berman, Grade 11

***A 'Heumann' Voice for Disability Rights***, 2026

Charcoal, colored pencil on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Clarkstown High School North, New City, NY

Unsung Hero: Judy Heumann

As someone interested in education policy and disability history, Judith Heumann falls at the intersection of these fields. In my AP US History class last year, I loved Unit 8, which focused on the Civil Rights Movement and the Counterculture Movement in the 1960s and 70s. Fast forward to my AP English Language class this year, we read “On Being a Cripple” by Nancy Mairs, which greatly increased my interest in disability rights. Following reading Mairs' story, I came across Heumann, a lifelong disability rights activist.

My mom was recently diagnosed with a rare neurological disorder, Primary Lateral Sclerosis, which leads to a gradual decline in motor functions. As a teacher, working with younger children in kindergarten, movement is essential to be on top of things in the classroom. Her disorder, however, has impacted on the way she has had to teach whether it be taking breaks throughout the day, lifting things, or having to go to the doctor's office. Much like my mom, Judith Heumann wanted to be a teacher growing up. Although she passed her written exams, Heumann failed her physical exam due to her polio diagnosis; thus, the Board of Education denied her teacher's license. As a result, she took her case to court and, with determination, pleaded her case as to why she should be able to teach. Her tenacity was seen throughout publications such as *The New York Times*, leading her to become the first teacher in New York City to use a wheelchair. I admire her dedication to upholding the rights of individuals with disabilities. Through her activism for increased accessibility, millions of individuals with disabilities have been granted access to life-saving accommodations such as ramps, healthcare, and education.

During the Disability Rights Movement, Judith Heumann's use of protest, legal action, and activism was revolutionary, challenging prevailing societal views of individuals with disabilities. Through protest, Heumann transformed how disability was viewed, from the medical model to a civil rights concern. In the Rehabilitation Act, all individuals with disabilities lacked representation in civic life, so she reacted and led the fierce and powerful 504 sit-ins, which lasted 26 days. Heumann reacted despite resistance from government officials who were unwilling to enforce accessibility laws. Heumann advocated for various reforms for individuals with disabilities, including the implementation of Section 504, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Moreover, she was the co-founder of the World Institute on Disability, Disabled in Action, and the Berkeley Center for Independent Living.

Unlike other activists, Heumann took direct political action both inside and outside government to advance equality and equity. Specifically, Heumann served in the Department of Education

under the Clinton Administration from 1993 to 2001 and became the “highest-ranking person with a disability in government.” Furthermore, President Obama appointed Heumann to the US Department of State as the first Special Advisor for International Disability Rights, where she advocated for the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which pushed for an international ADA. Through my research, I wrote a 14-page paper and a 14-page annotated bibliography.

I wanted to bring light to Heumann’s voice as an ‘Unsung Hero’ through her activism—from its inception to her participation in protests. In the background, I decided to draw a newspaper clipping from the article that brought her case to light, highlighting how her background influenced her activism. For my focal point, I drew a notable photo of Heumann during the 504 sit-ins. I usually see this photo online, but I found a color version. I emphasized it with colored pencils, highlighting the contemporary nature of her activism rather than depicting her work as something of the distant past. Furthermore, I wanted to draw attention to Heumann to how she personally influenced the Disability Rights Movement. Here, she is speaking passionately into the microphone and wearing a standout pin that reads ‘Sign 504.’ I also drew Heumann, showcasing her entire wheelchair, smiling, symbolizing how she embraced her disability and advocated for disability joy. For this, I chose to draw it in charcoal, a powerful, dramatic medium, to create contrast and capture the emotional intensity of Heumann. The photo of Heumann speaking into the microphone and her speaking into the microphone highlights the duality of Heumann and exemplifies all that she stood for; thus, I chose to overlay them, so they blend.

Researching for this project and spending countless hours on my drawing will be a highlight of my Junior Year and my High School experience. Heumann has inspired me to continue my interest in disability history and to study history. In college, I intend to study art history; through this project, I was able to combine these two passions. I hope to share my knowledge and ensure her story doesn’t get lost by leading by example, prioritizing inclusion in my everyday life, and sharing her story with my peers and family. For instance, since my freshman year, I have worked with adults with disabilities and collaborated with them on artistic projects, such as creating a rock garden. Overall, I hope that this piece stands out as a way to capture Heumann’s resilience and ensure her legacy lives on as an educator, activist, and true trailblazer.