



Impact Statement

Rhianna Jose, Grade 11

Mother of Disability Rights, 2026

Charcoal, graphite on paper, 12.5 x 16.5 inches

Esperanza High School, Anaheim, CA

Ungsung Hero: Judy Huemann

One of the longest sit-ins done in front of a federal building was the 504 sit-in on April 5, 1977, led by the “Mother of the Disability Rights Movement” herself, Judith “Judy” Huemann. Catching polio at 18 months left her unable to walk, but the only thing she truly saw as an obstacle was how other people treated her. Huemann was systemically barred from receiving an education until fourth grade, when her mother, Ilsa Huemann, advocated for Huemann to attend the local school when the principal deemed her a “fire hazard”. Huemann also attended and worked at Camp Jened, a summer camp for disabled people and where many prominent disability rights figures met. Despite the opposition she faced, Huemann graduated from Long Island University in 1969 and earned a Master of Science degree in public health at the University of California, Berkeley in 1975.

Carrying her mother’s sense of justice, she refused to let New York reject her rightfully earned teaching license in 1970, suing the board of education, having her story published in the New York Times, and eventually receiving a settlement. Judy Huemann became the first teacher in New York City to use a wheelchair, inspiring people with disabilities throughout the United States. Huemann was involved in several organizations for disability rights, such as being the cofounder of Disabled in Action, a cross-disability protest group, joining the Movement for Independent Living, and working at the Center for Independent Living. Eventually, Huemann even worked in the government, helping to create the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1974.

Huemann’s most important impact on disability rights was leading the longest protest sit-in to have taken place at a federal building in 1977. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which made it illegal for federally funded institutions to discriminate against disabled people, was signed in 1973 but lacked regulations or ways to enforce the act. Joseph A. Califano Jr., the U.S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), wanted to change the regulations. Activists objected and demanded that the law be authorized as is by April 4th, 1977. When the law was not authorized by April 5th, Huemann, along with 125-150 disabled protestors appeared at the HEW building at San Francisco, the protest lasting 28 days until May 4th, 1977. Mr. Califano signed both section 504 and the Education of All Handicapped Children regulations on April 28th, 1977.

This piece depicts Huemann at various stages of her life, from childhood to adulthood, with a banner reading “SIGN 504” wrapped around a wheelchair wheel. The reference photos used,

left to right, were an image from New Mobility's 2010 Person of the Year, Heumann at a conference in 1970, and Heumann as a child with her mother, attempting to walk. I wanted to make sure that it was obvious that Heumann was disabled, that it was something to be proud of, not hidden, as well as emphasize her role as a disability rights activist. The piece was drawn in mostly graphite with a touch of white charcoal.

As an ASL 2 student, my ASL teacher has always taught us Deaf Culture and how other people with disabilities live their lives, inspiring compassion and respect for all people. I wish to do the same with my art piece, as Judy Heumann is someone to respect and admire for all that she has done for her community, and I hope by sharing my artwork I can bring light to a world and culture that lives brightly alongside ours.