



Photo by Lona on Unsplash

## Women Make History: Stories We Should Have Learned in School

**Oops!** Our **Women Make History Community Call** is on **Thursday, May 14, 3 p.m. Pacific (not May 17!)**. To join, fill out [this form](#), and at the bottom where it asks: "How did you hear..." write: Zoom event. I'll send a link the day before. Let's connect!

### Judith Heumann: Warrior Activist

**Unstoppable:** In 1947, eighteen-month-old Judith Heumann contracted [polio](#), leaving her unable to walk. Throughout her life, she experienced unrelenting discrimination from every sector of society, including education, employment opportunities, politics, and law. But Heumann used it all as a catalyst to change how we think about people with disabilities and implement practical solutions. She served in the Clinton and Obama administrations,

***"It wasn't actually an 'I,'  
it was a 'we.' For any story  
of changing the world is  
always the story of many."***

Judith Heumann



Judy Heumann circa 1965, [JudithHeumann.com](http://JudithHeumann.com)

was the [U.S. State Department's](#) first special adviser on international disability rights, and was instrumental in passing the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#). She founded and served on several nonprofit boards, including as a senior fellow for the Ford Foundation, and she helped drive legal change at the federal, state, and local levels. When she died in 2023 at age seventy-five, Heumann was known as the "Rolling Warrior" and the "Mother of Disability Rights."

**Difficult Beginnings:** Born in 1947 in Philadelphia, Heumann's parents were Jewish Germans who had fled the Nazi holocaust. Her grandparents and other family members died in concentration camps. In her 2020 memoir, *Being Heumann*, she speculated that, because of her parents' personal tragedies, they refused to accept discrimination in any form and became her role models and biggest advocates.



Example of an Iron Lung, [Woodlibrarymuseum.org](http://Woodlibrarymuseum.org)

In 1948, polio was at epidemic levels, and a vaccine was nonexistent. For three months, as a toddler, Heumann was confined to an [iron lung](#), a device that helped patients breathe. Following treatment, doctors recommended that she be institutionalized, a common practice at the time. Her parents refused.

At age five, when children typically begin kindergarten, Heumann was [blocked](#) from entering the building by the principal, who declared her a fire hazard because of her wheelchair. Again, Heumann's mother—nicknamed "Mighty Mite"—fought back. Eventually, she succeeded in having her daughter attend a special elementary school and then a public high school. Heumann graduated from Long Island University in Brooklyn in 1969 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. By the time she started college, Heumann was already an activist who rallied classmates to protest for wheelchair ramps to enable access to dorms and classrooms. Otherwise, buildings were inaccessible.

**Finding Her Tribe:** In the 1970s, Heumann took a job that changed her life. She was hired as a counselor at a summer camp she had attended for people with disabilities. Later, she referred to Camp Jened as "liberating" and as a place where people could

simply be themselves. Described as a "ramshackle summer camp run by hippies...In its freewheeling, radical atmosphere of equity, a community was born of people with different disabilities." Many attendees became important activists in the disability rights movement. The camp was the subject of the 2020 award-winning and Oscar-nominated documentary [Crip Camp](#).



Judy Heumann disability activist,  
[JudithHeumann.com](http://JudithHeumann.com)

**Becoming a Changemaker:** It was also in 1970 that Heumann was denied a teaching position in New York. Just as in kindergarten, she was prohibited because it was believed she would be a fire risk, unable to evacuate herself or others. She sued and won, becoming the first teacher in the state to use a wheelchair. The same year, she co-founded [Disabled in Action](#) (DIA) with the mission of protecting people with disabilities through civil rights legislation and political protest. She led one demonstration that shut down Manhattan traffic and was removed from an airplane after insisting she had a right to a seat.



Judy Heumann, [JudithHeumann.com](http://JudithHeumann.com)

In 1973, she moved to California to attend graduate school at U.C. Berkeley. There, she [joined](#) the Center for Independent Living, where she launched initiatives to make all buildings, as well as sidewalks and curbs, accessible. At the time, curbs didn't have cutouts at street corners or store entrances. She served as deputy director from 1975 to 1982, and earned her master's degree in public health in 1975.

One of her most famous actions was helping to organize the 1977 [504 Sit-In](#). Protestors across the country occupied federal buildings to pressure the government to enact [Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act](#). It protects individuals with disabilities from discrimination. The bill had been passed four years earlier, but had not been signed into law. Heumann and her community were tired of waiting. All the occupied buildings were soon cleared, except for the San Francisco offices held by twenty-nine-year-old Heumann and 100 other demonstrators. During a twenty-six-day standoff, their demands garnered national attention and public support. The protests ended when Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Joseph Califano signed the bill on April 28, 1977.

**A Life Empowering Others:** In 1983, Heumann co-founded the [World Institute on Disability](#), one of the first global organizations to advocate for the rights of more than one billion people worldwide. During her life, she [served](#) on numerous boards, including the American Association of People with Disabilities, Disability Rights Education, Human Rights Watch, and the U.S. International Council on Disability. She also received many honorary degrees.



Judy Heumann TED Talk,  
[JudithHeumann.com](http://JudithHeumann.com)

Heumann died in 2023 and is remembered not only for her ferocious activism but also for her joyful, upbeat, and outgoing personality. She is frequently quoted as saying, "Disability only becomes a tragedy when society fails to provide the things we need to lead our lives."

## Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

**Ask yourself:** When faced with tough circumstances, what enables some people to remain positive while others become angry?

**Ask a friend:** Who are examples of people that remain hopeful and joyous, and what keeps them going?

**Together We're Spreading the Word!** Sharing the book and the newsletter with family, friends, colleagues, libraries, and more is making a difference. ***Women Make History*** is available at Indie Bookstores, [Barnes & Noble](#), [Amazon](#), [Kindle](#), and [BookShop](#).

**Shout out to Trish MacEnulty** for her article about the book in the May issue of [Historical Novel Review](#). Trish is a multi-talented author of historical thrillers, stand-alone fiction, and memoirs, and is a journalism professor at Florida A&M University. Her forthcoming book (Histria Press, Spring 2027), *The Woman with the Wicked Face: A Novel inspired by the Life of Theda Bara*, will join her popular Delafield & Malloy Investigations series and Cinnamon Girl. [TrishMacEnulty.com](#)



I'm passionate about all things Mary Ware Dennett, one of the most pivotal and unsung leaders of the early reproductive rights movements, and other remarkable women who were swept aside by history or had their achievements wrongly attributed to men. My book, ***Women Make History: Fifty-Three Stories of Courage, Strength & Resilience***, highlights a few of these inspiring stories. I'm also at work on a novel about her Dennett's extraordinary life.

My essays about Dennett have been published in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), and others.

If you need a speaker, reach out. If you would like to join me at an event, check the website for upcoming events in your city: [www.SharonSpaulding.com](#).

## Join the Women Make History Community!

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Share the newsletter and encourage others to subscribe:

[www.SharonSpaulding.com](http://www.SharonSpaulding.com)

