

LESSON PLAN

Judy Heumann and Disability Rights Activism

Compelling Question: Who was Judy Heumann, and how did she make a difference for people with disabilities?

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-1	2-3	45-60 minutes	Reading, Speaking and Listening, Language
4-8	9-12		



Web Related Connections

Lesson Plans

[The Tools I Need: Disability and Accommodations](#)

Other Resources

[A Brief History of the Disability Rights Movement](#)

[People with Disabilities and the Accommodations they Need](#)

Key Words

access
activist
advocate
barred
campaigned
dignity
disability
discrimination
immigrants
law
legislation
outlaw
paralyzed
polio
power
proposed
protest
rehabilitation
sit-in
tragedy
warrior
wheelchair

LESSON OVERVIEW

Judy Heumann, disability rights activist, died in March 2023 at the age of 75. Judy Heumann was born in 1947 to German Jewish immigrants. As a toddler, Heumann contracted polio, resulting in her using a wheelchair for the rest of her life. When Heumann was five years old, her parents tried to register her for kindergarten but were turned away. The principal told them because she used a wheelchair, Heumann would create a “fire hazard.” Years later, the same reason of a “fire hazard” was given when she tried to get a job as a teacher. When this happened, Heumann sued the Board of Education for discrimination, and the case was settled; she became the first teacher in New York City to use a wheelchair. Throughout her life, Judy Heumann, referred to as “the mother of the disability rights movement,” fought for the rights of people with disabilities in the U.S. and around the world.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn about Judy Heumann and her disability rights activism and to consider the ways in which our schools, communities and society need to continue to address the rights and fair treatment of people with disabilities.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will gain background knowledge about Judy Heumann.
- Students will reflect on what they know, want to know and learned about Judy Heumann and her work as a disability rights activist.
- Students will consider in what ways our schools, communities and world are still lacking when it comes to the rights of people with disabilities.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

- Video: [Judy Heumann: The Mother of ADA](#)
- Video: [Remembering Judy Heumann's lasting contributions to disability rights](#)
- [KWL Chart](#) (one copy for each student)
- [Judy Heumann, unyielding advocate for disability rights, dies at 75](#) (one copy for each student)
- [Judy Heumann Quotes](#)—each quote printed on piece of large paper

[Note to Teacher: As you teach this lesson, be mindful that you likely have students in your classroom who have disabilities, or they may have family members with disabilities. These disabilities may be visible or not visible. Students with disabilities may have a range of thoughts and feelings about discussing the topic of disabilities when it's so close to home. Students with disabilities should never be asked to discuss their disability with the class, or looked to as an "expert" on the topic. It must be their choice to share. While teaching the lesson, be especially attuned to their needs and possible discomfort about discussing this topic. In addition, if a student discloses that they have a disability—whether it's a visible or not visible disability, be prepared to address what they share in an appropriate and sensitive way so that you prevent teasing, bullying and other targeting behavior on the part of other students—during this lesson or afterwards.]

Introduction: Watch Video about Judy Heumann

1. Start the lesson by asking: *Have you heard of Judy (Judith) Heumann?* (You can show a [picture of Judy Heumann](#).) Explain that Judy Heumann was a disability rights activist who died in March 2023. Elicit/explain that a disability rights activist is someone who takes actions to fight for the rights and fair treatment of people with disabilities. Explain to students that they will learn more about Judy Heumann and her disability rights activism throughout the lesson.
2. Watch the video [Judy Heumann: The Mother of ADA](#) (2 min., 43 sec.) and if time permits, you can also show [Remembering Judy Heumann's lasting contributions to disability rights](#) (3 min., 50 sec.)
3. After watching the video(s), engage students in a brief discussion by asking: *As you watched the video(s) about Judy Heumann, what do you notice? What did you wonder? What did you learn about Judy Heumann? What more do you want to know?*



KWL (Know, Want to Know, Learned) Chart

1. Distribute a [KWL Chart](#) to each student. Explain that the KWL Chart is a way to organize what we already know (K) about a topic or issue, what we want to know (W) about that topic, and what we learned (L) about the topic. Explain that as we go through the lesson, they will fill in different parts of the chart.
2. Invite students to put some of the information they already knew about Judy Heumann in the "K" (Know) column. Then have them put information they just learned about Judy Heumann from the video(s) in the third column marked "L (Learned)." Examples might include: (1) Judy Heumann contracted polio when she was eighteen months old, and the disease led to her using a wheelchair for the rest of her life; (2) Judy Heumann attended Camp Jened, a summer camp for children with disabilities, and it inspired her to want to change things; (3) After graduating from college, she applied to be a teacher in New York City but she was denied the job because they said she was "a fire hazard."
3. Then ask students: *What else would you like to know? What questions do you have about Judy Heumann?* Have some students share their thoughts verbally and ask all students to record a few of their questions in the second column marked "W" (want to know).
4. Explain to students that there will be different points in the lesson where you will invite them to add to their KWL charts, but they can do so anytime.

Information Sharing: Who Was Judy Heumann?

1. In your own words, share some or all of the following information about Judy Heumann:
 - Judy Heumann was born in 1947; her parents were German Jewish immigrants. When she was eighteen months old, Judy Heumann contracted polio. This led to her using a wheelchair for the rest of her life.
 - When she was five years old, Heumann's parents tried to register her for kindergarten, but were turned away at the nearby public school. The principal told her parents that because she used a wheelchair, this would create a "fire hazard." She eventually did attend school.
 - When Heumann was in college, she studied to become a teacher. After graduating, she tried to get a job as a teacher in New York City but again was told she was a "fire hazard," telling her she would not be able to evacuate children during an emergency. She sued ("sued" means to use a legal process to seek justice or a right) the Board of Education for discrimination and the case was settled. Heumann became the first teacher in NYC to use a wheelchair and she taught there for three years.
 - Throughout her life, Judy Heumann fought for the rights of people with disabilities and worked with several organizations, movements and actions—both in the U.S. and around the world. Heumann led protests that pushed the government to implement Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which said that no government agency, or even a private business that accepted federal funds, could discriminate against someone on the basis of their disability. Section 504 became a model for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which prohibits discrimination based on disability to all public accommodations, employment, transportation, communications and access to state and local government programs.
 - In 1993, President Bill Clinton named Heumann as assistant secretary of education, in charge of all of the nation's federal education programs for students with disabilities.
 - Judy Heumann wrote several books, including her memoir *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist* and a young adult book, *Rolling Warrior: The Incredible, Sometimes Awkward, True Story of a Rebel Girl on Wheels Who Helped Spark a Revolution*.
 - Judy Heumann has been called "the mother of the disability rights movement." She died on March 4, 2023.

As you share this information, ask students to add some of this information to their KWL charts.

2. Explain that Judy Heumann had a disability. Ask: *Have you ever heard the word disability?* Provide a definition of disability as: "A mental or physical condition that restricts an individual's ability to engage in one or more major life activities (e.g., seeing, hearing, speaking, walking, communicating, sensing, breathing, performing manual tasks, learning, working or caring for oneself)."

Write the definition on the board/smart board. To explain what it means, you can break down the definition of disability by explaining the different parts of the definition as follows:

A mental or physical condition: A mental condition affects a person's thinking, emotions or behavior. A physical condition affects someone's body or specific parts of their body (i.e., eyes, legs, fingers, ears, etc.).

That restricts an individual's ability: Restricts means to limit or prevent something from happening. Restricting an individual's ability means they are unable to or have limitations in doing certain things.

To engage in one or more of major life activities: To engage means to do or participate in something. Engaging in one or more of major life activities (seeing, hearing, speaking, etc.) means to be able to do (or not do) these tasks or activities.

3. Have students think to themselves about whether they know someone or they themselves have a disability. Explain that according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 26% of people in the U.S. (or 61 million people) have a disability. That means that 1 in every 4 people have a disability.
4. Take a few minutes to allow students to add to their KWL Charts.



Reading Activity

1. Distribute a copy of the article [Judy Heumann, unyielding advocate for disability rights, dies at 75](#) to all students: Provide ten minutes for students to read the article silently, or read aloud together, with students taking turns to read.

[NOTE: This article is from [Newsela](#), which publishes daily high-interest news articles at five different reading levels. This article is a 5th grade reading level. If your students need reading materials at a lower or higher reading level, this article is available at grades 3, 5, 7, 9, and 12th grade levels. You can register on Newsela (for free) to access all the articles.]

2. After reading, engage students in a discussion by asking some or all of the following questions:
 - When Judy Heumann was a child, what was it like for people who used wheelchairs?
 - What bias and discrimination did Judy Heumann face?
 - What was the purpose of the “504 Sit In” that Heumann and others organized?
 - Why did Heumann sue (to “sue” means to use a legal process to seek justice or a right) the Board of Education?
 - How do you think what Heumann experienced as a child impacted her becoming an advocate for disability rights?
 - What did you learn by reading this article? What more do you want to know?
3. After this discussion, invite students to add to their KWL Charts, in Column “W” for what more they want to learn and “L” for what they learned by reading the article.



Quotes Activity (Optional)

1. Place the sheets of paper with the five [Judy Heumann Quotes](#) around the room. Explain to students that these are quotes from Judy Heumann. Explain that quotes are the exact words of a person. Quotes often tell you something important about who that person is, their values and what they believe.
2. Give students 3-5 minutes to move around the room and read the quotes. Then invite students to pick one of the quotes that they like, appreciate, find impactful, important or memorable and move to that quote. Try to ensure a somewhat equal distribution of students for each quote.
3. Give students 5-8 minutes to discuss the quote among their group. First, someone should read it aloud. If there are unfamiliar words in the quote they can't determine with context clues, you can allow students to look up those words. Have the students then share what they think the quote means, and remind them it can mean something different to different people. Next, they should share what they like or appreciate about the quote or why they find it impactful, important or memorable. Have students assign a reporter to report back to the larger group.
4. Have each group share aloud their quote and a brief summary of what it means to them based on their small group discussion.
5. If time permits, have students write a short essay on their chosen quote, their interpretation of what the quote means, and why it's important or impactful to them.



Activism: Disability Rights Work that Remains

1. Explain to students that Judy Heumann was described as a disability rights “activist.” Ask: What is an activist? Elicit a definition of activist as “a person who uses or supports actions to bring about change in their community or the world.” Ask students: *How did Judy Heumann bring about change in her community or the world?*

2. Then ask students: *What kind of bias or discrimination do people with disabilities still face?* Elicit and explain that people with disabilities often face bias in a few ways: (1) they experience different (and inferior) treatment compared to people without disabilities, (2) they may not have or be provided with what they need to fully participate in life's activities and (3) people with disabilities are not always visible or well-represented in books, TV shows, games, etc.
3. Then ask: *As you look around our classroom, school, community or world, what issues, barriers or problems remain for people with disabilities?* Record their responses to the above questions on the board. For each of their responses, brainstorm a list of possible solutions. Alternatively, and if time permits, divide students into small groups, assigning each of them one of the barriers/problems and have each small group brainstorm ideas for solving that problem.
4. Have each small group report back their ideas to the whole class.

Closing: Symbols that Represent Inclusion, Allyship and Justice

Do a go round, inviting each student to contribute a response to one or both of these questions:

Something impactful or important I learned is _____.

One more question I have is _____.

Additional Reading and Resources

- [Activist Judy Heumann led a reimagining of what it means to be disabled](#) (NPR, March 4, 2023)
- [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#) (Fact Monster)
- [Before the A.D.A., There Was Section 504](#) (New York Times, July 22, 2020)
- [Disability Impacts All of Us](#) (Centers for Disease Control)
- [Judith Heumann](#) (National Women's History Museum)
- [Judy Heumann: The Life and Legacy of "The Mother" of the Disability Rights Movement](#)
- [Judy Heumann, Who Led the Fight for Disability Rights, Dies at 75](#) (New York Times, March 5, 2023)
- [Rolling Warrior: The Incredible, Sometimes Awkward, True Story of a Rebel Girl on Wheels Who Helped Spark a Revolution](#) (Children's book for ages 10-13)

Common Core Anchor Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text. R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas. R7: Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue
Writing
W1: Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. SL3: Delineate a speaker's argument and specific claims, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate. L5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings. L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

CASEL's SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Relationship Skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

Judy Heumann, unyielding advocate for disability rights, dies at 75

By Harrison Smith, The Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff

Judy Heumann spent decades fighting for the dignity of people with disabilities. She campaigned for civil rights legislation while organizing sit-ins, marches and other nonviolent protests. She later served as an official at the institutions she had worked so hard to change. She died on March 4, 2023, in Washington, D.C. She was 75.

At a young age, Heumann (pronounced human) was paralyzed from polio. Polio is a disease. People who are paralyzed are unable to move certain limbs. Polio mostly affects children. She grew up at a time when disabled people had little access to public transportation, education or employment. She tried to change that.

Heumann said that disability becomes tragedy when society does not provide the things disabled people need to lead their lives. “It is not a tragedy to me that I’m living in a wheelchair,” she said.

In a statement, President Joe Biden described her as “a rolling warrior for disability rights in America.” He added that her courage encouraged the passage of important legislation. One of the laws she fought for was the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. It outlawed discrimination based on disability.

Fighting For The Rehabilitation Act Of 1973

Within the disability community, Heumann was best known for fighting for the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. It outlawed discrimination in programs receiving government money.

Even after the law was passed, the government did not put into effect the most important part of Section 504. Heumann and about 100 other people started protesting. They began a nearly monthlong sit-in at a government office in San Francisco, California.

The demonstration became known as the 504 Sit-in. It was a turning point for disability rights.

“People weren’t used to thinking of us as fighters — when they thought about us at all,” Heumann recalled. Still, she had long ago learned to ignore what other people said.

She Got Polio At Age 2

Judith Ellen Heumann was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on December 18, 1947, and grew up in Brooklyn, New York. Her parents were Jewish immigrants from Germany who were sent to the United States as teenagers; both were orphans.

Heumann caught polio the year she turned 2. That polio outbreak affected 42,000 Americans. She was barred from going to school and received only a few hours of home schooling each week.

With support from her parents, Heumann was eventually allowed into school. She also attended Camp Jened, a summer camp for people with disabilities. The camp served as a “playground,” as she put it, for future leaders of the disability rights movement.

They swam, played baseball and did arts and crafts, just like kids who did not have disabilities. “But we were also having time to gather our own voices,” she later said.

Heumann Sued The NYC Board Of Education

Heumann studied speech and theater at Long Island University. She graduated in 1969, and planned to become a teacher. The New York City Board of Education denied her application. It said that she had failed the physical examination because of her paralysis. Heumann sued.

The city gave in and Heumann got her teaching license. She taught at an elementary school and became an activist. She moved west to help run a disability rights group. In 1975, she received a master’s degree in public health from the University of California, Berkeley.

Heumann moved to Washington, D.C., in 1993, to work for the Education Department. President Barack Obama later appointed her the first special adviser for international disability rights. She pushed for the U.S. to sign the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a United Nations treaty.

Heumann was still protesting in recent years, said Maria Town. She is the president of the American Association of People with Disabilities. Heumann took part in a march to protest proposed cuts to Medicaid. “She was really focused on making sure disabled people understood our power,” said Town.

KWL(Know, Want to Know, Learned) Chart

Know	Want to Know	Learned

Judy Heumann Quotes

“Change never happens at the pace we think it should. It happens over years of people joining together, strategizing, sharing, and pulling all the levers they possibly can. Gradually, excruciatingly slowly, things start to happen, and then suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, something will tip.”

“Part of the problem is that we tend to think that equality is about treating everyone the same, when it’s not. It’s about fairness. It’s about equity of access.”

“Because the country was so inaccessible, disabled people had a hard time getting out and doing things—which made us invisible. So, we were easy to discount and ignore. Until institutions were forced to accommodate us, we would remain locked out and invisible—and as long as we were locked out and invisible, no one would see our true force and would dismiss us.”

“I was confused and heart-wrenchingly sad to the point of numbness. I just couldn’t understand what I had to do to be seen as an ordinary person.”

“When other people see you as a third-class citizen, the first thing you need is a belief in yourself and the knowledge that you have rights. The next thing you need is a group of friends to fight back with.”

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