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## On the passing of Judy Heumann, a Disability Rights Activist Hero

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## Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

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Judy Heumann was a major American Civil Rights hero who battled prejudice and discrimination to gain equal opportunity for all persons with disabilities. She passed away on March 4, 2023. Having contracted polio as a young child, she fought for inclusion in everyday activities and as a student led disability rights protests at Long Island University. In 1970 she won a lawsuit against the New York City Board of Education for denying her a teacher's license because of her disability.

A year after I had completed my undergraduate studies at the College of the Pacific, the passage of the landmark American with Disabilities Act in 1990 was a national milestone for higher education and became a central influence in my early career. I first learned about Ms. Heumann's work in this context as a higher education professional - as I would eventually lead university-wide efforts for students with disabilities as dean of students.



Judy Heumann

(credit: [Netflix](#))

The San Francisco Bay Area has been the central location for advancing the disability justice movement and Judy Heumann was at the center of that happening. In the spring of 1977, disabled persons took over a federal building in San Francisco demanding lawmakers to include milestone anti-discrimination language for people with disabilities in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

During that protest, at the age of 29, Ms. Heumann emerged as a leader and was recorded saying the following, *“We will no longer allow the government to oppress disabled individuals. We want the law enforced. We will accept no more discussion of segregation. And I would appreciate it if you would stop shaking your head in agreement when I don’t think you understand what we are talking about.”*

Simply put, Ms. Heumann was a civil rights giant of our time. Her life’s work has fundamentally shaped my approach to DEI as academic ableism works to maintain a privileged ‘abled’ status quo and urges me to think critically about the possibilities of universal design learning in higher education. Her legacy continues in how I lead, pushing me and others to understand how disability justice is the intersectional equity issue of our time and central to realizing the promises of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.

Sincerely,



**Mary J. Lomax-Ghirarduzzi**

Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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