

LEADERS IN THE DISABILITY CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Case Example A – Judy Heumann

When Judy Heumann was an infant, she had polio. As a child, she was not always allowed to go to school with other children. Judy was in school before there were laws to protect the civil rights of students with disabilities. After high school, Judy became a student at Long Island University.

The university was not designed for students using wheelchairs, but she helped organize disabled students to fight for ramps into buildings. Judy wanted to become a teacher, but when she graduated she was not allowed to become a certified teacher. Judy filed a law suit claiming discrimination and finally got her teaching certificate, but it still took a while before a school offered her a job.

When Judy was fighting job discrimination, her case got the attention of television and newspaper reporters. When other people with disabilities heard her story, they wrote and called her. In 1970, she organized a group called Disabled in Action (DIA). The group was involved in political protests to increase public attention of disability civil rights issues.

In 1973, Judy moved to Berkeley, California and used her experience in fighting for civil rights of people with disabilities by working with other Disability Advocates at the first Center for Independent Living. In 1977, she was one of the leaders of the group that held a twenty-eight day sit-in protest about the Rehabilitation Act at a federal building in San Francisco. In 1981, Judy worked with Ed Roberts and Joan Leon to start the World Institute on Disability (WID). Working for WID, Judy traveled all over the world working with disabled people fighting for their civil rights.

In 1993, President Clinton appointed Judy to be the Assistant Secretary of The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS). As the Assistant Secretary, Judy was responsible for all special education and rehabilitation programs for people with disabilities in the United States. After leaving her position with the U.S. Department of Education, Judy became the Advisor on Disability & Development at The World Bank where she continues to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities around the world.

Case Example B – Wade Blank

Wade Blank's first experience with disabled people was in 1971 when he got a job working with young people with disabilities who were living in a nursing home. Before working at the nursing home, Wade had worked with various groups protesting the Vietnam War and fighting for the civil rights of African Americans. At the nursing home, he realized quickly that it was inappropriate for people with disabilities to have to live in an institution.

Working with the young disabled residents at the nursing home, Wade helped start a Center for Independent Living in Denver, Colorado. The center helped people move out of nursing homes and find accessible homes in their community, and trained people to be personal assistants. A personal assistant helps a person with a disability accomplish daily activities such as getting in and out of bed, dressing, going to the bathroom, eating, and other tasks.

Even though people with disabilities had made great progress in advocating for the right to move out of nursing homes and other institutions, there were still many barriers to full access and inclusion in their communities. One of the biggest problems was that public buses were not accessible. In 1978, Wade and nineteen people with disabilities organized the first demonstration to demand accessible buses by blocking traffic in a busy intersection in Denver. The group called itself ADAPT (American Disabled for Accessible Public Transportation).

The organization quickly expanded to other cities around the country. For more than ten years, they held demonstrations to fight for accessible public transportation. Wade Blank and ADAPT helped get accessible public transportation included in The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that became law in 1990.

When the ADA became law, ADAPT changed its name to American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today. Since 1990, ADAPT has focused on advocating for people with disabilities to have in-home personal assistant services instead of having to live in nursing homes. Wade Blank and his son died in a swimming accident in 1993. Today, ADAPT members all over the United States still fight for the rights of people with disabilities.

Case Example C – Ed Roberts

In 1953, Ed Roberts became disabled due to polio at the age of fourteen. Polio affects each person differently. Ed could only move two fingers. When Ed was older, he learned to use his fingers to operate a power wheelchair. He also used an iron lung and respirator machine to help him breathe.

After almost two years in the hospital, Ed moved home. This was before there were laws to protect the rights of disabled students. Ed and his family fought the schools to let him attend school with other kids instead of having teachers come to his home. Eventually, Ed was allowed to go to school with other kids.

When Ed graduated from high school, he went to a junior college. Ed wanted to study political science at the University of California in Berkeley. He again had to fight the school because they did not want him to be a student. The school was not accessible to people using wheelchairs and none of the dormitories had floors strong enough to hold the weight of Ed's eight-hundred-pound iron lung. In 1962, Ed finally started attending the university and lived in the university hospital.

After Ed entered the university, more disabled students were allowed to attend. These students then started a disabled student organization on campus. The students worked on projects such as making the campus more accessible, and training people to provide the physical assistance the students needed everyday. The students learned how to fight for their rights as disabled people.

The student group realized the independence skills they were learning from each other were very important for all disabled people, not just university students. In 1972, Ed helped the student group start the first Center for Independent Living. The center was a radical approach to programs for disabled people because it was run by people with disabilities instead of medical professionals.

After being the director of the Center for Independent Living in Berkeley, Ed became the first person with a disability to serve as the Director of California's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. In 1981, Ed Roberts, Judy Heumann, and Joan Leon started an organization called the World Institute on Disability (WID) in Berkeley, California. WID studies discrimination and legal rights issues for people with disabilities around the world. Ed was the President of WID until his death in March 1995.