

# Review of *Crip Camp*

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“This camp changed the world, and nobody knows this story.” – Jim LeBrecht

I remember a former patient referring to herself as a “crip.” As a physician who uses a wheelchair, I was not offended. I also did not interpret her comment as an indicator of poor self-esteem. Instead, I believed it was a sign that she was comfortable with her disability. Terms such as “crip,” “cripple” and “gimp” have been used by people with disabilities (PWDs) as terms of empowerment, taking formerly insulting terms and repurposing them into words of advocacy.

Thus, seeing an ad for the Netflix documentary *Crip Camp* intrigued me. While I am somewhat familiar with the disability rights movement, I found the film fascinating. It can be enjoyed by anyone, not just those with an interest in disability history. Sensitive viewers may be offended by some of the language and sexual discussions. As an example of its inclusivity, it has audio descriptions and closed captioning in numerous languages.

*Crip Camp*, whose executive producers were Barack and Michelle Obama, shows footage and interviews from Camp Jened, a summer camp for PWDs. According to Jim LeBrecht, former camper and co-director of the film, it was run by “hippies” without disability experience. Camp director Larry Allison explains the camp philosophy: “As it evolved in the ‘60s and into the ‘70s, what we tried to do was provide the kind of environment where teenagers could be teenagers without all the stereotypes and labels.” The counselors facilitated participation in all the activities, regardless of severity of disability. In the days before widespread curb cuts and ramps, the camp itself had relatively good accessibility. Campers were more independent than they were

at home. They are seen discussing frustrations with their parents’ overprotectiveness and lack of privacy and grieving when the camp ended. However, the independence they experienced empowered them to seek changes to society outside the camp.

The documentary introduces us to camp counselor Judy Heumann. As a young child she was initially denied admission to school because her chair was assumed to be a fire hazard. Footage from Camp Jened shows her as an emerging leader. The documentary then follows her efforts to improve access to New York’s public transit system and suing the state so she could teach school. She became president of Disabled in Action and advocated for deinstitutionalization of PWDs.

Judy Heumann later fought for passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The act prohibited disability discrimination by entities that received federal funds. It eventually passed, but initially the Department of Health, Education and Welfare essentially did nothing to enforce it. Judy Heumann and other activists then occupied the San Francisco HEW offices to try to force HEW to do so. Despite the cut off of hot water, bomb scares by the FBI, and other intimidation, dozens of protesters with diverse disabilities occupied the office for weeks. Some participants in the sit-in were on a hunger strike. When the phones were cut off, people went to the windows to communicate by sign language with supporters outside the building. The group had cultivated relationships with a coalition of non-disabled supporters. As described in the film, members of the Black Panther Party brought food and never asked for payment, because “[they were] trying to make the world a better place.”

HEW proposed separate schools for all children with disabilities. In a meeting with two Congressmen and

a staff member from HEW, Judy Heumann testified, “We will no longer allow the government to . . . oppress disabled individuals. We want the law enforced. . . We will accept no more discussion of segregation.”

The 504 protests eventually were successful; the rules were in place. However, Section 504 was limited in its scope; it does not cover private businesses and employer discrimination. The Camp Jened team and others then worked for the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Watching a child struggle up the steps of the Capitol building during the Capitol Crawl in 1990 made me proud to be a PWD and regret that I had not participated.

Clips of the media coverage of the movement are effectively used throughout the film. Some reporters covered the protests positively and others were quite offensive. Parts of the documentary are hilarious. The discussions about sexually transmitted infections and hierarchy of disability are particularly entertaining and poignant. As a pediatric physiatrist, I often had to turn off my medical model brain and stop thinking about trying trihexyphenidyl for some of the PWDs featured and wanting to modify peoples’ wheelchairs. The film is about civil rights, not medical care.

Like other pediatric physiatrists, I routinely discuss 504 plans and Individualized Education Plans. I had the luxury of not having to fight to attend school because of the advocacy of the campers featured in *Crip Camp*. I have benefitted daily from the improved accessibility and opportunities provided by the ADA. My patients do too. We need to keep in mind, however, that these rights were hard-fought and continue to be under threat. We cannot assume they will be there forever. This film does a remarkable job demonstrating how far the disability rights movement has come and empowering viewers to continue the fight against discrimination.

“The ADA was a wonderful achievement. But it was only a tiny tip of the iceberg. You can pass a law, but until you change society’s attitudes, that law won’t mean much.” – Denise Sherer Jacobson, author and former camper

#### **Conflict of interest**

The author has no conflicts of interest to report.