



FILM: **CRIP CAMP**

FDG RATING: 4.5 😊😊😊😊😊  
Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Jim Le Brecht and Nicole Newnham: *directors*  
Documentary:  
Judy Heumann, Jim Le Brecht, and others

DATE: September 20, 2020

## DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **CRIP CAMP**

Crip Camp is a compelling, entertaining, enlightening, “must see” documentary that shows us what it was like to be a disabled teen in the 1970s and how a little known camp, created specifically for disabled teens, fostered strength, confidence, and a determination to fight for equality and change the way they were treated.

Camp Jened, or Crip Camp as it was nick-named, was created in the 1970s in the New York Catskills, (close to Woodstock) as a safe, fun place where teens with disabilities could be themselves without feeling embarrassed, self-conscious. They do all the fun and even risky things that other teens do and no one judges, not even the counselors, a title bestowed on the most responsible disabled teens. It's where we first meet Judy Heumann, a camp counselor, wheel chair bound from polio. Exhibiting an exuberant energy and innate organization and leadership skills, she rallies the campers for numerous activities. For her and many of the others, Crip Camp was an incubation experience where they honed their individual abilities, enabling them to achieve much more than anyone expected. Judy, a central figure in the film, went on to tackle the most challenging obstacles, leading the equal rights movement, fearlessly confronting a system that was intimidatingly stacked against her.

But what makes the film so warm and engaging is seeing it through the eyes of Jim Le Brecht, born with spina bifida, who we meet as he reluctantly attends his first summer session at the camp, not knowing what to expect. He is now an adult using his career in sound design with a focus on documentary films to tell the inspiring, eye-opening story about Camp Jened with co-director, Nicole Newnham.

The film begins with a treasure of archival footage where we get to know the free-wheeling spirited teens. We enjoy seeing their personalities as they express themselves freely, without feeling stifled, overly protected, or rejected- relegated to the basement classroom at their public school. One of our favorite female campers, who has cerebral palsy, is ballsy with an exceptional sense of humor and is open about her inquisitive need to explore her sexually. We meet her again as an adult, happily married, with the same sharp, engaging intellectual wit and sense of humor. The raw, vintage footage is peppered with more recent interviews with those same individuals, then segues to the profound political activism that many of the camp participants got involved in as they demanded change. Their experience at Camp Jened was formative, emboldening them with desire to be treated equally. It was no longer acceptable to be treated as a second class citizen with limited access. It's a fight that has had little light shed on it. We even see David, as a young adult, working at Berkeley Theater, with no wheel chair access, having to hoist himself up the stairs.

There are many powerful scenes in the film where we see Judy passionately, persuasively, petitioning for equity. One scene in particular is when certain legislation is passed, she poignantly refuses to be grateful for the basic right of an accessible bathroom. We also see how Black Panthers and LGBTQ+ activists at the time rallied alongside, aware that their individual fights were ultimately not that different. We agreed that the most impactful segment was the stunning 26-day, physically and mentally exhausting sit-in that Heumann and her fellow activists undertook at a San Francisco federal building, in 1977, to demand that Health, Education and Welfare department head, Joseph Califano, sign Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. It would radically reshape our civil landscape, enshrining the rights of disabled folks into law for the first time, expanding job opportunities and requiring accessibility for buildings and transit. It was a decisive first milestone in the eventual signing of the American Disability Act in 1990.

One discussion participant pointed out that this was happening in our own SF Bay Area backyard, and yet we know very little about the back story of these courageous individuals. Another discussion participant who lived in Berkeley, remembered hearing that it was too costly, wasn't feasible to make physical accommodations for disabled.

Extremely educational and inspirational, the film received unanimously high scores. The only hesitation was from one resident reviewer who, comparing it to other outstanding documentaries we have seen, thought, from a production perspective, it could have been fine-tuned further in the hands of an award-winning film maker with a larger budget. But Crip Camp still earned a rousing 4.3 on our scale of 1 to 5. 5 is the best.

See you at the movies!

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