



**James Lebrecht, Nicole Newnham, dir.** *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution*. Chicago: Higher Ground Productions, 2020. 106 mins.

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The opening black-and-white scene is from the early 1970s. A group of adolescents at a camp in the Catskills, in time-honored teenage summer camp tradition, are sitting around a table and complaining about their parents' overprotectiveness, which here has been exacerbated by fearful parental reactions to their disabilities. From her wheelchair, a camper with cerebral palsy speaks at length in a voice that many viewers may find difficult to understand. Her fellow campers patiently let her talk, as does the camera. A similarly situated male camper then interprets; she has insightfully spoken about her desire to "think alone" and the effects of her inability to exercise her "right to privacy." She responds, "That's true." There is likely no better argument for public deliberation to include embodied and collaborative speech for real understanding, even at the imagined cost of clarity, as Stacey Clifford has claimed, than this brief and moving scene.[1] Otherwise, as we see, insightful voices will be marginalized and the common good diminished.

*Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution*, directed by Nicole Newnham and James "Jimmy" LeBrecht, who was a camper present at that conversation, is based on interviews and archival footage shot between 1971 and 1973 by the People's Video Theater at Camp Jened. At the New York camp, students like Jimmy, who was born with spina bifida, was

only allowed to enter school in the first grade on a "trial basis," and never allowed in the Cub Scouts, were finally able to be themselves. After all, as Jimmy says, "everyone had something going on with their bodies." There, at Camp Jened, Jimmy even met his first girlfriend. A counselor, Judy E. Heumann, who had attended school in a basement reserved for students with disabilities, is shown leading inclusive group discussions, including about quotidian decisions on lasagna for a meal. "I didn't want to sideline anybody. We are willing to listen," she says. Unfortunately, at the time, few others were willing to listen in a world that, as Jimmy observes, "wasn't built for us," and where, as Judy remembers, she was seen "not as Judy, but someone who was sick." [2]

Lindsey Patterson has written about summer camps, including Camp Jened, that created a newfound sense of community and possibility among campers with disabilities and thus fostered future activism for equal access.[3] This documentary confirms her work and adds a new angle: Camp Jened was "run by hippies." It was "like Woodstock," "utopian," and one could not tell camper from counselor. There do not appear to be medical or bureaucratic authorities. When the camp director, Larry Allison, is first depicted, he is cryptically digging holes, imagining that it would be funny if campers "tripped" in absurdist humor. The camp

seems carnivalesque, not only in the absence of the usual hierarchical order—which could even apply to those with disabilities, polio over cerebral palsy—but also in the necessary emphasis on bodies that, in all their biological variety, discover a new world together, whether through sports, the rituals of budding teenage sexuality, or even in having to “work together” to shower and get rid of lice.[4]

*Crip Camp* then follows a number of campers, including Debbie P. Sherer, who gets a master’s degree in human sexuality and eventually wrote about sexuality and campers at Camp Jened.[5] But it mostly follows Jimmy, as he leaves New York for California for college, reunites with some Camp Jened alumni—one a prominent follower of the Grateful Dead—and comes into contact with the Center for Individual Living (CIL) at Berkeley where “the severely disabled help themselves” and where the goal was to “make the handicapped self-sufficient.” Once more, we see how the history of disability activism was nurtured by camp-like groups that Scot Danforth has described as “a handful of UCB [University of California, Berkeley] students hanging out together,” here in an “old hospital ward dormitory.”[6] At CIL, Heumann, former Camp Jened counselor, already a veteran of litigation and protests in New York, and now a Berkeley graduate student, organized protests against the lack of enforcement of §504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

The Rehabilitation Act had included, with little congressional discussion, §504: “No otherwise qualified individual with a handicap shall, solely by reason of her or his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” Even if it did not apply to the private sector, the amendment as written was not enforced by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) because of lobbyists—including educational lobbyists—and it had barely been litigated. *Crip*

*Camp* follows Heumann as the former camp counselor organizes protests in San Francisco that involve occupying a federal building for twenty-five days, still an oft-unrecognized record.

*Crip Camp* continually emphasizes the agency of those with disabilities. In that San Francisco occupation, when the phone lines were cut off, deaf protesters signed through open windows. Here, the documentary also describes many groups coming together—union members, the prominently liberal Glide Memorial Church, and Black Panthers who brought food to the demonstrators, one Panther declaring, “You are trying to make the world a better place.” When Joseph Califano, President Jimmy Carter’s secretary of HEW, sent a representative, he ominously talked about enforcing §504 “with all deliberate speed,” echoing the slow response to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and he was accused of supporting “separate but equal” for those with disabilities.[7] In reality, as Patterson and Jennifer Erkulwater have noted, there could be tensions between all these groups.[8] *Crip Camp* emphasizes the participation of Camp Jened alumni in the protest. “It was camp,” remembers one protester.

A delegation brought the protests to Washington, DC, in the form of demonstrations in front of Califano’s house and Carter’s church. Califano, who had worried about costs to small town libraries and the perils of the “handicapped” including drug addicts, finally signed regulations to generate enforcement of §504. Jimmy—LeBrecht, not Carter—who then worked for the Berkeley Repertory Theater, notes that when a new theater was built in 1980, it had to be more accessible. “The physical world around me began to be more accessible,” he says. Previously, he had to crawl up stairs.

But the election of Ronald Reagan made it clear that “we needed a civil rights law of our own.” *Crip Camp* ends triumphantly and it keeps focus on the grassroots activism of those with disabilities themselves, with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. The ADA

covered public *and* private entities, whether or not they received federal funding, and, to show the fight for it, *Crip Camp* shows footage of the Capitol Crawl, during which activist wheelchair users dramatically crawled up the Capitol steps. The documentary pronounces, “In the end it was the disabled themselves who made it happen.” They had finally been heard.

Obviously, no documentary, however engaging, can show all aspects of a movement. The emphasis on grassroots activism and local community means that some of the *institutional* factors in the movement may be neglected. For instance, as Patterson notes, as a college student, Heumann spent her summers as a counselor at Camp Jened, but Long Island University also played an important role in her life: the health sciences professor Ted Childs significantly influenced her, and she, with him, organized a conference at the university about discrimination. Further, as Linda Rothstein has pointed out, even if the Capitol Crawl was undoubtedly moving and even iconic, the ADA was being voted on that day and, unknown to the protesters, already had received congressional support.[9] Furthermore, the action did not draw universal support from those with disabilities—for instance, the injured war veteran Senator Bob Dole opposed it.

The film’s uplifting ending, with the passage of the ADA, can also be questioned. A couple in the documentary, Neil and Debbie Jacobson, both with cerebral palsy, who met at Camp Jened—even though Neil’s mother wanted him to marry “a polio”—recognize that what is really important is “society’s attitudes” rather than the law, and the documentary shows them happily married with a child. But *Crip Camp* does not cover if and when the ADA marked a real change in society’s attitudes. As Michael Ashley Stein has noted, a mere two years after the ADA was passed, President George H. W. Bush nominated Richard C. Casey, who was blind, to serve as a district court judge. [10] In an editorial, the *New York Times* suggested

that Casey could likely not be sufficiently attentive to his surroundings—he could not see an “inflammatory poster” introduced as an exhibit, and, besides, “the ability to make eye contact has almost universally been assumed indispensable for the task of trial judging.”

Nevertheless, *Crip Camp* is still valuable in its emphasis on a carnivalesque and informal camp as the place in which people with disabilities no longer had to “deny” a part of who they were and could finally be heard. The philosopher Anita Silvers has suggested that people with disabilities should not cultivate dependence or vulnerability as it “invites more suffering because it induces more need,” and “it becomes socially incumbent upon [those with disabilities] to profess incompetence even where they are more competent than” those without disabilities. Instead, before dependence can be discerned, those with disabilities should strive for equal access, for the elimination of “artificial and arbitrary barriers to the exercise of talent.” This is a “visibility of full participatory citizenship.”[11] *Crip Camp* is an example of the decisive effects of embryonic participatory citizenship.

In a now-closed hippie summer camp in New York State’s Catskill Mountains, teenagers with disabilities were allowed to participate in everyday decisions about lasagna, be the “cool kids” for the first time, make out with their first girlfriends or boyfriends, play in organized sports, and speak about the importance of being able to “think alone” while others patiently listened and interpreted. The campers then moved on to demonstrate for the common good. *Crip Camp* is exemplary and would make an excellent addition to courses in history, civic education, or social studies, especially those that otherwise would seem to limit civic engagement to schools—places that in their formality may not be as hospitable to embodied and collaborative speech as a summer camp in the Catskills.

Notes

[1]. Stacey Clifford, "Making Disability Public in Deliberative Democracy," *Contemporary Political Theory* 11, no. 2 (2012): 211-28.

[2]. See Judith E. Heumann, *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020).

[3]. Lindsay Patterson, "Points of Access: Rehabilitation Centers, Summer Camps, and Student Life in the Making of Disability Activism, 1960-1973," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 2 (2012): 473-99.

[4]. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (1941; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968); and Charles Lock, "Carnival and Incarnation: Bakhtin and Orthodox Theology," *Literature and Theology* 5, no. 1 (1991): 68-82.

[5]. Deborah P. Sherer, "Broadening Horizons: A Human Sexuality Program at Summer Camp," *Sexuality and Disability* 3, no. 2 (1980): 105-11.

[6]. Scot Danforth, "Becoming the Rolling Quads: Disability Politics at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1960s," *History of Education Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2018): 506-36.

[7]. Joseph Califano, *Governing America: An Insider's Report from the White House and the Cabinet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981).

[8]. Patterson, "Points of Access"; and Jennifer Erkulwater, "How the Nation's Largest Minority Became White: Race Politics and the Disability Rights Movement, 1970-1980," *Journal of Policy History* 30, no. 3 (2018): 367-99.

[9]. Linda Rothstein, "Would the ADA Pass Today? Disability Rights in an Age of Partisan Polarization," *Saint Louis University Journal of Health Law & Policy* 12, no. 2 (2019): 271-309.

[10]. Michael Stein, "From Crippled to Disabled: The Legal Empowerment of Americans with Disabilities," *Emory Law Journal* 43, no. 1 (1994): 245-70.

[11]. Anita Silvers, "Formal Justice," in *Disability, Difference, Discrimination: Perspectives on Jus-*

*tice in Bioethics and Public Policy*, by Anita Silvers, David Wasserman, and Mary Briody Mahowald (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 97-8, 119, 145.

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