

ADA 30

1990 - 2020

The ADA at 30 and the Power of Film to Remember

Whatever else 2020 was, it was also the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the law banning discrimination based on disability and requiring reasonable accommodations in our schools, workplaces and public life. Signed into law by President George H.W. Bush on July 26, 1990, the ADA followed decades of activism and previous disability rights laws, including Section 504 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Like most civil rights legislation, the act didn't cause America to change overnight. But it did provide an articulation of values enshrined in law that would slowly become the basis for standards in our institutions, including within higher education. Thirty years later these civil rights remain aspirational. If we know what's good for us, we'll all keep working at it.

In classes at Immaculata, when I teach the history of deinstitutionalization—the movement to house disabled people in their communities rather than in institutions separate from their families and peers—it's common for my students to gasp when they learn that disabled children were not legally guaranteed the right to education in the U.S. until the 1970s. I'm never sure how to interpret that gasp. Does it show how far we've come that students today are shocked to learn this history? Or does it show how far we've yet to go that the history of disability rights isn't taught in our secondary schools? My students are part of what has been called "the ADA generation," growing up with inclusive education as a birthright. And yet, 2020 has shown us that inequality persists.

This past spring we saw COVID tear through our long-term care facilities and other congregate settings that house disabled people. Disabled people are still twice as likely to live in poverty and more likely to work part-time or low-wage jobs without paid sick leave, meaning they are more vulnerable to the economic and health impacts of the pandemic.

The Americans with Disabilities Act galvanized an umbrella category, "people with disabilities." In other words, it popularized the language used to describe the kinds of systemic inequities the pandemic has laid bare. Simultaneously, the virus has asserted our shared vulnerability—a basic fact of the human condition that the ADA also lifted into public discourse. One of the paradoxes of disability rights is that even as "people with disabilities" are by now an accepted constituency, the right to be treated fairly under the law regardless of disability status will likely apply to each and every one of us at some point in our lives—even if temporarily.

Here's another paradox: a front page article in *The Inquirer* this October includes yet another story about how people with disabilities represent an untapped voting block. And yet, *The New York Times* op-ed commemorating the signing of the ADA this past July argues that disabled people remain invisible despite accounting for 20% of the population. How is it that such a large group of people, of Americans, of voters, remains teetering between invisibility and hyper-visibility?

Perhaps we lack the storytelling that would make authentic disabled experience not just visible, but memorable. To remember is not only to recall, but also to put ourselves, some part of our identity, there in the past with the actors who experienced it.

"Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution" is a documentary that immerses viewers in disability culture and proposes a fresh connection between civil rights and belonging. A Grand Jury Prize Winner at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival, *Crip Camp* is framed as Woodstock meets sleep-away camp for disabled teens. It's full of contemporaneous black-and-white footage of the camp complete with ripped jeans, tie-dye shirts and young people swimming, dancing, hugging and generally getting rowdy. They also hold communal meetings and seem to be inventing an ethic of care and inclusion. The real story is how the young people at what was known as Camp Jened grew up to lead the 504 Sit-in in San Francisco, the longest peaceful occupation of a federal building in American history. While Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act had already been passed, regulations that would allow it to be implemented, including definitions of what constituted discrimination, had not been written in the years after its passage. Disability activists demanded action.

"Crip Camp" is the story of the movement that eventually led to the ADA, but it's still a good way to celebrate. It has all the hallmarks of powerful past-making: unlikely heroes, rebellious teens, 1970s subculture and a familiar soundtrack. How the community built at a sleep-away camp became the basis for meaningful political action holds lessons for many of us, mostly about the power of humble servants at humble places with pie-in-the-sky vision. That may sound like a familiar tale, but that's also what makes it memorable. [IU](#)



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