Celebrating Disability Advocacy Week (DAW)

by Daisy L. Breneman

"Inclusion is moving from 'we tolerate your presence' to 'we WANT you here with us.'"

- Jillian Enright

Because this week is Disability Advocacy Week, sponsored by the Office of Disability Services, we wanted to take this moment to reflect on ways that we can celebrate disability as a form of diversity and be(come) disability advocates. Focusing on disability offers opportunities and insights that can help us be more effective teachers—since inclusive teaching *is quality teaching*—and work to create campuses and communities that are truly welcoming.

Unfortunately, we are also mourning a great loss. On March 4, 2023, the world lost Judith Heumann: a fierce disability advocate (and, according to the *Washington Post* and so many others, confirmed badass) whose accomplishments and contributions to disability rights were far more numerous than any Toolbox could contain.

Judy Heumann could not be contained.

As we mourn her loss, we can also celebrate and draw lessons from her life. About tenacity. About not backing down, even when confronted with threats, hostility, the hugeness of the task of securing and defending disability rights. She imagined, and helped create, a world in which we celebrate the multitude of ways there are to be human.

We can't be Judy, but we can do our part. While not an inclusive list, here are some ideas for ways we can work toward disability advocacy:

- Attend and support Disability Advocacy Week, the work of the Office of Disability Services, the Disability Studies minor, as well as student organizations and efforts around disability access and inclusion. Consider joining the CFI on April 17 or 19 for a workshop on "Creating Meaningful Access."

- Include disability and disability studies in existing courses; create new courses on disability; and hire new colleagues with expertise and experience around disability. Recent cohort hires, with racial justice and Latinx focuses, are powerful examples of ways to create positive change; could

we focus a hire around disability too? Disability touches [every discipline](#) and can [enrich every classroom](#), including with the kinds of critical questions it asks about the construction of identity. Learn more through the JMU Libraries [Disability Studies Research Guide](#).

- While it's important to address the harms of [ableism](#) and the difficult truths of [disability history](#), it's also important to create space for [joy](#), [pride](#), and [celebration](#) of disability identity and [disability justice](#).

- Consider ways that an understanding and celebration of [neurodiversity](#) can enhance all our lives and learning. Efforts like the [Neurodiversity Initiative](#) at William and Mary, or the [BASE program](#) at Bridgewater College, contribute greatly to increasing diversity and inclusion in higher education and could serve as models here.

- Continue working to create [inclusive classrooms](#), which is an ongoing journey for all of us. Collaborate with colleagues, read [Toolboxes](#) and books, participate in professional development opportunities, and engage in continual reflection. Inclusive teaching is not a checklist—it's about [being authentic](#), building trusting relationships, participating in [reflection and feedback cycles](#), and committing to iteration and accountability.

- While inclusive teaching is a continual process, there are ways to incorporate [Universal Design for Learning](#), [accessibility,](#) and other inclusive instructional approaches incrementally, and in ways that can reduce our workloads later. [Proactive planning](#) for access is typically more effective, and efficient, than trying to retrofit when [a barrier](#) is pointed out after the fact.

- Related, we shouldn't wait for accommodation letters [to provide access](#). While ODS access plans are vital for creating access, there are many students who choose not to [disclose disability](#) or who may encounter barriers to registering with ODS (e.g., the high costs of getting a medical diagnosis). Designing our classes with access in mind from the get-go means that the greatest number of students can benefit.

- Take [collective accountability for care](#), believe people when they express their needs, and affirm, validate, and respond to those needs. Work to create communities of care in our classroom and work environments.

- Address [microaggressions](#) and reflect on our own internalized assumptions and biases. Disability microaggressions can take many forms, including making jokes, using [non-preferred language](#), [imitating individuals with disabilities](#), having [low expectations](#), or grumbling about a particular access feature. Unfortunately, these can be common on college campuses, and they [harm everyone involved](#), taking away bandwidth from full participation in learning.

- Confront [stereotypes](#) and [myths about disability](#), including those around [inspiration](#), [violence](#), or [overcoming](#). Recognize that we all receive harmful and misleading messages around disability, but that we can all work to change those narratives.

While these bullet points are designed to offer some quick ideas (per the Toolbox genre), that does not mean that any of the above is easy or simple. This work requires us to engage in continual reflection, and to notice and [challenge ableism](#), in ourselves and others; we might worry about the impact on relationships if we question a student, colleague, or friend's actions or viewpoints. There are many ways that we might fail in disability advocacy—particularly in this age of student disengagement, faculty burnout, and the ongoing impacts of the last few, tough years. But we can try to be better. As [Maya Angelou](#) said ([actually said](#)), "When you know better, you do better."

Knowing (and doing) better is an ongoing process, of course, and not always a linear one. We may struggle with many parts of it, including to recognize and [apologize](#) for mistakes. The goal isn't to be perfect—in fact, [perfection is a concept that reinforces ableism](#). Rather, it's all about the process, the collaborative journey, of recognizing existing problems and barriers, and working to create the kind of world Judy Heumann, and so many others, imagined for us. As Judy reminded us:

"Change never happens at the pace we think it should. It happens over years of people joining together, strategizing, sharing, and pulling all the levers they possibly can. Gradually, excruciatingly slowly, things start to happen, and then suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, something will tip."
- Judith Heumann, *[Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist](#)*

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