

Women's History Month and the Disability Rights Movement

by Roberta Rosenberg

As I watched the opening ceremonies of the 2026 ParaOlympics Games in Italy, I was awed by the many determined athletes there to show the world what they can do. I was especially taken by Michela Benthaus, a German aerospace engineer and paraplegic who is the first wheelchair user to travel to space (12/25). Although I should not have been surprised, I found her strength, both physical and mental, encouraging for all women, especially those with a disability.

Women have always been central to the disability rights movement. They have been founders, strategists, and trailblazers, who have transformed inclusion through advocacy, and action.

Women were instrumental in securing the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act), founding organizations like The Arc, AHRC and the Disability Visibility Project. Women with disabilities have always been in the forefront of fighting for the rights of all.

Judy Heumann, often called the “Mother of the Disability Rights Movement,” led pivotal actions such as the 1977 Section 504 Sit-ins, which secured the first federal civil rights protections for disabled Americans. Elizabeth Boggs and Patricia Wright were instrumental in drafting and negotiating the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), ensuring its passage in 1990. Alice Wong amplifies diverse disabled voices through the Disability Visibility Project. Lois Curtis fought the landmark Supreme Court Case *Olmstead v. L.C.* to secure the right to live in the community rather than institutions .

Challenging ableism and sexism, these woman have not only advanced legal rights but also redefined disability as a matter of human dignity.

Women with disabilities continue to be critical to the disability world because they embody the inclusion of gender and disability. As leaders and activists they ensure that advocacy is inclusive, addressing both patriarchal and ableist barriers. They are vital for developing effective policies.

We are grateful for the women who have paved the way, and for those that continue to make life better for all.