

“Crip Camp”

If you want to treat yourself to a truly inspirational film then put “Crip Camp” at the top of your list.

In an era when handicapped children were regularly shunted aside there was an oasis in the Catskills - Camp Jened. Founded in the 1950's, and popularly known as “Crip Camp”, it was based on a premise which was novel in those days - treat these teenagers as normal everyday people. For many of the campers it was the first time they were part of a group which did not define them by their physical or mental handicaps. It was an empowering experience.

As we watch these young people getting off the bus as they arrive at camp the entire spectrum of disabilities is on display. There are kids in wheelchairs; those who have trouble speaking and walking due to neurological disorders, the blind and the deaf and those with a host of other afflictions. Their bodies may have betrayed them but it has not quelled their spirits. Seeing archival films of them playing ball; singing; talking about their first experiences of “making out”; and the everyday obstacles they had to overcome makes for compelling viewing.

Sadly “Crip Camp” had to close its doors in 1977 when its finances dried up. But the spirit of the camp lived on with the alumni. Years later some of them ended up in Berkeley. It was the perfect time and place to lead a movement for disability rights. Led by Judy Heuman, a charismatic young woman who had been stricken with polio as a child, they held demonstrations outside the Health Education and Welfare Building in San Francisco. When that did not attract the requisite media attention their next step was a 23 day sit in and later a demonstration in Washington. It was a long and arduous journey they had to travel but their efforts finally culminated with the passage of “The Americans with Disabilities Act” in 1990.

That is the story in a nutshell but it cannot begin to capture the emotional power of the film. Just some of the things which make “Crip Camp” so gratifying are:

The people you first meet as young campers and then later in life. There is the leader of the cause, Judy Heumann, the Martin Luther King of the

disability rights movement; James Lebrecht, a man with spina bifida who became a sound engineer and is the co-director of the film; Denise and Neil Jacobson, who have cerebral palsy, met at Crip Camp and later married (Denise is a particularly uninhibited soul); and a host of others who refused to let their disabilities define their lives.

The harrowing footage taken in 1972 for a report on the Willowbrook State School for the Mentally Disabled by Geraldo Rivera. With one caretaker for every 50 children, the “patients” had only three minutes to eat and slept on floors covered in their own waste. It was a house of horrors and thankfully it so shocked viewers that it was ultimately closed.

Scenes that will choke you up from a young woman at camp with severe neurological issues struggling to make herself understood, to a young boy not more than 11 or 12 years old laboriously hauling himself hand over hand up the Capitol steps so he can be present at a Congressional hearing. The everyday courage on display throughout the film is something to behold.

“Crip Camp” is a very special film which will continue to resonate in your mind long after the final scene where some of the alumni meet back at the now abandoned camp site years later to pay their respects to a time and place which changed their lives.

(Netflix)

