

The Pop Culture CELA: “Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution”

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Over the weekend I drafted this article, we experienced a mix of sunshine, rain, sleet, hail, and snow. In other words ... “Pittsburgh Partly Sunny”. With that said, it looks like we are finally turning the corner away from winter and looking toward summer. To me, summer is an exceptionally nostalgic season, conjuring up memories of sports camps, summer camps, trips to the pool, movies with friends, etc. More importantly, there was an overarching feeling of freedom or, more appropriately, a lack of barriers. Those fleeting memories are accompanied by a feeling of gratitude that I was fortunate enough to bask in that freedom, to move about as I pleased, and to just be a kid. These feelings and experiences are not universal as many children face challenges most of us take for granted due to experiencing disabilities. While these circumstances present unique barriers in modern times, the world was significantly less kind to those with disabilities in the past. It is from this time period that we get a glimpse into the strength, courage, and fierce independence individuals with disabilities dealt with and overcame in the incredible documentary, *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution*.

Streaming on Netflix since March of 2022, this documentary examines Camp Jened, a summer camp in New York that provided a “loose, free-spirited camp designed for teens with disabilities”. At Camp Jened, individuals would play sports, cook meals, fall in love, and enjoy the experiences most of us do as teens between school-years. The campers were not assigned labels, they weren’t treated differently or “less than” they were simply allowed to be kids, the feeling and experience that so many of us took for granted growing up. Through the lens of these charismatic, driven, and playfully sarcastic kids, I saw the people that would make the cornerstones of the disabilities Rights Movement of the 70’s through the 90’s that culminated in the passage of the ADA in 1990.

The documentary shifts from an idyllic New York Countryside to organized protests, sit-ins, and demonstrations all around the country. Up until this time period, individuals with disabilities simply were not considered in day-to-day life with respect to accessibility. This meant that folks with different capabilities than you and I did not have access to multi-level buildings, public transportation, and even sidewalks. Even more shocking was the revelation of massive, understaffed, and underfunded state institutions housing hundreds of individuals with disabilities in abhorrent conditions. While the footage swings to newsreels and television highlights, you can’t help but recognize the plucky teens from Camp Jened in clip after clip (helpfully identified by the documentarians in each scene). These kids blossomed into fierce leaders and political activists. To say that the documentary is inspiring would be a vast understatement. These folks battled and overcame obstacles that most of us can’t even begin to understand to work toward achieving their own agency and personhood.

This movement also served as the bedrock for many Federal and State programs designed to support and improve the lives of individuals with disabilities. Specifically, Pennsylvania provides numerous

programs and benefits structures for young people with disabilities. These programs include medical coverage, residential support, and leisure/occupational opportunities. While these programs can be life-changing and incredibly enriching, it is important to note that participants are subject to stringent means-testing. While this is generally easily met by the individual applicant, things become more complicated when parents plan to provide for their children with disabilities in their estate plans.

Parents of children with disabilities need to address the balance between leaving wealth for the next generation with ensuring that doing so does not spoil any benefits programs in which their children may be enrolled. Elder Law Attorneys have numerous planning options for this very situation including: Third Party Supplemental Needs Trusts, sub-trusts within other estate planning trusts, etc. These tools yield great advantages for younger disabled individuals.

In summation, *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* was an incredible documentary. Watching it gave me insight into the individuals who changed our country through their own bravery, sacrifice, and hard work. I cannot recommend this documentary more as it was both entertaining and enlightening. As an Elder Law/Disability Attorney, it provided powerful context behind the laws I utilize on behalf of my clients every day.