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AND **MICHELLE OBAMA**

A NETFLIX ORIGINAL DOCUMENTARY

# CRIP CAMP

A DISABILITY REVOLUTION



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# *Crip Camp:*

## A Global Youth Discussion Guide

**NETFLIX**



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**JOURNEYS IN FILM | CRIP CAMP**

## *To the Teacher or Discussion Group Leader*

As you and your group watch the film *Crip Camp* and consider the questions in this discussion guide, it is important to ensure that the materials and location are accessible to all participants. Making a space accessible isn't solely your responsibility as the facilitator; access is a community responsibility. However, as a facilitator, you can and should model what access and care look like in action.

We encourage you to start each lesson with an access check-in. This is an opportunity for participants to check in with their bodies and minds, to note any specific needs they may have, and to share whatever support or understanding they need. For example, does someone need a drink of water? Does anyone need to take medication? Who may be more comfortable lying on the floor or standing up? Does anyone need different lighting in the room? Do the chairs in the room work for people's bodies?

Go around the room and have students share how their bodies and minds feel and whether they need something to make them feel more comfortable. As the facilitator, it can help to go first to give an example. After you finish, you may say "check," so everyone knows you are finished sharing.

You may also remind participants that saying "All my access needs are met, check" is a good way to show that they have what they need to participate.

Remember that access needs can change from one moment to the next. An access check-in is also a reminder for you, as a facilitator, to create and maintain, as best you can, a space where participants can ask for accommodations.

In this guide we generally use the term "disabled people" instead of "people with disabilities." This is "identity first" language versus "person first" language and it is a choice made in the context of the U.S. disability community. You may shift the language if you know what is generally preferred or accepted in your community; you may also choose to make this a discussion with your group.

This guide indicates time stamps to break the film into sections for viewing and discussion. You may wish to allow time for participants to read the questions for each section before viewing that part of the film to encourage comprehension.

# Introduction

Welcome to the documentary film *Crip Camp*. You are about to see the story of Camp Jened and the way the opportunity to be a camper there changed the lives of many people. Whether you are a disabled person, count a disabled person among your friends and family, or just want to know more about the subject, this film will deepen your understanding. This discussion guide, to use as you watch the film, will help you record your reactions and share your ideas with others.

This discussion guide has been adapted from the *Crip Camp* curriculum, co-authored by Dr. Aiesha Turman, Bianca I. Laureano, and Cory Silverberg.

“At Higher Ground, we want to shine a light on stories that are hidden in the shadows. *Crip Camp* is exactly that kind of story. I’ve always believed that a few brave voices can be the driving force of progress – and this film is a tribute to an extraordinary group of people who, in speaking out in whatever way that they could, shaped our country’s course. *Crip Camp* is both a gripping look at the history of the disability rights movement and a timely call to action, urging us to explore our own duty to fight for the dignity of all people.”

- President Barack Obama

“Watching *Crip Camp* for the first time, I was reminded of how rare it is to see teenagers with disabilities on a big screen being just that: teenagers. Laughing and smiling, with sweet summer crushes and streaks of fierce independence. *Crip Camp* captures the complexity and humanity of living with disabilities, and it honors this community of young people who would go on to lead the disability rights movement. Their spirit and resilience reminded me of my father, a joyful man, quick with a laugh, who struggled with M.S. for much of his life. While his disability didn’t define who he was, it would be foolish to say it didn’t deeply impact him either. This film honors his story and so many others, and I’m proud of everyone who played a role in making it possible.”

- Michelle Obama



## Meet the Directors

In the opening few scenes, the viewer meets one of the directors of *Crip Camp*, Jim LeBrecht, who was born with spina bifida, a physical disability that can impact a person's mobility.

Jim has over 40 years of experience as a film and theater sound designer and mixer, author, disability rights activist, and filmmaker. He is currently a board member at the Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund (DREDF), which works for the rights of disabled people through education, legislation, and litigation. Jim lives in Oakland and is married to *Crip Camp* producer Sara Bolder.



Jim directed the film in collaboration with Nicole Newnham. Nicole is an Emmy-winning documentary producer and director, four-time Sundance Film Festival alumnus and five-time Emmy-nominee. A 1997 graduate of the Stanford Documentary Film Program, Nicole lives in Oakland with her husband Tom and two sons, Finn and Blaine.



**Watch the opening minutes of the film (to 02:20) to learn more about Jim's early years.**

1. What are some daily tasks that you do that may be different from how others do them?
2. Why do you think the first thing people often want to know about someone with a disability is what their disability is, whether they had it since birth, or how they acquired it?
3. In what ways do you feel like you have to fit into a world that's not built for you?

# Welcome to Camp Jened!



In this film, you will learn about the fight for the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the role that Camp Jened campers played in the passage and implementation of this landmark law. Founded as a traditional summer camp for disabled people in the 1950s, Camp Jened was supported in part by a foundation led by parents and staffed by college students. By the 1960s and 1970s, it was heavily influenced by counter-culture trends; in the film, the counselors are described as “hippies.” Certainly, there was much less structure than in a traditional camp.

**Watch the next segment of the film (2:20–22:44) to learn what Camp Jened was like for the campers.**

1. Larry Allison, the camp director, said, “We realized the problem did not exist with people with disabilities. The problem existed with people who didn’t have disabilities. It was our problem, so it was important for us to change.” What do you think he meant by this statement?
2. Have you ever attended camp? If so, how was Camp Jened different from camps that you have attended? How was it similar to your camp?
3. What leadership qualities do you see in the camp counselors at Camp Jened? (Examples: Judy Heumann, Lionel Je’Woodyard, Steve Hofmann)

# Coming Together/Saying Goodbye



The next segment of the film introduces Denise Sherer Jacobson and Neil Jacobson, both of whom have cerebral palsy. They found real happiness—and met each other—at Camp Jened. Denise is a disability rights activist, an educator, and a writer who served as a story consultant to *Crip Camp*. The son of Holocaust survivors, Neil went on to graduate school and then became a bank executive; he too is a disability activist. He is the founder and CEO of Abilicorps, an organization that promotes the hiring of disabled employees and the removal of obstacles to employment.

**Watch the film segment 22:44–39:27 to learn about the campers’ reflections on their experiences.**

**1.** Denise Sherer Jacobson and Neil Jacobson talk about a “hierarchy of disability” and Neil mentions what his mother said when he and Denise married. According to Denise,

the “polios” are at the top because they appear more normal, and the “C.P.s” [people with cerebral palsy] are at the bottom. What are some of the hierarchies in your school or community? What are they based on? Do you think there is still a hierarchy in the disability community?

**2.** Teenage experiences that were new to the campers could occur in the relaxed atmosphere of Camp Jened. How did the campers feel about these topics?

- Their romantic relationships
- Playing sports in an inclusive way
- Their relationships with their parents
- The need for privacy

**3.** What are some examples of ways that campers were changed (emotionally, spiritually, etc.) after attending Camp Jened?



## Taking to the Streets



Judy Heumann, the camp counselor in the early section of the film, went on to found Disabled in Action, which describes itself as “a civil rights organization committed to ending discrimination against people with disabilities—all disabilities.” She had been denied a teaching license in New York because of her disability and filed a lawsuit. The first challenge the organization addressed was the institutionalization of disabled people. Today DIA is involved in many different areas including education, employment, housing, and public accommodations.

**Watch the film segment 39:27–53:40 to learn about how Camp Jened alumni began to work together to improve conditions for the disabled community.**

1. What was your reaction to the protests that stopped traffic in New York City and Washington?
2. Have you ever been involved in a protest? What were you protesting? What was your experience like?



# Systems That Fail Us



The film uses Willowbrook State School as an example of institutionalization. Judy Heumann and Geraldo Rivera both describe Willowbrook as a system that failed its residents. Later, Denise tells a story of a doctor who harmed her because of assumptions he held about her life.

*[Note: Willowbrook State School, called a “snake pit” by Senator Robert Kennedy, was closed in 1987, but its inhabitants sometimes continued to be mistreated in smaller group homes. See a 2020 report in the New York Times at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/21/nyregion/willowbrook-state-school-staten-island.html>.]*

1. Why do you think the filmmakers decided to include footage of Willowbrook? What emotions does this scene make you feel?
2. Denise tells the story of her affair and the unnecessary operation to remove her appendix. Are you surprised by the way Denise was treated by the doctors and the hospital? Given that this happened, what would justice look like for Denise? What would you do if a doctor did something to you that was wrong?
3. Why do you think it's important and powerful to believe people when they tell you they have been harmed?

# Independent Living



The Center for Independent Living was founded in 1972 near the University of California, Berkeley to improve accessibility for disabled students to all the academic and social functions available on campus. It provides wheelchair repair services, transportation, affordable housing, and vocational training. The philosophy of the independent living movement ensures that Centers for Independent Living are led by disabled people by having a minimum of 51% disabled employees and board members. It was so successful that it has become the model for over 400 similar programs in this country and many in other countries as well.

**Watch the film segment 53:40–1:19:34 to learn about the Center for Independent Living and the 504 protests in San Francisco.**

1. How did the Center for Independent Living change life for the disabled people who came to Berkeley?
  - a. In the realities of their day-to-day living?
  - b. In their attitudes?
2. Why do you think a space for disabled people led by disabled people is important?

# The 504 Sit-In



Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act guarantees that no organization receiving federal funds could discriminate against disabled people. However, the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), Joseph Califano, refused to sign the regulations needed to enforce the law. A sit-in at the HEW office in San Francisco, led by disabled protesters, lasted 25 days with 150 disabled people refusing to leave, still the longest lasting occupation of a federal building in United States history. The Black Panther Party provided essential food and other necessities to the protesters, many of whom frequented the Center for Independent Living.

**Watch the film segment 53:40–1:29:11 to learn about the Center for Independent Living and the 504 protests in San Francisco.**

1. What were some of the strategies and approaches that the protesters used to work together and make sure everybody had a say?
2. What exactly is a sit-in? What other sit-ins do you know about?
3. Corbett O'Toole says of the 504 protests, "It was camp! Everything we learned in Crip Camp was what we did there." What do you think she meant by this?



# The “Capitol Crawl” and the ADA



While Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 applied to organizations that accepted federal funds, it did not cover private organizations and workplaces; public transportation systems were often still inaccessible.

**Watch the film segment from 1:29:11 to the end of the film to learn about how the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed and what became of Camp Jened.**

1. What changes came about for disabled people as a result of the enforcement of Section 504? Why did leaders feel that they still needed further legislation?
2. What was the motive behind the “Capitol Crawl”?
3. Denise Sherer Jacobson commented “You can pass a law, but until you change society’s attitudes, that law won’t mean much.” What do you think she meant by this statement?
4. Do you think attitudes toward disabled people have now changed? What impact do you think this film will have on society’s attitudes?



# What is Your Role?

The United Nations has established a Disability Inclusion Strategy that “provides the foundation for sustainable and transformative progress on disability inclusion through all pillars of the work of the United Nations: peace and security, human rights, and development.”<sup>1</sup> Over one billion people around the world now live with some sort of disability. 80% of individuals with disabilities live in developing countries.

However, regardless of the number of signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as we have seen from *Crip Camp*, laws are not always enforced and do not always change attitudes. Even today in our global world, cultures have different approaches to the subject of disability.

**In this section, you are asked to examine what is happening where you live.**

- 1.** Name three laws that protect the rights of people with disabilities in your local community, state, province, or country.
- 2.** Are children with disabilities integrated into your school system? How can you tell?
- 3.** What organizations in your community serve the needs of disabled people?
- 4.** What role do you see for yourself in furthering the integration of disabled people into society?

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.un.org/en/content/disabilitystrategy/assets/documentation/UN\\_Disability\\_Inclusion\\_Strategy\\_english.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/content/disabilitystrategy/assets/documentation/UN_Disability_Inclusion_Strategy_english.pdf)

## Resources for Further Study

Website of Bianca Laureano, co-author of the *Crip Camp* curriculum

<https://www.anteuppd.com/>

Website of Dr. Aiesha Turman, co-author of the *Crip Camp* curriculum

<http://aieshaturman.com/>

Website of Cory Silverberg, co-author of the *Crip Camp* curriculum

<https://www.corysilverberg.com/>

Website of Disabled in Action, the organization founded by Judy Heumann

<https://www.disabledinaction.org>

A TED talk by Judy Heumann on “Our fight for disability rights — and why we’re not done yet”

[https://www.ted.com/speakers/judith\\_heumann](https://www.ted.com/speakers/judith_heumann)

The Abilicorps website, including many of Neil Jacobson’s blogs

<https://abilicorp.com/>

The website of the Center for Independent Living

<https://www.thecil.org/>

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasam/centers-offices/civil-rights-center/statutes/section-504-rehabilitation-act-of-1973>

Protecting Students with Disabilities: Frequently Asked Questions About Section 504 and the Education of Children with Disabilities

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html>

The Justice Department website with information about the ADA, steps to file a complaint, accessible design standards, news about court decisions that affected the disabled community, and more.

<https://www.ada.gov/>

Government and Local Disability Programs and Services

<https://www.usa.gov/disability-programs>

The text of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-2.html>

The UN report on disability and health

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health>

The United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy

<https://www.un.org/en/content/disabilitystrategy/>

## Film Credits

Directors **Nicole Newnham, Jim LeBrecht**  
Executive Producers **President Barack Obama, Michelle Obama, Tonia Davis, Priya Swaminathan, Howard Gertler**  
Produced by **Sara Bolder, Jim LeBrecht, Nicole Newnham**  
Edited by **Eileen Meyer, Andrew Gersh**  
Co-Editor **Mary Lampson**  
Director of Photography **Justin Schein**  
Associate Producer **Lauren Schwartzman**  
Music by **Bear McCreary**  
Music Supervisor **Amine Ramer**  
Additional Editor **Shane Hofeldt**  
Story Consultant **Denise Sherer Jacobson**  
Impact Producer **Andraéa LaVant**

This discussion guide for the film *Crip Camp* was adapted from the *Crip Camp* curriculum, co-authored by Dr. Aiesha Turman, Bianca Laureano, and Cory Silverberg, with support from Journeys in Film. For this and additional free materials for your classroom or discussion group, see <http://journeysinfilm.org>.

## Image Credits

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