**Experience Engagement with Diversity (due Mar. 12)**

**25**Total Marks

**Unlimited time**

Kevin Salisbury

Experience Engagement with Diversity

***Event Attended: Documentary – Crip Camp***

Documentary Description taken from the internet:

*In the early 1970s, teenagers with disabilities faced a future shaped by isolation, discrimination and institutionalization. Camp Jened (Crip Camp), a ramshackle camp “for the handicapped” (a term no longer used) in the Catskills, exploded those confines. Jened was their freewheeling Utopia, a place with summertime sports, smoking and make-out sessions awaiting everyone, and campers experienced liberation and full inclusion as  human beings. Their bonds endured as many migrated West to Berkeley, California — a hotbed of activism where friends from Camp Jened realized that disruption, civil disobedience, and political participation could change the future for millions.* Crip Camp (Camp Jened) is the story of one group of people and captures one moment in time. There are hundreds of other quality important stories from the Disability Rights Movement that have not yet received adequate attention. This documentary was committed to using the film’s platform to amplify additional narratives in the disability justice communities – with a particular emphasis on stories surrounding people of color and other intersectionally marginalized communities. For too long, too many were excluded, and it is time to broaden the number of voices and share the mic.

**What Did I Observe**

The story started at Camp Jened in the Catskills. The camp was created for all people with disabilities. As counselors arrived at camp, they were in a bit of shock to see the vast number of people with disabilities. The counselors were overwhelmed and showed signs of being very uncomfortable. The camp director, Larry Allison, brought all the campers with disabilities together with the goal of making them comfortable with people like themselves. Mr. Allison thought that the problem was not with people with disabilities, but with society’s response and behavior towards people with disabilities that caused the challenges. The campers also felt free and open compared to the life they had at home due to other campers that were just like them. As one camper, Jennifer Huemann explained, while at home, a person had asked if she was sick simply because she was in a wheelchair. A principal also told her she could not attend school because she could not walk (there were very few accommodations in the 70’s). Jennifer mentioned the classes for disabled kids were all in the basement while the “normal” kids were all on a different floor. Jennifer never dated at home, but at camp where she felt “normal”, she dated. Jennifer Huemann eventually led the “Disabled In Action” group that led to Section 504 and eventually to the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Other campers mentioned that at home they would never be “picked” when choosing teams to play a game but at Jened every single person with a disability was picked and played the game. Campers also took care of the other campers when it came to dressing and washing, a task only parents took care of at home. The campers enjoyed this very much as it was a wonderful experience for them and those that cared for them. Because of these situations at camp, it provided the campers with other care options when they returned home. When camp ended for the summer, they all brought home “new ideas” for people with disabilities to their neighborhoods as they consistently adapted again to a world that was discriminatory. The campers felt empowered at camp and felt excluded at home.

When Jennifer began her fight with 504, it did not come easy at all. President Nixon actually vetoed 504 due to the fact that it would cost too much to retrofit buildings, sidewalks, etc. The group decided to block streets in Manhattan to begin to draw attention. Additionally, there was a sit in for 28 days organized by Judy Huemann, Kitty Cone, and Mary Jane Owen in a federal building in San Francisco which forced enactment of Section 504. They had many others back them such as the Black Panthers who provided food and other supplies during their 28 days. Congressmen Phillip Burton and George Miller came to listen to the group and eventually had Section 504 regulations signed in 1977. This eventually led to the Americans With Disabilities Act in 1990.

**What Did I Learn**

This was tough to watch but also very satisfying as I watched how successful they were with changing the way society must approach people with disabilities. Witnessing the emotions of the campers made me think about all the different groups that have been discriminated against over the years and continue to be. As I researched this topic, I found one research project (Scope, 2014) that found that “67% of people they interviewed felt uncomfortable when talking to a disabled person”. This awkwardness often is from a fear of seeming patronizing or making the wrong comment, or simply a lack of experience with individual with disabilities. As I watched the politician’s behavior toward the group in the documentary, I was saddened that individuals could be that discriminatory. I feel things have changed a bit but there are still some that have these same feelings today. Many other marginalized groups still go through this discrimination today. Misinformation often perpetuates attitudes, which then promote discrimination. In the documentary, the campers wanted to be judged for who they are, not what they talk like or look like.

**Summary**

While I understand the uncomfortableness people feel when around people with disabilities, the documentary made me understand that, like other marginalized groups, people with disabilities just want to be considered for who they are as a human being, not for what their disability is. Back in the 1980’s, I took a course called Adapted Aquatics. This course taught swimming instructors how to teach students with various disabilities. It was an eye opening course, not only working with these students, but actually experiencing (to a certain extent) what some of them go through on a daily basis. For instance, we had to spend an entire day blindfolded and entire day in a wheelchair. This was eye opening especially in the 80’s when accommodations and access was nowhere near what it is today.

While watching this documentary, it reminded me that we need to continue to approach people who are disabled with accommodations they ask for and not assume they need any. I have had students who have a hearing disability in my course as well as those in wheelchairs. While I had to adjust the way I approach lectures, it has always helped my teaching overall. I have also picked out certain physical areas in our buildings and can’t believe that there are still some areas that a person in a wheelchair cannot get to! We need to advocate for this group to be sure the educational opportunities are fair and access is equal.

Through challenging our own beliefs and continuing to educate, we will be able to see beyond a person’s disability. This is also what we need to continue with other marginalized groups. This experience has allowed me to reflect on my teaching. Students should not be judged by look, the way they talk, or where they come from. I will also share with other faculty ways in which this project (and course overall) has improved my preparation for the classroom.