NYSILC HOF Welcomes Five Advocates

By Karin Falcone Krieger

The New York State Independent Living Council (NYSILC) recently held their 4th Annual Disability Rights Hall of Fame (HOF) Banquet and Live Stream Event in Albany, N.Y.

This year's five inductees are each advocates with decades of experience from across New York state.

The event was hosted by Disability Rights Hall of Famer Clifton Perez, who serves as the systems advocate for the Independent Living Center of the Hudson Valley (ILCHV). Co-host Denise Dinoto serves as a board member of Consumer Directed Personal Assistance Association of New York State (CDPAANYS.)

Independent living centers across the state were represented as introductions were given by Christina Curry, executive director of the Harlem Independent Living Center, Denise Figueroa, founder of Independent Living Center of the Hudson Valley, and others.

Janice Lintz Does Not Take No For An Answer

The first inductee of the evening was Janice Lintz, a world renowned advocate for people with hearing loss and a parent of a daughter with the disability.

She partnered with dozens of businesses and organizations, from New York City taxis to Virgin Atlantic Airways, and testified before Congress to make the case for accessibility for people with hearing loss.

When doctors recommended "special schools" for Lintz's young daughter, she worked to make the mainstream world more accessible instead..

"We must choose to do what is right over what is safe and easy," Lintz said when accepting her award.

Her daughter is a graduate of Brown University and is now pursuing her master's degree at Yale, according to the NYSILC website.

Bernard Carabello Advocated For Change After Willowbrook

Bernard Carabello lived at Willowbrook at the time of television reporter Geraldo Rivera's 1973 expose of the inhumane conditions inside the institution for the disabled, which shocked the world 50 years ago.

"Anybody who knows Bernard's story is amazed by his independence and strength to be able to survive living in Willowbrook for so many years," said Denise Figueroa in her introduction.

Carabello said, "I was at Willowbrook for 18 years, from the time I was three years old. I thought I was going to die there. I thought that would be my life forever."

Inductee Bernard Carabello with NYSILC Executive Director Brad Williams

When accepting his award, he asked the audience to watch the disturbing footage. "We can never go back there again," he said emphatically.

He thanked Dr. Michael Wilkins, who snuck Rivera inside at great personal risk, and whom Carabello credits with saving his life.

Among his many accomplishments during 40 years, Carabello founded the Self-Advocacy Association of New York State, for people with developmental disabilities, and recently retired after a long career as a state-appointed advocate at the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities.

Susan Dooha Exemplifies Leadership

Susan Dooha is an attorney, who served as the executive director of the Center for Independence of the Disabled, NY (CIDNY) for nearly 20 years.

During her tenure participation grew from fewer than 5,000 when she joined CIDNY to 100,000 individuals in 2021, at the time of her retirement.

Under Dooha's leadership, CIDNY was involved in 11 civil rights lawsuits to enforce the

rights of people with disabilities in the areas of emergency preparedness, voting accessibility, curb cuts, accessible subways and accessible public accommodations, such as homeless shelters and libraries.

Dooha also ensured CIDNY's workforce mirrors the diversity of the city's population – 55 percent of the staff are bilingual, speaking a total of 24 languages.

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Sally Johnston Brought Accessible Transportation To Upstate N.Y.

Sally Johnston's acceptance speech is an education in disability rights advocacy before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). After being refused a college education in the early 1970's, Johnston founded a social group at her local library for people with disabilities, unemployed and homeless, and it was a huge success.

The disabled from that group asked her to join them when they invited a speaker, who presented ideas on advocacy for parents of people with developmental disabilities. Johnston's life was changed that day, when she understood what was possible.

She said the most difficult thing she accomplished with that group was getting access-

the award-winning documentary "Crip Camp," she is perhaps the most recognized face of the disability rights movement. As Figueroa pointed out during her introduction, "Judy is a force to be reckoned with anywhere she goes. But she started out in New York, and for those of you who don't know, she's from Brooklyn."

"She has worked for the U.S. Education Department, the State Department. She's worked for the World Bank, but even before that she was working on international disability rights, meeting people from Ireland and from Sweden, from all over the world. And I think that that's what has made her so unique in our movement," Figueroa said.

Heumann focused on her

sible public transportation in Syracuse, N.Y. "The last excuse (from city officials) was 'you can't do it here because of snow.' What the hell do you mean, we can't do it here because of snow? We actually found an engineer to help us design the busses. We got lifts before ADA. We won that battle."

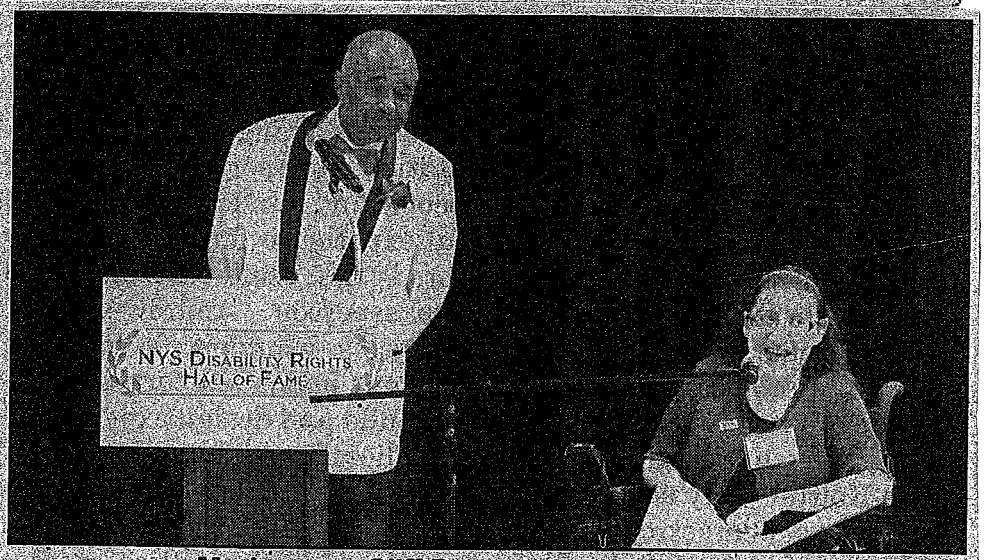
Among her later accomplishments is creating a statewide system for Consumer Directed Personal Assistance. In recognition of Sally's pioneering role in growing Consumer Directed Personal Assistance in New York state, CDPAANYS named an award after her.

Judith Heumann Made Advocacy Global

Judith Heumann was moved to tears during her award acceptance, when she credited the audience for the successes of the community. Author of a powerful memoir and a force behind deep connection to New York as the birthplace of activism, "since the 1940s when the disabled veterans began to really organize... I think we have really lead by example in taking the discrimination that we've experienced and not just complaining about it, but actively looking at solutions. I think everyone watching this can take partial credit for that."

"It's been your endurance, your fight at your local levels, and at the state level helping individual people get the benefits and services that they need. It's the ability to really look at justice as something which is obtainable – not overnight.

I think we obviously know from our experience that it's little by little and not only that, but we also have to always be careful about things falling backwards and not continuing to move forward."



Moderators Cliff Perez and Denise DiNoto

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