Pittsburgh's Crip Camp
L&A Treasures Column Summer 2025
By Sierra Green

Wilmerding native Kathleen Kleinmann couldn't wait for the arrival of Camp Easter Seals each summer. For a few weeks every year, she was just another kid at summer camp- exploring nature and making memories with her friends. Her journey began with a drop off at the Easter Seal Society headquarters in Downtown Pittsburgh. From there, the campers were transported to rural Somerset County on the grounds of Laurel Hill State Park. Somewhere along the drive, the kids all shed the same defining trait. As Kathleen tells it, Camp Easter Seals was the one and only place where "being disabled was absolutely normal."[1]

Western Pennsylvania's Camp Easter Seals began in the summer of 1949 as a recreational camp for disabled children from across the state. The camp was an initiative of the Easter Seal Society, a long-standing organization dedicated to serving children and adults with disabilities. Today, Easter Seals remains the largest provider of recreation and camping services for children and adults with disabilities in the United States.

The centrality of these camps as the seeding ground of the Disability Rights Movement has grown significantly over the past five years. Much credit for this is due to the 2020 documentary *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution*, which chronicles the role of a summer camp for disabled teens in raising up numerous disability rights advocates, including Judy Heumann.

Kathleen went to her first camp session in 1960 at the age of ten. She went faithfully for the next decade. For Kathleen, camp was synonymous with afternoon swims in the ice-cold lake, inside jokes, morning hikes, and homemade crafts. As is the case with countless children, camp was where Kathleen and her friends spent portions of their formative years. It was also a place where Kathleen shed her shyness and was finally free to explore her identity outside of her disability. It was also a place that called to her when it was time to decide her own career path.

Far from retrofitted for kids with physical disabilities, the grounds of Laurel Hill State Park were rugged and the cabins were somewhat remote compared to where camp activities took place. Kathleen and her peers spent many an afternoon at the Camp Easter Seal "beach" along "shore" of Laurel Hill Lake. Given the rugged campground, Kathleen and some of her fellow campers needed assistance to get to the beach. Referred to as "jeep riders," these children were loaded into the back of a station wagon and driven without seatbelts along utility roads to get to the beach. From there, they were loaded onto the shoulders of counselors in a firefighter hold to be reunited with their friends. Kathleen fondly recalls camp as a place where disability just "dropped out as the common denominator so all the other little social aspects of their little society could play out."[2] It was a place where she could dream and discover a future in the face of such broad marginalization and stigma outside of camp.

Outside of camp, Kathleen didn't attend her neighborhood elementary school in Wilmerding. She was sent instead to Electric Heights School for children with disabilities. The environment was like a one-room schoolhouse, with multiple grades and learning levels all in the same space. Kathleen

[1] Kathleen Kleinmann Oral History, HHC Detre L&A.
[2] Ibid.

did not have a cognitive disability but spent years learning out of the same third grade textbook. This continued until a teacher finally intervened and successfully advocated for her transfer to a typical school. This sadly was not an uncommon experience for disabled children before the mid-1970s. In fact, schools were overwhelmingly inaccessible to children with disabilities. Even worse, public schools frequently turned disabled children away until the 1972 Right to Education Consent Decree finally made it illegal for them to do so in Pennsylvania.

Inspired by her fellow campers and the love she felt for them, Kathleen went on to forge a remarkable career in disability services and Independent Living. For much of her career, Kathleen ran a Center for Independent Living (CIL) in Washington County. CILs were and are run by the disability community for the disability community. They are part community center, part library, part advocacy organization, part social service provider that are essential conduits to the needs and aspirations of people with complex disabilities. CILs created a pathway for people to attain accessible housing and receive consumer-driven medical and other services needed for them to pursue a fulfilling life as defined by them.

When it first arrived at the History Center, Kathleen's keepsakes from Camp Easter Seals read like a time capsule. The emotional weight of each item was evident, from the book of camp songs to the weathered pages of the camp's newsletter to the commemorative patch from 1966. Rounding out the set were a significant stack of letters and a handful of photographs. Thanks to these items and Kathleen's camp memories preserved in an oral history, the History Center now preserves rich glimpses into the history and significance of Pittsburgh's 'crip camp' to the Disability Rights Movement.