

My Aunt Frieda Tankus- Co-founding Vice President of Disabled In Action (DIA)

Notes on the Crises

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By Nathan Tankus



NOTES ON THE CRISES

OFF TOPIC WEEKEND EDITION:

My Aunt Frieda Tankus:
Co-founding Vice President of
Disabled In Action (DIA)

Nathan Tankus

This is an “Off Topic” piece of Notes on the Crises. Off topic pieces will always be colored blue. Readers are encouraged to ignore them if they are only interested in my day-to-day analysis and reporting. Check my “on topic” pieces for information about the anonymous sources I’m collecting, and ways [you can support the newsletter’s coverage of the Trump-Musk crisis](#). As always: if you want to back my work, take out a paid subscription, or [pester your institution to do so](#). Thanks!

Traditionally I’ve kept myself out of *Notes on the Crises* as much as possible. I worried that having more of my personality and my background would alienate the largely financial sector paid subscriber base I inherited from 2020. I was best known on “Econ twitter” and “Finance twitter” and my prominent support, most notably from Joe Weisenthal of Bloomberg, led to greatest success in those worlds. This was reinforced after I “crashed” after an absurd run of articles: I published a piece every other day on average (**including weekends**) between March 19th 2020 and July 2nd 2020 (when the [Bloomberg Businessweek profile on me](#) came out). Having already had such an

intense experience, I am much more prepared for this moment than a lot of other people would be. I know how to pace myself more when doing full time coverage of an intense crisis, and I have a lot more support around me to make doing this possible. (Thanks once more to all my regular readers, especially those who've been there since the first Crisis we covered!)

My audience has now shifted radically, especially my “paid subscription” audience. This new audience, who first became aware of me because of my coverage of the Trump-Musk Treasury Payments Crisis of 2025, is much more balanced gender wise. This new audience is clearly more interested in my (informed) political views. Its only been a couple weeks, but those of you who fit this description have also overwhelmingly demonstrated a very high degree of interest in and appreciation of me **as a person**.

Meanwhile, given what I just showed was in my reservoir of capabilities, I think the “financial world” can hang around for analysis clearly very few other people are doing, or are capable of. In that context, this older readership, which I very much still appreciate, can “tolerate” greater elements of my personality. Is there really a choice to be made between Nathan Tankus the economic policy expert, and well...me? **I don't think so**. If the most powerful people in the world can read past my political commentary for my analysis and investigative reporting, **then mid-level financial professionals can too**.

So periodically on weekends, **I'll be introducing more about myself**.

Where I'm going to start is something dear to my family's heart: my Aunt Frieda Tankus. There were many special things about Frieda, not least of which was that she attended a very special summer camp: Camp Jened. Camp Jened was devoted to disabled children and over time increasingly devoted to their freedom, and ability to express themselves. Frieda was of a key generation of disabled people to come to political consciousness there. It is widely argued today that the modern disability rights movement began at Camp Jened, with the “mother” of the disability rights movement being [Judy Heumann](#). Judy Heumann was my Aunt Frieda Tankus's **childhood best friend**. (You may know the story of Camp Jened and Judy Heumann from the [Netflix documentary Crip Camp](#). I highly recommend watching it)



My father and I attended the [February 5th 2020 premiere of Crip Camp at the Museum of Modern Art](#), which is the last time we saw Judy Heumann alive. It was terrible waiting so many hours for a news outlet to confirm the social media rumors of Judy Heumann's death [the day of March 4th, 2023](#). It was unbearable having to be the one to break the news to my father that she had died. My father and I rushed to D.C. to attend her funeral on [Wednesday March 8th 2023](#). I took the train back from DC Thursday March 9th, where I caught up with the ongoing strain (and eventual failure) of Silicon Valley Bank, and prepared to [rush out four pieces in a week](#). I capped off March 2023 with [a piece about well known financial system expert Zoltan Poszar](#), and the irony of his inability to [commentate on that moment](#). But that's a story for another time.

Return

TRAIN	CRESCENT	DEPARTS	ARRIVES
20	Mar 9, 2023	2:15 PM Washington, DC Union Station	6:08 PM New York, NY Moynihan Train Hall at Penn Sta.
2 Coach Seats			

My father Morton Tankus wrote a tribute in 2022 to Frieda for the anniversary of her death on July 11th. Before providing more of my own commentary, I'm going to let my dad speak for himself:

July 11th marked 50 years since my precious sister Frieda Henia Tankus passed away. I am going to take this occasion to pay tribute to her. She was a remarkable and sweet person, a wonderful sister and a pioneer. I shared 18 of her obscenely short 22 years of her life. We also shared a birthday - March 19th. Six weeks after my parents and sister came to America, I was her fourth birthday present. Frieda was born with Muscular Dystrophy. Her muscles grew increasingly weaker. She walked (very slowly) until she was about 12 years old when she became wheelchair bound.

Frieda was so sweet and caring that everyone considered her their best friend. People also remarked how Frieda and I had an especially close sibling relationship. She would keep in touch with friends by phone and letters. She would have thrived in the internet world.

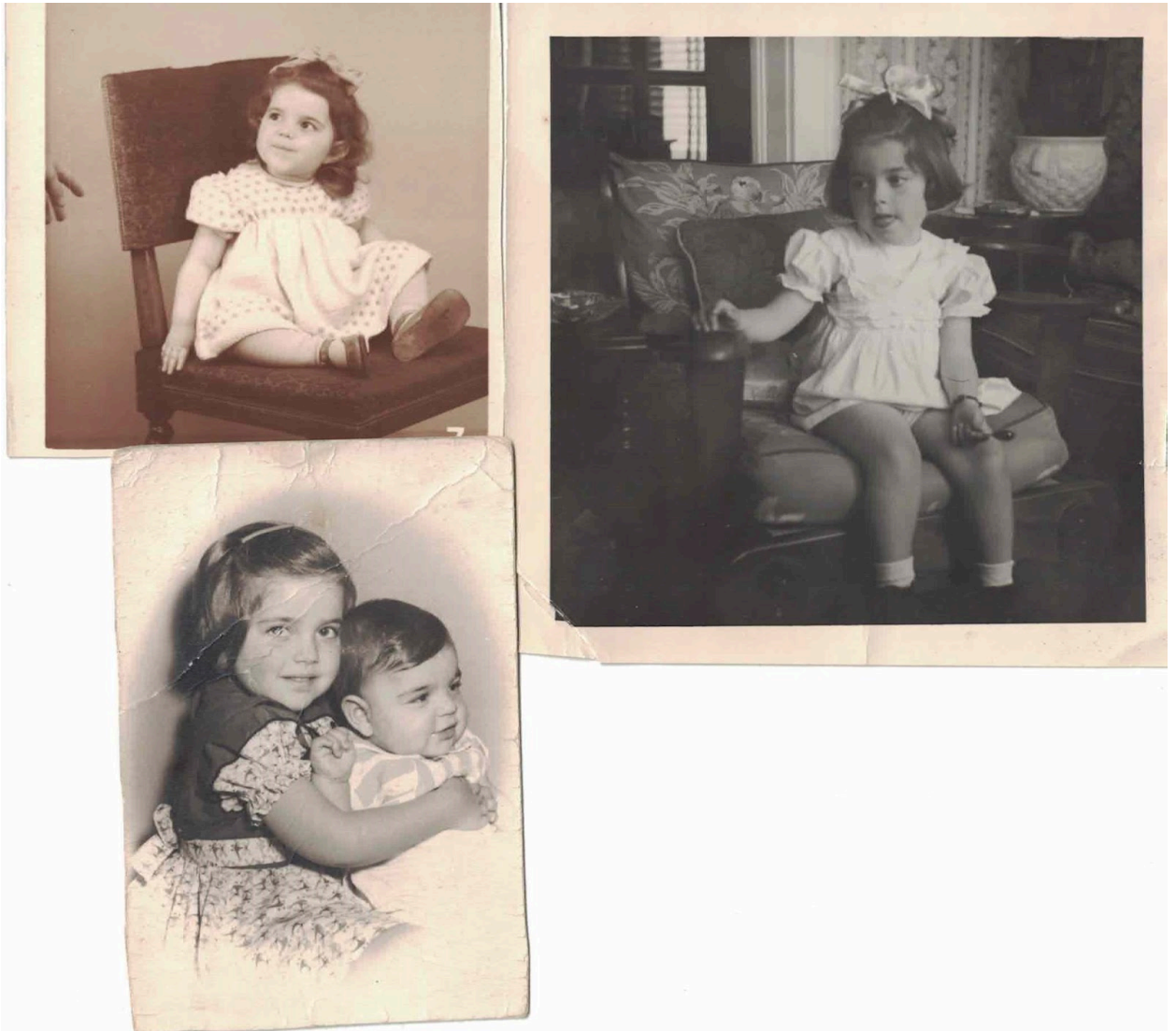
Frieda was very bright and curious. Her subpar education in the disabled unit of P.S. 219 did not stop her. Frieda was a pioneer and a fighter. She pushed to attend Canarsie High School when they had a policy to exclude disabled students. She won that battle.

Frieda went to NYU with a major in psychology. She fought to live in the dorm, Weinstein Hall when they had a policy to exclude students in wheelchairs. She won that battle and she was the first.

Frieda attended summer camps to share fun and conversation and ideas with her friends who were also disabled. First Camp Oakhurst and then Camp Jened. Frieda's best friend was Judy Heumann whom she met at P.S. 219. Judy had to fight to get a teaching position in the NYC school system after getting her license. Again they wanted to keep her from teaching because she was in a wheelchair. She won that battle. After that triumph Judy and Frieda and several disabled friends Denise Sherer, Bobbi Lynn, Denise McQuade and others formed a disabled rights organization in 1970.

Disabled in Action is still an active organization 52 years later. Judy Heumann was the first president and Frieda was the first vice president. I wish she would have been able to see the fruits of their vision, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act.

I was on a cross country trip when I called home and they told me she was "not feeling well" I was 90% sure she was gone. I flew home from Denver Colorado and when I came home and it was confirmed, it was the worst day of my life. I miss my sweet and wonderful sister everyday.















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There is frustratingly little of Frieda's words which have survived. We have a collection of her papers at our house which we are very overdue for depositing at an archive. (As you can imagine, my academic inclination is what makes me harp on such things). The secondary academic literature is also filled with the false claim that she attended Brooklyn College, and started a campus group SOFEDUP. As my dad stated above, she attended NYU and won the fight to be the first wheelchair user to be allowed to live in an NYU dorm. (If you are a disability history researcher who would like to write about Frieda and correct the record, please get into contact.)

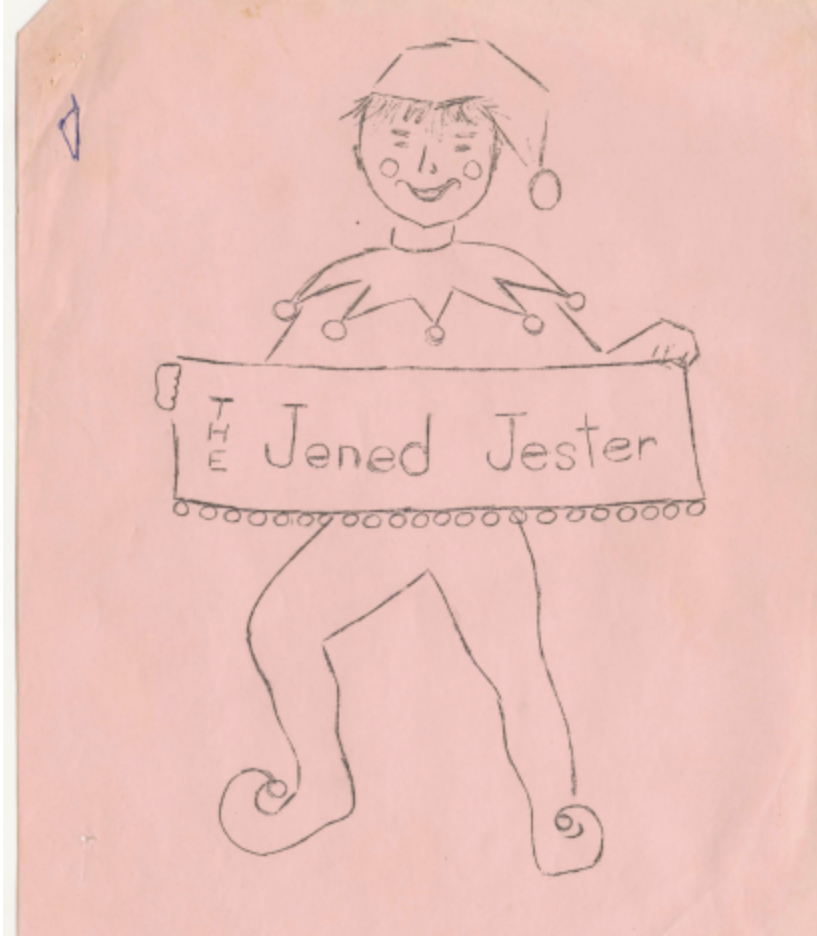
I'm an obsessive researcher so if there is anything on the internet in English, I'll find it. In some digitized papers deposited at UC Berkeley's **Bancroft Library** I [found a fragment of an article co-written](#) by Frieda Tankus with a "John Martin", for the camp newsletter the "Jened Jester". It reads as follows:

[...] at least spiritually and need not concern themselves solely with the physical man. **Surely, there are physical differences at Jened -- but they are recognized as only "differences" and not as insurmountable barriers.** For all men have wills and intellects and spirits of their own which, although housed in the body, are free of that body's limitation.

In that "outside world" physical differences are noted and invite a range of reactions including pity and scorn. **At Jened none deny the reality of physical differences -- they are, however, put in a proper perspective.** Once again, however, each of us must look forward to our return to the "outside world" where these differences become magnified and distorted by the prejudices of men.

In the meantime, **we enjoy an escape from reality or, perhaps, an escape to reality.** Let us agree that man "lives not by bread alone"; let us also, then, **agree that Jened is an attempt at putting "bread" in its place.** [emphasis added]

Those of you familiar with the ["social model" of disability will recognize](#) this as a remarkable prefiguration of such ideas. To me it's especially remarkable because it was **written by a 16 year old**, and her similarly aged coauthor.



Frieda tragically died at the age of 22. Yet she already had a legacy to leave behind. Some people live their whole lives and don't leave as much of an impact as she did. Frieda's political contribution was also not a result of coming from a powerful family, or because she had access to a tremendous amount of resources. After all, she grew up in the projects of East New York. Instead, her legacy was built on friends, community, intelligence and tenacity. I've known about Disabled In Action (DIA) and Frieda's role in it from a very young age. Her story, and many other stories I heard growing up, is what left me with the overwhelming impression that:

- 1) You don't have to be special to help change things
- 2) A lot of the time if you don't act, there is no one else to act in your place.

Clearly these are things I've carried with me and played a role in my instinct on [January 31st, when I read the Washington Post](#), that I both could act, had to act and the full knowledge that what I didn't do could easily be left undone. Rest in Peace Frieda Tankus.