

Celebrating The Life Of A Nebraska Advocate

By Shirley Dean

Thomas J. Houlihan was born Jan. 12, 1943 and died Oct. 27, 1999, after a six-month illness. Tom will long be remembered as a spokesperson in the field of developmental disabilities, an advocate, a friend and a family member, who lived life to the fullest and made an impact on the hearts of many of us.

Described by his friends as fun, outgoing, exuberant, thoughtful and big hearted. Tom had a twinkle in his eyes, a smile on his face and lots of ideas.

Tom was a charter member of Project II, the first self-advocacy group of people with developmental disabilities in Nebraska. Project II held the first statewide convention in 1978; Tom was a speaker and a leader. This was the exciting beginning of People First of Nebraska. Since then self-advocacy groups have started across the state and conventions have become an annual event.

Tom was an advocate; he spoke up for himself, his peers and his friends. He testified before county commissioners and legislators. He has helped educate people about issues that are important to people with developmental disabilities. He set an example of what a person with developmental disabilities could accomplish which was an inspiration to others.

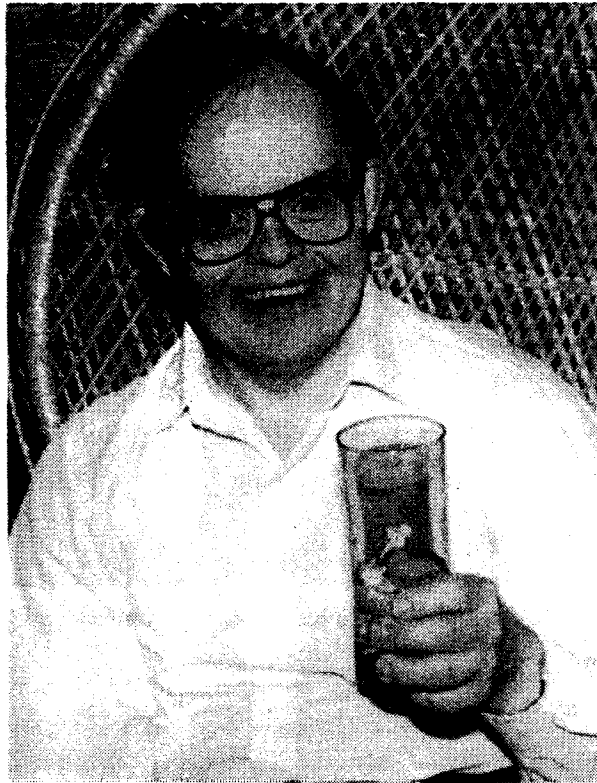
Challenged Board of Directors

At a speaking engagement in South Dakota, Tom asked to be the first speaker. He interacted with the audience of 600 people and set the crowd at ease, as well as the other speakers, Ollie Webb, Tom Miller and Bob Perske. Tom had a gift for making people feel comfortable. When Project II began having awards, Tom received the first award for most ideas.

Tom stood up in front of 200 people and spoke to the Board of Directors about

a decision he disagreed with. He planned his strategy himself and did not share it with anyone ahead of time. Tom had his cousin come up to stand with him at the meeting where he said he was going to resign as a client if the decision was not reversed.

When people came here from other countries to see the community based services for people with developmental disabilities, they met



"To me self-advocacy means learning to speak out for what you believe in and having a good life. Since I got involved an awful lot of good has happened inside me. I've gotten better at helping other people by listening to their problems, and I'm better at listening to people to get advice from them. I'm also better at speaking up for myself." --Tom Houlihan

Tom Houlihan and visited his apartment. He was truly an important part of the community. Tom was a devoted member of St. Cecilia's Cathedral Church and later at St. Pius X. He was a proud member of the Knights of Columbus for many years.

Community Involvement

For thirty-one years, Tom worked at St. Vincent DePaul. Tom was a leader in Project II and a friend to many people. Tom's family was very important to him. He

lived with his mother and took care of her when her health began to fail. Later he lived in an apartment by himself or with roommates. Tom often spoke of his brother Denny, who provided help and support for Tom throughout the years. Although Tom did not always agree with his brother, he spoke of his brother and his brother's children, with love and pride.

When Bonnie Shultz

went to a Christmas party hosted by her supervisor's supervisor. She felt very uncomfortable. From there she went to a party at Lois Reed's house, where she had a great time dancing with this exuberant guy, Tom Houlihan. Then she felt she was where she belonged. They became great friends.

Years later Tom was talking to a state senator and asked if a law could be passed that people could adopt brothers and sisters. Tom wanted to adopt Bonnie as his sister. Tom always came up with ideas.

Best Friends

Tom Miller and Tom Houlihan were best friends. Tom Houlihan stood up as Best Man at Tom Miller's wedding. Tom and Janet Miller had many fun birthday parties for Tom Houlihan, who looked forward to these occasions every year, as did his friends.

Tom had his own system of remembering friends and keeping in touch. He made a book himself of the months of the year and tracked important occasions in his friends lives and sent them cards for anniversaries, birthdays and other important occasions. Tom was a thoughtful person.

Fred Zydek says Tom knew what kind of coffee cups Fred likes, so when he would see one come in at St. Vincent DePaul, he would call Fred and Fred would come in and buy the cup.

Ollie Webb expressed her fond memories of Tom at a celebration of his life. Tom was friends with Ollie for years and at one time, lived at Ollie's house.

Denny Tom's brother, expressed the joy of living with Tom, an upbeat person, who had a wonderful life.

Tom's life touched the lives of many people from all walks of life through his involvement in his community his advocacy and his friendship. He will certainly be missed by all who knew him.

and I began planning a trip to England, people there asked if Tom could come with us. Tom was asked to come to England because of his accomplishments, his speaking abilities and the way he lived his life. Tom raised many important issues there. He also fell in love with England. We all had a wonderful trip.

Bonnie remembers the first time she met Tom. Bonnie had just started working at ENCOR. She