

Goodbye Ollie

By Robert Perske

*Anybody here seen our old friend, Ollie?
Can you tell us where she's gone?
She freed a lot of people and then she
left us.
You know, we just looked around and
she was gone.*

These words stem from a haunting song called "Abraham, Martin, and John," written by Richard Holler. With only a few changes in wording, it fit our old friend, Ollie, to a tee.

Ollie May Webb died in Omaha two days before Thanksgiving. Her valiant heart, weakened by pneumonia, finally gave out. She was 75.

When Omaha TV news directors received word, no explaining was needed. They knew who she was.

OPPRESSION

Ollie knew about the loss of freedom. In 1928, she was born into an Oklahoma farm family. A year later, the Great Depression forced the family to travel over the land as migrant workers. The family expanded to 13 kids. During those travels, Ollie suffered a childhood illness that caused serious brain damage. After that, she worked in farm fields.

"I didn't have no good life when I was a kid," she said in a recent video statement. "[They] take me outta school. Pick cotton. I had gotten up fifth grade. They'll take me out. They said I didn't know how to do anything."

When she wasn't in Oklahoma cotton fields, she hoed beets in Nebraska. At 15,



Tom Houlihan, Tom Miller and Ollie Webb often spoke out together. "We sat down before each speech," said Miller, "and they told me the topics they wanted to raise. I agreed to be their springboard. Once you got Tom and Ollie primed, they really took off on their own."

she gave birth to a daughter, Nancy. The baby was taken away.

In 1947, officials placed Ollie in the State Developmental Center at Beatrice, Nebraska.

There, she worked without a paycheck in the institution's baby wards. "I was on the main building institution," she said softly. "I was take care of little babies...I had two little kids died in my arms. I taken care of them as best as I know how."

During her time at Beatrice, she experienced an added shock: "Every day...made the rounds of the babies," she said. "One day, I saw my daughter among the new children...I almost fainted." Later, the mother and daughter were forced to live in different buildings and they didn't see each other as often as they wanted.

In 1954, officials sent Ollie to Omaha where she worked and lived in a series of

nursing homes. She never made more than five dollars a week.

TURNING POINT

In 1969, her lack of freedoms came to a halt. That's when Tom Miller, an adult advisor for the Eastern Community Office on Retardation, discovered Ollie working in a rundown nursing home and living in its basement.

"I was appalled by what I saw," Miller said, "The operators made good money by working Ollie for nothing." He also stated that the operators threatened to send Ollie back to the institution if she caused any trouble or did not work hard.

"We didn't have much money in those days, so we had to get creative," Miller said. "I was able to find a friend of mine...[She] agreed to live with Ollie and a couple of other women, and she helped them by taking them to the stores for grocery shopping and teaching them

how to cook." For the first time in her life Ollie felt loved.

SOARING

After 43 years of being devalued so horribly, one might expect Ollie to exude nothing but bitterness. Not so. Right off, she became a bubbling Alka Seltzer of gratefulness to everyone who helped her. She seized every opportunity to testify, argue, and speak out for the release of others who still lived at Beatrice. By rising up so palpably and so powerfully, she became Omaha's own Unsinkable Molly Brown.

Those in-home cooking sessions led to a job at Omaha's prestigious Field Club. She started by washing pots and pans. Then she moved through other stations until she became a salad maker. Once a manager took her off salads. He said he did it because she couldn't read. Even so, Ollie argued that she didn't have to read to make a good salad. She made her point and was reinstated.

She worked at the Field Club for 17 years – until a heart attack forced her to retire. By then, she was living in a home of her own and her daughter Nancy lived in a warm, supportive home close by.

“SPEAK FER YERSELF, AND I’LL SPEAK FER YA, TOO”

In 1974, Ollie and a handful of other former institutional inmates organized a powerful self-advocacy organization at the Greater Omaha Association for Retarded Citizens (GOARC). They called the organization “Project Two.” To them, the institution at Beatrice was “Project One.”

Ollie became a spellbinding speaker. She could sense an audience's mood. Then with her Oklahoma drawl and an uncanny wooing note in her voice she reached the hearts of her listeners as she voiced her single, noble mission in life. She was a powerful closer. Her final heartfelt appeals for the freeing and valuing of persons with disabilities were so gripping she made Billy Graham's altar calls seem like whimpers.

During her speech-making days, she testified repeatedly about the awful conditions at Beatrice. She railed against being called “retarded.” “I'm the same as you,” she often said, “I got a name. So why don't cha call me by my name? My name is Ollie Webb.”

Ollie became one of the best ambassadors to visitors at the GOARC office. She involved herself with a high school Rainbow Girls service organization. She gave rousing speeches to The Arc's chapters, community organizations, government hearings, and other self-advocacy groups across the nation – even in England. She received over 20 local and national awards.

Ollie was always quick to come to the aid of her friends. Once while I was serving as GOARC's executive director, Ollie and I were on the same panel in a plenary session. Suddenly, I took a hit from a person in an audience who disliked one of the stands I took. I sat quietly, not knowing what to say. Then Ollie, who was sitting next to me, came to my aid like Punjab used to do for Little Orphan Annie. She spoke out for me so strongly, the attacking man said nothing more and sat down.

Ollie loved and defended all of the people who supported her. That was one of the many reasons why, in 1998, GOARC

changed its name to “The Ollie Webb Center.”

OUTPOURING

*Didn't we love the things she stood for?
Didn't she try to find some good for all
of us?*

*She freed a lot of people and then she
left us.*

We just looked around and she was gone.

*With a soft, warm and relaxed voice,
Chaplain Anne Marie Aita guided Ollie's
funeral service. Aita now serves as a pastor
to “hospice” arrangements in the city, but
for years she served as a stable force for
good in the disability community.*

*During the funeral, she saw to it that quotes
in letters from all over the nation were read.
It took time, but the words were comforting
because they came from others who had been
valued members of Omaha's disability family.*

*Next, Aita invited anyone in the audience
to speak up for Ollie. One by one, parents,
workers and self-advocates took the long
walk up the aisle to the lectern, voiced
what was in their heart, then walked back
to their seats. Each one moved forward reverently,
as if they were about to deliver a
precious gift to a queen.*

*When one person took a long time hobbling
to the front, Aita comforted him by saying,
“It's okay, half the fun is getting here.” When
a person struggled with his speech, Aita
became an interpreter. There were long
moments of utter silence. Even so, when a
person reminisced about something funny,
the laughter was rich and heartwarming.
Many recited Ollie's most famous admonition
as if it were the Number One article of
their faith (“If you put your cotton-pickin'
mind to it, you can do anything”).*

Many voiced gratitude for the patchwork quilts and pillowcases she hand sewed for them. She literally sewed hundreds.

Chaplain Aita voiced the single, most important question on everyone's mind: "What are we going to do, now that Ollie's gone?" She deftly answered it by showing that every good thing spoken about Ollie now had a chance to exist in the lives of all in the audience.

Chaplain Aita drove home the idea that Ollie is now a member of "Project Three." "I hope heaven is ready for you, Ollie." (Laughter) "I have a feeling [Dr. Frank] Menolascino has got some things organized. I'm sure [you] can redirect him." (Lots of laughter) Dr. Menolascino was a political powerbroker of the disability movement in Omaha. But Ollie was its heart and conscience.

HERO?

Was Ollie a hero like Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John F. Kennedy? Was she that great? Could a woman with so much going against her finally become a hero like them?

Interestingly, when the first draft of this article was being tapped out, one of the playoff games of the National Football League was being played on a TV in the room with the volume turned to low. Suddenly one of the quarterbacks got whacked – hard! He suffered bruised ribs. Handlers helped this famous, million-dollar player to the bench. They taped his ribs – and sent him back into the game. Then, over and over the commentator exclaimed, "What a hero! What a hero!"

There was no doubt about it, the quarterback was a hero. He certainly was one of mine.

Even so, if Abraham, Martin, and John decided to add another hero to their group, and if it came down to the quarterback or Ollie, which would they choose?

Anybody here seen our old friend, Ollie? Now we know where she has gone. We just saw her walking up over the hill With Abraham, Martin, and John! ■

Shirley Dean, Patricia McGill Smith and Lori Ackerman helped with this story.

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