

Women Helped Meet Equipment, Health Care Needs

by [Jane McClure](#) // February 10th, 2015

A generous grant represents a shift in focus for a Minneapolis organization with a long history of helping people in need. The Crippled Child Relief Fund gave \$85,000 to EquipaLife, a donation described on page 5 in this issue of Access Press. As fund leaders decide to shift focus and change the group's name, it's time to look back at a time when the needs of many people with disabilities were met by dedicated volunteers.

The fund was founded in December 1929 by Mrs. O.H. (Della) Olsen of Minneapolis. Organization histories indicate that Olsen was the mother of a child with disabilities. She wanted to provide aid and relief to other "deserving" children.

Dozens of women filled early leadership roles in the organization. By the end of 1930, the women had raised more than \$1,500 to help children with medicine, braces and other needs.

During the first five years of the fund's existence, membership grew to 225 women. Services expanded to include financial assistance with hospital care and to help adults.

The fund filed its articles of incorporation in 1935. The papers state that the purpose was to "provide assistance for children with disabilities whose parents were financially unable to provide, to aid adults who with assistance could become rehabilitated, and to aid in the rehabilitation of handicapped persons in the State of Minnesota through contributions through various rehabilitation centers."

The organization's ranks grew, with a large board and many committees. The committees raised funds, did publicity for the group and provided transportation. Applications for aid came from doctors, hospitals, social workers and others. Each request was reviewed for need, and put to the board for a vote of approval. Emphasis for funding was placed on rehabilitation.

What's notable is the amount of work members did to raise money. These were the days when many middle-class and upper-class women didn't work outside of the home, and devoted themselves to "charity" work. While that might sound quaint or even patronizing today, there were few if any public assistance programs available. Without benevolent or charitable groups, many people may have been forced to do without basic items and care.

Fund histories describe the "staggering" number of fundraising efforts including member dues, rummage sales, sale of detergents and magazine subscriptions. Volunteers ran a thrift shop. Fundraising also had a social aspect, with card parties, fashion shows, teas and theater premiere outings.

In 1968 a student loan fund for occupational physical therapy was established for the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at the University of Minnesota. Over the years 322 students borrowed more than \$45,000 from this fund. Recipients signed an agreement for

repayment with no interest charged. A university scholarship for physical and occupational therapy students was also given in Olsen's honor for several years.

But sadly, as the volunteers aged, more funding came from members' bequests and memorial gifts. Olsen died in 1971, at the age of 83.

The fund's emblem is a small golden crutch, because "Every act, every deed is a staff of support given to persons with disabilities and produces 'happiness in sharing'."

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities.