

History Note – Olin has spent decades documenting civil rights movement

by [Access Press Staff](#) // June 9th, 2017

The disability rights movement has had many people who have followed its story. Few have been more dedicated than Tom Olin.

Olin is considered to be the social documentarian of the disability rights movement. He began taking pictures in 1985 and has since spent many years building an incredible collection of iconic photos of the historic struggle for civil rights and inclusion by people with disabilities. Olin's many photos are part of the ADA Legacy Project and the Disability Resource Center Disability History project. His photos have been exhibited at the Smithsonian and appeared in the Washington Post and numerous other publications and books over the years.

Twice, Olin took the Road to Freedom Bus around the country, in 2007 and 2014-2015 for the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. He has taken pictures around the country, documenting civil actions and protests. He has shot pictures as activists blocked traffic and of the famous "capitol crawl" in Washington, D.C.

He has become a key figure in the disability rights movement, not just for his work as a social documentarian, but for his tireless advocacy spanning three decades.

In interviews, Olin has spoken about growing up with dyslexia and working in a rehabilitation hospital in Michigan as a young man. He has spoken of the challenges of getting hospital residents out to even see a movie, in the days before accessibility accommodations were mandated.

He studied video production while working as a personal care attendant in the Bay Area. His first photo series was of a person living with chemical sensitivities. "It became a little show there in Berkeley, and then from there I just kept on taking photos" Olin said in an interview.

He soon moved to Los Angeles and got involved with the movement to make UCLA more accessible. One of his photos of an ADAPT protest, of a protestor's hand handcuffed behind a wheelchair, is still used today. Olin considered his photos of the protest to be his start as a social documentarian for the disability rights movement.

Other memorable photos have been of mass demonstrations in Atlanta and Washington, D.C., and of many demonstrations by ADAPT, Not Dead Yet and independent living groups. Many activists will not be forgotten because Olin documented their activities. His collection includes about 500,000 images.

Olin recently was hospitalized at the Methodist Specialty and Transplant Hospital in San Antonio, awaiting a liver transplant. Because of his commitment to documenting the movement

and the grassroots, he has almost never drawn a salary. Sale of his photos provides barely enough for food and fuel. Lately he has been too ill to work so finances are more dire than usual.

A Go Fund Me account set up for post-transplant expenses as well as copays had a goal of \$5,000. More than double that had been raised when Access Press went to press. Many people have donated to show their appreciation for Olin's work.

Olin would like to hear from people who have enjoyed his photos. Cards and letters can be mailed to Tom Olin, Methodist Specialty and Transplant Hospital, 8026 Floyd Curl Dr., San Antonio, TX 78229.

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.