

## TOM OLIN



*“My photos are my children. Choosing “favorites” is difficult. The totality of photos in my archive highlight some of the important events, the difficult, often dangerous work, and the passionate, dedicated people who time and again put their voices and bodies in the way of injustice – three plus decades of effort that lead to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 and beyond.”*

Most who know Tom, know him as a thoughtful, caring man – as dedicated to his craft as he is to the people in movement he documents. Tall and lanky, camera-vested, hat on backwards (because that's what photographers do), always helpful and full of story, Tom is love incarnate, dancing with the camera.

If a picture is worth 1000 words, Tom has at least that many for each of his pictures. He has watched a movement unfold through his lens, and he has played a part in its unfolding. He knows the people, the purpose, the fun stuff, the hard. He's been in the trenches capturing the struggle, the effort, the successes – the ongoing press for equity.

Tom first became interested in disability rights growing up with dyslexia. Having to take special classes, Tom came to understand the inequalities of the education system. Like so many kids at the time, when little was known or supported with his disability, he learned to mask and compensate. He worked hard to fit in, to find his place. Dreaming of becoming a teacher, his dream was never encouraged or supported. Writing was difficult and it only got worse in college. When he took a job as an orderly at a rehabilitation hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan at the age of 19, he was reintroduced to the inequities faced by people with disabilities “–his people.” Still trying to find himself and his place in the world, he travelled south and, ultimately, west. Living a life full of stories, Tom worked on a Mississippi River riverboat and lived in an Arkansas commune – among other things – before landing in Berkeley, CA.

While in Berkeley, he got his start as a photographer after originally working at a video production company. To improve his videography skills, he was encouraged to take photography classes at a community college. It was at this same time he became an attendant for people with disabilities in the San Francisco area, so his first photography subjects were people with disabilities. What he began to “see” through his viewfinder was powerful and he knew it. Combining his budding camera skills with his understanding of disability and the issues faced by the people living with them, he fell into photojournalism serendipitously – combining his photos with the unfolding story of a movement gaining traction. He never looked back and has been involved with assisting and documenting the disability rights movement ever since. He photographed the founders of ADAPT at a national action event in Los Angeles in 1985, which led to his

interest in being a social documentarian for the disability rights movement and the rest is history.

In addition to documenting the ADAPT movement he has documented many other disability rights events such as the Atlantis Independent Living Movement in Denver, which focused on deinstitutionalization. He worked with the Psychiatric Survivors, Self-Advocacy and Youth Empowerment movements, sharing his wisdom, capturing their moments and their place in history. He worked for Mouth Magazine, a bi-monthly disability rights magazine, from 1995 to 1999, and his photographs continue to be featured in magazines, books, documentaries, in museums and on walls across the country and around the world.

Tom has friends everywhere. With so much equipment, he has driven rather than fly – at first in his van, then in the “Road to Freedom” bus. For as long as anyone can remember, traveling from action to action, event to event, Tom has had a network of landing spots – friends he could call across the country, with homes for the night, or for however long. (Some of us even have a “Tom Olin” room at the top of our stairs.)

These days, health has dictated a slowdown. Tom still travels, just not as much. Today, Tom is working on a number of projects. His passion remains enlightening and empowering the next generation: keeping the Disability Rights Movement and story alive for the young people now living better lives because of the efforts and people who went before.

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To connect about his archive or about licensing/using his photos, please contact:

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