



Episode 14: A conversation with Tim Olin & Jim Ward

Voice Over:

(Hip-Hop music plays)

Barry Whaley:

Hi everybody. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and the ADA National Network, I want to welcome you to “504 at 50.”

I'm Barry Whaley. I'm the project director of the Southeast ADA Center. “504 at 50” is a special interview series created in recognition of the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. And in this series, we speak with people who are leaders in the disability rights movement who advance the cause of equal rights through their tireless work.

On our episode today, we welcome Tom Olin and Jim Ward. Tom Olin has been a social documentarian for more than four decades, capturing an unfolding history of much of the disability rights movement. Tom has spent his life building an incredible collection of iconic photos of the historic struggle for civil rights and inclusion of people with disabilities.

Jim Ward also began his advocacy journey well over 40 years ago in the areas of disability, mental health, advocacy, and electoral politics. Jim has served as the Director of Public Policy at the National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems. Jim is also the founder and the president of the Coalition for Disability Rights and Justice.

Our host for today's episode is University professor and chairman of the Burton Blatt Institute, Dr. Peter Blanck.

Gentlemen, we're so pleased to have you all with us today. And Peter, I'll turn it over to you.

Peter Blanck:

Well, thank you Barry. And Tom and Jim, it's such an honor and pleasure to be with both of you at this time of great controversy in our country. It's nice to be with great Americans who have fought for and documented civil rights--the civil rights of persons with disabilities and have been part of the civil rights, the women's rights movements and in reflecting the stories of those pioneers.

Barry said it's the 32nd anniversary of the ADA, but Tom and Jim, it's hard to believe it's the 50th anniversary next year of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. And I thought I'd start with your reflections. Maybe we start with Tom and then go to Jim. But where were you at in terms of your mindset and thinking about the issues we're grappling with today back in 1973 and at the birth of, really, the disability rights movement and how did that lead you to what you became involved with? Tom, perhaps we can start with you.

Tom Olin:

Well, during those times I was pretty much isolated. I moved from Michigan. I worked in a rehab hospital as an orderly. That's what it was. They call them differently now. And I moved from there. Like I said, it was rehab hospital and I got to... That's probably my first actually time I really got into, and that was in early seventies that I got into a whole different world of disability.

I grew up with dyslexia and dysgraphia, so I was in the dummy class, so I got to understand discrimination at a very early age. But then during the rest of the school, I learned how to mask it. I learned how to do oral stuff and not have to write and all that.

But I ended up in Arkansas pretty much away from most all disability. And it wasn't until I finally moved to California that I got into disability. And that was after '78 and that was the early 80s. So I didn't really get into the movement until the 80s. And there I went right to the city that a lot of it started from. I lived and went to Berkeley.

Peter Blanck:

In those early years when you had grown up feeling discrimination as you described, did you have a sense of disability rights or that your rights were being abridged? This was the heat of the civil rights moment.

Tom Olin:

No, I didn't. And even though I also lived for a year as a child, third grade in Fort Lauderdale, Florida where we had different drinking fountains, different doors for

different people, I didn't see disability as something different, even though I hung out with a albino girl at that age. But I didn't see the discrimination.

My family, they grew up in religious college. My father was on a basketball team of a Black and white. So I did not feel that discrimination until I got into the rehab and to other places. And those times people with physical disabilities and other disabilities were shut away. So people like myself that had other disabilities did not interact with each other.

Peter Blanck:

Yeah. And Jim, same sort of questions. Where were you at psychologically and physically back in those early days, the early 70s, and your conceptions of self and others in the community?

Jim Ward:

You sure you want to ask me where I was at psychologically? Pretty long answer. But I'm joking. I'm joking. Really, so much went on in the early days and I was unaware that I was a part of a movement. I can go back to grade school when one of my best buddies had untreated epilepsy. And I remember him just going down on these hard marble floors in Catholic school and trying to be there with him and support him. And I didn't realize that would open up, perhaps, a sensitivity to disability that wouldn't have come otherwise.

Peter Blanck:

What years was this? About early 70s?

Jim Ward:

Oh, my God. This was in the 60s, grade school. And then moving into the 70s, I started to become aware, like Tom, of my learning disabilities. I think because I was a quiet kid, I didn't get much attention until high school when I started masking my learning disabilities with drugs and alcohol and things that brought more attention to it.

And it was really only, it must have been 1979 that by chance I wound up in a job interview at the Arc of Sullivan County. At that time was headed up by Mark Grant, who went on to do some great things at a higher level in New York and nationally. And that changed my life.

I mean, I had dropped out of high school. I had dropped out of college. And getting this job really assisting folks, moving from very abusive institutions like

Willowbrook, like Letchworth Village and helping them integrate into the community really was the foundation of the work that I would do many years later. And in fact, many years later, coming full circle, because those early incidences, the abuse at Willowbrook, which was exposed, of course, by Geraldo Rivera, back when he was a beat reporter, led to the formation of the first protection and advocacy laws.

So it was full circle for me when I wound up in 1999 working at what then was called the National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems. And today is the National Disability Rights Network.

I was just in DC for Kurt Decker's retirement. He is retiring after many, many years as the executive director there. And it's interesting because as you said, I was in elective politics and in Vermont I was the executive director of the Vermont Democratic Party. I was the elected city counselor and Justice of the Peace. And it was in that position that I hit bottom with alcoholism and depression and signed myself into Brattleboro Retreat in Vermont.

And the name sounds very cozy, but in fact it had bars on the windows. And it was there that I was told that I had a broken brain and that I shouldn't have children. And that really made me much more aware of what the disability rights movement is all about, that nobody, no one should be prevented from following their dreams or lowering their ambitions or having to do less because of a disability.

And I'm very happy to report that I just celebrated my two sons' graduation and the children I wasn't supposed to have. And as Tom remembers, they were just two and three when we went on the Road to Freedom. And the Road to Freedom was our national bus tour. We traveled to every state in the country by bus, flew to Hawaii and Alaska and followed the, somewhat, of Justin Dart, the iconic leader of our movement, and Yoshiko who traveled to collected discrimination diaries that were presented to Congress and helped pass the ADA.

Peter Blanck:

Let me ask you, Jim, when did you become aware of disability as a civil rights endeavor? And were you aware of the rehabilitation of 1973 Act before the ADA got rolling?

Jim Ward:

Well, I was. And again, it was less personal. I hate to say that we need to be personally touched to fully develop our awareness of civil rights. And I know there's many people who do it because it's the right thing, not because they've been personally touched. But for me, I knew it was the right thing to help these folks get

out of these abusive institutions. I went to Willowbrook, I went to Letchworth Village, I went and saw the histories of what went on there and the horrific abuse. So I knew it was the right thing. I don't know that I put it in the civil rights model. Again, it was later when I went through my own hitting bottom that I was told not to have children. And that was a fundamental restraint put on me because of a disability or a perceived disability. And that's why I fight.

Peter Blanck:

Of course, 50 years before that, you had Buck v. Bell, where they were sterilizing people who shouldn't have children.

Jim Ward:

It was a horrific history. And don't think that any other movement is more important than ours or it was more dramatic or more horrific a history. We have a horrible history in this country and around the world of how people with disabilities have been treated. And we still have long way to go. And what we've seen currently with the recent Supreme Court rulings is that the ADA and the federal protections, all the federal protections for our community, are at risk now.

You asked about the history and Tom was there too. There's a photo in front of a vigil we had for Tennessee versus Lane. And I was in a sleeping bag in front of a tent in front of the court. And I had a suit on. And it looked a little out of place for an advocate at a vigil to be wearing a suit. But why I did that was because I wanted to go to the oral arguments and did go to the oral arguments in the beginning.

And the reason I bring this up is what ADA Watch is all about. It is about doing away with the distinctions between the inside the beltway and the outside the beltway, between the lawyers and the advocates. And really we're about an inclusive coalition because we need everybody. Our rights are so much at risk that we need everyone of all walks of life, inside Washington, outside of Washington to work together. And our goal is to do away with the silos and the divisions and the duplications of services and really have the community united to protect ourselves.

Peter Blanck:

When did you have this glimmer in your mind of that there could be a comprehensive law like the ADA and the community was moving towards that? What role did you play in that?

Jim Ward:

Well, my role very different. My role was as an elected leader, leader's too strong a word, elected official in Vermont where I was working firsthand with folks. I was a clinical social worker. And I had a private practice working with people with disabilities. And my work was much more hands-on rather than at the policy level. It was only later that I became involved at the policy level.

Peter Blanck:

Tom, what about you? When did you begin to think, "Well, there was this civil rights movement, and we could achieve this comprehensive law called an ADA?"

Tom Olin:

Well, that came pretty fast when I moved to California. And it wasn't in Berkeley. Berkeley had its thing, like I said, in '78 and on. But then it became, they had great organization. DREDF was happening, now ... But they were not the movement. They became organizations. And at that point, I was also one of the persons that when I was in rehab hospital and working there was Diane Coleman. I knew her when she was 17 years old and I was 19. And we had a great relationship of things that we kind of understood in the disability world. And she was working in LA at the time. I was working in Berkeley. And so I moved from Berkeley down to LA. A group of friends we had, Paul Longmore, Barbara Waxman, Ann Finger, and the list goes on. We had some really great people. And we had, at that point, our organization was called California Association of Physically Handicapped.

Peter Blanck:

When, Tom, did you first hear about this concept of an ADA?

Tom Olin:

One of the things we got into in LA was, '85 ADAPT came to the state conference of the California Association of the Physically Handicap. And I said, "Hey, we're going to be in LA." And it was Wade Blank and Mike Alberger that happened to be at conference. And we got talking and it was just like both Diane, and I said, "Oh my God, this is it. This is what we've been waiting for. This is the activism that we wanted." And so that was the time that ADAPT, of course, the black sheep of the family, disability family, back then. And that was when, I mean we had in the ADAPT world, Bob Kafka, who was very close in Texas politics, was Lux Friedan. Lux Friedan was very close, of course. And where Justin Dart came.

Peter Blanck:

Judy Heumann, of course.

Tom Olin:

Well, Judy Heumann, that was more of the 504 demonstration. But at that point there was a conference and that's when a lot of people said, "Hey, there is something we should do." That wasn't at the conference, but that was, I think it was '84, maybe.

Peter Blanck:

When, Tom, did you start thinking, you got to document this in photographs? When did you really start, or what were your first photographs?

Tom Olin:

My first photograph, actually, it was kind of funny because I really didn't start photography until I was in the Bay Area. And I said, "Oh, we need some photos for our disability newsletter." And so I took a course. I knew media, I loved media anyhow. And I worked also as an attendant and I worked at the Berkeley CIL and I worked at the Berkeley Disabled Students Union and other places. And so my first photos were of people with disabilities that I had worked with.

Peter Blanck:

What was the first photo you published that you were really proud of, that you understood was important?

Tom Olin:

Well, one of the first things... When I moved down to LA when ADAPT came to town, I took my camera and a roll of 24 exposures and took my first action photography. And out of that came some of the most iconic photos. Just that first row, probably, one of the first ones was Bob Kafka. You can't see him, but his hands behind the wheelchair with handcuffs. And to a lot of people, that meant -- it didn't mean who it was or whatever, but that photo, it didn't matter where that was, it was just people could understand that photo and put words into it. It was one of those a thousand words photo.

Jim Ward:

Can I just add to that the same question you gave to me? I have to admit that much of my really getting it as a civil rights issue came from Tom's photos. I mean, it touches you at a level that goes beyond the intellect. And emotionally, I knew when I saw those photos that I was part of a fight, a civil rights fight. And so we can't underestimate the value in this movement of Tom's work.

I had the good fortune of meeting Justin Dart and becoming friends and colleagues with Justin Dart and Yoshiko. And was included when Justin dictated his life story essentially from his bed to Mari Dart, his niece.

And I used to tell a story in speeches where Justin told me, "Jim, you're going to be a leader in this community." I was touched, of course, but I would tell the story by saying Justin told everybody that because everybody does have the potential. And I still believe that's true, although Yoshiko scolded me once when she heard that speech and said it was directed at me.

But I think that I understand about leadership in today's world is there's not going to be another iconic leader. There's not going to be a single person. I don't believe people are going to... We've become too cynical perhaps to put all our hopes in one person or too practical. And I think it's going to very much be a grass movement that propels us into the future rather than any one person.

Peter Blanck:

So Jim, when did you really get going as a director and a leader in the disability rights movement? When did you really know you were in the thick of things?

Jim Ward:

Well, again, my work--I was in the thick of things at a public policy level as an elected official, implementing the law, creating the law. And so it was much more personable, much more one-on-one in helping at that level and then creating policy from that.

But specific to our movement, I went out to lunch with Kurt Decker. I was employed as a policy person for the community and mental health centers, the National Council on Community Behavioral Healthcare. And I very sheepishly told Kurt about my personal experiences of hitting bottom with alcoholism and ADHD and depression. And I didn't know how he was going to react. And he hired me. He hired me to be his public policy person. And it shows his commitment to hiring people with disabilities and respecting people with disabilities as movers in this community.

And again, that goes back to my hope that we can take down the divisions of inside and outside the beltway and also the stigma. Well, I gave a big speech during Washington, that was very well received by the audience that was there, a mixed civil rights social justice group. And when I came off the stage, somebody who I respected told me, "That should have been somebody with a visible disability up." And that showed me within our own community, discrimination against people with "invisible" disabilities. Although Tom and my other friends will tell you it's not so

invisible. But the bottom line is, yes, there should have been somebody with a visible disability in addition to me, not instead of me.

Peter Blanck:

Jim, that's very interesting. For our listeners and for our archives, are there things that we should know that you really haven't shared? Not intimate things, but things that would be helpful to know for the archive of disability rights that you haven't really shared?

Jim Ward:

It is personal, but it's also not known because it took me many years to get through the things that covered it up like alcoholism. I've been sober for 25 years now. I've come to learn that it's the frontal lobe of the brain is impacted by the ADHD and potentially physical trauma.

And I came across a wonderful book called, "You Mean I'm Not Lazy, Crazy or Stupid." And it really explains things like planning and memory and things that people, I think, in the past might have thought, because I don't look like I have a disability, whatever that's supposed to look like, people might have thought I was being obnoxious, or I didn't care. Or back when I was a hippie in the 70s, it was a good way to cover it up.

Peter Blanck:

What about in terms of the movement, though, or the things you were involved with?

Jim Ward:

Oh, I've been handcuffed to the White House fence. I've been arrested at a number of events. Tom has documented many of them. And all while doing so-called in-the-beltway policy work and wearing the suit and doing all that at the same time, getting arrested with ADAPT, primarily. I guess that's the thing I should highlight the most is that ADAPT has been as influential as anything else in my understanding of the disability rights movement.

Peter Blanck:

Before we get to today, I'll go to Jim. I'll stick with you and then to Tom, what are your regrets that you perhaps could have done differently? I don't mean in terms of personal, but in terms of missed opportunities or were there things that should

have been done differently to move this movement forward? Because we're going to get to today in a little bit and how we got here.

Tom Olin:

There is one incident that I think happened that I think a lot of people either have not known about, and it is one of the largest moments of our history. The ADA is a living law. And one of the things that came out of it was the Olmstead Act also. And we had rally and a march for Olmstead that was the largest demonstration in the United States history when it comes to disability. We had it at Park Forest. This was in DC. This was three weeks after the oral arguments. And we had park service. We had 4,000 people there, 4,000 people from disabilities. There were so many people coming down from New York that they actually gutted an Amtrak car and took all the seats out so all the chairs could fit in.

Peter Blanck:

What was the objective?

Tom Olin:

The objective was to tell the Supreme Court that we were listening to them. We were out there, and we had 150 different groups. I mean, we had the rally, of course, included Dick Thornberg, our governor.

Peter Blanck:

This was before Olmstead or after the decision?

Tom Olin:

This is before the decision on Olmstead.

Peter Blanck:

Right.

Tom Olin:

But it was after the Aural Argument, three weeks after the Aural Argument. It was three weeks after Jim and I slept out in front of the Supreme Court.

Jim Ward:

Well, also significant about that, Tom, as you remember, there were a number of speakers from other communities, from the civil rights community, from the

women's community. I mean, it really united progressive organizations, many of whom were not seeing disability as a civil rights or a social justice issue. And that probably is... I hadn't thought about this before, but the roots of social justice really impacting the disability community can be traced back to that. That was really defining it as a social justice issue in many ways.

Peter Blanck:

What do you mean when you say... So we hear now disability rights to disability justice as a kind of description of where we're at. But say a little bit more about what you mean by the first time you recognize it as a social justice movement for this organization.

Jim Ward:

The first thing that comes to mind is that slogan, "piss on pity," which we use because this isn't about charity. This isn't about pity. This isn't about sympathy. This isn't about lending a helping hand. This is about boldly going where everybody else has already gone. This is about opening doors that should be opened, should have already been opened to us in this community.

And again, that's why there's an angry edge to it. People who have been dismissed or treated. There's a wonderful quote of Tom, actually... We did a concert, the disability rights concert, with Bruce Hornsby and Sweet Honey and the Rock. And Tom very articulately pointed out, "Once you pity somebody with a cane or somebody who's blind, you create separation, you create distance. Whereas the social justice model creates unity." And this is not about disability. This is about our shared humanity and how we're going to treat our brothers and sisters.

Peter Blanck:

Tom, what's your take on that?

Tom Olin:

Like you said, there's a lot of conversation and a lot of articulate conversation, academic conversation, on this. And it's kind of interesting because they're saying that "Well, that was a disability rights movement. Now it's a disability justice time." And actually, for me, it's actually the disability justice is, it's just part of the disability rights movement.

One of the things that early on that separates the disability rights movement is what happened in California is a independent living movement. And it was kind of funny. Because I was an attendant, I got to see two separate worlds in California,

and then also in Denver where the birthplace of, I really call it kind of the disability rights movement that the disability justice is really coming from.

My attendant services in the Bay Area of California were people that were actually pretty privileged. They could be white, they could be Black, but they were college people, some of them. And if they weren't college, they still had places to live. I mean, they were a little more privileged. At Denver, it was institutions. People were coming out of institutions. That was a whole different world. That's where people that did not have very much.

And we were getting people out of nursing homes, out of psych wards, out of different institutions, that kind of world, in the ADA world. We were talking about Title II. And then everything else. And that's where we have gone a little bit too far with the very physical part of the ADA, the accessibility part.

Peter Blanck:

So is it fair to say there was an independent living movement, which of course had overlap with the deinstitutionalization movement, but you're suggesting those were kind of separate threads although they were intertwined?

Tom Olin:

They were definitely intertwined, but they were separate, yes.

In independent living it was Ed and them, they were college kids that wanted to have access into Berkeley. That's where a lot of that started. That was very privileged stuff. They weren't talking about people coming out of institutions at all.

Peter Blanck:

You mentioned something like something's gone too far or something's kind of been pushed in this area. What were you referring to?

Jim Ward:

I think it has worked to the advantage of our opponents, the right primarily who pushed the ADA Notification Act and other weakening measures. It has worked for them to focus on the so-called burdens-placed-on-business by the ADA and the physical access issues of the ADA. And what gets left behind is the areas of education, jobs, employment.

And again, I'll let Tom answer for himself. But our job is to really make the public aware of just how inclusive and how broad the ADA is. And it's not just about physical access. And again, we diminishing the importance of physical access.

Peter Blanck:

Let me say, I want to hear about this and then I want to move with you both to how we got to where we are today in our remaining time. And then where are we going? If you guys are prophets, you'll have the answers, but you'll have inclination. So say a word or two, Tom, on that.

Tom Olin:

The ADA would not be passed today, period. We would not have an ADA if it came up to vote. So we have to realize that what we have is something that is kind of precious that we need to fight for and we haven't fought for it in a very long time. When I talked about the Olmstead stuff, do you remember that during the amicus brief, there were 28 states that signed on to the Amicus against us. And then the most incredible thing happened, in which, I don't think could ever happen again. We went to those states, and we got people involved in those states to have their attorney general sign off of those amicus brief. 18 of them, we got off. If you can imagine that.

Jim Ward:

We can't talk about social justice without talking about diversity. I don't see a big change between deinstitutionalization, civil rights and social justice. I think we've been working on the same thing. What I do see missing is diversity in our leadership, whether it's people of color, whether it's more women, we need more diversity in our movement. That's a social justice issue and we're responsible for it.

Peter Blanck:

Well, Jim, I'll stay with you. How did we get to where we are given that need, where are we going in light of some very important Supreme Court decisions that kind of change the paradigm of our world and in a decision next year on affirmative action, which goes to conceptions of have we gone too far or from disability to education? Where are we at, Jim? Where are we going? Your last major substantive question.

Jim Ward:

Well, I think we're in a dangerous place right now. Like many other communities in the progressive movement or just Americans in general, our rights are being rolled back on a regular basis. And the rights that we've seen shrinking or taken away by the Supreme Court or in Congress are ones that the ADA is based on in terms of the state's rights argument and federal protections, in general, are vulnerable now. And every time these cases turn out in this way or are decided in this way, it makes

us more and more vulnerable and should provoke us inside us, inspire us to take action at a level we've never taken action of before. It's one thing to fight like hell to get your law passed. It's another to have to fight to keep it. And that's where we're at now.

Our coalition efforts have been made possible by the big grant from the Ford Foundation. I want to acknowledge Rebecca Copley, who's the director of the disability program there, the first ever program focused exclusively on disability rights. And it's given us and our community the opportunity to really build the coalition and get beyond the silos and the divisions and work together to protect the ADA and to protect our civil rights.

Peter Blanck:

Tom?

Tom Olin:

Okay. Well, definitely, Jim was right. There are people that are doing the things right now. We're not at the table. We're stakeholders. Sometimes people that are the peer supported are not recognized as much because they don't have the education. But anything that is done should be done by disability. I mean, the ones that are in front of the table should be disability-led organizations, real true disability led organizations. And then sometimes even of those organizations there are very privileged people.

I mean, I want us to go and I think we should go and I think we could get together more on a narrative that says, "We're not free until we're all free." We got to get those people that are not recognized or not heard of. There are people without communication that cannot say, "Hey, I want to live in the community." It's all about trying to live in our community.

50 to 80% of people behind in crucial prisons and jails are people with disabilities, our community. We're not doing hardly anything.

Peter Blanck:

Tom, in your mind's eye, what pictures do you got left to take? What do you want to take? What do you hope you don't take?

Tom Olin:

Pictures I want to take are actually pictures of young people taking the pictures. I want some young, good photographers. And there are some good young photographers are coming out. I wanted to see them. Those are the pictures I want

to see. I want to see young people actually leading and helping us with our struggle. That's the pictures I want to see.

Peter Blanck:

It's been a great pleasure to speak with you both. I know our listening audience will benefit tremendously from this conversation. Thank you both very much.

Barry Whaley:

Thank you, Jim. Thank you, Tom. Thank you, Peter. Great conversation today.

Listeners, you can access this interview and more interviews at the Section 504at50 website. That web address is section504at50.org.

The "504 at 50" series is produced by the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and is a collaboration with the Disability Inclusive Employment Policy, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center.