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Gehrke: Barbara Toomer was a relentless advocate for fair treatment for Utah’s disabled and a role model for the rest of us

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By Robert Gehrke • Published: April 25 Updated: April 26, 2018

A bout with polio in the 1950s left Barbara Toomer in a wheelchair. She turned it into a steamroller.

For four decades, Toomer was among the leading advocates for civil rights for people with disabilities and the poor in Utah, organizing the state’s earliest disabled rights organizations, fighting relentlessly for health care access, for handicapped accessible buses and buildings, for in-home care options, and on and on.

Toomer died Tuesday, at the age of 88, but not before her tireless work and dogged protests and decades of victories improved the lives of Utahns with disabilities.

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"The issue the community as a whole is going to seriously have to reckon with is: Where does the next generation of leadership come from? Who is going to be the next Barbara?" said Andrew Riggle, a policy advocate with the Disability Law Center. "There's going to be a significant hole that we're going to have to learn how to fill."

Born in California in 1929, she attended nursing school, then became a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps and met the man who would become her husband of 52 years, Capt. Ross Toomer.

Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune The Salt Lake Tribune staff portraits. Robert Gehrke.

They were rebels at heart and after polio took Barbara's mobility, Ross, an engineer, would rig gadgets to help her get around. She'd pull herself into the car and with one hand chuck her wheelchair into the back seat and the kids in tow had better watch out, because mom had work to do.

"The two of them together made it so it never was, 'I can't.' It was, 'How are we going to do it?'" recalled Jennifer Toomer-Cook, Barbara's youngest daughter (and a friend of mine since college).

She began advocating for others with disabilities, forming Advocates for Utah Handicapped and in 1981 co-founding the Utah Independent Living Center. In 1983, she went to Denver to protest inaccessible buses, rallying in the cold and blocking bus routes and buildings until the transit agency caved.

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In 1985, Toomer helped lead similar demonstrations at home, staging "crawl-ons" and demanding that the Utah Transit Authority make its buses accessible to people with disabilities. In rush hour traffic, people would hurl themselves out of their wheelchairs and drag themselves onto the buses while shocked passengers were forced to wait and watch.

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When that failed, they shut down every bus route in the city, with protesters, including Toomer, chaining themselves to the buses. UTA eventually backed down.

Last year, when Toomer was honored by the NAACP with the Rosa Parks Award for her commitment to civil rights, she quipped: "I always felt Mrs. Parks and I have the same goals. She didn't want to move to the back of the bus and I just wanted to get on the bus."

The crusades didn't stop there. In the late 1980s, she battled for passage of the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act, which prohibits discrimination and requires certain accommodations.

She took her son to Washington, D.C., where she joined protesters who shut down Pennsylvania Ave. and chained themselves to the White House fence.

"As far as I know, she was the only Utahn to actually participate in rallies and protests at the Capitol that led to the passage of the ADA," Riggle said. "She is truly a link to our past and the progress the disability community has made."

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In 1991, Toomer helped organize the Disabled Rights Action Committee, which spearheaded a string of policy causes.

She fought UTA over steep fare hikes for paratransit riders (UTA backed down). She sued Wells Fargo for putting night deposit boxes out of reach of people in wheelchairs. She was a plaintiff in a lawsuit against Utah cab companies for not being ADA-compliant. And she helped fill Gov. Gary Herbert's office in 2015 to lobby for Medicaid expansion.

Last year, she was among a throng of advocates who packed a U.S. Senate committee hearing on the repeal of the Affordable Care Act. "If you want a hearing ... you had better shut up," warned Sen. Orrin Hatch, the chairman, banging his gavel.

Hatch clearly didn't know who he was dealing with.

"She's always the shortest person in the room. She's tiny and she was weakening physically," due to the effects of polio, her daughter said. "But to us, she was just a giant. And her shadow is so long we all walk in it."

Toomer's work garnered her a slew of accolades — the 2008 Community Justice Award, Advocate of the Year from the Disability Law Center, a lifetime achievement award from the Crossroads Urban Center — but when I got to talk to Barbara, what she proudest of was her family, her son James and her daughters Jean and Jennifer.

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In recent years, one of Toomer's primary focuses had been pushing the federal government to help pay for in-home attendant care, so people could live independently in their own homes, rather than having to resort to a nursing home or other long term care facility.

Last week, she developed some respiratory issues and was hospitalized. Then it worsened to respiratory failure. She was stabilized and her family made arrangements for in-home hospice care, but, once again, Barbara had other ideas.

"I'm not going to make it home," she said, ready to leave this world. "I want to go 'home' home."

"She fought for the right to choose," said Jennifer Toomer-Cook, "for people to say, 'Don't put me in a nursing home. Let me choose. She chose to live on her own terms and she chose how to leave."

And when she went, Barbara Toomer left our community a much fairer and a much better place than she found it.

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