

special report



Fresh Views on EMPLOYMENT OF MENTALLY HANDICAPPED PEOPLE

JULY 1978

TO: Harold Russell, Chairman
FROM: Barbara Schrader *B. S.*
SUBJECT: Ray Loomis and Project II

It all started with a misdirected letter from Omaha, NB. A short, scrawled note to the Department of Labor, penciled on the back of a calendar page. The note's two brief paragraphs mentioned Ray Loomis and something called Project II. Somehow, it found its way to the President's Committee, with dozens of other letters that cross our desks daily.

There was something different about this note. It didn't ask any questions, want any information. It simply told about an organization of and for retarded people, and about one man--Ray Loomis. What is Project II? Who is Ray Loomis? I decided to find out.

I located a telephone number for Ray Loomis. As I dialed, I felt a little uneasy about the reception I'd get. What would I say to a total stranger who happens to be retarded? Will I be able to get across my points? Since he's at work, will he have the time to talk? What motivates a retarded person to start his own organization?

A female voice said, "Coco's Restaurant." I asked for Mr. Loomis. "Hello. This is Ray Loomis," said a deep voice. I got the feeling he was busy but didn't want to say so.

I explained who I was and asked him about Project II. He began with a couple of sentences when he suddenly realized this was going to take a while. Our conversation was cut short with a hurried, "Hey,

The President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped
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I gotta go now. Call me back later."

The next day when I called, Ray eagerly talked about Project II, even before being asked. He spoke slowly, with a mid-western twang, slurring some words but making sure I understood each thought. He unfolded the story of a project and a group of people that mean a great deal to him.

How Project II Got Started

Ray got the idea of a rap session for people like himself--out of an institution and finding it hard to learn the ropes of living in the "normal" world--while talking one day with Tom Miller of the Greater Omaha Association for Retarded Citizens. But Ray didn't like those words, "rap session." He came up with "Project II." "It just stuck in my mind," he recalled.

Ray decided his group would be open to any handicapped person. As he saw it, "I figured all handicapped people could gain from sharing with others like themselves."

I asked Ray about the purpose of Project II. "To help handicapped people know they can help themselves," Ray replied. He strongly felt handicapped people could be their own best advocates. Also, Ray wanted a place for handicapped people to meet for social and recreational activities.

To get the project started, Ray set a meeting time and place. He got word to everyone he could think of--about 30 people, mostly friends he had met at Beatrice State School for the Retarded.

Three people came.

Ray continued his meetings. Six people came; then twelve. Today 2 1/2 years later, over 50 people may attend a Project II meeting. Thinking back, Ray figures 150 - 200 people around Omaha have come at one time or another.

Of handicapped people, Ray says: "We are people first. Our handicaps come second. We don't worry about our handicaps. We go about living just like other people do."

A New Direction

Project II started as a way to meet people. Outings were strictly for fun. Picnics in the summer; dances to celebrate holidays; a

Christmas party. Overnight camp outings became a favorite.

Gradually Project II changed. It evolved into a group of people interested not only in recreation but in helping each other get along in the world.

As a result, today's meetings include speakers with practical advice in day-to-day living.

What do the speakers talk about? One topic, the first that came to Ray's mind, was "sexual reality." They've also had speakers on budgeting and saving, and grooming. "And we're just now getting into politics," Ray adds.

"We also had a speaker on human rights." What does that mean to you, I asked. "Rights in the U.S. to be like anybody else and to get a job and support a family. We think these are rights everybody should have." (Note: Ray proudly uses "we" when speaking in behalf of the Project II people.)

I asked Ray if they've had a speaker talk about how to get a job. He didn't answer directly. Instead, he subconsciously switched the talk to something that was at the top of his mind--work itself. "I've been working almost all my life. When I went to get a job, nobody told me about how to get it." Although he went with someone else when he got his present job, Ray proudly states: "I filled out all the forms myself and started working the first day."

The Statewide Convention

At a Project II meeting one evening, someone suggested, "Why don't we have a state convention?" A lot of heads nodded yes.

To drum up interest in the state meeting, Ray and a couple of other Project II members visited four sheltered workshops and will visit eight more before the convention. Letters of inquiry have been coming in from all over the state. Ray or a Project II member sees that each one is answered--with a registration form, a small brochure and (sometimes) a poster. An ARC secretary helps out here.

As with all conventions, this one has a "planning group" which consists of two subcommittees. Five to seven people are on the "Poster Committee," responsible for stuffing envelopes and answering inquiries. The "Speakers Committee," of which Ray is a member, is responsible for traveling around the state to get word to as many people as possible.

The statewide convention will take place August 26 and 27 in Lincoln-- a weekend event so no one will have to miss work.

What will take place at the meeting? Ray hopes a variety of subjects will come up. Civil rights. Legislation. And "just talking about things you would have to know so you can get along better."

Ray expects 400 - 500 people to attend. "Anybody can come," but he made it clear that only handicapped people will be speakers. "I figure if it's going to be for the handicapped, let them do it."

Although the formal agenda will be set at a future Project II meeting, Ray sees the convention shaping up like this: On the opening day, someone from Project II will explain how it got started, what it does, how it is run. Four or five speakers will talk on rights, legislation, housing. Then the floor will be open to discussion and questions. Ray hopes for lots of give and take between speakers and the audience.

A dinner and dance are planned for the first evening.

A lot of people will be at the convention, listening and learning. I asked Ray what he would like to get across to them. "I'd tell them that Project II is the first group of its kind in Nebraska--a self-help group. But we don't have to be the only one. There is room for others. And I want each person to know what his rights are, know about government, and how to vote."

About Ray

Ray is a dishwasher at Coco's, a restaurant in Omaha. He has worked there for 1 1/2 years and replies with a resounding "yes" when asked if he likes his work. He is Chairman of Project II and active in the Greater Omaha ARC. He talks about Nancy, his wife, and how she is helping with the state convention. And he speaks with pride of his 18-month old son Billy.

About Ray's Ideas

Attitude About Work

"Handicapped people would like to be treated just like every other worker," Ray says. "I don't want to be the top person," but too often he feels, "there's a shield between you and me--kind of like 'you work over there and I work over here.'"

His Philosophy

"If you think you are handicapped, you might as well stay indoors. If you think you are a person, come on out and tell the world."

A Helping Hand

Ray offered this thought for those working with retarded people. "They don't understand retarded people. Retarded people should be there to help other retarded people. This way both gain confidence and feel that someone else knows what it's like to be retarded."

Questions

Ray turned the tables on me. "I have a couple of questions for you," he said. I said sure.

"How many handicapped people are there in the U.S.?" he asked. About 11 million adults, I replied. "I agree, that's about the right number," he replied. "Do you think everybody is handicapped in some way?"

Yes, I answered.

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Afterthoughts

When I first heard of Ray Loomis, I wondered what motivated him to start his own organization. I don't have the answer. Somehow, it doesn't seem important.

What does matter is the way Ray has built his life, one step at a time, into a whole that works for him. On one hand, here is Ray, a retarded man who is not ashamed of being labeled retarded. He has proudly chosen to become a spokesman for people like himself.

On the other hand, here is Ray, a member of the so-called normal world. He has chosen to work, to marry and accept the responsibility of a family.

He has chosen things from both worlds to balance his life, enabling him to cope. But Ray seems to have gone one step further. More than balance, he has been able to blend two worlds--the world of the retarded and the "normal" world--to make one happy individual, living life the best way he knows how.