

# Handicapped Unite With Purpose

Lincoln (UPI) — Ollie Rector clutched a tissue, and her hands quivered as she stood at the podium.

She looked out at the group of 200 people and stammered as she began to speak. But her audience didn't seem to notice.

They were eager to hear the words of this woman, who like many of them, spent part of their lives confined to institutions for the mentally and physically handicapped.

"I hope they can stop calling us handicapped," she said. "They think they're better than us . . . . But people have handicaps in their head somewheres." As her voice choked up, she stopped abruptly and sat down to loud applause.

Mrs. Rector is chairman of a two-day convention, "People First," which ended Sunday in Lincoln, for Nebraska's mentally and physically handicapped citizens.

## First of Type

It is the first convention of its type in the state, she said, and was organized and run by the handicapped themselves.

Mrs. Rector, who spent seven years in the Beatrice State Developmental Center, said the object of the statewide convention was to unite the handicapped and make them aware of their rights and potential.

"We want to be a part of other people, not pushed in a corner somewhere," she said.

The idea for the statewide convention came out of a self-help handicapped group in Omaha called Project II.

Ray Loomis, who was in the Beatrice institution for 15 years, started the project about 2½ years ago. He invited 30 people, mostly friends from Beatrice, to his first meeting. Three came.

## Equality

Now, the monthly meetings usually draw more than 40 people, and more than 150 handicapped people belong to the organization.

Loomis, 41, stammers slightly as he talks about the group. He started the group, he said, because he wanted the handicapped to "have equal rights for themselves and show they can make it by themselves." He said he doesn't think institutions teach the handicapped to rely on themselves.

Mrs. Rector and Loomis are both bitter about their days at

Beatrice. Social life was severely restricted, they said. Men and women were allowed to talk to each other only during dance sessions, and even then had to dance two feet apart, they said.

Loomis escaped five times, and each time when he was returned, he said, his head was shaved and he had to polish floors in his bare feet with an iron broom for 16 hours at a time.

## 'Best at Work'

Jack Conrad, 39, was at Beatrice for 11½ years. He was one of the first members of Project II. He now is a dishwasher at an Omaha bowling alley, is engaged and is happy with his new life and job.

"Everybody says I do the best at work," he said.

When Loomis isn't working as a dishwasher at Coco's, he organizes activities for the group, including meetings, picnics and dances. He and his wife, Nancy, have an 18-month-old son, Billy.

Project II is supported solely by members contributions. The group has \$270, Loomis said.

Loomis said he spent a year planning the convention, which was modeled partially after another "People First" convention of more than 700 handicapped people in Oregon.

## Group Progress

Most of the people attending the Nebraska convention have been in an institution, he said.

Convention activities include a film on other "People First" groups, speeches and dances.

Tom Miller, a former director of the Greater Omaha Association of Retarded Citizens, said the group has made "unbelievable" progress since it started more than two years ago.

Most of all, it brought handicapped people together, he said.

"People who didn't have much opportunity for social contact in the mass settings of institutions learn they are individuals," he said.

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